

Sharing by the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government, Inc. (CCAGG)

The Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government, Inc. (CCAGG) is a registered non-stock, non-profit, community-based people's organization. Its mandate includes (a) monitoring government projects, (b) facilitating barangay and community consultations, and (c) conduct of, and participation in, seminars (local and international) on good governance.

CCAGG uses community organizing (CO) and advocacy in carrying out its objectives. One of its unique experiences is that of "Participatory Audit" which is currently being replicated in other provinces.

A. The Socio-Political Setting:

Abra is a landlocked province located on the western side of the Cordillera in Northern Luzon. It is approximately 408 kilometers north of Manila. The province consists of twenty-seven (27) municipalities with Bangued as the capital town, and three hundred four (304) barangays with a total land area of 397,776 hectares. It has a population of 180,000, 75% of whom are Ilocanos who inhabit 25% of the total land area, and 25%, Tingguians, who occupy 75% of the total land area of Abra. Like other areas in the country, the delivery of services in the province is poor; its socio-economic development, slow; and popular participation in decision-making process in the government, negligible.

The harsh realities in the province of Abra serve as challenges which need to be faced by CCAGG with determination. One was the celebrated case of eleven (11) engineers of the DPWH in Abra (see boxed story in succeeding pages) who, in 1987, advertised in a newspaper their supposedly having fully completed what in reality were unfinished public works—which included roads, bridges, school buildings, and health centers in several areas of the province—worth millions of pesos. CCAGG contested their report, resulting in the suspension of engineers involved.

Other cases involved the anomalous concreting of a 6.8-kilometer road linking the municipalities of San Quintin and Pidigan; and reported corruption in the implementation of infrastructure projects by the municipal mayor of Tubo, who was brought to court by the Legislative Council with the help of CCAGG.

The Case of Eleven (11) DPWH Engineers in Abra

On February 25, 1987, a full-page "accomplishment report" of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) in Abra was published in the Norluzonian Courier, a newspaper of regional circulation based in San Fernando, La Union. DPWH-Abra reported that all their projects, which included roads, bridges, school buildings and health centers, were 100% completed. The news report did not tally with the findings of CCAGG, which wrote to then DPWH Sec. Vicente Jayme in Manila, requesting for "an audit team, who cannot be bribed, to conduct a physical

inspection of all on-going and even of past projects in Abra...”

The CCAGG later met with Sec. Jayme and his undersecretaries at the DPWH Central Office to present their evidence negating the newspaper report. As a result, Sec. Jayme sent unannounced an audit team which, together with representatives from DPWH-Abra and CCAGG, inspected a total of twenty (20) questioned projects in Abra. The audit team’s report to Sec. Jayme supported the earlier findings of CCAGG, and became the basis of a formal complaint lodged against eleven (11) engineers of DPWH-Abra, among whom were the District Engineer, Assistant District Engineer, and Unit Chiefs.

The respondents were mostly from families with “connections” with the influential and powerful politicians in Abra. This was the reason why CCAGG opted for the hearings to be held in Manila, even if such entailed more expenses and effort.

To drum up support for the case, a “dinner and dance party” was held where one hundred pesos (P100.00)—already a considerable amount in 1987—per plate was the minimum contribution. Surprisingly, many gave more. There were silent supporters from government offices who contributed but did not attend for fear of being identified as members of CCAGG, and face the possibility of losing their jobs. Many simple people sent rice, vegetables and their few hard-earned pesos. One businessman known for being a tightwad contributed generously to help pay for CCAGG expenses in Manila.

The marathon hearings started on July 2 and ended on August 19, 1987, during the entire period of which the charged engineers were put on preventive suspension. CCAGG was assured by the DPWH Central Office that a decision on the case will be promulgated within fifteen (15) days after the last day of hearings, but more than two months had passed with no decision made. At around this time, the League of Municipal Mayors, and the Provincial Governor, of Abra sent resolutions petitioning the DPWH Secretary to lift the suspension of the respondent engineers in view of “shortage of engineers” who could supervise public works in the province. CCAGG also found out that the hearing officer’s planned verdict on the administrative case was simply to reprimand the “erring engineers.”

Anxious letters and telegrams were sent by the people of Abra to the DPWH Secretary. One was a resolution from the People’s Economic Council (PEC) of Abra urging then OIC Sec. Fiorello Estuar to have the case “resolved on the basis of evidence presented, in the true spirit of justice, without succumbing to pressures exerted by politicians and by other vested groups.”

An “Open Letter in Support of CCAGG,” on the other hand, from the Clergy and Religious of Abra, was read in public; here they expressed “full support for the effort of the CCAGG to uncover anomalies in government, to bring them to the attention of the proper authorities.” They added, “we are convinced that the National Office of the DPWH has no alternative but to bring administrative charges against the people concerned and to give them a fair hearing. Only this way can injustices committed against the common good be brought to a stop and the necessary steps be taken so that they will not be repeated.” The “Open Letter” called on “all justice- and peace-loving Abrenians to become ever more vigilant in monitoring government projects so that they are properly accomplished and the public funds properly spent,”

emphasizing this as “the responsibility of each and every citizen.”

On November 10, 1987, CCAGG wrote the new DPWH Sec. Juanito Ferrer, describing the case against the DPWH-Abra engineers as “a test case, the first among one hundred and thirty-eight (138) to be filed with the department.” CCAGG added that the case would “withstand any attempt [at] whitewash or political interference because in it lies the answer to the question whether the government is really sincere and able to restore the faith of the people in [it].”

On February 4, 1988, CCAGG received a communication from the DPWH Asst. Secretary for Legal Services, Atty. Dominador Madamba. It was regarding the decision on Administrative Case No. 87-15 (Administrative Case against the accused engineers), which found the eleven (11) DPWH-Abra engineers guilty.

The decision proved the respondents culpable for the falsification of Certificates of Completion of eight (8) projects when these were still on-going; falsification of Certificates of Completion of three (3) other projects even before the start of these projects; making end-users of projects accept these as “completed” when in fact these were still on-going or have not yet been started; and substitution of specified materials in the program of work of two (2) projects with different materials of inferior quality.

All the respondents were suspended from office for periods ranging from one (1) to nine (9) months without pay. But this decision was not well-received by Abrenians who expected a tougher punishment for the guilty engineers; they called the decision “lutong macao” (a farce). Nonetheless, it represented a moral victory for the people: for the first time ever, government officials in Abra were suspended from office because of the people’s strong will to pursue and right a wrong, setting a precedence for public accountability.

A few days after receipt of the decision, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) advised CCAGG of the latter’s having been chosen as “Outstanding NGO in Region I for Community Service,” with then President Corazon C. Aquino awarding the Plaque of Appreciation during a February 15, 1988, ceremony. The award bolstered CCAGG’s image and its monitoring work became more extensive.

Shortly thereafter, the DPWH-CAR (Cordillera Administrative Region) made a decision that no project would be paid without CCAGG’s monitoring report. CCAGG, additionally, was asked to sit in the Pre-Bids and Awards Committee (PBAC).

From then on, CCAGG signed Memoranda of Agreement with NEDA, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), and the Commission on Audit (COA), which made it a partner for participatory monitoring and audit of government projects.

These events same led to the recognition of CCAGG by Transparency International, which gave it the Integrity Award for the year 2000, in a ceremony held on September 30, 2000, in Ottawa, Canada.

B. Programs and Projects of CCAGG:

The CCAGG is a non-profit, non-stock, and non-partisan province-wide organization whose membership represents a cross-section of Abra society, e.g., farmers, housewives, youth, and professionals. The commitment to social transformation is at the heart of the CCAGG when it registered itself at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in 1987. Even before its registration, it was already becoming the “people’s watch-dog” by monitoring government projects as well as the performance of government officials. To this date, monitoring has become its signature activity. At the same time that it monitors government programs and government officials’ performances, it also organizes autonomous geographic and sectoral groups, as social change and social transformation can only be the product of an empowered citizenry.

Monitoring is CCAGG’s signature activity. CCAGG is known for this activity. Why? The projects being implemented and the subsequent call to monitor them becomes an occasion to organize the community, and in the process raise their political consciousness. Monitoring becomes the people’s concrete participation in governance and, depending on the result of their findings, the succeeding activities can become an expression of empowerment and of political maturity as they will, expectedly, push for accountability and transparency in government.

1. Monitoring and Participatory Audit:

CCAGG regularly conducts monitoring of government infrastructure projects. Monitoring reports contain details re: type of projects monitored, location, costs, implementing agency, findings, and recommendations, which are mostly for review and policy formulation.

A lot of thought and preparation goes into the pre-implementation phase of Participatory Audit, a joint undertaking between the Commission on Audit (COA) and CCAGG, which is being funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This is understandable because it is the first ever to be conducted in the Philippines. Its success will determine its replication not only in other provinces in the Philippines but also in Asia-Pacific. Joint meetings and trainings of COA and CCAGG personnel were held. It was agreed also that projects to be audited shall be based on financial magnitude, project impact, public interest, utility and auditability.

Participatory audit of both the DPWH and DENR included review of the bidding process and of contracts, actual visit of the projects, and interview with management as well as with the community-beneficiaries to find out the impact of the project on their lives. As to its scope, it was jointly decided to cover DENR and DPWH management, as well as the community beneficiaries—to find out the impact of the project on their life.

2. Capability Building and Empowerment of People:

The CCAGG organizes community dialogues and meetings to inform the people of their fundamental social obligation to participate in the development and management of projects that are being implemented in their respective locality. Meetings are conducted with a clear objective to inform the communities on the de-tails of the project that is being implemented, the quantifiable items picked out from the corresponding Program of Work, and the basic requirement of quality drawn out from the Quality Control Program of the implementing agency (DPWH). Open forum follows; it is an effective means to clarify uncertainties and redirect the attitude of the people on their poor and sometimes crooked understanding towards the project’s technical and social aspects, thereby empowering and enabling them to participate actively in

the safeguard and proper implementation of projects in their area.

3. Advocacy for Good Government Through the Broadcast and Print Media:

The CCAGG sustains its advocacy work through the broadcast and print media. A total of fifty-two (52) weekly radio programs for the Year 2000 were produced and aired over radio station DZPA. Called "Allangugan"(echoes), the program has maintained its primetime schedule at 7:30 in the evening of Sundays, and replayed at 11:00 in the morning of Mondays.

Monitoring reports and various CCAGG-led activities and involvement are discussed. Emerging socio-economic and political issues are also shared for the people's information, to help develop public opinion and draw them to action as these affect their lives.

Beneficial government programs and projects are also disseminated so that communities can avail of them. Community actions which reflect an awakened and growing social consciousness are also highlighted. This is to invite others to do the same.

It also maintained its column "Your Monitor" in Abra Today, the diocesan newspaper. In addition, CCAGG activities, e.g., speaking engagements, participation in government and non-government thrusts and program relative to people empowerment, participation in governance, and other activities, are documented and published for dissemination purposes.

C. Processes and Methods of CCAGG:

To prepare us for the task of monitoring, we were trained by NEDA. We were also taught how to fill out forms for reporting purposes. When NEDA released the project listing, we realized that the CEDP projects were all over Abra. As agreed upon, we went into a massive information-dissemination on the CEDP projects on the broadcast and print media and in community meetings, taking care to mention the type and location of the individual projects, the cost per project and the mode of implementation. We also organized the recipient communities and transferred to them the monitoring technology taught us by the NEDA technical staff. When project implementation finally started, the people's interest was very much felt. The implementing agency resented this. They looked down on us and asked what do we understand of their technical work like road building, or irrigation construction.

Communities were interviewed on the air regarding their participation in project implementation. They were also asked how they were benefited by the CEDP. And where anomalous biddings happened, these were immediately exposed. The information on project costs made the people realize the enormous funds being poured into Abra. People asked each other: "Has it always been like this before? Or is this a new development initiated by the Cory Government?"

Additional CCAGG strategies include the following:

- a) Community building and community organizing at the barangay and municipal levels to foster unity and cooperation among the people for a more enlightened citizenry;
- b) Sponsorship of public fora, symposia, and seminars to provide a mechanism and venue for direct consultation with the people on key issues and concerns, thus, enabling them to express their problems, needs, interests, and sentiments;

- c) Establishment of a complaints and actions center to receive/accept and act on the legitimate complaints of people;
- d) Making representations with government agencies and other institutions/agencies to ensure that the aspirations, interests and grievances of the people are acted upon and/or be included in the political agenda;
- e) Monitoring of the implementation of government projects with the active participation of the people. The communities nearest to the projects are given information on the different aspects of the projects (activities to be undertaken, project costs, contractors, supervising engineers, etc.) to heighten their awareness and ensure their participation in project monitoring. To realize the intent of project evaluation, several efforts are undertaken to reach the stage of reporting and feedbacking.
- f) Sponsoring of Community-Based Training-Seminars in Monitoring and Evaluation of Projects in the local levels as well as in the neighboring provinces like La Union, Ilocos Sur, Mountain Province, Pangasinan, Ifugao, Mindoro, Nueva Vizcaya, and Agusan del Norte. At the international level, CCAGG has participated in conferences in Thailand, Indonesia and The Hague, Netherlands. Technology transfer equips the 'common tao' with the necessary technological know-how and skills thus ensuring greater public participation.
- g) Coordination and co-partnership with the government agencies and other agencies of programs and projects that contribute to poverty alleviation thus raising the living standard of the people.
- h) Involvement in electoral exercises where volunteer poll watchers are trained and fielded during elections to safeguard the sanctity of the ballot. Candidates' Fora are sponsored on the air and on community level to allow candidates to present their respective political platforms, thus affording the people an objective appraisal of what candidates are offering and can do.
- i) Assistance to the different CCAGG chapters and other people's organizations in the participation and packaging of project proposals. It also provides its expertise in community organizing and project management.
- j) CCAGG provides for a continuing education and conscientization of the people and the popularization of issues and concerns through the mass media available, both print and broadcast, to shape a responsible public opinion.

D. Lessons Learned as Volunteer Worker:

"When I was asked to take the post of Municipal Budget Officer in Daguioman, a remote upland town in Abra in 1992 I got oppositions and protests from the municipal treasurer who was so afraid of the possibility of being "macagg". The Treasurer would do anything to pressure me to resign my CCAGG membership by withholding my salaries or asking for my clearance from CCAGG stating specifically that I am no longer connected with the organization. Threats to my life included. Taking the challenge was a great ordeal. There were times when I was even suspected of conniving with the Treasurer when I could not explain to the members of the Sangguniang Bayan the financial status of the municipality. But I tried to live up to the expectations of the people of Daguioman so with the help of the Mayor, the Municipal Administrator and the Sangguniang Bayan, I tried to institute changes in the local fiscal administration.

"I employed community organizing tactics particularly in preparing the officials of the town and employees whose support I needed to combat corruption. I worked the extra hours to produce the information they would need to

decide on the case against the Treasurer. In the end, truth and what was right prevailed.”

Ma. Teresa B. Benas
Founding Member/Advocacy Officer, CCAGG

“On another occasion, there was another project which we have been inspecting in another town. Our first report showed that the project did not pass our monitoring and evaluation. On our second and third visit, the contractor, son of the Mayor, would add improvements but still, his implementation had deficiencies. The contractor was persuading us to the point of offering special favors/benefits but we stood firm in our stand. Finding us uncooperative, he harassed Simeon, one of our team members. We reported the matter to the police and to his mother but nothing happened to our report.”

Eric Basa
Founding Member, CCAGG; and
COMELEC Official, La Paz, Abra

“There was a time when I was assigned to lead the monitoring team in Pilar, Abra, my hometown. We were to monitor the on-going implementation of a school building. As a protocol of monitoring, the team made a courtesy call to the Teacher-In-Charge. We discussed the monitoring activity which we will conduct, especially because the foreman/supervisor of the project was not around. During the inspection of the structure, an interview with the laborers also took place. The monitors based the inspection on the Program of Work which was shown to the workers. Minutes later, the supervisor of the said project appeared and scolded us, saying: “You are by-passing us! Why didn’t you inform us before you came? And you (pointing at me), APAY NGA AR-ARAMIDEM DAYTOY KADAKAMI? IMBES NGA ISAKIT NAKAM, APAY IRURUMEN NA KAMI! (Why do you do this to us? We are your relatives. Instead of working for our interest, you fight us!)

“We reasoned out diplomatically that monitoring is not a fault-finding activity but a worthwhile task to oversee sustainable project implementation. On the same afternoon, the issue was forwarded to the Mayor through VHF Communication. The feedback from the Mayor was known to us at once. Allegedly, the Mayor said: “MAKITAK TO LAENG IDA, AWAN GUN-GUNADA A KABAGYAN! (They behave as though we are not relatives. Just wait til I get to see them!)

“The team went back to our office in Bangued early the following day. At the office, the issue was processed in a meeting with the Core Group and all the staff. It was decided that some of the CCAGGs will talk to the Mayor. But the issue was broadcast on radio and heard by the concerned party causing deeper misunderstanding. Days after, a relative of the Mayor met with me and some of the monitoring team members. He scolded me. Not only that, my parents’ name were maligned because of his reasoning that they cannot discipline me.

“The most hurtful was that since then, he became cold to me and to my parents. The Mayor treated us like villains. In spite of this, I did not give up my principle of good governance. Meetings with other CCAGGs and co-staff became venues for molding upright principles. Later, these relatives of mine found ways to reconcile and restore broken relationships with my family.”

Leonardo Domingo
Community Organizer, Pilar , Abra

“I had been tried by a contractor who had a controversial project. Because of the CCAGG monitoring report, a project costing more than P2.5 Million was discovered not being constructed in accordance to plans and specifications. He was bribing me to change the monitoring report before it reaches the CCAGG. I told the contractor that the CCAGG never changes reports. Then I told him with finality: Why not come to the office to discuss your concern?” The contractor never came to our office.”

Renato Brasuela
Monitor/Community Worker
Civil Engineer from San Juan, Abra

“One tried to bribe me with a P500.00 and another frightened me with his gun.”

Ruel Busque
Monitor/Community Worker
Civil Engineer from San Isidro, Abra

“...Months after, the secretary of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan came to present a resolution offering to CCAGG the administration of the Small Town Lottery to fund social development projects. We declined the offer. Looking back, we can only exclaim: “What a way to silence us!”

Pura Sumangil
Chairperson, CCAGG

“Let us see how long would CCAGG last. A comment from many politicians who were very angry with our monitoring endeavor. With Divine Grace and self-determination of its members, CCAGG is now 16 years old and it is very much alive. But how? In my 16 years with the CCAGG, it never solicited funds from politicians. When its members and volunteers become resource persons, they share part of their honoraria with the CCAGG to support its mission. Sometimes, we contract community organizing work for line agencies. CCAGG members who are abroad also send funds or materials to support the CCAGG mission. That’s how we fund our monitoring activities.”

Myrna Caoagas
Founding Member, CCAGG
Teacher, Penarrubia, Abra