



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

---

## BUILDING TRUST AND PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY: JESSE ROBREDO AND NAGA CITY, PHILIPPINES, 1988 - 1998

---

### SYNOPSIS

When Jesse Robredo became mayor of Naga City in 1988, he faced a population disenchanted with the corrupt and closeted manner in which previous city administrations functioned. The once-thriving Philippine city was broke. Despite Naga's landlocked location in one of the most impoverished regions of the country, Robredo had a plan to revitalize the city. He first focused on closing the budget deficit and answered citizens' demands to crack down on illegal activities that had benefited previous administrations. Next, to promote transparency and accountability in government, he took steps to increase citizen participation in government functions. By the end of his nine years as mayor—term limits prevented him from running again—Robredo had closed the budget gap, and Naga had gained international recognition as a model of effective and transparent local government.

*Michael Scharff drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Naga City and Manila, Philippines, in March 2011. Case published July 2011.*

---

### INTRODUCTION

When 28-year-old Jesse Robredo took the stage in 1987 to debate his rivals in the campaign for mayor of Naga City, the young candidate stood out from his opponents. Willie Prilles, a university student who was at the debate and later became one of Robredo's trusted advisers, recalled: "It kind of struck me that there was this young Filipino-Chinese-looking man actually running for office against visibly older candidates. I then later learned that he had beaten his closest rival by the skin of his teeth." Robredo's chief opponent was Ramon Roco, a member of a family that had deep

political roots in the area and the brother of a congressman, Raul Roco.

Active in the Boy Scouts, the Rotary Club and his church, Robredo eked out a victory against five other mayoral aspirants in the 1988 election. Upon entering office, he confronted a city in desperate need. Located about 400 kilometers south of the Philippine capital of Manila, Naga had been a thriving regional center for education and commerce. By 1988, its population had reached 100,000. But years of mismanagement and neglect by city politicians left Naga in debt and municipal services in disarray. Robredo said that when he

took office, “there was not much investment or increase in local incomes or local revenues.” Illegal gambling, called *jueteng*, was rampant, and city streets were dotted with venues that staged lewd shows that violated local decency ordinances.

The style of governance practiced by Naga’s past elected officials was not unique. Filipino mayors and city councilors curried support with gifts doled out to constituents before elections. Their performance in office often played little role in determining their chances for re-election. “Voters never really expected to see their representatives in their communities until they came asking for votes at the next election,” said Francis Soler, who in 1988 was Robredo’s secretary. The powers associated with elected office, including the authority to grant business licenses and permits and to control the allocation of state resources, created ample opportunities to collect bribes. Turning a blind eye to illegal activities also enabled politicians to enrich their coffers. This money helped sustain the dynastic rule of political families that used coercion and patronage to cling to power for extended periods.

Changes at the national level helped create the space for Robredo’s victory. Two years earlier, nationwide protests against the autocratic rule of President Ferdinand Marcos brought Corazon Aquino to power. Aquino pledged to answer protesters’ demands for accountable government and a greater voice in government. In Naga, Robredo’s campaign promise to return the city to solid financial footing and to restore trust and accountability in government resonated with voters eager for a different style of governing. In 1988, Naga’s voters “were expecting something new,” Prilles said.

In his first year as mayor, Robredo balanced the city’s budget. By the time he was re-elected in 1992, he had closed the lewd shows and taken a big step toward eliminating illegal gambling. He spoke openly about creating a formal

mechanism to allow citizen participation in government decision making. Robredo was easily re-elected to a third three-year term in 1995. Term limits prevented him from running for a fourth consecutive term. However, after a three year hiatus, Robredo ran again for mayor in 2001 and went on to serve an additional nine years.

This case study demonstrates how a local mayor circumvented entrenched political interests and revitalized a city, first by building trust in government and second by promoting accountability through sustained citizen participation.

## THE CHALLENGE

When voters went to the polls in 1988, they gambled that Robredo, a political novice, would be able to address their concerns. Robredo had never held elected office. He was born in Naga to a Filipino mother and a father of Chinese descent. He earned a master’s degree in business administration from the University of the Philippines in Manila. After graduation, he worked for Magnolia Dairy Products, a subsidiary of San Miguel Corp., the Philippines’ largest publicly listed food, beverage and packaging company. He left San Miguel in 1986 to become director of the Bicol River Basin Development Program, a World Bank-funded project to promote development in the Naga area. Robredo recalled that the job “allowed me to really look at the problems which I felt were retarding the development of Naga.”

Robredo inherited a city where illegal activities, including lewd shows and lottery gaming, thrived. He understood that many citizens, including the influential archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church, wanted to see illegal activities shut down. The church in Naga had long preached against both illegal gambling and nude shows, which it viewed as having a corrosive effect on society. Naga was the seat of an archdiocese that represented about a quarter

of all Catholics in the predominantly Catholic country. The failure of previous administrations to do away with these practices fueled voters' suspicions that elected officials benefited from allowing the illegal activities to go on.

Although local laws allowed risqué shows, nudity at public venues was specifically prohibited. In 1988, nude shows were staged at an estimated 15 locations in Naga, raising concern among the conservative population. Meanwhile, more than three million pesos, or about US\$70,000 a day, was bet in Naga on *jueteng*. Bet collectors visited individual homes and businesses, sometimes several times a day. Players wagered money on numbers that they selected. After all the bets were collected, a drawing was held using bingo balls, and the winning numbers were announced. The total daily take was a remarkably large figure given the high level of poverty in the city. The game helped to perpetuate the cycle of poverty, as families sometimes wagered significant portions of their incomes. Politicians received lucrative kickbacks from gambling bosses and show operators not to interfere.

Meanwhile, the city's budget deficit in 1988 came to about a million pesos, or \$23,000. Although the actual figure was small, Naga's designation as a debtor city weighed on the morale of both citizens and government workers.

Robredo's inauguration followed the Marcos presidency, which had been characterized by the stifling of democracy. Civil society groups called for more citizen participation, and Robredo, eager to promote government accountability, needed to find a way to answer their demands.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

"We immediately addressed long-standing problems that were doable, but difficult, just to gain the confidence of the constituency," Robredo said in 2011, looking back on his mayoralty. Because most city councilors in 1988

belonged to other political parties, Robredo sought confidence-building measures that would bolster his popularity without the need for council approval. "In the Philippine context, when the majority of the membership of the City Council belonged to the opposition, usually what the mayor would like to have happen doesn't happen," Robredo said. Aware that he had to control the council in order to institute sweeping, sustained reforms, he concentrated on issues that would help him win a majority of the legislative body in the next elections, scheduled for 1992.

To build public confidence and bolster his voter appeal, Robredo decided to first eliminate what he called the "symbols of bad governance," specifically *jueteng* and the nude shows. Because a high percentage of Naga's population was conservative and aligned with the positions of the Catholic Church, Robredo saw his efforts in this area as a way to demonstrate that his administration was taking a moral as well as legal stand against corruption. At the same time, Robredo sought to heighten his visibility in the community to show that he was one of them and that he genuinely cared about his constituents' needs.

Robredo's affiliation with his uncle, Luis R. Villafuerte Sr., complicated efforts aimed at demonstrating the government's trustworthiness and accountability. In 1988, during Robredo's first term, Luis Villafuerte was governor of Camarines Sur, the province in which Naga was located. The Villafuerte name was synonymous with entrenched dynastic rule. The governor's father, Mariano Villafuerte Sr., had been a two-term member of the legislature and governor of Camarines Sur in 1942. In 1959, Luis Villafuerte's brother, Mariano Villafuerte Jr., became vice mayor of Naga. In 1979, Marcos appointed Luis Villafuerte as his minister of trade.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it was Luis Villafuerte who had gotten his nephew Robredo a job at the Bicol River Basin Development Program in 1986, and

it was Luis Villafuerte who had encouraged Robredo to run for mayor and who had opened up his deep coffers to bankroll Robredo's campaign. Many voters viewed Luis Villafuerte as largely responsible for thriving illegal practices like gambling.

After Robredo discovered early in his first term that his uncle was a beneficiary of many of the practices he sought to do away with, their relationship soured. In a clear indication of how estranged the two had become, Villafuerte in 1992 tapped his sister, Pura Luisa V. Magtuto, to run against Robredo.

To coincide with his efforts to eliminate the symbols of corrupt and ineffectual governance and to demonstrate that he was a different type of mayor, Robredo sought a strategy to close the budget deficit. Assisting Robredo in this effort were a few staff members whom he had brought with him to City Hall. Gabriel Bordado Jr., Robredo's public information officer, and Soler, Robredo's secretary, had been associates of Robredo's at the Bicol River Basin Development Program. He trusted both men for their political savvy and intellect. Other than Prilles, whom he had hired to work in the City Planning Office in 1991, and Frank Mendoza, a friend whom he made city administrator, Robredo relied on existing staff at City Hall, confident that he could win them over to his cause. "My policy has been that I try to work with the people that I have," Robredo said. "I always say it is the 20-20-60 rule. Twenty percent of those who are in the organization will always get on board with those who are in charge, 20% will oppose, and the remaining 60% will just watch who wins and go with the winner. So if I have my 20%, I will get the other 60%."

When it came to boosting city revenue to close the budget deficit, there were few options. Robredo could either raise income taxes on businesses or raise property taxes on everyone by

reassessing property values citywide. Robredo opted for the first approach in order to limit opposition; a full reassessment risked creating backlash among both business owners and property owners.

When he came to office, Robredo had a suspicion, shared by many both in and outside of City Hall, that many business owners were dodging taxes by reporting lower sales than they actually had. To confirm this notion, Robredo instructed the city treasurer to make rough estimates of the daily sales at local businesses. As a test case, the treasurer's office assigned staff to count customers at a movie theater. "I think the original computation was only 34 people entering the movie at the time," said Prilles, referring to the number of patrons the movie theater claimed frequented the establishment on an average day. "Remember, this was before DVDs, and movie theaters were still a very good businesses. So it was outrageous for a movie theater to be having only 34 or even a hundred patrons every day." Staff from the treasurer's office counted far more customers entering the theater, providing support for the argument that businesses were declaring figures significantly lower than what they were earning. Convinced that some sort of crackdown on business taxes would increase city revenues and balance the budget, Robredo looked to persuade business owners to cooperate.

In addition to taking steps to contain illegal activities and close the budget deficit, Robredo responded to demands for increased citizen participation. Since his election in 1988, Robredo had been thinking of ways to get people involved with decision making at City Hall. "We have an imperfect political and election system in the Philippines," Robredo asserted. "It doesn't follow the rule that whoever is voted into office deserves it. The only way to make sure that people are represented is if we pass a local law that requires government to have

people's representatives."

Two events helped open a window of opportunity for Robredo to enact his "people power" concept. First, in 1991, lawmakers in Manila passed the Local Government Code, a law that required local governments to involve citizens in government affairs. Then, in the 1992 elections, all 12 of the candidates running for City Council on Robredo's ticket were elected. Robredo had won over voters, in part with his push against the "symbols of bad governance," and secured a landslide victory of 33,487 votes to his aunt's 9,056.

After a councilor from Robredo's party drafted an ordinance in 1994 to allow citizen representatives on government committees, Robredo urged his colleagues to pass the measure and implement its provisions.

### GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In his first two years in office, Robredo demonstrated that his administration was unlike its predecessors, by assuming a more public profile and eliminating vices that past leaders had ignored. During this time he also closed the budget deficit. These early reforms won voters' trust in his style of government and resulted in his re-election. During his second and third terms, he promoted government accountability by formalizing a system for citizen input into government decision making.

#### *Changing perceptions, restoring trust*

Robredo's strong work ethic and public presence distinguished him from Naga's past mayors and helped him to build support among his constituents. Former city administrator Mendoza said of Robredo in an interview, "He always arrives earlier than the firefighters every time there is a fire, a flood or an accident. If there is a typhoon, he is out in the streets cleaning and digging. He is quite happy doing mundane tasks."<sup>2</sup>

As a first step toward bolstering the public's confidence in city government workers, Robredo instituted an open-door policy at his office. Any employee or constituent could speak with the mayor without having to make an appointment. Even though the policy meant that large chunks of his time were devoted to meeting with constituents, he viewed it as critical to giving people a forum to speak out on issues they felt were important. Moreover, these one-on-one meetings were a chance for Robredo to share his vision for the city and to discuss how he planned to address individuals' concerns.

Robredo had been on the job for only a few months when he had his first opportunity to demonstrate independence from his powerful uncle. Villafuerte asked him to appoint a former classmate as Naga's new chief of police. Robredo refused the request, because he knew that Villafuerte's pick had a reputation for being soft on illegal gambling.

Normally, mayors in the Philippines chose local police chiefs from a list of candidates prepared at the national police headquarters, but Manila had the authority to supersede local government officials. Villafuerte, who had supported President Aquino's election triumph in 1986, succeeded in getting his nominee named to the position. Not surprisingly, Robredo quickly found that the police chief would be no help in his push against illegal activities.

After failing to get the Aquino administration to rescind the appointment, Robredo decided on the unconventional approach of organizing his own law-enforcement group. Operating in a legal gray area, Robredo put together a volunteer group he called Naga's "vice squad." Robredo assigned his secretary, Soler, to head the group. As mayor, Robredo was entitled to round-the-clock protection by the local police. Soler informed the seven members of Robredo's security detail



that they were to participate in the exercise. It was important that the squad involve at least some police officers since they had the legal authority to make arrests. To bolster their numbers, Soler enlisted 30 volunteers from the private armed guards who were responsible for security at City Hall. The security guards provided extra back-up to demonstrate a show of force that deterred suspects from resisting arrest by the police officers. Later, in 1991, the new Local Government Code gave chief executives the authority to mobilize resources for the empowerment of their local communities.

To promote professionalism and safe practices among the vice squad, Soler asked a friend at the 502<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division of the Philippine Army, which had been headquartered inside City Hall since the Marcos era, to help enroll the guards in a Special Forces training course. The training promoted physical fitness and mental fortitude. "The training was to inspire discipline," Soler recalled. City Hall paid for training expenses such as food and supplies and offered an honorarium to the instructors.

The vice squad first moved to shut down the lewd shows that were outlawed under Philippine law. In order to provide proof of illegal activities, the city's official photographer accompanied the vice squad to each venue. After the photographer captured evidence of illegal activities, the police officers from the vice squad arrested the venue's owner. City Hall then canceled the business' operating license. The arrests and suspension of licenses succeeded in driving the shows out of Naga.

Although the nude shows were blights on Naga's image, *jueteng* had a greater impact on the daily lives of constituents and was also illegal. Robredo's push to shut down *jueteng* began after less than a year in office, when his uncle, who was the provincial governor at the time, summoned local leaders to his home. Soler joined Robredo at the meeting. Villafuerte told the group that the archdiocese was insisting

that *jueteng* be stopped, and he called on the leaders to design a plan of action to carry out the church's wishes.

On the ride home, the two men discussed the hard political decisions required. The mayor would have to come down hard on someone whose support had proven critical in the last election. "Jess, we have a problem," Soler recalled saying in the car, "Remember how we won the last election by only 800 votes? Do you remember how we won?" Robredo had worked hard during the campaign to win the support of the local gambling heads from each area. He needed their support to deliver him votes, something that Robredo viewed as a necessary evil. But of all the gambling operators in the city it was Sonny Mercado, the chief gambling lord, on whom Robredo leaned most heavily. Mercado ran the city's *jueteng* operation from his large compound in the foothills of Naga where he owned a sprawling sugar plantation. The voters in Mercado's area had given Robredo his critical margin of victory. Soler remembered pressing Robredo for a decision: "Jess, what do we do with Mr. Mercado? We owe him for our win."

The following day, Robredo and Soler visited Mercado at his home. Mercado initially refused Robredo's demands that he shut down the operation. "In the days after our conversation with Mercado, his men approached me on three occasions," said Soler. Soler refused to back down, even in the face of inducements. With Mercado unwilling to budge, Robredo sought a way to gain the upper hand, and found he did not have to look far. Mercado's son worked for the city planning and development office in city hall. Robredo used the prospect of his son's continued employment as the bargaining chip. Sonny agreed to cease his operations.

Yet within two months, *jueteng* was back. The new gambling head in the city was his uncle's son, Mariano "Bong" Villafuerte III.

Robredo realized that he had been deceived by his uncle into closing Mercado's operation to create space for the Villafuerte family to take over *jueteng*.

For nearly three years, the vice squad struggled to drive out *jueteng*. As the crackdown continued, the betting operations became more sophisticated. Drawings were sometimes held in cars and ambulances. The vice squad gathered intelligence on the location of prize drawings and arrested bet collectors. While the raids curtailed *jueteng*, it was not until 1992, when Fidel Ramos became president, that *jueteng* suffered a near-fatal blow.

Robredo had campaigned for Ramos, and his loyalty was rewarded with a police chief who joined Robredo's drive against *jueteng*. The vice squad supplemented the police force with extra manpower, and together the two groups raided drawings and arrested bet collectors. The arrests, combined with the deterrent effect created by the willingness of the police to tackle the issue head-on, forced most *jueteng* operations to leave the city.

#### *Closing the budget deficit*

After Robredo's team had determined that businesses were underdeclaring their income, Robredo approached Naga's Chamber of Commerce, hoping that the organization would embrace the idea of truthful reporting for the good of the city. Robredo's message to members of the business community was that their taxes would be reinvested in the city and thus benefit their businesses in the long run. Unlike property taxes that were sent to the national level and were then redistributed—often disproportionately—among local governments depending on whether the local government was allied with the president, sales taxes on revenue went directly to City Hall.

When the business owners declined to cooperate, Robredo had two options left. The first, taking individual business owners to court,

would involve a lengthy and costly legal process. Robredo could not afford the time or the money. The second option was to confront business owners individually. Every year, business owners had to obtain a mayor's permit from City Hall—essentially a license to operate. Robredo decided that before he would sign each permit, he would first send someone from the city treasurer's office to observe the particular business and make a rough computation of the business' earnings. Although it was impossible to know the exact amount, the procedure could establish a reasonable estimate for bargaining purposes.

Robredo then mediated between the city tax authority and businesses. When a business owner arrived at city hall for his meeting with the mayor, Robredo was armed with the previous years' income statements and the estimated income generated by the investigation. It was impossible to pinpoint the exact amount of taxes owed, but Robredo could argue that if the investigation went forward, the owner might owe even more. Robredo and the business owner compromised. "Literally, one-by-one we negotiated with the businesses about their increases," said Soler. The strategy succeeded, and within one year the budget deficit was eliminated. The practice was similar to strategies used by tax offices in many industrial countries.

#### *Increasing participation*

Beginning with his first campaign, Robredo had spoken often about the need to create avenues for people to closely engage with the local governments. He believed increased citizen participation would lead to greater accountability on the part of government officials.

Immediately following the passage of the 1991 Local Government Code, several civil society organizations in Naga formed an ad hoc coordinating council. The group explored ways

that civil society groups could collectively approach local government about their needs. By 1993, this group had grown into a larger coalition of organizations. The group prepared a position paper that suggested a partnership between local government and civil society.

A series of consultations followed between local government officials and civil society actors. James Jacob, a city councilor elected in 1992 as part of Robredo's clean sweep of the council, incorporated feedback from these consultations into a draft law, called the Empowerment Ordinance.

The ordinance sought to expand on provisions of the 1991 Local Government Code that required local governments to create special bodies and standing committees to study various issues. In Naga, such committees included the Urban Development and Housing Board, the Investment Board, and the Task Force on Labor and Traffic Management. Policies were debated and laws were drafted in these committees before they were forwarded to the full City Council for consideration.

Jacob's Empowerment Ordinance called for the creation of a People's Council—essentially, a group of civil society representatives—that would get one seat on each of the government's special bodies and standing committees. The People's Council representatives could participate in all aspects of committee-level deliberations and could even propose laws, but they had no vote in the City Council.

Naga's City Council adopted Jacob's ordinance in 1995. Robredo contributed to the creation of the Naga City People's Council by making greater participation a campaign pledge and allowing Jacob to draft the ordinance. In its first year of operation, the People's Council comprised 44 civil society organizations. Representatives had seats on the city's five local special bodies and 25 standing committees and lent a strong voice to policy discussions.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Since becoming mayor in 1988, Robredo had often spoken about creating a formal mechanism to allow ordinary citizens to participate in government. He had been re-elected in 1992 with an overwhelming majority of votes, in part on his pledge to increase citizen participation. So when Robredo presented Jacob's draft Empowerment Ordinance to city councilors for their vote in early 1995, his credibility hinged on getting the law passed.

The proposal shocked most councilors. "I believe they [the city councilors] were stunned by the idea of allowing unelected members of the Naga City People's Council to be part of the process of legislation," said Bordado, Robredo's public information officer. Jacob said the opposition arose from councilors who were concerned that "these groups should have a powerful role in decision making but would not be accountable to anyone because their members were unelected."

Fervent discussion continued in the City Council until April 1995 when, frustrated that some council members opposed the ordinance's passage, Jacob threatened to resign his seat if the ordinance failed to pass. Although Jacob was a strong Robredo supporter, he was not from Robredo's political party. Robredo realized that Jacob's resignation could cause him to lose his "clean sweep" of city councilors in the upcoming elections if the candidate who replaced Jacob did not align himself with the mayor.

With the elections just weeks away, Robredo strengthened his position. He identified a particularly influential councilor, a former judge, who he thought could be won over and used to persuade others of the law's merits. "As a legal expert, the judge was one of the few councilors who actually understood everything about the ordinance," Jacob said. "Most of the other councilors looked to him for advice on how to interpret the legislation."



Robredo warned the councilor about the potential political fallout—for both Robredo and the council—of any failure to enact the ordinance. The former judge persuaded skeptical councilors that their political futures depended on the passage of the ordinance. A week later the ordinance became law, with all councilors voting in favor of passage.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

Robredo was elected mayor in 1988 with the strong support of his politically powerful uncle but quickly went beyond the image of a traditional Filipino politician. His intolerance for illegal activities demonstrated that he was different from the rest. At the same time, he increased government accountability with innovations such as the Naga City People's Council. His ability to showcase his opposition to illegal activities and deliver tangible results made for a winning combination.

Within a year he had closed the city's budget deficit. Naga, which had been a third-class city on the national Department of Finance's six-tier ranking system based on municipal income and revenue, had attained first-class status by 1990.

By shutting down the lewd shows in the city and largely expelling illegal gambling operations, Robredo signaled to voters that his administration was a departure from the status quo. Unable to appoint his own police chief, he created his own vice squad to deliver quick results and provide a visible indication to the public that he was intent on tackling illegal activities.

Robredo's struggle to name his own chief of police was an example of the constrained environment in which he operated. Robredo had a vision for Naga as a city free of illegal activities, where people had a voice in government. But it was often difficult to execute this vision. When his initial plan of action did not succeed, as was sometimes the

case, there were few options left other than to venture down paths that raised questions of legality, or left citizens to trust that he was acting in their best interests.

Robredo risked accusations of collusion and corruption by negotiating behind closed doors with business owners over how much they should pay in taxes. Yet given the limited options available, it was the best solution he could come up with. Moreover, Robredo's business experience—members of his extended family were business owners—gave him an advantage in the negotiations.

Robredo was the first mayor in the Philippines to oversee the institutionalization of a system to enable people to engage with the government. He provided the political space for the creation of the Naga City People's Council by prioritizing the issue in his campaigns. Moreover, the creation of the People's Council further strengthened Robredo's image as a representative mayor. His control after the 1992 elections of all of the city councilors meant that he could pass virtually any legislation needed to achieve his goals. Yet giving citizens a seat at the decision-making table showcased Robredo's willingness to allow the public to check his ambitions. At the same time, the People's Council was a means for Robredo to ensure that future government officials were accountable to the people long after he left office.

In the decade that followed the creation of the People's Council, Naga hosted a stream of visitors from throughout the Philippines eager to learn how the city had strengthened participatory governance. By 2011, at least five cities in the Philippines had adopted councils modeled after the one created in Naga.

In 2011, policymakers in Naga continued to struggle to identify sources of funding for the People's Council that did not come from City Hall and international donors. The original support structure led to questions about the People's Council's independence from

government influence. At the same time, enthusiasm for the People's Council waned as civil society groups declined in number and those still in operation became less active. Some council-reserved seats on special committees remained unoccupied.

Awards attested to Robredo's success in revitalizing Naga. In 1999, *Asiaweek* magazine named Naga one of Asia's "most improved cities." The magazine cited Robredo's pivotal role in energizing the bureaucracy and improving people's participation in governance.<sup>3</sup> The following year, Robredo received the Ramon Magsaysay Award. Considered Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, the award recognized Robredo's efforts to sustain citizen participation through the creation of the People's Council.

## REFLECTIONS

Looking back on his early attempts to build trust, Jesse Robredo said, "Initially, I was a novelty, reporting to work early and getting out in the city and interacting with people. But later on, it became the standard." Robredo suggested that his style of management set a precedent for future mayors. "I think anyone who becomes mayor and deviates from that standard will cause people to begin to look for somebody else for the job."

Robredo credited many successful reforms to the citizens of Naga, who he said took the time to demand more from their government.

Moreover, he emphasized that there were avenues for revitalizing the city that he failed to explore. "The other thing that I was not very concerned with, but where we should have focused some resources and attention, was with history, arts and culture," he said. "But sometimes with these things, when you pass on the opportunity, it's gone."

Gabriel Bordado Jr., Robredo's public information officer and later the acting city administrator, described Robredo's first nine

years in office as "building the mechanisms and institutionalizing the systems" of representative government.

"They were new, they were innovative," Bordado recalled. "There was really this transformation of a sleepy little city. Naga was thrust into the national consciousness as a city with innovative programs and practices."

## EPILOGUE

In 1998, as the end of his third term as mayor neared, Robredo sought to endorse a candidate who he believed would help sustain his reforms. Robredo and his team persuaded Sulpicio "Cho" Roco to run for mayor. Roco had been planning to retire from his job as head of technical resources at a local arm of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the foreign aid arm of the United States government. Naga received USAID funds for various projects, including the People's Council, and Robredo had come to know and trust Roco. With Robredo's endorsement, Roco was elected mayor and served a three-year term.

Meanwhile, Robredo enrolled in a master's program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He returned to Naga in 1999, and decided to run again for mayor. He was elected in 2001 and served another three consecutive terms, during which he instituted a number of reforms including an i-governance initiative, a major part of which consisted of refurbishing the city's website and Internet offerings. The new website displayed city ordinances and resolutions passed by the City Council. Also on the site, constituents could view the city's budget, see all bid notices and results related to the procurement of items, and access a directory of city officials' phone numbers and email addresses.

Another of Robredo's major reforms focused on the education sector. The Ford Foundation—a major international donor—

approached Robredo in 2001 with the idea of stimulating citizen involvement in the decisions made by local school boards, which had the final say on most local education matters, including spending. Until that time, school boards had been small, insular groups led by superintendents who were appointed by the Department of Education in Manila. With the assistance of the Ford Foundation, Robredo broadened the membership of the school boards to include parents and teachers and educated the community about the most pressing needs in the schools. As a consequence, communities played

a greater role in prioritizing the needs at each school and deciding where to target funds. This in turn led to, among other things, better quality textbooks and improved student performance, as measured by standardized test scores.

In 2010, President Benigno Aquino III appointed Robredo to be secretary of the Department of Interior and Local Government, a position that gave him oversight of many local government functions. John Bongat, a former city councilor whom Robredo endorsed as his successor as Naga's mayor, won handily in the 2010 elections.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kawanaka, Takeshi. "Power in a Philippine City." Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization. 2002. p 35.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Francis and Aceron, Joy. "Breaking New Ground: A Profile of Mayor Jesse M. Robredo," in *Frontline Leadership: Stories of 5 Local Chief Executives*. Ateneo School of Government and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. 2007. p 26.

<sup>3</sup> Sieu Tet Choong, "Special Report: Pressure Points." *AsiaWeek*. 17 December 1999.



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

### Terms of Use

Before using any materials downloaded from the Innovations for Successful Societies website, users must read and accept the terms on which we make these items available. The terms constitute a legal agreement between any person who seeks to use information available at [www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties) and Princeton University.

In downloading or otherwise employing this information, users indicate that

- a. They understand that the materials downloaded from the website are protected under United States Copyright Law (Title 17, United States Code).
- b. They will use the material only for educational, scholarly and other noncommercial purposes.
- c. They will not sell, transfer, assign, license, lease, or otherwise convey any portion of this information to any third party. (Re-publication or display on a third-party's website requires the express written permission of the Princeton University Innovations for Successful Societies program or the Princeton University Library.)
- d. In all publications, presentations or other communications that incorporate or otherwise rely upon information from this archive, they will acknowledge that such information was obtained through the Innovations for Successful Societies website. A suggested citation format is below.

[Document author if listed], [Document title], Innovations for Successful Societies, Princeton University, accessed at <http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties> on [date accessed on web]

- e. They understand that the quotes used in the case study reflect the interviewees' personal points of view. Although all efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information collected, Princeton University does not warrant the accuracy, completeness, timeliness or other characteristics of any material available online.
- f. They acknowledge that the content and/or format of the archive and the site may be revised, updated or otherwise modified from time to time.
- g. They accept that access to and use of the archive is at their own risk. They shall not hold Princeton University liable for any loss or damages resulting from the use of information in the archive. Princeton University assumes no liability for any errors or omissions with respect to the functioning of the archive.



**PRINCETON  
UNIVERSITY**

The Mamdouha S.  
**Bobst Center**  
for Peace and  
Justice



Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS) is a joint program of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs and the Bobst Center for Peace & Justice. The Woodrow Wilson School prepares students for careers in public service and supports scholarly research on policy and governance. The mission of the Bobst Center for Peace & Justice is to advance the cause of peace and justice through mutual understanding and respect for all ethnic traditions and religious faiths, both within countries and across national borders.