

The program to institutionalize meritocracy and excellence in human resource management in the Bangsamoro autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao

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Abstract: The Civil Service Commission implemented the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management to enhance the performance levels of government agencies throughout the Philippines. This study aimed to examine and analyze the program's implementation, focusing on the local government units of Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, and Datu Abdullah Sangki, Maguindanao del Sur, both within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study focused specifically on the implementation of the four-core human resource management systems: recruitment, selection, and placement; learning and development; performance management; and the challenges encountered during the program's execution. The findings revealed that the municipalities of Parang and Datu Abdullah Sangki had achieved human resource management system maturity level 2, indicating that the program was effectively implemented. While challenges were encountered during the implementation, they provided a valuable impetus for developing an organizational development intervention specifically tailored to address the needs of these local government units.

Keywords: Meritocracy in the Bangsamoro Autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao, PRIME-HRM in Southeast Asia, PRIME-HRM in the Bangsamoro autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao.

1. Introduction

The Civil Service Commission (CSC) stands as a cornerstone in the Philippine bureaucracy, acting as both a quasi-judicial body and a central human resource institution. Tasked with overseeing government agencies' adherence to human resource policies, the CSC has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Through its Human Resource Policies and Standards Office (HRPSO), the CSC has empowered agencies to make more decisive appointments, provided they meet the established criteria.

Aiming to establish itself as Asia's leading hub for human resource and organizational development (OD) by 2030, the CSC has partnered with the Philippine-Australia Human Resource and Organization Development Facility (PAHRODF). This strategic alliance has been instrumental in advancing the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM), as outlined in the CSC PRIME-HRM Manual (2014).

Before the launch of PRIME-HRM, government agencies were bogged down by a routine of submitting documents and adhering to CSC procedures, leading to inefficiencies and delays that hampered service delivery. The introduction of PRIME-HRM marked a significant shift, empowering agencies to transform their Human Resource Management (HRM) systems in alignment with their mandates. The program's goals include enhancing HRM functions, rewarding exemplary practices, and fostering expertise exchange among agencies (PAHRODF & CSC-PRIME HRM Primer, 2016).

Despite these advancements, questions remain about the program's effectiveness. This study aims to explore and analyze the implementation of PRIME-HRM in the Philippines, with a focus on the local governments of Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, and Datu Abdullah Sangki, Maguindanao del Sur, all within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The findings revealed that these local governments have achieved Human Resource Management maturity level 2—process-defined—through strategic measures like assessments, assistance, and awards. The program has also notably influenced employee behavior, enhancing motivation, commitment, and job involvement. Despite facing challenges, the study suggests that PRIME-HRM has been effectively executed, making a significant impact on HRM practices in the region

2. Theoretical Framework

The attainment of excellence in Human Resource Management (HRM) can be achieved by raising standards in four key areas aligned with the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM): Recruitment, Selection, and Placement (RSP); Learning and Development (L&D); Performance Management (PM); and Rewards and Recognition (R&R).

Recruitment, Selection, and Placement (RSP): The Human Capital Theory (HCT) posits that individuals possess unique skills, competencies, and knowledge that can add significant value to an organization (Ekwoaba et al., 2015). This theory highlights the importance of identifying and retaining talent that aligns with organizational goals, suggesting that HR strategies should focus on attracting individuals with the potential to enhance overall performance (Nalla & Varalaxmi, 2014). In addition, the Equality Approach Model advocates for fairness and non-discrimination in recruitment, ensuring equal opportunities and access to resources for all members of the workforce (Adewale & Anthonia, 2013).

Performance Management (PM): The Resource-Based View (RBV) supports the idea that organisations investing in the development of their human resources gain a competitive advantage. By cultivating the right competencies, firms can outperform rivals and improve their performance (Ekwoaba et al., 2015). This approach underscores the strategic significance of human capital in achieving organizational objectives and maintaining a competitive edge (Adewale & Anthonia, 2013).

Learning and Development (L&D): Effective human resource management is rooted in fostering employee growth and development. Training programs are crucial for enhancing employee capabilities, improving expertise, and boosting organizational performance (Khan et al., 2011; Mirza & Riaz, 2012). Research demonstrates a strong correlation between learning opportunities and increased employee engagement and productivity (Armstrong-Stassen, 1993).

Rewards and Recognition (R&R): Motivation plays a key role in employee performance, and well-designed Rewards and Recognition Systems are essential in this regard (Bunn & Dugas, 2008; Kopelman et al., 2011). Properly structured compensation and acknowledgment programmes not only enhance employee satisfaction but also encourage higher levels of dedication and productivity (Houston, 2000; Nazir et al., 2016). In public agencies, incentives have been linked to improved motivation, commitment, and the achievement of organisational goals (Park, 2014; Belle, 2015; Kim, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive-evaluative design, using a qualitative approach. The choice of this design was motivated by the need for an in-depth analysis of why certain agencies within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) have actively implemented PRIME-HRM, while others have not. This method is particularly suited to uncovering and documenting the factors and circumstances influencing the effectiveness of PRIME-HRM implementation across the four-core human resource management systems.

Qualitative research analyses data of data were drawn from direct field observations, in-depth open-ended interviews, and written documents. Researchers using this approach engage in naturalistic inquiry, examining real-world settings inductively to generate rich, narrative descriptions and construct case studies. Through inductive analysis across multiple cases, this method reveals patterns and themes, which are the core outcomes of qualitative research (Platton, 2005).

4. Results and Discussion

This research examines the Local Government Units (LGUs) of Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, and Datu Sangki Abdula, Maguindanao del Sur.

4.1. Local Government of Parang, Maguindanao del Norte

4.1.1. Recruitment, Selection, and Placement (RSP)

The LGU of Parang has effectively institutionalized recruitment, selection, and placement (RSP) standards through the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM). Equal employment opportunities are strictly upheld, ensuring full compliance with civil service laws, including the Omnibus Rules on Appointment. Notably, political referrals and shortcuts are completely excluded from the hiring process. These practices were already in place before PRIME-HRM, but the programme introduced formal documentation and standardisation.

As noted by the Human Resource Management (HRM) Officer *“prior to the implementation of this programme, we lacked proper records of our practices. Now, documentation is a key requirement.”*

The Civil Service Commission (CSC) has also granted compliant agencies, like Parang, the authority to manage appointments independently, without external audits. The HRM Officer highlighted that Parang’s maturity level 2 status gives their mayor the power to approve appointments, a responsibility that once belonged to the CSC Director. The HRM Officer further said that *“Since Parang achieved maturity level 2 status, our Municipal Mayor has been authorised to approve appointments without needing the Commission’s involvement.”*

4.1.2. Learning and Development (L&D)

Learning and development (L&D) have long been the core HRM practices in Parang, even before the introduction of PRIME-HRM. The municipality established a Development Personnel Committee, which tailors L&D programs to meet the specific needs of individual employees. These programs are consistently approved by the Civil Service Commission (CSC), with funding for training mandated annually by the local executive.

A significant enhancement introduced by PRIME-HRM is greater transparency in the selection of training programs, ensuring all employees have open access to training opportunities. The programme also prioritizes inclusivity, supporting employees with disabilities and ensuring equal access to L&D initiatives.

The Development Planning Officer praised the programme for its financial benefits, particularly the 50% discount on Civil Service training programs: she said that

“As a PRIME-HRM-compliant entity, we now enjoy a 50% reduction in training fees for our participants.”

This privilege has enriched the municipality’s development plans, ensuring that all employees benefit from training aligned with their job functions. The Planning Officer emphasized: *“The Municipality of Parang has many plans to enhance employee capabilities. Most employees have attended trainings or seminars based on the needs of their respective roles, and no one has been denied the chance to participate.”*

The Budget Officer confirmed this, stating that the initiative had full support from the Local Chief Executive.

4.1.3. Performance Management (PM)

The Performance Management System in Parang is well-established, with the local government utilizing the Strategic Performance Management System (SPMS), as approved by the Civil Service Commission (CSC). Regular evaluations are conducted through Office Performance Commitment Reviews (OPCR) and Individual Performance Commitment Reviews (IPCR) to assess both departmental and individual employee performance.

A key feature of this system is the principle of equal opportunity, ensuring that employees with disabilities are fairly evaluated. The Civil Service Commission has formally recognized Parang’s compliance with the programme, and all performance management practices are thoroughly documented.

The Human Resource Management (HRM) Officer stated that the LGU of Parang has implemented the Strategic Performance Management System (SPMS). He noted that, aside from being a requirement from the Civil Service Commission, the enthusiasm for implementing SPMS reflects the competency of the HR department, a standard not consistently observed in neighbouring LGUs. He added that this commitment is regarded as a best practice for the local government unit.

He further elaborated: *“As part of the SPMS implementation, employees are mandated to submit their duly accomplished Individual Performance Commitment Review (IPCR) and Office Performance Commitment Review (OPCR) every six months.”*

To enhance staff responsiveness and performance outcomes, the LGU has established a Performance Management Team (PMT) tasked with evaluating staff performance on a biannual basis.

4.1.4. Rewards and Recognition (R&R)

The rewards and recognition system in the local government of Parang, particularly its annual awards programme, is a significant source of pride for the local government. Initiatives like the **"Gantimpala Agad"** award recognise employees for exemplary performance and honesty, enhancing morale and promoting a culture of excellence.

Giving due recognition to employees, we are empowering them, and by providing this empowerment, their performance will increase (CSC- PRIME-HRM, 2014) as Human Resource Management Officer of Parang said *“we feel motivated to work more and produce more because we reap what we had planted, we have all the energy to work because we understand that we are part of the operation, our failure is the failure of the organization and vice versa.”*

What sets the LGU apart from its neighbors is its commitment to the principle of equal opportunity, ensuring that all employees, irrespective of their position or background, have the chance to be acknowledged for their contributions. This practice has earned Parang a distinguished reputation for excellence in human resource management, both within the autonomous region and beyond.

4.1.5. Challenges

Despite the numerous benefits of the PRIME-HRM programme, its preparation and implementation have posed significant challenges. The extensive documentation requirements and the complexity of the programme have been cited as major hurdles. Many employees have found the process burdensome, often necessitating consultations with the Civil Service Commission to clarify procedural requirements.

The HRM Officer noted: *“Many of our colleagues felt that the program was too difficult, and the extensive documentation would restrict their opportunities for promotion.”*

Another employee echoed these sentiments, highlighting the difficulties in comprehending the program requirements: *“There were many documents to prepare, and sometimes, we did not fully understand the terms used.”*

Although the four core human resource systems—recruitment, selection, learning and development, performance management, and rewards and recognition—are not new to the LGU of Parang, the stringent documentation, evidence-based, and customized requirements introduced by the programme represent significant adjustments for the local government unit.

Despite these challenges, the local government of Parang has been accredited by the Civil Service Commission for its excellence in human resource management. This achievement conferred a maturity level 2 status, which provides the LGU with certain powers and privileges.

4.2. Local Government of Datu Abdullah Sangki, Maguindanao Del Sur

The Human Resource Management (HRM) system in the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki has traditionally centered on recruitment, selection, placement, performance management, learning and development, as well as rewards and recognition, even before the introduction of the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM). Nevertheless, the program has led to significant improvements, enhancing the efficiency and transparency of HRM practices.

4.2.1. Recruitment, Selection, and Placement

Recruitment, Selection, and Placement are key components of the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki's overall outsourcing strategies. The municipality follows a structured process for these functions, prioritizing merit and fitness while avoiding shortcuts. Political recommendations are strictly disregarded, ensuring a fair and unbiased selection process. Employees are assigned roles that match their skills and areas of specialization, promoting job fit and optimal performance.

As the Human Resource Management Officer explained *"Insofar as recruitment, selection, and placement are concerned, we follow defined steps in outsourcing human resources, which involve: 1. Creating job descriptions, 2. Advertising the roles, 3. Screening candidates/applicants, 4. Conducting interviews, 5. Administering tests and assessments, and 6. Selecting the successful candidate."*

Since adopting the PRIME-HRM programme, the local government's human resource management system has transitioned from a transactional to a process-defined approach, achieving Maturity Level 2 compliance. Although the record-keeping system is not yet fully electronic, a transparent and accessible database has been established. This improvement has enhanced the transparency and efficiency of HRM practices.

4.2.2. Performance Management

Similar to the municipality of Parang, Datu Abdullah Sangki has implemented a robust performance management system tailored to meet both individual and agency-wide goals. This system also incorporates the principle of equal opportunity. Employee performance is regularly evaluated by a performance management team through the Strategic Performance Management System (SPMS), which includes both the Office Performance Commitment Review (OPCR) and the Individual Performance Commitment Review (IPCR).

The Human Resource Management Officer highlighted a significant improvement under the PRIME-HRM programme: the transition from the often-criticized traditional performance evaluation system to the more realistic SPMS. This shift ensures that performance appraisals reflect employees' actual responsibilities and outputs. The officer further explained that *"One good practice in Datu Abdullah Sangki is the mandatory submission of the Individual Performance Commitment Review (IPCR), which ensures that employee performance and responsibilities are always realistically assessed."*

According to the PRIME-HRM Manual (2014), the performance management system must align, monitor, and evaluate performance in line with the organization's objectives. Effective performance management is continuous rather than annual and involves leadership at executive and upper management levels. The chairperson of the Performance Management Team emphasised this by stating that *"Our Individual Performance Commitment Review (IPCR) contains activities aligned with the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki's strategic development plan, and our performance evaluations are conducted twice a year."* He further added that *"all of us in the local government are part of the evaluation process; no one is exempt. At the end of each evaluation period, we are required to submit our Individual Performance Commitment Review to the Human Resource Management Office."*

4.2.3. Learning and Development

The local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki has developed a comprehensive learning and development plan tailored to the organization's specific needs. This plan integrates the principle of equal opportunity and emphasizes the continuous professional growth of employees. It has been officially approved by the Civil Service Commission (CSC).

Learning and development have become embedded in the local government's culture, contributing to the retention of efficient and dedicated employees, who are now valuable assets to the organization. The Development Planning Officer explained that *"One of the strategies the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki has employed to broaden and enhance the knowledge and skills of officials and employees is sending them to relevant training sessions, even abroad."* He further added that

“we have developed the technical know-how of our employees, and we have successfully retained them within our local government.”

The Human Resource Management Officer also highlighted a key advantage of being compliant with PRIME-HRM and accredited at Maturity Level 2 by the CSC: the local government unit (LGU) receives a 50% discount on all CSC-related training fees. This benefit was introduced through the programme. As the officer remarked that *“Since Datu Abdullah Sangki became compliant with the PRIME-HRM program, all CSC-related training fees have been reduced by 50%, which is a significant benefit.”* (Interview, April 11, 2022)

4.2.4. Rewards and Recognition

The local government's Programme on Awards and Incentives for Service Excellence (PRAISE) has become a highly regarded component of the HRM system. This program plays a crucial role in boosting employee morale by recognizing their contributions and reinforcing their sense of belonging within the organization. Employees are motivated to excel, knowing that their efforts will be acknowledged and rewarded.

Just like local government of Parnag, Datu Abdullah Sangki has given the reward system as vital instrument in boosting the morale of employees to deliver their services with dedication and commitment. This reward system become the channel of communication for the Mayor of Datu Abdullah Sangki to the employees and constituents the importance of teamwork and shared responsibilities. The Human Resource Management Officer exposed that *“we feel our importance and belongingness in the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki since our Mayor every sixth month of the year launches programme to give due recognition to all our efforts in the form of rewards.”* This is further supported by the Assistant Human Resource Management Officer of the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki who said that *“we work hard to give in return for the equal opportunity we enjoy and even our family earned the benefits from the reward program.”*

Effective employee recognition and rewards can significantly, resulting in higher productivity, better job performance, and increased company loyalty (Satish, 2023). This undoubtedly conquered by the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki as the Budget Officer remarked that *“from the year we applied the recognition and reward system effectively, we see better performance of all of us in the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki, moreover, we remain loyal to the it because we feel that we are valued.”*

Recognition could also improve self-efficacy (Zhang et al. 2023) found to be true. People naturally gain confidence in their ability to achieve when motivated by recognition. The Human Resource Management Officer of Datu Abdullah Sangki stressed that, *“we really feel self-motivated and satisfaction with what we have and earn from our local government through the reward and recognition system, our rank-file employees work well even without being told.”*

4.2.5. Challenges

Just like the municipality of Parang, Datu Abdullah Sangki encountered challenges in preparing the required documentation for the PRIME-HRM program. Not all employees initially understood the value of the initiative, and some stakeholders were hesitant, interpreting the program as a means for the administration to restrict their rights and privileges.

The programme requires several years for full compliance with each core human resource system. The Human Resource Management Officer emphasized that *“volumes of documents are needed, so time and resources are crucial considerations in preparing for the program. This is the primary reason why many agencies in the region, particularly local government units, have not yet fully complied with the Civil Service Commission's program. Most remain at Maturity Level 2 – process-defined – as reaching Maturity Levels 3 and 4 is significantly more challenging.”* This was confirmed by another employee of Datu Abdullah Sangki, who shared that *“the first HRM core system that Datu Abdullah Sangki complied with was recruitment, selection, and placement. It took us two years to complete this core system.”*

According to the Civil Service Commission, there are various reasons for the slow compliance of some agencies compared to others that are more advanced in human resource management. In local

government units, the preparation for PRIME-HRM compliance is particularly burdensome for human resource officers, who must balance these tasks with their regular duties. Additionally, the program requires competent personnel to handle the preparation process. Line agencies often find compliance easier due to having enough skilled staff dedicated to the program.

The Human Resource Management Officer of Datu Abdullah Sangki echoed this concern, stating that *“as far as our municipality is concerned, the first challenge we faced was understanding the required documents and their purpose. The second issue was the lack of personnel to handle the programme’s preparation. Aside from having a limited human resource pool, the preparation requires staff with specific competencies, and we have very few employees with the necessary skills.”*

Despite these challenges, the local government of Datu Abdullah Sangki has achieved **accredited** status, demonstrating readiness to exercise delegated human resource functions. This Level II accreditation grants certain privileges, such as the authority to take final action on appointments. The municipality has also received a Certificate of Recognition for compliance with at least one core HRM system.

5. Common Experiences

These local government units (LGUs) shared similar experiences during the preparation and implementation of the PRIME-HRM programme across the four-core human resource management systems. Both LGUs faced a substantial workload in preparing the necessary documents, many of which were difficult to understand and required personnel with specialised expertise. The programme demands a high level of diligence, necessitating focal and expert personnel to ensure the accuracy and timeliness of the preparations. Additionally, stakeholders initially displayed reluctance, perceiving the program as a restriction on their growth opportunities.

It took nearly three years for these local government units to achieve Maturity Level 2 accreditation, reflecting their commitment to meeting the program's requirements.

Despite these challenges, the local governments of Parang and Datu Abdullah Sangki were ultimately empowered by the Civil Service Commission to exercise certain privileges and prerogatives. This recognition elevated their human resource systems to a higher standard of excellence, contributing improved governance and more efficient public service delivery.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Local Government Units (LGUs) of Parang and Datu Abdullah Sangki have effectively implemented the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM). Both municipalities achieved Maturity Level 2 accreditation. This accomplishment reflects their commitment to improving human resource management systems and enhancing governance.

However, the journey was not without challenges. Both municipalities faced significant hurdles in preparation and execution. They dealt with complex documentation and initial resistance from stakeholders. Despite these issues, their dedication and the support from the Civil Service Commission have facilitated progress.

These conditions highlight the importance of ongoing capacity-building and stakeholder engagement. By addressing these areas, the municipalities can ensure sustained improvements in their HRM systems. The successful implementation of PRIME-HRM marks a vital step towards achieving more efficient and transparent governance in public service.

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