

Roundtable Discussion on the Stimulus Paper on Social Accountability and Public Education

August 18, 2010, Peace Room, Ateneo School of Government

Opening Remarks

Mr. Adel Briones, Research Coordinator of ANSA-EAP opened the Round Table Discussion and welcomed all participants. Each participant introduced themselves and gave brief information on the organization where they belong.

Concept of Social Accountability

Mr. Briones gave a short video presentation on the background of Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) showing its short history, nature of programs and activities as well as its networks and partner countries.

He explained the concept of social accountability as a process of constructive engagement between citizens and government to check the actions and decisions of government with the end goal of delivering better services, improving community welfare, and protecting people's rights.

He cited some good examples of areas where the citizens groups were able to participate in crucial decision making areas of the local government. Among the areas cited were Naga, Abra, Cambodia and Indonesia.

He discussed how constructive engagement is applied in social accountability. Constructive engagement is **not** destroying institutions, built on top-down relationship, co-optation as a neutralizing tactic and confrontation for the sake of confrontation. More specifically, constructive engagement focuses on citizen groups and government. It is evidence-based or information based, results or solutions-oriented and sustained.

Briefly, he discussed the four pillars of social accountability which refer to the conditions that create an enabling environment for constructive engagement with the government. The four pillars include (1) organized and capable citizen groups; (2) government openness; (3) access to information (4) context and cultural appropriateness.

Social Accountability Issue Paper

The purpose of doing social accountability issue papers were discussed to the participants so they will appreciate its value and relevance.

There is a wide range of governance issues that can be tackled in an issue paper but the focus should always be the SaC dimensions, specifically the four pillars of social

accountability. These include: government openness, organized and capable citizens, access to information and context and culture appropriateness.

The issue paper is meant to offer the readers/audience an agenda for further investigation and discourse. Through the paper, the author will frame questions that will address the limitations of the present discourse or suggest areas for fresh or re-directed investigation. The issue paper may also report relevant and verifiable topic or identify gaps or problematic aspects of the present discourse.

In addition, it is supposed to serve as a “challenge” paper in the sense that it aims to serve as tool for advocacy for future action. It seeks to identify policy gaps and generate possible recommendations on how to address these gaps.

For this roundtable discussion, the paper presented was a stimulus paper which served as a means to challenge the participants to give their insights on the various issues of public education. Through the insights and inputs that will be generated, a more comprehensive issue paper on public education will be developed.

Presentation of the Paper

Ms. Anne Candelaria, a faculty from Ateneo Political Science Department and former director of Ateneo Center of Education presented the highlights of the Stimulus paper on Social Accountability and Public Education. The paper seeks to explore the challenges in terms of the design and processes involved when assessing social accountability prospects in a decentralized public education system.

At the beginning of her presentation, she discussed the difference between administrative and political decentralization to provide the participants with the proper context of how decentralization operates in the country. She cited two major goals of decentralization which include a) improving the delivery of basic goods and services b) providing a space for people to participate in the various processes of government.

She emphasized that under the Local Government Code, public education was not among the basic services devolved to the local government units. Although not devolved, the Local Government Code provides for the creation of Local School Boards in all municipalities, cities and provinces to help manage the concerns of public education in their localities. Although the Code mandates the allocation of 1% of the Real Property Tax for the use of every Local School Board, towns and component cities remits 50% of its Special Education Fund collections to the Provincial Local School Board.

For purposes of discussion, seven key questions were raised by the author and in the process each participant in the forum shared their respective insights on each issue.

The seven issues discussed were as follows:

1. Is it possible to create a social accountability framework that is flexible yet rigid?

It was discussed that there is a lack of an overarching framework that will bind these social engagements together and define common success indicators and benchmark for “quality education” and social accountability practices in public education. There is a need to develop “national accountability standards” or an “accountability yardstick” for public education.

2. How can we transform our best Social Accountability ‘police’ from Community Organizers to Bureaucracy Specialists?

It was cited that the best change agents are those who have experienced the change themselves. The bigger challenge is how these change agents such as the teachers, principals and even parents can be comfortable speaking the language of the policy makers or the “elite” found on the top level of our bureaucracy.

3. Can Social Accountability Institutions and Networks be totally independent from public financing?

The counterpart funding from the Department of Education and Local Government Units should be the last option especially if it involves funding of parts of the social accountability work. The author proposed that the private academic tertiary institutions can be tapped as a partner for social accountability engagements because they understand education better and they have resources that are not tied to any public bureaucracy.

4. How can we transform government’s perception of accountability from bureaucratic to democratic?

The author discussed the concepts of bureaucratic and democratic accountability. Bureaucratic accountability was defined as the accountability to higher authority within the bureaucracy (organizational hierarchy) while democratic accountability referred to accountability to the clients or the end users of the public goods and services. The challenge is to revolutionize the culture within DepEd and LGUs and transform bureaucratic accountability into democratic accountability. In the process of developing a “counter culture”, we need to look for champions within the bureaucracy from the field to the national offices who will take the lead in making the service more responsive to the clients’ needs and in providing more avenues for public participation.

5. To whom are Social Accountability groups and networks more accountable to?

It was emphasized by the author that the government is generally perceived as the “thief” and the non-government or citizen groups as the watchdogs. Using the perspective of social accountability, the government and the citizen groups can now work as partners in pursuing common goals and aspirations. However, the social accountability groups should also be transparent in its operations and activities. They should also be open to external auditing and public scrutiny particularly in its sources of funding and resource utilization. At the same time, the citizen groups should continue to be responsible for their actions and accountable to their clients.

6. Are Social Accountability Groups able to understand and appreciate non-education factors that affect public education?

The author raised the issue of the link of political influence and patronage with the problems of public education. It was highlighted that politics play a pivotal role in sustaining gains in public education or in hampering reforms in the educational system especially at the local level. The participants agreed that the forms and methods of social accountability engagements in public education must go beyond education related-issues and arenas.

7. How do we balance goal-based and process-based occupation of social accountability?

In practice, social accountability in public education is ends-driven; results oriented (i.e National Achievement Test improvement, counting the textbooks, quality inspection of school furniture). The primary question now is whether these are the right ends to begin with. Some local government units have began to question the relevance of using global indicators such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to measure their achievements in the education sector in their localities. They tend to push for a more localized community-based assessment of students learning in addition to the NAT.

In addition, the role of the citizen groups in the planning and decision making processes of the schools and local school boards are essential in the overall sustainability of school improvement and implementation of educational reforms at the local levels.

Summary of the Main Issues Raised in the RTD

The panelists in the Round Table Discussion came from the government, private sector and parents teachers associations. They shared their respective experiences and insights about how social accountability mechanisms were applied in the management of public education. Their inputs were vital in determining policy gaps and in improving social accountability practices in the education sector in the future.

The representative from the local government explained the role of local chief executive in making social accountability effective. The insights shared by the representative from the Department of Education particularly on the processes used and outputs developed by their Local School Board can serve as a benchmark of best practices of LSB particularly in the area of local government and Department of Education partnership.

The panelists identified important issues that need to be addressed to improve the enabling environment for sustainable constructive engagement in the future. During the discussions, specific challenges were set forth by stimulus paper particularly in developing a framework or yardstick for social accountability in education which will adapt to local and cultural context. Specific cases have been cited showing the current weaknesses in the education bureaucracy and the local government units. In the forum, they have also identified existing socio-political factors which hamper social accountability action to thrive.

The discussions centered on the following issues and concerns:

Role of Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs)

The representative from the Parent Teachers Association group in Quezon City shared their experience in dealing with the principal in their school. Apparently, they were not allowed to actively participate in the formulation of school plans. Their role is limited to the monitoring of projects. They also experienced how they are left out during the local school board meetings especially when they express their opposition on some issues and programs of the school. Despite the reluctance of the principal to involve them in the school activities and management, they continue to help the teachers by giving them some rewards and financial assistance as well as support in some school projects when necessary.

The three-time mayor of San Isidro, Nueva Ecija shared a more positive story about the involvement of the Parent Teachers Association in various school programs in their province. Their local government was able to motivate the parents to share in the expenses of purchasing workbooks for the schoolchildren. After a series of meetings conducted by the LGU, the parents were able to appreciate the value of workbooks to the overall learning process so they did not resist additional expenses on their part. The harmonious relationship between the LGUs, parents and school administrators were

evident in other projects such as the family managed health programs and feeding projects initiated by the LGU of San Isidro.

The Division Superintendent of Valenzuela also shared their inspiring story of harmonious relationship with parent teachers associations in Marikina where she was first assigned. But now she is presently working in Valenzuela division office. Although she cited some problems with the PTAs which have been engaged in money-making ventures such as collection for field trips and other activities, she still recognized that most of the PTAs remain to be staunch partners of the schools. She also argued that PTAs today are already empowered but they need to know their responsibilities and limitations so as not to create problems in dealing with the school officials.

Role of Political Leaders in sustaining public education programs

The resource persons shared stories about how the local chief executives have been instrumental in sustaining public education programs. For the part of former Mayor Lorenzo of San Isidro, Nueva Ecija, they worked for the development of a system where the various education stakeholders in education which include the parents, teachers, school administrative officials, LGU and other concerned groups collaborate to provide for complete set of workbooks for English, Math and Science for all their students. The same story goes for Marikina and Valenzuela where their mayors have been supportive to education hence, they helped fund for the provision of textbooks, school buildings and teacher training. In all three areas, the local chief executives have institutionalized a system for public participation.

Impact of overpopulation to public education

The common problem affecting the public education system is the inability of the facilities and resources to cope with the needs of the growing population. The resource person from the Department of Education division office argued that there are many improvements happening in the field particularly in the provision of educational inputs such as textbooks and facilities such as classrooms. However, when we assess the state of education in a national scale, the problem on resources remain to be enormous given with the number of new enrollees or transferees to public schools every year. The student–teacher ratio, drop out rates, student-classroom ratio seem not to have significant change especially in the urban areas.

Role of leadership in transforming culture in government

Based on the discussions, it was agreed that the role of political and administrative leadership is key in transforming the bureaucratic culture in government. The culture of corruption and inefficiency can be corrected once the bureaucratic and political leaders lead by good example. The leaders' willingness to allow all stakeholders to participate

in the planning and implementation of education projects can be the first step towards building a harmonious partnership between government and citizen groups. It is possible to transform bureaucratic to democratic accountability if the political leaders will be more pro-active and open-minded.

Enhance the Utilization of School Governance Councils and School Based Management approach

Among the tools that can be utilized by the citizen groups are the existing mechanisms such as the School Governance Councils and the School Based Management Approach. In line with the thrust of the Department of Education to empower the principals and transfer funds to the schools themselves, the citizen groups can be more active to participate in the school management. They can directly help the principals formulate their school improvement plans, implement annual projects, tap community partners and develop fund raising activities for the schools.

Enhance public participation in managing education

The Division Superintendent of Valenzuela shared her experience in Marikina where they conducted series of consultative meetings with various stakeholders and discussed the problems which caused the failures of public education. She recalled that the meetings raised old issues and most of the personalities tend to blame each other for the problems and failures. But in the end, it has opened avenues to develop consensus, communication and collaboration. Once all the systems have been put in place, the different stakeholders have learned to work in partnership with each other.

Advantage of building organized groups from within the bureaucracy

The former Mayor from San Isidro, Nueva Ecija shared how the principals and district supervisors in their town collaborated with each other to push for their rights and advocacy despite the resistance of the division superintendent in the province. As a result of their joint efforts, they were able to succeed. They consider this as a proof that when a group is organized and capable, they can easily achieve their goals.

Need to develop SaC champions within the education bureaucracy

The participants agreed that social accountability is not a panacea for all the problems in the public education. However, it can pave the way to push for active citizenship where the stakeholders will not only assert for their rights but also develop a sense of collective responsibility to address the issues in public education.

Need to develop social accountability index

The participants discussed the need to have a general framework or standards on measuring the success of social accountability practices but the local government practitioners argued that the LGUs should be given discretion to innovate in the area of implementation in order to adapt to their respective cultural practices and local needs. At the local government level, the Mayor of San Isidro proposed that the success of the LGUs can be measured based on their ability to promote community participation, sustain their programs despite minimal support from national government and independence from political patronage.

Need to institutionalize measures to define role and responsibilities of PTAs

Based on the insights and inputs generated, it has been agreed that there is a need to propose to the policy makers to develop institutional measures to define the role and responsibilities of PTAs to participate in decision making processes related to school management and define their system of accountability. In addition, capacity building and training are necessary for the PTAs to be equipped in performing their tasks and functions.

Need to develop mechanisms to enhance information systems

The Department of Education continue to struggle in developing a viable and relevant information system that will reflect the actual state of education in various municipalities, cities and provinces. Given the enormous scope of their department, it is really difficult to gather all information and statistical data on resources, facilities, educational inputs etc. In addition, some schools are uncooperative to post their achievement rates online because it might have a negative effect on their reputation. There is a need to develop a common sense of appreciation of the value of being transparent about the various educational indicators per school, district and per region. In the end, accurate and reliable information about the true state of education from the regional down to the school level is essential as inputs for development of relevant policies and budgetary allocations.