



The Philippines

Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government

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Citizen engagement and participation is a key ingredient for building accountability, driving improvements and innovation, and increasing trust between actors within the public contracting process.

This case-study is part of a larger study that explores and compares the direct results and benefits of this citizen engagement and participation, and the various strategies adopted by different open contracting initiatives to achieve these benefits. The complete study and results are found [here](#).



Sources

This case study draws on a questionnaire filled out by members of Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG). It also uses a number of secondary sources shared with us by CCAGG, which are detailed in the bibliography.

Context and Beginnings

In the 1980s, regional inequality in the Philippines was acute. Remote provinces such as Abra, in Northern Luzon, around 400km north of Manila, suffered from poor infrastructure, which hindered their economic growth.¹ This political situation was partly the result of deep corruption in President Ferdinand Marcos' regime. Transparency International estimates that Marcos personally embezzled between \$5 and \$10 billion from 1972 to 1986.² However, the country's geography was also a factor. The Philippines is made up of over 7,500 islands, of which 2,000 are inhabited. Even where the central government wanted to build better infrastructure, it was not feasible for it to monitor development in remote areas.³

The Philippines has only one autonomous region with any significant devolved powers - the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. However, in practice local politicians wielded significant power because of the remoteness of the central government. Corruption at the local level was endemic, and often funneled through the infrastructure sector. In Abra local politicians regularly siphoned off public funds for infrastructure projects.⁴ Local power was concentrated in the hands of a few families, who maintained heavily armed militias to intimidate voters and attack rivals.⁵ Local politicians often owned the construction companies that bid for infrastructure contracts. They would then intimidate officials in the district highway department to mark the project as completed when it had not even been started, or was only partially finished.⁶ As a result, local infrastructure was severely underdeveloped, and the province was one of the poorest in the Philippines.⁷ However, citizens were afraid to speak out when offending local politicians could make finding work more difficult, or even provoke violence.⁸

In 1986, the People Power Revolution brought President Corazon Aquino to power, ending 21 years of rule by Marcos. Her new government launched the Community Employment Development Program (CEDP), to address local infrastructure needs and boost employment. The CEDP involved a mandate for citizen engagement in the procurement process, inviting civil society organizations (CSOs) to monitor the implementation of the program's infrastructure

¹ Rushda Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots: Monitoring Public Works in Abra, Philippines, 1986-1990', (2013), Innovations for Successful Societies, Princeton University, <http://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/>, p. 1.

² Transparency International, 'Global Corruption Report', (2004), p. 13. Available at: https://issuu.com/transparencyinternational/docs/2004_gcr_politicalcorruption_en?e=2496456/2106435.

³ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 1.

⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 3-4.

⁷ Procurement Watch Initiative (PWI) (2009), 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives in the Philippines' Construction Sector', p. 30.

⁸ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 4.

projects.⁹ One of the organizations the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) approached to be part of this monitoring was Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG).¹⁰

CCAGG was formed in 1987. Their volunteers had previously been involved in the National Movement from Free Elections (NAMFREL), conducting election-monitoring in Abra. These volunteers wanted to continue their engagement with the government and to promote freedom and democracy.¹¹ They saw the CEDP as an opportunity to tackle corruption in Abra, improve its infrastructure, and promote greater citizen participation.¹²

Project Development

Once CCAGG had signed an agreement with the NEDA, their members organized into committees of three to five people, each with responsibility for specific functions (e.g. logistics, education, legal, media, mobilization, and training). They designated one member, who was a trained engineer, to lead monitoring activities.¹³ The group then recruited and trained volunteers, giving them the technical expertise necessary to spot engineering flaws in infrastructure projects.¹⁴

When CCAGG monitors visit a construction project, they conduct a technical inspection and also interview members of the community to produce a social impact assessment.¹⁵ The team discusses their findings with the contractor at an exit conference, before writing up a report that they send to the relevant implementing agency. The stakeholders then agree on corrective measures, and the Commission on Audit (COA) is provided with a report summarizing the agreed measures. For DPWH projects, CCAGG brings up any issues directly with the provincial, regional or central office.¹⁶

CCAGG monitored 100 CEDP projects in 1987, and by 2006 had monitored over 600 infrastructure projects worth \$7 million.¹⁷ In 1988, they received a Presidential Citation from Aquino for 'Outstanding Community Service' in recognition of its monitoring work.¹⁸ They went on to receive many other awards and recognitions: in 1989, the Federation of the People's Economic Council and Department of Trade and Industry of the Province of Abra recognized CCAGG for the economic benefit of their work to the province; and in 2000, they won Transparency International's Integrity Award.¹⁹

⁹ CCAGG Questionnaire.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 8.

¹⁵ PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 33.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 33.

¹⁷ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 16.

¹⁸ International Budget Partnership, 'Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG) - Philippines'.

¹⁹ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 16.

CCAGG has also branched out over the years into other monitoring activities. For example, in 1998 and 1999 they worked with the Department of Education to monitor preschool services. They have also helped in other areas of government: from 1993 to 1997, they partnered with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to mobilize communities for a forest management project.²⁰ The organization also continues to train local citizens to boost engagement in the monitoring process,²¹ and mentors other similar groups in other regions in the Philippines.²²

The role of open data in CCAGG's work is perhaps more limited than in some of the other cases. This is in part because the initiative predates the Open Contracting Partnership and the Open Contracting Data Standard. CCAGG also told us that they prefer to speak in terms of public procurement rather than open contracting because of the negative connotations of 'contracting' that arise from the perception that contractors are one of the main sources of corruption.

Project Goals

According to one of their founding members, the overarching goal of CCAGG was 'to challenge the government and make sure that public services are used judiciously and for the development of the people.'²³

Specifically, current members of the CCAGG told us that their goals were:

- To change the top-down approach of development planning, which caused significant wastage.
- To improve the capacity for citizens to make their needs heard.
- To make infrastructure projects more responsive to communities' needs.²⁴

Impact

Impacts on Civil Society

CCAGG's work has increased citizen participation in the monitoring process. The organization trains volunteers in local communities to be able to monitor infrastructure projects effectively, with seminars teaching basic math's and engineering, showing how to use a program of works, and explaining the social benefits that derive from the projects.²⁵ In the questionnaire, CCAGG said that they had seen an increase in citizens discussing government projects, and often flagged substandard projects publicly, e.g. over the radio.²⁶ They also noted that since the project's initiation, citizens have become 'aware of their responsibility as citizens and assertive of

²⁰ Ibid. p. 18.

²¹ Lily L. Tsai, Nina McMurry, Swetha Rajeswaran (2018), 'The effect of civic leadership training on citizen engagement and government responsiveness: experimental evidence from the Philippines', Making All Voices Count Research Report, Brighton: IDS, p. 4.

²² Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 19.

²³ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 5.

²⁴ CCAGG Questionnaire.

²⁵ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 14.

²⁶ CCAGG Questionnaire.

their rights. They became convinced that even ordinary citizens can make a difference in curbing corruption.²⁷

CCAGG has also helped to train volunteers in other provinces. In 2006, they partnered with the Transparency and Accountability Network to lead as part of Road Watch, a national construction monitoring project. Through this program, they helped to train around 100 volunteers to monitor roads in different regions.²⁸ The 'Laymanised Manual on Monitoring Infrastructure Projects by a Practitioner' that they developed in 2006 with help from the UNDP has been used by many other citizen monitoring organizations to improve their work.²⁹

CCAGG has empowered citizens and has helped them understand their rights. By sponsoring public fora, symposia and seminars, they have given citizens a way to express their concerns to the local government.³⁰ CCAGG also runs leadership training for civil society volunteers. A study by the Institute for Development Studies, conducted as part of their Making All Voices Count initiative, found that those who received this civic training were more likely to attend town hall meetings, and spoke up more often at these meetings. They also had higher levels of interest in local community politics, and higher levels of knowledge about local government systems and about their rights as citizens. Finally, they had more face-to-face interactions with local officials.³¹

As a result of increased citizen participation, infrastructure services have improved. As well as successfully identifying substandard projects, and seeking appropriate corrective measures, CCAGG has also recommended changes to the way roads are designed and tested. For example, road projects now include drainage systems, which prevents scouring of the road base.³²

Impacts on Government

CCAGG has successfully helped to identify and curb corruption. For example, in 1987, the group successfully lobbied the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) to launch an administrative investigation into 11 engineers in Abra who had falsely claimed that their CEDP projects were already finished.³³ CCAGG reports were a key piece of evidence in the inquiry, which resulted in the engineers being suspended without pay.³⁴ The group is now a member of the Corruption Prevention Unit (CPU) in the Office of the Ombudsman, and in 2009 they joined the Multi-Sectoral Anti-Corruption Council (MSACC).³⁵

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 19.

²⁹ PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 25

³⁰ CCAGG, 'Sharing by the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government, p. 4. Available at: http://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Salin_Chapter2.pdf.

³¹ Tsai, McMurray, Rajeswaran, 'The effect of civil leadership training', p. 21.

³² CCAGG Questionnaire.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', pp. 11-12.

³⁵ PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 50.

Government attitudes towards citizen monitors have improved over time. In particular, CCAGG reported that local government agencies in Abra were initially resistant to their work, but that over time they came to see CCAGG monitors as a force for changing corrupt practices.³⁶ After the successful case against the 11 engineers in 1987, CCAGG also developed a close working relationship with the DPWH. For a period of time, CCAGG monitors were so highly regarded by the DPWH that the department would not release funds until they had a CCAGG monitoring report.³⁷ Because of this close relationship, CCAGG find it easy to obtain information that they need for their monitoring work, from the DPWH, but sometimes continue to experience difficulty getting information from local officials. Furthermore, CCAGG may be an exception for citizen monitoring groups in the country, thanks to their high profile and long history of working with the DPWH. Other CSOs have pushed for the government to pass a freedom of information law, which would allow more widespread access to documentation.³⁸

CSOs are now institutionalized in the procurement process. This was as a result of the Government Procurement Reform Act (GPRA), introduced in 2003. The GPRA states that at all stages of the procurement process procuring entities must invite at least two observers to sit in its proceedings, one from a duly recognized private group in a sector or discipline relevant to the procurement at hand, and the other from a non-government organization.³⁹ However, CCAGG stated that their role as an observer in the bidding process has had little effect on curbing corruption, as their presence has not deterred collusion between bidders and the procuring entity.⁴⁰

CCAGG has successfully pushed for greater citizen participation in the audit process. Auditing used to be the sole remit of the COA, but has now opened up to citizen participation.⁴¹ CCAGG's partnership with the COA led to changes such as the introduction of a social impact evaluation to audit reports. CCAGG also argue that their presence means that locals will be more forthcoming about projects in their area, as outsiders may not gain the trust of local people.⁴²

Enabling Factors

CCAGG has benefitted from the Philippines' policy environment, where successive governments have encouraged CSOs to take part in monitoring activities. The 1987 Constitution stated that the government should support and encourage NGOs and community-

³⁶ CCAGG Questionnaire.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 28.

³⁹ Government of the Philippines (2003). Republic Act no. 9184: Government Procurement Reform Act. Available at: https://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Philippines_Government%20Procurement%20Reform%20Act_2003_en.pdf, p. 9

⁴⁰ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Alex B. Brillantes Jr. and Maricel T. Fernandez (2012), 'Engaging Citizens in the Struggle against Corruption: The Case of a People's Organization in the Philippines', pp. 12-3.

based organizations, and the 1991 Local Government Code also called for NGOs and CSOs to partner with local governments to benefit communities.⁴³

These policies reflect a positive attitude of the central government towards citizen monitoring, and CCAGG has benefitted in terms of resources and training from a positive relationship with the government. After the revolution of 1986, both the NEDA and the Ministry of Budget Management (MBM) were in favor of engaging CSOs through the CEDP.⁴⁴ These agencies were able to assist CCAGG in their monitoring efforts. The NEDA provided training for all NGO partners to help them carry out inspections, and the MBM provided CSOs with statements of project costs and a schedule for the release of funds.⁴⁵ Although CCAGG clashed with local officials in their early years, this positive relationship with the central government gave them access to vital technical training, and to the documentation necessary to carry out monitoring. NEDA training was particularly important, as CCAGG's initial volunteers mostly did not have a technical or engineering background.⁴⁶ CCAGG also has a good relationship with the Ombudsman, which was responsive in sending investigating teams to validate CCAGG's complaints, and kept them informed about results of investigations.⁴⁷

The Catholic Church in Abra supported CCAGG from the beginning, which members believe was a factor in their success. Many founding members of the group had previously worked or volunteered at the diocese's social action centers before they volunteered for CCAGG.⁴⁸ The Catholic Church is influential and highly revered within the Philippines, and its connection to CCAGG gave members credibility, protected them from harm and helped win round recalcitrant politicians.⁴⁹ As well as support from the Church, CCAGG's recognition by the international community gave them credibility. The UNDP and Transparency International have both either partnered with CCAGG or recognized their work through awards.⁵⁰

CCAGG uses media effectively to engage the local community. They have a radio program on the diocese-owned radio station which, due to their links with the Church, they were offered for free.⁵¹ Members also have a column in the local newspaper, *Abra Today*.⁵² This effective use of media allowed the group to reach potential volunteers,⁵³ and to raise the profile of the group within the local community.⁵⁴ When CCAGG met with resistance from local officials who

⁴³ Ibid. p. 2.

⁴⁴ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁴⁵ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 7.

⁴⁶ Brillantes Jr. and Fernandez, 'Engaging Citizens in the Struggle Against Corruption', p. 11.

⁴⁷ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁴⁸ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 29.

⁵⁰ Brillantes Jr. and Fernandez, 'Engaging Citizens in the Struggle Against Corruption', p. 14.

⁵¹ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 9.

⁵² CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁵³ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 7.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

withheld information about projects' specifications, they were able to use the media and the Church to exert pressure on civil servants, rallying public opinion against this behavior.⁵⁵

CCAGG has also benefited from a strong sense of community volunteerism, and from strong leadership. In the questionnaire, CCAGG cited strong leadership as one of the main enabling factors for their success.⁵⁶ They have been led by Pura Sumangil, one of the founding members, for over three decades. She has been recognized nationally and internationally for her work.⁵⁷ Abra also has a strong tradition of volunteerism: CCAGG grew out of an earlier volunteering group, NAMFREL, which in turn was comprised of members of the Abra Youth Organization who volunteered as the citizen arm of the national election commission in the 1970s.⁵⁸

Barriers

CCAGG initially faced hostility from officials and contractors in Abra. The group cited harmful attitudes, including 'traditional, autocratic leaders / politicians who ... are used to doing things on their own' and 'government bureaucrats who thought that ordinary citizens have nothing to contribute to nation-building' as two of the main barriers in the early years of the project.⁵⁹ In addition, monitors often faced pressure of harassment from the contractors they were monitoring, especially if they found evidence of substandard construction.

In dealing with difficult local officials, CCAGG adopted an **adversarial approach**. Members approached officials to remind them of legal rules and regulations surrounding citizen monitoring, and the organization applied public pressure via the media to get them to release project specifications.⁶⁰ Where such tactics failed, members would interview members of the local community about how long a project had been going on for, how many workers and what sorts of machines they had seen on site, etc. In this way, they were able to estimate project costs, and compare it with the budgets they'd received from MBM.⁶¹ It is worth noting that in recent years, similar citizen monitoring projects such as Road Watch have tended to avoid a confrontational approach, instead trying to work with local officials in a cooperative way. Roach Watch coordinators were also less likely to use the media to criticize officials, preferring to settle disputes through internal channels first.⁶²

In order to deal with pressure from contractors and officials, CCAGG were strict about preserving their **independence**. The group forbade its members from accepting any gifts or bribes from

⁵⁵ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 10.

⁵⁶ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁵⁷ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 23.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 5.

⁵⁹ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁶⁰ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 10.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 10.

⁶² Ibid. p. 19.

implementing agencies or contractors.⁶³ Monitors were not even allowed to accept food from contractors while on site.⁶⁴

Because of its commitment to independence, fund-raising was a persistent issue for CCAGG. Initially, the group sustained itself through small community fund-raising activities, such as dinners and dances, and all of its members were unpaid volunteers.⁶⁵ However, this proved a challenging strategy to maintain. Volunteers regularly had to leave the group to make a living, which meant CCAGG was constantly having to expend time and resources training new volunteers.⁶⁶ In the 1990s, the group began to solicit donor grants, and was successful in obtaining funding from organizations including the UNDP, the British Council, and the World Bank. The government also began giving CCAGG funding as a partner NGO from the mid-1990s. This money allowed CCAGG to hire full-time paid staff.⁶⁷ **However, funding remains limited,** with CCAGG employing a staff of only 14 people.⁶⁸ In the questionnaire, CCAGG stated that they had as yet been unable to conduct an impact evaluation of their work due to lack of funds.⁶⁹

Although CCAGG has successfully overcome barriers of access to information, not all CSOs enjoy the same access. In the early days, CCAGG struggled to get documents from local agencies even with the central government on their side,⁷⁰ but over time their access to information has improved. This gives them access to documents such as the program of work (POW) for a project, which CCAGG cited as their main tool in monitoring.⁷¹ However, this is largely due to a longstanding relationship with the DPWH;⁷² in other contexts, access to information is a real problem for CSOs, and there is a culture of secrecy within the DPWH that hampers citizen monitoring efforts and limits public access to information.⁷³

Background conditions of poverty and disorder in Abra have made CCAGG's work more difficult. The province remains poor, with the National Statistical Coordination Board classifying it as 9th in the 10 most impoverished provinces in the Philippines. Enduring poverty and poor quality government services have meant that CCAGG serves multiple roles in the community besides citizen monitoring. For example, they have also tried to tackle biodiversity issues in the area, and help citizens settle boundary disputes.⁷⁴ The group's resources have been stretched even further as a result. In the early years of the project, insurgency in Abra made CCAGG's work more difficult, threatening the physical safety of volunteers.⁷⁵ Violence continues to be a

⁶³ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁶⁴ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 18.

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 14, 18-19.

⁶⁸ PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 37.

⁶⁹ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁷⁰ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 9.

⁷¹ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁷² PWI, 'A Study of Anti-Corruption Initiatives', p. 28.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 7.

⁷⁴ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 15.

problem: between 2001 and 2009, around 30 well-known political figures were killed in Abra.⁷⁶ These larger development and security challenges have arguable prevented CCAGG from effecting deeper structural change in the region, which still suffers from poor infrastructure despite citizen monitoring efforts. As of 2012, 75% of national and provincial roads in Abra were still unpaved.⁷⁷

Lessons

In the questionnaire, CCAGG highlighted two lessons from the project that could be useful to other practitioners:

Maintain independence. CCAGG always had a firm stance against bribery,⁷⁸ and wanted to be financially independent from the government (although they did start receiving some money from the central government from the mid-1990s). As a result, they relied either on fund-raising by volunteers, or they sought money from organizations with a similar vision of challenging corruption and promoting transparency and accountability.⁷⁹

Build capacity for your own organization and for the community as a whole. CCAGG focused in the early years on building their technical expertise so that they were up to the task of infrastructure monitoring.⁸⁰ In the questionnaire, the organization stressed that this capacity should be transferred to local people as well,⁸¹ building a wide grassroots base of empowered citizens within the community.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 16.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 16.

⁷⁸ CCAGG Questionnaire.

⁷⁹ Majeed, 'Power at the Grass Roots', p. 18.

⁸⁰ Brillantes Jr. and Fernandez, 'Engaging Citizens in the Struggle Against Corruption', p. 11.

⁸¹ CCAGG Questionnaire.

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Colophon

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Photo on first page: Construction workers (photo from Unsplash)

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