

Participatory monitoring to improve performance of government services and promote citizen empowerment: a success story from the Philippines.

Participatory monitoring, Philippines



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**Citizen engagement
and closing the loop**

Abstract: This case study pertains to an assessment conducted by the Basel Institute on Governance, in collaboration with UNDP's Global Anti-Corruption Initiative (GAIN), of a social accountability monitoring project in the municipality of San Miguel, Bohol in the Philippines. The aforementioned project, called Bayaniham Undertaking Living in a Healthy and Organised Neighborhood or BULHON sa Panguma (BULHON), involves the monitoring of agricultural subsidies and was developed and implemented by the Government Watch (G-Watch) programme of the Ateneo School of Government in Manila.



Abstract continued

This project received support from the predecessor of UNDP GAIN (Global Programme on Anti-Corruption – PACDE) as part of its ongoing efforts to promote citizen participatory anti-corruption efforts world wide. The assessment was aimed at furthering an understanding about the context-specific factors that enable the success of social accountability interventions.

This case study presents the results from that assessment (conducted in San Miguel, Bohol, Philippines during the month of July 2013) and the lessons learned about the importance of adequately contextualizing social accountability initiatives generally.



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Country context

The potential of social accountability initiatives to support public sector performance is especially meaningful for remote rural areas in developing countries, where scarcity of human resources and limited accessibility often complicate performance monitoring through conventional state-based mechanisms (Baez-Camargo and Megchún Rivera 2013). In this sense, the Philippines represents a particularly pertinent case study given its geographic characteristics being composed of thousands of islands, the largest of which have vast expanses of jungles and mountains that separate large populations.

As Azfar and Gurgur (2008) point out, the sheer geography of Philippines has for centuries, necessitated some form of decentralized or at least de-concentrated governance. The Local Governments Act of 1991 devolved substantial political authority and administrative control over many areas to the provincial and municipal levels with the intention to bring the government closer to the people. As a result, Local Government Units (LGUs) acquired the authority to create their own revenue sources and became responsible for delivery of essential public services.

However, although the Philippines has a long tradition of broad, participatory democracy, poor governance, weak rule of law, and corruption have continued to thwart the Philippine government's ability to deliver basic services and attract investment for economic growth (US Mission to the Philippines 2009). In fact, according to some authors, much of the corruption in Philippines happens at the local level with around 49% of corruption cases open in 2000 involving municipal mayors (Batalla 2000). Furthermore, quantitative

analysis of the impact of corruption on provision of public services in Philippines has shown that the negative impact of corruption is more serious in rural as compared to urban areas (Azfar and Gurgur 2008). For these reasons, social accountability initiatives in the Philippines are seen as having significant potential to achieve positive governance and development outcomes.

Constructive engagement – the BULHON project

In 2009, G-Watch initiated a project entitled “*Monitoring and Improving Service Delivery of LGUs using Government Watch (G-Watch) as a Social Accountability Tool*” to help address these challenges in governance at the local level. The project involved getting the support and buy-in of the LGU officials, capacitating local civil society organisations (CSOs), and mobilizing communities in order to promote monitoring of selected social programmes and projects (G-Watch 2015, p.4).

Project BULHON is a joint government-citizen initiative to monitor agricultural services, particularly the distribution of rice subsidies and production programmes. The Rice Production Programme is one of the basic services offered by the San Miguel Municipal Agriculture Office (MAO) and is of high relevance for the community as a whole since the majority of the residents are rice farmers and subsidy recipients. The primary goal of the project is to ensure that the right type, quality and quantity of rice production programmes and related services are provided to beneficiaries following established standard processes that ensure effective and efficient service delivery (G-Watch Programme 2012, p.5). The monitoring methodology was



initially piloted in four barangays¹ (Mahayag, Cabangahan, San Isidro and Bayongan) and afterwards made extensive to another 14 barangays. During its first phase (2012-2014) the project mobilised 41 monitors of which 17% were women, 47% were farmers, 10% were Barangay level LGU officers, 7% were agricultural technicians from the MAO, 17% were municipal level LGU officers, and 2% were provincial level LGU officers.

The main principle upon which the social accountability approach, in general, and the monitoring protocols, in particular, were constructed is that of constructive engagement. Therefore, a key attribute of the G-Watch model for performance monitoring is that it brings together citizens and local government officials from the inception of

¹A *barangay* is the smallest unit of local government in the Philippines. See: <http://manila.gov.ph/government/>, 'About Manila'.



the initiative and keeps them engaged through the design, planning, implementation and evaluation phases (G-Watch 2015). From the outset, ownership is promoted with the formation of a core group, consisting of LGU officials and citizens, which provides coordination and oversight functions for the monitoring activity.

The starting point for the project are capacity building activities, facilitated by G-Watch staff, whereby community-based monitors are instructed on basic concepts of social accountability, the rights and entitlements of the recipients of the agricultural subsidies programme and on the correct application of a monitoring tool. The main participatory activity in BULHON is direct monitoring of the implementation of the rice subsidy programme involving a simple checklist of standards. After each monitoring cycle is completed, the monitors gather together in sharing sessions to exchange experiences, validate their monitoring results,

and jointly identify issues. The sharing sessions are followed by problem-solving sessions, where monitors meet with LGU officials to present the monitoring results, issues and recommendations, soliciting their response and generating commitments from them. Finally, a public meeting is called to present the findings of the monitoring to the communities at large and to announce the commitments made by the LGU to address problems encountered.

Results achieved

Overall, the evidence gathered through the research indicates that the BULHON project has been successful in reaching its goals of improving the delivery of a key public programme, and increasing transparency and accountability of local government through citizen participatory inputs. There are several dimensions along which the project has achieved positive impacts in the communities of San Miguel.

A first of these dimensions is citizen empowerment, which is one of the outcomes of a successful social accountability initiative. Citizen monitors reported unanimously feeling motivated and empowered through their involvement. During focus group discussions several participants described how, as a result of their involvement with the BULHON project, they gained recognition and respect in the communities, established new friendships and improved their self-esteem. Some explained that they have come to be regarded as farming experts, are sought out by community members for advice and perform a connecting function (akin to a “bridge”) between farmers and the LGU.

Furthermore, the research also revealed evidence suggesting that farmers in general, not only those

participating in the monitoring activities, developed a more proactive attitude coming forward with their issues or concerns to the LGU. The expressed opinion of several farmers interviewed was that the monitoring programme demonstrated that the LGU was “looking out for them.”

Secondly, the assessment of BULHON project revealed widespread perceptions among community members of improved performance of the LGU. Leaders of Farmers’ Associations (FAs) stated that as a result of the monitoring there has been a noticeable improvement in the timeliness and overall quality of service delivery. The monitoring activities have also improved the transparency of the agricultural subsidies programme because, in the words of a Farmer Association leader, *“it is now easier to check the quantities of seeds delivered and received.”* LGU officials also reported positive outcomes from the implementation of BULHON. Several officials who were interviewed said that, as a result of the monitoring activities, they have obtained better information about the problems farmers face, that the monitoring has opened opportunities for immediate resolution of problems, and has led to fewer complaints received.

Thirdly, the assessment also collected evidence in connection to positive effects of the monitoring activity on farming outcomes. Some Farmer Association members attributed improved farming outcomes to the implementation of BULHON, stating that the project has also provided a vehicle through which farmers have become better informed about the services available from the LGU, about their own entitlements, and have begun to apply improved farming methods. The MAO also commented that, while in the past some farmers would

re-sell some of the seeds that were distributed to them, the monitoring has decreased this practice. As a consequence of better techniques and use of resources, rice production has increased in the communities of San Miguel.

Finally, the evidence collected during the assessment also suggested that the BULHON project contributed to developing positive attitudes of citizens and LGU officials toward each other. Citizen monitors participating in focus group discussions reported that, not only had they developed closer ties to the LGU but also, as a result of the monitoring activities, closer relationships had developed between the LGU and Farmer Associations, between the LGU and local San Miguel CSOs as well as between the LGU and individual farmer beneficiaries. Overall, the assessment findings confirmed a perception of increased trust in the LGU among people and development of mutual respect among all stakeholders consulted.



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Identified factors behind the success of BULHON

As mentioned above, the aim of the assessment of BULHON project that was conducted by the Basel Institute on Governance and UNDP's PACDE was to generate insights into those elements of the local context that enable positive results of social accountability initiatives. In the following we discuss two main factors identified as prevalent in the communities of San Miguel, Bohol, which contributed to the success of BULHON: a) high levels of social capital and dense horizontal networks prevailing in the communities, and b) significant embeddedness of local government officials in the communities.

Social capital and horizontal networks

The social context prevailing in the communities of San Miguel, Bohol can be characterized by a strong communitarian orientation, regular and intense social interactions by the majority of community members, as well as high levels of participation in a multitude of organisations of civil society.

The information obtained through the assessment points to the barangay (village) assembly is the main venue in which the notion of community is crystallized. Barangay assemblies are composed of all village residents 15 years or older and are where people in the communities come together to discuss their concerns. Citizen participation in barangay assemblies was reported to be high (around 80% according to the estimation of an LGU official) and according to focus group participants *“everybody gets a chance to articulate concerns during assembly meetings.”*

Besides the role of the barangay assembly as a forum for community debate, citizens in San Miguel also participate actively in a variety of voluntary associations and CSOs. In a survey applied as part of the assessment, 86% of respondents declared that they participate in at least one type of organisation. Evidence compiled through the assessment pointed to high participation rates, understood as attendance to meetings and involvement in activities supported by the local organisations, of between 75 to 85 percent of the membership base.

The high levels of participation in the barangay assemblies and in the local voluntary associations have significant implications for the success of a social accountability initiative such as BULHON for at least two reasons.

First, high levels of participation in local associations have been long identified in the literature (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993, Evans et al. 1996, Fukuyama 2001) as generating social capital and having a positive impact for the development of democratic governance. Such beneficial effects of dense horizontal networks were observed in connection to the BULHON project in the communities of San Miguel. First, because community members interact with each other frequently, the capacity building trainings that were undertaken with a few community members in the context of BULHON proved to deliver beneficial effects across the communities because useful information on rights, entitlements and LGU services could be effectively and efficiently transmitted by virtue of such social networks. Thus, the capacity building and training of a few community members in social accountability methods had a positive impact for entire communities.

Second, a strong sense of community and dense horizontal networks generate significant collective action capabilities. As (Putnam 1995, p.67) pointed out, the horizontal social networks “foster sturdy norms of generalised reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved.” Such collective action capabilities are necessary to sustain social accountability approaches, such as participatory monitoring which are significantly demanding of participants in terms of time commitment and depth of the trainings they must undergo in order to become monitors (Baez-Camargo 2015).

Overall, based on the information compiled during the assessment, it can be asserted that the familiarity and ease

with which citizens who participated in the BULHON project interacted with each other was extremely conducive to the effective coordination of monitoring visits as well as for the organisation of sharing and problem solving sessions that follow the monitoring exercise. In other words, dense horizontal social networks and a strong communitarian orientation were instrumental in San Miguel to enabling an effective articulation of citizen voice, which is one of the essential goals of any social accountability initiative (Baez-Camargo 2015).

Embeddedness of LGU officials

The second contextual factor that stands out in the assessment and can be considered to have significantly contributed to the success of the BULHON project is a remarkable degree of embeddedness of LGU officials, particularly the mayor of San Miguel, with their constituent



communities. Embeddedness refers to situations where there is a deep involvement on the part of public officials in the lives of the communities they serve, to the point that the boundaries between public and private are blurred, and this enables the emergence of significant public/private synergies (Evans 1996).

Overall, from the information compiled during the assessment, the extent to which LGU officials demonstrated a commitment to be accessible to citizens through diverse channels was notable. During interviews, LGU members explicitly reflected on their belief that citizen engagement is a prerequisite to making their activities successful. One concrete manifestation of the embeddedness of LGU officials in the communities was the observation that a regular means of communication

with citizens is through texting, as the mobile numbers of these public officials, including that of the mayor, are widely known and used by people to contact them. The Municipal Agricultural Officer (MAO) explained this situation in the following manner:

“We used to have a dedicated phone hotline and even kept a log of complaints. We later learned that the hotline was only effective during office hours when office staff is available to answer the phone. By making my mobile number and the agricultural technicians’ numbers public, the farmers could seek our assistance even at night.”

Furthermore, LGU officials also reported that they hold house visits, receiving citizens in their private residences as well as paying visits to the citizens’ homes in order to attend to citizens’ needs. These examples are meaningful ones to the extent that they illustrate the manner in which interactions between community members and LGU officials blur the distinction between public and private.

Besides such informal mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to citizen’s concerns, the LGU also actively seeks out citizen feedback on a regular basis. Key to enabling the outreach activities of the LGU are the community voluntary organisations, especially the Farmer Associations when it comes to addressing issues that concern farming. However, it was noted that this could potentially leave out the community members who, for one reason or another, are not associated with any groups. Being aware of this situation, LGU officials explained that they strive to capture the feedback and concerns of unorganised farmers by regularly attending the barangay assemblies.



In the assessment there were several other examples observed, which illustrate how responsiveness is in effect a high priority for local government officials. For instance, once a year the LGU also organises a “*Municipal Government Information and Action Caravan*” (MGIAC) to actively seek out the problems, complaints and concerns of the people of the 18 barangays that make up the municipality.

On their part, community members appreciate the efforts on the part of the LGU to reach out to them. In the words of a local Farmer Association leader: “We are very fortunate to have an LGU that is very open and that actually encourages CSO participation in its committees and councils.” Furthermore, results from a survey applied across four barangays of San Miguel reflected that 80% of respondents have very high trust towards the LGU (Baez-Camargo and Mariano 2013). The observations acquired in the assessment therefore confirmed the notion of high embeddedness, both from the perspective of the actions undertaken by the LGU to reach out to citizens as well as from the perspective of community members in that they tend to view the local authorities with trust and appreciation.

In the implementation of project BULHON, the responsive predisposition of LGU officials has been an important asset during the various stages of implementation of the monitoring activities. The mayor, MAO and other LGU officials formed part of the project’s core group which was in charge of coordinating and launching the main project components. Furthermore, close ties between citizens and LGU ensured that irregularities identified in the course of the monitoring activities could be promptly communicated to the pertinent authorities. As recounted by some of the project



monitors, in many cases corrective measures were triggered immediately by the LGU as soon as problems with the rice subsidy programme were reported through BULHON.

In any social accountability initiative, articulating citizen voice is only one of the fundamental challenges to be met. Equally important is to transmit that citizen voice to those state actors who can act upon it, making sure that a minimum degree of answerability is achieved through the citizen participatory actions. In this respect, the embeddedness of the local authorities with the communities in the case of San Miguel was an invaluable asset for enabling the success of a participatory monitoring project such as BULHON.

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Sustainability

Social accountability initiatives often fail to accomplish their long term goals, not because of flawed programme design or problematic implementation, but rather due to serious challenges to their sustainability once donor funds or practitioner's involvement phase out (McGee and Gaventa 2010, McNeil and Malena 2010). In the case of BULHON, several meaningful facts are encouraging of the long term viability of the participatory monitoring activities.

Firstly, those elements of sustainability contingent on continued citizen motivation or continued support on the part of local government suggest a promising outlook for the survival of project BULHON. During interviews, stakeholders across the board enthusiastically supported the idea of extending the monitoring to other sectors and a recent confederation of the CSOs in the municipality has provided a strong and stable supply of monitors (G-Watch 2014). In fact, since then and with continued support from

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G-Watch, monitoring activities have now been extended to water service delivery. Meaningfully, the municipality of San Miguel, Bohol has since then also passed a resolution recognizing the capacitated monitors of the BULHON project as citizen monitors of LGU service delivery.

Secondly, and admittedly of great importance, other sustainability concerns for BULHON hinge mostly on financial considerations. At the time of the assessment, the most frequently mentioned concerns expressed by citizen monitors related to the lack of adequate funds available to cover expenses such as transportation costs to the monitoring sites, and purchase of items such as raincoats and rain boots to conduct monitoring activities during the rainy season. With a longer time frame in mind, certainly a question in need of resolution referred to the viability of continuing monitoring activities once the donor support ended. In this respect, a very encouraging development has been the allocation of Php 96,000 from the municipality's general fund as *"Aid to the Government Watch Monitoring Programme"* (G-Watch 2014).

A third dimension with clear potential impact on the sustainability of the BULHON monitoring initiative relates to whether the proactive stance of the LGU and the collaborative relationship between local authorities and the communities will be preserved after the incumbent local government's term in office expires. On this point, the hopes and expectations are that the inroads made by project BULHON (and its successor focusing on the monitoring of water services) have been able to generate significant demand side synergies that will be able to continue to extract accountability from the LGU once the current administration has been replaced.

Conclusions/lessons learned

The BULHON programme is an example of a highly successful social accountability initiative. Two major elements associated with local context have been identified as being instrumental in the positive results achieved by this citizen participatory initiative: dense horizontal social networks and embeddedness of LGU officials.

Horizontal social networks were crucial to maximizing the impact of capacity building of citizens and to empower community members through the information generated by the social accountability initiative. The functional role that such networks can play in maximizing the impact of social accountability suggests that donor and practitioners' efforts towards strengthening civil society organisations are well founded.

Furthermore, the evidence from this case underscores that a strong civil society does not necessarily develop from the activities of overtly political or development-oriented NGOs. Rather, it appears that voluntary organisations such as those formed on the basis of economic activity (prominently Farmer Associations in this case), but also women's organisations or faith based organisations, all work towards developing social trust and ties of reciprocity among community members that enhance the collective action capabilities of communities and upon which social accountability initiatives can thrive.



The role that embeddedness played in the success of BULHON would tend to stress the importance of democratic accountability at the local level, not only via the electoral process, but perhaps also through other informal and context-specific means. Also important here is whether decision making power over the services targeted by the social accountability initiative is decentralized in a manner such that local government officials actually have the authority to act upon the information generated by the citizen participatory activities.

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