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Libraries Starve, While the Barangay Queen Gets a New Crown

When Republic Act 7743 was enacted in 1994, it vowed that each city, municipality, and even barangay would have its own library or reading center. The National Library of the Philippines (NLP) would provide the books and technical assistance; LGUs would supply the space, manpower, and budget. Three decades hence, the vision remains largely unchanged. The NLP's latest directories, published in December 2023 and July 2024, indicate hundreds of affiliated libraries; however, most are inactive, understaffed, or operating without internet and electricity (NLP, 2024a; NLP, 2024b).

The ASEAN Library Services Framework (2022) bluntly confirmed the problem: Philippine libraries face chronic underfunding, understaffing, and governance gaps. Meanwhile, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) reported that as of March 2025, there were more than 42,000 barangays (DILG, 2025). Yet, the number of functioning barangay reading centers barely breaks a thousand. If every barangay basketball court were turned into a library, we'd rival Finland by now.



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LGUs, meanwhile, often devote significant energies to concerts, basketball events, fiestas, and pageants. While such activities are important to cultural and social life, the Year One Report of EDCOM II (2024) emphasized that community-based learning support remains one of the Philippine education system's weakest links, warning that unless substantial investments are made, the learning crisis will persist (EDCOM II, 2024). Meanwhile, while Miss Barangay 2024 receives her sash and the limelight, the public library on the next corner remains without Wi-Fi and with only a broken electric fan.

Some movement has been made. In 2024, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) hailed the Philippines for expanding funding for public libraries (IFLA, 2024). Congress has been actively filing remedies, as evidenced by Senate Bill 2429 (2023) and House Bill 2264 (2025), both of which seek to update RA 7743 by advocating for "digital libraries" (Senate of the Philippines, 2023; House of Representatives, 2025). But unless they are accompanied by actual teeth and consistent funding, they'll be as effective as a "No Videoke After 10 PM" barangay ordinance, which is aspirational but largely disobeyed.

The Unseen Aftermath

And here's the part we often miss: overlooking public libraries has a significant impact. Without them, poor children lose one of the only free and safe places to study. The digital divide widens further when barangay libraries lack internet connections. Adults, employment seekers, and the elderly are often denied access to lifelong learning and community activities. During disasters, libraries can be considered resilience centers, providing shelter, power, and information, only if they are operational. Abandoned, they are just dark, dusty rooms with padlocked doors.

In the long term, the outcome is certain: diminished literacy rates, increased inequality, and an educational system in which only those who can afford private means succeed. The Philippines already has what EDCOM II terms a "learning crisis" (EDCOM II, 2024). Denying libraries only ensures that the crisis becomes the norm. And no series of barangay pageants will make us "Most Literate Nation."



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Yes, the concerts, pageants, fiestas, and basketball games will continue. The lights will be bright on the pageant stage. But when the drums stop and the lights go down, the town's quietest corner, the library, will still be neglected. It is time for LGUs and policymakers to move beyond pageantry and invest in libraries as essentials for learning and equity. Prioritizing libraries over mere festivities will empower both our youth and our communities, raising not just queens, but readers and leaders.

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