

Enhancing Accountability in Education Governance: G-Watch Engagement with the Department of Education

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In 2001, the Philippines was reported to be one of the most corrupt in Asia. There was a plethora of reports on corruption that came out. Most particularly, notable anomalies in the education sectors surfaced and began to alarm the public and civil society alike. Billions of pesos were lost in procurement-related corruption in the Department of Education like the textbook scam and ghost school building projects.

Government Watch (G-Watch) was formed as a civil society response to address this worsening corruption in government. Initially seen as an anti-corruption initiative, G-Watch evolved to be a social accountability program that mobilized communities and service beneficiaries to be active monitors themselves, having the most natural interest in ensuring the services delivered to them are of good quality and of the right quantity.

Textbook Count is a pioneering initiative of G-Watch with the education department. Textbook Count ensures that the right quantity and physical quality of textbooks reach the public school students on time. G-Watch facilitated the first four (4) rounds until its “spin-off” as a government-community engagement.

Later on, G-Watch expanded its engagement with DepEd to include school-building construction (*Bayanihang Eskwela*) and other procurements (Protect Procurement Project or PRO), slowly moving to more comprehensively covering the delivery of all the critical education services and goods that ensure that the right quantity of quality education services and goods reach the public school children on time in order to improve the quality of education.

These initiatives over the years have significant successes. Although not totally attributable to G-Watch alone, G-Watch arguably contributed or catalyzed these successes.

G-Watch has helped facilitate the institutionalization of policies that promote transparency and accountability in the education department. On a procedural level, there is now an existing system for citizens to check and monitor the delivery of education services. This system supports access to information, capacity-building activities, easy-to-use tools with clear performance indicators and that generate hard data, mechanism for public-private coordination and quick response, spaces for government-civil society processing of monitoring results and soliciting response of concerned agencies and support of the public.

More substantively, Textbook Count, for one, was able to help reduce the prices of textbooks and even the length of procurement time. On the other hand, *Bayanihang Eskwela* ensured school-building projects that follow performance standards and contract specifications with very minimal reported cases of deviations from plans and with reports of corrected or pre-empted flaws or mistakes in constructions. PRO also took note of high compliance to standards with G-Watch monitoring. These initiatives were able to account for billions of pesos worth of goods ensuring that these resources were spent accurately.

G-Watch provided a venue where citizens can be involved in ensuring proper service delivery. Textbook Count, *Bayanihang Eskwela*, and PRO were able to activate, capacitate and mobilize citizen organizations and citizens as monitors. Thus, G-Watch was able to facilitate the engagement of the citizens and strengthened their capacity for claim-making while understanding more the complexities of governance.

Monitors during project activities were optimistic and festive as they see the immediate gains of their monitoring: when they see the textbooks delivered on time and in good condition and the quality SBPs constructed on time. As pointed out by one of the monitors: “to monitor is perspiring, but inspiring.”

Through the years as G-Watch has been deepening its engagement in the education sector, we have witnessed the growing openness in the government to involve citizens in their “internal” and delicate affairs like monitoring. Because of this, public perception towards the education department improved dramatically; from one of the top three most corrupt agencies in the government, the department currently stands with a relatively high public trust rating among the executive departments.

How exactly is G-Watch’s engagement in DepED done that led to these results? What can be considered the success factors of G-Watch’s engagement with DepED? The key idea is being referred to now as social accountability or society-led effort to account for government action and decisions. The G-Watch social accountability approach, to be exact, means constructive engagement between government and citizens in performance monitoring towards improvement of service delivery.

Gleaning knowledge from G-Watch’s experience in engaging DepED, the following are the features of the G-Watch social accountability approach that worked in contributing to the improvement of education service delivery, particularly for textbooks and school-building constructions.

First, G-Watch involves joint citizen-government monitoring of service delivery. This means that by watching the government, the citizens and government officials jointly monitor the performance of particular government process and constructively engage towards ensuring better services for the people.

Secondly, the G-Watch approach is preventive and pre-emptive as it clarifies the standards (processes, outputs, performance targets, etc.) of an on-going process that it monitors, hence serving as an affirmative action to ensure compliance to standards and to avoid deviations.

Thirdly, it is community-based. G-Watch continually works to empower the service beneficiaries themselves to ensure that the government actually does its job and delivers quality goods and services to them. Decentralization and localization of monitoring also allows the initiatives to be embedded in the community life for sustainability.

Fourthly, G-Watch equips the communities and citizens in monitoring critical processes in the government education service delivery by developing easy-to-use monitoring tools. These tools enumerate measurable and observable performance indicators which ordinary citizens can easily take note of during the service delivery implementation.

Lastly, through the aforementioned tools, G-Watch generates hard data and evidence that ensure objectivity and serve as bases for recommendations on how to improve the service delivery monitored.

Through these features, the G-Watch monitoring initiatives in the education department contributed to improvement in transparency, accountability and efficiency that resulted in better education services provided to school children. Hopefully, if sustained and expanded, these can show impact on development outcomes and overall accountability situation of the country.