

Sinalang Detour Bridge, a story of people's awakening

By Desiree Caluza

*“We are the vision and the star, the quietous of pain;
We are the terminals of inquisition, the hiatuses
of a new crusade; we are the subterranean subways
of suffering; we are the will of dignities;
we are the living testament of a flowering race.”*

-Carlos Bulosan

From “If you want to know what we are”

The year 1996 was one of the pivotal years for Concern Citizens of Abra of Good Government (CCAGG) when it found itself extremely challenged by a struggle against a government agency which had played a major role in fanning the flames of graft and corruption that involved an P8.2 million bridge.

It was called the Sinalang Detour Bridge, or the bridge that never was.

But the Abrenos have branded it “*sinayang*” (Filipino language for wasted).

If one visits Barangay Lipcan in Bangued today, one can only be awed by the new bridge which was constructed in 2001. Beside the sturdy bridge is the old Sinalang Bridge which is now blocked from plying motorists and is serving as a temporary camp and checkpoint for the local police all at the same time.

The old bridge, which was built during the Japanese occasion in the Philippines, does not only host the camp of police officers, it also serves as a temporary convenient home to these government entities. The old bridge is a place where they can install their hammocks and clothesline where they can hang their uniforms and underwear for drying purposes.

An obliging young police officer said the advantage of encamping literally beside the new Sinalang Bridge was that they would be able to monitor or check it regularly to make sure that a thief would not get away with a load of steels from the structure.

“At least we can check if the nuts and bolts or the steels supporting the bridge are still intact. Any thief should not dare come near bridge and steal anything from it because we will arrest him,” Sgt. Jake Dati Guinadan, said.

Guinadan said he admired the new bridge because it was well-built. But because he was not originally from the Lipcan community, it was understood that he would not be knowledgeable about the controversial Sinalang Detour Bridge.

He never knew that a detour bridge ever existed. He also never knew that the bridge was not only stolen of nuts and bolts, it was also stolen of people's money.

Under the old and new bridge, one can take just have a glimpse of the river flowing beside a land where roaming cattle graze on. And this is the river that swells when strong typhoons or intermittent rains strike the province.

One with a sense of historical perspective will be surely interested to see signs or artifacts of the Sinalang Detour Bridge which was built in 1996. But the person will be only disappointed to find out that there is no any sign of the detour bridge...no posts, no rails..no nuts and bolts.

Jun Bejarin, former barangay captain of Barangay Lipcan said only animals and push carts could only be seen passing through the bridge, but he did see any light vehicles passing through it.

The residents knew from the very start that the detour bridge would not last long because it looked weak and unstable. Their fears were validated when a flashflood vigorously flowed down the lower stream, completely washing out the bridge with the power of monsoon rains.

“We saw how big the water which was coming from the upstream that was flowing downstream where the detour bridge was. Then there was this huge acacia tree which was knocked down because of the very strong current. The tree that fell on the river near the bridge put a huge pressure on the water. Because of the pressure, the bridge instantly collapsed. What we could only see at that time were a few posts and steel plates, but after a while, it also disappeared,” Bejarin said.

Sinalang Detour Bridge, a project

According to the Regional Project Monitoring Committee-Cordillera Administrative Region (RPMC-CAR) report on the validation of Sinalang Bridge and Detour Bridge in Bangued, Abra on April 25, 1997, the road project was proposed at a time when budget for the rehabilitation of Sinalang Bridge was approved.

During a cabinet meeting in Bangued in August 1996, former president Fidel V. Ramos approved the release of P4.0 million for the rehabilitation of Sinalang Bridge. The amount was deemed insufficient for the replacement of the bridge substructures which was estimated at P26 million in preparations for the installation of FVR Bridge (British steel compact bridge system). This amount was then requested for realignment including an earlier allocation for the same bridge repair worth P4.94 million to the construction of a detour steel bridge.

The justification for realignment was the urgency to construct a detour bridge in order not to hamper vehicular traffic flow while the existing bridge would be under repair or replacement.

In an official endorsement by Salvador Pleyto, regional director of DPWH-Cordillera, to the main office of DPWH in Manila dated November 6, 1996, he noted that the Sinalang Detour Bridge along Abra-Ilocos Sur Road would cost P8.294 million.

“The detour road is now an immediate need since the present critical and dangerous condition of the bridge proper has been hampering the smooth flow of traffic not to mention economic dislocation because the produce of nearby municipalities is not transported normally. In all indications, the proposed work is emergency in nature,” Pleyto wrote.

After the request was favorably endorsed by DPWH-Cordillera, it was approved by DPWH- Central Office, Department of Budget and Management and Malacanang.

The proposal to replace the Sinalang Bridge was justified after an investigation report of the DPWH Bureau of Design and Bureau of Construction indicated that the aging bridge was deteriorating and was becoming hazardous, thus, a need for replacement was needed.

The need for investigation

After a decade of monitoring development projects in Abra, CCAGG found itself battling corruption after learning that the Sinalang Detour Bridge did not serve its purpose as originally proposed by the DPWH. The organization found irregularities in the work-output.

On April 11, 1997, Pura Sumangil, chairperson of CCAGG, wrote DPWH Secretary Gregorio Vigilar to air their protest against the manner of implementation and the secrecy “with which the Abra Engineering District conducted the projects.” She was not only referring to the Sinalang Detour Bridge, she was also emphasizing the flaws of the work-output of the rehabilitation of the Sinalang Bridge.

Sumangil noted in her letter that they saw the portent of things to come, predicting that the Sinalang Detour Bridge would eventually collapse should a flashflood happen.

In her letter, she said that they requested the Abra Engineering District for a copy of program of work of the project, but the request fell on deaf ears. But despite the handicap, the monitoring was religiously conducted by the group.

Sumangil said they interviewed the residents in the area who said that the repair of the old Sinalang Bridge was simply consisted of painting, welding and application of epoxy to cracks caused by the earthquake of July 1990, underneath the bridge and asphalt overlay.

As for the detour bridge, it did not serve its purpose and was never once used, the heavy pieces of equipment passed through the Sinalang Bridge.

“The approach to the detour bridge from south made use of a combination of gabions and coconut trunks while from the north, only gabions laid on geo-textile were used to hold the backfill for the approaches which were not compacted. In fact, even this early, the approach from the south is already eroding. A single downpour will washout both approaches leaving the detour structure isolated and with a possibility of it being carried away by the first flashflood,” she said.

Sumangil said the runway was made up of metal sheets while the posts are made of H-piles. The center portion of the runway is not covered with metal sheets that were why even hand tractors (kuliglig) or the carabao drawn cart could not even pass through it.

Sumangil ended her letter asking the Highways secretary to send “uncorrupt and independent investigating team” to look in the veracity of their monitoring findings.

The follow-up letter of Sumangil to Vigilar on June 1, 1997 regarding the Sinalang Detour Bridge sounded more resolute, revealing details of irregularity and fraud in the construction of the detour bridge. She said that when the construction began on November 22, 1996 as evidenced by the Disbursement Voucher No. 101-96-12-1745 in the amount of P417, 987 (for rental of equipment which would be used for excavation), the bidding of the project which happened on Nov. 28, 1996 was highly questionable. “Heavy equipment like truck-mounted crane, payloader, backhoe road grader, etc. were continuously used on the Sinalang Detour Bridge from Nov. 22, 1996 until December 15, 1996, yet, the lease contracts covering use of these pieces of equipment were signed only on December 16, 1996 and notarized on the next day, December 17, 1996,” Sumangil said.

She also stressed the following points: some disbursement vouchers were not numbered in their appropriate boxes, vouchers in payment for purchased materials were not supported by receipts nor by a canvass sheet to show that the payee offers lowest price, and the signatures of three recipients amounting to P7, 469,977.69 was one and the same.

“The haste of the implementation of the Sinalang Detour Bridge is very suspicious. Also, the reality that the community along the Sinalang Detour Bridge perceives it as a threat to their cornlands and the fact that till now, it has never been used even by *kuliglig* or a carabao-drawn cart, are reasons enough to invite you once more to look into the matter,” Sumangil wrote.

Meanwhile, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) wrote CCAGG in June, 1997 to express gratitude for its continued support to the monitoring activities and vigilance in order to improve the implementation of government development projects in Abra.

CCAGG was an RPMC deputized non-government organization in Abra.

Edmundo Mir, former undersecretary of DPWH, replied to CCAGG’s letter on July 28, 1997 saying that they sent an investigating team to probe the project.

The undersecretary rebutted each of the points which Sumangil wrote in her letter.

Sinalang Bridge, Sinayang Bridge

And then it happened.

The worst fear of the CCAGG and the Bangued community happened when rains struck Abra in August of 1997, four months after the CCAGG warned the government about what may happen to the bridge given its condition and the manner it was made.

The group urged the DPWH to act immediately on their complaint as rains became unstoppable, but Vigilar downplayed the group’s fears.

On August 28, 1997, Sumangil wrote Vigilar saying that they were not expecting a point by point rebuttal from Mir to her letter. She said the investigation team which Vigilar sent took the CCAGG’s complaint lightly and they were not even interviewed so they could provide pertinent documents to support their claims.

But what Sumangil wrote at a latter part of the letter justified one of their issues which the group earlier raised to the DPWH.

“Sir, the approaches of the Sinalang Detour Bridge were already washed-out by the first flash flood occasioned by the monsoon rains last August 17, 1997. The anomalous and inept building of the design and implementation of this detour bridge has earned a name from the angry public. It is now called *Sinayang Bridge*,” Sumangil said.

“The purpose for which it was constructed was defeated; P 8,262,995 was a real waste of scarce resource! The persons responsible for this, if found guilty, should be held liable, punished and brought to jail. The cost of the materials used in the Sinalang Detour Bridge appeared bloated and overpriced,” she added.

Attached to the letter were communication canvass sheets of materials and the disbursement vouchers of Abra Engineering District regarding the materials, which would prove that the disparity in the cost was glaring and that the government lost so much.

“These money lost would have been judiciously used in constructing functional hanging bridges for the interior barangays in the province of Abra, thus, saving school children from drowning in flooded creeks and brooks as it happened in the past,” Sumangil said.

“Mr. Secretary, P8, 262,995 is a big loss by poor Juan dela Cruz. Let this letter be a reiteration of our two previous letters of complaint dated April 11, 1997 and June 1, 1997. Let this letter be our formal complaint against tall erring Abra Engineering District personnel and all the others who connived with them in the anomalous implementation of Sinalang Detour Bridge,” she ended.

Sumangil also disclosed in her succeeding complaints to government officials such as the office of the Ombudsman that the governor of the province or the mayor of Bangued or the barangay officials of Lipcan community, representing the general public as end-users of the rehabilitation of the Sinalang bridge, were not the entities who signed the Certificate of Acceptance for the project. Instead, it was the maintenance section chief of the DPWH-Abra District Office, who was at the same time the project engineer, who accepted the project on behalf of the end users.

“The Sinalang Detour Bridge did not pass the test of good governance which dictates that where resources are scarce, prudence and utmost care in its use should have been exercised,” Sumangil said.

As for the rehabilitated Sinalang Bridge, no vehicles weighing above three tons were allowed to cross it. “This government spent millions for the strengthening and repairs of the old Sinalang Bridge. But still, no vehicle above three tons is allowed to cross it after its repair and rehabilitation. What is therefore the value gained for such expenditure of government resource? Can these facts mentioned above not qualify the saying ‘they speak for themselves.’ *Sinayang bridges talaga* (a clear case of wasted bridges),” Sumangil said.

The special audit report

In the special audit report on the audit and investigation of the construction of the Sinalang Detour Bridge, and the repair and rehabilitation of the old Sinalang Bridge submitted by the Commission on Audit-CAR to Sumangil on April 8, 1999, it emphasized the irregularities on the conduct of work of the said structures based on the monitoring work of CCAGG.

While the audit report recognized that the straight contract for the repair and rehabilitation of the old Sinalang Bridge was 100 percent completed on January 7, 1997, based on the certificate based on the Certificate of Acceptance on the same date, the Sinalang Detour Bridge had no status report.

The Abra Engineering District did not present to the team any project status report or “any report for that matter.” Records of the DPWH-CAR regional office on July 8 and August 2, 1997 bared no report for the 100 percent completion of the Sinalang Detour Bridge.

“The only project status report submitted by the Abra Engineering District wherein the latter reported a 100 percent completion was the status as far as the fund of P 4 million was concerned. In the absence of the project status report or accomplishment report for the 100 percent completion of the Sinalang Detour Bridge, the team presumed that as of December 19, 1996, the date when the total funds of P8.2 million were already disbursed and paid to the supplier and pacquiao contractors, the construction of the detour bridge was completed. In fact, all vehicles passed through the old Sinalang Bridge. The team had the

impression that since December 19, 1996 until the present date, the detour bridge was never used. This can further be proven by the monitoring report of the CCAGG,” the special audit report said.

The special audit report also highlighted the fact that the cost of steel H-Pile materials was more than 50 percent overpriced resulting to an overpricing of the materials in the total amount of P1.2 million. The team used an infrastructure project within the Cordillera region which used the same material, to compare the prices of the materials used in the construction of Sinalang Bridge. It found out that the Soot Bridge in La Paz, Abra used the same steel H-Piles when it was built in 1995.

“The subject of this audit or the Sinalang Detour Bridge was a November 1996 project. Notwithstanding the year gap in the implementation of the Soot project over the Sinalang Detour Bridge, the audit team still opined that the price of the subject material in 1995 was still controlling since the peso devaluated only in 1997. Review of the Soot Bridge contract and its supporting papers disclosed that indeed the unit price of steel H-Piles used in the construction of the detour bridge was overpriced,” the report said. With the said findings, the COA special audit team recommended to file criminal charges against the members of the Pre-qualification, bidding and awards committee for the violation of the Republic Act 3019, otherwise known as the Anti-graft and Corrupt Practices Act.

A call for a deeper audit

CCAGG has been working with the Commission on Audit (COA) in project monitoring of development projects in Abra.

CCAGG’s presence in the project sites ensured that plans and specifications are followed to safeguard people’s money allotted for the projects. Such involvement became a commitment to protect the interest and well-being of the poor stakeholders. Without intending it, project monitoring augmented and complemented COA’s workforce.

When CCAGG came into the picture, auditing of public infrastructure projects became more comprehensive and elaborate. COA’s auditing became deeper when CCAGG merged with the government agency in participatory and social auditing.

Before the CCAGG tied with COA for auditing, the social impact and analysis of the government project to the beneficiaries were not yet included in the line of government’s auditing work.

The lack of social impact and analysis of government projects meant the absence of interviews with the stakeholders such as the project beneficiaries, community meetings, documentations and validations. The CCAGG conducted participatory audit with COA in areas and would conduct meetings in the community. As for the social audit, the group’s monitoring assessed the social impact of the project to the community.

Paz Bomogas, project coordinator of CCAGG, said since DPWH was reluctant in releasing the program of work of the Sinalang Detour Bridge when the anomalies were being investigated, they relied on consultation and interviewing the people to learn their feedbacks as supposed beneficiaries of the project. “The detour bridge was necessary; however, it was never used. The people’s money which was allotted for the bridge disappeared like a bubble in thin air,” Bomogas said.

The Sinalang Detour Bridge controversy spawned an intensive participatory and social auditing from the CCAGG.

In a report of the CCAGG on the group's audit work, it recognized the demanding task to be furnished with documents especially if the party in question, such as government agencies, was being criticized and probed for its anomalies.

Bomogas said it was in this light that she realized that there was a need for the Freedom of Information bill to be passed into law, so the public could have access to all documents that showed government transactions and dealings which use people's taxes and to finally put an end to graft and corruption in the government.

Unfortunately, the bill was quashed by the House of Representatives in June, 2010. The nullification of the bill drew the ire of the media practitioners and civil society groups because the act only quelled expectations of making the government more transparent and accountable to the public that it serves. Other countries such as India has already passed laws pertaining to rights to information which "watchdogs" invoke to obtain information and documents from their respective States.

CCAGG's report on audit work narrated the rigorous part of obtaining information:

It was difficult to secure the program of work of this detour bridge but the community meetings which were conducted gave the CCAGG a picture of the project activities. Anomalies were perceived in project implementation, hence the series of request to the DPWH department secretary to conduct an investigation on account of the following:

- 1. Bidding of the project took place six days after work in the detour bridge commenced;*
- 2. Heavy equipments like truck-mounted crane, pay loader, backhoe, road roller were continually used on the Sinalang Detour Bridge from Nov. 22, 1996 until December 15, 1996 yet the lease contracts covering use of these equipment were signed only on Dec. 16, 1996 and notarized the next day, Dec. 17, 1996; and*
- 3. The steel H-piles used were overpriced.*

The request for an impartial investigation fell on deaf ears and so CCAGG wrote to COA- Manila and COA-CAR to conduct an audit on the financial transactions relative to the aforesaid projects. A special audit team came from CAR and conducted an investigation. Among others, they recommended

- 1. The suspension of Php4, 494,000.00 due to the absence of authority from the Department of Budget and Management to realign the project from rehabilitation of Sinalang bridge to construction of Detour Bridge.*
- 2. The amount of Php1, 287,421.72 which represented the variance of 55.93% from the contract unit cost of steel H-pile materials for the detour bridge resulting into an overpricing was disallowed.*
- 3. The material and labor costs of wheel guards in the amount of Php122, 606.00 were suspended having been found uninstalled on the longitudinal center gap of the detour bridge.*
- 4. The team leader, later, unilaterally reconsidered her team recommendations on the basis of a motion for reconsideration by one of the respondent – engineers, which laid claim on a COA decision of Jan 08, 1999 which said "that while it is desirable that auditing rules be faithfully observed, this Commission should not be so strict about innocuous procedural lapses that do not*

really prejudice government.” The suspension of payment and disallowances were eventually lifted in 2000.

This was the first partnership of COA with an NGO to do joint audits. The project was meant to enhance public accountability of the COA and was funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). A MOA was signed by COA and CCAGG to formalize the engagement in 2000. COA then was headed by Chairman Celso Gangan.

When the partnership of COA and CCAGG was announced to the auditees, they were initially reluctant to accept said partnership citing possible use of information by the private party. The people of Abra, on the other hand, lauded CCAGG’s participation in public auditing.

Prior to the joint engagement, both the COA and CCAGG underwent team building trainings and leveling off on the basic concepts of value for money audit, project inspection, fraud audit, monitoring and evaluation. Each party spoke about its experience, COA on post – audit and financial audit and CCAGG on performance and social impact audits.

A set of rules of engagement was defined after a lot of discussion foremost of which were: the purpose of the joint collaboration is to promote effective governance, strict compliance with government audit standards should be adhered to, and the barring of premature disclosure of audit findings.

However, the report further narrated that premature disclosure of audit findings created tension between the COA and CCAGG.

“The CCAGG was used to involving citizens in all phases of its work and a sudden change in style might create suspicion from the people. COA, on the other hand, wanted to stay discreet until all findings were verified and approved for circulation,” it said.

Case filed, case closed

On September 08, 2000 Sumangil wrote Ombudsman Aniano Disierto to protest the termination of their complaint against the erring government officials who were involved in the anomalous construction of the Sinalang Detour Bridge.

The same letter was sent to Commissioner Celso Gangan, then the chair of the COA.

The complaint was “closed and terminated” by the Ombudsman in a decision on dated May 29, 2000, on the basis of an affidavit on February 13, 2000 executed by Atty. Arlyn Encarnacion, COA-CAR Special Audit team leader, lifting the disallowances and procedural lapses. The affidavit was in turn based only on an endorsement on Nov. 18, 1999 and signed by the same team leader.

“The people of Abra are so disgusted since the washed-out Sinalang Detour Bridge is the symbol of wasted government resources. The public never benefited from it because it was never used contrary to the claim of the implementing agency. It was hazardous driving through it due to its poor or eroded approaches and a wide gap at the longitudinal center. Then, it was washed-out less than two years after completion, which further substantiates our earlier observations that its construction was substandard,” Sumangil said.

She further said: “Moreover, the detour bridge construction was untimely. It did not serve its purpose as vehicular traffic by-pass because the reconstruction of the old Sinalang Bridge has not been undertaken up to now. The Abreno commuters have a sight of the ruin everyday while passing through the old

Sinalang Bridge. Meanwhile, the government officials involved in this project are secured in their respective positions without being made liable of their malfeasance.”

The CCAGG urged the Office of the Ombudsman to reopen and review the case.

The DPWH engineers who were involved in the irregularities were later convicted.

Meanwhile, the 2000 CCAGG Audit Work gladly reported that 23 road projects and community-based projects of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) implemented in 1999 and 2000 were successfully audited in Abra. Participatory audit was also replicated in Mt. Province, Samar and in Camarines Norte and it was declared a success.

The group believes that public accountability can be enhanced by a trusting collaboration between civil society groups and oversight bodies if partnership presumes equality.

The partnership requires humility, but it can be done. Civil society groups have gained competence in their respective field and have honed their own expertise to equal, if not, to compliment government qualifications, the group claimed.

The CCAGG also said the oversight government bodies should practice transparency, and they should not take their work as their exclusive domain, for by doing so, they douse cold water on citizens’ initiatives to safeguard the common good. They can contribute a lot in making audits more responsive, transparent and efficient.

The sincerity of oversight bodies to rid government of corruption should be made manifest in not protecting erring subordinates.

“Take again the (Sinalang Detour Bridge) case which said that “while it is desirable that auditing rules be faithfully observed, the COA should not be so strict about innocuous procedural lapses that do not really prejudice government,” is also very telling. Such ways of seeing things do not advance the cause of good governance,” the CCAGG said.

Participatory audit using the value for money as an approach should be revived. The presence of civil society groups working with the COA in project areas presents definite advantages like the ready and immediate source of information on the progress of the projects.

CCAGG said with the civil society group’s participation, it is easier to gauge whether the funded programs, projects and activities were accomplished with the least cost and if the accomplishment resulted to the desired value or benefit derived by the community.

CCAGG and Abra, how the graft-busting started

Abra is one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines. The lack of roads and bridges relegate the province to under-development. This is one of the reasons why the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG) pursue relentlessly monitoring of public expenditures for infrastructures for the sake of the marginalized majority.

The members of CCAGG are the original NAMFREL volunteers of the snap presidential elections. They come from the cross section of Abra society who share a common purpose and a sense of outrage at the waste of the province’s precious financial resources to corruption.

The year 1987 ushered in a development project called Community Employment and Development Program (CEDP). It introduced a novel concept which called for the participation of NGOs in monitoring project implementation.

The print and broadcast media aided effectively the CCAGG in its advocacy for honest implementation of projects, hence the heightened awareness of the people.

One day, they were surprised to read a news report which said the twenty CEDP projects which they were monitoring were finished. To their knowledge, these projects were barely begun, or were only midway in implementation.

Thus, began CCAGG's quest for honesty, accountability and transparency. They reported the matter to the department secretary of the DPWH and asked for an audit team to investigate their complaints. An audit team came and found their complaints to be true. The secretary of DPWH filed an administrative case against the eleven engineers of the Abra Engineering District. CCAGG monitors became the witnesses to the case.

The hearings of the administrative case were held in Manila, away from the influence of the engineers' patron politicians. The hearing further unraveled documents which showed that the questioned projects were already turned-over to the end-users.

The acting COA auditor detailed to the Abra Engineering District stood by CCAGG. She lent support to this citizen-led complaint by submitting boxes of subpoenaed financial documents pertinent to the questioned projects.

After months of anguished waiting, the case was finally resolved. The engineers were found to have falsified documents of completion of projects before these were started or were only midway in implementation. However, the resolution said that "despite these falsifications, no undue harm was inflicted on government", something which angered the people of Abra.

Expectedly, the respondents were lightly punished by suspension from office from nine to two months. In addition to their nine months suspension from office, the district engineer and his assistant cannot go back to reclaim their offices in Abra Engineering District.

Luz Rimban wrote in an article for the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism that the CCAGG, which converted itself from being a poll-watching body into graft-busters, has become synonymous with graft busting in Abra.

The key objectives of CCAGG are as follows:

- Organize communities and create a sense of citizenship
- Establish permanent structures for regular and direct consultation with the public on their needs, problems, and interests
- Deal effectively with government agencies to ensure that the public's interests are on the political agenda
- Monitor government projects to ensure that funds meant for the projects are judiciously used and that projects' plans and specifications are followed
- Undertake projects aimed at improving people's socioeconomic and political conditions

Mobilizing the community through social and participatory audit

Bomogas said aside from the participatory audit, the Sinalang Detour Bridge had pushed them to conduct social audit of the project in the communities.

“We pushed social audit in every project and mobilized the community to be part of the process. We conduct meetings community beneficiaries to monitor and conduct ocular visits to projects every day,” Bomogas said.

As part of the audit and monitoring work, the CCAGG taught the residents the basics of engineering. “We teach them the right mixture of cement or grave, our para-engineers are sent to the communities to train them. The women are taught the basics of the use of tools and materials like steels in the construction,” Bomogas.

CCAGG as a case study

CCAGG was cited as an example of a case study which spawned social accountability in Abra province and in Asia as a whole.

Karen Sirker and Sladjana Cosic, authors of the “Empowering the Marginalized: Case Studies of Social Accountability in Asia,” which was published by World Bank in 2007, underlined the systemic corruption in the Philippines where lack of accountability and corruption of the government continued. The country ranked 102nd out of 145 countries in Transparency International’s 2004 corruption, indicating rampant corruption.

CCAGG was one of the groups in the Philippines that rallied around the issue of roads in Abra. It focused specifically on development projects and public expenditures in the province with a view to enhancing public participation in development processes and bringing accountability tools such as social auditing to the people, the case study indicated.

In 2000, the UNDP and COA held the first ever participatory audit of a local government in the Philippines using CCAGG as the NGO partner. Unlike regular audits that simply stressed compliance with rules and regulations, this audit added concept the value for money, where community members assessed the actual benefits derived from public expenditures. The intent was that NEDA and other oversight agencies would use the results of the participatory audit for planning purposes.

The case study highlighted CCAGG’s activities that are participatory in nature. The infrastructure monitoring initiative is extremely inclusive, as monitoring teams are composed of the beneficiaries of the projects being investigated.

“As regards to the participatory audit, the name of the initiative suggests the vital role of citizen participation. The social validation part of the audit provides a promising venue for community members from poor and marginalized families, many of them women, to participate. Their views and concerns about a project are solicited during informal community meetings or household interviews. CCAGG also ensures sustained community participation by organizing people into village monitoring and evaluation team,” it said.

“Monitoring infrastructure is CCAGG’s “signature activity”. It uses the following procedures in conducting its infrastructure monitoring activities. It begins by formulating a monitoring work plan and then acquires the technical profile of the project it has decided to monitor from the government implementing agency or office. Once it has become familiar with the technical aspects of the project, it organizes the project beneficiaries and transfers the monitoring technology to them,” it added.

The monitoring led by CCAGG members conduct a field visit to validate field conditions, that is, to check actual status against baseline parameters mandated by the project documents, namely workmanship, quality, cost and time. After completing the monitoring over a period of time, CCAGG compiles its findings and releases them at a conference at which recommendations are also discussed with the head of the implementing agency or office, it said.

Thereafter, CCAGG collects comments and solutions for better management of the project- and of other projects- and incorporates these into a final report, drawing on its members' multidisciplinary academic, practical, and technical expertise. The final monitoring report is disseminated to the pertinent communities. CCAGG also uses the media for broad dissemination of its findings during its monitoring of government projects.

“In the beginning, the activities of CCAGG spawned negative reactions from government agencies and some members of the private sector. One member was killed at the height of its monitoring activity. CCAGG members received anonymous threatening calls and faced a hostile reception during field visits. They were also offered bribes, but refused them. Despite such intimidation, CCAGG members continued with their work,” the study said.

In relation to CCAGG's participatory audit work, CCAGG was selected as the civil service organization (CSO) partner organization for the Enhancing the Public Accountability Program of the Philippine COA through participatory audits with CSOs project, which was supported by UNDP. The project piloted the involvement of CSOs in an attempt to address the increasing demand for transparency and accountability through greater citizen participation in auditing government services.

The study said the success of the project challenged the mind-set of government officials by demonstrating that citizen groups have the technical skills, could be unbiased, and could work in partnership with the government. However, the incoming chair of the COA was initially resistant to involving civil society in a function that required accounting expertise.

Participatory audits proceeded as follows. CSOs are selected, trained, and deputed as members of an audit team. The audit team is formed on a per audit activity basis, meaning that is dissolved after the specific audit activity has been completed. The overall terms and conditions covering the CSO audit activity are spelled out in a memorandum of agreement signed by the COA and CSO.

The focus of the participatory audit is value for money, a systematic evaluation of the agency's objective and how this was achieved through programs, projects and activities. During a participatory audit, project beneficiaries evaluate the effectiveness of the project. The audit process documents project information and observations and recommends productive implementation of project activities. The participatory audit was pilot tested in 23 road projects in Abra province and the COA judged it as very successful. The case study highlighted the small but efficient staff of the CCAGG which included engineers and accountants, as it also depends on voluntary contributions of time and labor.

CCAGG deliberately avoided applying for grants or funds for a long time, as it did not want to compromise its independence. The UNDP recently stepped in to provide funding for its participatory monitoring program.

“CCAGGed”

One of the outputs of the infrastructure monitoring of the CCAGG was the prosecution of inept officials who were involved in the corruption of funds on the Sinalang Detour Bridge.

The study narrated that the bridge was completed in 1996 and at a cost of P8.26 million. It was hastily built and in the end was never used because of errors in the engineering design. To add fuel to the controversy, a flashflood destroyed the bridge in 1997, unleashing a public outcry. CCAGG pushed for government agencies to investigate the matter, and NEDA, the DPWH and the COA sent in teams. CCAGG was not satisfied with the response of the DPWH, following which the COA recommended the prosecution of certain DPWH personnel.

The monitoring of projects reduced graft practices in the government, the study said.

“CCAGG’s monitoring activities have checked the systemic corruption in the region. Government officials have become quite cautious in case they end up being “CCAGGed” a new slang term for having one’s misdeeds exposed,” it said.

The study said because of the group’s graft-busting initiatives, attitudes among local officials in relation CCAGG have shifted from strong resistance to cooperation, and these officials now use CCAGG’s assessment reports as one of the bases for the release of government funds. That is, CCAGG’s work has become part of the system.

“In general, the project succeeded in creating a more transparent, accountable, and participatory environment. Furthermore, the agencies being audited were more comfortable in the knowledge that members of an audit team were residents of the area. Accountability was highlighted, because area residents monitored the results. The sense of community was heightened, as the project brought together to work for a common goal. Lastly, the exercise built up citizen empowerment, as residents could use their knowledge as a weapon against corruption,” it said.

Lessons learned

Bomogas said if there was one thing that the people could learn from Sinalang Detour Bridge episode, it was the importance of strengthening the advocacy work among people and entities who were part of the greater community that continuously campaign for good governance, thereby eliminating graft and corruption practices.

“People should be involved in every step of the way and should speak up if they see anything wrong in the way their taxes are being wasted,” she said.

The episode also taught the people to be more vigilant and observant of other projects in Abra, specifically the construction of the new Sinalang Bridge which was built in 2001, said Bomogas.

The consistent vigilance of CCAGG in securing people’ money by going after corrupt entities of government projects has been told and retold through the years, and the labor that drove the Abra communities into action has kept the fire of vigilance burning.

And it keeps burning because the work is all about labor of love. ###