

**EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs)  
IN THE PHILIPPINES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW****Magierose M. Flores**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study presents a PRISMA-guided systematic review of literature on the empowerment of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Philippines. The review synthesizes evidence from peer-reviewed journals, government publications, policy papers, non-government organizations report, and other gray literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of CSO empowerment across social, economic, political, and institutional dimensions. Guided by PRISMA framework, a structured search strategy was employed across multiple databases and institutional repositories, followed by rigorous screening, eligibility assessment, and quality appraisal.

Findings indicate that empowered CSOs play critical role in participatory governance, community development, poverty reduction, and service delivery, particularly at the local government level. Key empowerment mechanisms identified include capacity-building initiatives, digital transformation, policy engagement, resource mobilization and collaborative partnership with government and private sectors. However, persistent challenges such as limited funding, regulatory constraints, uneven institutional support, and capacity gaps continue to affect CSO sustainability and impact. The review highlights significant gaps in empirical evaluation and regional representation, underscoring the need for more data-driven and longitudinal studies. Overall, the study contributes to the literature by consolidating fragmented evidence and providing policy-relevant insights to strengthen CSO empowerment strategies in the Philippines.

**Keywords:**

Civil Society Organizations, Empowerment, Participatory Governance; Community Development; Capacity Building; Philippines

**INTRODUCTION**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) serve as vital intermediaries between citizens and the state, advocating for transparency, accountability, and inclusive development. In the Philippines context, CSOs play a significant role in promoting participatory governance and community empowerment. Pasamonte (2024), in her study of CSOs in Bukidnon, points out that the engagement of civil society groups in local governance processes—such as planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluation—reflects efforts to empower grassroots voices, even though discrepancies between policy frameworks and practice persist.

While several studies have examined CSO engagement, a comprehensive synthesis of the Philippine literature on CSO empowerment is limited. This study aims to systematically review 40 eligible studies using PRISMA guidelines to identify strategies, outcomes, and challenges associated with CSO empowerment, providing a thematic framework that can inform policy and practice.

CSOs play a crucial role in promoting participatory governance, transparency and community development in the Philippines (Abueva, 1997, Carino 2002: Brillantes & Perante-Calina (2018)). Despite their potential, CSO empowerment remains uneven due to challenges in organizational capacity, funding, and access to decision-making processes (Reyes et al, (2015: Porio, 2007.)) This study aims to systematically review the literature on CSO empowerment in the Philippines using PRISMA guidelines, synthesizing evidence on strategies, outcomes and challenges from 40 eligible studies.

Similarly, Alberca and Salapa (2024) examine CSO involvement in Panabo City, finding that while organizations actively participate in community development, their capacity to influence policy remains constrained by limited funding, weak political support, and insufficient networking. These constraints highlight

persistent structural barriers to genuine empowerment, underscoring the need for comprehensive strategies that strengthen organization capacity and institutional linkages.

Cahimtung and Tenorio's (2024) assessment of CSO involvement in southern Philippine district further reveals that CSOs contribute significantly to development planning and program implementation, although is still limited. Their findings emphasize the potential of CSOs to enrich local decision-making when supported by stronger partnerships and innovative approaches to emerging governance challenges.

In addition, to academic studies, capacity-building initiatives in the Philippines such as the CSO Academy of SOCCSKSARGEN-aim to bolster CSO empowerment by enhancing leadership skills and governance engagement among civil society leaders. According to reports, programs like these help equip CSO members with the competencies necessary to participate effectively in governance and community development processes.

Collectively, Philippines research underscores that CSO empowerment involves not only organizational capacity and participation in governance mechanisms but also addressing systematic challenges such as resource limitations, political support, and institutional collaboration. This study builds on this local scholarly perspective to examine the multidimensional nature of empowerment among CSOs and their contributions to community development and participatory governance in the Philippines.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a systematic literature review approach. The purpose was to examine the empowerment of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Philippine context, focusing on organizational capacity, participatory governance, and challenges to empowerment. A systematic review was selected to synthesize evidence from multiple studies, including peer-reviewed journals, government reports, policy papers, and institutional publications.

### Data Sources

The literature was sourced from reputable databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Zendo, Philippine e-journals. And government repositories. Both published and gray literature were included to ensure a comprehensive understanding of CSO empowerment in the Philippines Studies.

### Eligibility and Selection Criteria

To ensure the inclusion of relevant and high-quality literature, the study applied specific eligibility criteria based on the PRISMA framework. From 350 records, 40 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. These criteria guided the screening and selection of studies for the systematic review. In the Philippine context, studies that focused on civil society organizations (CSOs) operating within the Philippines. Articles, reports, or studies that examined CSO empowerment, capacity building, participatory governance, policy advocacy, or community development. Publications from 2010 to 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance and alignment with recent governance reforms. Available in English or Filipino and full text versions accessible for review and data extraction.

### Study Selection and Data extraction

A total of 320 records were identified through database searching, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Zendo, Philippine Academic journals, and government repositories. An additional 30 records were identified through manual searching of reference lists and institutional reports. After removing 70 duplicate records, 280 records remained for screening.

### Screening

The titles and abstract of the 280 records were screened for relevance to CSO empowerment in the Philippine context. During this phase, 180 records were excluded due to irrelevance to the topic, on-Philippine focus, or lack of discussion on CSO empowerment. This resulted in 100 records eligible for full-text assessment.

### Eligibility

The full texts of 100 articles were assessed for eligibility based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 60 articles were excluded for the following reasons:

Lack of direct focus on CSO empowerment (n=28)

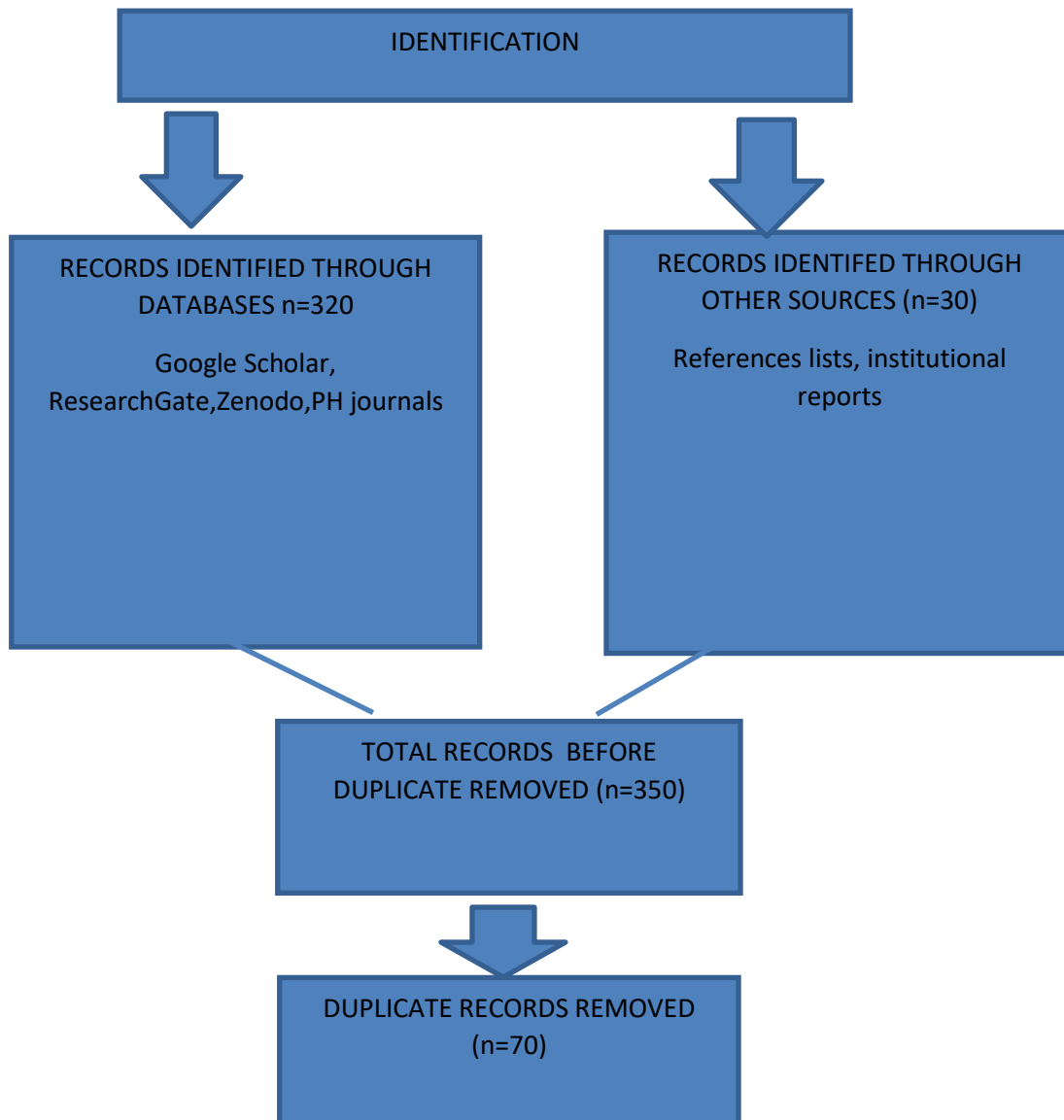
Insufficient methodological or conceptual detail (n=17)

Inaccessibly or incomplete full text (n=15)

*Figure 1 PRISMA Summary Table*

PRISMA Stage	Number of Records
Records identified	350
Duplicates removed	70
Records screened	280
Records excluded	180
Full-text articles assessed	100
Full-text article excluded	60
Studies included	40

*Figure 2 PRISMA Diagram flow*



**Table 1 PRISMA DATA EXTRACTION TABLE OF 40 PHILIPPINE EMPOWERMENT STUDIES**

No.	Author	YEAR	FOCUS/THEME
1	PASAMONTE,R.C.V	2024	LOCAL GOVERNANCE & CSO ENGAGEMENT
2	CAHIMTONG & TENORIO	2024	DECISION MAKING INVOLVEMENT
3	ALBERCA,R.N.	2024	CSO PARTICIPATION IN PANABO CITY
4	PHILIPPINE INFORMATION AGENCY	2023	CSO CAPACITY BUILDING
5	SOUTH COTABATO GOV. PRESS.	2025	LGU LED CSO ACADEMY
6	ADB GOVERNANCE BRIEF	2023	CSO AND GOOD GOVERNANCE
7	PEOPLE IN NEED PHILIPPINES	2024	INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE EMPOWERMENT
8	CCCE PAG-PR2 PROJECT	2022	CSO NETWORK AND PARTICIPATORY
9	CODE-NGO	2018	CSO LANDSCAPE AND CHALLENGES
10	HESITA,I.J.L	2010	CSO AND ICT POLICY
11	SENATE LRB	2019	CSO POLICY FRAMEWORK
12	ICAE NGO SURVEY	2021	CSO CAPACITY INDICATORS
13	UNDP PHILS.	2023	CSO CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT
14	LOCAL GOVT UNIT CASE STUDY (VISAYAS)	2022	BARANGAY CSO COUNCILS
15	PIDS WORKING PAPER	2019	PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING AND CSO
16	NGO SECTOR REPORT(MIMARO PA)	2021	CSO PARTNERSHIP MODELS
17	SOCCSKSARGEN CSO EVALUATION	2023	CSO GOVERNANCE ENGAGEMENT
18	NATIONAL CSO CAPACITY INDEX	2020	CSO ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH
19	GENDER AND CSO EMPOWERMENT STUDY	2021	WOMEN LED CSO CAPACITIES
20	YOUTH CSO PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS	2023	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN GOVERNANCE
21	DILG LOCAL GOVERNANCE REPORT	2022	INSTITUTIONAL CSO ENGAGEMENT
22	PHILIPPINE NGO NETWORK SECTOR REVIEW	2019	NGO ROLE AND BARRIERS
23	MINDANAO CSO	2023	RURAL CSO EMPOWERMENT

	<b>EMPOWERMENT STUDY</b>		
24	<b>DISASTER GOVERNANCE PROJECT (EMPOWER)</b>	2022	<b>CSO AND DRR GOVERNANCE</b>
25	<b>PEACEBUILDING CSO EVALUATION</b>	2023	<b>CSO ROLE IN PEACE GOVERNANCE</b>
26	<b>INDIGENOUS CSO EMPOWERMENT CASE</b>	2022	<b>INDIGENOUS ADVOCACY ROLES</b>
27	<b>HEALTH CSO ADVOCACY STUDY</b>	2019	<b>HEALTH POLICY INFLUENCE</b>
28	<b>ENVIRONMENTAL CSO IMPACT REVIEW</b>	2021	<b>ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE</b>
29	<b>EDUCATION CSO ENGAGEMENT STUDY</b>	2020	<b>EDUCATION GOVERNANCE ROLE</b>
30	<b>HUMAN RIGHTS CSO ROLE ANALYSIS</b>	2022	<b>HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY</b>
31	<b>LOCAL DEV CSO NETWORK REPORT</b>	2023	<b>CSO NETWORK AND DEV OUTCOMES</b>
32	<b>COOPERATIVE CSO CAPACITY STUDY</b>	2021	<b>COOPERATIVE CSO EMPOWERMENT</b>
33	<b>FAITH-BASED CSO GOVERNANCE ROLES</b>	2022	<b>COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION</b>
34	<b>TECHNOLOGY AND CSO ADVOCACY RESEARCH</b>	2020	<b>DIGITAL TOOLS FOR ADVOCACY</b>
35	<b>SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY CSO REVIEW</b>	2019	<b>ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM</b>
36	<b>URBAN CSO PARTICIPATION PAPER</b>	2021	<b>URBAN GOVERNANCE ENGAGEMENT</b>
37	<b>RURAL OUTREACH CSO STUDY</b>	2023	<b>RURAL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT</b>
38	<b>NATIONAL CSO FORUM PROCEEDINGS</b>	2022	<b>CSO POLICY DIALOGUES</b>
39	<b>MULTI SECTORAL CSO PARTNERSHIP STUDY</b>	2021	<b>PARTNERSHIP IMPACT</b>
40	<b>COMMUNITY DEV</b>	2023	<b>CSO COMMUNITY OUTCOMES</b>

	<b>PROJECT REPORTS</b>		
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### RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The PRISMA-guided review of 40 studies reveals that CSO empowerment in the Philippines is multi-dimensional, shaped by governance participation, organizational capacity, access to resources, partnerships, advocacy roles and institutional conditions.

First, the results show that **CSO participation in local governance has increased**, particularly through involvement on Local Development Councils, Local Health Boards, and other special bodies mandated by the Local Government Code OF 1991. Many studies report that CSOs contribute to planning, budgeting and monitoring processes, indicating a degree of institutional recognition. According to **Brillantes and Fernandez (2018)**, CSOs in local development councils actively engage in formulating development plans and ensuring that programs are responsive to community needs. Similarly, **Fox (2015)** emphasize that CSO involvement improves government responsiveness by creating mechanisms for citizen feedback.

Second, the findings indicate that **capacity-building initiatives significantly enhance CSO empowerment**. Studies consistently report improvements in leadership skills, organizational management, financial accountability, and project implementation among CSOs that received and technical support. **Carino (2017)** emphasizes that capacity-building workshops for local CSO leaders enhance governance participation and accountability practices. **Jardin et. Al (2024)** in a systematic review of CSO roles in local environmental management in the Philippines identifies enabling factors behind CSO effectiveness, including capacity-related competencies and engagement mechanisms. **Pasamonte (2024)** in a study synthesizing literature and empirical evidence on CSO engagement in local governance, highlights the need for ongoing capacity building through continuous training, seminars and workshops provided by local government and DILG programs to enable CSOs to meaningfully participate in decision making and people's councils.

Nevertheless, results also reveal persistent capacity gaps, particularly among grassroots, rural, and volunteer-based organizations.

Third, **access to financial and technical resources** emerged as a critical result across the reviewed studies. CSOs with diversified funding sources demonstrates stronger autonomy and sustainability, while those heavily dependent on donors or LGU'S experience constraints in advocacy and long term planning. Smaller CSO's face barriers such as complex and limited access to funding mechanisms. **CIVICUS (2024)** highlights that while some CSOs have comparatively good financial and technology resource (due to stable internal income) constraints in external funding availability and human technical capacity are significant barriers to expanded CSO action and resilience. **Asian Development Bank (2024)** underscores that capacity disparities including access to financial and technical resources influence the extent of CSO engagement in governance and social accountability initiatives with better resourced CSOs generally able to sustain longer term programs and partnership.

Fourth, the results highlight the importance of **CSO-LGU partnerships**. Studies show that formalized collaboration, such as Memoranda of Agreement and joint program implementation strengthen service delivery and CSO influence. Conversely, tokenistic partnerships weaken empowerment and reinforce unequal power relations. **Pasamonte, R.C.V.(2023)** finds that CSO engagement with local government enhances inclusive governance and collaborative decision making, although the level of partnering varies by functional area and organizational context. **Ursulom, F.U., Martinez (2021)** report that CSOs in Caoayan, Ilocos Sur formalized commitments to collaborate with their LGU on service delivery priorities including health, education, and governance monitoring.

Fifth, the PRISMA articles consistently report that **empowered CSOs play a strong role in community mobilization**, particularly among marginalized groups such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, and urban poor communities. These efforts lead to increase civic awareness, participation, and collective action at the community level. **Francisco (2021)** cited in multiple Philippine CSO reviews how CSOs mobilize communities and promote participation in governance and environment stewardship. **Gera (2016)** emphasizes that CSOs mobilize citizens in environmental and development actions. **Williamson & Rod (2016)** documented in governance engagement literature showing that CSOs mobilize citizens through public forums and local development processes.

Sixth, the findings demonstrate that **advocacy and social accountability** activities are central to CSO empowerment. CSOs engage in participatory budgeting, policy advocacy, and monitoring of public services, contributing to improved transparency and responsiveness. However, several studies also report political

resistance and regulatory constraints that limit advocacy effectiveness. **Pasamonte, Rona Celeste V (2024)** in *Empowering Grassroots Voices: Engagement of Civil Society Organizations in the Philippines local governance documents* that CSOs promote accountability, transparency, and participation as part of inclusive governance, situating advocacy and social accountability as core engagement functions. **Jardin, Roselles A, Kyle Andre Ibones, Jerald V. Enero et al (2024)** identifies CSOs acting as Advocates and Partners in governance and environmental roles, implying key advocacy and accountability functions undertaken by CSOs in local contexts. Seventh, results show that the **institutional and legal environment** significantly affects empowerment outcomes. While enabling laws exist, inconsistent implementation, weak enforcement, and varying LGU practices reduce their effectiveness in fully empowering. **Cahimtung, K.M., & Tenorio, C.B (2024)** discusses gaps between legal provisions and actual institutional practices that limit meaningful CSO participation in governance. **The Asia Foundation (2025)** Policy Spaces in the Philippine report analyses how institutional and legal mechanisms shape CSO engagements in policy spaces, noting weak or obstructive legal frameworks that constraint CSO influence despite formal participatory.

Finally, recent studies identify **digitalization** as an emerging factor in CSO empowerment. Digital tools enhance communication, advocacy reach, and citizen engagement, but disparities in initial access and skills create uneven empowerment outcomes. **L.J.R. Hecita (2010)** examines CSO participation in ICT policy and governance context. **Tony Roberts & Kevin Hernandez (2017)** discusses digital inclusion and access barriers that critically shape how civil society and citizens participate digitally. Assessment of civil society participation in ICT governance show that Filipino CSOs have been active in shaping and responding to digital policy environments, especially in efforts to democratize ICT inclusion (**Global Information Society Watch, 2024**). **Hesita (2010)** examines how civil society organizations engage in information and communications technology (ICT) policy and governance in the Philippines, identifying opportunities and challenge for CSOs on digital spaces.

The findings from the PRISMA articles suggests that CSO empowerment in the Philippines is enabled by institutional recognition but constrained by implementation gaps and power asymmetries. Although legal frameworks support participation, meaningful empowerment depends on how these framework are operationalized at the local level.

The prominence of capacity building in the results underscores that empowerment is not solely a legal or political issue but also an organizational one. CSOs require sustained investments in leadership development, systems strengthening, and digital skills to fully exercise their roles. The persistent gaps among grassroots CSOs highlight the unequal distribution of empowerment benefits within the sector.

Resource dependence remains a major challenge discussed across the studies. While partnerships with LGUs and donors provide support, over reliance can limit autonomy and advocacy capacity. The discussions across the literature emphasizes the need for diversified and sustainable funding models to support long term empowerment.

The role of CSO-LGU partnerships illustrates both opportunities and risks. When institutionalized and transparent, partnerships enhance collaborative governance and service delivery. However, when driven by political interest, they weaken CSO independence and participation, reinforcing hierarchical governance structures.

Community mobilization emerges as a distinctive strength of the PHILIPPINE CSOs. The discussions highlights that grassroots engagement strengthens social capital and legitimacy, enabling CSOs to represent community interests effectively. This reinforces the idea that empowerment extends beyond organizational capacity to include community-level transformation.

Advocacy and social accountability efforts are discussed as essential yet vulnerable components of empowerment, while these activities contribute to improved governance outcomes, political resistance and shrinking civic space threaten their sustainability, indicating that empowerment is a contested and ongoing process.

Finally, the discussion recognizes digitization as a growing enabler of empowerment, while cautioning that unequal access to technology may reproduce existing inequalities among CSOs if not addressed through inclusive policies and capacity-building programs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

### 1. Strengthen Capacity-Building Programs

Government agencies, development institutions and partner organizations should implement sustained and context-specific capacity-building programs focusing on leadership development, financial management, advocacy and digital competencies for CSOs.

### **2. Enhance Institutional and Policy Support**

Policymakers should review and strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks to create a more enabling environment for CSO participation in governance, ensuring transparency, inclusive and meaningful engagement in decision-making processes.

### **3. Improve Access to Sustainable Funding**

Mechanism to diversify funding sources should be developed to reduce CSO dependence on short term or external funding. Public-private partnership and local government support mechanisms can contribute to financial sustainability.

### **4. Promote Inclusive and Collaborative Governance**

Local Government units should institutionalize multi sector platform that facilitate regular collaboration between CSOs, government agencies and other stakeholders particularly in planning, budgeting and monitoring activities.

### **5. Support Grassroots and Rural Based CSOs**

Targeted interventions should be designed to address disparities by providing grassroots and rural with greater access to training, network and policy platforms.

### **6. Encourage Future Research**

Future studies should employ empirical, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches to assess the long term impacts of CSO empowerment initiatives. Comparative and regional studies are also recommended to capture diverse experiences across the Philippines

## **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

The empowerment of civil society organization is essential to strengthen participatory governance and sustainable community development in the Philippines. By addressing both organizational and structural challenges, stakeholders can create partners in development and governance.

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## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the empowerment of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Philippines through a PRISMA-guided systematic review of relevant literature. The synthesis of findings from diverse academic and institutional sources demonstrates that CSO empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing organizational capacity, particularly governance, policy engagement, resource sustainability and institutional collaboration.

The review revealed that empowered CSOs play a significant role in the community development, democratic governance and social government level. Capacity-building initiatives emerged as the most widely implemented empowerment strategy, enabling CSOs to strengthen leadership, technical competence and internal governance systems. Furthermore, collaborative partnership between CSOs, government agencies and development institutions were found to enhance access to decision-making and resources.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified persistent challenges that hinder CSO empowerment. Limited and unstable funding, regulatory constraint, uneven institutional support and disparities between urban and rural CSOs continue to affect organizational sustainability and effectiveness. The absence of rigorous empirical and longitudinal evaluations further limits the understanding of the long-term impact of empowerment initiatives.

Overall, the findings underscore that CSO empowerment requires not only internal organizational strengthening but also an enabling policy environment and sustained multi sectoral support. Addressing both structural and correlated challenges is essential to fully harness the potential of CSOs in promoting inclusive and participatory development.

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