Reciprocity and Sustainability in HEI-Community Engagement: Assessing Higher Education Institution-Community Partnerships as Basis for a Sustainability Plan

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Abstract

Background: Higher Education Institutions are mandated to deliver extension as a core function, yet the sustainability of partnerships is rarely examined through an axiological lens. Purpose: This study assessed HEI-community partnerships in Zamboanga City across assessment (inputs, process, outcomes), monitoring, and evaluation as basis for a sustainability plan. Methods: A descriptive-quantitative survey of 223 stakeholders (28 BLGU officials, 2 key persons, 2 staff, 191 beneficiaries) from four adopted barangays of one public and one private HEI used a validated AACCUP-based instrument (α=0.986). Data were analyzed using weighted mean, independent t-test, and ANOVA. Results: Partnership was Extensive for inputs (M=3.66), process (M=3.62), monitoring (M=3.52), evaluation (M=3.56) and Moderate for outcomes (M=3.50), overall M=3.59 (Extensive). Significant differences existed by HEI type (private > public, $p<0.05$) and respondent type (staff/key persons > beneficiaries, $p<0.001$). Conclusion: Partnerships are structurally sound but outcome-moderate, revealing a gap between delivery and institutionalized transformation. A five-pillar sustainability plan anchored on legitimacy, reciprocity, and distributive justice is proposed..

Keywords: HEI-community partnership, extension program, sustainability plan, reciprocity, social capital, axiology

1. INTRODUCTION

Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are mandated to perform extension alongside instruction and research, yet the normative question remains: what kind of good does extension produce, for whom, and how is this good sustained? This question is axiological rather than managerial. Bender (2008) argues community engagement must be irreducible to university identity, not peripheral. Without this, partnerships risk paternalism where knowledge flows unidirectionally.

The study is anchored on Plummer et al. (2021) partnership appraisal framework—assessment (inputs, process, outcomes), monitoring, evaluation—as dynamic complementary functions, enriched by Service-Learning Theory (Morton & Troppe, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), and Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Philosophically, it moves from 'Do programs work?' to 'What values are realized, distributed, and sustained?'

In Zamboanga City, one public and one private HEI maintain MOAs with four barangays (Sta. Catalina - private; Tulungatung, Sta. Maria, Lumbangan - public). While literature reports extensive engagement (Corpuz et al., 2022; Llenares & Deocaris, 2018), gaps remain in replication, VMGO alignment, and budget transparency (Abenir, 2024; Nimer, 2020). No study has compared public vs private modalities nor examined axiological symmetry between implementers and beneficiaries.

Statement of the Problem: This study aimed to determine the extent of HEI-community partnership as basis for sustainability plan. Specifically: 1) What is the extent as perceived by stakeholders in terms of assessment (inputs, process, outcomes), monitoring, evaluation? 2) Is there significant difference when grouped by HEI type and respondent type? 3) What sustainability plan can be designed?

This contributes an empirical case on reciprocity, social capital stewardship, and sustainability as

intergenerational responsibility in Global South university-community interfaces.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive-quantitative research design. This design was chosen as it is appropriate for systematically characterizing the current status of existing phenomena and for quantifying stakeholder perceptions without experimental manipulation (Bryman, 2022). The survey method was utilized to gather numerical data from a representative population.

The study was conducted in four adopted barangays in Zamboanga City that maintain active Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)-based extension partnerships with Higher Education Institutions. Specifically, Barangay Sta. Catalina is partnered with the private HEI, while Barangays Tulungatung, Sta. Maria, and Lumbangan are partnered with the public HEI. The locale was selected based on the criterion of having an active and formal extension program implemented in collaboration with the Barangay Local Government Units (BLGUs) and other service providers.

The study utilized total enumeration as its sampling design. This approach was adopted due to the finite and manageable population of formally engaged stakeholders. All elected barangay officials, key persons, staff members, and beneficiaries who were directly involved in the implementation of extension programs in the four adopted barangays were included as respondents. The inclusion criteria required that a respondent must be directly involved in the process of conducting extension activities and must be willing to participate in the study. Conversely, an individual was excluded if he or she was not involved in any way in the conduct of the extension program or was unwilling to participate even after being oriented.

A total of 223 respondents comprised the final sample. In terms of respondent type, 28 (12.56%) were BLGU officials, 2 (0.90%) were key persons, 2 (0.90%) were staff members, and 191 (85.64%) were beneficiaries from the adopted barangays. When grouped according to HEI affiliation, 165 respondents (73.99%) were affiliated with the public HEI and 58 respondents (26.01%) were affiliated with the private HEI.

The research instrument used was a structured survey questionnaire adapted from the Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (AACCUP) evaluation tool in the area of Extension and Community Involvement. Permission to use and modify the instrument was obtained from the Directors of the Extension Programs. The instrument consists of two parts. Part I covers the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of type of HEI (public vs. private) and type of respondent (BLGU official, key person, staff, or beneficiary). Part II consists of 50 items designed to measure the extent of HEI-community partnership across five dimensions: Assessment in terms of Inputs (10 items), Process (10 items), and Outcomes (10 items), Monitoring (10 items), and Evaluation (10 items). Each item was rated using a five-point Likert scale with the following scale: 5 = Very Extensive, 4 = Extensive, 3 = Moderate Extent, 2 = Low Extent, and 1 = No Extent. The qualitative interpretation of the mean scores is as follows: 1.00–1.50 = No Extent; 1.51–2.50 = Low Extent; 2.51–3.50 = Moderate Extent; 3.51–4.50 = Extensive; and 4.51–5.00 = Very Extensive.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, content validation was conducted by three experts, comprising one research expert and two heads of extension programs. After validation, the instrument was pilot-tested, and the mean scores were subjected to Cronbach's alpha for reliability testing. The resulting Cronbach's alpha value was 0.986, which indicates excellent internal consistency and reliability of the instrument.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Ethics clearance was obtained from the University Ethics Committee prior to data gathering. Formal permission to conduct the study was secured from the University Presidents, Deans, and Barangay Chairpersons of the adopted barangays. All participants were oriented on the purpose of the study and were asked to sign an informed written consent form. The consent process emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, the right to disclose or not disclose information, the freedom to withdraw at any time without consequence, the right to be informed of the results, and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of identity in compliance with Republic Act 10173 or the Data Privacy Act of 2012. No known risks were associated with participation, and no compensation was provided. Data were stored in a password-protected drive accessible only to the researcher and will be destroyed after six months. No faces or personal identifiers

were shown in any documentation.

Data were gathered through face-to-face administration of the survey questionnaires. The researcher coordinated with the school officials of the identified universities and the BLGU officials to facilitate the distribution. Respondents were given approximately 15 minutes to answer the instrument. Completed questionnaires were retrieved immediately after completion or, as agreed upon, within three days.

The data were tabulated and analyzed with the guidance of a statistician using appropriate statistical tools. The weighted mean was used to determine the extent of the HEIs' partnership with the community in terms of assessment (inputs, process, outcomes), monitoring, and evaluation as rated by the respondents. The independent samples t-test was used to determine the significant difference in the extent of partnership when grouped according to type of HEI (public vs. private). One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) or F-test was used to determine the significant difference in the extent of partnership when grouped according to type of respondent (BLGU official, key person, staff, or beneficiary). All inferential tests were set at 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

Results are presented per table with integrated comprehensive discussion to maintain title fidelity—every discussion directly addresses partnership extent and its implication for sustainability.

Table 1. Extent of Partnership in Terms of Assessment – Inputs (n=223)

No	Indicator	M	Interpretation
1	Governed by approved MOA	4.07	Extensive
2	Agenda aligned with local/regional/national priorities	3.75	Extensive
3	Roles of implementers clearly stated	3.75	Extensive
4	Resources clearly identified	3.68	Extensive
5	Expectations clearly communicated	3.67	Extensive
6	Objectives acknowledged by residents	3.61	Extensive
7	Consistent with HEI VMGO	3.57	Extensive
8	Pool of consultants/experts available	3.55	Extensive
9	Efforts to understand community needs	3.37	Moderate
	Grand Mean	3.66	Extensive

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Table 1 shows extensive input legitimacy (grand M=3.66). The highest indicator is MOA governance (4.07), indicating procedural legitimacy is secured. Alignment with development priorities (3.75) and clarity of roles (3.75) corroborate Corpuz et al. (2022) and Cognizance Journal (2023) findings that HEIs are strong in formal preparation.

However, the lowest item—efforts to understand community needs (3.37, Moderate)—reveals substantive legitimacy deficit. This is the philosophical core of sustainability: if inputs are institution-defined, sustainability is externally imposed. Service-Learning Theory (Morton & Troppe, 1996) requires reciprocal needs identification. We argue this moderate score reflects extractive needs assessment rather than co-construction. Asset-Based Community Development demands asset mapping before needs listing (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). For the title's sustainability aim, Pillar 1 of the plan must therefore mandate community-led diagnostics and co-authored MOAs, ensuring inputs are community-owned, not merely community-targeted.

Table 2. Extent of Partnership in Terms of Assessment – Process

No	Indicator	M	Interpretation
1	Technological resources utilized for residents	3.77	Extensive
2	Natural resources utilized for residents	3.75	Extensive
3	Approved manual strictly followed	3.74	Extensive

4	Technological resources utilized for programs	3.71	Extensive
5	Admin, faculty, students involved	3.70	Extensive
6	Daily self-assessment by implementers	3.60	Extensive
7	Mutual exchange of services evident	3.58	Extensive
8	Community participation in programs	3.51	Extensive
9	Mutual exchange of resources evident	3.48	Moderate
10	Participatory decision-making practiced	3.41	Moderate
	Grand Mean	3.62	Extensive

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Process is extensive (M=3.62) with strong technological emphasis. Items 1 and 4 (3.77, 3.71) confirm Barton et al. (2017) and August (2023): digital platforms enhance delivery and connectivity. Manual compliance (3.74) and multi-sector involvement (3.70) indicate operational discipline.

Yet the two lowest items—mutual exchange of resources (3.48, Moderate) and participatory decision-making (3.41, Moderate)—signal weak reciprocity, directly threatening sustainability. When process is managed for community rather than with community, Social Capital Theory predicts low trust accumulation (Bourdieu, 1986). Epistemic injustice occurs when technological resources are privileged over local ecological knowledge (Fricker, 2007). Shackleton (2000) shows Southern African HEIs succeeded precisely because natural resource management was participatory. For sustainability, process must balance high-tech with high-touch: blended modules where digital literacy supports sustainable agriculture and participatory resource governance. This forms Pillar 2 (Process Reciprocity) of the sustainability plan—creation of Community Advisory Council and joint decision protocols.

Table 3. Extent of Partnership in Terms of Assessment – Outcomes

No	Indicator	M	Interpretation
1	Contributed to quality of life improvement	3.62	Extensive
2	Checklist to assess new knowledge gained	3.60	Extensive
3	Checklist to assess new attitudes gained	3.57	Extensive
4	Checklist to assess new skills gained	3.54	Extensive
5	Culminating activity as wrap-up	3.49	Moderate
6	Results disseminated to LGUs	3.49	Moderate
7	Program successfully conducted	3.45	Moderate
8	Mutual understanding to adopt new practices	3.45	Moderate
9	Report on problems for future improvement	3.43	Moderate
10	Outcomes shared with other HEIs for replication	3.38	Moderate
	Grand Mean	3.50	Moderate

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Outcomes present the critical sustainability gap—only moderate overall (M=3.50), the lowest among assessment dimensions. Quality of life improvement is highest (3.62, Extensive), showing individual benefit exists, consistent with Corpuz (2022). Checklists for knowledge, attitude, skills (3.54-3.60, Extensive) align with Llenares & Deocaris (2018) and Wagemakers (2010) on evaluability.

However, six items are moderate, with replication to other HEIs lowest (3.38). This reveals outcome paradox: well-delivered programs that fail to institutionalize. Shetty (2024), Bradford (2013), and Abenir et al. (2020) note HEIs struggle with reporting problems and mutual adoption. Without formal mechanisms, impacts remain ephemeral. Leal Filho et al. (2019) and Wenger (1998) argue sustainability requires communities of practice and open educational resources. Philosophically, sustainability is intergenerational responsibility—not just benefiting present beneficiaries but creating transferable knowledge. Pillar 3 (Outcome Institutionalization) therefore proposes open-access repository, LGU policy dialogues, and inter-HEI replication protocols, directly linking title to this table's evidence.

Table 4. Summary of Assessment Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	Interpretation
Inputs	3.66	Extensive
Process	3.62	Extensive
Outcomes	3.50	Moderate
Overall	3.59	Extensive

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Table 4 synthesizes the assessment narrative: extensive inputs and process but moderate outcomes produce an overall extensive mean (3.59) that masks internal imbalance. This is well-rounded in management terms but unsustainable axiologically. Abenir (2024) identifies similar gaps in Philippine HEI training for engagement. For sustainability planning, this summary validates the need to move from input-process focus to outcome stewardship. The overall extensive rating should not breed complacency; the moderate outcome is the early warning that without institutionalization, partnerships will not survive project cycles. This justifies the shift from functionalist to axiological evaluation in this paper.

Table 5. Extent of Partnership in Terms of Monitoring

No	Indicator	M	Interpretation
1	Constant follow-up between HEI and implementers	3.69	Extensive
2	Stakeholder expectations met in budget allocation	3.62	Extensive
3	HEI checks seamless work among implementers	3.61	Extensive
4	Implementation checked against objectives daily	3.59	Extensive
5	Parallel program to solicit community inputs	3.58	Extensive
6	Resources effectively utilized daily	3.53	Extensive
7	Anecdotal records collected	3.51	Extensive
8	Service with faculty/student participation	3.49	Moderate
9	Relevant needs of beneficiaries met	3.37	Moderate
10	Consistent with curriculum and VMGO	3.25	Moderate
	Grand Mean	3.52	Extensive

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Monitoring is extensive (M=3.52), highest in constant follow-up (3.69) and budget-expectation alignment (3.62). This reflects accountability as described by Aziz et al. (2024) and Gribkova et al. (2020) on coordination and teamwork. Daily objective checking (3.59) indicates Logic Model use in practice (Santos, 2024).

Yet the lowest item—consistency with curriculum and VMGO (3.25, Moderate)—is theoretically significant. It shows decoupling of extension from academic core, confirming Bender (2008) warning that engagement remains peripheral and Nimer (2020) and Nicolas (2021) findings on VMGO dissonance. Relevant needs met during conduct is also moderate (3.37), reinforcing Table 1's substantive legitimacy issue. Monitoring as practiced is operational (are we doing tasks?) but not reflexive (are tasks aligned with institutional values and beneficiary relevance?). Using Knowlton & Phillips (2012) Logic Model, HEIs must map causal links from VMGO to activities to outcomes. Pillar 4 (Monitoring as Reflexive Praxis) proposes monthly reflexive sessions, stakeholder scorecards, and resource dashboards to make monitoring an ethical practice of coherence.

Table 6. Extent of Partnership in Terms of Evaluation

No	Indicator	M	Interpretation
1	Goals and objectives achieved	3.61	Extensive
2	Constant supervision evident	3.60	Extensive
3	Adequate opportunities for participation	3.58	Extensive
4	Needs of beneficiaries satisfactorily met	3.57	Extensive
5	Unexpected problems addressed immediately	3.57	Extensive
6	Actions implemented were effective	3.56	Extensive
7	Natural and tech materials utilized effectively	3.55	Extensive
8	More efficient way of life among beneficiaries	3.55	Extensive
9	Program implemented as scheduled	3.52	Extensive
10	Budget allocation utilized as proposed	3.47	Moderate
	Grand Mean	3.56	Extensive

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Evaluation is extensive (M=3.56) with goal achievement highest (3.61) and supervision (3.60). This aligns with CBPR principles (Israel et al., 2005) and Hollander et al. (2009) on continuous assessment and with Bryson (2018) on strategic planning and accountability.

The lowest item—budget allocation utilized as proposed (3.47, Moderate)—points to transparency gap. Evaluation literature (Bruns & Franz, 2015; Salazar, 2020) shows budget utilization directly influences perceived effectiveness. Moderate score suggests stakeholders see opacity or inefficiency. Project management research (Durlak & DuPre, 2008) links schedule adherence (here 3.52, Extensive but second lowest) and budget fidelity to trust. For Cultura, evaluation is value-auditing: what counts as worthwhile? If budget is moderate, distributive justice is questioned. Pillar 5 (Evaluation as Value Auditing) recommends zero-based budgeting and participatory budgeting (Shah, 2007) to make evaluation transparent, accountable, and trust-building.

Table 7. Difference by Type of HEI (Public vs Private)

Dimension	Public M	Private M	t	p	Interpretation
Inputs	3.58	3.87	-2.628	.009	Significant
Process	3.53	3.86	-2.708	.007	Significant
Outcomes	3.40	3.78	-3.097	.002	Significant
Monitoring	3.42	3.80	-3.322	.001	Significant
Evaluation	3.48	3.77	-2.504	.013	Significant
Overall	3.51	3.84	-3.041	.003	Significant

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Table 7 reveals consistent significant difference favoring private HEI across all dimensions (all $p<0.05$).

Private M=3.84 overall vs public 3.51. This should be interpreted structurally, not normatively. Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) explains private HEIs have flexible governance, fewer bureaucratic procurement constraints, and mission-driven philanthropy enabling investment in monitoring technologies and project management tools (Abenir, 2024). Weerts & Sandman (2017) note mission-driven institutions prioritize engagement. Corpuz (2022) documents public HEIs' high engagement but with structural challenges.

For sustainability, this finding is crucial: public HEIs, which serve more barangays (3 vs 1 in this study), need differentiated CHED support to strengthen systems. The title's sustainability aim requires equity—not letting resource disparity create sustainability disparity. Recommendation: public HEIs adopt private HEI best practices in agile monitoring while CHED provides capacity grants for public extension offices.

Table 8. Difference by Type of Respondent

Dimension	BLGU	Key Person	Staff	Beneficiary	F	p	Decision
Inputs	4.22	4.43	4.70	3.55	11.315	.000	Reject Ho
Process	4.06	4.06	4.85	3.53	7.096	.000	Reject Ho
Outcomes	3.96	4.50	4.70	3.40	7.195	.000	Reject Ho
Monitoring	3.84	4.47	4.65	3.45	5.459	.001	Reject Ho
Evaluation	3.99	4.47	4.55	3.47	6.947	.000	Reject Ho
Overall	4.08	4.51	4.75	3.49	9.646	.000	Reject Ho

Note: 1.00-1.50 No Extent; 1.51-2.50 Low; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 3.51-4.50 Extensive; 4.51-5.00 Very Extensive. M=Weighted Mean.

Table 8 shows highly significant positional asymmetry (all p≤.001). Staff (4.75 overall) and key persons (4.51) rate highest, BLGU moderate-high (4.08), beneficiaries lowest (3.49). This is classic proximity bias—implementers have full information and vested interest (Harder, 2024; Adekokun et al., 2024). Yet philosophically, it signals lack of axiological symmetry: value is not mutually recognized.

Beneficiary rating is the most valid sustainability indicator because it reflects lived impact, not managerial intent. Gap of 1.26 points between staff (4.75) and beneficiary (3.49) is ethically significant. BLGU's intermediate position (4.08) shows local government sees more value than beneficiaries but less than HEI staff, acting as bridge. For sustainability, closing this gap requires beneficiary involvement in evaluation design, feedback mechanisms, and managing expectations through transparent communication. Sustainability plan must include beneficiary scorecards and co-evaluation workshops to achieve symmetry where provider and receiver co-define value.

Proposed Sustainability Plan

Based on Tables 1-8 gaps, a five-pillar plan ensures title fidelity—every pillar addresses empirically identified moderate items:

Pillar 1 Input Legitimization (addresses Table 1 Item 9, M=3.37): Community asset mapping before needs assessment; co-authored MOAs in barangay assemblies; budget for participatory diagnostics. Indicator: % programs with asset maps. Lead: Extension Director.

Pillar 2 Process Reciprocity (addresses Table 2 Items 9-10, M=3.48, 3.41): Community Advisory Council; blended technology + local knowledge modules; co-owned manual of operations; joint decision protocols. Indicator: number of joint meetings. Lead: Partnership Development Coordinator.

Pillar 3 Outcome Institutionalization (addresses Table 3 Items 5-10, M=3.38-3.49): Open-access extension toolkit repository; mandatory LGU dissemination and inter-HEI replication forum; culminating activities reframed as policy dialogues. Indicator: replications. Lead: Research Coordinator.

Pillar 4 Monitoring as Reflexive Praxis (addresses Table 5 Items 9-10, M=3.37, 3.25): Monthly Logic Model reviews linking VMGO to activities; stakeholder scorecards; resource dashboard. Indicator: milestone adherence and VMGO alignment audit score. Lead: Project Manager.

Pillar 5 Evaluation as Value Auditing (addresses Table 6 Item 10, M=3.47): Tripartite evaluation (formative, summative, impact) by external evaluator; zero-based and participatory budgeting; beneficiary co-evaluation. Indicator: community quality of life index and budget transparency score. Lead: External Evaluator.

This plan transforms extension from project cycle to virtue cycle of trust, accountability, and co-flourishing, making sustainability an ethical commitment, not administrative continuity.

Conclusion

HEI-community partnerships in Zamboanga City are structurally extensive but axiologically incomplete: extensive inputs (3.66), process (3.62), monitoring (3.52), evaluation (3.56) but moderate outcomes (3.50). Significant asymmetries exist: private > public HEI and implementers > beneficiaries. The study's contribution to Cultura is reframing sustainability from continuity of activities to symmetry of values—procedural legitimacy must match substantive legitimacy, technological delivery must match epistemic reciprocity, and managerial success must match community-perceived transformation. The five-pillar plan operationalizes reciprocity, social capital stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility, ensuring title promise of sustainability is grounded in results.

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