



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

POWER AT THE GRASS ROOTS: MONITORING PUBLIC WORKS IN ABRA, PHILIPPINES, 1986-1990

SYNOPSIS

In the early 1980s, the poor condition of roads and other infrastructure in remote areas of the Philippines hindered economic growth and heightened regional inequalities. A major problem was the central government's inability to follow through on its own improvement projects in far-flung regions of the 7,100-island archipelago. In 1986, President Corazon Aquino created the Community Employment and Development Program, which changed the way the government managed its rural public works program. Her administration empowered citizens to monitor the progress and quality of construction. In the northern province of Abra on the main island of Luzon, two dozen volunteers formed Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government to ensure that officials and contractors carried out their jobs faithfully. In 1987, the group alerted central government agencies to 20 incomplete projects and provided evidence on which to base a high-profile inquiry against a number of local officials. The group then went on to monitor about a hundred projects under Aquino's development program. In 1988, the group earned a presidential citation as well as national and international recognition. Over the next two decades, Concerned Citizens expanded its activities to monitor more than 600 infrastructure projects valued at 300 million pesos (US\$7 million), including roads, school buildings, irrigation systems, and bridges. This case study illustrates the challenges associated with citizen monitoring, a form of short-route accountability.

Rushda Majeed drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Manila and Bangued, Abra, Philippines, in February 2013. Case published July 2013.

INTRODUCTION

In early 1987, citizens in the northern Philippine province of Abra were surprised to read an official pronouncement in the *Norluzonian Courier*, a regional newspaper, that the Abra district office of the Department of Public Works and Highways had completed 20 central-government-funded infrastructure projects. Pura Sumangil, cochair of Concerned

Citizens of Abra for Good Government (referred to locally as CCAGG), and her colleagues knew better. "Most of the projects that we were monitoring were reported finished," she said. "But some were just beginning, some were halfway, and some had not even started. We were very angry."

The disparity between the local department's claims, as reported by the

newspaper, and actual performance underscored the reasons that a group of teachers and community organizers had come together to form the Concerned Citizens group a few months earlier.

Sumangil's citizen-run program had its roots in a government initiative in the country's capital, Manila, about 300 kilometers south of Abra [see map in Appendix]. In August 1986, the new president of the Philippines, Corazon Aquino, launched the Community Employment and Development Program (CEDP), a one-year initiative to boost employment and encourage citizen participation in government. The main purpose was to create jobs by employing local workers in the construction of relatively small-scale projects such as farm-to-market roads, health clinics, school buildings, and irrigation systems, especially in rural areas. To ensure that government agencies used funds as intended, the program called for communities to monitor progress. The experiment formed the basis of a series of similar efforts when it ended a year later.

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA)—the government's planning and development agency—oversaw the president's initiative and worked closely with the Department of Public Works and Highways. In 1986–87, the Aquino administration allocated 9,064 million pesos (US\$178 million) to the CEDP. More than half of the funds, totaling P5,132 million (US\$101 million) went directly to the public works and highways department for infrastructure projects. Department representatives consulted with officials of barangays (the country's smallest administrative units, akin to villages) and with citizens to determine local needs. The national planning authority then weighed the recommendations with help from regional, provincial, and municipal development councils.

As top officials at the national planning authority were assembling the CEDP, they also

contacted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) nationwide in an effort to recruit community groups that could help track the projects. They reached out to the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) to recruit volunteers. Set up as a nonpartisan election-monitoring network in 1983, NAMFREL had chapters all over the Philippines. The group mobilized volunteers for voter registration, education, electoral reform advocacy, poll watching, and vote counting. And its vast network could yield local volunteers for CEDP projects.

Like many organizations in the Philippines, NAMFREL had strong ties to the Roman Catholic Church, which exercised considerable moral authority—especially in rural areas—and most parishes had their own NAMFREL chapters. The late bishop Artemio Rillera of the diocese of Bangued (1993–2005) chaired Abra's chapter and enabled the Church to mobilize a large number of volunteers in the province. Carmelita Bersalona, a NAMFREL volunteer who served as cochair of the Concerned Citizens group from 1986 to 1988, said, "The Catholic Church was a very strong force in the organization of NAMFREL. Most of the priests in the respective parishes were with NAMFREL."

In Abra, NAMFREL had organized community poll watchers during the February 1986 snap elections, which paved the way for the People Power Revolution, which in turn brought Aquino to office and ousted a dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. Afterward, the volunteers realized they could use the organization's network and their own political skills to help the people of their province benefit from the new president's program.

Sumangil explained: "When the presidential elections ended in 1986, many of us—realizing that we have many things to do—decided not to fold our things but to continue working. We decided to call ourselves

Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government. We said that good government would be the umbrella of our work.”

THE CHALLENGE

In 1986, Concerned Citizens had a core of roughly 25 volunteers, including teachers, professors, priests, engineers, and reporters. Many had expertise in agriculture, community organizing, construction, and forestry. Sumangil took charge of the organization as cochair, with Bersalona as the other cochair. The founding group also included Aniceta Baltar, Eric Basa, Irene Bringas, Leticia Madriaga, Merla Ruiz, and Elizabeth Valera.¹

In helping focus the group’s work, chairs Sumangil and Bersalona drew on their deep knowledge of and connections with the local and national communities. Sumangil was director of research and community extension at Divine Word College in Bangued, and Bersalona was a professor at the University of the Philippines in Manila and an Abra native. Both were keenly aware of the province’s need for better roads and other infrastructure.

With a population of about 180,000 spread across 4,200 square kilometers, Abra was remote and isolated. In 1997, it was one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines: about 56% of families (or 60% of the population) fell below the poverty line, which the government pegged at P10,280 a year (US\$300).² Although the region had a wealth of resources—including dense forests, gold, silver, copper, and limestone—most people derived their incomes from rice production and a seasonal bamboo industry.

Farmers and workers needed good roads to transport their produce to provincial and regional markets. Indigenous communities, whose members lived in the most-remote areas, needed roads and bridges to get to hospitals and schools, yet many of the nearly 2,500 kilometers of national, provincial, municipal, and barangay

roads were unpaved. Although some local communities preferred gravel and dirt feeder roads for environmental or financial reasons, Abra needed paved roads that would not be washed away during the heavy rains of typhoon season from May to October. Of the province’s 27 municipalities, 11 were in mountainous regions that during the rainy season had no access to Bangued, the province’s capital and commercial hub.³

Madriaga, who taught at Divine Word College and helped cofound Concerned Citizens, underscored the importance of roads to citizens’ well-being: “Roads are basic to us. Can you bring your products from the mountains if you don’t have good roads? You can imagine the suffering of teachers and children walking on slippery [unpaved] roads just to get to school. Can you imagine if there are sick people, and the only hospital is in Bangued? People would die along the way and would not get to a hospital because the roads were in bad shape.”

Government-funded road and bridge projects remained incomplete or existed only on paper because contractors and local officials siphoned off public funds. Sumangil said, “We would hear of reports [from some officials and newspapers] that this and that place had roads, but in reality there were none.” The Department of Public Works and Highways usually commissioned new roads or extensive repairs every 25 years. “If a road was reported finished [but it was not finished], then for the next 25 years, the people there would walk in dusty roads during the summer and in muddy roads during the rainy months instead of in good roads,” she said.

Many politicians in Abra owned construction companies that bid for public contracts. Madriaga bemoaned the network of special interests: “The politicians make use of dummy contractors. Close relatives and associates of politicians are the contractors of government projects as well as owners of

hardware stores. When you subcontract and want supplies, you go to the hardware store managed by a close relative of this or that politician. It is common knowledge.”

A number of civil servants also collaborated with politicians and their contractors to siphon off funds. Kickbacks from road projects could range anywhere from 20 to 40 percent, and corrupt legislators, mayors, barangay officials, or civil engineers pocketed the money in exchange for awarding lucrative contracts.⁴ After securing projects, contractors often deviated from project specifications—such as length of the road they were to build, labor costs, rental of equipment, and taxes—to increase their profit margins.⁵ Bosses and local politicians pressured district highway department officials to file reports with the central office and to say construction projects were complete when they were only partially finished or had not even been started.

Safety was a serious challenge for anyone who sought to upset the status quo. Abra’s history of political violence and intimidation of citizens raised the stakes and the potential dangers for Concerned Citizens. Since the 1920s, two clans had competed to control political posts in Abra,⁶ and several others had joined the fray in the 1960s. The first reported case of election-related violence was in 1965, when the vice mayor of a town in central Abra was assassinated.⁷

The bishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Bangued, Leopoldo Jaucian, said: “Politics in Abra is inherited and passed through generations. If parents become politicians, then children are involved. It is a family affair. Moreover, politicians are part of four or five families and all are interrelated by blood and by marriages. Politics here is more of a family competition.” According to a report by the Political Democracy and Reform program at the Ateneo School of Government in Manila, the province’s major political families maintained a total of 10 heavily armed groups,⁸ which often

resorted to violence against rivals during elections and maintained power through intimidation.

The families used money from public projects to acquire guns, hire thugs, and buy votes. Edgar Gurrea, a former army general, said: “The biggest resources politicians can accumulate in preparation for any elections are projects in social services, farm-to-market roads, and other projects that affect the local community. They spend about 40% in reality, and rest goes into their pockets.”

Joy Aceron, director of Government Watch, an Ateneo school-affiliated research program that assessed government performance in service delivery, recalled: “People used to say that in Abra there are only two sources of income: politics—because you can either run for office or provide services for politicians—and the funeral house. The politicians in Abra had no qualms about using arms to protect themselves.”

Because of intimidation and the threat of violence, citizens were afraid to speak out against the corruption. Sumangil said: “If you questioned some people in government, then the next day you would be found by the wayside. It really petrified people, and that is why they would rather keep quiet.”

In addition, many residents were beholden to politicians, who often helped them get jobs. Madriaga said, “There is the culture of indebtedness to a politician. ‘If you give me work, I will be indebted to you. I will ask permission from you to make sure that what I am doing is right.’ So, it goes back to the cycle of poverty and vulnerability of the poor. You will not have the confidence to speak up and criticize.”

A history of insurgency complicated this context further. In the 1970s and 1980s, Abra was caught up in the fight between the New People’s Army (NPA)—the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines—and the Philippine military. In Abra and five other

northern provinces, known collectively as the Cordillera region, the rebels joined indigenous groups that opposed a planned dam—which threatened to inundate ancestral lands and villages—and the destruction of pine forests by a new paper and cellophane plant.

Yet despite those obstacles, Abra had a history of voluntarism. In the 1970s, members of the Abra Youth Organization volunteered as the citizen arm of the national election commission. Locally known as apathy breakers, the organization’s youth leaders and coordinators were stationed in each municipality. Bersalona, who had served as chair of the youth group, recalled: “We thought that while we have plenty of resources here, the reason we were not developing as fast [as possible] was the indifference of our people.” Members of the youth organization became NAMFREL’s and, later, Concerned Citizens’ volunteers.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

The founding members of Concerned Citizens looked for ways to hold government accountable and improve services in the province. Baltar, a founding member, said: “We named ourselves Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government because we wanted to participate in a transparent, accountable, and participatory government. It was very rare that you heard of such a concept at the time.” She added, “We wanted to challenge the government and make sure that public services are used judiciously and for the development of the people.”

The question was how to build that capacity, and the organizers found inspiration and assistance close at hand. The Roman Catholic Church played a significant though largely unofficial role in the Concerned Citizens organization’s planning and activities by building on its deep roots in the political culture of the Philippines. As elsewhere in the country, more than 80% of Abra’s citizens were Roman

Catholic;⁹ most of the rest were of other Christian or indigenous faiths. With 22 parishes in the province, the Church had a corps of priests and volunteers with ready access to Abra’s citizens, even those in remote municipalities. It funded and operated schools, colleges, hospitals, and employment programs, including cooperatives for small businesses. It also owned a radio station and a weekly newspaper, *Abra Today*.

The Church stepped in when the government did not. Sumangil said: “The Church wouldn’t have done all that if the government was responsive. It would not have done these were it not for the failure of the state.” Importantly, it also served as a nonpartisan buffer among political forces.¹⁰

Many core group members had worked or volunteered at the diocese’s social action centers, which addressed social concerns through volunteer work or charity. Sumangil, for instance, had served in the diocese since 1970. She had earned a degree in education from Divine Word College while serving the diocese. She later taught at the college and managed a dormitory. Others were affiliated with the Society of the Divine Word, a Roman Catholic congregation that played a crucial role in many areas, including operating Divine Word College of Bangued.

Religion was also an important motivator for many volunteers. Madriaga said: “Most of the volunteers came from the college and the Church and from the bishop and priests—those who were willing to join us and couldn’t attack the government through politics. We found a common ground in the Concerned Citizens group. It was an alternative way of making change if you couldn’t make change in the institutions that have been there for so long. We thought a people’s organization could do it.”

Relying on recommendations from NAMFREL’s central office, the regional office of the national development authority, NEDA,

certified Concerned Citizens as a credible partner. In January 1987, Solita Collas-Monsod, director general of NEDA, and other officials at the Department of Budget and Management signed an agreement with Concerned Citizens to monitor the progress of the community development programs in the province.

Members of Concerned Citizens soon organized into committees to handle specific functions: organization and mobilization, programs, logistics, education, research and documentation, legal, and media. Each committee consisted of three to five people. The two chairs, a treasurer, an auditor, and a secretary completed the group's early organizational structure. Members decided that Bringas, an engineer by profession, would lead the group's monitoring activities; Basa became in charge of mobilizing volunteers; and Baltar managed training.

An early task for the group involved spreading news about CEDP projects, the extent of the problem in Abra, and the group's plans. Concerned Citizens disseminated information about the government program, including the number of projects to be implemented and funds coming into Abra. Sumangil recalled: "After we signed the memorandum of agreement with NEDA and the Department of Budget and Management, we disseminated [the information] to people [through] print media and on air, including [details on] the projects covered. We also summarized the total project funds. The people of Abra were very surprised to know that such a big amount could come to Abra in 1986–87. They said, 'How much more had come in in the past? We had been shortchanged. People in the government kept us ignorant so that they could do what they wanted.' That was a discovery for people."

Members of the core group of Concerned Citizens agreed on ground rules to navigate Abra's challenging political waters.

Unity emerged as an overarching requirement for success. The group members decided to meet regularly and share updates on activities, progress, and problems and also agreed to arrive at decisions collectively. Sumangil said: "It was a strength for us because the perspectives came from different people. Most often, the decision we made was a good decision that could stand." The group also agreed to keep its deliberations confidential. Sumangil said, "Even if we were not in accord sometimes on some topics, never would we give that away to politicians, because they would use that to crack us and break us. If we were narrow-minded, if we had given away our misunderstandings within the organization, then that would give the politicians—who hated us so much—the opportunity to break the organization."

Credibility was another critical factor. To ensure independence and cultivate a reputation for professionalism, monitors would receive no pay for their time, and they could not accept anything from contractors during site visits, including food. The organization held fundraisers and accepted donations from supporters and the Church to defray travel and food expenses.

Under guidelines set by the CEDP, the national development agency provided partner NGOs with training, a list of local projects and their locations, and information about the implementing agencies. In addition, the Department of Budget and Management provided statements of project costs and a schedule for the release of funds. NGOs were responsible for documenting the project's progress and reporting back to NEDA and the implementation agencies regularly. Monitors from NGOs were also responsible for documenting the number of local citizens employed at a project site, the number of days they worked, and the income they received.

NGO reports had to include recommendations for resolving any irregularities that had arisen. The rules also required each participating NGO monitor to attest to a project's satisfactory progress before the release of a new installment of funding. Contractors would be paid only after monitors confirmed completion of various stages of work. Program rules also required NGOs to gather information on the number of local citizens employed in the projects, the income those employees earned from the public works projects, and the number of days they worked.

NEDA carried out a series of training sessions on the monitoring of construction projects for NGO partners. The three-day seminars focused on conveying an understanding of project specifications, teaching government rules and regulations, explaining project cycles, describing the technicalities of monitoring, specifying reporting guidelines, clarifying government agencies' responsibilities, covering auditing procedures, and discussing the nature of citizen-government partnerships. During the sessions, the trainers assured participants that lines of communication would remain open between partner NGOs and the national government.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

With an organizational structure and a mandate in place, Concerned Citizens' next step was to find volunteers to do the legwork.

Recruiting monitors

Recruiting people to monitor projects was a first priority. "Our recruitment started with NAMFREL," said Sumangil. "And our volunteers—such as students, professionals, priests, farmers, housewives, and out-of-school youth—came from all over the province." The parish chapters also served as Concerned Citizens' local chapters.

The group relied on media to reach potential volunteers. Ruiz said, "To recruit volunteers, [Sumangil] went on air, and so did the bishop." Priests helped organize Concerned Citizens meetings in local parishes and spoke favorably of the organization's work. Some priests recruited volunteers directly for the members.

To spread the word about Concerned Citizens and to sign up volunteers in barangays, team members held evening meetings in towns and villages across Abra. During the meetings, Basa and other mobilization-committee members would often talk to interested participants into the early hours of the morning. Citizens also took advantage of the meetings to air concerns and provide information about local projects. Basa said, "In the beginning, people . . . regarded Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government as an organization that could hear their problems."

Early recruiting was difficult. Basa recalled two shortcomings: "Everybody was afraid. It was also very hard to get volunteers, because we had no money." Although community voluntarism was difficult to sustain, the core group kept the monitoring going. Basa said, "I worked almost every day, just coming to the office to write reports. I literally grew up in the communities. [Sumangil] came with us, and sometimes it would just be a handful of us."

Recruitment became easier as the organization's credibility grew and its reputation solidified. In 1988, for instance, members who taught at Divine Word College helped students form the Young Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government. Bringas said, "The YCCAGG was mentored on how to monitor roads. Members would go on Saturdays and Sundays when we expanded our projects. In one year, for instance, there were more than a hundred students and even people from women's organizations and farmers' groups. These were people from all over Abra."

Young Concerned Citizens volunteers began to carry out checks on their own. Paz Bumogas, who had started volunteering as a college student and who later became a staff member, said: “We could go monitoring by ourselves with one technical person of the CCAGG assisting us. If it was not a big project and they saw that we could monitor by ourselves, then we could go with minimum supervision.” The young volunteers secured project schedules and weekly updates from the organization’s staff. Many members of the student group went on to join the parent group later.

Concerned Citizens continued to recruit volunteers as monitoring activities increased. Bumogas noted: “We didn’t have any targets for the number of [community] volunteers, but while monitoring, we did community organizing to get people to volunteer, and we held sessions at night. So, we did monitoring during the day and recruiting at night, and that is how we were able to expand our volunteers.”

Training

Engineers within the ranks of Concerned Citizens, who had attended NEDA training, trained new volunteers to monitor roads and infrastructure projects. Those training sessions were often spread over a period of several weeks. Bumogas said: “Sometimes engineers did not do the training all at once because potential volunteers did not have the time to sit through a full training course. The engineers would split the three-day training into three sessions. The first session could be on a day during the first week to share positive and negative experiences and the legal bases of conducting monitoring. A second session the following week would be on the technical aspects of monitoring infrastructure projects. A third session could be held during a third week for hands-on training at available infrastructure projects in the area.”

Bringas and others modified aspects of NEDA reporting requirements to suit the local context. “We developed a very simple tool that an ordinary person could use,” she said. “For example, for a road, then we have to consider the length and thickness of the road, labor requirements, and how many days it would take for the project to be implemented.” During training, Bringas and others provided specifics on acceptable gravel size, purity of raw materials, amount of gravel in each bag of cement, and thickness and depth of national and regional roads, drawing on guidelines in NEDA documents. Practical lessons completed the training.

“When we went, we had long steel tapes to measure the length of the road—on foot under the heat of the sun,” Bringas added. “The engineers would teach the people how to compute the volume of the pavement. If it was earthwork, they had to know how many cubic meters of road had been dug out.”

Because the government’s detailed report forms taxed the resources of local volunteers, Bringas and others simplified the form and asked the volunteers to write narrative reports in their local languages. Sumangil said, “The engineers among us worked hard and improved the meticulous but very technical training given to them by NEDA. There were many columns to fill up [for reporting]. It was difficult for ordinary citizens.” The engineers would later rewrite the reports to fit the government’s reporting requirements.

During training, Concerned Citizens’ instructors asked newly recruited monitors to refuse bribes in the form of food or drink from officials or contractors. Sumangil said: “When we went to visit the project sites, we took public [transportation] and didn’t allow contractors or agency implementers to feed us. We had to eat what we brought. That was part of our guiding principle, because after feeding you, they would ask about your monitoring findings. We would

not like to be put into a [position of] compromise.”

Building a constituency through the media

“The core group was very aware that knowledge is power and that you gain knowledge through the media,” said Ruiz, both a member of Concerned Citizens and manager of the diocese-owned radio station. “We decided to inform people about the different projects in our communities so that people could also take part in monitoring. Media were used really well by the organization.”

The diocese’s radio network proved invaluable. At a time when there was no Internet or cell phone service in Abra, radio and newspapers were the main media sources of news and information. The diocese-owned radio station reached nearly all parts of the province and helped spread the word about Concerned Citizens’ work. Further, the radio station’s Church affiliation helped establish the organization’s credibility. Baltar said: “It is the diocese’s radio station and maintains neutrality. It has a wide listenership. People see it as a source for true information.” As an added bonus, the Concerned Citizens office and the radio station were on the second and third floors, respectively, of the same Church-owned building, giving the group’s staff easy access to reporters and announcers.

The radio station gave Concerned Citizens a prime, 30-minute weekly slot—a boon for the cash-strapped organization. Baltar said, “We had no money, but we got 30 minutes for a radio program—a cost of about P12,000 [US\$200] today. We were getting it for free.” The program, *Echoes*, aired every Saturday and was replayed every Monday. Announcers disseminated details of new public works projects funded under the Aquino program, discussed monitoring activities, reported findings, announced future meetings, and solicited the public’s help.

Concerned Citizens also made use of *Abra Today*, the diocese’s weekly newspaper, which had been in circulation for 20 years. Members contributed a regular column, *Abra Monitor*, which carried information on the organization’s activities.

Journalists who volunteered at Concerned Citizens took it upon themselves to discuss corruption and politics. Baltar recalled: “At that time, announcers were afraid of discussing issues on air. That was our contribution. Our interviews were deep because they tackled and analyzed issues. I would manage my own reporting and questions on air in such a way that it would encourage people to talk, give feedback, and participate. We discussed issues openly, even if it meant being under threat.”

Those early volunteers encouraged and trained community members to write scripts and host programs. Basa said: “We would draft scripts to dramatize the situation we wanted to emphasize. More often than not, the scripts were about fighting graft and corruption.” Sumangil added, “All the write-ups, scripts, and critiques that aired on the radio and were printed in the paper helped popularize the cause which we were espousing.”

Working around barriers to information

In early 1987, Concerned Citizens received a list of local projects from NEDA and its budgets and payment schedules from the Department of Budget and Management. To monitor a particular project, however, the group had to secure each project’s program of works, or specifications, from the local district office of the Department of Public Works and Highways. Volunteers would then be able to match a construction project’s progress with the details and schedules outlined in the program of works.

Securing a project’s specifications was often challenging. Sumangil indicated that the local district office “would not give us the program of works even if the national development agency

instructed them to. There were government officials who were angry with us and said we were meddlers and faultfinders. They could not stand the thought of monitors who were not engineers looking over their shoulders.”

The citizen group tackled the problem head-on. Members approached officials and reminded them of legal rules and regulations. They also solicited the help of the media and the Church in rallying public opinion against recalcitrant civil servants. Baltar remembered: “An adversarial approach was effective during that time. We did not have an option other than to take that course. So, we exerted pressure through the media and the Church. Priests would go to the pulpit and make a statement. It is very difficult to advance advocacy when you don’t go to the grass roots. That’s where our strength came from. Otherwise, we would not have survived for this long.”

Because such tactics still failed in some instances, Concerned Citizens members developed workarounds. Sumangil said: “There are many ways of skinning a cat. We went to the communities and asked them: ‘When did this project start? What did you learn about this project? How many people worked in the project and for how long? How much were they paid each day? What machines and heavy equipment were used?’” The answers helped the monitors figure the approximate costs. For instance, operators of heavy equipment were paid by the hour, as were subcontractors who leased the equipment. By asking specific questions, volunteers could estimate the amount spent on equipment and labor for a given number of days and compare it with the budget received from the Department of Budget and Management.

When officials refused to cooperate with Concerned Citizens, members sometimes obtained through unofficial channels the information they needed. The group’s grassroots nature and its efforts to cultivate awareness

across the province yielded supporters everywhere—even within the Department of Public Works and Highways. Sumangil said the group’s work “was augmented by documents sent to us by insiders who were not happy with the corruption that was happening.”

Bringas, the head of the monitoring team, described one instance of obtaining information covertly: “Some people in the government services did not want to be involved openly, but they would support us. I remember a civil servant who gave a complete file to [Sumangil] secretly. The file had project listings, vouchers, etc.”

Taking on local officials

The 1987 Norluzonian Courier article that listed accomplishments claimed by the local office of the Department of Public Works and Highways had infuriated Concerned Citizens’ members. Baltar, a group member who was also a radio reporter, recalled: “It was normal to have ghost employees and projects at the time the article was published. But we knew that most of the 20 projects had been neither started nor finished.” The group decided to take action. Cochair Sumangil said, “Abra was very poor then. It still is. But you can imagine that it was worse 25 years ago. What we wanted to show with our action was that no one could just do that to the poor. We were tired of being poor.”

The group’s members first approached the Department of Public Works and Highways’ local office before escalating their concerns to higher officials. When the local office did not heed their complaints, the group approached the central office and the Office of the President. Members also wrote to national development agency officials to inform them about the newspaper report. Wilfredo De Perio, the NEDA official with oversight responsibilities for projects in Abra, recalled, “A letter was sent to NEDA from Abra stating that

there was a problem in the implementation of the projects the department had reported as complete.”

Concerned Citizens gathered solid evidence from project sites to support its claims. Members divided the sites among four teams of volunteers, each team comprising a team lead, a documenter, and a community organizer. The teams took pictures and asked residents to sign affidavits. Sumangil recalled: “The teams had many stories to tell when they came back. That was when we realized the projects not only were mismanaged but also had become a milking cow.”

Sumangil and other team members wrote to Vicente Jayme, secretary of public works and highways, to report the missing funds and request a meeting. At the meeting in Manila in March 1987, Concerned Citizens representatives asked Jayme to dispatch a team to Abra to corroborate their findings. Sumangil said: “The secretary promised to send an audit team but did not say when. We were surprised when the team suddenly appeared in town.” Investigators kept the dates of their April visit secret to prevent officials or others from bribing or threatening potential witnesses in advance. The auditors’ work turned out to be as risky as that of the monitors. As they inspected programs of works, project details, and budgets and conducted site visits, team members received threats. In one instance, the auditors found bullets in their car at the conclusion of a site visit, and left shortly after.

Concerned Citizens and auditors’ reports became the basis of a department administrative inquiry against 11 Abra engineers, including the district engineer and the assistant district engineer. The Commission on Audit, a central body responsible for auditing the expenses of public agencies in the Philippines, also investigated the projects; and its findings added to the evidence. Sumangil said: “We refused to file the case against the errant engineers

ourselves. We said that the Department of Public Works and Highways had to file a complaint to clean its ranks. But we at the CCAGG were willing and ready to stand as witnesses in the case. It was big news here in Abra.”

Proceedings of the inquiry took place in Manila instead of Abra—a decision that Sumangil applauded: “When the case was filed by Secretary Jayme based on the report of the audit team, we requested that the administrative case be heard in Manila. Manila is far, but we felt it was a safer place. We felt we could get more justice there. The regional office, four hours away in San Fernando, La Union, is too close to home. Most of the officials there are relatives and friends of the engineers and could easily influence the process.”

The monitors made regular trips to Manila to serve as witnesses during the hearings initiated in June 1987. Sumangil recalled: “We used a borrowed jeep each time we went to Manila. There would be 20 or more of us. We would travel at 6 pm—early evening—arrive in Manila in the early morning, and then go sit under the trees to eat our packed lunch. The people in Abra were very generous. They would give us vegetables, bundles of string beans, and rice, which we cooked for our food. They also gave us a little money, which we used for buying gasoline for the trip. Many people identified themselves with the case because it was also their fight.”

The accused engineers said they had reported the projects as complete in order to retain unspent money for the next year’s budget cycle. (Government rules required a fiscal year’s unspent money be returned to the central government’s coffers.) Adamson Gumangan, engineer at the district office of the public works department said: “We didn’t spend the money of the national treasury. They assumed we had spent the money and pocketed it. But we did not spend the money for those projects. We only

did it in order to not return the money to the national treasury.” Returning the money to the treasury would have made it difficult for the local office to justify financial requests for the next budget cycle, he emphasized.

The engineers received a reprimand, but that did not satisfy the Concerned Citizens group. Sumangil said: “We were angry because to reprimand is a very light [punishment]. That was no match for the indignities they had inflicted on the people of Abra. It was making a mockery of the harm that the engineers had done to Abra’s people.”

Upon appeal, a third verdict, issued in November 1987, found the 11 engineers guilty of negligence and transferred them or suspended them from office for five to nine months without pay. The chief and the deputy chief engineer were barred from serving in the province.

Although Concerned Citizens members did not consider suspension as adequate punishment, they acknowledged the verdict as a moral victory. The group kept track of the district and deputy engineers to make sure they did not return to the province. Sumangil said: “They made efforts to come back to Abra through their politician friends. Each time we heard there was an effort for them to come back, we would always write petition letters to block their reentry into Abra.”

Monitoring and reporting

Following the early victory, Concerned Citizens volunteers continued to track project implementation meticulously. Armed with lists of projects, budgets, and programs of works, monitoring teams, often including homemakers and students, conducted field visits to check a project’s status against official documents. They documented their findings and paid particular attention to the number of workers and the quality of construction.

Staff members assisted volunteers and verified findings. Comparison between information gathered during site visits and contract specifications in a program of works formed the basis of Concerned Citizens reports to NEDA. Baltar offered an example, referring to cement. “A particular mixture volume had to be accomplished as per the program of work, but we might find that the mixtures at a site did not conform to it. The road would have horizontal cracks if the quality was substandard because of a weak cement mixture.” In one instance in 1990, contractors had added a weak cement base to the 4.5-kilometer road between Abra and the bordering province of Ilocos Sur. Volunteers monitoring the project counted the number of cement bags at the site and observed the use of oversized aggregates (materials such as crushed stone and gravel).

The staff members sometimes had to help find creative ways to resolve issues. Bringas recalled: “Sometimes the work had already been finished by the time we went. We didn’t know how much cement they had put in. For instance, they have to put in one bag of cement for every nine boxes of gravel, but we could tell what they had done by measuring the thickness of the concrete.”

After gathering data, the group compiled a comprehensive report and submitted it to the Department of Public Works and Highways and NEDA. The department verified the monitors’ findings and ordered the contractors to replace the road with concrete and a new asphalt overlay.

Central government officials kept their pledge to maintain lines of communication. De Perio of the national development agency recalled: “The Concerned Citizens of Abra could call me whenever they wanted information on CEDP. They would also tell me if something wasn’t going well with the projects. They always reported quarterly, but they could convey anything to us in between quarters.”

In case of irregularities, Concerned Citizens filed complaints with multiple agencies such as NEDA, the Department of Public Works and Highways, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Commission on Audit. Sumangil said, “We went to the Commission on Audit’s regional and national offices because they are in charge of tracking how government money is used.” Often, the commission’s findings bolstered Concerned Citizens’ monitoring work and served as validation during official inquiries.

In the beginning, Concerned Citizens volunteers took a hard-nosed approach that officials said reflected their inexperience with government projects. Edwin Bringas (not a direct relative of Irene Bringas of Concerned Citizens), an engineer at the local district office of public works and highways, said Concerned Citizens monitors were very strict in the early days. “Back then, they complained even if there was one nail missing,” he said. “It became a burden on us because even if we didn’t intend anything, they assumed we were corrupt and not doing our jobs.”

But monitors softened their attitudes as they learned more about construction practices, public contracts, and government regulations. Edwin Bringas recalled, “In the beginning, they did not know that markup costs [indirect costs] had to be included in the programs of works. They thought these were not required. But it is the system, and we have to follow the rules. When they submitted their findings and observations on projects they inspected, we went to their office to talk to them on the rectification of such defects.”

Department officials and the monitors learned to cooperate over time. Engineer Gumangan said: “It was a difficult thing for us earlier because we were not used to the setup. But our relationship has improved. They ask for project documents from us, go to the sites, prepare reports, and then submit these to our records section.” Upon receiving the reports,

department officials said, they dispatched personnel to verify the monitors’ findings and instructed contractors to fix problems if any.

Sumangil agreed that the two groups found common ground: “People in the [local] government recognized that we were not fighting them for the sake of fighting and that monitoring is actually a help to them. Recognition and awards from the national government also had a mellowing effect on them.”

Reform-minded officials at all levels of government also realized they could use the organization’s reports as a basis for managing contractors. Basa said, “Some politicians controlling the projects are very assertive in getting their funds released, but department officials could say that they couldn’t release the funds without a report from the Concerned Citizens of Abra. They [the officials] used us as a shield because our reports were required for the release of funds.”

Institutionalizing

Strapped for resources, Concerned Citizens sustained itself through volunteer support and modest fund-raising activities. Sumangil said: “Sometimes we would go and ask friends, ‘We heard you will be having a christening party. Can we do the cooking?’ We were very happy if we earned P1,000 because that would keep our monitors going. Some people would give us their hard-earned pesos. Never did we approach the politicians for help. Some of us who earned enough would give generous support as well.” Members paid nominal membership dues. Other volunteers organized fund-raising dinners and dances.

The diocese and the Society of the Divine Word provided financial and material support. Basa said: “The clergy was discreetly helping us, including the bishop. They kept us afloat, so to speak.” Volunteers traveled to remote locations in a car owned by the Society of the Divine

Word and took shelter in parishes when monitoring.

Although the organization received only training and mentoring support from the government initially, it started receiving a small payment as the government's NGO partner later on. In the mid 1990s, the provincial and regional monitoring committees received P600,000 (US\$ 21,000) to P1 million (US\$36,000) annually from the central government. As a member of the regional committee, Concerned Citizens started receiving a token amount of P10,000 (US\$360) a year.

In 1988, in a step toward institutionalization, Concerned Citizens formally registered with the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, becoming an independent civil society organization and an entity separate from the one that operated under the umbrella of the Church.¹¹

By 1990, Concerned Citizens had cemented its presence in Abra. It recruited volunteers on a regular basis and held seminars and workshops to train them. A training module included instruction in basic mathematics and engineering formulas, programs of works, types of infrastructure, civic duty, and social benefit derived from the projects. The group held legal and educational seminars on a regular basis. It also continued to pursue or support communities in cases against negligent or dishonest civil servants and politicians. For instance, in 1990, it pursued four cases, including two against town mayors. (Because of the drain on resources, the group decided the same year that it would go to court as a last resort, preferring to rely on dialogue and public pressure to resolve issues.) With its growing credibility and recognition, it formed connections in Manila and often shared and solicited ideas and support from organizations and universities in the capital.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The work that Concerned Citizens volunteers undertook meant going up against powerful interests in the province, including politicians, contractors, and high-ranking government officials. Contractors often pressured Concerned Citizens to change a monitoring report if the report pointed to their poor performance. Irene Bringas, the monitoring lead, said: "The contractors wouldn't like to do the corrections mentioned in our reports. We got lots of calls, sometimes every 15 minutes, asking for changes in reports. They would even stop us when we drove around town and threaten us."

Volunteers also encountered obstacles when working at sites. Often harassed or offered bribes, volunteers sometimes feared for their safety during monitoring activities. Sumangil recalled, "Irene Bringas, the head of our monitoring team, and Mely [Carmelita] Bersalona, our chair, were trailed separately by cars. Someone even put plastic in the fuel tank of Mely's car."

Others, too, recalled the difficult times when Concerned Citizens started operating. "We had death threats for breakfast," recalled founding member Madriaga. But the threats did not deter the volunteers. Baltar agreed, "We were threatened, but we didn't want to be crippled by it, and we went about with our usual advocacy."

Finding strength in numbers, the core group of volunteers decided to travel in groups of three or more. Baltar said, "There were many rumors during the time that they would kill one the leaders of the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government. Our policy then was that no one would go out alone because of threat to our lives. The risk was really high. The clergy even came out with a statement supporting the group."

Although fearful of physical harm, volunteers forged ahead. Valera of Divine Word

College said: “Of course, we were afraid to die. We all have families. But we would go to meetings even if we were afraid. The students at the time were especially brave.”

Some volunteers were from politically powerful families. Basa said, “They didn’t threaten me. I was one of them but worked on the other side. It is just a matter of principles.” Others had powerful relatives as well. “[There were] others also. We were willing to sacrifice ourselves to realize our dream of a better Abra,” he added.

Concerned Citizens’ affiliation with the Church and the Society of the Divine Word provided members with substantial protection. Madriaga said, “We had the Church [behind us], and politicians knew they would be dead if they harmed the Church. They would lose their future in politics.” Sumangil, too, credited the group’s safety to the Church’s influence: “It is good that the Catholic Church here supported the cause that we were espousing. Otherwise, things would have been different. Many incumbents are mostly Catholics. Were it not for the influence of the Church, the politicians would have been much worse.”

Concerned Citizens also branched out into a number of other projects, forging partnerships with various government agencies and solidifying its reputation locally and in Manila. Threats and offers of bribes waned as the group gained in stature and became known nationally and internationally. Sumangil said, “Citations and awards from Manila made the offices in Abra recognize us.”

In the early years, the insurgency also interfered with some of Concerned Citizens’ monitoring activities, and the organization had few ways to create space for its work in affected areas. Volunteers sometimes were caught in the crossfire as rebels and soldiers clashed in areas around Bangued. Bumogas, a young volunteer at the time, recalled: “Our deadliest experience was in Lacub, an upland municipality, where

we were monitoring the opening of a road. We didn’t know the signs of battle and insisted on finishing the activity. When we heard gunshots, we did not expect it to be a bloody battle. We weren’t hurt, but we felt frightened to see a lot of dead bodies when we reached the community. Of course, that experience did not stop us. Battles were very prevalent during that time and we didn’t know when one would happen, but monitoring activities had to go on.”

Sumangil remembered: “At that time, the fighting between the military and the NPA was very intense. Despite the difficulties in the peace situation, we continued to monitor with caution because construction of roads was ongoing. We would meet NPAs on the way, and they would tell us, ‘Ma’am, you did not see us.’ And we would say, ‘Yes, we did not see you.’”

In 1987, the group joined peace negotiations at the behest of an Aquino administration that needed ways to negotiate with the rebels. The organization was in an ideal position to help coordinate an amnesty program for rebel returnees. Believing that there could be no development without peace, the group worked closely with the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process to implement the program.

Sumangil said: “Many of the NPAs whom we had met during monitoring trips found the democratic space created by the peace process reasonable. They availed themselves of the amnesty program offered by the national government. The CCAGG actively participated in many dialogues in the countryside that formed part of the peace process. We were also active members of the local amnesty board in Abra.” The government channeled small grants through the organization to help integrate returnees into local communities.

In 1994, the organization received the Aurora Aragon Quezon Peace Award—named after a former First Lady of the Philippines—for its role in the peace process and in community

building, especially in the uplands areas where insurgents enjoyed wide support.¹² The negotiations eventually led to the formation of the Cordillera Administrative Region in northern Luzon and cessation of most hostilities. (Low-level rebel activity also continued in parts of Abra in 2013.)

ASSESSING RESULTS

By the time the CEDP ended in 1987, NEDA had helped create and implement 22,828 projects in 1986 and 29,796 in 1987. It also boosted countrywide employment, creating 454,009 new jobs in 1986 and 448,330 in 1987, according to agency documents. (Some studies estimated that the employment benefit was much lower—130,000 new jobs from 1986 to 1987.¹³)

In Abra, Concerned Citizens volunteers monitored more than 600 infrastructure projects worth P300 million (US\$7 million) from 1987 to 2006.¹⁴ The projects included 100 CEDP projects in 1987 and 145 barangay, 29 municipal, 46 provincial, and 17 national roads in subsequent years. Volunteers also inspected 149 school buildings, 123 deep wells, 42 flood control projects, and 19 bridges.¹⁵

The group's monitoring activity exposed technical flaws in a number of projects, such as a faulty irrigation system in the remote Tubo municipality and missing gravel in the national Abra-Kalinga road that linked the two provinces. In 1996, monitors reported that the Sinalang Detour Bridge, which had cost P8.26 million (US\$300,000), was of poor quality. The Concerned Citizens report and subsequent Commission on Audit investigations led to the commission's recommending prosecution of a number of public works and highway officials.¹⁶

Government officials in Manila took note of Concerned Citizens' effectiveness compared with similar groups in other places. De Perio, NEDA project officer in charge of Abra, said, "The Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good

Government was one of the best compared with others. They were efficient and committed. They always reported on time. They were keen on monitoring implementation and were committed to the success of their projects."

In February 1988, President Aquino awarded Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government an award for the "Most Outstanding NGO in Region 1 for their active participation in community development through the monitoring of Community Employment and Development Program projects."

Other awards and recognition followed. In December 1989, the Federation of the People's Economic Council and Department of Trade and Industry of the Province of Abra recognized the organization for bringing economic benefits to the province through the organization's infrastructure-monitoring work. In 2000, Concerned Citizens won Transparency International's Integrity Award in the category of "groups fighting graft and corruption in pursuit of good governance," one of just four awardees worldwide. In 2005, the Office of the Ombudsman of the Philippines recognized Concerned Citizens as one of its outstanding civil society partners.

By itself, citizen monitoring was no panacea. Although Concerned Citizens continued its monitoring activities, 75% of national and provincial roads in Abra remained unpaved in 2012.¹⁷

Big development and security challenges prevented deep changes in Abra. For instance, government indicators pointed to poverty as an enduring problem. In 2006, the National Statistical Coordination Board classified Abra as ninth of the 10 most impoverished provinces in the Philippines, with 50.1% families living below the poverty line, which was pegged at P17,900 (US\$390) per year.¹⁸ Data from the board further indicated that poverty in the

Cordillera Administrative Region had risen from 25.8% in 2003 to 28.8% in 2008.¹⁹

Political violence peaked in the 2000s, as electoral competition became more vicious. From 2001 to 2009, for instance, about 30 well-known political figures were killed in Abra. In the 2007 election alone, there were more than 300 incidents of election-related violence, in which 129 people were killed and 177 wounded.²⁰ In 2008, according to the Philippine National Police Regional Office, 60% of all murders in the Cordillera region happened in Abra.²¹

Changing relationships

Longtime volunteers noted that although problems persisted in construction projects, checks and balances had improved under the group's watch. Valera reasoned: "Although I cannot say that corruption is no more, I can say that it has lessened. We monitored one project recently and saw that it was substandard. They had used smaller numbers of bags of cement than what was in the program of work. We sent those concrete [blocks] to Manila, and the people there certified them as substandard. The department asked the contractor to remove and rebuild the road, and the contractor incurred a loss."

The penalties imposed on offending officials did not always match the scale of malfeasance, however. For example, when Concerned Citizens questioned the quality of the 1996 Sinalang Detour Bridge project, the Department of Public Works and Highways ultimately suspended the accused engineer for only a month and a day for neglect of duty.²² The bridge was washed away by a flash flood in 1997.

In most instances, the group's relationships with contractors and local officials improved with time. Previously resistant local officials cooperated with the monitors and based their reports on the regional directive to evaluate

progress before releasing government funds. The monitors modified their strategy as well.

Sumangil said: "In the beginning, we were fighting them, but we have now learned to use constructive engagement. Our shift to constructive engagement was born out of experience."

There were exceptions, nonetheless. Some municipal governments in the province bristled at the idea of receiving outside help and spurned Concerned Citizens. For example, the municipal council of Danglas municipality passed a resolution prohibiting Concerned Citizens from inspecting Danglas projects, claiming that Concerned Citizens involvement caused "destabilization, disunity, and hinder[ed] development" in the municipality.²³

Further, some of the elements of the program dissolved as time went on. After the mid 1990s, local officials no longer waited for Concerned Citizens' monitoring report before paying contractors. For its part, the department could not delay payment as it waited for progress reports. Edwin Bringas said Concerned Citizens had expanded its activities in collaboration with other government agencies and could not keep track of all projects. "The memorandum died a natural death. It was no longer required. The CCAGG had already seen reforms in the department and did not have time to inspect all our projects. And the contractors had to be paid," he said.

Neither did Concerned Citizens insist on enforcing the Department of Public Works and Highways' 1988 regional directive that had made it mandatory for its volunteers to observe bids and monitor progress before the department could release funds. Although members' presence during the bidding and awarding of contracts had opened up the procurement process, it did not guarantee impartiality in the awarding of contracts. Valera said: "In a way, there is supposed to be more transparency because they cannot award

projects [beforehand]. But officials still have a way of awarding contracts to preferred contractors. Sometimes we do not mind this, as long as they implement the project in the right way.”

At the same time, Concerned Citizens members said the organization’s advocacy work helped broker a change in citizen norms and behavior. Baltar said: “Earlier, people would accept whatever they got, but we taught them to ask questions and engage officials. It was their right because public money had to be guarded, monitored, and accounted for. We demanded accountability from our officials.”

Sumangil added, “The start of project monitoring was an uphill fight. [Our] trailblazing activity broke Abra’s culture of silence. In time, we were able to prove that monitoring was an effective tool against crooks. It is now acceptable for government implementers to respond to people’s questions on public projects.”

Expansion and sustainability

The success of Concerned Citizens as an organization could also be measured in terms of the group’s many cooperative ventures with various arms of government. From 1993 to 1997, the group partnered with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to organize communities for a forest management project. In 1998 and 1999, it worked with the Department of Education in the monitoring of preschool services. In 2000, as part of the Enhancing Public Accountability Program of the Philippine Commission on Audit, it partnered with the commission to hold the country’s first-ever participatory audit of local government agencies in Abra. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-funded audit involved 23 road projects of the Department of Public Works and Highways and community projects of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The group also collaborated with the Department of Agrarian Reforms in reform efforts from 2002 onward. In 2003, Concerned Citizens worked with the National Anti-Poverty Commission to monitor local poverty-reduction projects. In 2013, the organization started monitoring a central-government-initiated conditional cash transfer program in Abra. In addition to those activities, the group monitored elections every four years as a NAMFREL chapter and led programs on voter education.

Despite such collaborations, Concerned Citizens members said the government could have done more to enable their work. Basa said: “The succeeding head was not as supportive in advocating people’s empowerment after Monsod’s departure from NEDA. We did not enjoy what we used to get from the administration of Cory [Corazon Aquino]. There was no sustainability on the part of the national government to empower the people. Luckily, we were into other advocacies and equipped with technical know-how, so we were able to branch out into different concerns and to package proposals that kept us afloat.”

To sustain operations and move beyond voluntarism, the organization started to solicit donor grants for a wide range of activities. Sumangil said: “There came a time when staff members [who were volunteers] asked to leave to look for a living. It is a good thing there were volunteers, [but] they come and go. With volunteers, you invest time and money, send them to meetings and conferences, and expose them to government processes. And when we lose them, we have to start anew and train others. That was the time when we started to think deeply—that we should not be purists and apply for funding from organizations whose societal vision is identical to ours.”

In 1991, Oxfam Canada provided Concerned Citizens with funding for an earthquake relief and rehabilitation program in northern Luzon. During the next two decades,

Concerned Citizens' project funding came from such organizations as the UNDP, the British Council, the World Bank, the Partnership for Transparency Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the Asian Development Bank. Such funding enabled the organization to hire full-time paid staff and maintain activities.

Broadcasting lessons

To disseminate lessons learned over the years, Concerned Citizens expanded its reach by working with and mentoring similar groups in other parts of the country. Established in 2003, the Northern Luzon Coalition for Good Governance, a coalition of 30 mostly parish-based groups from Abra and two other northern provinces, solicited help and training from Concerned Citizens—one of the participating organizations—in monitoring construction projects.

In 2006, the organization collaborated with the Transparency and Accountability Network—a coalition of 24 organizations—to lead Road Watch, a national construction monitoring project. Along with other partners, Concerned Citizens trained about a hundred volunteers to monitor roads in different regions. By 2007, the organization had representatives or partners in 15 provinces.²⁴ In 2010, it trained 35 monitors to oversee infrastructure projects in Bicol, a remote southern region on the country's main island of Luzon.

Road Watch coordinators learned from Concerned Citizens' grassroots approach. Vincent Lazatin, executive director of the network, said: "The organization was very emphatic about empowering the local monitors. Initially, local monitors would give us reports, and we would bring it to the attention of the ministry. But the Concerned Citizens said it would be too late and the road would be built by then. They said monitors should first engage with local officials. Persistent problems can be

escalated up later, but [we must] solve issues on the ground first."

But Lazatin said that the coalition partners did not adopt Concerned Citizens' hard-nosed approach when operating Road Watch. "They [Concerned Citizens] grew up in a hostile environment with an adversarial relationship with the [local office of the] Department of Public Works and Highways, which also did not cooperate," he said. "It is not that at the national level there was no reluctance, but we played along and worked within the system. Our approach was cooperative and partnership oriented."

Adopting a cooperative rather than confrontational approach, Lazatin said Road Watch also was reluctant to invoke the power of the media, as Concerned Citizens had done. "At the national level, we wanted the department to have the first crack [at resolving an issue] before blasting it out to the media and embarrassing officials," he said. "We really wanted to see if internal procedures worked. If they didn't work, then we could go to the media. But in most cases, issues were resolved to our satisfaction."

Still, when by mid 2000, donor agencies had started advocating for greater transparency and accountability in government, Concerned Citizens was ahead of the curve and had lessons for other organizations. Baltar said: "In our time, we were not talking of transparency and accountability but of people's participation. Then the concepts of transparency and accountability became the in things. There was a demand to look for some of these models. That's when the international organizations found us. We were invited to share our experience with others, and these were effective means of disseminating our concept."

REFLECTIONS

Leaders of Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government attributed to a variety of factors their ability to sustain monitoring

campaigns. Emphasis on recruitment of community members and maintenance of a pool of volunteers paid rich dividends. Founding member Leticia Madriaga said: “That’s our strength, and a lot of people’s organizations should start from there. People can work for change even if they are not in the government.”

Effective use of media helped spread the word about Concerned Citizens’ work and cultivated grassroots support. Reporter and volunteer Aniceta Baltar reflected: “Most of our advocacy has been through the radio station and print. We would not be where we are now if it were not for the media. If we wanted to pressure officials, we went on the radio and exposed anomalies. It worked.”

National and international recognition encouraged volunteers and established credibility for the organization and its members. Another founding member, Elizabeth Valera, recalled, “We became more committed to the organization when we received the award from the president in 1988.”

Concerned Citizens’ Church base was critical to the group’s initial survival and success. Officials such as Edwin Bringas observed, “What makes them survive is their credibility. And they are credible because they are connected to the Church. Here in Abra, everyone listens when the bishop talks.” The Roman Catholic Church’s practical role in providing Concerned Citizens with monetary support, office space, access to its media, and equipment helped stabilize the organization in its early years. The Church’s backing also helped protect volunteers from physical harm.

Partners attributed success to the organization’s dedicated and long-running leadership. In early 2013, Concerned Citizens chair Pura Sumangil was 71 years old, had led the organization for 27 years, and was recognized nationally and internationally. Road Watch executive director Vincent Lazatin

noted: “Pura [Sumangil] provides a particular brand of leadership and charisma. She is a hard-core advocate. She makes the 12-hour round-trip [to Manila] on a single day. And there are others who started the organization with her and are still with it.”

But future sustainability would mean focusing on strengthening Concerned Citizens’ internal leadership and governance structures. Sumangil—and others who had been with the organization since 1986—felt the need to ensure sustainability beyond their own retirements. With funding from the Partnership for Transparency Fund, the core group put a board in place in 2011. Members of the core group annually elected officers for the positions of president, executive director, vice -president, and seven other managerial positions.

Abra’s tough context and lack of adequate government services forced the organization to serve multiple roles, but the organization’s large number of activities diluted resources across multiple projects. Valera said: “At one point, we were discussing why we were doing so many things. For instance, we were into biodiversity and helping people settle boundary disputes. Why didn’t we focus on one thing like other civil society organizations did? But there are so many problems. How do we say no?” Additional projects forced the organization to expand beyond its original goals.

Although the organization’s work helped fill a void in service delivery, it had not brought about long-term structural changes in the province, said members and observers. Former volunteer Eric Basa said: “In terms of awards received, I would say that the Concerned Citizens of Abra has come a long way. But there is still more work to be done. The fight against graft and corruption is still there. The government needs to put in place systems to enable the Concerned Citizens of Abra to actively or positively intervene. Even if we are

driven, we can do only so much without these structures for intervention within the government.”

Observers in Manila, too, lamented the lack of institutional change. Joy Aceron of Government Watch said, “The Concerned Citizens of Abra is one of the most successful [organizations] in terms of resilience and sustainability, but we need to look at the impact. Abra remains very poor. The organization was able to ensure that services are

sustained, but the province is still very poor and the structures have not changed.”

In 2013, volunteers continued to believe in a higher goal of contributing to Abra’s development. Basa said: “We believed we were empowering people. We helped people organize, and we gave them information about different government projects. People became aware of what was supposed to be beneficial to them. Although our entry point was combating graft and corruption, we were trying to contribute to a better Abra.”

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Appendix: Map of Abra, Philippines



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