



THE BANTAY LANSANGAN (ROAD WATCH) EXPERIENCE

**Improving the Philippine Road Sector
Through Vigilant Monitoring and Volunteerism**



**Affiliated Network for Social Accountability
in East Asia and the Pacific**

...connecting citizens to improve governance

The Bantay Lansangan (Road Watch) Experience

Improving the Philippine Road Sector
Through Vigilant Monitoring and Volunteerism



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Table of Contents

Preface

Acknowledgments

I. Background

II. Can This Partnership Work?

III. Roll-Out

IV. Iloilo in Focus

V. Kalinga in Focus

VI. Key Vulnerabilities

VII. Transparency and Sustainability

VIII. The Way Forward

ACRONYMS USED

ABC	<i>Approved budget per contract</i>
ANSA-EAP	<i>Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific</i>
AusAID	<i>Australian Agency for International Development</i>
BL	<i>Bantay Lansangan</i>
CCAGG	<i>Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance</i>
COA	<i>Commission on Audit</i>
DPWH	<i>Department of Public Works and Highways</i>
DSWD	<i>Department of Social Welfare and Development</i>
HDM	<i>Highway Development Model</i>
ICODE	<i>Iloilo Caucus of Development Non-Government Organizations, Inc.</i>
KALAHI-CIDSS	<i>Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan-Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services</i>
KARSA	<i>Kalinga-Apayao Religious Sector Association</i>
NGO	<i>Non-government organization</i>
NRIMP	<i>National Roads Improvement Management Program</i>
PAGC	<i>Presidential Anti-Graft Commission</i>
POW	<i>Program of Work</i>
SONA	<i>State of the Nation Address</i>
TAN	<i>Transparency and Accountability Network, Inc.</i>
TOR	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
UNDP	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>
VILJODRAS	<i>Villa Jeepney Drivers Association</i>

PREFACE

The development objective of the Affiliated Network for East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) is to improve governance in East Asia-Pacific countries by strengthening partnership and monitoring capacities of civil society and government through the adoption and implementation of social accountability methods in the key thematic areas of education, health, public infrastructure, and environment. Budget, expenditure, and service delivery in the thematic areas are areas of concern.

To achieve the objective, the conduct of learning-in-action trainings and action researches on social accountability tools and techniques are thus a key strategy of ANSA-EAP.

The *Bantay Lansangan* or Road Watch project is a 30-month project aimed at monitoring and advocating reforms in the Philippine road sector. Initiated in November 2007, Bantay Lansangan is a multi-sector partnership of 23 organizations that mobilize the active participation of government, private

sector, citizen groups, NGOs, and development partners to act collectively and strategically in monitoring the performance of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) in its function of providing quality road sector services to the public.

The Bantay Lansangan membership includes representative organizations from road users, governance advocates, media, road service providers, national road asset managers, government partners, regulators and enforcers, centers of expertise, and development partners.

Public infrastructure is a vital component of local service delivery, a key thematic area of ANSA-EAP. This makes it important to study and document Bantay Lansangan as an approach to road sector reform that centers on constructive engagement between citizen groups and government.

This is a documentation of Bantay Lansangan. The paper looks at the project's conceptual design, operational

framework, relationship between its secretariat and local partners, modes of partnership, and terms of engagement among partners, among others. The case study includes stories that describe the model and the experiences of local Bantay Lansangan partners in Iloilo, Kalinga, and Abra provinces. These stories help to illustrate the emerging experiences and insights of key Bantay Lansangan stakeholders.

This paper should be seen as an initial attempt to advance the agenda and capacity of citizen groups to monitor road construction projects and strengthen citizen group capacities in engaging government for good governance. Written in cooperation with Transparency and Accountability Network, Inc. (TAN), which provides secretariat support to Bantay Lansangan, this documentation is written in a compelling narrative style that depicts a holistic portrayal of Bantay Lansangan's experiences and results. The narrative describes Bantay Lansangan's processes, main actors, chronology, including perceived strengths and weaknesses, key issues and concerns as identified as such by project actors.

The narrative is based on actual experience and information. It has been written in a highly readable style suitable for a general audience and integrates and summarizes key information about Bantay Lansangan. The narrative is complete to the extent that it serves as the eyes and ears of a third party partner of TAN and Bantay Lansangan who wants to appreciate what happened and is happening with Bantay Lansangan.

The narrative includes key background information about the stakeholders, phases in the program's process, significant events and incidents, early indicators of both failures and successes, and key quotes from actors, emerging insights and lessons. When read, the narrative depicts the experiences of the main stakeholders of Bantay Lansangan.

The narrative does not end with a synthesis or concluding analysis. Instead, it ends by outlining observable, evidence-based trends and patterns that characterize the Bantay Lansangan experience so far, and by suggesting areas for further inquiry.

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I. BACKGROUND

When contractors submitted curiously high bids for the World Bank-assisted National Roads Improvement Management Program Phase 1 (NRIMP1)¹, bank officials and casual observers could not help but be suspicious. Procurement in the Philippines had long been identified as a problem area by donor agencies and civil society organizations alike, and these bids seemed to point towards possible irregularities.

As investigations proceeded, it became clear that a major cartel involving local and international firms had designed a collusive scheme that established bid prices at artificial, non-competitive levels, that would force the borrower—the Republic of the Philippines—to spend more for these roads.

As the World Bank mulled stiff sanctions, including permanent debarment, against the erring firms, the need to put in place governance safeguards became even more critical, to ensure greater transparency

and preserve ethical standards in the procurement process. Beyond stringent rules and regulations, the need to have a watchdog that could sniff out rats in the cracks and ensure that these rules are complied with gained greater urgency.

For several years, various citizen groups in the Philippines have already served as observers and monitors in different infrastructure projects. The Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG), for example, is one of those that has monitored government projects in the northern Philippines over the last two decades. Over the years, its volunteers have unearthed irregularities in infrastructure projects, and its effectiveness as a citizen watchdog has been confirmed by the government and donor agencies alike. Citizen volunteerism has, in fact, worked in other projects across the Philippines. When plans for NRIMP2 started, the World Bank knew exactly what it needed—tighter anti-corruption controls, including independent procurement evaluation, stronger internal controls and oversight of road construction. The latter would be carried out by a multi-stakeholder civil society group whose sole mandate

¹ NRIMP was designed to assist the Philippines Government to upgrade its roads network and was partially financed by a \$150 million loan from the World Bank. It aimed not just to build roads, but also to address weaknesses in project management, so that future roads projects would deliver more benefit at lower cost. As a result of NRIMP 1, which closed in March 2007, 1,400 kilometers of roads were built or resurfaced.

will be to monitor the conduct of road construction across the archipelago.

Thus was Bantay Lansangan (Road Watch) born—a partnership among different stakeholders who shared a common vision: the improvement of the Philippines road sector through vigilant monitoring and volunteerism. Bantay Lansangan was also tasked to come up with the Road Sector Status Report Card.

This ragtag team was brought together under the auspices of TAN², which served as Bantay Lansangan secretariat. The AusAID, which equally valued governance, provided seed funding.

Bantay Lansangan's first task was to identify the stakeholders for whom social accountability was a priority. The list of stakeholders included:

- Road users (i.e., bus, jeepney³ and taxi operators)
- The Department of Public Works and Highways
- Road service providers (i.e., contractors represented by organizations like Philippine Contractors Association, Confederation of

Filipino Consulting Organizations of the Philippines, and others)

- News media (e.g., Catholic Media Network)
- Government anti-graft agencies (e.g., Office of the Ombudsman and the Presidential Anti-Graft Commission), and
- Other non-government organizations (NGOs) and citizen groups.

For these stakeholders, the mandate was clear: they would work together to ensure that resources meant for building and maintaining roads went where they were intended, and not in some other person's pocket.

Bantay Lansangan can be viewed three ways: as a project; as an organization; or as a citizen initiative. This paper looks at Bantay Lansangan as a citizen's initiative—how it is expanding on this concept to create a sustainable initiative using a multi-stakeholder approach.

2 The Transparency and Accountability Network (TAN) is a coalition of multisector organizations that seeks to contribute significantly to the reduction of corruption in the Philippines by advancing a comprehensive and multi-sector transparency and accountability strategy founded on the prevention and prosecution of corruption, and the promotion of a corruption-intolerant society. The Network was finally formalized in November 2000 with 19 organizations as founding members and is supported by various development partners. Its members include the Caucus of Development NGOs, Makati Business Club, members of the academe, and various CSOs, among others.

3 Jeepneys are the most popular means of public transportation in the Philippines. They were originally made from US military jeeps left over from World War II and are well known for their flamboyant decoration and crowded seating

II. CAN THIS PARTNERSHIP WORK?

The first challenge that Bantay Lansangan faces is to get this coalition of organizations with different agendas to truly work together after signing their names in the Bantay Lansangan Memorandum of Understanding. Although the stakeholders of Bantay Lansangan adhere to the ideals of transparency and social accountability, it is also a fact that each of them holds their unique frames of reference. As ongoing business concerns, contractors understandably want to remain profitable.

Vigilant NGOs, on the other hand, wish to see a more credible and responsive bureaucracy that listens to the voice of its citizens. Progressive champions in DPWH want an opportunity to change tinted public perception of corruption within its walls. Politicians want to be remembered for their good works, while most people—the road users themselves—simply want to use their roads safely and peacefully.

Each of these sectors has their own agenda and perspectives but are, nonetheless, bound by the same belief that there is hope for the

country's beleaguered road sector and modifications can be instituted if they band together.

Bantay Lansangan's main task is to monitor infrastructure projects to ensure that roads are engineered and built according to conceptual design and quality benchmarks. Deviations from the plans, or worse, defects that manifest after construction, signify something unusual or irregular and merit a deeper investigation, usually on the part of the contractor or the DPWH.

Ideally, the different stakeholders can work together and help the DPWH monitor the conduct of its people and contractors. Bantay Lansangan could be DPWH's partner—providing corroborating, right-hand support, possibly during construction itself, and not acting as a mere watchdog or whistle-blower.

But while the relationship looks ideal on paper, the question on everybody's mind is clear. Can this type of relationship work? When conflicting interests clash—given that the mandates of some stakeholders are naturally opposed—

how is the coalition going to stand as a cohesive body?

“We have not yet gone to a point where we’ve identified resistance among stakeholders,” says TAN Executive Director Vincent Lazatin. “Being in the early stage of our development, there is still very much this spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding.” The DPWH, or at least, some individuals within the agency, he says, have been particularly supportive of Bantay Lansangan. Although corruption is perceived to seep through its ranks, the DPWH has surprisingly redeemed its credentials, thanks to reformists within the organization who see Bantay Lansangan as an opportunity to push for reforms within the organization.

Under the rules of Bantay Lansangan, the Bantay Lansangan Secretariat should bring to the attention of DPWH any report of problems that its volunteers are able to ferret out or discover from the grounds. A Bantay Lansangan Coordinating Committee specifically looks into these problems and serves as the mechanism by which complaints are heard and processed. While complaints are lodged with the Coordinating Committee, stakeholders are expected not to point fingers or speculate on any individual’s guilt.

“If we find any disputable areas, we allow DPWH to address those issues internally first,” explains Lazatin. “If we confront them and expect them to start firing people based on our say-so, it may not be good for the partnership. We don’t want to create an adversarial relationship with DPWH. We know they have problems. They know

they have problems. So let’s try to find a way to solve them.”

Clearly, respect for process is at the core of the envisaged DPWH-Bantay Lansangan relationship. But process necessarily takes time, which impatient stakeholders are not too appreciative of.

“Passion works,” continues Lazatin. “But at the same time, you should not let emotion and passion run loose. As passionate as we are to see change, we also have to realize that these things take shape very slowly.”

Misalignments in expectations are not limited among stakeholders, but happen within the organizations as well. The DPWH has, quite expectedly, encountered typical resistance on the ground and at the central office. Even as there are movers and shakers within DPWH who are committed to reform, there is also an established convention and pecking order within the department that would be difficult for a reformer to rock through the partnership with Bantay Lansangan.

“I am not quite sure if across the DPWH, the same sentiment is shared,” admits Tino Santamaria, Project Director of the DPWH. “Officials have different perspectives. Some of them might just be paying lip service to Bantay Lansangan in terms of transparency and accountability. But in reality, we still need to find out how serious most of them are in terms of forging a strong partnership with Bantay Lansangan. You cannot really blame them because espousing this partnership and engaging civil society groups to watch over your service is a real paradigm shift.”

Some DPWH officials, for example, are hesitant about sharing their data with Bantay Lansangan representatives. Others are open about their inherent mistrust for Bantay Lansangan. In fact, when Bantay Lansangan was first discussed at the DPWH, the then Secretary was not even receptive to it, and it was only when a reformer became temporary DPWH head that the agency's partnership with Bantay Lansangan was inked.

By then, too, the World Bank had explicitly made it clear that anti-corruption measures had to be in place for NRIMP2 to proceed.

Just as there were skeptics in DPWH, there are also those in the DPWH who are genuinely glad that Bantay Lansangan

exists—to give weight to their findings, to augment their limited resources on the field, and to show arrogant contractors that there are other eyes out there checking on their work.

Even during these early stages of the struggle, Bantay Lansangan has undeniably made inroads towards creating a climate that fosters social accountability. Its impact may yet be too feeble to be felt. Still, the fact that linkages between citizen groups and the bureaucracy have been established and are being fortified brick by brick is an early win worth noting.

III. ROLL-OUT

To quickly roll out operations nationwide, Bantay Lansangan stakeholders used their networks on the ground, within the regions, to help identify volunteers to monitor the roads. These volunteers became the monitoring teams in the 16 regions. Trainings were then conducted in Baguio, Cebu, Davao and Metro Manila to equip them with a working knowledge of road monitoring, including the important concepts of the stages of road delivery, infrastructure monitoring templates, and the use of the Road User Satisfaction Survey (RUSS). Bantay Lansangan also consulted with these teams to help single out priority projects within their area. It was agreed that one foreign-assisted and two locally-funded projects would be monitored per region.

Project Identification

Project identification was primarily based on accessibility. Other NGOs set additional parameters in choosing the projects, while others chose at random. Some were finished projects, others were in the process of construction while a number had yet to begin. In the case of Iloilo, only projects worth over

P20 million were included in the list of projects for monitoring. Given the limited budget of P36,000 for the activity, the Iloilo Caucus of Development Non-Government Organizations, Inc. (ICODE) selected areas within a 60-kilometer radius from Iloilo in order to minimize the travel time of visiting monitors. Others chose to focus on projects that were part of the President's State of the Nation Address (SONA) promises.

Volunteer Training

To ensure the soundness of its volunteer's reports, Bantay Lansangan had to equip its roster of road monitors with the tools they needed. Using the technical expertise of GHD Consultancy, an Australian firm, it developed a monitoring tool and training manual for use of the volunteers. The resulting tool was later fine-tuned to make it understandable to those regional volunteers without engineering backgrounds without unduly trading off its effectiveness. Consultants tried to simplify the monitoring tool to suit the needs of laymen without compromising its adequacy.

Alongside this, Bantay Lansangan invested in training its pool of monitors. Training programs were held in the different regions, where volunteers were introduced to the basics of road design and what they had to know as effective road monitors.

Still, two days is hardly enough to teach volunteers all they need to know to carry out road monitoring. Two days are also not enough to cover enough volunteers for road monitoring. Bantay Lansangan relies heavily on the output of its monitors. To become more effective, it might have to provide ongoing workshops and continuous consultation with the volunteers. It also needs to organize its batches of volunteers from across the country so that they can share their local experiences with each other and learn from such reciprocity.

“These people cannot just meet once and that’s it,” says Santamaria. “We need to help them do their function. Interaction and training on the use of the tools should be constant. Bantay Lansangan needs to also clarify with the volunteers the rules for engagement and familiarize them with certain protocols.”

Road monitoring tools

Another observation relates to the nature of the monitoring tool, which was patterned after the DPWH model. “From a civil society perspective, you would want to benchmark government from an independent barometer,” says Caroline Belisario, Technical Officer of Procurement Watch, a stakeholder of Bantay Lansangan tasked to carry out the training of volunteers especially in matters

that pertain to procurement and bids and awards. “What is the use of monitoring them if the tool that we are using is the government’s tool?”

Using a DPWH monitoring template as a signaling device for its own performance leaves a negative public impression. Unfounded or not, such skepticism needs to be shaken out by using a non-partisan, unbiased yardstick to measure project compliance.

At best, Bantay Lansangan could take advantage of key components in the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance’s (CCAG) tool¹ which the Commission on Audit and the United Nations Develop Programme have acknowledged to be effective as a monitoring tool. “CCAGG does more thorough analysis and tests,” concurs Anthony Septimo, Research and Technical Assistant of Procurement Watch. “Their approach is more empirical whereas DPWH’s is more ocular and visual.”

Of course, there are contrary opinions. DPWH project engineer Ruth Pedroso notes that Bantay Lansangan reports, which are based on the same parameters as government’s, are therefore more acceptable and clearer to understand.

¹ The Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance was formed in 1987 to monitor government projects in the northern Philippines. It received training from the National Economic and Development Authority in project monitoring. The Commission on Audit (COA) partnered with CCAGG to conduct participatory audits in Abra region, focusing on assessing the impact of the audited government project/program in meeting its desired results. The exercise was sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The lessons from the audit were later published into a manual on the Conduct of Participatory Audit published by COA and the UNDP.

Because the same parameters are used, it is easier for the DPWH to verify observations made by Bantay Lansangan.

CCAGG's Manang Pura, also Bantay Lansangan Chairman, sees no problem with developing a new tool, however. "Sometimes you need something more

technical to show the observers and the donors, just to show that your findings are correct," she pointed out.

What truly matters, however, is that the volunteers are able to use the monitoring tools effectively.

IV. ILOILO IN FOCUS

Experiences on the Ground

His brows were beaded with sweat. The dusty shirt beneath the reflectorized vest clung to his damp skin. The white helmet was hardly enough protection against the scorching heat of the sun, but Art Bacali was still smiling as he surveyed the length of the Oton-Mambag Road. His back ached as he bent low, meticulously measuring the cracks and the thickness of the poured cement under the sweltering heat of the sun. Thankfully, the cool breeze that blew across the rice fields that lined the road soothed his body. He worked non-stop, walking at a snail's pace for several kilometers with tired eyes constantly on the look-out for construction defects—small slabs of wood embedded in the concrete, spider-web cracks, and small potholes. He engaged in light banter with his eight other companions, who shook their heads and let out small howls each time they came across yet another defect, which they faithfully recorded.

In their gear, most people would mistake Art Bacali and his group to be road

engineers. In truth, the motley group of volunteers is no engineers but jeepney drivers and operators who decided participate in Bantay Lansangan, an initiative they came to know about through their colleague, Dan Purzuelo. In all likelihood, they probably did not know at the onset what a huge sacrifice this surge of volunteerism would cost them, but they have held on to it with surprising tenacity since the day that Purzuelo first invited them to become volunteer road monitors.

Unmindful of the distance from their homes and regardless of the time of day, the Iloilo monitors would inspect the road construction sites, sometimes for as long as three straight days. While checking the Oton-Mambag Road, they took momentary breaks only to eat lunch by the roadside under the trees, and then proceeded until the darkness of night dimmed their vision. It didn't matter if the rain poured in torrents, or if they had to abandon their means of livelihood and let go of the wages they were guaranteed to pocket for the day. For the Iloilo volunteers, it was equally important to curb corruption and

see their potholed roads reconstructed according to design and specifications. *“Kami rin naman ang gagamit nito, kaya kailangan bantayan namin [We’ll be the ones to use this road so we have to safeguard its construction],”* said Jun, another volunteer.

For sure, volunteerism requires much from people. There is nothing in the job description that would make people scramble for the position of Bantay Lansangan road monitor. The P500 (about US\$11) daily transportation and food allowance is hardly sufficient, especially for one like Bacali who lives 40 kilometers away from the capital. To maximize their resources, the volunteers would usually pool their allowances together and after the expenses for food and transportation have been deducted, they would divide the proceeds among themselves. After completing a hard day’s work, they would each bring home between P180 to P200 (US\$4-4.3) to the wife and children, the sum they would usually get on a slow day driving their jeepneys. *“Yung obligasyon mo sa pamilya mo, medyo napapabayaan mo na (Our obligation to our families are somehow overlooked and brushed aside),”* says Nestor, president of the Villa Jeepney Drivers Association (VILJODRAS), the volunteer group monitoring road projects in the province of Iloilo. *“Siempre, volunteer ka lang. Wala kaming kita dahil wala kaming biyahe at nandoon kami sa project. (Of course, we are only volunteers. We have no income since we chose not to ply our regular jeepney routes to be in the project site.)”*

The project site is also not a haven for the faint-hearted. The volunteers would often raise sharp questions and stares

from the engineers and contractors when they would show up unannounced. Some construction workers would refuse to talk to them, worried that speaking with these volunteers would endanger their jobs. A project engineer even argued against the presence of the volunteers in his turf. But the volunteers are no longer intimidated. In fact, they have become so used to the subtle intimidation and are not too worried about it. Life as a jeepney driver teaches you to be tough, they reason. But of course, they have to come to the construction site prepared too.

Armed with their Bantay Lansangan IDs and an endorsement letter from the Secretary of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), the nine Iloilo volunteers fend off the menacing scrutiny and approach the job with a good mix of diplomacy and scientific methodology with the monitoring tools learned from their training programs. Often, it is enough to quiet down simmering tempers or acts of resistance among the contractors. It helps that Bacali and Purzuela actually have legitimate engineering backgrounds and could spew engineering jargon if needed. Although such paraphernalia help vouch for the volunteers’ legitimacy and somewhat soften the abrasive welcome from the contractors, the hazards of the job are still a lingering reality.

As such, the volunteers do not take any chances with their security. As much as possible, they do not venture alone. *“Mas sigurado kami sa security namin kapag sabay kami lahat lumalabas sa field (We are more assured of our safety if we work in teams),”* a jeepney driver confessed. *“Alam namin*

yung risk sa trabaho namin, lalo na noong na-ambush yung Undersecretary ng DPWH. Yun ang panahon na nag-uumpisa kami ng monitoring at survey. (We are conscious of the risks of the job especially when the DPWH Undersecretary was ambushed. That was the time we were starting our monitoring and survey work.)”

Whether real or imagined, the threats hover in the minds of the monitors. They know that they are crucial players in the drive towards a corruption-intolerant society. And their fight is against a system that seems larger than life. Yet, they take the bull by the horns and persist, knowing that their effort will leave a positive impression in the long haul.

The question, however, remains: How effective is their effort? How deep is its impact?

Small Victories

Limited resources and logistical limitations might discourage less committed mortals, but for Iloilo’s crew of volunteers, this was not enough to dampen their spirits. Although TAN appropriated a budget for only five volunteers in each region, Iloilo enlisted nine. So what if only five of the volunteers had the protective gear and warning devices to use during monitoring? The nine of them gladly shared what was available. Although they loudly wished that they each had helmets and vests, the lack did not dampen their vigilance.

In fact, the monitors of the 4-kilometer distance in Oton-Mambag tracked down 40 construction flaws. In some cases, the

compaction of the cement was uneven and the quality of concrete road pouring was poor. Since then, 20 of these have since been corrected. A copy of the findings was coursed to DPWH Region 6 which resulted in an early intervention and the removal and replacement of the defective slabs at the expense of the contractor, Gurrea and Associates.

“Yung ibang nakita namin, lumalabas na yung ibang semento na dapat sa kalsada, hindi napunta sa kalsada. Napunta na sa labas. Halimbawa, ang thickness dapat ng kalsada ay 12, pero lumalabas sampu lang. Nawala ang semento,” explained Bacali. (“According to some interviewees, the cement that should have been poured on the road cannot be fully accounted for. The road thickness, which ought to have been 12, was calibrated at only ten.”)

Besides analyzing the situation from an engineering perspective, the volunteers take a wholistic view of the road construction process. They check out the workers’ compensation as a possible angle to consider in determining the cause of poor roads. Some laborers in the road project receive a daily wage of P150, which is lower than the minimum wage stipulated by the regional wage board.

Although they might as well be the thorn on the side of contractors, the volunteers themselves accede that not all flaws they have recorded are due to the shortcomings of the contractors. Many of the uncovered deficiencies, they say, result from the project’s structural design. Purzuelo notes that the Oton-Mambag Road was designed to carry a maximum of 10 to 15

tons of load, when people knew all along that many of the trucks plying this route carried more than 25 tons. *“Alam na naman nilang ganun, hindi mo maintindihan bakit hindi pa tinama yung specification nila [They know it’s wrong but they still insist on not correcting the specifications],”* he said.

The volunteers note that often, the townsfolk are also to blame for some of the road defects. Bacali notes that even if the poured cement on the road has not yet been fully cured, the barricades would be removed by people to permit the free flow of traffic. Sometimes, these would be private drivers, bus conductors, or residents who simply do not understand why roads that look perfectly fine should be closed off for a good ten days.

Committed volunteers

Definitely, the unflagging commitment of the Iloilo volunteers have brought forth many little victories on the ground. However, these triumphs could not have been realized without the reinforcement of ICODE, a network of non-government organizations which has partnered with TAN to promote social accountability in the province.

Boyet Areno, Executive Director of ICODE, believes that one reason for the dynamism of Bantay Lansangan in Iloilo is that the right set of volunteers was chosen. Jeepney drivers and operators spent their waking hours on the road. They suffered when potholes emerged and ruined their vehicles, or when traffic was slow because of road defects. They also had the wisdom of the streets that others, like students,

did not yet possess, plus the confidence and enough militancy to face any form of intimidation.

They have also gone through a series of workshops on how to face different scenarios of non-cooperation, strong-arm tactics, and harassment. They have also been coached on the techniques of how to retrieve information because of their linkages with other NGOs. This continuous support and coaching gave Iloilo volunteers an edge in terms of road monitoring and access to information.

Non-adversarial approach

ICODE tries to approach its partners in a constructive, non-adversarial way. This is one reason why the NGO is effective in gathering relevant public documents and eliciting the cooperation of DPWH. Although ICODE recognizes that there may be fraudulent practices in the system, it does not send its volunteers to visit the project site acting like a self-righteous, antagonistic watchdog who will jump at the first culprit who violates the system.

“We try to see, evidence-wise, what happened to the construction and the work plan,” explains Areno. “We explain to people that we are here to help in making systems work effectively and efficiently to avoid corruption. If there is a leakage, we try to uncover the reasons behind them. Then we confirm the results to the end-users and the implementing organizations.”

ICODE’s non-belligerent approach to monitoring has paved the way for a

smoother collaboration with the DPWH in the region. Although their volunteers are militant supporters of the cause, they are not argumentative reformers. As such, DPWH welcomes their cooperation, regularly sending out invitations for ICODE to send volunteers to their biddings and consulting with them on different matters.

“We appreciate the presence of the monitors because it helps us ensure that the contractor’s workmanship is good,” says Ruth Pedroso of DPWH who likewise acknowledged the department’s occasional dilemma in project supervision. “Volunteers complement our work because we are undermanned especially for materials testing.”

Pedroso adds that most of the defects reported by the volunteers have already been spotted by their own Quality Assistance unit, but that having a third party attest to the presence of these defects is added ammunition for the DPWH when it deals with the erring contractors.

Mutual cooperation

The cooperation between the volunteers and DPWH was captured during a routine inspection when two DPWH engineers themselves waved over the Bantay Lansangan volunteers in one of their road inspection projects, even hitching a ride to another part of the road in the volunteers’ rented vehicle. One could almost feel the sense of relief of Engineers Marivic Bayaban and Rhodoro Escudo as they watched Gurrea workers pour concrete on a problem area, with the Bantay Lansangan volunteers huddled with them.

“We really need help in monitoring and materials management,” volunteered Engineer Bayaban.

As they directed the workers to turn on the concrete vibrator to extrude air voids and bubbles from the poured concrete, the Gurrea project engineer watched with clear disdain etched on his face, rolling his eyes in silence and kicking a few pebbles while his men worked. Perhaps, the sulking Gurrea contractor should be grateful that their problems have not even reached the press.

Media has a role to play in enabling transparency in governance. ICODE fully understands the power it wields. But as much as possible, it avoids reporting their initial findings to media so as not to create ripples of unsubstantiated allegations. Part of its “non-adversarial” approach is the prevention of controversy.

“Media can wait at the right time when reports have already gone through a process of validation and final analysis,” says Arenó. “At that point, we submit to media the results for their evaluation.”

In Iloilo, the relationship between ICODE and DPWH works because they concur on many fronts. Both have given their stamps of approval on the importance of the Bantay Lansangan vision. Both of them believe in their individual roles as conduits to change. They agree that their responsive partnership can influence road sector reform. But a lot more things are required besides this fully functioning relationship, for which help is desired. The spectrum of cooperation needs to be

broadened in order to gain wider victories in social accountability, says Areno.

Lack of Access to Information

Although ICODE has gained speed and has learned backroom techniques in information retrieval, there are still impediments to data access especially from the district engineers and the offices of public officials.

“There are uncooperative districts, especially those that belong to congressmen who are not transparent with their projects,” Areno shared. “Unfortunately, there are only a few politicians who are open to giving information.” Bacali narrates how a volunteer who was able to get documents was chased by a congressman whose name was all over the billboards on road projects across Iloilo.

It is a tough challenge for citizen groups to avail of public documents. Agencies that want to remain ambiguous about their transactions can do so in the absence of a law that requires them to disclose information. Although a Citizen’s Charter Law has been passed covering all government agencies, its effectiveness as a tool that will compel officials to release data remains to be seen. Areno loudly wishes that a directive be sent to district engineers to compel them to supply volunteers with updated facts, but recognizes that for many agencies, in Iloilo and across the Philippines, limited disclosure of information is their silent mandate and way of life.

Limited Budget

Limited resources remain one of the biggest challenges of the Bantay Lansangan initiative. The road networks are big and far and the work is daunting, yet the budget provided is hardly enough for the volunteer’s logistical expenses.

To make up for this shortfall, ICODE has disbursed money beyond the stipulations of the project, such as expenses for the capacity-building exercises of its monitors. However, the NGO has a small operating budget which is stretched thin by its other commitments.

Limited Scope of Work

If additional funds are within its control and reach, ICODE, said Areno, would like to mobilize its volunteers to participate in project procurement and actively sit as monitors in the Bids and Awards Committee to preempt any unscrupulous deals in the bidding process.

That Bantay Lansangan is focused on post-construction monitoring is not bad, per se, given that all parts of the project process need equal attention. However, post-construction monitoring overlooks the often bigger anomalies that happen in the earlier phases of the process. Volunteers are only too aware of this. Given a chance, they would want to oversee actual road construction but this is not provided for by its Terms of Reference (TOR). Although TORs are not supposed to stop a volunteer from doing beyond what is mandated, it serves as their only source of protection when confronted by other entities, and

serves as their ticket to the funding for the monitoring exercises. Volunteers specifically wish to be involved in the planning phase so they can audit project designs and proposed budgets where over-estimation of costs can materialize.

As a proponent of participatory local governance, ICODE favors the creation of mechanisms that will increase the role of community in negotiating change. It is true empowerment if communities can collaborate even in project identification and in the selection of contractors. This, of course, will entail a lot more planning and resources, but ICODE is hopeful that projects like Bantay Lansangan can stir up communities and people from indifference and fear.

Lack of ownership within the community

The volunteers acknowledged that sometimes, the lack of ownership for Bantay Lansangan among those in the community has made the initiative a little less vibrant than they would want it to be. In conducting the road users' survey, for example, they found many of the road users hesitant to share their thoughts.

“Yung iba, medyo takot sumagot at baka madamay sila (Some people do not want to respond because they are afraid to get involved),” explained one volunteer. Due to a deep sense of self-preservation, many did not wish to delve into what they saw as political or social issues that might stir a hornet's nest and cause trouble in their personal affairs. Despite the promise of confidentiality, it took a good measure of coaxing before the Iloilo volunteers achieved the desired level of participation. To put people at ease, they showed them that the survey had been translated to Ilonggo. Then, they gently reminded them that the roads that were being discussed were their own roads, paid out of their own sweat and blood. Only then did people begin to appreciate Bantay Lansangan and its vision of a reformed road sector. These were their roads, and not anyone else's. When people came to this realization, they eagerly hauled in other respondents to share their thoughts with the surveyors. *“These are our roads,”* said one resident, as he called on other neighbors to participate in the survey.

V. KALINGA IN FOCUS

On January 6, 2009, the second working day of the year, the early evening news carried a story that woke most Filipinos from their post-holiday stupor: that road works in the Kalinga area were done sloppily by the contractor that the DPWH was backing.

“A civil society group has disputed claims of the DPWH that some projects in the Cordillera Administrative Region have already undergone rehabilitation work. The Kalinga-Apayao Religious Sector Association (KARSA) pointed to the Bontoc-Tabuk-Tuguegarao road, which DPWH-Cordillera director Mariano Alquiza claims to have already been rehabilitated. Anglican Bishop Renato Abibico, a leader of KARSA, reportedly said that the project was implemented in a questionable manner, such as the absence of work plans and programs and bidding process which are both standard government instituted regulations,” GMA-TV announced.

Engineer Pedro Pis-o, KARSA’s technical consultant and a former DPWH project engineer, explained

that the Tabuk-Tuguegarao road was constructed without any plan – a definite no-no and a sure way to make the project the locus of corruption.

On nationwide TV, Director Alquiza retorted that the watchdog groups in Kalinga and Mountain Province are not experienced to monitor projects. KARSA, on the other hand, insisted on Alquiza’s ouster.

The next day, major and regional dailies carried the same story, prompting Malacañang [the presidential building] to call DPWH and the Presidential Anti-Graft Commission. The stakes, after all, were high. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo herself, addressing the Filipino people at her State of the Nation Address (SONA), had announced that the national government earmarked P5.2 billion (US\$113 million) for road projects in the region, to be released in tranches from 2007 to 2009. The SONA commitment includes the P1.9 billion (US\$ 41.3 million) rehabilitation of the Mount Data to Bontoc and the Bontoc to Banaue sections of Halsema

Highway, as well as the P3.2 billion (US\$ 69.5 million) upgrading of certain sections of the Bontoc-Tabuc-Tuguegarao Road. The President plans to inaugurate the projects before her term expires in 2010. As such, the Halsema Highway, which spans a distance of 180-kilometers, is slated for completion by end-2009 while the 108-kilometer Bontoc-Tabuc-Tuguegarao Road is scheduled for April 2010. Given the cynicism with which most Filipinos regard SONA promises, the last thing the President needed was news that her projects were mere platforms for corruption. As fingers were pointed and accusations flew, Alquiza was transferred to DPWH Region 1.

At the Diocesan Center in Tabuk, where KARSA members regularly met, the members of the clergy were confused. They had been reminded by the Bantay Lansangan national office that, as members of the coalition, they did not have to go straight to the media or to Malacañang, considering that Bantay Lansangan had the mechanism to address such grievances.

It did not help that DPWH Secretary Hermogenes Ebdane was aloof when he met with them. Pastor Luis Ao-as, chairman of KARSA, recalls the closed door meeting with the secretary. “He questioned our qualifications. He was very intimidating to us. He asked if we were qualified to monitor the roads. He did not talk about projects, but our competence to check the size of the stones. I told him that even a grade 3 pupil can identify big and small stones.” Although Ebdane promised to look into the KARSAs findings, the

members could not help but think he was unreceptive.

Unmet expectations

Frustration, for most part, has been the overriding sentiment that KARSAs members have about their road monitoring activities. Although the group has long served as a regional watchdog, sniffing out illegal logging and jueteng [illegal gambling] activities in the area, its members are appalled to see that the problem with road construction is a systemic one. Said Pastor Ao-as: “The problem is from top down. We observed that DPWH engineers are under the contractors, when it should be the other way around. DPWH engineers are scared of the contractors because these are rich people. We keep on pounding the head of the engineers about the defects, but they only become defensive. Each time we point out something, they make all kinds of excuses.”

The group had hoped that being made part of the Bantay Lansangan network would give fire to their monitoring efforts, but their expectations have yet to be met. As it turned out, Bantay Lansangan’s idea of how road problems would be attended to was not the same as KARSAs, especially in terms of time frame.

To illustrate, KARSAs expected that its complaints would be attended to expeditiously—meaning, Bantay Lansangan would facilitate submission to the higher-ups in the DPWH hierarchy immediately. “We submitted our report to Bantay Lansangan national in November 2008 but they only responded in March

2009. Some of them were questioning why we gave our report to DPWH, saying that there are procedures that we have to think of,” said Pastor Ao-as.

“We said we thought we are monitoring teams. For us, that is not the essence of monitoring. The essence is we send our reports to the Bantay Lansangan and DPWH central office and the implementing agency. At least, those who are involved can take remedial corrections. But they don’t want us to furnish the others our reports. The process they want takes a long time, and by then, contractors would have already finished with the projects. Finished roads are much harder to check. *E bakit ganuon? Aanhin pa ang damo kung patay na ang kabayo? [We don’t get it. What’s the use of a report when it’s already too late to do anything about it?],*” said Bishop Abibico.

A road without a plan

At the very least, KARSA had expected that its Bantay Lansangan affiliation would facilitate its access to important data. This, said Engineer Pis-o, was why KARSA alerted Bantay Lansangan and DPWH higher-ups about the absence of proper plans. “We sent a letter to the regional office to give us copies of the documents but they never replied to us. If there was a plan, it came out later—after the project has been completed. So it’s not really a plan of the road,” he said.

A plan eventually made available by the DPWH to the KARSA team did not coincide with the project site covered. DPWH said it was a mere guide. Even so, Pis-o and the monitoring team noted all sorts of defects,

from the height of the slope, to problems with sand work and drainage, to the size of pebbles used in the grouted riprap to the use of dirty, low-grade aggregates during concrete paving, resulting in premature road cracks.

Engineer Teodoro Owek, Head of the Sub-Operations Center, SONA-Kalinga, admits that the road project started without detailed engineering and a well-conceived Program of Work (POW). The POW is supposed to highlight the specifications of the project including the unit cost of materials to be used, defined jobs to be executed and delivered, corresponding labor expenses, equipment rentals, and contractors’ profits. The absence of such documentation is, in itself, a breach in transparency.

However, the President’s SONA speech sparked a hasty release of the funds for Kalinga which left little room for comprehensive planning prior to project implementation. “Ideally, in project implementation, you should start with plans,” says Engineer Owek. “But this takes time as you need to prepare feasibility studies and detailed engineering. But because the SONA was so sudden, we no longer passed through the actual process of preparing plans.”

Recognizing that it lacked proper plans for the SONA project, the DPWH agreed to dialogue with KARSA and Bantay Lansangan. Lazatin himself came, and assured KARSA that the problem would be brought up with the DPWH central office. But eight months hence, KARSA has yet to hear from anyone on its complaints.

Bantay Lansangan, of course, is fully aware of KARSA's sentiments. However, the processing of complaints by the Bantay Lansangan Coordinating Committee is, like all processes, a long one, explains Flora dela Cerna. "*Dumadaan tayo sa proseso [We go through a process here],*" she points out.

Unfortunately, there are differences in the rules of engagement of Bantay Lansangan and KARSA, which is the same as CCAGG's, of which it is a member, said dela Cerna. "CCAGG's model is not the same as Bantay Lansangan's. CCAGG's model calls for immediate prosecution, while Bantay Lansangan calls for a process. The models are not necessarily conflicting, but we have to reconcile both," she explains.

In fact, Lazatin wrote Ao-as a letter on December 19, 2008, requesting for a meeting "to iron out and align expectations of all groups with regards to the Bantay Lansangan project." He requested for "patience as we sort things out and try to find the best solution. How the DPWH responds to your report will give us an indication of their commitment to reforms. To a great extent, I understand the urgency of addressing the problem on the ground, as things are proceeding as if everything is fine. At the same time, we must balance that with the need to constructively engage the DPWH and allow for them to undertake the long-term institutional changes that would be required to prevent things like this from happening in the future."

"Let's give the partnership a chance," says Dela Cerna. "We have to work within the parameters of the partnership. If DPWH

does not respond after we go through the process, then we could go outside of the partnership," she stressed.

Joint monitoring

KARSA was accompanied by other groups when it conducted its monitoring activities in October 2008. The other monitors were the media, the provincial monitoring committee and the DPWH, plus members of CCAG. Having other witnesses, says KARSA, gives more credence to its reports. "We had all of them to show the credibility of the findings. These were validated by CCAG. We always make it a point to have media with us because that makes people aware of what is happening out there." Media, he explains, gives KARSA added protection and minimizes its risks.

The group that made the long trek uncovered various anomalies, documented by media for the people to see. Beyond that, KARSA proceeded even further, scaling the length of the Tabuk-Tuguegarao road, braving the elements, taking rests along the quiet roads, under the protection of the trees. They observed that the defects were usually in those roads farther away from the city, where there were less people.

As they went around, sub-contractors would occasionally stop them to show their work, explaining that they were simply doing what they were told. A number expressed fear that their men would not be paid if KARSA objected to the quality of their road work. "We have nothing to hide. The community knows this, because they are watching us. Please do not blame us," one said in Ilocano. "Look at the officials of

government and the DPWH instead.”

Ever since KARSA started making noise about road project anomalies, said the subcontractor, ordinary folk had taken an interest in their activities, and are watching their every move – from the stones they are using to making sure that there is concrete in between the stones in the riprap. With all these eyes watching their every move, there could be no room for shenanigans – at least at their level. Could KARSA train its sights elsewhere in the chain, he implored?

Sustaining community interest

Getting people aware of goings on around them is the bigger objective that community initiatives seek to achieve. “Who else will watch out for the way their roads are being built except the people themselves,” Ao-as agrees. Most everything that KARSA has unearthed in the years it has been in existence came from information provided by the community. No force could be as powerful as the community itself.

For KARSA, the next challenge is therefore to sustain community interest and participation and ensure that there are mechanisms to make the most of community vigilance. Bantay Lansangan could be one such mechanism. “What’s more important now is that we do something to make the monitoring more functional,” says Abibico. “We think that the mechanism should be strengthened if we want to make it an effective development partner of government projects,” he added.

Resource limitations

Getting in the way of sustained monitoring, says Ao-as, is the busy schedule of KARSA volunteers and limited funding. Among its most active members are the heads of the Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches which also have the biggest flocks to minister to. “We are all members of the clergy, which means we are very busy. We need to have time for this, and we need resources, but right now, we are acting on our own. It is very fortunate that the Bishop of the Anglicans is very supportive of this, and they spend for their food and gas. The rest of us use our own vehicles and resources. Ang layo-layo ng pinupuntahan namin [We have to travel long distances]. Even KARSA has no funds for that. We have done the best we can.”

So limited are the funds, said Ao-as, that the group has not even proceeded with the second component of the monitoring, or the road user’s survey. Additional resources, they said, are needed to keep the momentum of the activities on the ground.

Need for improved communication

Definitely, KARSA’s efforts would also benefit from better communication, not only with Bantay Lansangan national, but also with the DPWH. Within Bantay Lansangan, a discussion on expectations and responsibilities could help redirect energies and give focus to activities. For KARSA, whose members are fiery and who expect immediate action, being told to go through channels is confusing and a major let-down. After all, the reason

they joined Bantay Lansangan is because they believed it would allow for a quicker resolution of problems on the ground. Being told that there are processes to follow is akin to going through the government bureaucracy. In fact, the government bureaucracy can be jolted to go much faster, which was what happened when KARSA took its findings to a national audience. Through the years, KARSA has scored victories against jueteng operators and illegal loggers in its jurisdiction using time-tested strategies that capitalize on its strength and its ties with the community. And KARSA has proven that there are alternative, faster ways of dealing with problems.

Better coordination with the DPWH could also lead to a quicker resolution of problems of complaints, or at least, that is what Engineer Owek says. KARSA has submitted its findings and asked for documents from the regional department, but these documents were not lodged in these offices. He believes that KARSA should coordinate its monitoring efforts with the DPWH, so that questions are answered promptly. Sometimes, he says, there are deviations from the plan that are decided on in the ground that are brought about by structural limitations. Two of these, he noted, were noted by KARSA. Besides, he says, the DPWH hand book provides that works should be carried out based on the plan, but it does carry a provision that the engineer could direct how work should be carried out. "I wish we acted in a more coordinated, unified way here in Kalinga," he says.

But then again, he could hardly blame KARSA for their passion to see their projects made right. "This is the first time we've had projects like these in Kalinga," explains Ao-as. "How can KARSA not move quickly now?"

For sure, KARSA would not stop its monitoring activities, not only for the road sector but for everything else that concerns the community. As clergy, it is their mission to work for social justice for their flock. They would always welcome a little help from those who have the same objectives, and it would be good if their strategies on the ground are aligned to give speed and weight to their efforts.

Beyond raising awareness

Bantay Lansangan, of course, is one of those groups, and they do not doubt that it can yield results. In fact, he says, KARSA wants to look beyond other pre-construction phases of road projects—project identification, design, and bids and awards. They have their technical consultant to give them the expertise they need. They hope that, in the future, Bantay Lansangan will give them the wider platform to pursue these.

Definitely, there are still numerous logistical and coordination challenges down the road. For the Kalinga volunteers, what matters is that they are not about to abandon their efforts to push for transparency and accountability in government projects, and that they are willing to continue talking with other stakeholders to attain their common goals.

Bantay Lansangan, of course, is just as committed. “Even if some NGOs think we have mellowed down in our strategy, we are not weakening. By going through

the process, we are putting across the message that we are serious about Bantay Lansangan,” says Dela Cerna. “We will make it clear that we will not be co-opted.”

VI. KEY VULNERABILITIES

Political Interference

Political interference is probably the most pervasive force that agencies involved in the road sector have to deal with. Their desires, which may or may not redound to the community's greater good, almost always dictate how, when and where projects will be undertaken. The road that leads to nowhere and the bridge that leads right smack to an old church are powerful metaphors that depict how politicians can dictate the fate of road projects.

A vulnerability study commissioned by Bantay Lansangan revealed construction anomalies in all stages of the DPWH infrastructure development cycle. As early as the project identification and budgeting phase, errors already blinked under the radar, almost always with strong political undercurrents. Politicians, after all, control funding for road projects through their pork barrels. DPWH officials in the regions also experience pressure from their respective congressmen or local government officials.

Citizens have long questioned the road users' tax which is supposed to finance road maintenance in rural districts. Disbursement of the pork barrel fund has been repeatedly questioned. The road fund was equitably distributed among congressmen, regardless of whether or not they actually need roads and maintenance support. Some areas with less roads require less funding from the road users' tax, notes Santamaria of DPWH. "But just the same, they get an equal slice of the pie. When there are interferences from politicians, plans can be altered."

The DPWH utilizes the Highway Development Model (HDM) as a planning tool. Given a certain road condition, this model should flag the department on when intervention is required – e.g., when a highway needs upgrading or overlays to restore them to compliance standards. Conceptually, the HDM is an ideal tool for planning and budgeting resources based on needs. However, the underhanded stirrings of politicians create distortions in the

pre-construction preparations that totally derail this needs-driven approach.

“Politicians ask the department to build a road where there is no need for a road,” says Lazatin. “The department has no choice because politicians hold the purse strings. This is a typical example of how things outside the control of the department adversely affect public perception (of DPWH).”

The contractors’ side

Even contractors who are often accused as deceitful in their dealings and who have had to face public criticism and prejudice, admitted to being caught in the crossfire.

“Not all contractors are evil. Quite a number are victims of political machinations and corrupt bureaucrats,” pointed out Madrasto, whose group represents the Philippines’ largest contractors. “Having Bantay Lansangan operate in all parts of the country will help fend off pressures from politicians to cheat on the projects. One must understand that if the contractor is forced to chip away money from his contract, he still has to finish the project with the remaining funds. If we mobilize observers to stop the cheating as to quality of materials and measurements, then the contractors can fight back at the wrong type of bureaucrats who want a share of the contract through cuts in the monies.”

Prosecution mechanisms

Given that politicians are almost always involved in these deals, there is a need for a third party with the teeth to impose sanctions when needed. This power resides in the Presidential Anti-Graft Commission

(PAGC) and the Office of the Ombudsman, who are also part of the Bantay Lansangan initiative.

“There is a very real possibility that the partnership between Bantay Lansangan and PAGC would lead to a fruitful realization of anti-corruption goals,” says Christina Manalang, PAGC executive director. “We welcome the participation of an organization such as Bantay Lansangan especially if they would encourage members of civil society to report anomalies. Anti-graft agencies’ investigating bodies need witnesses and complainants. Since the Commission can take cognizance of any complaint, even those sent anonymously or by walk-ins, email or SMS, then Bantay Lansangan can use the trust of people in civil society organizations by way of gathering information, evidence or documents which citizens might otherwise hesitate to communicate to government for fear of reprisal.”

PAGC has limited jurisdiction over administrative cases covering presidential appointees with salary grade 26 and above. This includes people in the position of assistant regional director and higher. Meanwhile, the Ombudsman has authority over all public officers and criminal cases. PAGC endorses to the Office of the Ombudsman or to the Civil Service Commission any allegation it receives against barangay officials, elected mayors, and governors. Although PAGC values the participation of Bantay Lansangan in its investigation battles, this collaboration is not a prerequisite before the Commission steps into the scene to probe charges.

However, the agency admits its struggle in investigating because of a dearth in witnesses who are willing to testify. Most cases of bribery and extortion are difficult to appraise because of the absence of a paper trail.

“If Bantay Lansangan can help us look for willing witnesses and encourage them to cooperate, then PAGC can fire up more investigation reports and formal charges,” says Manalang.

Lack of Transparency in Transactions

One of the major reasons why corruption permeates the government system is the fact that individuals purposely shroud transactions behind a curtain of secrecy. The Iloilo volunteer who was chased by the congressman was actually lucky to have gotten documents. In many cases, there are simply none. Even DPWH engineer Teodoro Owek admits that documents for the SONA projects in Kalinga were not complete. Lazatin admits that the inability of DPWH officials to submit data is not so much because they are hesitant, but because they do not have the needed information. Not surprisingly, Bantay Lansangan gave the DPWH a grade of “Incomplete” in its first report card—again, due to its inability to submit needed information.

Big-time construction projects are also vulnerable to covert manipulations. As Santamaria of DPWH admits, “Di pa nag-uumpisa ang project, nag-uumpisa na ang krimen. (The project has not even started yet but crime has already kicked off.)” Foreign-assisted projects reflect

cost overruns of as much as 30% because procurement rules and regulations of multilateral lenders like the World Bank allow the estimated cost of an infrastructure to go beyond the agency’s approved budget per contract (ABC). Such policy inadvertently breeds collusion that pushes a \$1 million expenditure to bloat to \$1.3.

Backroom negotiations

“Consultants talk among themselves on what bids to give. Project costs become more expensive because actual materials included are more than what the design requires.” Consultants try to squeeze in more specifications that are not demanded by the plan so that their services may be engaged for a longer period. Generally, such collusion happens with foreign-funded projects because local procurement rules are more prohibitive. Overpricing is restrained as costs are not allowed to tip the scales and overtake the approved budget per contract.

“This whole problem of collusion won’t be seen at the procurement process,” says Lazatin. “We recognize that backroom deals at the procurement level are made before any of the bidders even sit down to submit a bid. So even if we sit as observers in the entire procurement process, we would not be able to see. The problem is much deeper and to address it, we need to take a much wider view.”

VII. TRANSPARENCY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Working Toward Transparency

Transparency and accountability are goals that both Bantay Lansangan and the DPWH aspire to reach. Towards this, both are finding ways to make data readily available for public scrutiny and consumption.

With Bantay Lansangan pushing for the release of more data, which is essential for it to finalize the Road Sector Status Report Card, reformists in the DPWH have escalated efforts to build a more methodical system of providing Bantay Lansangan with their data requirements. They are trying to abstract details on fund utilization and fund allocation, i.e., monitor what stands between monies that have been allocated and then officially used. In procurement, DPWH is trying to probe the number of contracts awarded without bidding. In human resources, it is looking into the number of sanctioned personnel. People in the department

need to do a lot of digging into their databases in order to reconstruct facts and figures into acceptable report formats.

“All these information are not readily available in DPWH,” admits Santamaria. “Probably, the data is there but it would take an extra effort to put them together. This task is on top of the personnel’s routine functions. It is over and above what they normally do. So considering all the reports that the department already has to generate and submit, this is additional work.”

Yet, it has to be done. Victor Dato of the World Bank believes that “the process of developing and preparing the Road Sector Status Report Card should help DPWH in improving its own data collection and monitoring capacity by pinpointing areas where information needs to be regularly collected to be able to audit results on a regular basis.”

The DPWH's task is thus clear-cut: to systematize the information retrieval process in order to act on Bantay Lansangan's requirements. It recognizes that doing so will mutually benefit them. "We can also use the information for our own internal monitoring and control," discloses Santamaria. "By preparing this system and collating the data, we would be able to indirectly help civil society groups who want these inputs." Most importantly, there are also the financing institutions which are looking for clear reforms as a requirement for their continued support of infrastructure projects.

Logical as this mandate is, there is still a wind of resistance from other segments within DPWH that had to be dealt with. "As we went through the process of gathering data for the report card, we realized that there was left-over culture from the department to withhold information rather than to share," reveals Lazatin. "We sort of had to pound the table with the committee and say, 'we need the data otherwise you'll not make the grade in the report card.'"

For DPWH to truly win points in the battle for transparency, reforms have to be institutionalized within the department. It needs to build the technical capacity to make relevant records periodically available to the public and not just react to pressure simply because civil society organizations are a noisy crowd of policy-shapers.

"What we'd like to see is a department that on its own has built the institutional integrity and strength to monitor itself and to make sure it does its job properly,"

says Lazatin. "When we achieve that, then we've achieved success in the department. When we reach the point where Bantay Lansangan does not need to exist, then we succeed."

Moving Toward Sustainability

All community-based initiatives need a program for sustainability. To be truly effective, these initiatives cannot be bound by time and project limitations. They have to establish mechanisms that will ensure that gains achieved become permanent and that they systems that made these gains possible can also be replicated.

Sustainability is one of Bantay Lansangan's major challenges. Despite shortfalls in some areas, Bantay Lansangan has successfully proven that road monitoring can work in the Philippines. It proved the willingness of various stakeholders and the community at large to take responsibility for engaging government in pushing for reforms in the road sector. More importantly, it showcased their willingness to reach out to other parties and engage in constant, meaningful dialogue, creating the "space for negotiation" that is critical to push initiatives with many stakeholders. Bantay Lansangan's goals should be two-fold: to propagate the Bantay Lansangan model to communities and stakeholders so that they may, on their own volition, monitor road activities when and where these are undertaken; and to institute mechanisms within the government to ensure that citizen groups may gain access to data and make recommendations, if warranted. The platform for continuous engagement should also be established

for various stakeholders to meaningfully communicate with each other.

Achieving sustainability, however, will not be possible unless Bantay Lansangan is able to engage its external and internal stakeholders effectively. Bantay Lansangan should actively communicate with and seek out its stakeholders, and, rising above differences, point them towards their common goal of reform for the Philippines road sector.

Participatory Monitoring

Community participation has emerged as key to the sustainability of citizen initiatives. When the community is aware of a project and appreciates its importance, the community itself will own it and claim responsibility for it. The beauty of community participation is that it is spontaneous. It comes from the citizenry's genuine desire to protect what is truly theirs, and it is always effective.

However, Bantay Lansangan's present design does not enlist the participation of the community as widely as some stakeholders wish it would. The sporadic assistance of a handful of regional volunteers is not sufficient to thwart fraud in the road sector. A lot can happen while monitors are not physically in attendance at the construction site.

This discontinuity in service can easily be filled by residents in the neighborhood. Monitoring gaps should not become a drawback if villagers are deployed as patrols. There will always be a surge of volunteerism if communities take

ownership of the roads and realize they are the real stakeholders and ultimate recipients of the infrastructure projects. Volunteers in Kalinga and Iloilo have noted that generating community interest is not difficult. They have noted, too, that community volunteers are the most committed and the most effective volunteers. There is nothing like having a thousand eyes watching the projects and a thousand ears listening to the deals being made by the roadside.

The most experienced volunteers know the value of the community. "Their inputs matter," says Pura Sumangil, founder of the CCAGG, who has spent decades in community work. "People are on the look out. It is important to involve them in problem-solving and decision-making because their support is invaluable. Citizens should be allowed to speak up and say what is wrong and what needs to be done. Thereafter, monitors can draft their reports, incorporating the findings of the community."

Areno says that participatory mechanisms can work in the Philippines. For the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan-Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (Kalahi-CIDSS)¹ project

¹ The flagship program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the KALAHI-CIDS mission of fighting poverty and fostering change was started in 2003. It has expanded to 4,216 barangays (village) of 183 municipalities, with an estimate 6.6 million poor Filipinos (DSWD, 2007) as beneficiaries. One of its goals of community empowerment resulted in "enhanced people's participation in barangay assemblies (BAs) and other community meetings for local development with household participation in BAs ranging from 51% to 71%, and increased volume of resources mobilized by poor communities to implement priority needs, with P0.54 in local counterpart contributions mobilized for every P1 the project provided."

of the World Bank, the community was given a role in all parts of the process: project identification, budgeting, and even the selection of contractors. “For the volunteers’ perspective, the relationship between government and the citizens can become stronger if the monitoring is institutionalized, not only on a small project basis.”

NGOs who have done similar initiatives prescribe no-fail strategies to help Bantay Lansangan. “Make an effort to do a community-based recruiting,” suggests Belisario, citing experiences of Procurement Watch in monitoring the acquisition and delivery of school desks by enlisting community participation. “Who are your primary beneficiaries? Who are in the community? Make an effort to laymanize your tools, teach the community and get them interested in the project. If you let communities see what they can benefit out of this experience, they would be more than willing to volunteer even without any remuneration.”

Training for community involvement

To make community involvement effective, training should be a high priority. There is a need to increase the competence level of citizens if they are to effectively participate in governance processes. It should be stressed that part of giving people their voice is giving them the confidence and skill to communicate.

“Education should be continuous,” says Manang Pura. “One set of training is not enough because people come and go. New volunteers join in and although they

can learn on the job, they do not absorb as much as those who were technically prepared. Group instructions should not just focus on the technicalities of road building and irrigation systems. Bantay Lansangan should also teach the finer points of report-making.”

Another concrete way of upgrading the skills of citizens is by restyling the technical manual to suit the aptitude of any unseasoned rookie on the block. Madrasto suggests translating the manual into various dialects – Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Ilocano, Ibanag, Bicolano, Visayan, Waray, Ilonggo, Chabacano, and Tausog, which has already been done for the Road User’s Survey.

“If this can be done,” says Madrasto “then the Bantay Lansangan technical manual can be used by any barangay in the land. The partnership can draw more observers even for local government unit roads, barangay roads, and farm-to-market roads. One does not need to be an expert in infrastructure development to be able to evaluate. One does not even have to be an architect or an engineer to do monitoring. Of course, engineering professionals will not agree with this approach but I believe the citizenry deserves a better deal.”

The need for closer collaboration

For Bantay Lansangan, the importance of constant communication cannot be overemphasized. Some do not appreciate the processes introduced by Bantay Lansangan, or the wisdom behind these, because these have not been explained to them in full. Few know the terms of their

engagement with Bantay Lansangan, and are unaware of any rules of engagement in the field. Due to a lack in collaboration and communication, some members are unaware of recent updates, and expectations and roles are not clearly defined. Others feel they are being ignored.

Communication among stakeholders is an indispensable ingredient in sustaining the drive and gains of Bantay Lansangan's previous two years. Everyone is impatient and wants to see progress. Everyone wants to see more impact and action, rather than mere action-planning which Bantay Lansangan, being new, is doing a lot of. Members also wish to be kept in the loop and to have a voice in decision-making. For now, some of the regional units have the impression that decisions are too centralized in Manila. Most importantly, they want to see which direction the partnership is headed through a straightforward mapping of event timelines and success indicators. Efficient collaboration and constant communication can help ensure Bantay Lansangan's long-term sustainability.

The need for stronger systems

Alongside greater coordination, stronger systems have to be established within Bantay Lansangan to strengthen its regional units. "They need to devolve and give autonomy to volunteers," says Manang Pura. "We need to create mechanisms that will give autonomy to the monitors on site."

Bantay Lansangan could, for instance, provide its volunteers the technical

assistance that they lack. To do this, Manang Pura believes that Bantay Lansangan should hire its own engineer who could help out the volunteers. "Consultants are not at our beck and call. If there are problems on the field, the engineer can be sent to look into that."

Greater safeguards also need to be built in and systems to ensure that volunteers are always ready to meet the challenges they face on the field.

Beyond contract implementation

Strengthening its systems could enable Bantay Lansangan to look at other phases such as procurement, budgeting, and project design and identification. Belisario explains that some phases of infrastructure development could be highly technical. "You need to understand the procurement process—how the project identification would feed into the procurement process by having a sound, detailed engineering. If you are not highly technical, the estimates are just a bunch of numbers. You have to look at detailed engineering. Is there double padding of costs? Did the district engineer build in man days at the same time that he is receiving a paycheck from the local government? The premise is if planning is good, then the procurement should be okay. There should be no misprocurement of failed biddings. Your actual estimates are on track and close to the mark. Once you go into project implementation, everything is seamless. There should hardly be any variation unless there is a price escalation on materials."

The problem with most road projects, says Belisario, is that feasibility studies used to start a project are almost always copied down the line. This results in failed biddings, or projects with a lot of cost overruns. This is the reason why planned roads sometimes end up going through mountains, which have to be blasted for a lot of money.

In the end, everything is interconnected. Even if the procurement phase is clean, if there is a problem with planning, then the road projected will be riddled with problems. Contract implementation follows procurement. “By then, you should be able to check if the steel bars used are

the same as that in the bidding document. But you can only know that if you know what happened during procurement,” she explained. And if the road is already paved, how can you see the grade, width or size of the steel used? Or how will you determine the mixture of the cement itself?

Bantay Lansangan, for now, is focused on contract implementation. Given its resource constraints, and the fact that it has just started to roll out operations, this is understandable. In fact, this may be a good way to establish a strong foundation for its monitoring operations. But definitely, it will have to look at ways to expand beyond post-project monitoring.

VIII. THE WAY FORWARD

For a 30-month old initiative, Bantay Lansangan has succeeded in breaking new ground, creating the negotiating space for government and civil society. The spirit of volunteerism is alive and can be easily ignited if goals are clear and expectations are well established.

To ensure that it maximizes this, Bantay Lansangan should quickly establish the systems that will enable it to continuously and effectively engage stakeholders towards reaching

their common goal of improving the Philippines road sector. Though resources may be limited, commitment levels uneven, and expectations varied, Bantay Lansangan has demonstrated that citizens and communities are willing to work together and to find common ground in establishing mechanisms for transparency and accountability. For as long as it engages stakeholders meaningfully, they can be counted on to help achieve their common cause.

The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) is a networking facility for networks promoting the “social accountability” approach to good governance. It provides capacity building through a learning-in-action approach and serves as an information gateway on social accountability tales, tools and techniques.

Social accountability is the process of constructive engagement between citizens and government in monitoring how government agencies and their officials, politicians, and service providers use public resources to deliver services, improve community welfare, and protect people’s rights.

The social accountability approach needs four basic conditions to work: a) organized, capable citizen groups; b) responsive government; c) context and cultural appropriateness; and d) access to information.

ANSA-EAP operates in a large and diverse region. It pursues a geographic strategy that currently puts priority on support and technical assistance to social accountability activities in Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines. It also follows a thematic and sector strategy by supporting mainly local social accountability efforts that deal with service delivery (education, health, local infrastructure), procurement monitoring, the youth, extractive industries, and climate change.



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