

Contribution of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations to the Development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries in Surigao del Norte

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) to the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Surigao del Norte, Philippines. Anchored on phenomenology and employing narrative-phenomenological analysis, the study engaged ten purposively selected ARBs from various ARBOs in the province. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to describe their lived experiences and perceptions of ARBO roles in their personal and community development.

The analysis revealed that ARBOs contribute significantly to ARB development through social, economic, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal dimensions. Socially, they foster community cohesion and solidarity. Economically, they provide market linkages, cooperative financing, and livelihood support. Technologically, they facilitate access to agricultural innovations and equipment. Politically, they enable representation and advocacy. Culturally, they preserve heritage and promote indigenous practices. Regulatory and legal roles include assisting in compliance and providing legal literacy. However, challenges such as financial limitations, communication gaps, and insufficient capacity-building opportunities persist.

The study concluded that stronger institutional partnerships, improved internal communication, and enhanced capacity development are necessary to maximize ARBOs' positive impact. The findings provide actionable insights for policymakers, ARBO leaders, and development stakeholders in crafting programs and policies that align with agrarian reform objectives and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries, Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations, Social Dimension, Economic Dimension, Technological Dimension, Political Dimension, Cultural Dimension, Regulatory Dimension, Legal Dimension

Introduction

Agrarian reform has long been recognized as a critical strategy for achieving social justice, reducing rural poverty, and improving agricultural productivity, particularly in developing countries. Beyond land distribution, the success of agrarian reform depends on the provision of support services and the strengthening of institutions that empower beneficiaries to sustain livelihoods. Globally, farmer cooperatives and community-based organizations have been identified as key drivers of rural development, providing smallholder farmers with access to resources, markets, and capacity-building initiatives (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2021). Such collective action is particularly vital in marginalized rural areas where state-led support alone cannot address the complex challenges of agricultural production and rural transformation.

In the Philippines, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and its extension with reforms (CARPER) have facilitated the redistribution of millions of hectares of land to landless farmers. However, research has shown that the full potential of these land transfers can only be realized when beneficiaries also receive adequate post-distribution support (Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2023). Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) have emerged as essential partners in this process, delivering interventions such as agricultural extension services, credit facilitation, organizational capacity-building, legal assistance, and market access initiatives. Yet, despite policy improvements, fragmented support services, lack of market integration, and gaps in legal literacy remain persistent barriers to the long-term success of agrarian reform (PIDS, 2023).

The province of Surigao del Norte in the Caraga Region presents a unique context for examining these issues. Its agricultural communities are shaped by a rugged landscape, susceptibility to natural disasters, and limited access to markets, all of which complicate efforts to improve productivity and rural livelihoods. In this environment, ARBOs play a multidimensional role—extending beyond economic production to include community development, cultural preservation, political advocacy, and disaster preparedness. They often serve as focal points for resource mobilization, capacity building, and legal education, yet they also face constraints such as aging memberships, insufficient capital, and limited technological adoption. Reports from the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in the province reveal that while many ARBOs actively participate in training, equipment sharing, and inter-agency collaboration, they encounter ongoing challenges in sustaining member engagement, upgrading farming systems, and resolving land tenure disputes.

Given these realities, this study on the contributions of ARBOs to the development of ARBs in Surigao del Norte is both timely and necessary. It seeks to explore how ARBOs facilitate the holistic development of ARBs—not only in terms of material and agricultural outcomes but also in fostering empowerment, cultural preservation, legal awareness, and community solidarity. Such an inquiry responds to national priorities and aligns with global development commitments, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on poverty reduction (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). By examining the lived experiences of ARBs within the province, this study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform the design of more effective programs, strengthen institutional partnerships, and enhance the overall impact of agrarian reform at both the local and national levels.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) regarding the contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) to their development in Surigao del Norte. It sought to capture how ARBOs have influenced ARBs across multiple dimensions, including social, economic, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal aspects, while also identifying challenges, meanings, and policy implications emerging from these experiences.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To which Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) do the informants belong?
2. In what ways do ARBOs contribute to the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Surigao del Norte?
3. What underlying meanings and lived experiences can be drawn from the responses of the informants regarding the contributions of ARBOs?
4. What key themes emerge from the informants' narratives about their involvement with ARBOs?
5. Based on the analyzed data, what evidence-based policy recommendations can be proposed to enhance the role of ARBOs in beneficiary development?

Review of Related Literature

Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations

Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) serve as collective entities that unite farmers who have been granted land under agrarian reform programs. They function as cooperatives or associations providing essential services such as access to farm inputs, technology, market linkages, credit, and capacity-building. Globally, farmer-led organizations are recognized as critical mechanisms for inclusive rural development, bridging the gap between national policies and grassroots realities (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2022). Studies have shown that membership in farmer organizations improves competitiveness and market access, particularly in agriculture sectors characterized by high transaction costs and limited economies of scale (Justus et al., 2018; Markelova et al., 2009; Hellin et al., 2008).

In the Philippine context, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) positions ARBOs as key partners in its Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Development Sustainability Program (ARBDSP), which strengthens cooperative management, transparency, and innovation. However, challenges persist, including limited access to capital, leadership conflicts, and political interference (Galang, 2021). Addressing these requires integrated support that includes legal empowerment, gender mainstreaming, and inter-agency collaboration. ARBOs, therefore, are not simply extensions of government programs but are people-centered rural development institutions essential to sustaining agrarian reform outcomes.

Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries

Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) are individuals who have been awarded land under CARP and CARPER. They are expected to make the land productive, comply with amortization obligations, and participate in community-based programs. While land ownership provides an initial advantage, the long-term success of agrarian reform depends on continuous support services. Research has found that ARBs with access to capital, training, legal assistance, and organized representation through ARBOs report higher income stability and stronger community engagement (Gonzales & Relingo, 2011). Conversely, persistent issues such as unclear land titles, gaps in legal literacy, and limited market access hinder their development (PIDS, 2023).

ARBs also play a significant role in advancing food security and environmental sustainability. Empowered ARBs contribute to biodiversity-friendly farming systems, reducing dependency on synthetic inputs (FAO, 2021). This is particularly important in disaster-prone areas, where institutional support and adaptive capacity help maintain agricultural productivity (Supnet et al., 2023). Thus, ARBs are not passive recipients of land but are active participants in rural development, provided they are supported by responsive institutional mechanisms.

Contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations

The contributions of ARBOs span multiple dimensions. Economically, they reduce production costs through shared services such as tractors, dryers, and warehouses, while improving market competitiveness (Marco et al., 2011). They also enhance bargaining power, enabling members to negotiate better prices for inputs and produce. Socially, ARBOs strengthen community cohesion, foster leadership development, and encourage youth and women participation (Lally et al., 2023). Politically, they serve as collective voices in policy dialogues and protect members' rights through legal education and conflict mediation (Anderson, 2017).

Technologically, ARBOs facilitate access to agricultural innovations, mechanization, and digital platforms that improve productivity (PCAARRD, 2021). Culturally, they preserve indigenous practices, promote local heritage, and uphold community values such as bayanihan (Santos & Mendonca, 2014). Regulatory and legal contributions include assisting in compliance with DAR policies, managing land tenure documents, and ensuring organizational accreditation. However, sustaining these roles requires capacity-building, infrastructure investment, and stronger linkages with government and private sector stakeholders (LBP, 2023).

Synthesis of the Review

The reviewed literature shows that ARBOs are indispensable to the sustainability of agrarian reform. Their multi-dimensional contributions—economic, social, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal—enhance both individual and collective development among ARBs. However, challenges such as resource limitations, governance gaps, and external political pressures continue to constrain their effectiveness. Existing studies highlight the need for context-specific interventions, particularly in geographically disadvantaged provinces like Surigao del Norte, where market access and institutional support are limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of ARBs in the province, focusing on how ARBOs influence their development and how these contributions can be strengthened through policy and programmatic reforms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on multiple philosophical perspectives that inform its design, analysis, and interpretation of findings. **Pragmatism** underpins the inquiry, valuing knowledge derived from lived experiences and its practical application in solving real-world challenges (Biesta et al., 2021). This approach ensures that the realities faced by Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs)—such as sustaining livelihoods, securing land rights, and engaging in community initiatives—are examined in their practical contexts.

Critical realism further frames the study by probing the underlying structures and mechanisms influencing observable events (Danermark et al., 2019). It guides the exploration of systemic factors—state policies, economic inequalities, and institutional arrangements—that shape how Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) deliver support to ARBs in Surigao del Norte.

The **humanistic perspective**, particularly Nussbaum's (2020) capabilities approach, reinforces the study's focus on empowerment, dignity, and agency, emphasizing the ARBs' right to pursue lives they value. **Communitarianism** contributes by highlighting collective responsibility and solidarity in achieving rural development goals (Schilcher, 1999). Finally, **decolonial philosophy** (Mignolo & Walsh, 2021) ensures the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, local governance practices, and cultural traditions as integral to ARB development.

Together, these philosophical lenses support a holistic examination of ARBO contributions, enabling the research to move beyond quantitative measures and capture the socially embedded, value-laden realities of agrarian life.

Conceptual Framework

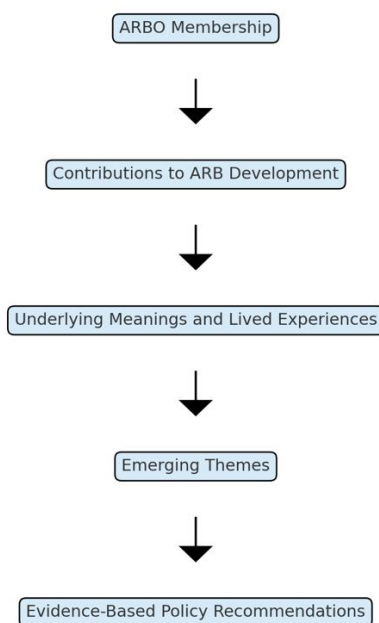


Figure 1. Eidetic Model of ARBO Contributions to ARB Development

Figure 1 presents the eidetic model showing the logical flow of this study on the contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) to the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs). The process begins with identifying the ARBO membership of the participants, which establishes the organizational context. The next layer examines the specific contributions of ARBOs across social, economic, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal dimensions. These contributions are then interpreted through the lived experiences of ARBs to uncover underlying meanings. The distilled insights are clustered into emerging themes that reflect shared realities and challenges. Finally, the process culminates in the formulation of evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at strengthening ARBO roles and enhancing ARB development in Surigao del Norte.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, guided by narrative-phenomenological analysis, to explore the lived experiences of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) regarding the contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) in Surigao del Norte. Conducted in a province characterized by rugged terrain, disaster vulnerability, and market inaccessibility, the research involved ten purposively selected ARBs who met the criteria of active ARBO membership, at least one year of continuous engagement, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. Data were gathered using a validated semi-structured interview guide containing a grand tour question and probes addressing contributions across social, economic, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal dimensions, along with challenges and improvement suggestions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes. The researcher, serving as the primary instrument, applied bracketing to minimize bias, while the adviser ensured methodological rigor. Analysis involved identifying significant statements, grouping them into meaning units, and synthesizing them into thematic categories. Trustworthiness was maintained through member checking, rich contextual descriptions, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling. Ethical approval was obtained from the Graduate School of Saint Paul University Surigao, with permissions from relevant authorities, and all participants provided informed consent; confidentiality was upheld through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

Findings

Research Question 1

To which Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) do the informants belong?

Table 1. ARBO Membership of Informants

Participant Code	ARBO Name	Location	Type of Organization	Years of Membership
P1	Kahayag Agrarian Reform Cooperative	Alegria, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	5
P2	Mabini Farmers Association	Mabini, Surigao del Norte	Association	4
P3	San Isidro ARB Multipurpose Cooperative	San Isidro, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	6
P4	United ARBs Association of Gigaquit	Gigaquit, Surigao del Norte	Association	3
P5	Malimono Sustainable Farmers Cooperative	Malimono, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	8
P6	Taganaan ARB Cooperative	Taganaan, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	7
P7	Claver ARB Development Association	Claver, Surigao del Norte	Association	5
P8	Placer United Farmers' Cooperative	Placer, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	4
P9	Mainit Integrated ARBs Cooperative	Mainit, Surigao del Norte	Cooperative	6
P10	Sison Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Association	Sison, Surigao del Norte	Association	3

Table 1 shows the distribution of informants across various ARBOs in Surigao del Norte. The participants represent a balance of cooperatives and associations spread across multiple municipalities, with membership duration ranging from three to eight years. This diversity allowed for varied perspectives on ARBO contributions and challenges.

Research Question 2

In what ways do ARBOs contribute to the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Surigao del Norte?

Table 2. Perceived Contributions of ARBOs to ARB Development

Dimension	Key Contributions Reported by Participants
Social	Strengthening relationships among members, promoting bayanihan, organizing assemblies, and fostering community trust.
Economic	Providing shared farm equipment, cooperative financing, marketing support, and livelihood training.

Dimension	Key Contributions Reported by Participants
Technological	Facilitating access to tractors, rice threshers, organic fertilizer production units, and digital market platforms.
Political	Representing ARBs in LGU councils, lobbying for farm-to-market roads, and engaging in agrarian policy consultations.
Cultural	Reviving traditional planting rituals, promoting indigenous seeds, and integrating cultural practices in cooperative events.
Regulatory	Assisting with DAR documentation, organizational accreditation, and compliance with agrarian laws.
Legal	Providing legal literacy training, mediation in land disputes, and assistance in CLOA processing.

Table 2 highlights the multidimensional nature of ARBO contributions. Participants consistently identified social cohesion, economic support, and political representation as core functions, while also recognizing cultural preservation and legal assistance as important but often under-resourced aspects.

Research Question 3

What underlying meanings and lived experiences can be drawn from the responses of the informants regarding the contributions of ARBOs?

Table 3. Underlying Meanings and Lived Experiences

Meaning/Essence	Description
Empowerment	Gaining self-confidence, leadership skills, and the ability to advocate for rights.
Collective Identity	Developing pride and belonging through shared cooperative or association membership.
Security and Stability	Experiencing reduced financial vulnerability through pooled resources and legal protections.
Cultural Continuity	Preserving heritage practices and indigenous knowledge alongside modern innovations.
Community Solidarity	Strengthening mutual aid systems and support networks among members.

Table 3 distills the participants' narratives into five core meanings. These reflect the personal and communal transformations that ARB members attribute to their involvement in ARBOs, going beyond material benefits to include identity, stability, and solidarity.

Research Question 4

What key themes emerge from the informants' narratives about their involvement with ARBOs?

Table 4. Emerging Themes from Participant Narratives

Theme Code	Theme Description
T1	Social bonds and mutual trust developed through ARBO membership.
T2	Economic empowerment via collective marketing and resource sharing.
T3	Adoption and utilization of modern farming technologies.
T4	Advocacy and representation in governance and policy spaces.
T5	Preservation of indigenous culture and farming traditions.
T6	Support in legal compliance and agrarian rights protection.

Table 4 presents the themes derived from thematic clustering of meaning units. They show that ARBO engagement impacts members on multiple levels, with economic and social themes being most frequently emphasized, followed by political, technological, and cultural dimensions.

Research Question 5

Based on the analyzed data, what evidence-based policy recommendations can be proposed to enhance the role of ARBOs in beneficiary development?

Table 5. Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations

Policy Area	Recommendation
Institutional Partnerships	Expand collaboration between ARBOs, DAR, LGUs, and private stakeholders.
Communication Systems	Develop internal communication platforms for timely information sharing.
Capacity Development	Offer continuous governance, leadership, and technical training.
Financial Support	Increase access to credit lines and capital grants for ARBO-led projects.
Legal and Regulatory	Strengthen legal literacy programs and streamline documentation processes.

Table 5 consolidates participant suggestions into actionable policy areas. Recommendations focus on institutional strengthening, resource accessibility, and regulatory support, indicating that capacity-building and partnerships are vital for sustaining ARBO contributions.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) in Surigao del Norte perform a multidimensional role in advancing the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs), consistent with earlier literature emphasizing the importance of farmer-led organizations in rural transformation (FAO, 2022; Galang, 2021). The diversity of ARBO membership across municipalities, as presented in Table 1, illustrates the wide reach of these organizations, which operate both as cooperatives and associations. This variety of organizational structures enables them to address diverse needs, ranging from large-scale collective farming to small, community-based livelihood initiatives, aligning with the communitarian principles identified in the theoretical framework (Schilcher, 1999).

The range of contributions outlined in Table 2 reinforces the perspective that ARBOs are not merely service delivery mechanisms but catalysts for comprehensive rural development. Socially, they foster solidarity and mutual trust, echoing the findings of Tilles (2023) on the role of farmer organizations in building social capital. Economically, they improve market participation through resource pooling and cooperative marketing, supporting previous conclusions by Marco et al. (2011) that shared facilities lower production costs and enhance competitiveness. Technologically, their role in providing access to modern farming equipment and digital tools is consistent with PCAARRD's (2021) assertion that digital agriculture can close the productivity gap between smallholders and commercial farmers. The political, cultural, regulatory, and legal contributions identified here extend the discourse by illustrating how ARBOs act as both advocates for members' rights and custodians of indigenous traditions, a link between cultural preservation and economic resilience rarely emphasized in policy discussions.

The underlying meanings distilled in Table 3 suggest that ARB development through ARBO participation extends beyond material outcomes to include empowerment, collective identity, and cultural continuity. These findings

parallel Nussbaum's (2020) capabilities approach, which emphasizes expanding individuals' freedoms to live lives they value. The empowerment derived from ARBO engagement aligns with decolonial perspectives (Mignolo & Walsh, 2021), as members reclaim agency in both agricultural production and cultural expression.

Emerging themes (Table 4) reveal that economic empowerment and social bonds remain the most visible impacts of ARBO membership, but participants also value the political and cultural dimensions. This balance of material and intangible benefits supports the pragmatic lens of the study (Biesta et al., 2021), which prioritizes solutions that integrate real-world utility with community well-being. The prominence of technology adoption as a theme also reflects the critical realism stance (Danermark et al., 2019), recognizing the structural influence of technological access on agricultural outcomes.

Finally, the recommendations in Table 5 point to a need for systemic interventions that strengthen institutional partnerships, enhance capacity-building, and expand financial and legal support. These align with Ballesteros et al. (2021), who argue that sustaining ARBO contributions requires ongoing institutional investment and inter-agency cooperation. Strengthening internal communication systems, as suggested by participants, addresses a long-standing barrier in rural organization governance, while targeted capacity development can ensure that both leadership and membership are equipped to adapt to changing market and policy environments.

Overall, the findings support the study's conceptual framework by showing a clear progression from organizational membership through tangible and intangible contributions, to lived meanings, emerging themes, and practical policy implications. The ARBO experience in Surigao del Norte exemplifies how collective organization, when supported by responsive institutional frameworks, can bridge the gap between land redistribution and sustainable rural development.

Summary

This study examined the contributions of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations (ARBOs) to the development of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Surigao del Norte using a qualitative phenomenological design. Guided by narrative-phenomenological analysis, it explored the lived experiences of ten purposively selected ARBs from various cooperatives and associations in the province. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, focusing on organizational membership, perceived contributions, underlying meanings, emerging themes, and policy recommendations.

The findings revealed that participants belonged to diverse ARBOs across multiple municipalities, representing both cooperatives and associations with varying years of membership. ARBO contributions were found to be multidimensional, encompassing social, economic, technological, political, cultural, regulatory, and legal aspects. Socially, ARBOs fostered community cohesion and mutual support. Economically, they provided market linkages, cooperative financing, and livelihood programs. Technologically, they facilitated access to farm machinery, modern agricultural methods, and digital tools. Politically, they engaged in advocacy and policy representation. Culturally, they preserved indigenous farming practices and promoted local traditions. They also played roles in regulatory compliance and legal assistance.

From these experiences, participants identified underlying meanings such as empowerment, collective identity, stability, cultural continuity, and community solidarity. Thematic analysis highlighted six recurring themes: strengthened social bonds, economic empowerment, adoption of modern farming technologies, political advocacy, cultural preservation, and legal compliance support. Based on the narratives, participants proposed evidence-based policy recommendations focusing on strengthening institutional partnerships, improving communication systems, enhancing capacity development, expanding financial support, and increasing legal literacy programs.

Conclusions

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that ARBOs in Surigao del Norte serve as catalysts for holistic rural development, extending beyond their traditional economic functions. Their contributions integrate social cohesion, economic viability, technological advancement, political empowerment, cultural preservation, and legal protection. These multidimensional roles demonstrate that ARBOs are not merely service providers but community builders, rights advocates, and cultural custodians.

The study further concludes that the lived experiences of ARBs within ARBOs are characterized by a balance between tangible benefits and intangible gains. While economic support and market access are highly valued, empowerment, identity, and cultural continuity are equally significant outcomes. The themes emerging from the data reflect a model of rural development rooted in both material improvement and socio-cultural resilience.

Finally, the study underscores that the sustainability of ARBO contributions depends on robust institutional partnerships, targeted capacity-building, efficient internal communication, and access to financial and legal resources. Without these systemic supports, the potential of ARBOs to drive inclusive and sustainable development for ARBs may be constrained.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

For the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), it is recommended to strengthen partnerships between ARBOs, local government units (LGUs), private stakeholders, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure a more integrated and sustained delivery of support services. Policy measures should also prioritize streamlined documentation processes, improved compliance support, and expanded legal literacy programs tailored to ARBs' needs.

For ARBOs, it is suggested to enhance internal communication systems to facilitate timely decision-making and information dissemination. Leadership training and technical capacity development should be institutionalized, ensuring that both leaders and members can adapt to market changes, technological innovations, and policy shifts.

For ARBs, active participation in ARBO governance and program implementation is encouraged to maximize the benefits of membership. ARBs should also take advantage of capacity-building opportunities provided by both ARBOs and partner agencies.

For development stakeholders such as LGUs, NGOs, and academic institutions, collaborative programs that integrate economic, technological, and cultural initiatives are recommended. These programs should align with local contexts, promote sustainable practices, and reinforce the cultural heritage of agrarian communities.

Lastly, for future researchers, comparative studies across different provinces are suggested to deepen the understanding of ARBO contributions in varied socio-economic and environmental contexts. Expanding research to include quantitative assessments of ARBO impact could also provide more comprehensive evidence to inform policy and practice.

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