

Empowering Indigenous Voices: Strengthening the Capacities of Indigenous People's Mandatory Representatives (IPMR) in Sarangani Province for Effective Governance and Advocacy

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Abstract

This study examines the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in Sarangani Province and analyzes the capacity gaps that limit their full participation in governance and advocacy. Anchored on Pitkin's (1967) Theory of Representation, Morgan's (1998) Capacity-Building Framework, and the Good Governance model of Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2010), the research explores how IPMRs perform their mandated roles, the challenges they encounter within local governance structures, and the institutional support systems required to strengthen their representational functions. The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design and gathered data through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving municipal and provincial IPMRs, local officials, Indigenous leaders, and relevant stakeholders. Findings reveal that while IPMRs possess strong cultural legitimacy and community support, their governance participation remains constrained by limited training opportunities, weak institutional backing, political interference, and inadequate access to resources. These barriers affect their ability to influence policy, implement Indigenous programs, and integrate community priorities into local development planning. However, IPMRs also demonstrate resilience through culturally grounded strategies such as consensus-building, unity through customary laws, and partnership-based advocacy. The study concludes that strengthening Indigenous representation requires institutionalized capacity-building, sustainable resource support, improved legal and policy literacy, and reforms that ensure consistent recognition of IPMR mandates across LGUs. This study aligns with SDG 16 by supporting inclusive and accountable governance, SDG 10 by addressing structural inequalities in political participation, and SDG 11 by strengthening culturally responsive local development processes. By promoting empowered Indigenous participation and stronger governance mechanisms, the research contributes to institutional and community sustainability through more inclusive policy-making and culturally grounded development planning.

Keywords: Advocacy; Capacity-Building; Governance; Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives; Indigenous Rights; Inclusive Development; Sarangani Province

1. Introduction

This study examines the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in Sarangani Province and the capacity gaps that limit their full participation in governance and advocacy. Although the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) institutionalized the IPMR role to ensure Indigenous participation in local decision-making (Molintas, 2004), IPMRs continue to experience barriers related to training, institutional support, political inclusion, and access to resources. These limitations reflect wider governance concerns where leadership performance and institutional systems often determine whether participation mechanisms become functional or remain symbolic (Jacoba et al., 2024; Santos, 2023). Capacitation gaps also highlight the importance of structured development systems that strengthen leadership competencies, administrative support, and coordination frameworks, similar to standards-based approaches that improve organizational performance and accountability (Gamit et al., 2024; Santos, 2023). In addition, challenges in documentation processes, program implementation, and institutional responsiveness suggest the need for support models that promote organizational efficiency and effective service delivery mechanisms (De Lara & Santos, 2024; Jacoba et al., 2025). Strengthening Indigenous representation further requires leadership preparedness and human capital development that enhance confidence, decision-making capacity, and policy engagement in governance spaces (Ortiz et al., 2025; Santos & Cajucom, 2020). This is also consistent with the need for collaborative systems and resource mechanisms that support community-oriented governance outcomes and sustainable participation in development planning (Santos et al., 2025; Yu & Santos, 2025). By exploring IPMR experiences, challenges, and support needs, the study aims to strengthen Indigenous representation in local governance and help bridge the gap between policy recognition and meaningful participation, consistent with inclusive governance and cultural preservation goals (United Nations, 2007; Battiste, 2008).

1.1 Background of the Study

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) worldwide have long encountered challenges in securing rights, recognition, and meaningful inclusion in policy and governance processes that shape their lives and territories. In the Philippines, Indigenous populations comprise about 14 to 17 million people and remain among the sectors most vulnerable to marginalization (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP], 2022). The enactment of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) in 1997 created a national mechanism for protecting Indigenous rights, including the formal establishment of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in local government units to ensure IP inclusion in governance and decision-making (Molintas, 2004). In principle, the IPMR mechanism supports Indigenous self-determination, cultural integrity, and participatory development. However, many IPMRs operate under difficult conditions such as limited political leverage, weak institutional backing, inadequate training, and constrained access to resources, which reduces their influence in policy-making and reinforces perceptions of symbolic representation (Paredes, 2015). In Sarangani Province, home to Indigenous communities such as the Blaan, Tboli, and Tagakaulo, the IPMR role remains essential but challenging. While IPMRs carry cultural legitimacy and community trust, they must navigate bureaucratic processes and political conditions that shape whether Indigenous concerns are integrated or sidelined in local development planning. Strengthening IPMR capacities is therefore critical for enabling Indigenous representatives to move from formal inclusion toward substantive governance impact.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature

Research on Indigenous political participation emphasizes that representation in formal institutions is meaningful only when it translates into genuine policy influence, institutional support, and protection of Indigenous rights. Pitkin's (1967) Theory of Representation highlights the distinction between descriptive representation—being present in decision-making spaces—and substantive representation—actively advancing community interests. In Indigenous governance contexts, representatives may hold recognized positions yet remain constrained by structural and political barriers that limit their capacity to advocate effectively. Capacity-building literature reinforces that effective participation depends on development at multiple levels. Morgan's (1998) Capacity-Building Framework identifies individual competencies, organizational effectiveness, and institutional support systems as key requirements for sustainable participation. This perspective is consistent with governance models that define effective governance as participatory, inclusive, and accountable (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Studies further suggest that Indigenous representation often faces persistent institutional resistance, unclear mandates, and marginalization within formal governance structures (Stavenhagen, 2005; Kingsbury, 2001). Scholars also stress that Indigenous empowerment requires culturally grounded approaches rather than generic leadership training. Community-led strategies and Indigenous-defined frameworks have been recommended to ensure relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; Colchester, 2019). Leadership and advocacy training focusing on policy literacy and negotiation has been found essential for strengthening Indigenous representatives' effectiveness (Smith & Hunt, 2016). In the Philippine setting, studies note that capacity-building programs for IPMRs exist but often face limitations such as weak funding, inconsistent implementation, and political constraints (Macusi, 2018; Ramirez, 2020). Indigenous governance literature emphasizes that outcomes improve when traditional governance systems and formal institutions are harmonized, allowing Indigenous leaders to uphold customary practices while engaging state systems (Agrawal, 2005; Cornell & Kalt, 2007). In addition, advocacy research highlights that Indigenous rights are strengthened when leaders mobilize legal tools, community organizing, and partnerships to influence policy outcomes (Brysk, 2000; Davis, 2012). Together, these studies establish that IPMR effectiveness depends on institutional support, culturally appropriate capacitation, and governance environments that genuinely respect Indigenous perspectives.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context

At the national level, the Philippines has established legal mechanisms intended to secure Indigenous political participation. The IPRA provides the statutory basis for protecting ancestral domains, cultural integrity, and self-governance, while also institutionalizing the IPMR role as a key representation mechanism in local legislative councils (Republic Act No. 8371, 1997). The Local Government Code promotes participatory governance and supports sectoral inclusion in local governance processes (Republic Act No. 7160, 1991). Executive Order No. 77, s. 1999 operationalizes IPMR roles and privileges, and NCIP Administrative Order No. 3, series of 2018 standardizes community-based IPMR selection aligned with customary laws (NCIP, 2018). Internationally, Indigenous political participation is reinforced by frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirms Indigenous rights to self-determination and participation in decision-making (United Nations, 2007). ILO Convention No. 169 similarly emphasizes state obligations to consult Indigenous Peoples and ensure participation in matters affecting their territories and governance (ILO, 1989). These commitments align with global development goals that advocate inclusive, representative decision-making. In Sarangani Province, Indigenous representation is shaped by both formal governance structures and Indigenous political traditions. Although the IPMR mechanism provides a formal avenue for inclusion, local implementation is often uneven and dependent on political will, institutional clarity, and the ability of IPMRs to navigate complex socio-political dynamics. This local reality reflects broader patterns observed in studies showing that legal recognition alone is insufficient when institutional and political constraints limit meaningful participation (Macusi, 2018; Ramirez, 2020).

1.4 Theoretical or Conceptual Basis

This study is anchored in theories and frameworks that explain representation, governance performance, and empowerment. Pitkin's (1967) Theory of Representation provides the foundation for assessing whether IPMRs achieve substantive representation beyond formal presence in decision-making institutions. Morgan's (1998) Capacity-Building Framework supports analysis of the multi-level capacities required for IPMR effectiveness, including individual skills, organizational readiness, and institutional support mechanisms. The study also draws from the Good Governance framework, which defines effective governance through participation, transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). This model is relevant for examining how governance systems either enable or constrain IPMR participation within local policy structures. Additionally, Indigenous governance scholarship highlights that Indigenous political participation is strengthened when customary governance practices and formal state systems are integrated rather than treated as separate or incompatible (Agrawal, 2005; Cornell & Kalt, 2007). The conceptual basis of the study emphasizes empowerment through skills development, knowledge enhancement, and confidence-building, supported by capacitation strategies including training, resource provision, and mentorship. These enable representational outcomes such as advocacy, participation, and accountability, while recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems and practices as essential foundations of culturally grounded leadership.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale

Despite strong legal mandates supporting Indigenous participation, research consistently shows a gap between the intended role of IPMRs and their actual influence in local governance. Many IPMRs remain constrained by limited training, insufficient resources, and weak institutional support, resulting in marginal participation in policy-making and development planning (Paredes, 2015; Macusi, 2018). Furthermore, politically influenced selection processes and inconsistent implementation of Indigenous rights mechanisms weaken IPMR legitimacy and reduce the ability of communities to assert self-determined leadership (Macusi, 2018; Ramirez, 2020). While examples from other areas show that IPMRs can contribute meaningfully to policy reforms and Indigenous development when supported (Paredes, 2015; NCIP, 2022), localized evidence remains necessary to understand how these conditions play out in Sarangani Province. This study responds to the need for context-based research that documents IPMR lived experiences, identifies institutional and socio-political constraints, and proposes sustainable capacity-building and governance reforms that strengthen Indigenous participation. The research also aligns with broader concerns on Indigenous rights protection amid land disputes, resource pressures, and threats to cultural integrity (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016).

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study supports the goals of inclusive development by strengthening Indigenous representation and ensuring meaningful participation in governance processes. The research aligns with **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**, as it addresses the need for inclusive decision-making, accountable governance, and strengthened institutional mechanisms that support Indigenous political participation through IPMRs (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010; United Nations, 2007). It also connects with SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by focusing on institutional and structural barriers that marginalize Indigenous voices despite legal recognition (Paredes, 2015; Macusi, 2018). In addition, the study relates to SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities, since culturally responsive governance and Indigenous participation contribute to inclusive and sustainable local development planning, especially in areas where ancestral domains and Indigenous priorities must be integrated into development processes (Agrawal, 2005; Cornell & Kalt, 2007). The study also aligns with SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals, as it emphasizes coordination among LGUs, NCIP, NGOs, and other stakeholders in developing sustainable capacitation systems for IPMRs (Ramirez, 2020; NCIP, 2022).

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

This research contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by strengthening governance mechanisms that support Indigenous rights and culturally grounded participation in local development. In terms of policy and governance sustainability, the study promotes institutional reforms and capacity-building strategies that make Indigenous representation functional rather than symbolic, reinforcing inclusive and accountable governance systems (Pitkin, 1967; Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). The study also supports cultural sustainability by emphasizing the preservation and integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, customary laws, and cultural identity within governance and advocacy, consistent with the protection of Indigenous heritage and self-determination (Battiste, 2008; United Nations, 2007). It further advances community sustainability by strengthening leadership capacity and participation structures that enable communities to articulate priorities, address land and resource concerns, and engage effectively with formal institutions (Agrawal, 2005; Cornell & Kalt, 2007). Focusing on the capacities and lived realities of IPMRs in Sarangani Province, the research helps strengthen Indigenous-inclusive development pathways that are socially just, culturally responsive, and institutionally sustainable, grounded in the principles of rights-based governance and participatory policy-making (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016; NCIP, 2022).

2. Material and methods

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the capacities, challenges, and empowerment needs of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in Sarangani Province. Data were gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to capture both the lived realities of IPMRs and the institutional conditions that shape their participation in governance and advocacy. The methodology was designed to generate rich, contextual narratives and triangulated evidence that can support recommendations for strengthening Indigenous representation in local governance structures.

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and interpret the experiences of IPMRs as they perform their roles in governance and advocacy. This design was appropriate for capturing the perspectives of Indigenous representatives and stakeholders within their specific cultural and political contexts. Through semi-structured inquiry and narrative accounts, the research aimed to describe the realities of IPMR participation in local decision-making, identify barriers affecting their effectiveness, and determine the institutional and capacity-building supports needed to enhance their representational functions. The study prioritized depth of understanding by focusing on detailed experiences and meaning-making rather than numerical measurement, allowing for a nuanced analysis of Indigenous leadership and participatory governance.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The research was conducted in Sarangani Province, a culturally diverse area in Mindanao with Indigenous communities including the Blaan, Tboli, and Tagakaulo. The locale is significant due to the presence of Indigenous political structures alongside formal local government systems where IPMRs are expected to function as mandatory representatives. The study drew contextual information from local government documents covering the period 2021–2023 to support the analysis of governance realities and the contributions of IPMRs in the province. The locale was selected because it provides a relevant setting for examining both the opportunities and constraints associated with Indigenous representation in local governance.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The primary respondents of the study were municipal and provincial IPMRs across Sarangani Province. To deepen contextual understanding, the study also involved key stakeholders such as local government officials, Indigenous community leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations engaged in Indigenous governance concerns. These participants were included to provide multiple perspectives on the governance environment, institutional support systems, and challenges affecting IPMR work. The study ensured that respondents were positioned to describe both the internal realities of Indigenous representation and the external structures influencing policy participation.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in IPMR governance roles and related institutional processes. This sampling approach was suitable for qualitative inquiry because it prioritized information-rich cases and ensured that respondents had relevant experience in local governance, advocacy, and Indigenous representation. Municipal and provincial IPMRs were included to reflect a range of experiences across governance levels, while local officials and stakeholders were selected to provide insights into institutional dynamics, decision-making practices, and support mechanisms affecting Indigenous participation. The study relied on engagement with respondents across different communities in Sarangani Province to capture variations in experience and governance conditions.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in the study was an interview guide designed to support semi-structured data collection. The guide included questions focused on empowerment, capacitation, governance participation, advocacy experiences, and challenges encountered by IPMRs. This instrument enabled the researcher to gather narratives while allowing flexibility to probe deeper into specific issues raised by participants. The research instrument also supported the documentation of institutional barriers and support systems relevant to IPMR governance roles. Ethical considerations were integrated into the instrument's application, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, ensuring that participants' responses were protected throughout the study. Data collected using the interview guide were analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection involved multiple qualitative methods to ensure comprehensive and validated findings. Key informant interviews were conducted with IPMRs, local government officials, Indigenous leaders, and civil society representatives to gather in-depth insights regarding roles, governance experiences, and institutional constraints. Focus group discussions were undertaken to capture community-level perspectives on the effectiveness of IPMR representation and to understand how Indigenous concerns are communicated and supported within local governance systems. Document analysis was also

conducted through the review of legal documents, local policies, and reports relevant to IPRA implementation and IPMR participation, including materials provided by local government institutions in the study locale. The use of interviews, group discussions, and document review enabled triangulation of data to strengthen the reliability and completeness of the study's conclusions.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and themes that emerged from the narratives of IPMRs and stakeholders. Interview and focus group responses were examined to highlight shared experiences, institutional barriers, governance strategies, and capacity-building needs. The analysis emphasized how IPMR participation is shaped by socio-political realities, cultural legitimacy, and institutional support or resistance. Document review findings were integrated with interview-based themes to provide contextual grounding and strengthen interpretation. Through thematic synthesis, the study generated evidence-based insights that informed recommendations for sustainable capacity-building frameworks, institutional reforms, and strengthened support systems for IPMRs in Sarangani Province.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings describe how IPMRs navigate governance and advocacy roles through culturally grounded leadership, while also facing institutional constraints, political marginalization, and uneven support across local government units. The discussion emphasizes that the effectiveness of the IPMR mechanism depends on both legal recognition and the political will of LGUs and institutions such as NCIP, with Indigenous strategies rooted in customary unity, rights-based advocacy, and collaborative partnerships shaping how these challenges are addressed (NCIP, 2012; Delos Reyes, 2018; UNDRIP, 2007).

3.1 Lived Experiences of IPMRs in Governance and Advocacy

3.1.1 Formative Experiences That Shaped IPMR Leadership

The data showed that IPMRs developed their leadership roles through a combination of cultural immersion, service-oriented community involvement, political engagement, and exposure to governance-related activities. Respondents described early identity formation grounded in Indigenous traditions and learning from elders, along with active participation in community roles that strengthened their readiness to represent Indigenous concerns. Several also identified institutional experiences such as summits, consultations, and involvement in policy formulation as significant in shaping their understanding of governance responsibilities and advocacy expectations. These results suggest that IPMR leadership emerges from both cultural legitimacy and experiential learning, reflecting the importance of grounding formal representation in Indigenous identity and community service. Exposure to policy processes and consultations highlights how governance engagement can strengthen representative functions when IPMRs are provided opportunities to learn and participate meaningfully. This supports the view that Indigenous leadership development requires environments that recognize cultural foundations while building skills necessary for formal decision-making, especially within governance structures shaped by institutional requirements and political processes (NCIP, 2012).

3.1.2 Pressing Challenges in Fulfilling IPMR Mandates

The findings showed that IPMRs consistently faced institutional, financial, and socio-political barriers that limited their ability to perform duties effectively. Respondents reported non-recognition of IPMR legitimacy, unequal resource allocation, lack of support staff, and time constraints due to multiple responsibilities. Political interference was frequently cited, particularly in relation to selection processes that weakened Indigenous autonomy. Land disputes were also identified as persistent issues, including overlapping claims between ancestral domains and the presence of organizations perceived as lacking legitimacy under tribal leadership. Additional challenges included pressure from LGUs, high community expectations, and difficulty adjusting to formal governance systems as new representatives. These challenges indicate that while the IPMR role is legally mandated, the conditions for meaningful participation remain unstable and often shaped by political control and weak institutional support. The persistence of political interference aligns with accounts that selection processes should be grounded in community-determined customary systems, yet are vulnerable to manipulation when local executives influence representation outcomes (NCIP, 2012). The reported budget and resource constraints are consistent with findings that financial withholding and institutional resistance can weaken Indigenous participation and limit the operational impact of representatives, especially when resources are tied to political interests (Delos Reyes, 2018).

3.1.3 Effects of Barriers on Advocacy and Indigenous Welfare

Results showed that the barriers faced by IPMRs affected both their performance and the outcomes of their advocacy. Some respondents reported that limited institutional support hindered the implementation of Indigenous programs and delayed the rollout of ADSDPP and cultural preservation initiatives. Others described personal challenges including family responsibilities, emotional strain, lack of broader community support, and fatigue, which reduced sustained engagement. Several respondents also emphasized that limited platforms for participation and underrepresentation in decision-making bodies restricted their ability to influence policy. However, some IPMRs highlighted that strong tribal unity and cooperation

served as a source of resilience, enabling collective action and shared responses to community issues. Despite these strengths, respondents acknowledged a gap between community expectations and what IPMRs could realistically deliver, particularly when LGU and council-level awareness of Indigenous laws remained limited. These findings suggest that operational limitations and political marginalization can weaken substantive representation, reducing Indigenous participation to symbolic inclusion rather than policy influence. Delays in implementing ADSDPP-related initiatives illustrate how institutional constraints can disrupt culturally grounded development priorities and limit the capacity of IPMRs to translate community needs into actionable programs. At the same time, accounts of tribal unity reflect the protective role of customary solidarity in sustaining advocacy, consistent with the importance of Indigenous political structures in strengthening representation amid contested governance environments (UNDRIP, 2007). The reported lack of awareness among council members further reflects the need for continuous institutional learning and support systems to ensure that Indigenous rights are operationalized rather than merely acknowledged.

3.1.4 Government Support and Institutional Hindrances to IPMR Work

The results showed mixed experiences regarding government and local official support. Some respondents described verbal recognition without concrete assistance, while others reported direct obstruction, including blocked budget provisions and staff appointments for IPMR offices. Delays in certificate issuance and misunderstandings of the IPMR mandate were also identified as limiting factors. In contrast, respondents from more supportive areas described positive relationships with government agencies and local officials, particularly where Indigenous political structures were recognized and IPMR participation in decision-making processes was allowed. However, even among supportive contexts, limited budgetary support remained an ongoing concern. These patterns demonstrate that IPMR effectiveness is strongly shaped by local political will and institutional responsiveness, leading to uneven outcomes across municipalities. Obstruction through budget restriction highlights how institutional power can undermine legal mandates and weaken Indigenous representation by limiting operational capacity. Conversely, contexts where Indigenous political systems are respected show that local recognition can create enabling conditions for participation, illustrating that structural inclusion becomes more sustainable when governance systems acknowledge customary legitimacy and provide necessary institutional support (NCIP, 2012).

3.2 Barriers Impacting Representation and Advocacy

3.2.1 Institutional, Financial, and Socio-Political Constraints

The findings revealed consistent barriers across communities, including political interference, financial manipulation, and external challenges to Indigenous legitimacy. Respondents noted that local chief executives influenced IPMR selection processes, despite expectations that these should be community-determined and guided by customary processes (NCIP, 2012). Financial constraints were also reported through non-release or delayed budgets intended for Indigenous development initiatives, which respondents perceived as deliberate strategies to weaken IPMR activities that did not align with political interests (Delos Reyes, 2018). Socially, respondents observed that external groups sometimes attempted to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities, generating confusion and weakening traditional leadership legitimacy. These experiences were framed as undermining Indigenous autonomy and representational authority (UNDRIP, 2007). These results emphasize that governance barriers are not isolated administrative challenges but are part of broader power dynamics that determine whether Indigenous representation is respected in practice. Political interference and financial withholding reflect governance environments where formal recognition exists but is constrained by local-level control and contested authority. The reported external representation attempts further underscore that Indigenous self-determination is threatened when non-Indigenous actors claim authority over Indigenous priorities, reinforcing the importance of legal and institutional safeguards that protect Indigenous decision-making integrity (UNDRIP, 2007; NCIP, 2012).

3.2.2 Indigenous Strategies to Overcome Governance Barriers

The data showed that Indigenous communities and IPMRs employed strategies rooted in customary unity and formal legal mechanisms to respond to governance barriers. Respondents emphasized consensus-building and reliance on customary law as primary sources of legitimacy, while also using formal documentation and submission of resolutions to LGUs that cite IPRA-based rights. Collaboration with NGOs, legal aid groups, and in some cases media engagement were identified as strategies to elevate Indigenous concerns and strengthen advocacy platforms (Gaspar, 2000). Respondents also highlighted education and capacity-building, both within Indigenous communities and among LGU officials, as necessary for improving mutual understanding of responsibilities and Indigenous representation mandates. These strategies reflect a dual approach to governance participation, combining customary systems with formal political engagement. The use of IPRA-based legal arguments and policy documentation indicates that Indigenous advocacy requires both cultural legitimacy and technical engagement with governance structures. Partnerships with NGOs and legal support actors emphasize that external collaboration can strengthen Indigenous claims and broaden access to advocacy resources, particularly when institutional support is weak or politicized (Gaspar, 2000).

3.3 Inclusion and Marginalization of Indigenous Perspectives in Local Governance

3.3.1 Selective Inclusion of Indigenous Priorities in Development Planning

The results showed that Indigenous perspectives were often included only partially within local government planning processes. Respondents reported that even when IP programs appeared in LGU development plans, they were frequently sidelined unless aligned with dominant political agendas. In Alabel municipality, one respondent described that a resolution requesting inclusion of Indigenous development priorities in the Annual Investment Plan was excluded without consultation, which was viewed as inconsistent with Indigenous autonomy and participatory mechanisms such as FPIC (Free, Prior, and Informed Consent) (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). Respondents also stated that in some municipalities, IPMR resolutions were ignored despite formal inclusion of IPMRs in councils, while other municipalities granted fuller legislative participation and responsiveness. These findings illustrate that legal mandates do not automatically translate into consistent governance inclusion, and that Indigenous participation remains conditional in practice. This reflects observations that IPRA implementation is often dependent on political will and awareness rather than standardized institutional commitment, resulting in uneven application across local governance units (Cariño, 2012). The sidelining of Indigenous resolutions also suggests that representation risks becoming symbolic when institutions do not integrate Indigenous priorities into final planning outputs.

3.3.2 Institutional Milestones and Local Recognition of Indigenous Governance

The data showed that some municipalities demonstrated institutional progress in recognizing Indigenous concerns through local policies and cultural initiatives. Respondents described Malungon as an example where an ordinance formally recognized the Municipal Tribal Council as the legitimate representative body of the Blaan and Tagakaulo tribes, enabling more structured Indigenous participation in local planning and reinforcing traditional governance legitimacy (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). Respondents also identified cultural milestones such as the Helubong Festival in Kiamba and the adoption of ADSDPP into local investment planning as examples of LGUs aligning programs with Indigenous priorities. These developments were framed as supportive of cultural integrity and participation, consistent with principles affirmed in UNDRIP (United Nations, 2007). These findings suggest that Indigenous participation becomes more meaningful when local ordinances and governance actions formally recognize Indigenous political structures and integrate Indigenous priorities into development processes. Such examples demonstrate how political will, legal recognition, and institutional responsiveness can combine to strengthen Indigenous participation and protect self-determination in local governance contexts (United Nations, 2007).

3.3.3 Factors Enabling Indigenous Voice and Policy Influence

The results showed that several conditions supported the inclusion of Indigenous voices in governance. Respondents consistently referenced RA 8371 (IPRA), the Local Government Code, and international instruments such as UNDRIP as foundations for asserting Indigenous rights and governance participation (Participants 3, 4, 6). Respondents emphasized the importance of IPMR presence in legislative councils, strong Indigenous Political Structures (IPS), and partnerships with supportive council members, which helped bridge customary governance with formal systems and facilitated the articulation of Indigenous priorities (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). Community unity and credibility were also identified as enabling factors, particularly when IPMRs consistently consulted elders and documented community needs, strengthening legitimacy and representation capacity (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025). These results indicate that inclusion is supported not only by legal frameworks but by operational and relational mechanisms that enable Indigenous participation in practice. The findings support the view that legal recognition alone is insufficient and must be reinforced through political capital, local capacity, and functional inclusion mechanisms in governance processes (Macdonald and Hinz, 2021). The role of unity and consultation reflects the importance of culturally grounded leadership practices in sustaining credibility and strengthening decision-making legitimacy.

3.3.4 Policy Engagement and Advocacy Practices of IPMRs

The findings showed that IPMRs engaged policymakers through both formal and relational strategies. Respondents described submitting resolutions, attending committee hearings, and participating in consultations as key mechanisms for advancing Indigenous priorities. They also emphasized relationship-building approaches such as seeking allies, maintaining respectful engagement, and consistently educating stakeholders about Indigenous rights and cultural contexts (Participants 2, 4, 6, 7). Respondents highlighted the importance of communication skills and the use of IEC materials to increase awareness and improve engagement outcomes (Participants 6, 8, personal communications, 2025). These findings indicate that IPMR governance work requires ongoing negotiation of hybrid leadership roles that combine cultural legitimacy with bureaucratic interaction. The reliance on dialogue, education, and alliance-building reflects the necessity of sustained engagement to influence policy within formal systems that may not fully understand Indigenous governance norms. This supports the view that Indigenous leaders often balance traditional responsibilities with bureaucratic expectations to assert rights and sustain representation within state institutions (Trask, 2004).

3.4 Capacity Strengthening and Empowerment through Capacitation

3.4.1 Training Exposure and Uneven Capacity Development

The results showed that IPMR capacity development varied widely. Some respondents reported receiving training from NCIP and DILG, while others relied on personal initiative and self-study, including learning the IPRA law independently despite limited time in office. Where training existed, respondents described it as focused on leadership development, conflict resolution, and community development planning, while others noted that lack of structured training limited readiness for formal governance responsibilities. These findings emphasize that unequal access to capacitation creates uneven governance performance among IPMRs, reinforcing differences in confidence, technical engagement, and ability to influence policy. The reliance on self-study shows commitment but also highlights the absence of standardized institutional support systems needed to ensure all IPMRs can meet the technical demands of governance and representation roles.

3.4.2 Essential Knowledge, Skills, and Support Mechanisms

The data showed that respondents consistently identified legal literacy, policy drafting, leadership, negotiation, communication, and technical governance knowledge as essential competencies for effective representation. Respondents emphasized that an IPMR must understand IPRA and local legislative processes, while also practicing leadership grounded in Indigenous values. Participants highlighted the need for standardized and continuous training, logistical and legal support, and inclusive partnerships with NGOs and agencies to sustain effective governance engagement. These findings suggest that substantive representation requires both cultural grounding and technical governance capacity. The demand for consistent support systems indicates that capacitation must go beyond isolated training events and be embedded in institutional partnerships that enable IPMRs to navigate governance processes confidently and effectively.

3.4.3 Empowerment Outcomes of Capacitation

The results showed that respondents viewed capacitation as empowering because it increases confidence, strengthens legal and technical competence, reinforces cultural identity, and sustains advocacy efforts. Participants described capacitation as providing tools to assert rights confidently, navigate government processes, and communicate priorities clearly. The findings also indicated that empowerment was strengthened when capacitation validated Indigenous voices and supported meaningful participation rather than token inclusion. These results demonstrate that capacity-building is directly linked to representational effectiveness by strengthening both individual readiness and the ability to sustain policy engagement. Empowerment through training and support reinforces Indigenous participation not only as a legal requirement but as an active governance contribution rooted in both rights-based frameworks and cultural legitimacy.

3.5 Reform Priorities and Future Directions for IPMR Governance

3.5.1 Institutional Reforms and Policy Recommendations from IPMRs

The results showed that IPMRs consistently called for reforms that institutionalize their role and protect representation from political interference. Respondents emphasized the need for mandatory budget allocations for IPMR offices, enforcement measures for non-compliance with Indigenous representation laws, and stronger legal mechanisms through DILG and NCIP to protect Indigenous autonomy. Participants recommended that staffing and budget allocations be automatically integrated into LGU structures and that penalties be imposed for continued exclusion (IPMR-04, 2025). Respondents also stressed that IPRA enforcement should be strengthened so that IPMR roles are respected beyond symbolic recognition (IPMR-02, 2025). These findings indicate that sustained Indigenous participation requires structural reforms, not only individual leadership capacity. Institutional measures such as mandatory budgets and enforcement provisions would reduce vulnerability to political obstruction and ensure that Indigenous representation functions as an operational governance mechanism consistent with legal intent (Cariño, 2012).

3.5.2 Leadership Preparedness and Strengthening Qualification Standards

The results showed broad agreement that leadership development should be sustained for both current and future IPMRs. Respondents proposed strengthening selection criteria to ensure qualified representatives and expanding training on legal frameworks, governance systems, public administration, and Indigenous rights. One respondent proposed that NCIP, DILG, and DBM mandate LGUs to allocate a 5 percent share for Indigenous concerns through the IPMR and elevate qualification standards to strengthen leadership effectiveness (IPMR-06, 2025). These findings suggest that strengthening qualifications and sustaining training supports the view of the IPMR role as a technical governance position rather than a ceremonial seat. This aligns with the need for leadership competency to ensure representatives can participate meaningfully in legislative processes and influence development planning beyond formal attendance (Cariño, 2012).

3.5.3 Guidance for Future IPMRs: Culturally Rooted and Strategic Representation

The results showed that advice offered to future IPMRs centered on cultural grounding, unity, legal literacy, continuous learning, and strategic engagement with governance systems. Respondents emphasized that the IPMR role carries responsibility to represent ancestral voices and community identity, while requiring patience, assertiveness, and commitment to learning laws that protect Indigenous rights. Respondents also emphasized the importance of serving as a

bridge between Indigenous communities and LGUs while ensuring decisions remain rooted in consultations with elders and community consensus. These findings reflect leadership expectations that integrate cultural responsibility with strategic governance participation. The emphasis on community-embedded leadership supports the view that representation must remain culturally grounded, legally informed, and responsive to community priorities while navigating formal institutional systems, aligning with participatory governance models emphasizing culturally legitimate and accountable representation (Cornwall, 2008).

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in Sarangani Province and found that, despite their formal inclusion in local governance, IPMR effectiveness remains constrained by limited training opportunities, weak institutional support, political interference, and inadequate access to resources. The findings show that while IPMRs possess strong cultural legitimacy and community trust, their influence in local policy-making is often inconsistent and dependent on the political will of local government units and the level of institutional support available. Overall, the study highlights that meaningful Indigenous participation requires sustained capacitation, stronger governance mechanisms, and structural reforms that move IPMR representation beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive involvement in decision-making and development planning.

It is recommended that capacity-building for IPMRs be institutionalized through sustained and standardized training focused on governance participation, leadership development, legal literacy, and advocacy. Local government units should strengthen support systems by ensuring adequate budget allocation, providing staffing and logistical resources for IPMR offices, and establishing mechanisms that prevent political interference and ensure consistent recognition of IPMR mandates. Strengthening partnerships with relevant agencies and organizations is also recommended to expand technical and legal support, while reinforcing culturally grounded consultation and consensus-building practices to sustain community accountability and strengthen Indigenous participation in governance.

This study is limited by its focus on the lived experiences of IPMRs and related stakeholders within Sarangani Province, which may not fully represent the conditions and governance dynamics of IPMR implementation in other provinces or regions. Because the research used a descriptive qualitative design, the findings emphasize depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization, and outcomes may vary depending on local political contexts, institutional capacity, and community structures. Future researchers may build on this work by conducting comparative studies across multiple provinces, integrating mixed-method approaches to quantify capacity gaps and governance outcomes, and examining the long-term effects of specific capacity-building programs or policy reforms on IPMR performance, community satisfaction, and Indigenous participation in local development planning.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study adhered to accepted academic and institutional ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs), local government officials, Indigenous community leaders, and relevant stakeholders in Sarangani Province was voluntary. Confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data management were maintained throughout all stages of the research process to ensure the protection of participants and the integrity of the findings.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest. No external individual, institution, or organization influenced the design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of this study.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical safeguards were integrated into the research design and implementation. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant authorities and participating offices prior to data collection. The study complied with accepted research ethics standards, including confidentiality protection, respectful engagement with Indigenous communities, fair recruitment procedures, and objective reporting of findings.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participation was

voluntary, and anonymity was ensured throughout the research process, including during interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation review.

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