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Research Article

# Social Amelioration Program (SAP) in Focus: Understanding Public Perceptions and Communication Channels During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Social Amelioration Program (SAP) beneficiaries in Quezon City, Philippines, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on their knowledge, attitudes, practices, and social accountability measures. Using a mixed-method approach that combined a Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) survey of 195 beneficiaries with key informant interviews from local and national agencies, the study examined how the beneficiaries' is shaped by communication channels and grievance mechanisms. Findings show that while beneficiaries displayed high awareness of program guidelines and expressed gratitude for SAP's role in supporting household survival, their engagement in accountability systems was minimal. Fear of reprisal, limited resources, and doubts about the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms constrained active participation. Respondents acknowledged the availability of grievance channels, yet most chose not to utilize them, reflecting a pragmatic orientation toward securing aid rather than demanding systemic reform. Civil society-led transparency tools, such as the Citizens' Budget Tracker and G-Watch monitoring platforms, highlighted the potential of digital innovations, though uptake was restricted by the digital divide and low digital literacy among poor households. The study concludes that while SAP provided critical relief, gaps between program design and implementation limited accountability and inclusivity. Strengthening grievance redress systems, improving access to open data, and fostering partnerships with civil society are recommended to build more transparent, participatory, and equitable social protection in future crises.

## Keywords

Knowledge, Attitude and Accountability, Civic Engagement, Participation, Social Protection

## 1. Introduction

Citizen engagement plays a pivotal role in fostering transparency, enhancing public service delivery, and ensuring that the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations are met. Through social accountability mechanisms, citizens and civil society actors can hold those in authority accountable by participating in various formal and informal processes [5]. Engagement not only promotes responsive governance but also empowers individuals and communities to engage in constructive dialogue with the state, ultimately contributing to the development of evidence-based and inclusive public policies.

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During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, citizen engagement assumes even greater importance. As governments mobilize emergency resources and roll out large-scale social protection programs, the need for accountability becomes more pressing. In such situations, the public's role in monitoring implementation, raising concerns, and ensuring the fair distribution of aid becomes critical in upholding the integrity of government responses.

One of the most significant social protection measures deployed in the Philippines during the COVID-19 crisis was the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). SAP aimed to provide financial support to 18 million low-income households severely affected by lockdowns and economic disruptions. It included diverse beneficiary groups such as senior citizens, persons with disabilities, solo parents, repatriated Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), indigenous peoples, informal workers, and those under "No Work, No Pay" arrangements.

Despite its extensive reach, the SAP's implementation faced numerous operational challenges, including delays in guideline dissemination, verification of eligibility, and distribution of funds. These complications undermined the program's effectiveness and highlighted the importance of involving citizens in oversight functions to enhance responsiveness and equity.

By analyzing both quantitative data from KAP surveys and qualitative insights from key informant interviews with local government units (LGUs) and national agencies, this study seeks to uncover how citizen engagement can influence social protection outcomes in emergency contexts. It offers lessons on the potential and limitations of accountability mechanisms in crisis governance, with implications for future emergency response planning and social welfare programming.

*Social Accountability*

Social accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms—beyond elections—that citizens, communities, and civil society organizations use to hold public officials and service providers accountable. These mechanisms are grounded in a rights-based approach that underscores citizens' entitlement to quality and equitable public service delivery. Especially in developing contexts, social accountability has been recognized as a crucial element in improving governance, enhancing service efficiency, and empowering citizens to actively participate in decision-making processes [3].

Social accountability processes can be classified into two dimensions. The vertical dimension involves direct engagement between citizens and state actors, often through elections or protest, and centers on the relationship between citizens and their representatives [18]. Diagonal accountability introduces elements of both vertical and horizontal forms, wherein citizens directly interact with state oversight bodies such as audit institutions or ombudsmen [18]. Regardless of the form, the effectiveness of these approaches is highly contingent on contextual factors—ranging from institutional readiness to sociocultural norms and citizens' access to information [8, 14, 16].

Grandvoinnet et al. identify four core elements necessary for effective social accountability: (1) citizen action, such as collective mobilization or individual advocacy; (2) state response, which can either be enabling (e.g., improved service delivery) or obstructive (e.g., repression); (3) information flows, which ensure transparency and informed decision-making; and (4) the interface, which facilitates interaction between citizens and the state [8].

Yu explored accountability in the context of COVID-19 by challenging traditional, transparency-driven approaches rooted in economic or political frameworks [20]. Yu introduces the idea of "accountability as mourning"—an ethical and affective form that recognizes the social and emotional costs of death. Drawing on critical accounting literature, the study calls for a more human-centered, freedom-enabled form of accountability that encourages empathy, spontaneous action, and deeper engagement with collective loss. This approach highlights how accountability can function as a moral practice shaped by, but not fully controlled by, power and institutional interests.

Information transparency is a critical enabler of accountability. When well-presented and accessible, information can empower citizens to evaluate government performance and demand corrective action. Joshi emphasizes that when citizens actively monitor public services, their collective voice becomes a vital check on state power [11]. Case studies from various countries illustrate the diverse applications and challenges of social accountability mechanisms:

In India, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) pioneered social audits in rural employment programs, uncovering fraudulent claims and illegal payouts [19]. Their innovative "Jan Sunwai" (public hearings) enabled community members to voice grievances and catalyzed institutional reforms in government auditing practices.

In Ethiopia, [7] found that citizens' limited knowledge of rights, cultural norms discouraging dissent, and poor access to government financial data impeded social accountability efforts under the Ethiopian Social Accountability Program (ESAP). Their study recommended decentralization, capacity-building, and stronger community engagement.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, [14] revealed that weak community networks, socioeconomic deprivation, and lack of educational opportunities—particularly for women—hampered collective action in maternal health services. These challenges were compounded by insufficient funding and limited responsiveness from state actors.

In Ghana, [1] reported that public distrust of both government and civil society organizations weakened accountability efforts in budget transparency initiatives. Despite well-intentioned forums and budget analysis campaigns, public participation remained low due to inaccessible technical documents and skepticism over their impact.

Similar dynamics were also observed in the Philippines, particularly in the implementation of sector-specific SAPs. For example, [17] documented how unclaimed and unaccounted cash bonuses within the sugar industry's SAP raised serious concerns about transparency and the need for robust reporting systems. Government interventions—including legal action and policy adjustments—highlighted the critical role of accountability mechanisms in protecting program integrity.

These cases underscore the importance of tailoring social accountability approaches to local contexts, addressing structural inequalities, and ensuring sustained citizen participation. They also emphasize that accountability is not only about citizen demand but also about the state's willingness and capacity to respond.

*Social Assistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled governments worldwide to adopt rapid and large-scale social assistance programs to cushion the socio-economic shocks experienced by vulnerable populations. Among these interventions, cash transfers emerged as the most widely used modality due to their efficiency in reaching low-income households during lockdowns and mobility restrictions.

Globally, [9] reported that approximately 65% of COVID-19-related social protection interventions across 71 countries involved cash transfers, with over 50 programs newly launched in response to the crisis. These programs were deemed critical in addressing immediate consumption needs and preventing deeper poverty and social unrest. In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) rolled out a cash transfer initiative targeting 200,000 urban poor and rural ultra-poor families, emphasizing rapid disbursement and targeting transparency.

In Kenya, the National Safety Nets Programme (NSNP), known as *Inua Jamii*, served as the government's flagship mechanism to deliver continuous cash support during the pandemic. Administered through three targeted schemes—the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC), Older Persons Cash Transfer (OPCT), and Cash Transfer for Persons with Severe Disabilities (CT-PWSD)—the program aimed to provide consistent income to households in extreme need. The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis emphasized that maintaining these programs was central to the government's COVID-19 mitigation strategy [13].

In the Philippines, the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) was introduced as the country's principal emergency subsidy measure. It aimed to reach over 18 million low-income households affected by Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) protocols. While the SAP was generally appreciated by its recipients, field-level studies revealed significant implementation issues. For instance, [4] documented that SAP beneficiaries in Digos City, Davao del Sur, expressed dissatisfaction with the selection process, which they perceived as politicized and biased toward favored constituents. Beneficiaries reported long waiting times and unclear distribution schedules, further exacerbating their hardships during lockdowns.

The reactions of beneficiaries may be understood through the lens of System Justification Theory (SJT). According to [12], SJT posits that individuals—especially those from disadvantaged groups—may support and justify existing social arrangements, even when they are unfavorable, as a way to meet psychological needs for stability, certainty, and belonging. In the case of SAP, some beneficiaries accepted delays and irregularities as part of a necessary compromise for receiving government aid during a national emergency. The immediacy of survival needs overshadowed concerns about transparency or fairness in program implementation.

Globally, social and economic inequalities—both between and within countries—have played a major role in determining who is more likely to catch COVID-19 and who has access to proper healthcare and social services. The most at-risk individuals are often the least visible in society. Christ and Burritt highlight this in their study on modern slavery during the pandemic, showing that COVID-19 pushed victims into even more vulnerable and exploitable situations [6]. This made it much harder for systems like accounting, auditing, and accountability to track and support them, especially as these systems were already strained by the pandemic.

Overall, these global and local experiences point to several shared insights: (1) Cash transfers are a lifeline in emergencies, particularly when designed and delivered efficiently; (2) Targeting and delivery systems must be robust and inclusive to prevent perceptions of injustice; and (3) Citizen voice and grievance mechanisms must be strengthened to maintain trust and accountability, especially under crisis conditions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Area and Selection of Respondents

This study was conducted in Quezon City (QC), Philippines, spanning approximately 171.71 square kilometers, with a population of 2.96 million (Philippine Census of Population and Housing, 2020). QC is administratively divided into six zonal districts and 142 barangays (localities). The data collection period spanned from June to August 2022 and focused on Districts 1, 2, and 3, identified as having the highest number of SAP beneficiaries in the city.

Within these districts, the selected barangays were:

1) District 1: Vasra, Sto. Cristo, Talayan, and San Jose.
2) District 2: Payatas, Holy Spirit, Bagong Silangan, Commonwealth, and Batasan Hills.
3) District 3: Bagumbuhay, Rodriguez, Libis, and Matandang Balara.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representative coverage of SAP beneficiaries across the three districts. Beneficiary population data were obtained from the QC Local Government Unit (LGU). The sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula to determine the minimum number of respondents required for a 95% confidence level and a ±5% margin of error. A conservative proportion (p = 0.5) was used to maximize variability, given the absence of prior data on citizen demand for social accountability.

The total computed sample size was 385. The sample was proportionally distributed across districts based on their respective SAP beneficiary populations. Table 1 presents the computed sample size per district.

***Table 1.*** *Sample Size Distribution by District.*

| District | Number of Beneficiaries Per District (N) | No. of Locality Covered | Sample Size Computed Per District |
|---|---|---|---|
| District 1 | 28,583 | 4 | 49 |
| District 2 | 136,323 | 5 | 235 |
| District 3 | 59,012 | 4 | 101 |
| Total | 223,918 | 13 | 385 |

## 2.2. Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection a structured survey on the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP): This was administered to the selected SAP beneficiaries to assess their KAP concerning the program. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The survey covered the following areas:

1) Familiarity with the SAP program
2) Understanding of inclusion and exclusion criteria
3) Frequency and amount of cash assistance received
4) Intended and actual use of the assistance
5) Perceptions on fund distribution mechanisms (e.g., digital disbursement).
6) Experiences with grievance reporting and complaint mechanisms

In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted to complement the survey data and gain insights into the implementation and governance of SAP at both local and national levels, conducted from June to August 2022, involving various actors engaged in the implementation and oversight of social assistance programs at both regional and national levels. Participants included representatives from the Quezon City LGU, the Social Services Development Department (SSDD), and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), particularly from its Agency Operations Center (AOC).

The discussion with local program implementers from the QC LGU highlighted issues related to fund management, the potential for digital cash transfer systems, and the mechanisms in place to respond to citizen feedback and complaints. Insights from SSDD officials focused on institutional mechanisms designed to encourage citizen participation, monitor program performance, and address grievances. Meanwhile, the DSWD-AOC representative provided perspectives on public information dissemination, formal grievance redress systems, anti-corruption safeguards, and inter-agency coordination.

Together, these interviews offered a comprehensive view of the operational, institutional, and systemic dimensions of social assistance delivery, underscoring key themes of transparency, accountability, and participatory governance.

Secondary data were obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant documents, reports, and national legal frameworks. These included:

1) *Program and audit reports* from the DSWD and Commission on Audit detailing the implementation and performance of SAP.
2) *Monitoring dashboards and civil society reports*, such as the G-Watch report on citizen entitlements.
3) *Policy and legal documents*, including Republic Acts related to anti-corruption and COVID-19 emergency response.
4) *Statistical reports* from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) provide socioeconomic context, such as unemployment and poverty data.

The integration of primary and secondary data facilitated a triangulated approach to understanding the governance, responsiveness, and effectiveness of SAP implementation at the community level.

# 3. Results and Analysis

## 3.1. Socioeconomic Profile and Distribution of Respondents

A total of 195 respondents from the three most populous districts of Quezon City participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 52%, which is within acceptable standards for social research [15, 2]. Please see Table 2 for the summary.

*Table 2. Response Rate.*

| District | No. of Respondents Per District | Response rate (%) |
|---|---|---|
| District 1 | 28 | 57 |
| District 2 | 117 | 50 |
| District 3 | 50 | 49 |
| Total | 195 | 52 |

Source: Survey, 2022

*Table 3. Distribution of respondents by socio-demographic profile.*

| Socio-demographic profile | Total | |
|---|---|---|
| | No. | % |
| Age (years) | | |
| 18-30 | 29 | 15 |
| 31-41 | 75 | 38 |
| 41-50 | 41 | 21 |
| 51-59 | 35 | 18 |
| ≥ 60 | 15 | 8 |
| Ave. age: 41 | | |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 78 | 40 |
| Female | 117 | 60 |
| Civil Status | | |
| Single (solo parent) | 36 | 18 |
| Married | 152 | 78 |
| Widowed | 7 | 4 |
| Educ. Attainment | | |
| Elem. Undergraduate | 20 | 10 |
| Elementary graduate | 22 | 11 |
| High school undergraduate | 19 | 10 |
| High school graduate | 102 | 52 |
| College undergraduate | 20 | 10 |
| College graduate | 7 | 4 |
| Vocational course graduate | 5 | 3 |
| Source of livelihood | | |
| Carpentry/construction | 23 | 12 |
| Marketing/vendors | 31 | 16 |
| Cleaning jobs | 37 | 19 |

| Socio-demographic profile | Total | |
|---|---|---|
| | No. | % |
| Small business | 30 | 15 |
| Drivers/transportation | 13 | 7 |
| Others | 61 | 31 |
| Ave. monthly income (PhP): 9,566.00 | | |
| Total | 195 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2022
*Note:* Other sources of livelihood include delivery jobs, store assistant/attendants, and online jobs

The average age of respondents was 41 years, with most falling in the 31-41 age group. Respondents in this group often expressed heightened concern for service delivery due to disrupted employment and increased household obligations, similar to findings in Kenya, where the Inua Jamii program provided critical income support to families under similar socioeconomic strain [13].

A majority of respondents were married (78%) or solo parents (18%), suggesting greater household dependency and heightened vulnerability during the pandemic. Educational attainment was relatively low: 52% had completed high school, while only 4% had finished college. Informal employment was predominant, with many engaged in vending, cleaning services, and other casual labor. Respondents' average monthly income was PhP 9,566—below the official poverty threshold—making them heavily reliant on SAP for survival. The above situation mirrors that of the context in Bangladesh, where the profile of recipients of cash transfers targeted the ultra-poor and urban poor who similarly lacked access to stable employment [8].

## 3.2. Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of SAP Beneficiaries

***Table 4.*** *Knowledge of beneficiaries on SAP.*

| Level | KQ1[1] | | KQ2[2] | | KQ3[3] | | KQ4[4] | | KQ5[5] | | KQ6[6] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Strongly aware | 171 | 88 | 183 | 94 | 172 | 88 | 146 | 75 | 176 | 90 | 179 | 92 |
| Moderately aware | 17 | 9 | 8 | 4 | 13 | 7 | 31 | 16 | 13 | 7 | 11 | 6 |
| Somewhat aware | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 16 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Slightly aware | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Not at all aware | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| No response | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Mean score ($\bar{x}$) | 4.82 | | 4.89 | | 4.76 | | 4.62 | | 4.84 | | 4.86 | |
| TOTAL | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2022
[1]KQ1: SAP grants should be given to all eligible poor household beneficiaries, as this is intended to help the low-income families in the informal and vulnerable sectors during the pandemic
[2]KQ2: Every qualified household, and not individually, can receive PhP 5,000 - 8,000 based on regional location
[3]KQ3: The list of qualified beneficiaries should be released by DSWD and DILG/LGU for transparency
[4]KQ4: The priority beneficiaries of SAP are the poor and vulnerable families, including Senior Citizens, Persons with Disability (PWDs), Indigenous Peoples (IPs), street dwellers, and solo parents
[5]KQ5: There should be established grievance channels and mechanisms to report complaints and air voices regarding SAP implementation
[6]KQ6: Beneficiaries can only receive the SAP grants twice or two (2) times, for April and May 2020.

Respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness about SAP, indicating familiarity with program guidelines, eligibility criteria, and the aid amount. Across all key questions (KQs), awareness levels are very high, with "Strongly aware" dominating the responses. "Moderately aware" responses are highest for *KQ4* (16%), suggesting that this area might need more emphasis or clarity. This implies that perhaps *KQ4* should be prioritized for targeted improvement in communication, training, or reinforcement efforts. At the same time, *KQ2* can serve as a benchmark or model for designing strategies to raise awareness across other KQs.

***Table 5.*** *Source of information of SAP beneficiaries.*

| Source | # | % |
|---|---|---|
| News on TV | 122 | 41 |
| Social media | 82 | 28 |
| Word of mouth | 47 | 16 |
| Brgy / LGU | 43 | 14 |
| No response | 3 | 1 |

Note: multiple responses
Source: survey, 2022

The respondents' various sources of information about SAP were also determined, as presented in Table 5. Results showed that 41% of the respondents learned about SAP through Television. Social media was also a major source of information about SAP, with 82 or 28% of the respondents reporting it as a source of information. Moreover, the other sources of information identified were word of mouth in the community with 47 responses (16%), and Brgy and LGU announcements with 43 responses (14%). Note that the respondents had multiple responses, which meant they had obtained information from different or a combination of sources.

Note, however, that while awareness was widespread, some respondents in the interview revealed gaps in information regarding subsequent tranches of aid. Despite government efforts—such as disseminating through various media channels-beneficiaries still faced barriers in accessing real-time updates or clarifications, especially those lacking digital literacy.

*Attitudes*

***Table 6.*** *Attitude of beneficiaries towards SAP.*

| Level | AQ 1[1] | | AQ2[2] | | AQ 3[3] | | AQ 4[4] | | AQ 5[5] | | AQ 6[6] | | AQ 7[7] | | AQ 8[8] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Strongly agree | 158 | 81 | 156 | 94 | 182 | 93 | 174 | 89 | 169 | 87 | 153 | 78 | 150 | 77 | 8 | 4 |
| Agree | 25 | 13 | 26 | 4 | 13 | 7 | 18 | 9 | 15 | 7 | 17 | 9 | 25 | 13 | 129 | 66 |
| Neither | 11 | 6 | 12 | 1 | 0 | - | 2 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 14 | 7 | 10 | 5 | 17 | 9 |
| Disagree | 0 | - | 0 | 1 | 0 | - | 0 | - | 5 | 2.5 | 11 | 6 | 10 | 5 | 37 | 19 |
| Strongly disagree | 0 | - | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 3 | 2 |

1 AQ1: The implementation of SAP was done in an efficient and effective manner.
2 AQ2: The SAP was a big help from the government to the poor and marginalized.
3 AQ3: The SAP grants should be increased and be regularly given to help the poor and marginalized.
4 AQ4: The government should implement mechanisms to improve delivery of social protection programs such as SAP.
5 AQ5: The SAP should be given to all members of the households and not per family.
6 AQ6: The targeting and selection of beneficiaries should not be based on "padrino system"
7 AQ7: There were limited options to report complaints regarding SAP implementation.
8 AQ8: SAP, in general, is a failure.

| Level | AQ 1[1] | | AQ2[2] | | AQ 3[3] | | AQ 4[4] | | AQ 5[5] | | AQ 6[6] | | AQ 7[7] | | AQ 8[8] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| No response | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | - | 1 | 1 | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 1 | 0.51 |
| Mean score ($\bar{x}$) | 4.73 | | 4.72 | | 4.93 | | 4.86 | | 4.78 | | 4.60 | | 4.61 | | 3.51 | |
| TOTAL | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2022

The beneficiaries expressed a positive attitude toward the SAP, underscoring both its perceived effectiveness and its crucial role in assisting poor and marginalized communities. High percentages of "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses dominate most attitude questions, with mean scores above 4.6 in seven out of eight items. A large majority affirmed that SAP was implemented efficiently and effectively, with 94% strongly agreeing that it served as a significant form of government aid to those most in need, as seen in AQ2. In AQ3, consensus was observed on the proposition that SAP grants should be increased and given regularly, reflecting the beneficiaries' desire for more sustained and substantial assistance.

In terms of improving delivery mechanisms (AQ4), the majority, or 89%, strongly agree that mechanisms for enhancing the delivery of social protection programs should be established, alongside calls for expanding coverage from a per-family basis to per individual, suggesting perceptions of inequity in the current distribution scheme. The 78% who showed strong disapproval of beneficiary targeting based on the "padrino system" (AQ6) signaled a demand for fair, transparent, and merit-based selection processes—indicating strong demand for transparent, merit-based targeting.

While still positive (mean = 4.61), only 77% strongly agree there were limited options to report complaints, pointing to a gap in the grievance redress mechanism.

On the question of whether SAP was a failure, the lowest mean score (3.51) and distribution shows: only 4% strongly agree that SAP is a failure, but 19% disagree, and 66% agree that it is *not* a failure (since "Agree" here aligns with rejecting failure). This suggests most beneficiaries do not view SAP as a failure, though a small but notable group holds critical views. The majority either disagreed or refrained from affirming the statement, indicating that most beneficiaries viewed SAP as a legitimate and valuable intervention despite areas for improvement.

Overall, around 81% described the program positively, referring to the assistance as a "blessing" that helped them cover essentials like food, rent, and medicine. The mean attitude score ($\bar{x}$ = 4.58) reflected a strong appreciation for the initiative despite its logistical flaws.

This acceptance can be interpreted in light of System Justification Theory (SJT). As theorized by [10], individuals in marginalized conditions may rationalize systemic inadequacies as a psychological strategy to cope with uncertainty. During the survey, several respondents articulated that while the SAP distribution process was flawed, it was "better than nothing"—a sentiment echoing findings from Digos City [4], where similar deference to government efforts was observed, even amid reports of favoritism and distribution delays.

The respondents appeared to possess an understanding of SAP, being well-versed in the potential cash assistance amount of up to PhP 8,000.00 per household, contingent upon regional wage rates and location. They were aware of the opportunity to receive the subsidy twice, covering April and May 2020. Conversely, certain beneficiaries, as revealed in key informant interviews (KII 1), expressed grievances over not receiving their second tranche of cash aid. They resorted to lodging complaints through diverse channels, including LGU and DSWD hotlines, as well as social media platforms.

The respondents recognized the importance of complaint and redress channels for addressing concerns about SAP. They noted that these channels helped resolve issues such as neglect, reduced cash assistance, and inconsistencies.

*Practices*

***Table 7.*** *Practices and preferences of beneficiaries in the use of the grants and their implementation.*

| | PQ 1 [1] | | PQ 2 [2] | | PQ 3 [3] | | PQ 4 [4] | | PQ 5 [5] | | PQ 6 [6] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Strongly agree | 182 | 93 | 154 | 79 | 169 | 87 | 179 | 92 | 164 | 84 | 170 | 87 |
| Agree | 13 | 17 | 23 | 12 | 23 | 12 | 12 | 6 | 11 | 6 | 17 | 8 |
| Neither | 0 | 0 | 12 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 3 |

| | PQ 1 [1] | | PQ 2 [2] | | PQ 3 [3] | | PQ 4 [4] | | PQ 5 [5] | | PQ 6 [6] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Disagree | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 8 | 2 | 0 |
| Strongly disagree | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| No response | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 0.5 | 1 | 1 |
| *Mean ($\bar{x}$)* | 4.93 | | 4.65 | | 4.85 | | 4.88 | | 4.65 | | 4.8 | |
| TOTAL | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 | 195 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2022

The KAP assessment also determined the ways and practices of the respondents on SAP. The respondents were asked six questions to evaluate their practices or preferred practices on SAP. Table 7 revealed that the mean scores of their responses assessing their practices were all significant, ranging from 4.65 to 4.93. The majority of respondents (98%) reported using their cash aid responsibly as intended. Table 8 below shows that they spent it on food, medicine, and hygiene products. A smaller share used it for rent and debt payments (20%), savings (11%), or livelihood activities (2%). None reported using it for gambling or non-essential expenses.

This pattern in the use of SAP confirms what the study of [4] found, that the money given to the SAP beneficiaries by the government was used for its original purpose and intention. The study concluded that the SAP respondents have a good sense of personal ethics and responsibilities towards their own families. Likewise, these practices reflect a rational response to economic uncertainty and limited income as observed in international settings, such as Kenya and Bangladesh, where beneficiaries used emergency cash transfers to meet basic needs during lockdowns [13, 9]. Overall, these findings provide valuable insights into the practices and how recipients of SAP cash assistance utilized the support during the pandemic, underscoring the importance of targeted relief measures in addressing immediate needs and promoting financial stability among the vulnerable population.

Additionally, the majority, or 79% of the respondent, also strongly agreed that LGU should handle the implementation of the program, as seen in their responses in PQ2. This is a significant finding ($\bar{x}$=4.65), and one major reason cited by the respondents is that LGU can be easily accessible by the beneficiaries, and they would know who the actual person/s are who need assistance on the ground. In that way, according to beneficiaries, the list of beneficiaries can be easily finalized, and the distribution of cash aid can commence immediately. While this appears to be a preferred practice of the respondents, they also acknowledged that the selection of beneficiaries can also be influenced by local officials favoring one over the others if the LGUs finalize the validation and official list.

***Table 8.*** *Usage of SAP.*

| | TOTAL | |
|---|---|---|
| | No. | % |
| Food, medicine, basic needs | 163 | 64 |
| Rent/loan payment | 51 | 20 |
| Savings | 28 | 11 |
| Invested for profit | 6 | 2 |
| Used in gambling | 0 | 0 |
| No response | 6 | 2 |

Source: Survey, 2022

***Table 9.*** *Contributing factors to the respondents' perception of SAP.*

| | TOTAL | |
|---|---|---|
| | # | % |
| Strong LGU and DSWD coordination | 81 | 35 |
| Available list and efficient targeting | 38 | 16 |
| Low number of beneficiaries in the locality | 28 | 12 |
| Readily available budget | 42 | 18 |
| Swift action of the LGU | 35 | 15 |
| No response | 8 | 3 |

Source: Survey, 2022

The respondents were also asked about why they think the SAP had been effectively implemented. The results are presented in Table 9, which shows that a majority of the respondents, or 81 out of 195 (35%), believe there was strong coordination between DSWD and the implementing LGU. Moreover, the respondents also found that a readily available list and efficient targeting of beneficiaries also contributed to its successful implementation, with 38 or 16% of the total respondents.

This is followed by LGU inclusion for the waiting list of beneficiaries, with 41 or 21% of the total respondents. About 35 or 15% of the respondents believe that the swift action of the LGU contributed to the program's success. This is because the LGU was able to help them be included as deserving beneficiaries of the program. Another factor that the beneficiaries cited that contributed to the effective implementation of the program was the readily available budget, with 42 or about 18% of the total beneficiaries mentioning the same. The timely receipt of cash aid by these beneficiaries may explain this.

*Beneficiaries' perspectives on the challenges of SAP implementation*

However, the implementation of the SAP has its challenges and dissatisfaction. From the KII with the implementers and the qualitative feedback from the beneficiaries, the following are its challenges.

*The targeting process was faulty.* The 18 million families in SAP were based on the DSWD's 2015 *Listahanan* database of poor households. However, the pandemic caused job insecurity for those people who may not have considered themselves poor before. Hence, they were not included in the official list of the DSWD for SAP. The additional listing coming from the LGUs confused the official listing, with issues of '*palakasan'* and non-poor beneficiaries being included in the list. This is related to the reports depriving SAP forms of the qualified beneficiaries in favor of preferred but unqualified recipients or relatives.

*Mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic.* The SAP distribution during the pandemic has been very challenging for the LGU. The delivery of cash or '*ayuda*' encountered mobility and logistical barriers due to the health and safety protocols.

*Data errors and discrepancies in SAC forms*. The beneficiary information, which was collected manually through the Social Amelioration Card (SAC), contained errors. This has eventually contributed to the heavy workload of the validators and thus led to delayed payments and the timely receipt of cash aid to the beneficiaries.

*Limited timely access to real-time data and information*. The information being released to the public regarding the actual status of SAP is partially transmitted, delayed, and riddled with inconsistencies.

*There are weak communication channels between the national and local governments.* The handling and implementation of the national and local government has been criticized for the lack of credibility of program processes, especially the listing and eligibility of the beneficiaries, and how the actual program implementation takes place at the local level.

*Lack of emphatic frontliners and external validators*. There were frontliners, but because of the many complaints and concerns about the SAP, the way concerns were handled by the beneficiaries is lacking. Also, there was an exclusion of external validators during SAP implementation that were supposed to serve as watchdogs on the government processes happening on the ground. The validation was done in a rush and with limited guidelines.

While a majority of the beneficiaries acknowledged that SAP was effectively implemented—citing strong coordination between the DSWD and the local governments, the availability of beneficiary lists, swift local action, and the prompt release of funds—it is important to recognize that these same mechanisms also became areas of concern during on-the-ground implementation. In other words, respondents appreciated the presence of clearly defined systems and the availability of resources, but their actual experiences exposed significant gaps between policy design and implementation.

For instance, the strong LGU-DSWD coordination that was highlighted as a key success factor also created confusion and overlap in the targeting process. The use of the outdated 2015 *Listahanan* database forced LGUs to undertake additional listing, which in turn opened opportunities for favoritism and the inclusion of unqualified beneficiaries ("*palakasan*"). Similarly, while the existence of beneficiary lists was seen as efficient targeting in principle, it also contributed to the exclusion of newly poor households brought about by the pandemic. The LGU's swift action was viewed positively by beneficiaries who were successfully included in the program. Yet, this rapid response often bypassed proper validation protocols and eventually resulted in data errors and delayed payouts.

Moreover, although the availability of funds was perceived to have enabled timely delivery, the realities of mobility restrictions, logistical constraints, and manual data collection (i.e., SAC forms) caused further delays and frustrations. These operational inconsistencies—particularly in the areas of transparency (e.g., real-time information on distribution status) and fairness in targeting—ultimately created a sense of uneven access to social protection and, by extension, triggered calls for greater accountability among the implementing agencies.

Thus, the seemingly contradicting perceptions may be understood as complementary: beneficiaries recognize the strength of the program's institutional design but simultaneously underscore the weaknesses in its implementation. This gap between design and practice becomes a critical driver of public demand for accountability, as people question not only *whether* support systems exist, but *how* and *for whom* they work in times of crisis.

Given these mixed operational challenges and perceived inconsistencies, many beneficiaries voiced out their dissatisfaction, which accounted for 19% or 37 respondents who did not remain passive recipients of aid. Rather, they actively sought avenues through which they could express their concerns, clarify information, and demand fair treatment. Understanding the channels of grievance and feedback used by SAP beneficiaries is, therefore, critical, as it reveals how citizens respond when implementation gaps are encountered and how they attempt to hold authorities accountable during emergencies.

The following section explores the different platforms and mechanisms through which beneficiaries voiced their grievances during the SAP implementation.

*Channels of Complaint and Citizen Feedback*

***Table 10.*** *Medium for complaints, reporting, and grievances of respondents.*

| Medium | % |
|---|---|
| Text-call hotlines | 21% |
| Report to LGU | 18% |
| Email DSWD-LGU | 18% |
| DSWD Appearance | 8% |
| LGU Appearance | 7% |
| Social Media | 9% |

Note: Multiple responses
Source of primary data: Survey results, 2022

Respondents were asked about the channels they used to raise concerns regarding the SAP implementation. The most commonly cited platform was social media (43%), followed by SMS and hotline calls (21%), direct reporting to local government units, and email submissions. A smaller number also made personal appearances at DSWD or LGU offices. Despite the availability of these channels, only 19% of the beneficiaries used them to engage with the LGU or DSWD regarding the implementation of SAP.

Jiang and Tang provide empirical evidence from a daily panel dataset covering 189 Chinese cities during COVID-19, showing that crisis-related social media posts by local governments positively influenced citizen compliance. This impact was especially strong when the posts focused on prevention measures and was more pronounced in cities with higher GDP per capita, better-educated populations, and broader internet access [10]. Their findings suggest that social media can be an effective, low-cost tool for local governments to achieve public administration goals during crises, though its effectiveness is shaped by regional socioeconomic conditions.

While SAP beneficiaries in Quezon City demonstrated high levels of awareness and generally used the financial assistance responsibly, their engagement in demanding accountability remained limited and cautious. This reflects what social accountability literature often describes as *latent demand*—citizens are aware of shortcomings, but are constrained from actively questioning state actors. Four key barriers help explain this limited demand for accountability. First is the fear of reprisal: many beneficiaries were hesitant to lodge complaints given the possibility that their access to subsequent aid might be compromised. In some cases, hotlines or frontliners provided little or no response, reinforcing a perception that "speaking up" could jeopardize future entitlements. From a social accountability perspective, this weakens both *answerability* (citizens' ability to question authorities) and *enforceability* (the ability to impose consequences). Under the System Justification Theory, such behavior can be viewed as a rational strategy for stability—poor households may downplay flaws in the system to maintain access to needed resources under crisis conditions.

Second, socioeconomic constraints such as time, energy, and access prevented beneficiaries—many of whom were in informal or precarious employment—from navigating formal complaint systems. Third, perceived futility and distrust in government responsiveness reduced their incentive to participate; similar to observations in other developing country contexts, the lack of procedural justice (i.e., fairness, transparency, and responsiveness of systems) undermined meaningful civic engagement.

These barriers reveal that grievance mechanisms on their own do not automatically translate into social accountability. The inequitable distribution of aid (distributive injustice), the limited opportunity to engage in decision-making (procedural injustice), and the lack of recognition of beneficiaries' voices all combine to create an environment where accountability is perceived as risky or ineffective. Survival needs often took precedence over civic demands—even when beneficiaries were aware of implementation flaws.

In effect, the SAP experience demonstrates that citizen engagement during crises is shaped more by pragmatism than by principle. People act within the confines of the existing system to secure immediate needs, rather than to challenge its structural inequities. From this analysis, it can be inferred that citizen engagement during socio-economic crises—at least within comparable urban poor settings in the Philippines—is shaped more by pragmatism over principle at times of crisis. Citizens often act within the limitations of the system to secure immediate needs, rather than to challenge structural deficiencies. This illustrates the importance of pairing grievance mechanisms with empowerment measures—such as safe spaces for feedback, protection against retaliation, civic awareness, and participatory program design—so that beneficiaries are not only informed, but also able and willing to hold duty bearers to account.

The study's use of standardized survey tools and semi-structured interviews allows for replicability in other localities. Future researchers can adapt similar approach to assess the KAP, accountability mechanisms and civic engagement in other comparable crisis contexts, particularly where state-citizen dynamics are similarly shaped by resource scarcity and institutional mistrust.

*Citizen participation through available social accountability tools during SAP implementation*

In addition to formal grievance channels, a range of social accountability mechanisms emerged during the implementation of SAP, some initiated by civil society organizations (CSOs) and others through community mobilization. These mechanisms are essential not only for enhancing transparency but also for enabling citizens to participate meaningfully in monitoring and evaluating public programs.

Table 11 presents four categories of social accountability mechanisms observed during SAP implementation: NGO and citizen-led initiatives, grievance systems, collective advocacy, and open data platforms.

***Table 11.*** *Summary of social accountability mechanisms during SAP implementation.*

| Category | Design features | Social accountability mechanism |
|---|---|---|
| NGO and citizen-led mobilization initiatives | The civil society set up and mobilized initiatives to monitor the status of SAP funds, disbursements and utilization, validation efforts, and monitoring of overall program implementation, at the national and local levels. | SAP validation<br>Citizen Budget Tracker<br>GWatch Citizen Monitoring |
| Grievance mechanisms | Grievance systems and channels to enable individual citizens to lodge complaints about program delivery and/or appeal decisions, particularly on inclusion/exclusion errors, and other concerns on SAP. | National grievance and redress channels<br>LGU grievance channels |
| Collective action and participation in budget processes | Calls for action addressed to the House of Representatives, Senate, and Malacañang were expressed by several civil society organizations for the passing of crucial bills for pandemic response and recovery. | CSO call for action to pass crucial bills for pandemic response and recovery<br>Joint statement of CSOs |
| Open access to data and information | Public access to data and information on the actual status of SAP, the number of beneficiaries served, and the amount of funds disbursed. Includes also access to key information/source of information. | DSWD SAP Monitoring Dashboard |

Source: Authors' mapping, 2022

*Citizen-Led and NGO Monitoring Initiatives*

Among the most notable civic innovations was the Citizens' Budget Tracker, a digital, open-data initiative launched by a coalition of advocacy groups including the PH COVID-19 Action Network, Right to Know Right Now Coalition, and Move As One Coalition. This platform transformed raw government data into digestible information to track budget allocations and disbursements related to COVID-19 response programs, including SAP. By promoting public awareness and citizen oversight, the Budget Tracker exemplified a digitally mediated model of accountability that fosters real-time vigilance.

Similarly, Government Watch (G-Watch), a long-established citizen-monitoring platform, launched the COVID-19 Citizen Entitlement Map (C-CEM). This tool disaggregated citizen entitlements by sector, location, and program, and served both as a monitoring instrument and an educational tool. It included legal references, hotline numbers, and clear summaries of what citizens were entitled to receive under SAP and other COVID-19 relief efforts.

These initiatives parallel global examples. In India, MKSS's community-led audits and *Jan Sunwai* public hearings created spaces where citizens could interrogate discrepancies in welfare delivery, influencing the institutionalization of social audits in government employment programs [17]. In both cases, grassroots-led monitoring bridged the gap between data availability and actionable transparency.

However, in Quezon City, the uptake of these tools was uneven. Interviews revealed that while some respondents had heard of initiatives like the COVID Budget Tracker, many lacked the digital skills or internet access to engage fully. Others were unaware of their existence entirely, underscoring the digital divide that persists within urban poor populations. This indicates a significant information gap between government initiatives and public awareness. The lack of awareness may have limited citizens' ability to engage in feedback or grievance mechanisms, undermining participatory governance during the crisis. While the survey was conducted in three urban communities within Metro Manila, the consistent trends across locations suggest that similar gaps in citizen engagement and awareness can be cautiously generalized in other urban areas with comparable socio-economic contexts in the Philippines.

In comparison, Kenya's Inua Jamii dashboard allowed real-time tracking of disbursement schedules by county and sub-county, enabling better planning and transparency [11]. For dashboards to support accountability, they must not only release accurate data but also ensure accessibility for non-technical users.

## 4. Conclusions

This study presents critical insights into the dynamics of citizen engagement and social accountability in the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) in Quezon City, Philippines, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from a knowledge-attitude-practice (KAP) survey and key informant interviews, the research reveals a nuanced interplay between beneficiary awareness, attitudes toward government assistance, and patterns of civic participation.

First, while beneficiaries exhibited high levels of awareness (92%) and demonstrated responsible financial behavior—allocating aid to essential needs such as food, medicine, and hygiene—their participation in accountability mechanisms remained markedly low. This paradox of high gratitude yet low grievance action underscores a survival-driven rationality among the urban poor, best understood through System Justification Theory (SJT). Many respondents, particularly those facing extreme economic precarity, rationalized the SAP's implementation flaws as necessary compromises, thereby reinforcing a passive acceptance of systemic shortcomings.

Second, although formal grievance systems existed and were utilized to some extent—especially through digital platforms such as SMS hotlines and Facebook—most beneficiaries refrained from lodging complaints related to deeper governance issues such as favoritism, procedural violations, or misuse of funds. This indicates a tendency toward instrumental engagement—where civic action is aimed at accessing entitlements rather than transforming systemic structures.

Third, social accountability initiatives led by civil society organizations (CSOs), including G-Watch and the Citizens' Budget Tracker, showcased innovative attempts to bridge the information gap and promote transparency. However, their reach was limited due to digital divides and low digital literacy among SAP beneficiaries. Thus, while these platforms hold transformative potential, their effectiveness remains circumscribed by issues of access and inclusivity.

In sum, the study reveals that citizen engagement during crises is deeply conditioned by material realities, institutional cultures, and psychological coping mechanisms. The existence of accountability mechanisms, while crucial, is insufficient in ensuring empowerment unless accompanied by deliberate strategies to address the socio-political and cognitive barriers that suppress active participation.

To strengthen future emergency welfare programs and social protection measures, the study recommends:

1) Institutionalizing safe and user-friendly grievance systems that protect citizens from reprisals.
2) Expanding digital literacy and access among vulnerable populations to ensure equitable participation in online platforms.
3) Partnering with CSOs and local NGOs to conduct civic education campaigns on rights, entitlements, and accountability tools.
4) Ensuring transparency through real-time, accessible open data dashboards that are intelligible to non-technical users.
5) Embedding participatory mechanisms in the program design phase, enabling beneficiaries to co-shape policies that affect their lives.

Ultimately, achieving social accountability requires more than mechanisms—it demands redistributing voice, power, and trust in ways that affirm the agency and dignity of the most marginalized. This study contributes to broader debates on crisis governance, citizen empowerment, and inclusive development, offering grounded lessons for social policy reforms in the Philippines and comparable contexts.

## Abbreviations

SAP Social Amelioration Program

## Author Contributions

**Arjay Padua:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Investigation

**Rhea Gumasing:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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