

Collective Action Dilemmas and Integration Mechanisms in the Time of COVID-19: Examining Government Responses to the Pandemic in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the country's weaknesses in health and emergency management. Against the backdrop of scarce resources and governance challenges, the health crisis has highlighted the importance of collective action among government units in containing the virus and meeting the day-to-day needs of constituents. This article examines the collective action dilemmas faced by national and local governments in the Philippines during the pandemic and the integration mechanisms they implemented to address these challenges through the lens of the Institutional Collective Action framework. By examining various cases, it argues for the need to incorporate new elements into the framework—such as power asymmetries, leadership role, political pressures, technological applications, institutional capacity—that are shaping collaboration risks, mechanism costs, and the choice of collaborative mechanisms. The Philippine experience can inform future governance arrangements and crisis management strategies, such as in harnessing existing networks and self-organized partnerships, leveraging technology, and fostering institutional adaptability.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. It was first reported that a pneumonia case of the virus started in Wuhan, China in November 2019. In the Philippines, an estimate of 4,000,000 cases was confirmed in 2023 with more than 60,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2023). The global health crisis became a challenge to mitigate and had prompted immediate response from national government agencies and local government units (LGUs). Many countries acted immediately to contain the virus through lockdowns, social distancing, hygiene information dissemination, and travel bans. Testing, isolation, and contact tracing became the common and critical strategies adopted to fight the pandemic (Lau et al., 2020). Developed countries with sufficient resources were able to implement various interventions, whereas developing countries had to face challenges in allocating the needed resources and in dealing with the limited capacity of their public health systems.

The Philippines belonged to that category where capacity and preparedness were limited, thereby affecting its effort to respond effectively to the public emergency. Its overall strategy relied on community quarantine imposing minimal population mobility and shutting down the economy (Lau et al., 2020; Tabuga et al., 2020). Its national response came into effect through legislation, mandates, assistance programs to affected sectors, and the creation of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-

EID) led by the Department of Health (DOH). Its efforts to contain community transmission, however, had faced numerous challenges exposing the country's governance issues, especially those relating to national disaster response and public health emergencies, and exacerbated existing social, political, and economic disparities (Quintos, 2020; Tabuga et al., 2020). Such issues and challenges include the lack of immediate protocols for local government implementation, poor information systems, and deficient targeting mechanism for social assistance programs (Tabuga et al., 2020). These were aggravated by the disparities within the country in terms of unequal resources, information infrastructure, and emergency management capacity in local jurisdictions (Lau et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a national emergency that put into spotlight the country's long-standing governance issues. It has underscored the importance of collective action to public policy issues that are not defined by administrative boundaries nor confined to political jurisdictions. The COVID-19 pandemic was such issue where decisions made by one LGU would have spillover effects on another. The externalities of choices made by national and local governments would therefore necessitate collaboration. As evident during the pandemic, collective action is neither automatic nor self-executing. There are transaction costs, which can pose as barriers to collective action. Government, however, can decide to integrate efforts through appropriate institutional arrangements.

In this study, the Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework is applied to frame the collective action dilemmas faced by the government and its efforts to collaborate through informal and formal institutions. It problematizes the collective responses of LGUs and government agencies under a fragmented governance system. It raises the question: What are the factors shaping the integration mechanism choices of government to deal with collective action dilemmas during the COVID-19 pandemic? Specifically, what would explain the national government's decision to choose a hierarchical and encompassing authority to implement the Social Assistance Program? Or, what facilitated the decision of LGUs to mobilize existing institutional arrangements or to self-organize by creating a new collaborative undertaking? And what lessons can be learned from the COVID-19 experience that have implications for policy and governance?

The study answers these questions through illustrative cases, which are examined through the lens of the ICA Framework. It is supported by literature review, including published and unpublished materials, policy papers, news reports, as well as interviews of key informants conducted in August 2022. By examining the collective action dilemmas of different government units and their choices to integrate efforts, this study contributes to the discourse on collaborative governance and to theory building by incorporating new elements into the ICA framework given the local context and unique circumstances of the Philippines. Along with others that applied ICA framework to public health emergencies (e.g., Kang & Mao, 2022; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022; Soujaa et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020), this study provides new insights into collective action dilemmas and alternative pathways to collaborative governance.

The analytical framework for the study is discussed next. This is followed by three illustrative cases on integration mechanism choices of government during COVID-19. Then, the following section defines the key findings that extend our understanding of collective action during crisis situations. The last two deal with the implications for policy and governance, and the conclusion summarizing the study and identifying areas for future research.

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The ICA Framework and COVID-19

The ICA framework is built on different theories (e.g., collective action, transaction-cost politics, public choice theory, local public economies, political market) to provide explanation for how collaboration

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emerges, the risks involved in facilitating and integrating efforts, and how to deal with those risks so as to realize collective action (Cruz, 2015; Feiock, 2013; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022). It is applied to composite actors (Feiock, 2013), which, in this study, refer to LGUs and government agencies. It can help in understanding collective action dilemmas and the mechanisms for mitigating them.

The ICA Framework analyses policy through the lens of externalities resulting from the choices made by composite actors in fragmented systems (Feiock, 2013). The presence of these externalities would necessitate collective action, which would have potential benefits for these actors. However, collaboration involves risks and implementing joint agreements entails costs (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Feiock, 2013). Thus, despite the potential benefits, collective action does not happen automatically. The ICA Framework tackles this collective action dilemma, the risks and costs involved in collaboration, and the alternative governance mechanisms to address these challenges.

This study examines the factors shaping the choices of government to integrate their efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. It applies the framework below (based on Feiock, 2013; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022), which shows the context of decision-making, the potential barriers to collaboration, and the implementation consequences. It builds on the proposition that integration mechanism choice of actors is shaped by the context within which they operate. This context can include geographic location, socioeconomic standing, political values or preferences, institutional arrangements, among other factors. Further, the study examines the different collaboration risks (e.g., coordination, division, and defection problems) as well as the mechanism costs (e.g., monitoring compliance, enforcing rules, and managing resources) involved in implementing integration mechanisms. These risks and costs can pose barriers to any collaborative efforts. They are considered in this study as factors affecting decision-making ex-ante; that is, benefit and cost calculation is made before the choice is made. It explores how these risks and costs influence the integration mechanism choices of composite actors. It also examines the collaborative mechanisms adopted by national and local governments, along with other sectors, in overcoming the accompanying risks and potential costs of collective action.

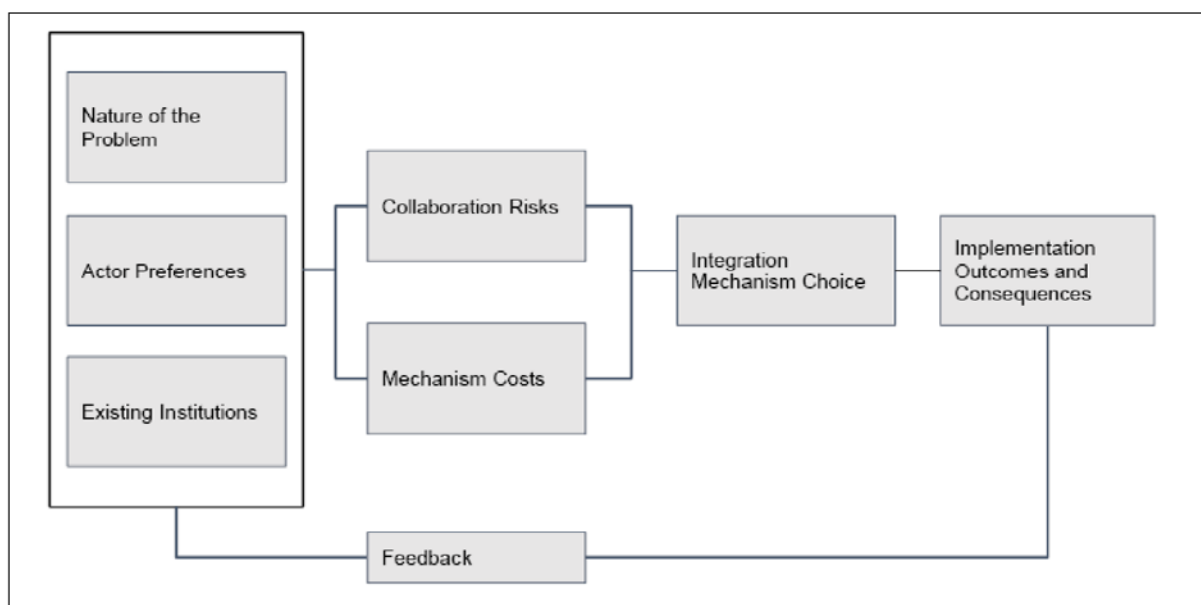


Figure 1. The Institutional Collective Action (ICA) Framework
Sources: Adapted from Kim et al. (2022) and Feiock (2013).

ICA Dilemmas Faced by Government Actors

COVID-19 can be viewed as an ICA dilemma as different actors recognize the benefit of collective action but face barriers to collaborating to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. This dilemma generally arises due to the partitioning of authority under a decentralized system resulting not only in the disparities in organizational capacity and resources but also in the externality of choices (Feiock, 2013; Tavares & Feiock, 2018). One LGU, for example, may see the benefit of strictly implementing COVID-19 restrictions but may decide to ease the regulation to give way to the demands of local constituencies, which then may affect overall efforts to contain COVID-19 transmissions. This raises the question as to how interactions and collaborative agreements occur between and among LGUs since individual goals and interests are often predicted to take precedence over collective goals when pursuing solutions to problems affecting not one but many government entities. In other words, social inefficiencies often result in the face of collective action dilemmas.

Exacerbating these ICA dilemmas has been the reality of resource scarcity and limited capacity at the local level. Even before COVID-19, the Philippines has been facing governance and capacity issues. For many developing countries, the lack of institutional capacities and resources are persistent problem, which can impede collaborative arrangements (Lubell et al., 2002; Ramírez De La Cruz et al., 2020; Tavares & Feiock, 2018). In fact, many LGUs in the country had faced challenges in operationalizing national government directives on COVID-19 due to these limitations.

Institutional Arrangements and Challenges

The Local Government Code of 1991 is the policy framework that defines the decentralized system of governance in the Philippines. The Code devolves certain functions, responsibilities, and resources from the national government to LGUs with the overall goal of empowering local authorities and improving service delivery at the local level (Republic of the Philippines, 1991). Despite this policy framework in place, intergovernmental relations face several challenges that persist especially at the local level. Significant among these issues include: the mismatch between devolved functions and financial resources resulting in unfunded mandates for LGUs (Llanto, 2012; Manasan, 2007); patronage politics being prevalent at the local level with politicians prioritizing personalistic goals or short-term gains over long-term development (Hutchcroft, 2012; Sidel, 2018; Swamy, 2016); and the presence of political dynasties with entrenched power base that can be resistant to reforms (Mendoza et al., 2016; Querubin, 2016; Villanueva, 2020).

National and local government relations have also been defined in the way LGUs have been involved in the formulation and implementation of national mandates. For example, one of the emergency responses of the national government was to conduct lockdown and impose quarantine measures across the country. As evident during the pandemic, this national mandate was not easily implemented at the local level. Coordination with the national government (as represented by the IATF-EID) and LGUs was limited and disjointed as much as the former saw the latter as mere implementers of national policies (Atienza et al., 2020; Talabong et al., 2020). When the national government was planning its national response, LGUs were expected to provide most of the information needed to mitigate COVID-19 transmission in local communities and administer social assistance programs, but were not consulted on many of these policies (Atienza et al., 2020). An example of this was the *Balik Probinsya*¹ program, which required extensive

¹ The *Balik Probinsya* program is a government initiative aimed at decongesting Metro Manila by encouraging residents to return to their home provinces. It offers various incentives and support to facilitate this migration, such as transportation assistance and livelihood programs.

coordination among authorities to ensure the safe return of people to their provinces. In a statement of Alangalang, Leyte mayor Lovely Yu, they were only informed of the returning constituents into their province an hour before their arrival (Marticio, 2020). This raised concerns over limited time to prepare for proper COVID-19 protocols and a lack of coordination between national agencies and LGUs.

Coordination Risks and Mechanisms Costs

This study recognizes collaboration risks and mechanism costs as important predicates in understanding the integration mechanism choices of government. The assumption is that both are considered in the ex-ante calculation of benefits and costs that would shape the decision of actors on whether to collaborate or not. Kim et al. (2022, p. 5) define collaboration risks as “the likelihood that collaboration may fail to achieve collective goals.” The authors recognize the potential negative consequences that may arise from engaging in collaborative activities because of uncertainties in outcomes as well as in the intentions and capabilities of potential partners. Collaboration risks may therefore arise due to the following: coordination problems, which stem from the challenges of aligning actions and decisions across multiple actors; division problems, which relate to the fair distribution of costs and benefits among actors engaged in collaborative arrangements; and defection problems, which involve the potential for partners to renege on their commitments or free-ride on the efforts of others (S. Y. Kim et al., 2022).

Mechanism costs are “the transaction costs which limit opportunities for collective action” (S. Y. Kim et al., 2022, p. 6). They include those related to bargaining, negotiating agreements, monitoring compliance, coordinating activities, managing joint resources, and enforcing rules. Kim et al. (2022, p. 4) identify two types of mechanism costs, namely: autonomy costs (i.e., “associated with sacrificing localized autonomy”) and decision costs (e.g., “associated with information-searching, bargaining, and negotiating integration mechanisms”). The authors emphasize that these costs can vary significantly depending on the complexity of the collaborative arrangement, the number of participants involved, and the nature of the collective action problem being addressed. They note that mechanism costs tend to increase with the scale and scope of collaboration, potentially offsetting some of the benefits of collective action.

In the study of Ramírez De La Cruz et al. (2020), collaboration risks were linked to the characteristics and heterogeneity of subnational governments, economic conditions, social inequalities, political polarization, and the lack of institutional capacities. Reviewing various studies on shared service delivery in the United States, Carr and Hawkins (2013) identified the following factors affecting collaboration: negotiation costs, preference divergence, fiscal stress, relative power of participants, resource levels, demographic composition, characteristics of public services, among other things. Further, incentives of political and bureaucratic actors can be misaligned as to create tensions and undermine effective collaboration and displace collective responsibility (Curley et al., 2023). All these factors can increase transaction costs and, therefore, affect the decision to integrate local initiatives. The assumption in the ICA framework is that collaboration can occur when the benefits outweigh the costs (Feiock, 2008). Actors make calculations of the net benefits of collaboration, especially when choosing the appropriate integration mechanism to mitigate the potential risks and costs due to fragmented authority (Feiock, 2013; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022).

Integration Mechanisms

Despite existing governance challenges, however, the pandemic has led many LGUs to pursue inter-jurisdictional collaborations in the face of the public health emergency. Understanding the different ways that LGUs integrate their efforts can help in identifying the factors that shaped their choices to adopt certain integration mechanisms.

Integration mechanisms are crucial in addressing collaboration risks and mechanism costs within the ICA framework. They are designed to facilitate cooperation and overcome barriers to collective action. There are several types of integration mechanisms, including informal networks, formal contracts, and integrated organizational structures. Each of these mechanisms serves to address specific challenges in collaborative governance. Informal networks, for instance, can help mitigate information risks by fostering trust and improving communication among partners. They can reduce transaction costs associated with information sharing and decision-making, while also building social capital through shared history of collaboration, which enhances the resilience of collaborative arrangements (Feiock, 2013; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022). Formal contracts, on the other hand, are particularly effective in addressing division and defection risks by clearly specifying roles, responsibilities, and consequences for non-compliance, as well as providing a framework for the fair distribution of costs and benefits (Feiock, 2013; S. Y. Kim et al., 2022). Integrated organizational structures, such as inter-governmental organizations and regional bodies, provide a centralized framework for decision-making and resource allocation, which can streamline collaborative processes over the long run. Feiock (2013) identifies generic integration mechanisms to address ICA dilemmas in the US context, which are categorized according to the degree of autonomy afforded to actors and the level of collective relationships and exchanges. These integration mechanisms include informal networks, contracts, mandated agreements, working groups, partnerships, constructed networks, multiplex self-organizing systems, councils of governments, and centralized regional authorities (Feiock, 2013). Carr and Hawkins (2013) highlight three general strategies in reducing collaboration risks as identified by scholars, namely, adaptive and restrictive contracts, the use of different institutional arrangements, and social networks.

Implementation Outcomes and Consequences

Implementation outcomes and consequences are included in the analytical framework to take into account the impacts of implementing the chosen integration mechanisms. More than the decision and autonomy costs incurred in choosing a particular mechanism, implementation could have an impact not only on the immediate policy objectives but also on the long-term sustainability of collaborative arrangements. Successful collaboration, for example, can build trust and strengthen relationships among participating organizations. Conversely, implementation failures can erode social capital and increase the costs of future transactions. Implementing integration mechanisms may also yield unintended consequence or an unexpected by-product, which could be beneficial (e.g., might spur institutional innovation) or could be adverse (e.g., might crowd out volunteerism or affect the willingness of actors to engage in future collective action).

Further, implementation outcomes can also result in policy learnings for actors and organizations, which can enhance institutional capacity and adaptation. They can affect or reshape the context of governance arrangements as well as integration mechanism choices. In other words, implementation outcomes and consequences are relevant to ICA framework inasmuch as they shape both current and future collaboration efforts. These implications are depicted in the feedback loop in Figure 1.

INTEGRATION MECHANISM CHOICES: THREE ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

Case 1: Vertical Integration in the Social Amelioration Program

The Social Amelioration Program (SAP) or Emergency Subsidy Program was a nationwide undertaking that required large-scale collaboration between the national and local governments. It was

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part of the solutions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on low-income households as provided in the “*Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act” (Republic Act No. 11469)² passed on 24 March 2020. The law designated the Department of Social Welfare Development (DSWD) to lead in the program implementation during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ)³. In the first wave of the subsidy program, the goal was to distribute cash and/or in kind (i.e., a monthly assistance for two months ranging from Php5,000 to 8,000 Philippine pesos or roughly USD\$100 to \$160) in April and May 2020 to 18 million poor Filipino households with the LGUs, through the *barangays*⁴, tasked with the distribution of the cash subsidies. The government had allocated Php200 billion Philippine pesos (around USD\$4 billion) to provide support to these households (Abad, 2021; DBM, 2020). One of the difficulties in the implementation was the communication and coordination between the national government agency, this being DSWD, and the LGUs. The SAP relied on the LGUs to deliver a long list of tasks; however, these tasks were contingent on the national government agency’s outputs and the capacity at the local level.

For example, part of the collaboration effort was coming up with the list of beneficiaries. The remit to provide the list of eligible recipients fell on the DSWD, which relied on its 2015 *Listahanan*⁵ originally intended for the conditional cash transfer program. The *Listahanan*, however, accounted for only 25% of those eligible for the SAP making it difficult to identify the remaining 75% of beneficiaries (Eadie & Yacub, 2024; Ramos, 2021). Thus, it took time for DSWD to process and finalize the list before it was turned over to the LGUs. The government’s decision to centralize the process was meant to prevent patronage politics from distorting SAP allocation. Considering the gargantuan task, however, the LGUs had to take part in the identification of those not part of the *Listahanan*, which was administered through paper application forms (i.e., Social Amelioration Card) and manual application process (Cho & Johnson, 2022). The process gave local politicians wide discretion where many of them used it to promote their self-interests, discriminate against non-supporters, and secure political allegiances (Eadie & Yacub, 2024).

Numerous LGUs experienced difficulties in implementing the SAP because of uneven capacity. Some were better equipped with handling the validation processes because of existing data infrastructure, human capital, and prior experience with implementing similar programs. This resulted in recurring delays in the downloading of funds by DSWD to different LGUs. In fact, DSWD failed to meet its self-imposed deadline of August 15, 2020 (Abad, 2021), and only 13.9 million families had received the second payment of the cash aid as of September 2020 (Eadie & Yacub, 2024). The LGUs, being the face of the delivery of the cash assistance, were at the receiving end of the citizens’ frustrations.

Initial responses were hindered by a lack of clear protocols, outdated information systems, limited tool for targeting beneficiaries, which delayed crucial data gathering and hampered effective program implementation (Cervantes, 2020; Tabuga et al., 2020). The lack of a reliable targeting system of beneficiaries and the absence of a consolidated database for validation and accountability led to the delays and the disruption of essential services to communities during the pandemic. Added to this was

² Republic Act No. 11469 or the “*Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act” was enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, granting the Philippine government special powers to address the crisis (Republic of the Philippines, 2020). This emergency power was extended until 2021 with the enactment of Republic Act No. 11494 (or “*Bayanihan* to Recover as One Act”) on September 11, 2020.

³ Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) is the term used by the national government on its lockdown of cities and municipalities, and the imposed restrictions on travel and outdoor activities to curb the spread of COVID-19 virus.

⁴ The *barangay* is the smallest political and administrative unit in the Philippines.

⁵ The *Listahanan* is a database system that identifies poor and vulnerable households in the Philippines, which is used for the provision of social protection programs, particularly the 4Ps or the conditional cash transfer program intended for the poorest of the poor (Department of Social Welfare and Development, n.d., 2016; Eadie & Yacub, 2024).

the complicated identification process involving multiple layers of approval and verification, thereby introducing bureaucratic hurdles that slowed down the process. The DSWD's validation process was aimed at preventing the misuse of funds and insulating the program from political patronage and interference⁶, but public clamor had been strong for DSWD to find ways to expedite distribution without compromising accountability.

Despite efforts at collaboration, the imbalance of decision-making power and capacity affected the efforts of both national and local governments. Many LGUs also had to face other challenges, such as delivering SAP in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas and hard-to-reach island communities (Cervantes, 2020), distributing food aid and subsidy to informal workers and residents who did not qualify for SAP (Eadie & Yacub, 2024), and providing temporary employment and livelihood assistance to displaced workers (Cho & Johnson, 2022). Thus, many struggled because of limited capacity and resources causing delays and inconsistencies in implementation.

Case 2: Horizontal Collaborative Arrangements of BLISTT Council

There had been evidence of collaborative efforts among LGUs during the pandemic. The BLISTT Council is one example of horizontal arrangements of collaboration, which made use of existing organizational structure and network resources to deal with COVID-19. It is composed of six (6) cities and municipalities, namely, Baguio, La Trinidad, Itogon, Sablan, Tuba, and Tublay (BLISTT). It has been constituted not as a political unit but as an agglomeration of LGUs sharing adjacent boundaries that allow member-LGUs to plan and deal with issues that go beyond their respective administrative jurisdictions (Mercado & Chammag, 1998). The LGUs are nestled in the Cordillera central mountain range in Northern Luzon. The Council is supported by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA)⁷, which serves as its Secretariat.

Previous projects of the Council have been directed towards addressing overlapping issues, such as in tourism, socio-economic growth, waste management, and traffic policies. However, with limited budget and enforcement capacity, most, if not all member-LGUs, especially lower class municipalities, had faced difficulty in implementing policies and resolutions of the Council⁸. Since the Council is not a political unit, funding is based on the municipal's fiscal capacity to implement programs and projects in their locality⁹. Hence, disparity in implementation resources usually arises. Sablan and Tublay, for instance, are fifth-class municipalities, whereas Baguio City is classified as a first-class city. This disparity became apparent, for example, in the implementation of a unified tourism plan to expand economic opportunities. The influx of tourists emanating from Baguio City can put a strain on the carrying capacity of these lower-class municipalities in terms of managing traffic, preserving public health and safety (National Economic and Development Authority, 2019). This can lead to defection problem since the socioeconomic status of municipalities can limit their ability to comply with Council resolutions and policies, as well as national rules and standards.

⁶ There were reported incidents of irregularities in the SAP implementation that resulted in the preventive suspension in September 2020 of 89 *barangay* captains in different parts of the country as ordered by the Office of the Ombudsman (Abad, 2021; Cabrera, 2020). In October 2020, it was reported that the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission (PACC) had investigated 7,601 corruption complaints related to the SAP distribution (Mendez, 2020).

⁷ The National Economic and Development Authority of the Philippines is the government's primary economic planning agency responsible for formulating development plans and policies.

⁸ Jaqueline Nabaysa, Attorney III, Office of the Municipal Mayor of Itogon, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 24, 2022.

⁹ Jaqueline Nabaysa, Attorney III, Office of the Municipal Mayor of Itogon, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 24, 2022.

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The socio-economic capacity of each municipality within the Council significantly influenced its ability to leverage the Council as a resource in mitigating the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. An early response was the implementation of cross-border checkpoints to restrict movement and contain transmission. Mayors collaborated through online meetings, adopting policies informed by Baguio City's successful community quarantine lockdown¹⁰. As the region's economic hub, Baguio's actions had a ripple effect on neighbouring municipalities. Due to Baguio's high earning status and strategic location, its policies on lockdowns and checkpoints were closely followed by other LGUs, aligning their policies with Baguio¹¹. Interviews revealed minimal disagreements, as members often looked to Baguio for guidance and modelled its successful approaches. This dynamic reflected the Council's collaborative nature and the learning opportunities afforded by repeated interactions with Baguio City.

In the transportation of goods and services, health declaration form for each member-LGU was required for consistency and ease of processing vehicle passes along entry and exit points (Agoot, 2021). The mayors were supportive of the policies as shown in various meetings and took on the responsibility of informing their constituents¹². However, during implementation, a number of mayors received several complaints from their constituents about the border restrictions, which many perceived to be too stringent and unnecessary¹³. It was then uncovered that mayors, who had initially agreed to the policies, withdrew their support in response to those complaints¹⁴. This was also during the time when local elections were drawing near and mayors, being aware of need to gain electoral support, decided to loosen or even overturn border restrictions.

Case 3: Self-Organized Mechanisms between Government Units and Other Sectors

Integrating mechanisms to address collaboration risks and reduce transaction costs can be realized through either inter-local agreements or inter-municipal associations. These are consistent with the policy framework set up by national or regional governments. Existing leagues of different LGUs have been utilized for information gathering and easier coordination. An example is the League of Cities in the Philippines (LCP), which provided a venue for members to gain information on different issues concerning COVID-19. One of the initiatives was to conduct regular webinars on DOH guidelines for expanded testing and to answer any queries from the city mayors regarding DOH programs and national government's strategy against COVID-19 (NDRRMC, 2020). These webinars and online consultations had contributed to reducing enforcement costs of implementing national policies by providing avenue for information-sharing and problem-solving.

The circumstances of COVID-19 necessitated the immediate action from national and local governments. Government units at different levels used formal and informal institutions and innovative tools for emergency response, foremost among them was information and communication technology (ICT). Local governments maximized the use of ICT for coordination as seen in the conduct of virtual meetings of inter-task force groups, which became commonplace during the pandemic. Through these technologies, LGUs were able to develop informal networks and facilitated their coordination unhindered by geographical divide and mobility restrictions. For example, the Regional Disaster Risk Reduction

¹⁰ Vittorio Jericho Cawis, Assistant City Administrator, Baguio City, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 25, 2022.

¹¹ Vittorio Jericho Cawis, Assistant City Administrator, Baguio City, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 25, 2022.

¹² Jaqueline Nabaysa, Attorney III, Office of the Municipal Mayor of Itogon, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 24, 2022.

¹³ Jaqueline Nabaysa, Attorney III, Office of the Municipal Mayor of Itogon, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 24, 2022.

¹⁴ Vittorio Jericho Cawis, Assistant City Administrator, Baguio City, interview by Zarina Vazquez, August 25, 2022.

Management Councils and local groups in *barangays* and villages conducted meetings and working groups through Zoom and other online platforms, which were not done before (NDRRMC, 2020).

Social media and mobile phones also played a role as a platform for coordination. The LCP launched a Viber group¹⁵ when EQC was imposed, which paved the way to build partnerships among cities during the pandemic (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020). Mayors and governors utilized these networks for communication and coordination during ECQ when travel restrictions were in place and the delivery of public service was adversely affected (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020). They built this relationship by accessing available tools without requiring significant transaction costs between LGUs.

Technology was also at the forefront in the development of a website platform (i.e., lguvsocovid.ph)¹⁶ which was a forum providing up-to-date information on COVID-19 for LGUs (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020). The Asia Foundation and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) also provided a venue for LGUs to upload information about their locality leveraging technology to bring together data from various LGUs including their COVID plans, local issues and challenges. The LCP set up a Google drive¹⁷ and organized data to serve as source of information among its members (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020). Member-cities could access the drive to keep track of issuances, guidelines, and advisories affecting their respective localities. Data from the drive were also made available to other cities to enable them to align their policies on COVID-19 (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020). The LCP reported that cities had been active in keeping the database updated at a timely manner (Yu-Pamintuan et al., 2020).

Technology had also facilitated the creation of inter-LGU partnerships. On 5 December 2020, Pasig City Mayor Vico Sotto and Valenzuela City Mayor Rex Gatchalian signed an interconnectivity Agreement for Pasigpass and Valtrace app, which was a contact tracing solutions that unified digital contact tracing and facilitated data merging and collation between the two cities (Kabagani, 2020). Under this agreement, Valenzuela contact tracing application and PasigPass QR code were used interchangeably between cities, thus providing interoperability between systems and easy access for the LGUs while keeping data secure (Kabagani, 2020). This collaboration, as seen through the ICA framework, was brought about by the similarity in leadership styles, demography, and institutional capacity (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Tavares & Feiock, 2018).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The cases above demonstrate different integration mechanisms adopted by government to address collective action dilemmas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from the ICA framework, this section analyses how various factors shaped integration mechanism choices and how these choices, in turn, influenced collaborative outcomes. The analysis reveals several key findings that extend our understanding of institutional collective action in crisis situations. These findings are summarised in the following propositions.

¹⁵ The viber group is a group chat used by LCP as a resource to communicate with other government stakeholders during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) (<https://invite.viber.com/?g2=AQAXwOW3gGhcZ0tG%2Bxxz%2FIgcMWlhgR4Bweazo1v9pcrhqjAnoZvjyqdvSD8gSn5n&lang=en>).

¹⁶ This is the COVID-19 Information Portal for LGUs (<https://lguvsocovid.ph>).

¹⁷ This is the cloud storage service offered by Google used by LCP to collate data and digital resources, which were used by members (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10VkiUA8x7TS2jkibhSZK1gmWxFM-EoZP>).

Proposition 1. Institutional capacity and resources are essential to meet the demands of collective action during crises.

The cases show that existing institutional arrangements can influence integration mechanism choices, but their effectiveness depends on how institutional capacity aligns with collaborative demands. The SAP case, for instance, demonstrates how vertical integration through hierarchical authority can face significant implementation challenges when institutional capacities are lacking to meet program requirements. While DSWD was designated as the lead agency, the program's success relied heavily on LGU implementation capacity, which is uneven across local jurisdictions. The mismatch between devolved functions and financial resources has been a persistent governance issue in the Philippines. The SAP case shows how such mismatches become more problematic, especially during crises when coordination becomes critical and urgent.

The BLISTT Council case offers an interesting contrast, which illustrates how horizontal collaborative arrangements can leverage existing institutional structures and network resources more effectively when there is established patterns of interaction or shared history of collaboration. The Council's success in coordinating COVID-19 responses builds on what Feiock (2013) describes as the importance of repeated interactions in reducing transaction costs.

Proposition 2. The presence of an engaged and proactive leadership within LGUs enhances their capacity for effective collective action.

The cases further reveal that LGUs with proactive and engaged leadership were successful in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic. For example, mayors who actively sought collaboration with other LGUs and engaged in regular communication were able to implement cohesive and effective responses to COVID-19. The BLISTT Council, the LCP, and the partnership between Pasig and Valenzuela Cities are cases in point. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the role of leadership in facilitating collective action (e.g., Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Souja et al., 2021). That is, the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements depends not just on repeated interactions but also on the exercise of leadership that can serve as model and anchor for collective action. These leaders can mobilize resources and support, foster collaboration, and mitigate risks associated with implementing integration mechanisms. They can provide effective public service during crises while upholding the principles of transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening trust among local constituents.

Proposition 3: Power asymmetries can affect collaborative decisions of actors. Depending on the institutional context and the calculation of benefits and costs, they may either facilitate or hinder collaboration.

The impetus behind the integration mechanism choice in the context of BLISTT was the socioeconomic background of other municipalities, which relied on the actions and policies of Baguio City. Despite the power imbalances in BLISTT, neighbouring municipalities still opt to support the Council and rely on the recommendations of Baguio City. The resource dependency of LGUs has outweighed the autonomy costs and perceived risks of integration and power imbalance existing in the relationship. That is, member-LGUs may have calculated the positive net benefit in carrying out the policies agreed upon by the Council. Further, the BLISTT reveals an interesting case where power asymmetries within horizontal networks may have facilitated rather than hindered collaboration during the pandemic. Baguio City made use of the existing arrangements to assume an active and leading role to ensure effective delivery of aid, the conduct of contact tracing, vaccination, and enforcement of public health regulations and restrictions.

With the creation of the Metropolitan BLISTT Development Authority (MBLISTTDA) on July 30, 2022 through Republic Act No. 11932, such power imbalances could be alleviated by redefining the institutional arrangements and structure (National Economic and Development Authority, 2022). The MBLISTTDA is expected to operate according to equity considerations where municipalities contribute based on their capacity but benefits would be equally distributed among its members.

This power imbalance is relevant to the study since this can affect the collaborative decisions of actors. It is therefore important to recognize disproportionate power relations in various forms of collaboration, because such power asymmetries could also have adverse effects—as is often the case—on the assignment of roles and responsibilities, the division of benefits and costs, among other things. Powerful entities in a group or community, for example, might deprive the powerless of their rights and entitlements, or coerce them into taking action that they would not otherwise take, as evident in the SAP case between local politicians and those dependent on cash aid. Those in authority could use police power disproportionately to go against erring individuals and groups as seen during the pandemic (Hapal, 2021).

Proposition 4. Political pressures can undermine collective action agreements, particularly when electoral considerations conflict with crisis response.

The BLISTT case also provides an important insight into how political pressures can affect the durability of collective action agreements. Despite initial agreement on border controls, some mayors later withdrew support or ease the strict implementation of these controls in response to constituent complaints, particularly as elections approached. This suggests that political cycles can impact collaborative arrangements. It also reveals that defection risks increase not only due to capacity constraints, but also due to political factors. While previous research has highlighted the politics of governance (e.g., Hutchcroft, 2012; Querubin, 2016), the BLISTT case shows how political pressures become particularly acute during crises when unpopular but necessary response measures need to be maintained. It shows how these pressures can undermine even well-designed collaborative arrangements, suggesting the need to incorporate political factors more explicitly into the ICA framework.

Proposition 5. Crisis situations can alter the calculation of collaboration risks and mechanism costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic created unique conditions that affected how actors evaluated collaboration risks and mechanism costs. Typically, the distribution of costs and benefits becomes particularly contentious under conditions of resource scarcity, especially when allocation decisions are removed from the LGUs. Coordination risks can be high in hierarchical arrangements, such as the SAP case, due to validation requirements and bureaucratic procedures. A hierarchical arrangement can mitigate defection and division costs, but can, in turn, reduce autonomy and make coordination significantly problematic (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Feiock, 2009). The SAP case, however, illustrates how the need for the timely delivery of critical services during public emergencies could outweigh concerns over division and coordination problems and autonomy loss. LGUs in the country complied with the SAP requirements in order to avail themselves of the needed assistance from the national government. In other words, the urgent need for action can override barriers to collaboration. This was also evident in how LGUs rapidly adopted virtual meetings and online platforms despite limited experience with such tools.

Proposition 6. Technological solutions can create new pathways for collective action by overcoming collaboration risks and mechanism costs.

The success of the self-organized mechanisms can be attributed to the use of ICT and digital platforms. Different LGUs were able to find ways to leverage ICT tools and social media to mitigate collaboration risks and reduce transaction costs. The cases show how ICT has enabled coordination despite the geographical divide and resource constraints.

The LCP's use of Viber groups, shared online databases, and website platforms demonstrates how technology can reduce information asymmetries and coordination problems. The Pasig-Valenzuela partnership further illustrates how technology can facilitate collaboration between geographically separate jurisdictions with institutional capacities. These cases suggest that technology not only reduces mechanism costs but can also help overcome collaboration risks by standardizing processes and creating shared platforms for coordination. Notably, ICTs have proven crucial in rapid response and collaboration, even in the absence of formal policies (K. Kim et al., 2017; Soujaa et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). However, as Mirandilla-Santos (2021) points out, the effectiveness of such technological applications was constrained by the country's digital infrastructure limitations, particularly in less developed areas of the country. This highlights how underlying infrastructural inequalities can affect the distribution of benefits and costs across different localities.

Proposition 7. The effectiveness of integration mechanisms depends not just on their ability to reduce transaction costs, but also on their ability to innovate and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

Many LGUs have utilized different forms of integration mechanisms to respond to the pandemic. They demonstrated adaptability by mobilizing pre-existing networks and resources without relying solely on national directives. For instance, LGUs in Metro Manila adopted data sharing agreements in their contact tracing efforts. The choice was shaped by reliable ICT infrastructure and the high volume of movement of people in the cities, which required the integration of data to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

The cases also reveal how crises can lead to hybrid forms of integration mechanisms that combine formal and informal arrangements. For instance, the LCP's initiatives combined formal institutional structures with informal communication networks. Similarly, the BLISTT Council's response to COVID-19 involved both formal policy coordination and informal social network that has developed through its shared collaborative experiences. This suggests that the integration mechanisms in the ICA framework might need to account for these hybrid forms that emerge during crises.

The study also reveals an important pattern regarding the role of informal institutions in crisis response. While formal integration mechanisms (such as SAP's hierarchical structure) faced significant challenges, informal networks (as seen in the BLISTT case and self-organized mechanisms) were able to mobilize in a timely manner to meet the needs of their constituents. The establishment of informal networks enhances collaborative governance by reducing information asymmetries and fostering trust among LGUs, whereas formal contracts serve to clarify roles and mitigate defection risks. Informal networks, however, may be more effective in facilitating rapid response than formal hierarchical structure. This suggests the need to give more attention to informal institutional mechanisms, particularly in crisis situations.

Proposition 8: The success of integration mechanisms is contingent on local context and the corresponding risks and costs of collaboration faced by institutional actors.

As depicted in Figure 1, integration mechanism choice is shaped by collaboration risks and mechanism costs, which in turn, are influenced by contextual factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, institutional arrangements, and actor preferences. For instance, LGUs operating in economically disadvantaged areas faced greater difficulties in mobilizing resources for collective action compared to their counterparts in more affluent jurisdictions. Enforcement costs were lower in existing horizontal arrangements like the BLISTT Council due to established relationships and clear leadership role, but higher in vertical integration schemes (such as the SAP case) where monitoring and compliance requirements were substantial, e.g., stringent validation procedures and multi-level government coordination. It underscores the significance of cultivating shared values, trust, and reciprocal relationships among partners involved in service provision. Furthermore, it explores the role of social networks among municipal administrators and elected officials in stimulating intergovernmental collaboration.

The heterogeneity in resources and institutional capacity highlights the need for tailored approaches that consider local contexts when choosing and designing collaborative arrangements. Politically similar jurisdictions are more likely to engage in frequent inter-jurisdictional cooperation, both formally and informally. This political alignment can facilitate timely disaster response and influence the structure of inter-organizational networks (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Kang & Mao, 2022). Having a better understanding of the ICA dilemmas and collaboration risks can help in estimating the fit between context and integration mechanism choices of public agencies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

The findings from this study have important implications for policy and governance, particularly in addressing collective action dilemmas during public emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided lessons about collective action within the governance framework of the Philippines. The implications tackle several key areas, which can inform future crisis management strategies.

Strengthening institutions to mitigate crisis situations

Inadequacies in institutional capacity must be addressed to improve government response to crises. The SAP case reveals that establishing hierarchical authority is not sufficient without related improvements in institutional capacity to ensure timely coordination and information exchange. To enhance coordination between national and local governments, the following interventions can be undertaken:

- Define protocol and standard operation procedures during emergency situations that clearly delineate the roles of different government agencies and LGUs;
- Develop localized capacity-building programs for LGUs in emergency response and crisis management; and
- Make critical investments in ICT infrastructure to enhance coordination between different levels of government and to ensure stakeholder participation.

Harnessing existing networks and self-organized partnerships

Building upon existing networks instead of setting up new ones appears to be a viable alternative as seen from the success of the BLISTT Council and other self-organized mechanisms. This lesson indicates the need for the following:

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- Provide technical and financial support to inter-local partnerships to enhance the capacity of members in crisis management;
- Promote the formation of self-organized mechanisms at the local level, especially relating to inter-jurisdictional concerns; and
- Develop a means to transfer knowledge of successful collaborative networks to LGUs and other potential partners from other sectors.

Leveraging technology for collaborative governance

The pandemic has highlighted the role of technology in facilitating collaboration among government agencies, civil society, and the private sector. Future policies should be directed toward integrating technology into governance practices, such as the following:

- Develop online platforms for real-time data sharing, resource management, and communication among LGUs and national agencies;
- Integrate information systems to facilitate information-sharing between government agencies, such as standardizing data format and protocols across different systems and platforms to ensure system interoperability;
- Apply data analytics to assess community needs, track resource distribution, and monitor response measures during crises; and
- Build capacity of government employees in using digital tools designed for coordination.

Fostering institutional adaptability for crisis preparedness

The ability of collaborative institutions to adapt and innovate during the pandemic has been one of the hallmarks of a successful integration mechanisms. Inter-local partnerships and self-organized mechanisms have demonstrated their capacity to negotiate the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to build the capacity of institutions to take protective action during crises, implement coping strategies, and develop resilience to be able to manage uncertainties and future threats. The following are some measures to achieve this remit:

- Build broad community support for collaborative initiatives by improving stakeholder engagement processes;
- Institute clear accountability mechanisms to ensure credible commitment of collaborative partners;
- Invest in early warning systems and monitoring capabilities; and
- Design flexible response protocols based on the nature of public emergencies.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the collective action dilemmas and integration mechanisms adopted by the national government and LGUs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. Using the ICA framework, it reveals how various factors played a role in determining the choice and the effectiveness of integration mechanisms to counter barriers to collective action during the crisis. The findings in this study suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of how institutional arrangements adapt to crisis situations and how different types of integration mechanisms perform under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change.

As many LGUs in the Philippines grapple with present and future crises, the study has underlined the need to strengthen inter-local collaborations and enhance institutional capacities at the local level. Policymakers may need to prioritize creating flexible frameworks that allow for both formal institutions and informal networks to thrive, thereby fostering resilience against future public emergencies. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a foundation for more integrated and responsive governance structures that can better serve communities across the country.

Looking forward, many areas require further research. There is a need, for example, to test how effective collaborative arrangements can be replicated in other contexts. More research is also needed on how digital technologies can be appropriately and strategically mobilized to support governance during crisis situations. Further, there is need to investigate how political dynamics affect the sustainability of collaborative arrangements. Future research should continue to explore the interplay between contextual factors, local capacities, and integration mechanisms to enrich our understanding of governance strategies in public emergencies.

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