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Short Communication

Instrumental Role of the Technical Assistance Program on Human Settlements Planning (TAP-HSP) in Local Development Planning in the Philippines

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Abstract

Local development planning remains a challenge for municipalities and cities in the Philippines due to the lack of personnel with technical planning capacities and poor database management systems amplified by the recent devolution policy and the COVID-19 pandemic. The need to address these gaps has given birth to the Technical Assistance Program on Human Settlements Planning (TAP-HSP) as a public service and extension program of the College of Human Ecology, University of the Philippines Los Baños. TAP-HSP provides capacity building and technical assistance to various planning institutions in the country and aims to make cities and communities safe, resilient, inclusive and sustainable. This short communication explores the history, milestones, components and modalities of TAP-HSP, emphasizing its instrumental role in local development planning in the country. TAP-HSP offers different modalities and planning arrangements through its three components: Capacity Development for Planners, Practice of Profession, and Model Community/City for Sustainability and Resilience. Over the years, the demand for TAP-HSP services has remarkably grown that it has played instrumental roles in empowering local planners, molding future planners, bridging planning theories to practice, championing evidence-based, participatory, and inclusive planning, being a key partner for local development, and advocating for liveable cities and communities in local development planning. TAP-HSP's relevance shall continue progressing with its sustained excellent program ratings and growing network of LGU partners, positioning it as a key player in local and national development and a promoter of inclusive and sustainable communities.

Keywords— TAP-HSP, Local Development Planning, Sustainable Development Goal 11

1 Introduction

All local government units (LGUs) in the Philippines are mandated to formulate local development plans pursuant to the Local Government Code of 1991. Thirty years since the promulgation of the policy, local development planning has still been a great challenge for many LGUs in the country. According to Quitalig and Orale [1], lack of personnel with the necessary knowledge, skills, training, and capacity, poor data management and incomplete information for decision-making, and lack of equipment are among the reasons for the difficulty of LGUs to comply in updating their local plans. Lech and Leppert [2] further supported this in 2018, where they identified factors constraining the preparation and implementation of local land use plans such as complex planning policies, lack of vertical and horizontal integration, and limited local government capacities among others. Quite interestingly, the Philippines shares similar challenges to plan preparation and implementation to other developing countries, particularly in the lack of municipal human resources and capacity, weak vertical and horizontal coordination, and inadequate planning instruments [3, 4].

Recently, the challenges in local development planning in the country have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of Executive Order 138 series of 2021 or the full devolution of certain functions of the executive branch to the local governments [5]. Local governments served at the forefront of the pandemic battle with no proper tools and plans for infectious disease, worsened by inapplicable national policies and misinformation about the pandemic [6, 7].

Meanwhile, decentralization requires LGUs to have additional responsibilities for service delivery and local economic development, necessitating more human resources with sufficient capacities [8]. LGUs must deal with these new challenges while addressing the other longstanding gaps in local development planning.

The Technical Assistance Program on Human Settlements Planning, also known as TAP-HSP, responds to the gaps in the local development planning in the country through capacity building, plan preparation, and partnerships to help create sustainable and liveable communities. TAP-HSP is the banner public service arm of the College of Human Ecology (CHE) at the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB). It provides technical assistance to local government units crafting risk-sensitive development plans. TAP-HSP is CHE's means to link its expertise to the Sustainable Development Goal 11 and the New Urban Agenda. TAP-HSP aims to contribute to making sustainable cities and communities through public service and institutional partnerships with planning and development stakeholders from local to national institutions. This is done by tapping the vital resources of the college, such as its faculty, students, and alumni. The partnership under TAP-HSP connects the theory and concepts in land use and local development planning to implementation in the local government units.

This short communication explores the TAP-HSP's crucial role in local development planning. Specifically, this paper aims to trace the history, milestones, and accomplishments of TAP-HSP, discuss the components and modalities of the program, and synthesize the instrumental roles of TAP-HSP in the local development planning arena in the Philippines.

2 A Brief History of TAP-HSP: Milestones and Accomplishments over the Years

TAP-HSP was conceptualized in 2015 to provide a formal structure to the public service and extension projects of the Department of Community and Environmental Resource Planning of the CHE, UPLB. Rooted in the Department's long-running technical assistance to various public and private planning offices, TAP-HSP was an attempt to consolidate the Department's public service and extension efforts and create strategic and effective mechanisms to respond to the needs of the planning stakeholders. As initially conceived, TAP-HSP has four (4) components including capacity building for planners, young professionals mentoring, practice of profession, and model community and city for sustainability.

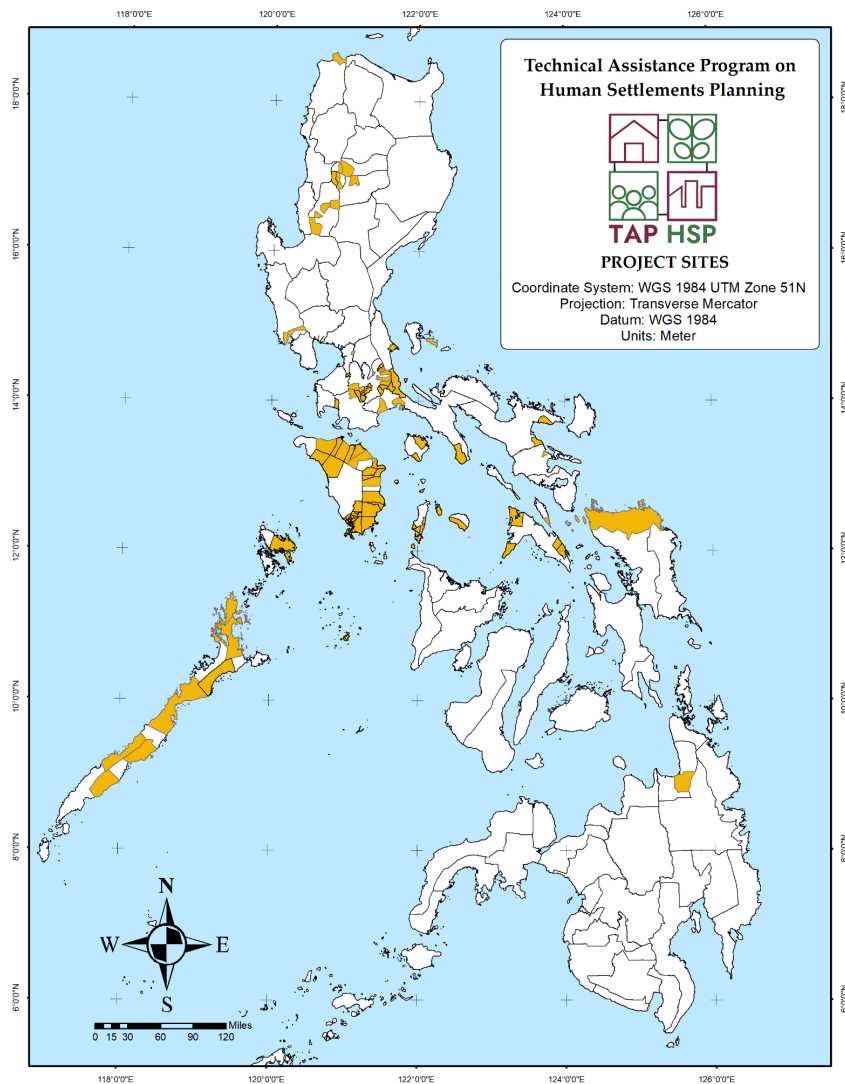


Figure 1.
TAP-HSP Project Sites

One of the early partners was the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB), now the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD). The first applications of the TAP-HSP model were piloted across municipalities in MIMAROPA region through the partnership with HLURB. Typically, local government units outsource expertise from consultants including experts from the academe in preparing their local plans. The TAP-HSP model presented alternative modalities to plan preparation, prioritizing the low-income and hard-to-reach municipalities.

During the same period, environmental planning gained popularity with the passage of Republic Act No. 10587 or the law regulating the environmental planning profession in the Philippines 2013. The policy stipulated that after five years of its effectivity, only licensed environmental planners shall be appointed as heads and assistant heads of government units that require competencies, knowledge and skills of licensed environmental planners [9]. It was a reasonable time to launch the short environmental planning course, which became the first training course offered under TAP-HSP. In 2020, the pandemic affected the usual operation and service delivery of TAP-HSP, requiring it to adapt alternative plan preparation tools and modalities to cope with imposed health and safety restrictions.

Digital technology and hybrid modalities were explored, eventually becoming the new normal in the program's operations. The adjustment to new tools and technologies has opened opportunities for TAP-HSP to expand its network, reaching untapped regions and provinces in the three major islands of the country (Figure 1). More precise guidelines, databases and protocols for TAP-HSP were also established during this period using digital technology.

Through TAP-HSP, DCERP was recognized by DHSUD Region 4A in December of 2021 for its contribution to pursuing sustainable human settlements and urban development. In February of 2023, TAP-HSP was elevated as a college public service flagship program under the Dean's Memorandum No. 08-2023 [10].

Over the years, TAP-HSP has continued to serve its various planning stakeholders. Regarding capability building, TAP-HSP has organized 22 trainings and seven seminars, with an average of three (3) trainings and two (2) seminars per year, which were attended by more than 2,600 participants nationwide. It has deployed 163 young professional graduates, also called mentees, mentored by 51 volunteer professional planners who worked in 59 LGUs for local plan preparation (see [Supplementary Material: TAP-HSP Project Sites](#)). The planning teams have completed 132 development plans with an average evaluation of 4.48 out of 5. The program has also collaborated with different agencies to develop different manuals such as the mainstreaming food and nutrition security in local disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation (DRR-CCA) planning, mainstreaming DRR-CCA on the comprehensive development plan, and the integration of science, technology and innovation in local development. Further, it established urban laboratories in the three municipalities (Sto. Tomas, Batangas; Victoria and Bay, Laguna) in CALABARZON which serve as the main sites for students, faculty, and staff to conduct research work and planning exercises conducive to the development of the municipalities. At present, DCERP has several existing memorandums of agreements with local government units and provincial, regional, and national public and private agencies in the country.

A graphical timeline of the milestones and accomplishments of TAP-HSP is shown in Figure 2.

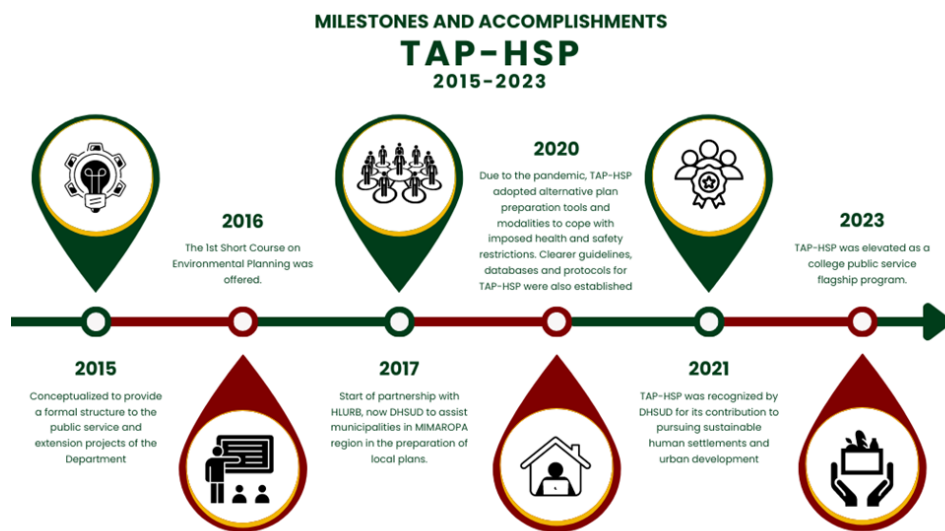


Figure 2.
TAP-HSP Milestones and Accomplishments

3 The Components and Modalities of TAP-HSP

From the original four (4) components of TAP-HSP, it was later consolidated into three (3) components (Figure 3):

The first component is the Capacity Development for Planners which is intended to capacitate and develop the skills of professional and future planners through 1) training and 2) mentoring mechanisms. The training sub-component allows planners to equip and update themselves with necessary planning skills required to perform their planning functions. Under this sub-component, TAP-HSP offers short courses and trainings on environmental planning, planning tools and techniques such as climate and disaster risk assessments, nature-based solutions, participatory and GIS-based mapping, and CLUP-Zoning Ordinance (ZO) Enforcement among others. The training offered under TAP-HSP typically involves joint collaborations between the Department and professional planning organizations or planning-related offices from national and local governments.

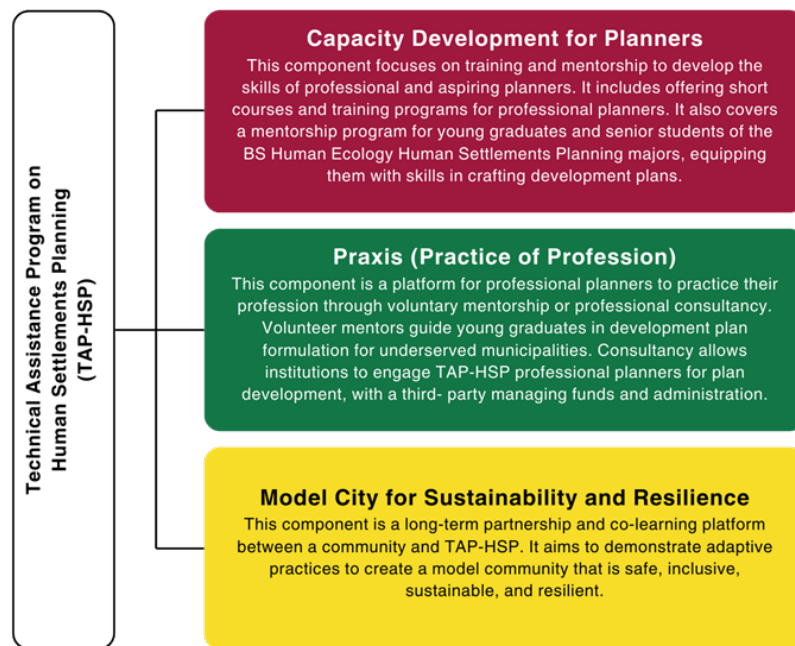


Figure 3.
TAP-HSP Components

On the other hand, the mentoring sub-component of the Capacity Development for Planners caters to young professional graduates and senior graduating students of the BS Human Ecology (BSHE) major in Human Settlements Planning (HSP). Young professional graduates referred to as mentees are mentored by experienced planning professionals and are deployed to the different municipalities in the Philippines to assist in crafting various development plans. Meanwhile, senior graduating students, referred to as practicumers, are supervised by faculty advisers and are fielded to specific planning sites to assist the partner agencies, usually LGUs, in preparing planning documents as part of their culmination coursework. The mentoring sub-component allows the young alumni and students to experience actual planning activities which help them qualify for the licensure examination for environmental planners.

Most of the projects of TAP-HSP are anchored under this first component. TAP-HSP modalities were developed according to the planning partners' and planners' needs and capacities. These modalities shall be discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

The second component is the Praxis or the Practice of Profession. Under this component, TAP-HSP creates platforms for professional planners, commonly from the roster of alumni experts and

faculty members, to practice their profession by providing technical assistance in planning projects. Praxis takes place in the form of either 1) voluntary mentorship or 2) professional consultancy. Volunteer mentors from the professional planners serve as planning specialists and planning team leaders of the young professional graduates who are their mentees. They set the direction and provide the necessary guidance in developing and formulating development plans. Given its voluntary nature, a criterion for mentorship apart from their expertise is their willingness to serve low-income and hard-to-reach municipalities.

In contrast, traditional consultancy allows institutions to tap alumni and faculty experts as consultants in preparing plans and planning manuals. Usually, in a consultancy modality, institutions request the expertise of TAP-HSP professional planners and a third-party non-profit organization serves as fund and administrative manager. Given the existing demand for this intervention, the consultancy modality opens an alternative option and an opportunity for the institutions to meet their planning needs and for the planning experts to practice their profession.

The third and last component of TAP-HSP is the Model Communities and Cities for Sustainability and Resilience. This component aims to adopt a community or municipality where sustainable practices will be implemented and stakeholders will be capacitated to be adaptive and resilient. It hopes to help build sustainable and resilient model communities and cities. TAP-HSP's attempt to help develop model communities and cities was through establishing long-term partnerships with different institutions. In particular, TAP-HSP sets the groundwork through collaborations with international organizations such as the UN-Habitat, Habitat for Humanity, among others; national and regional institutions of Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA); local government units; and most importantly local communities and people's organizations. The establishment of urban laboratories through partnerships with municipalities in CALABARZON is a concrete effort to realize this component. Urban laboratories are platforms to practice critical and creative urban thinking, research, extension and instruction, addressing the complexity of urban challenges through interdisciplinary approaches [11]. All of these efforts and initiatives collectively contribute to creating safe, inclusive, sustainable and resilient communities which is the ultimate goal of the TAP-HSP.

In terms of operations, TAP-HSP offers different modalities and planning arrangements that fit the needs of its partners and stakeholders.

The Mentorship Model

The mentorship model is an original TAP-HSP-developed modality that veers from traditional consultant-led technical assistance. It establishes a partner relationship between the TAP-HSP planning team and the requesting institutions, mostly LGUs. At the inception of the project, a planning team composed of a team leader, planning specialists and planning assistants is created to provide technical assistance to the requesting agency (Figure 4). Similarly, the partner agency assigns its co-team leader and a technical working group who will work closely with the TAP-HSP planning team during the entire duration of the project.

In this model, planning assistants, also referred to as young professional graduates and mentees, are deployed to municipalities while being mentored by planning specialists to formulate the local plans. During the planning process, the team conducts data collection, validation, analysis, site visits, workshops, and consultations with local offices and stakeholders to accomplish the requested development plan while ensuring that the core planning values of participation and inclusivity are upheld.

The mentorship model is cost-effective, especially for low-income municipalities with limited human resources. Partners are capacitated to conduct the participatory planning processes and transfer knowledge from the TAP-HSP planning team and their local counterparts. At the same time,

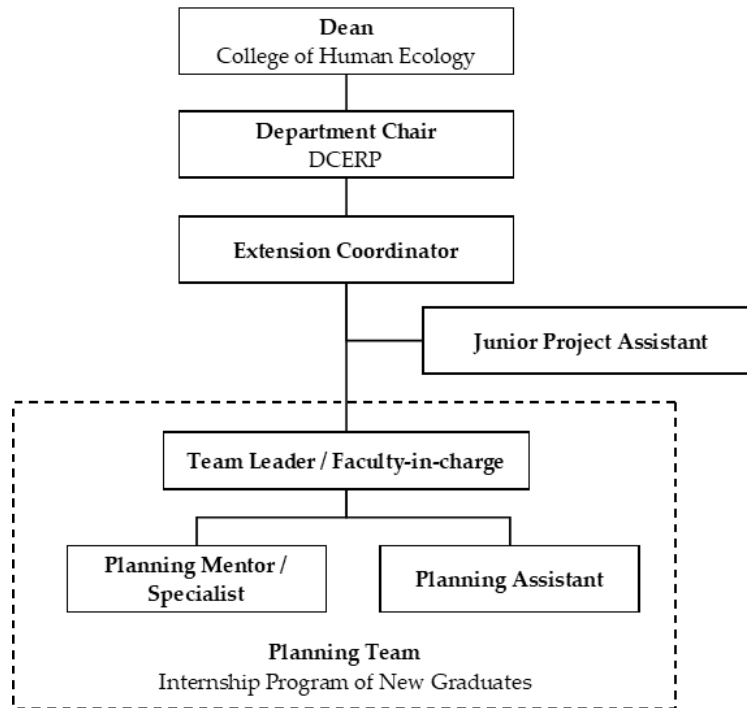


Figure 4.

Planning Team Composition of the Young Graduates Mentorship Model

this provides suitable setups for fresh graduates to experience actual planning activities to qualify for the environmental planning licensure examination. For TAP-HSP, this type of engagement is an opportunity for molding future planners and administrators who will be on the frontline for community development and governance.

The Practicum Model

The practicum model is an adoption of the existing partnership framework of the BSHE curricular program offered by the CHE. One of the course requirements for senior graduating students pursuing BSHE-HSP majors is the Supervised Field Experience also known as “practicum” hence the practicum model. It serves as the culmination of the degree program where students actively engage in the planning process of LGUs or corporations.

Similar to the planning assistants in the mentorship model, practicumers, guided by their practicum supervisors from the faculty members of the Department and the head of the partner institution (Figure 5), are deployed in their respective field sites to prepare their assigned planning documents. However, unlike in the mentorship model where project duration is computed based on the period required to craft the plans, in the practicum model, the engagement is bounded by the semestral offering of the coursework. Despite such limitations, the practicum model remains an in-demand modality for institutional partners.

The model provides a win-win solution to the requirements of the academe and the partner institutions. The students are exposed to a combination of research and fieldwork activities, wherein they can apply a holistic perspective in identifying community problems and appropriate interventions. This experience will equip the students with professional attitudes, technical skills, and self-confidence as future planners. In the meantime, the partner institution will complete the required and mandated planning documents under the full supervision of faculty experts.

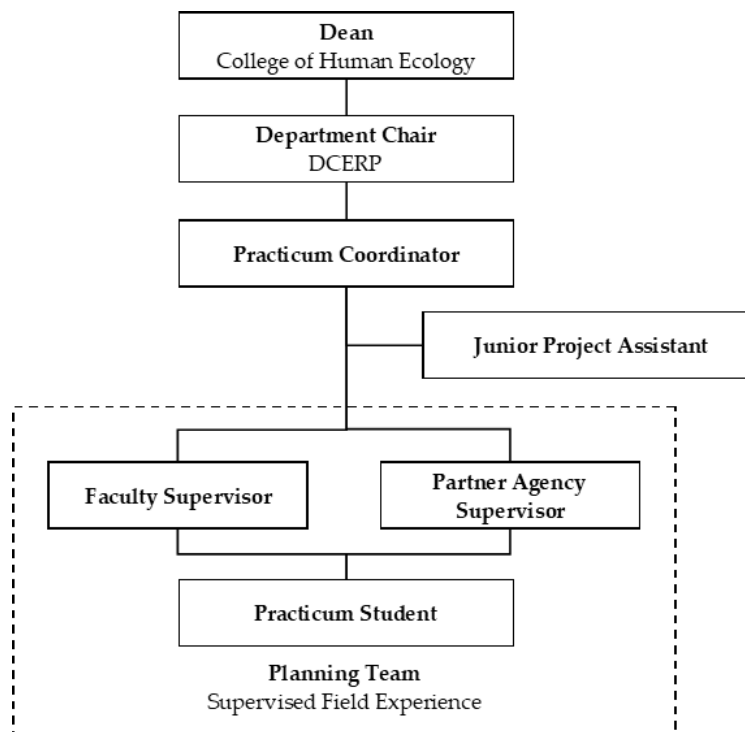


Figure 5.
Planning Team Composition of the Practicum Model

The Modular Training Model

The modular training model was developed as a response to the limitations of the mentorship and practicum models. Due to the high volume of technical assistance requested through TAP-HSP, the program faced shortfalls in the human resources that were to be deployed on sites in its mentorship and practicum models. To meet the gap, the modular training model was offered to provide technical assistance to agencies with sufficient planning staff who require capacity building.

The training team comprises a training leader, resource speakers from the eligible roster of alumni experts and faculty members, and training assistants (Figure 6). The modular training is a classroom-type lecture supplemented by hands-on exercises utilizing the local data. The resource speakers discuss the concepts and planning process. At the same time, the LGUs and the participants are expected to actively participate in the activities and complete the outputs required for each module. The topics are broken down into several modules considering the time the participants can internalize and execute the module locally. At the end of the training, a complete planning document is expected.

The modular training model requires committed LGU participants with the technical abilities to synthesize and process data into information. This model has great potential to escalate the capacities of local planners and augment the gap in local plan preparation.

4 The Instrumental Role of TAP-HSP in Local Development Planning

The development planning process involves the mobilization of the planning team, assessment of current conditions, development of strategies, prioritization of programs and projects, plan implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. This systematic approach to development planning aims to ensure the optimal use of limited resources as it responds to the needs of the communities. However, local development planning remains a challenge for LGUs, given limitations in planning

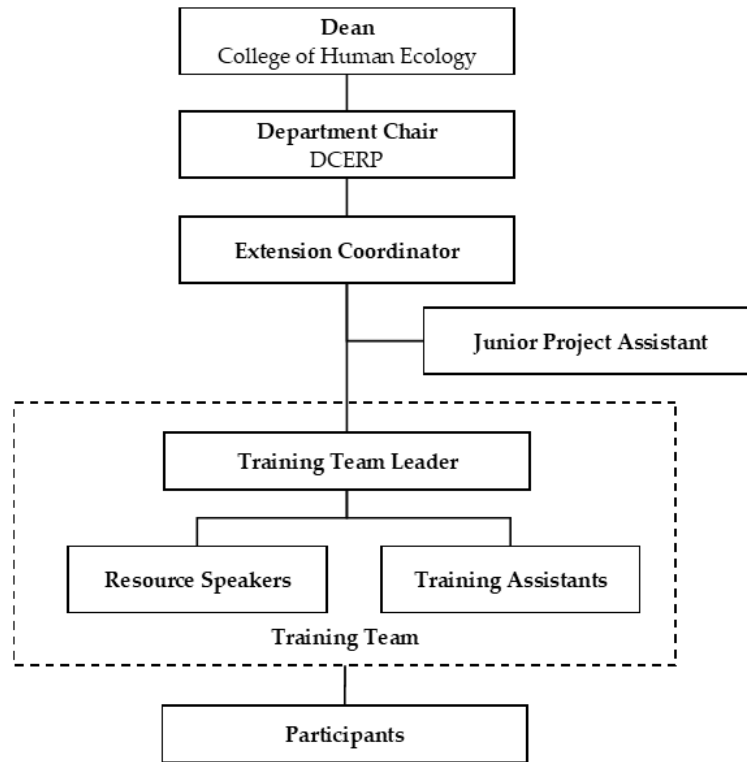


Figure 6.
Training Team Composition for the Modular Training Model

capacities alongside the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent implementation of EO 138 or the full devolution of Section 17 of the LGC. TAP-HSP has continuously responded to these challenges and gaps in local development planning. But now, more than ever, its role in local development planning has become significant.

TAP-HSP has secured a spot in influencing local development planning in the country through its unconventional, adaptive, and need-based mechanisms for planning. Anchored on the program’s mission, functions and components, the instrumental roles of TAP-HSP in local development planning are explored in this section (Figure 7).

Empower Local Planners. A core function of TAP-HSP is to build planning stakeholders’ capacities, knowledge and skills. The training offered under TAP-HSP equips local planners with the necessary planning tools and capacities to perform their planning functions. Given the differentiated and limited capacities of local planners in the country, this is a vital role that the program tries to fulfill. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Pintig Lab [12], significant capacity support in the devolution areas is likewise needed apart from the current gaps in planning knowledge and capacities.

TAP-HSP has organized a total of 22 trainings and seven (7) seminars with an average of three (3) trainings and two (2) seminars per year, attended by more than 2,600 participants all over the country. One established training is the Short Environmental Planning Course (SCEnP). The annual crash course provides an avenue for interested individuals to learn about the environmental planning field and prepares aspiring planners who intend to take the environmental planning licensure exam. Since the pandemic, the course has been offered virtually, which has allowed the expansion of its reach to interested individuals from different regions of the country. Another training offered annually by TAP-HSP is the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Zoning Ordinance Enforcement Training. This training was developed in partnership with DHSUD Region 4A. It aims

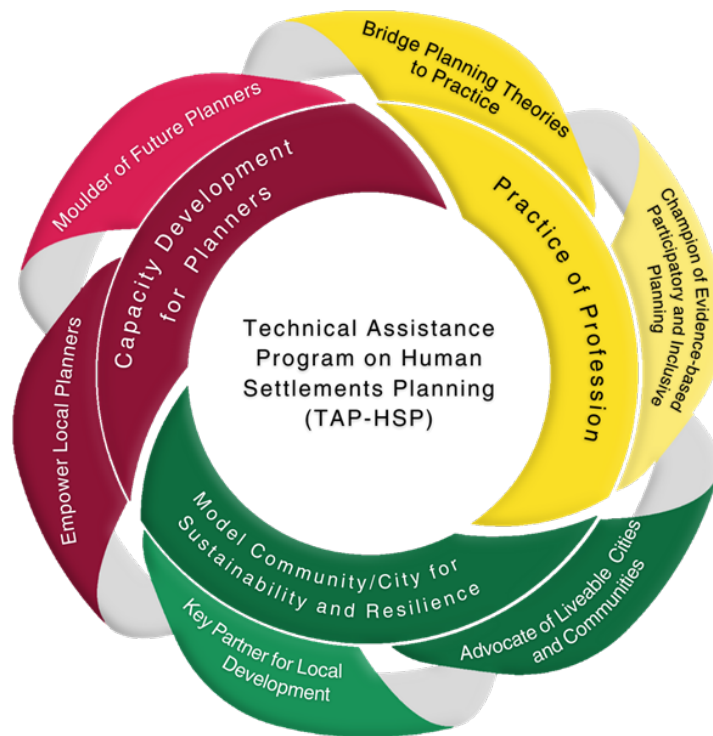


Figure 7.

Instrumental Roles of TAP-HSP in Local Development Planning

to equip planners on the utility of the local zoning ordinance to implement land use regulation and development control effectively. The course targets local planning and development coordinators and planning officers from LGUs nationwide. Other thematic trainings were conducted based on the needs and requests of different agencies and organizations. For the seminars, pressing issues on human settlements are tackled such as “Human Settlements Planning Amidst the Global Pandemic”, “Housing and Resettlement Plan for the Philippines”, “Smart City Initiatives” and others.

Moulder of Future Planners. TAP-HSP also provides a platform for learning for future planners through mentorship. This matches the academe-industry human resource gap given the country’s high demand for the planning profession [13]. In some instances, TAP-HSP mentees are either directly recruited by the LGUs they have worked with or eventually enter other planning-related agencies in the country. The program ensures that these new planners have the necessary planning skills before they land the job in their new workplace. TAP-HSP has mentored 163 young professionals in formulating various development plans embodying the planning approaches of TAP-HSP. These young professionals are mentored by a pool of experienced planners from the faculty members and experienced alumni volunteers.

Bridge Planning Theories to Practice. With its roots in the academe, TAP-HSP is a bridge to put planning theories into local practice. The planning processes, tools and techniques employed in LGUs through TAP-HSP are grounded in the planning theories and tailored to the local contexts. The planning coursework, such as planning tools and techniques, land use planning, plan implementation and practicum, are solid platforms for applying planning theories. Annually, at least six (6) practicum teams are deployed in various LGUs to assist in formulating planning documents. These are usually the Climate and Disaster Risk Assessments, Socio-Economic and Physical Profiles, Local Shelter Plans, and Environmentally Critical Areas Network (ECAN) Resource Management Plans. Moreover, the partnerships with LGUs allow BSHE-HSP students to practice skills learned from

their core and major subjects directly. Outputs include but are not limited to feasibility studies, climate and disaster-related planning documents, transect maps, scalogram analysis, and theses. Champion of Evidence-based, Participatory and Inclusive Planning. Evidence-based, participatory, and inclusive are distinct values in the planning approaches of TAP-HSP. The program guarantees that plans are co-created through collaborations with its key stakeholders and sectoral representatives, making the LGUs and their people the genuine owners of their local plans. This is done while ensuring that the plan is based on validated information vital to determining the core problems and appropriate solutions for sound decision-making of the local implementers.

Under TAP-HSP, planning teams are deployed to their respective sites for fieldwork and planning activities. Planning stakeholders and sectoral representatives from the LGU, private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs) are invited to several workshops regarding situational analysis, goal setting, policy option formulation, and project ranking. The planning team facilitates the planning process, allowing participants to provide valuable input and insights freely. These inputs are further processed and validated through meetings with the core technical working groups wherein changes are made and details are added. This participatory planning method is the standard methodology that TAP-HSP employs in each of its partner sites.

Key Partner for Local Development. TAP-HSP has served 59 LGUs in less than ten years, wherein 14 of the LGUs had multiple requests, a total of 76 technical assistance provided. TAP-HSP has sustained excellent service ratings with a score of 4.48 out of 5. The increasing demand for its services and the growing network of local government partners have placed TAP-HSP as a key player in local development planning. A common pronouncement received by TAP-HSP from its previous partners is that TAP-HSP benefited LGUs with limited funds and technical staff in formulating their development plans due to the deployment of competent planning teams to assist them. This is expressed verbally during various planning workshops and in writing during project evaluation. Below are some excerpts from the project evaluation reports of partner LGUs emphasizing the importance of TAP-HSP as a key partner in local development planning.

“We highly appreciate the help of TAP-HSP on our planning needs. This program is very beneficial to local governments like ours with minimal funds and personnel for the implementation of different programs and activities.”

“The program is a productive and rewarding undertaking - the services being cost-effective, a better option considering inclusive immersion allowing for mutual learning process; and with the mentees’ professionalism, competence and commitment, along with the mentors’ dedication, technical competency and strong leadership, the data-driven crafting mechanisms applied, prompt observance of timeframes and the participatory process employed, all led to the successful completion of the agreed program deliverables.”

Advocate of Liveable Cities and Communities. Consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 11, TAP-HSP envisions more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable human settlements in the country. The provision of technical assistance to LGUs responds to SDG 11 indicators particularly on integrating participation of civil society in the planning and management of human settlements, implementing urban and regional development plans, and adopting local disaster risk reduction strategies for local governments [14]. Above all, creating and developing resilient and sustainable communities is TAP-HSP’s ultimate goal, and all of its initiatives and activities are aligned.

5 Conclusion

TAP-HSP has secured its relevance in the local development planning arena by responding to local planning stakeholders’ planning needs and challenges. Through training, mentorship and

partnership, TAP-HSP continues to provide technical assistance to local governments through public service and extension services. Over time, the program has become more responsive, adaptive and innovative in addressing the planning needs of the LGUs. Given the rich exposure and experience of TAP-HSP with LGUs, the accounts and learnings from program implementation are important inputs to how local planning practices can be improved.

This opens a call for more in-depth exploration of what TAP-HSP has learned and experienced. Studies documenting the best and unique strategies, processes, and practices can provide critical inputs to existing planning manuals and sound evidence on crafting local policies. Likewise, analyzing the emerging challenges and lessons learned in local development planning from the various partnerships should be treated equally. Evaluation studies from the perspectives of the partners and beneficiaries are further suggested to determine how the program influenced these stakeholders and how it contributed to local development. The program needs to develop its logical framework to clearly define its program goals and properly guide evaluators on program and project impact assessments.

TAP-HSP shall continue to be a key player in local development planning and significantly contribute to national development. It hopes to evolve as a national human settlements planning and development extension center notable for promoting evidence-based, participatory and inclusive planning, and prioritizing low-income and hard-to-reach municipalities towards more sustainable and liveable human settlements.

Supplementary Material

[TAP-HSP Project Sites \(2016-2024\)](#)

Statements and Declarations

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Not Applicable

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Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

A.G.L.D. Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision. **A.P.M.** Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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