

# People's vigilance makes dream road turn into a reality

by Desiree Caluza

It was 1950, and life and times were hard for a certain village in Abra that had its tribal members walking through the rugged roads and terrains for hours just to make ends meet for the family by farming and peddling.

It was in this year that Arsenio Gumanab was born. A member of the Maeng Tribe, he grew up in the family of farmers that tended to a farm that grew lowland vegetables which hardly found its way to the trade center in Bangued, the capital of Abra.

He also grew up to a reality that his village, Barangay Callao, in the town of Villaviciosa, was one of the most neglected communities by the government when it came to basic services and infrastructures.

Sixty-year-old Gumanab started farming at the age of 18. In his early age, he would trudge the rugged roads just like any villagers to transport mango, rice and vegetables such as string beans, squash, bitter gourd and eggplant and even tobacco leaves. If he was lucky, he would find a careta (carabao-drawn cart) and a carabao to carry his products for easier mobility.

Being used to the unforgiving and challenging village road which was always susceptible to landslides and erosions, he never thought that one day, a farm-to-market road would be built in Barangay Callao.

The road could be very muddy when heavy rains would pour in the small village. It was a challenging test of will most of the time to the residents who would hike for hours just to get to their point of destination.

"When the villages were told that a farm-to-market road was to be built in the community, I could not believe it at first, it was like a dream because I never thought that a road would be built in Callao. I never thought that it would be built even in my life time," Gumanab said.

In the middle of his recollection, the 60-year-old farmer would clench his fist, it showed black linings in his fingernails from calloused fingers, which showed signs of a life time of tilling the earth as a village farmer.

As Gumanab continued to speak about the road, his eyes would also become dreamy.

"It was always a dream for me, I told myself it would never happen even if we were told that there would be a farm-to-market road. But after it was finished, I was very happy, the road is already here. And still, until now I cannot believe that I'm walking on it, it is still like a dream... it is like walking on a dream," Gumanab said.

### **Barangay Callao, a peaceful community**

Barangay Callao is situated in Villaviciosa, one of the 27 municipalities of Abra province which is categorized as one of the sixth class municipalities or one of the poorest towns in the whole Cordillera region. Despite being poor, the community relied on subsistence farming at a time when farm-to-market roads were unheard of in the area.

With a total land area of 57,731,626 square meters, the community is home to 898 residents composed mainly of Tingguian and Maeng Tribes and Ilocanos based on the 2007 Census of Population.

The barangay is composed of three sitios: Callao Proper, Sitio Calcalumadsi and Sitio Lagaosian. It is home to 182 households with an average income of P2,000 each household.

Abra is one of the provinces in the Cordillera which adheres to indigenous practice and laws despite the presence of the Western type of governance and politics in the country. Barangay Callao is just one of the many villages which strongly adheres to the traditional practice of consulting the Council of Elders, to effect a collective decision-making process in the community. Most of the members of the community are Roman Catholics.

The Villaviciosa municipality has a population of 4,877 and hosts 930 households based on Census 2000 records.

Aside from Callao, other barangays include Ap-apaya, Bol-lilising, Lap-lapog, Lumaba, Poblacion, Tamac and Tuquib.

The spirit of bayanihan (community cooperation) strongly persists in Barangay Callao, and indigenous rituals are still practiced during weddings, birth and death of a family member.

The peace and order situation in the community is generally peaceful. The village members rely on farming and fishing as their major source of income.

The community produces Virginia tobacco and fruits such as mangoes and banana and lowland vegetables such as string beans, squash, eggplant and bitter gourd among others.

### **The Denden-Callao Farm-to-Market Road**

In 1993, Barangay Callao was identified as one of the focal points of the Department of Agrarian Reform's (DAR) Agrarian Reform Communities (ARC) under its Agrarian Reform Infrastructure Support Project Phase II (ARISP).

The community was among the 153 beneficiaries of ARC projects nationwide and it was the first in the province of Abra. The main ARC project in the community was the development of Denden-Callao farm-to-market road.

The road was funded by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC).

Touted as a dream road by the residents and local government officials, the road was seen as the community's hope to better economic opportunities particularly for farmers.

Gumanab was just one of the members of the Maeng Tribe who saw to it that the farm-to-market road would be constructed. He was one of the residents who would make sure that the road was built with good quality, an infrastructure which was free of imminent damages unlike other roads and infrastructures which suffered damages because of poor implementation, a kind of implementation that corresponds to corruption of funds by the builders and the government itself.

Gumanab was one of the residents who would actively monitor the construction of the 4.44 kilometer road from the building period on November 15, 2003 until it was completed on June 15, 2006. He was present in community meetings in one of the residents' houses or barangay hall just to be updated on the status of the road project, and to be counted to express his sentiments on how the construction was being carried out.

The community of Callao was accompanied by its local government and the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG) in monitoring to guarantee that the road of their dreams for the farming villages would be properly built.

### **Farm-to-market road prevailed**

Edralin Asia is a fixture in Villaviciosa who rides on a motorcycle on a regular basis around town, to inspect government projects in the villages such as Barangay Callao, where he works as Development Facilitator of DAR-Abra. It was under his watch when the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road was being conceptualized and was later implemented.

Asia said in 2000, the Food and Agricultural Technical Support on Agrarian Reform Program held a simultaneous consultation in Barangay Callao and Barangay Poblacion to ask the residents what they needed for the community.

"They were asked to choose between farm-to-market roads and irrigation, so they cast their votes. The result of the votes showed that most of the residents were more interested on farm-to-market roads than irrigation. The desire for a farm-to-market road prevailed, and they did not just want any regular road, what they wanted was the one which was durable, a road which was of a very good quality," Asia said.

In 1993, Barangay Callao and Barangay Poblacion were launched as villages covered by Agrarian Reform Community (ARC). In 1996, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) of DAR funded a road opening which cost P450,000.

The road opening was only the starting point of hope for villages. However, it was deemed later that the road opening was still not enough to hasten the transport of goods from the village to Bangued town, thus, the need for a farm-to-market road was conceptualized.

The construction of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road was not only monitored by the various stakeholders, but it was also being inspected by representatives from JBIC. The representative, an engineer from JBIC, came to Barangay Callao during the whole process of implementation.

"It took time before this project was turned over by the DPWH to the LGU because the community wanted to make it sure that the road did not suffer any defects. The road was being monitored every day," Asia said.

## **Social Audit filled the gaps**

In this exercise, the concerned sectors proved that vigilance through social auditing would ensure that basic and social projects would be implemented carefully and effectively.

In the case of Barangay Callao, the local people involved themselves in planning and decision making process on how their dream road should be built so it could last a life time. It was also in this case that CCAGG actively monitored and reported the process of community involvement, which led to the success of the implementation of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road.

CCAGG made sure that the voice of each and every resident would be heard and counted in this process.

CCAGG is a civic organization which specializes in monitoring the implementation of infrastructure projects in Abra. Their community-base approach relies on the voluntary efforts of area residents who verify whether bridges, roads and other infrastructure projects are executed according to contract regulations.

CCAGG fostered an agreement with the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) for the monitoring effort.

CCAGG promotes participatory and social auditing among members of various communities who are beneficiaries of the projects. Social auditing is one of the key components of mobilizing the communities to assess the projects with their active monitoring skills to ensure that the projects were efficiently carried out by its implementers.

Another key element in exercising social auditing is information dissemination. CCAGG partnered with media outfits and actively distributed press releases to community and even national press to spur wide vigilance on the status of the public infrastructure projects.

In the early years, it saw the need to publicize the status of public infrastructure and development projects through the media.

Pura Sumangil, chair of CCAGG, earlier wrote that when the CCAGG was starting, its members went into massive information dissemination using both radio station DZPA, a broadcast company in Abra and Timek ti Amianan, a community newspaper, to publicize the

list of projects and projects costs provided for by the NEDA and Ministry of Budget and Management (MBM).

"The CCAGG also visited project sites, held meetings with the communities to inform them of the projects to be implemented in their locality. The Abreños were elated. They almost cannot believe that such information, unheard of in the past, were at their disposal," Sumangil wrote.

"The components of the program of work were explained to the communities. The what and how of the monitoring were also taught them. This proved fruitful for the people, realizing that the projects were theirs, took special interest on them. They eagerly awaited the projects and when these were already being executed, they worked hard and monitored them as well," she added.

Asia said CCAGG was in the project site in every step of the way to monitor the status of the road construction.

"Everything was aired over the radio, especially when the residents would report about the irregularities in the construction," Asia said.

Asia referred to the complaints raised by the residents of Barangay Callao when they observed that a portion of the road had a wide longitudinal crack about 40 meters long in October 2004, after Typhoon Igme struck the country.

Asia said the CCAGG made sure that the Callao villagers had a say in the farm-to-market road project.

### **The Barangay Callao meeting**

On December 20, 2004, Sumangil wrote the NEDA-Cordillera to report the complaints of the residents of Barangay Callao who noticed cracks and other damages on the road project. The residents also reported the irregularities on the implementation.

Sumangil wrote Juan Ngalob, regional director of the NEDA-Cordillera and said that after several monitoring engagements, the CCAGG found out the blatant implementation inefficiencies that was worthy of an oversight review by the NEDA office.

In the letter, Sumangil attached pictures and other pertinent documents regarding the monitoring report. But one of the documents that struck the interest of the government agency was the detailed discussion of the residents in their barangay meeting.

Sumangil emphasized that the project implementation failed to meet its timeline. The physical accomplishment of the project as of the first half November 2004 was pegged at 70.4 percent when it was supposed to accomplish 89 percent.

Again, in this case, the residents of Barangay Callao and CCAGG have proven the importance of social auditing when it enhanced the community participation and collective decision making on the monitoring of the project.

The following is the minutes of the meeting held by the residents with the local government unit of Villaviciosa, media and farm-to-market road project implementers. The CCAGG facilitated the meeting and documented the points that were discussed.

**Result of the meeting in November 13, 2004 among DPWH, CAR, CCAGG, Baroña Construction and Local Government Unit (LGU) of Villaviciosa on the current project (Callao-Denden Road)**

The meeting was held at the project site, in the bunkhouse of Baroña Construction at 10:30 a.m. on Nov. 13, 2004 with the following participants:

<b>CCAGG</b>	<b>DPWH</b>	<b>LGU-Villaviciosa</b>	<b>PARCCOM</b>
Pura Sumangil	Ferdinand A. Tadeo	Nixon Belmes	Efren Perlas
Melchor Pacopia	Xerxes N. Astudillo	Generoso Doro	
Marc Anthony Baday			
Felimark Poblete	<b>DAR</b>	<b>Baroña Construction</b>	
Melvin M. Llanes	Noli B. Bayogo	Don Hernandez	
Ricel Regulacion			
Windy Nazaire	<b>DZPA-Abra</b>	<b>SARF-DF</b>	
Julio Babida	Priam Parel	Edralin Asia	
Excelsis Bayle			
Jeremias Tiggangay			

Before the meeting started, Mr. Efren Perlas (PARCCOM) reminded the group that there was a problem regarding the road which was being built. He said the road project was not acceptable to the landowner whose property was traversed by the road, affecting his rice

fields during rainy season. He said the landowner was the one who donated the piece of land where the road was being built.

Mr. Edralin Asia (SARFPT-DF) replied to the comments of the barangay captain that consultation was made in the year 2000 which was attended by the barangay residents and officers wherein they discussed the road, irrigation, and water system projects.

It was further asked by Pura Sumangil how many times the consultations were made during the year 2000 because the project only started in 2003, considering that more consultations would have been made during that period.

Engr. Xerxes Astudillo (DPWH-ARISP Facilitator) added that most of the jobs would be done through machines and equipment, thus only few laborers were needed; also because bulk of the job was only on road widening. Engr. Astudillo also said that when a meeting was conducted by the LGU of Villaviciosa, no problem or concern was brought out.

Pura Sumangil asked if the road roller was being used or only being displayed for propaganda.

Engr. Hernandez of Baroña Construction replied that they used the unit but it bogged down and they used the portable vibrator as an alternative.

Ms. Sumangil advised that a project of good quality would serve the community for a long time.

Engr. Melchor Pacopia (CCAGG) said that the usage of the portable vibrator was not fit for the project because it was light, and the job required a degree of compaction which was not met.

Ms. Sumangil also stated that during the previous monitoring, honeycombs (holes) were observed at the side of the cemented road which should not be the case. Also, there were cracks observed which meant that the program was not properly implemented.

Engr. Astudillo answered, "Those were damaged during Typhoon Igme, but we will try to change and repair it." He stated that the damage covered 67.5 meters or equivalent to 15 spans with a value of about P400,000.



Ms. Sumangil reminded that if ever the damages would be changed or repaired, the LGU of Villaviciosa or the community itself should be present to oversee and to make sure that the repair job was duly done.

The engineers of DPWH and Baroña answered, "Those recommendations are well taken; we will invite them when we will do the repairs."

Engr. Bayogo said that the Japanese consultants would be coming to inspect the project and would wait for their comments and recommendation about the job that needed to be done.

Pura Sumangil said that before the Japanese consultants arrived, it was better that the repair jobs would be done, and "we would not wait for them to see the lapses that resulted to the poor quality job because it could possibly affect the future projects."

Engr. Pacopia discussed in detail the things he saw and observed while he was monitoring the project. He said that they were not aware how the project was managed. There were many damages because preparations were not enough or compacting was not properly observed before the concreting. Water sprinkling was inadequate, 95% maximum compaction should have been made for better strength. The correct curing period for the concrete road was not followed. The day to day activities should have been given enough time to avoid rushing which affects the quality of the work.

Engr. Astudillo immediately answered back saying that they were monitoring the project even three times a week to come up with good results.

Ms. Sumangil asked Engr. Tadeo how many times he issued permit for the pouring. Engr. Tadeo replied, "I forgot my record book."

Engr. Hernandez said that before concreting, he always reminded the group that before the pouring, preparation and compaction of the road should have been properly made.

Engr. Noli Bayogo said that the community also helped in monitoring and said, "One time I received a text (message) advising that the ongoing job is not properly handled and it needs to be inspected."

Engr. Astudillo recommended that the road should be properly compacted to avoid honeycombs.

Ms. Sumangil asked how long the remaining part that needed concreting was. Engr. Hernandez answered only one kilometer was left to be concreted.

Ms. Sumangil further asked if before the pouring, the barangay officials could be invited to observe it. Engr. Hernandez answered back, "What if they are not available or they are busy?" Ms. Sumangil said they should be informed one week before the pouring was to be made.

Excelsis Bayle (CCAGG staff) shared his observations about the road project: the sub-base or foundation of the road was not good before the pouring process; and the thickness of the road is not correct.

Engr. Hernandez said that the thickness of the road was correct if we consider the average standard because the slope condition of the road varied. The honeycombs which were observed were the effects of Typhoon Igme.

Efren Perlas also said that the foundation of the road was not properly prepared before the pouring. Engr. Astudillo told the group that before the pouring started, the LGUs should be invited to witness the correct procedure of pouring.

Barangay Captain Belmes insisted if there were still works to be done, residents of the Villaviciosa should be considered so they could also be employed. The presence of the municipal engineer should also be needed during days of pouring.

Engr. Pacopia asked what should be the control mechanism in running a good project?

Engr. Astudillo said before the pouring was to be made, all contractors should see to it that the needed checklist must be prepared and followed. Engr. Pacopia said that everybody were partners and that CCAGG were also advised to come and witness the pouring that was to be made.

Engr. Astudillo also advised the community that they were also invited to observe the pouring process. He also said that there were also 100 sections in a pouring covered under one permit.

Engr. Pacopia recommended that the hydraulic discharge of the river should be studied to avoid possible negative effects to the rice fields. Complaints should be properly studied so that corrective measures could be considered.

Before the meeting was adjourned, Efren Perlas reminded the group again about the problem of right of way which should be solved by the contractors, DPWH and DAR. He said the complaint of the landowner had to be immediately addressed.

After the meeting, Ms. Sumangil discussed in detail the important concerns that should be taken care of which was seconded/affirmed by the partner agencies. These include the following:

- The damaged part of the road should be repaired in the presence of the municipal officials and CCAGG monitoring team;
- All parts of the road consisting of 15 spans should be repaired by the contractor under the presence of LGU of Villaviciosa and partner agencies;
- The road should be properly compacted to avoid the occurrence of honeycombs; should there be honeycombs, these should be repaired by means of pressure curing.
- The sub-base/foundation of the road should be properly compacted and the thickness of the concrete as programmed or planned should be followed;
- Proper curing should be observed, water sprinkling, and the surface of the concerned road should be properly covered to maintain moisture content;
- It is a must to use a road roller;
- Employment of the residents of the community should be considered for the remaining work to be done in the project;
- All partner agencies should be duly notified before pouring is made;
- Engr. Hernandez should inform Mr. Jun Baroña, the contractor, about the decisions agreed upon during the meeting.

The CCAGG's monitoring report based on the community meeting emphasized how community dialogues and technical observation by the civil engineers and monitoring members of the CCAGG affirmed that aside from the longitudinal center crack, the road had a technical problem when the compaction or densification of subgrade and base courses were not carried out in consonance to the required work standard.

The monitoring report also emphasized that the curing of the Postland Cement Concrete Pavement (PCCP) was not being observed.

"Curing is the continuous application of moisture to the concrete which starts from the time the concrete had set up to seven consecutive days onward. This is often called the finishing touches in the production of concrete. The purpose of curing is to prevent the loss of moisture in the concrete mass. This moisture is vital in the hydration process," the group said.

The group had also stressed in its monitoring report that the masonry of the road collapsed. "Structural soundness should be the foremost consideration in the design of a system structure. Constraint is the cost, furthermore, it should not limit the structure to be built and operated within an incomplete continuum of design assumptions, otherwise the system will fail under the actual conditions upon which is forced to operate," it said.

"The present management mindset is that money can only do this much but a greater structure is actually what is needed. There is a trade-off between structural sanity and financial constraint wherein finances always dictate turn out of the structure. The scenario is worse, because one is building a structure that is destined to fail," the monitoring team ended.

A month after, Sumangil wrote Director Ngalob on the irregularities on the implementation of the road project. Mariano Alquiza, former regional director of the Department of Public Works and Highways-Cordillera (DPWH-CAR) wrote the NEDA-CAR regional director saying that they acknowledged the complaints on the observed project defects which was a result of the problem solving session initiated by the CCAGG on November 13, 2004 at the project site.

Alquiza said it was agreed during the problem solving session that the same contractor should undertake necessary repairs and remedial repairs using his own expense.

Fernando Tadeo, Engineer II of the DPWH-Abra and project engineer of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road, wrote the officer-in-charge District Engineer of their office to explain the defects which were observed and reported by the CCAGG. Tadeo justified that the observed defects on the project was primarily caused by Typhoon Igme, however, DPWH instructed the contractor to institute reparation of the noted defects using his own money which he willingly accepted.

### **The cost of rework – P400,000**

In CCAGG's Participatory Project Monitoring Annual Report in 2004, it noted that it focused much of its time in monitoring the development of the improvement of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road.

The Denden-Callao farm-to-market road was one of the 37 list of projects under their monitoring for the whole year of 2004. Among other projects which were listed in CCAGG's monitoring were construction of roads and bridges and school building and classrooms in various municipalities in Abra.

The annual report stated that the cost of the development projects which were monitored was P1,073,060,671.00.

The CCAGG said their intervention in the implementation of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road, which costs P15.5 million, had ensured that the problems and issues of the community on the road construction would be resolved.

Technical coordination meeting was conducted with the DPWH as the implementing agency. A major coordination meeting that included DAR, DPWH, PARCCOM, LGU and CCAGG and the community was organized and conducted.

"Our intervention had resulted into various findings of critical concerns ranging from technical, management and social matters were discussed and together explored solutions to the evolving problems," it said.

The report stressed that one of the critical issues that was resolved in the particular forum was to solve the longitudinal crack that developed on a portion of the pavement. The longitudinal crack from a settling foundation could have been caused by a poorly prepared subgrade, it said.

"The solution to this is a remove-and-replace order agreed upon by the group. The cost of the rework, which amounts to P400,000, will be borne by the contractor by virtue of its performance security," it said.

The CCAGG further narrated in its report that the road had a lingering problem on unmonitored activities of concrete pouring and compaction. The solution, it said, was the circulation of an activity request form which would be accomplished by the contractor and approved by the implementing agency prior to the implementation of work.

"The purpose of this is to give the management players such as the implementing agency, the management and independent observers, an ample time to institute corrective measures on any deficiencies found in the work," the report concluded.

In December 2005, the Philippine Information Agency-Abra reported that the road was not yet turned over to the community, pending the repairs that needed to be done to the road project because of major damages incurred within the warranty period.

"This is subjected to remove and replace of some sections of the road at the expense of the contractor. Such a move by the government proves its sincerity to mitigate graft and corruption in project implementation," the PIA-Abra report said.

### **Because there is a watchdog**

It was inevitable that Tadeo would receive so much criticisms from the residents of Barangay Callao when their complaints had reached CCAGG and government executives. But in a latter part, Tadeo said he appreciated the villagers because they were aware of their rights, and civic groups such as CCAGG was at the forefront of helping marginalized sectors of the society to ensure that funds for public infrastructure projects were not corrupted.

Tadeo said they also provided the community and the local government the program of work on the said project for transparency and accountability of project implementers.

*"Mas maganda na may watchdog dahil naririnig iyong boses ng mga tao na may malasakit sa mga ginagawang proyekto at natutukan nila iyong workmanship na hindi pumapasa"* (Having a watchdog is laudable because the voices of the people who are concerned about the project are being heard and these people can actively participate in the monitoring of the workmanship of the project to check if it fails the standards), Tadeo said.

Because the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road was a special project which was foreign funded, the implementation of the project was according to standards unlike other government funded regular infrastructures, which he admittedly said had been subjected to damages due to poor quality of materials and workmanship used.

Tadeo quipped that reality remained that only special projects which enjoyed funding from international agencies could be given such attention and special monitoring, and unfortunately for other regular projects, poor quality could be expected because of the corruption of funds.

Tadeo said after the damages were reported by the villagers of Barangay Callao, the contractor removed and replaced 30 blocks of the damaged road. Each block measured 3 m x 5 m each. "The contractor did this using his own expense," Tadeo said.

Noli Bayogo, ARISP engineer of DAR-Abra, said the cracks and damages that happened after Typhoon Igme was not due to heavy rains. He said he believed that the project was damaged because of the poor workmanship of the contractor.

"There was a problem with the DPWH and the contractor, we told them to do the right process to construct the road because it was under a very strict monitoring. The contractor did not believe us, they thought that it was just any like other farm-to-market roads. So when the cracks happened, that was when they realized that the project was really being monitored by the people, so they had no choice but to remove and replace the damaged part of the road," Bayogo said.

Bayogo said the social audit was effective during the course of the road construction because it involved the stakeholders in the monthly monitoring and evaluation of the project through community meetings.

"We had monthly meetings with the stakeholders such as representatives of the community and the local government of the municipality," Bayogo said.

In 2006, Villaviciosa Mayor Jose Lagen officially accepted the Certificate of Turn-over and Acceptance from the DPWH the completed Denden-Callao farm-to-market road in good and order condition.

Representing the beneficiaries of the road, Lagen said they would assume full responsibility for the proper operation and maintenance as project end users.

### **The value of active participation**

Asia said the farm-to-market road helped spur economic growth in Barangay Callao and the whole Villaviciosa town.

"Trucks can enter the town to transport the products, it also opened opportunities for a small scale transport industry because we have jeeps and tricycles that travel everyday in the area. The road also lessened the travel time for farmers who sell their products outside Villaviciosa," Asia said.

Nixon Belmes, barangay captain of Barangay Callao, said he appreciated the importance of social audit when they themselves became involved in the monitoring of the project. For him, the social auditing that transpired in his community strengthened the relationship of the villagers and the local government because the project created awareness, vigilance and promoted active participation and communication among themselves.

"We all shared responsibilities in making sure that our dream road would be implemented in our village which suffered so much neglect for so many years. If there is no participation from our end, I don't think this road would be effectively implemented, it would just be built like any other roads which have poor quality," Belmes said.

Belmes said the construction of the Denden-Callao farm-to-market road would always remind them the value of active participation in all of the government projects, which he hoped would continue to pour in their village.

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## **SOURCES**

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