



Helping Communities by Monitoring Infrastructure: A Case Study of the CCAGG in the Philippines

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Summary

Since 1986 the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG), a civil society organization in the Philippines, has engaged in monitoring and auditing public infrastructure projects. Because of its extensive experience, CCAGG had established a reputation as the go-to group for complaints on government infrastructure projects in the region. Although CCAGG's core activity is participatory monitoring and auditing, it is also involved in community organizing; working with indigenous cultural communities; development programs; conducting research; and engaging in activities related to ecology, peace-building, and media outreach. CCAGG has adopted an approach of constructive engagement, and at times critical collaboration, toward government. Its monitoring work has resulted in positive policy changes relating to procurement and audits.



Photo courtesy of CCAGG.

Introduction

March 2004 was supposed to be an auspicious month for farmers in Sitio Lagaoisan, a small community in the village of Callao in Villaviciosa, a town on the southwestern edge of the province of Abra, Philippines. Construction had started on a P5 million (US\$116,000) communal irrigation system that would water 45 hectares of rice fields, potentially increasing harvests from three tons per hectare to 4.25 tons.

This project was part of a number of efforts to support farmers who, as beneficiaries of a national government agrarian reform program, had just graduated from being tenants on a wealthy landowner's estate to finally owning the land themselves. These former tenants formed the Lagaosian Farmers' Irrigators Association (LFIA), which represented the farmers in the development and operation of irrigation systems. As several LFIA members still owed installments on the land, and thus had not achieved full ownership yet, to make payments they had to make the land productive — an effective irrigation system was supposed to help the farmers do this.

However, laying pipes in a mountainous province like Abra was difficult. The pipes were to draw water from a creek three kilometers away from the reservoir, and the trip from water source to water storage required crossing a gorge that is 200 meters from end to end and as much as 100 meters deep.

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A Profile of Abra

Abra is a mountainous landlocked province in the northwestern side of Luzon island between the mountains of Ilocos Norte and the Cordilleras. With 27 towns spread over an area nearly 4,000 square kilometers, Abra is smaller than Los Angeles, California, but bigger than Dallas, Texas. It is not a travel destination, rather it is an out-of-the-way realm, set back far from the main highway from the capital, Manila. Although Abra is rich in natural resources — abundant forests and minerals, such as gold — the province ranks among the poorest in the Philippines.

Three-fourths of Abra's population of 240,000 is Ilocano, tracing their roots mainly to the neighboring provinces of Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte. The rest are Tingguian, the collective term referring to the ethno-linguistic groups that inhabit Abra: Banao, Masadi-it, Maeng, Mabaca, Adasen, Balatoc, Binongan, Gubang, Danak. According to the historian William Henry Scott, "Tingguian" came from the Malay word *tingue* or *tinguanes*, which means "high" or "elevated," and he describes these tribes as mountain people who managed to resist Spanish colonial rule.

Abra has no city, and its lone urban center is its capital, Bangued, in which 20 percent of the province's population is concentrated. It is also the province's commercial, academic, and media center. The dominant economic activity in Abra is agriculture, rice being its major food commodity. A common complaint among farmers is the difficulty of transporting their crops, due to the lack of roads, especially in Abra's far flung villages. The Provincial Engineer's Office reports that out of Abra's 462 kilometers of provincial roads, 75 percent are unpaved. The same is true for the 243km national roads that link the province to its neighbors and the rest of Luzon. Two-thirds of these national roads are still gravel or dirt.

In the 1990s, during the term of President Fidel V. Ramos, Abra was listed as one of 20 priority provinces (out of a total of 72 nationwide) into which government planned to pour resources for badly needed services, such as health and education. These provinces were classified as such under Ramos' Social Reform Agenda for having, among other problems, widespread poverty and a festering armed conflict.

As of 2009, according to the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB), the proportion of poor families to the total number of families in the Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR) — Benguet, Abra, and Ifugao — was 17.1 percent, considered an improvement from the 18.6 percent in 2006. In all three CAR provinces poverty has worsened. In Abra, as of 2006, family poverty was 32.6 percent, rising slightly to 33.3 in 2009. The poverty rate among individuals was 41 percent in 2006, compared to 23 percent for the region, and in 2009 it was 43.7 percent.

Abra distinguishes itself from its neighbors in another aspect: there has been a troubling breakdown of peace and order. In 2008, according to the Philippine National Police Regional Office, 60 percent of all murders in the region happened in Abra. The province is slowly gaining a reputation as the "murder capital of the north," and in the first quarter of 2011, 36 killings were reported to the police, nearly thrice the number in 2010 (an election year when incidents of violence are high).

But the statistics agency seems to see a glimmer of hope in Abra. NSCB data show that nine Abra towns landed in the top 10 municipalities in the region with the highest good government index (GGI). The GGI measures how well local government units manage resources, given the incomes from local sources and the expenditures for social services such as education and health.

The irrigation system was set to be completed by December 2005, but this date was moved to March 2007 due to various problems. By early 2008 the irrigation system was finally "complete" — except for one problem: owing to faulty design the system could not actually deliver water.

Engineers from the government's National Irrigation Administration (NIA) had implemented a "catenary" system, in which the pipes would sag from the weight of the water as it tried to make its way across the gorge. Unfortunately, there was not enough momentum for the water to rise from the low point of the dip and flow to the land on the far side of the gorge. Originally the water transport system was designed as a "parabola" where steel towers would be built near both ends of the gorge, which would keep the pipes from sagging from the weight of the water. However, early in the project the NIA abandoned the parabola design because the towers had cracked as a result of a misalignment of the pipe cables.

When the farmers reported that the irrigation system was a failure, the NIA said there was nothing it could do because the funds had been depleted. In a report on the project in the Irrigation Project Monitoring Manual, NIA engineers also told the farmers “to accept the project as it is, in its present state of disrepair, so that fresh money could come in, which would enable repair of the poor and ailing irrigation system.”

By February 2008 the farmers had sought the assistance of the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG), a civil society organization (CSO) that had established a reputation as the go-to group for complaints on government infrastructure projects because of its extensive monitoring of such projects in the province. CCAGG then presided over meetings with the NIA and other involved agencies.

The LFIA took the position, supported by CCAGG, that the irrigation system was neither a gift nor a grant from the government, and so not only did the farmers have a right to demand that it be fixed but the government had a responsibility to do so. This position was based on the fact that the farmers had shouldered much of the cost of the system, in part by providing labor for the construction, and because the LFIA was required to pay the amortization costs. As a communal irrigation system — a small-scale project covering less than 1,000 hectares, for which the NIA advanced the project construction cost — it was to be taken over by an irrigators’ association, which had agreed to repay the cost. Thus the farmers had paid, and would continue to pay, for a nonfunctioning system, so the government was obliged to remedy the mistakes and deliver a working system.

CCAGG helped the community take on the role of “monitors,” urging them to not simply be passive recipients of government projects. “They have to participate because the project is theirs. They have to make sure it reaches its maximum lifespan, and not fall into disrepair so soon,” said CCAGG chair, Pura Sumangil.

In discussions, CCAGG and the farmers convinced the NIA to agree to contribute more funds to rectify the faulty irrigation pipes and to defer the LFIA’s amortization payments. It took the NIA two more years to fix the irrigation system, which finally became operational in 2010.

Since 1986 CCAGG has engaged in monitoring public infrastructure projects, which it defines as the process of checking and determining whether a contractor or government agency has complied with the plans and specifications of a particular project. Since it was formed, CCAGG has examined over 600 infrastructure projects worth some P300 million pesos (nearly \$7 million), ranging from village roads to municipal roads to provincial and national roads; from school buildings to irrigation systems and deep wells, flood control projects, and bridges (see Table 1). Over time, CCAGG has developed expertise, as well as a level of influence with the government agencies in their locality, that no other CSO in Abra, or anywhere else in the country, has been able to achieve.

The purpose of monitoring is to “safeguard...scarce public resources thus ensuring quality projects through effective management,” said the CCAGG in one of its monitoring reports. “Monitors exact social accountability from the erring party.”

Monitoring entails not only matching the technical specifications of a plan with actual implementation but also scrutinizing the budget to see if the funds were well spent.

“CCAGG has a track record,” said Teresita Pajara, provincial resident auditor of the Commission on Audit, the government institution that examines and audits all government expenditures. “People in Abra are more afraid of CCAGG than they are of the Commission on Audit. . . . There are no other nongovernmental organizations here. No other group would dare be an NGO here.”

But CCAGG is unlike other CSOs. It started out as a people’s organization with mass membership from across Abra. For years its members donated time and effort to monitoring infrastructure projects without expecting compensation. It has evolved into a nongovernmental organization with salaried staff and funded projects. A core of professionals runs the CCAGG and simultaneously implement multi-million peso projects that involve activities ranging from community organizing and training to media work.

CCAGG’s monitoring work has led it into many different advocacy directions. When it started in the 1980s, monitoring activities took the group to the Abra hinterlands, where it was accepted by communist rebels. This made CCAGG the logical choice to provide assistance when the government began efforts to promote peace with communist insurgents in the 1990s. CCAGG became part of the local amnesty boards and helped the

rebels surrender. The organization assisted thousands in making the transition back to society by providing them with livelihood assistance, which became another one of its projects.

Table 1. Projects monitored by CCAGG, 1987 – 2006

Project Type	Number of contracts monitored	Amount (Philippine Pesos)
Barangay (Village) Roads	145	53,430,881.03
Municipal Roads	29	5,205,248.90
Provincial Roads	46	67,757,993.74
National Roads	17	31,442,591.74
Flood control	42	16,949,415.87
School buildings	149	38,785,736.21
Deep wells	123	15,529,694.44
Bridges	19	55,523,901.52
1987 CEDP projects	100	7,368,428.15
TOTAL	670	P291,993,891.60

Roaming Abra to check on infrastructure projects also brought CCAGG into constant contact with the Tingguian tribes and elders, some of whom the CCAGG assisted in filing claims over ancestral domains. Indigenous communities like the Tingguians have always languished at the margins of society in the Philippines, even as mining and logging companies coveted the natural resources found on indigenous peoples' ancestral lands.

CCAGG provided expertise and staff support to help these communities map ancestral territory and to document tribal customs, practices, and history — all of which are required for Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims or Titles (CADCs or CADTs). These certificates granted indigenous peoples the right to manage their land and resources.

A familiarity with Abra's terrain and territory also led to CCAGG's involvement in environment issues, such as reforestation and biodiversity mapping and preservation. Because many of CCAGG's members are also community organizers, they either help form or work with existing community organizations in Abra's villages and towns to undertake monitoring.

Unlike other CSOs that keep the government at arms' length, from the start CCAGG has adopted an approach of constructive engagement, and at times critical collaboration, toward government. As part of this strategy, it has worked with the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), the Commission on Audit (COA), Civil Service Commission, the Departments of Agriculture (DA), Environment, Social Work and Education, as well as the different local government units of the province.

An offshoot of its various programs is CCAGG's media advocacy work. It produces a weekly radio program called "Allangungan" (Echo) broadcast on radio station DZPA, which is owned and run by the Catholic Church. CCAGG discusses hot topics in "CCAGG Monitor," its regular column in Abra Today, a community newspaper published by the Diocese of Bangued.

Monitoring, however, is CCAGG's core and constant activity. "No matter what, we don't abandon monitoring," said Sumangil, who describes good governance as the "umbrella" that covers all other advocacy issues and efforts. CCAGG members always make time for monitoring, pausing to check on government projects whenever they find themselves in a particular town for other activities like promoting peace or protecting biodiversity. Please refer to Annex 1 to see select programs and projects implemented by the CCAGG from 1986-2011.

In the early years, CCAGG had hardly any source of funds except the Catholic Church which, aside from loaning the group its operational funds, also provided it with an office and vehicles needed for CCAGG's monitoring work. Today, after 25 years, it has implemented at least 25 projects and programs in various sectors and locales worth nearly P50 million (US\$1.17 million). (See Table 2)

CCAGG has just wrapped up an engagement under the Abra Water and Irrigation Systems to monitor infrastructure projects and is also in the final stages of its Budget Partnership Initiative and Volunteer Management Program. Other ongoing and recent CCAGG projects and initiatives include:

- the P10 million (US\$233,628) Social Mobilization, Participatory Investment Planning and Land Titling component of the Cordillera Highland Agricultural Resources Management Project (CHARMP) (to implement CHARMP, CCAGG works with various government agencies led by the Department of Agriculture);
- a project to monitor the implementation of the Conditional Cash Transfer Program by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, a P21-billion-peso (almost \$500 million) effort to help the poorest of the poor by giving them cash directly (CCAGG will track the program's implementation in Abra);
- the Anti-Red Tape Act and Report Card Survey in partnership with the Civil Service Commission, which, in July and August 2011, aimed to assess the Abra provincial government's compliance with the Citizens Charter called "Kari nga Agserbi" (Promise to Serve). (The Charter is an initiative of the provincial government itself and cuts red tape by listing the services it offers to citizens, and the accompanying systems for to citizens to access those services.); and
- the "Expanding and Diversifying the National Systems of Protected Areas in the Philippines," also known as the "New Conservation Areas in the Philippines Project" (EDNSTPAP or NewCAPP). One of the project sites is the Balbalasang-Balbalan National Park in neighboring Kalinga province, which is located within the 20,864 hectare ancestral domain of the Banao tribe.

The NewCAPP expands and strengthens the terrestrial protected area system in the Philippines by developing new models and building local community capacity to effectively manage the system. The NewCAPP is a five-year (2009-2014) project of the Philippine government, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) financial institution.

In addition to these efforts, CCAGG also serves as the secretariat of the Abra Multi-Sectoral Group for Peace and Development, which works to address peace and order problems.

CCAGG is the only CSO in Abra to have stayed alive in spite of the political situation, continuing to do what it originally set out to do — help watch over government programs and projects. But being a watchdog CSO in Abra is no mean feat. The province is notorious for being warlord country, where political dynasties rule and politicians maintain private armed groups. (See Box 2.)

The risks of exposing corruption committed by politicians and government officials are all too real in Abra. And CCAGG only has to look back to the murder of lawyer George Tugadi, who was working with CCAGG when he was gunned down in 1987, to be reminded of these risks. But CCAGG members like to say that their "love for Abra" conquers the fear and anxiety of working in one of the most dangerous provinces in the Philippines.

Abra's Dangerous Politics

Monitoring infrastructure projects may seem like a harmless enough undertaking. But not in Abra, where local officials do not appreciate — and are not used to — citizens poking their noses into government projects, examining technical specifications and grilling government functionaries on matters like costs and timetables. "Here, if you ask questions, you are likely to end up by the wayside dead the next morning," said CCAGG chair Pura Sumangil. For this reason, it is necessary to make community groups strong, and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to face local executives. The CCAGG, however, also maintains cordial relations with local executives, preferring to adopt a stance of critical collaboration.

In Abra, there is reason to fear politicians, most of them known or believed to maintain private armies, which are blamed for violence, especially during election years. The political violence is said to have started in the 1960s when gubernatorial candidates hired goons to intimidate opponents (or borrowed inmates from the national penitentiary) from nearby Ilocos Sur, a province also dominated by warlords. This was described by journalist Artha Kira Paredes in “Democracy at Gunpoint: Election-related Violence in the Philippines.”¹

The goons formed the private armies that dynasties employed to eliminate opponents or sway voters through coercion. Clans further tightened their grip on power by fielding various members to different positions in their province. The more members a political clan manages to elect into office, the bigger the returns. Some politicians would not even balk at running for barangay captain (village chief) just to keep a foot in the door of politics, as was the case with one defeated mayoralty candidate in 2010.

During the 2010 elections, Paredes listed the members of the two clans — the Valera-Bernos and Seares-Luna clans — that fought it out for the different positions in Abra. (See table below).

Table 2. Members of the Valera-Bernos and Seares-Luna clans that fought for positions in Abra

Cecilia Seares-Luna Lost in her second bid for district representative		Dominic Valera Lost in his second bid for Bangued mayor (Elected as barangay captain of Zone 5, Bangued on October 25, 2010) Andres Bernos Former Abra governor	
Relation: Second Cousins (Seares-Luna’s and Valera’s fathers are first cousins)			
Other relatives/in-laws that ran for public office or are incumbent public officials:			
Name/Relation	Position Aspired/Election Results	Name/Relation	Position Aspired/Election Results
Ryan Luna (Son)	Bangued mayor (Won)	Ma. Jocelyn “Joy” Valera-Bernos (Daughter)	District representative (Won)
Cromwell Luna (Son)	Tineg mayor (Lost)	Joseph Domino Valera (Son)	Bangued councilor (Won)
Lara Haya Luna (Daughter)	Lagayan vice mayor (Won)	Sylvia Valera-Go (Daughter)	Zone 5, Bangued barangay captain
Allan Seares (Nephew)	Bangued vice mayor (Won)	Janssen Valera (Daughter -in-law)	Pidigan vice mayor (Won)
Robert Victor Seares (Nephew)	Dolores mayor (Won)	Esther Bernos (Mother -in-law of Joy)	Danglas mayor (Unopposed/Won)
Leonidas Seares (Brother)	Villaviciosa vice mayor (Lost)	Joseph Sto. Nino Bernos (Brother -in-law of Joy)	La Paz mayor (Unopposed/Won)
Sesy Seares (Cousin -in-law)	Dolores councilor (Lost)	Menchie Bernos (wife of Joseph)	La Paz vice mayor (Unopposed/Won)
Correa Seares (Cousin -in-law)	Provincial Board member (Lost)		
Mark Seares (Nephew)	Zone 4, Bangued barangay captain (reelected in 2010)		

Source: Paredes, A. K. (2011). *Abra: Bloody struggle for control of public funds*. In Y. T. Chua, & L. Rimban (Eds.), *Democracy at Gunpoint: Election-related Violence in the Philippines*. The Asia Foundation.

Over the years, the names have changed but the configuration remains the same: Two clans, usually related by blood or affinity, fought for control over the province. The clan's prize for winning the governorship — or any local elective position for that matter — was not only a rule that could last decades, but also other rewards in the form of government contracts and projects, the power to appoint friends and relatives, and the power to do as they pleased with the funds of the town province.

In Abra, it is well known that politicians own construction companies that bid for public works projects such as roads and bridges. Construction firms are usually listed in the names of dummies or fronts, but no one in the province is left with any doubt as to who owns them.

Politicians have also been known to appoint relatives to lucrative local agencies such as the water board, which implements water and irrigation projects or the electric cooperative. It would not be far-fetched for a member or chair of the water board or the electric cooperative to be the wife, daughter, son, sibling, or parent of the mayor.

And then there is a bigger prize: the power over the local government's Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), the annual amount a city, town, or province gets from the national government as its share of revenue. (See table below)

It is no coincidence that the positions of mayor in the two towns with the highest amounts of IRA were also the most hotly contested. The highest IRA-earner is the town of Tineg, a backwater town situated in the far reaches of Abra's northeastern section that is only 80 kms from the capital Bangued, but whose farthest villages can be reached only on foot after at least a day's travel. Despite the amount of money Tineg receives, it still does not have a municipal building (one was still under construction as of 2010).

Paredes reported that the highest number of violent incidents in the 2010 elections occurred in Tineg and the capital, Bangued. Bangued, meanwhile, continues to be a hotbed of criminal activity. In the first quarter of 2011 alone, the provincial unit of the Philippine National Police had 36 shooting incidents, triple the number in 2010, which was ironically an election year.

Table 3. Ranking of towns based on Internal Revenue Allotments for 2009 (IRA computation depending on land area and population)

Municipality	IRA (2009) ¹	Area (in sq km) ²	Population (2007)
Tineg	P68 million	744.8	4,317
Bangued	P57 million	105.7	46,179
Tube	P46 million	409.9	5,588
Lacub	P37 million	295.3	3,050
Malibcong	P36 million	283.2	3,354
Licuan-Baay	P35 million	256.4	3,990
Bucay	P34 million	127.6	16,266
Lagayan	P32 million	216	4,134
Lagangilang	P32 million	101.4	13,490
Boliney	P32 million	216.9	3,349
Luba	P30 million	148.3	6,363
Danglas	P29 million	152.7	5,411
La Paz	P29 million	51.4	14,658
Tayum	P29 million	61.1	13,360
Dolores	P28 million	80.4	10,787
Sallapadan	P28 million	106.5	6,370
Pilar	P27 million	66.1	9,792
Pidigan	P26 million	49.2	11,280
Manabo	P26 million	111	10,538
San Juan	P26 million	64.1	9,714
Langiden	P25 million	116.3	3,242
Villaviciosa	P25 million	89.8	5,147
Daguioman	P23 million	101	1,916
San Quintin	P23 million	66.6	5,341
Peñarubia	P22 million	38.3	6,443
San Isidro	P21 million	48.1	4,647
Bucloc	P20 million	50	2,227
ABRA PROVINCE	P470 million	4,158.10	230,953

CCAGG History and Mission

CCAGG traces its beginnings to the February 1986 People Power Revolution, also known as EDSA 1, when then-President Ferdinand Marcos was ousted and replaced by democracy icon Corazon Aquino. Months earlier, bowing to national and international pressure, Marcos had called for snap elections to be held on 6 February. His lone opponent was Corazon Aquino, widow of the former opposition senator, Benigno Aquino Jr., who had been gunned down in broad daylight as he was returning from exile in 1983. By 1986, the movement against 20 years of the graft-ridden and abusive Marcos government had snowballed and, along with others, formed the election watchdog group, the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL).

The Catholic Church supported NAMFREL with its nationwide grassroots presence. In several Abra towns, NAMFREL chairmen included the parish priests — diocesan as well as those who belonged to the Society of Divine Word (SVD), which had taken root in Abra — and lay leaders. NAMFREL's mission was to guard the people's vote, a dangerous but urgent one given Marcos' track record of having manipulated elections since 1969, when he first ran for re-election, and then in the 1970s after he placed the country under martial law.

As expected, Marcos was emerging as the winner as the votes were counted following the 6 February election, much to the consternation and frustration of various sectors. Within one of those sectors was a group of computer programmers who walked out of the canvassing of votes in Manila, suggesting that Marcos was again rigging the elections. Not long after came the turning point, leading to what Filipinos label as EDSA 1, when two of Marcos' most trusted men — his Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Armed Forces Vice Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos — announced their defection and repudiation of Marcos. The two holed themselves up at EDSA, the police and military headquarters on Manila's main avenue. Within hours, then Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin called on Filipinos to surround EDSA to prevent military units still loyal to Marcos from firing at the two defectors.

CCAGG's Formation

"We were actually in the midst of an organizational meeting in Bangued when news of the EDSA Revolution reached us," said Pura Sumangil, CCAGG chair. Some 100 NAMFREL volunteers had converged in Bangued, all fresh from various experiences around the recently concluded snap elections.

Abra was then what it continues to be now: an election hotspot. During the Marcos years, the family that ruled Abra was that of his close friend and law school classmate, former Deputy Defense Minister Carmelo Barbero, while many local officials were pro-Marcos.

It was this Marcos machinery that NAMFREL volunteers faced when they took part in the February 1986 election. In Langiden town, for example, "Nobody could talk against Marcos," said CCAGG founding member Aniceta Baltar, then NAMFREL chair of Langiden. She remembers keeping a whole day's watch over ballot boxes on 6 February 1986, only to see the chief of police and his men arrive, fully armed, to confiscate three boxes as voting booths closed.

"It was frightening . . . our volunteers were all crying," Baltar remembers. Still, the NAMFREL volunteers gave chase, using the parish's vehicles to follow the police to where they were taking the ballot boxes: the mayor's house. There was nothing NAMFREL volunteers could do at that point, Baltar said, but report the incident to their colleagues.

"Marcos was the common enemy," said Fr. Adonis Bringas, then assistant parish priest of Bangued. "We were bound together, whether those above ground or below ground," he added, referring to the underground leftist movement that was at its strongest just before Marcos was ousted, and whose members also worked with the church.

And so the NAMFREL volunteers could relate to the drama that erupted in Manila on 22 February 1986, when Enrile and Ramos broke away from the Marcos government, accusing him of cheating in the snap elections.

It was in those heady days that CCAGG was born. "We had mixed feelings and were anxious for the safety of everyone in Manila," Sumangil said.

The NAMFREL members decided to constitute themselves into a group with a purpose and a mission broader than guarding ballot boxes and watching elections. After EDSA, founding CCAGG members said

they realized that they would be facing a fight of a different nature. “There would be a new government, but the system was still there,” Bringas recalled discussing with fellow founders. There seemed to be a bright future ahead, but the same officials and the same bureaucracy would be in it. And so Abra’s former NAMFREL volunteers decided that they would take on the role of “fiscalizers” — acting as watchdogs of government performance and making sure that the new government, and those that would follow, fulfill the promise of being democratic, transparent, and accountable.

That mission was later embodied in CCAGG’s goals, as it envisioned that a “new order” would soon dawn on the Philippines and Abra. The new organization would:

- catalyze the revitalization and formulation of autonomous groups on geographic and sectoral levels;
- establish permanent structures for regular and direct consultation with the public on their needs, problems, and interests;
- deal effectively with all other agencies/institutions to ensure that the public’s interests are on the political agenda;
- support government programs that align with the organization’s goals;
- monitor (“fiscalize”) government and semi-government agencies and contribute to building a new order based on the renewed power of the people in the quest for justice and peace; and
- undertake projects that aim to uplift the socioeconomic and political conditions of the people of Abra.

At the start, CCAGG had a mass membership of local volunteers based in Abra’s different towns. The Catholic Church again played a crucial role by providing CCAGG with its startup capital, a rent-free home, and needed equipment and other resources. The CCAGG set up shop at the Church-owned DZPA building that was the nerve center of the SVD congregation and the Diocese. The building also housed the Diocese’s radio station, DZPA, as well as its paper, Abra Today, the province’s lone community newspaper. Sharing the space with media entities provided CCAGG with opportunities to pursue its mission of spreading the word of good governance.

CCAGG was formally registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission as a nonstock, nonprofit organization in 1988, some two years after it came into existence and one year after it called to task the DPWH over the controversial case involving 11 of its personnel. (See Box 3.) Being registered with the SEC accorded CCAGG the status of an independent CSO rather than a group operating under the umbrella of the church. Church leaders at that time thought it necessary to distinguish CCAGG as a “nonprofit” CSO that is autonomous from the church, and one with its own social action arm through which it directly undertakes community-based programs.

“CCAGG is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission and there’s an advantage to that,” said Bishop Artemio Rillera, who worked with the CCAGG in Bangued in the late 1980s and 1990s and is now Bishop of San Fernando in La Union province. Rillera said it shielded the church from the controversy that came with fighting corruption, and from the ire of politicians who thought that by backing the CCAGG, the church was being one-sided and fighting them.

CCAGG’s work of monitoring infrastructure projects often put it on a collision course with some government functionaries, who viewed monitoring work as adversarial. The mayor, governor, or member of congress who initiated the project being monitored, or helped source funds for it, would not always welcome scrutiny. “If the local chief executives have nothing to hide or are democratic, they should invite independent monitors,” said Provincial Planning and Development Officer Philip Tingonong, who was himself an active CCAGG member in the early years and continues to work with the group on various projects.

Tingonong said monitoring should be viewed as a management tool to ensure that a project is carried out according to plan. But a number of officials don’t view it this way and are offended when CCAGG monitors come calling, asking for access to project documents and other information. The complaint is: Why do you fight us? We are so devout, helping the church in our own way,” Rillera laments, quoting politicians who chide priests and bishops for supporting groups like CCAGG.

During the Marcos years and shortly after, the Marcos legacy and machinery was Filipinos’ common enemy, and fighting it was a moral duty that justified even church involvement. The CCAGG was an example of an “apostolate,” and the Catholic Church’s immersion in issues of social justice and peace was strong, according to Bringas, a priest who went on leave after entering politics and becoming a municipal councilor in San Quintin town in 2010.

But people like to think that the common enemy is gone, though it was replaced by 100 different demons, so to speak. “Now here in Abra you don’t know who your enemy is anymore,” said Bringas. “It has metamorphosed into a more systematic and violent one. Before, you could identify them. You recognize them and once you see them, you get out.”

The church thus maintains a distance from the CCAGG (or at least appears to), even if it deserves much credit for helping start the organization, and even if some of CCAGG’s key personalities are priests and church laity.

Soon enough though, CCAGG’s work attracted the attention of funding agencies that provided it with financial support to enable it to stand on its own, and the broader public began to see its advocacy efforts as unique and groundbreaking.

CCAGG’S Monitoring Work

In the 1980s, when CCAGG was just starting out, the state of Abra’s infrastructure was dismal — a reflection of decades of neglect, mismanagement, and corruption. Roads that were needed to connect Abra’s mountainous and hilly areas to each other and to the outside world were either bad or nonexistent. What was supposed to be the main highway linking Abra to its neighbor to the west, Ilocos Sur province, and the rest of Northern Luzon, for example, was a mere gravel road, illustrating how national roads were “below par compared to other provinces” in Region I, the administrative unit to which Abra belonged at the time.

The Abra District Engineering Office presented those findings to the regional director in a report in October 1987. The Abra office also said the province had “no comprehensive flood control systems,” resulting in floodwaters destroying infrastructure projects and agriculture. There was lack of adequate barangay (village) roads to penetrate the hinterlands, resulting in the affected municipalities having economies that remained “depressed, making them vulnerable to subversive advances.” There also were too few school buildings, and those that existed had dilapidated rooms into which students were crowded.

Abra was in this state when then-President Corazon Aquino marshaled CSOs to assist in implementing the Community Employment and Development Program (CEDP). The program allotted P3.9 billion (US\$90 million) for various projects — including roads, irrigation systems, and school buildings — to generate jobs and spur economic recovery after the economic devastation of the Marcos years.

One of the program’s key features was the involvement of “non-government organizations and private volunteer groups in monitoring the progress of the program,” said the monitoring manual produced by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the Ministry of Budget. The CSOs were to take on the task of oversight — monitor the progress of projects, provide information to be used in assessing their impact, disseminate information about CEDP to the community, and report to government on the progress of implementation. The CSOs were also deemed “signing witnesses” of procurement pre-bids and awards committees.

In exchange, the NEDA would train the participating civil society organizations’ members on the technical aspects of monitoring projects, provide them with a list of projects to be monitored, and ensure that concerned agencies release documents that would facilitate monitoring. Critical to connecting the monitoring with greater accountability and improved outcomes the NEDA committed to taking into account CSOs’ recommendations.

Among the organizations tapped to monitor the CEDP projects were local chapters of Jaycees, the Philippine Institute of Certified Public Accountants, and the local chapters of the NAMFREL, which had played a key role in the EDSA revolution. In places where these three did not have a presence, local civil society organizations were tapped, according to an assessment report on the CEDP. For the province of Abra, CCAGG, with its identity as the local chapter of the NAMFREL, was tapped to take part in the CEDP.

CCAGG found its calling in the CEDP. The organization was ideally positioned to implement the program and fulfill all its requirements because it had among its members engineers engaged in infrastructure projects. Among these was the Abra Irrigation Project (AIP), a special project of the Diocese of Abra and funded by Misereor (the German Bishops’ Organization for Development Cooperation) to irrigate farmlands in Tayum, Bangued, and Pidigan. Through the project, the Diocese coordinated with government agencies, such as the NIA, which was building irrigation systems in other parts of Abra.

“We also helped in the construction of Diocesan projects like chapels and schools and sometimes undertook their repair,” said engineer Irene Bringas, one of CCAGG’s founding members, who worked with the AIP. She would put to good use her training as an engineer, her experience with the AIP, and her familiarity with construction practices as the head of CCAGG’s Monitoring Team until the mid-1990s.

Another AIP engineer who would move on to become head of CCAGG’s monitoring team was Rene Brazuela, who was trained under the AIP River Project. Even Sumangil was at one point general manager of the AIP, active in the Diocese’s many activities; and Aniceta Baltar also was once the head of AIP’s Education and Information Section.

Several CCAGG members went through the CEDP training and would eventually pass on the technical knowledge to the community, multiplying the organization’s workforce in the task of monitoring.

The case that started it all

In 1987, the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government did the unthinkable: It exposed the long-running practice by public works officials of declaring projects completed even if they were not. The CCAGG unearthed such a case when the provincial office of the Department of Public Works and Highways, which was in charge of building roads and bridges, took out an advertisement in a regional newspaper claiming it had finished 20 projects, even though some were still under construction.

CCAGG members had just undergone a training given by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), as a prelude to a nationwide campaign to monitor infrastructure projects. The government of then-President Corazon Aquino was new, and it was taking the idea of “people empowerment” seriously, relying on grassroots organizations for assistance in good governance. A tangible way of doing this was through infrastructure project monitoring.

CCAGG put its training to the test when, in March 1987, it asked the DPWH Central Office to “send someone who could not be bribed” to verify the claims made in the advertisement in the *Norluzonian Courier*. At that time, the DPWH office sent a team to investigate, which returned to Manila with a list of findings validating CCAGG’s initial report. In a letter to CCAGG, DPWH officials acknowledged that, among other issues, “projects were certified as 100 percent complete although construction was ongoing.” The team also found that “except for Soot Bridge, all road projects were found to have no approved plans and specifications and programs of work, and the estimates were approved without the required detailed engineering in violation of rules and regulations.”

Then-DPWH Secretary Vicente Jayme said, “Based on the report and recommendation of our investigating team, we have already prepared formal administrative charges against all officials/employees who appear to be involved or responsible for the abovementioned irregularities.” The administrative case, however, would drag on for various reasons. Jayme would be transferred to the Department of Finance and two other secretaries would replace him before the matter would be resolved.

Two years later — and only after much pressure from CCAGG and people from Abra — the DPWH main office punished the Abra-DPWH personnel through suspensions and transfers. The penalties were lighter than expected — most implicated were suspended, which was the minimum for such offenses — but the case would lead to changes in the procurement system, in general, and in the Department of Public Works and Highways, in particular. The case became a triumph for good government at the local level, and CCAGG’s style of fighting corruption became a model emulated by other civil society organizations.

On 15 February 1988, just two years after the group was founded, CCAGG was chosen “Outstanding NGO in Region I for Community Service.” CCAGG members traveled to Manila to receive the Plaque of Appreciation, handed to them by no less than President Cory Aquino herself.

Looking back, one of the DPWH engineers implicated in the case defended his involvement, insisting most of the projects were nearly completed. Besides, said the engineer who declined to be named, the projects had to be declared completed “because at that time, it was almost end of the year, and if I wasn’t going to do that (certify projects as completed), the money would revert to the treasury,” he said.

Infrastructure projects can get delayed for a variety of reasons. Although they are supposed to follow a Program of Work (POW) that details the cost estimates, materials and standards, many projects deviate from the POW. A

study on corruption by Eric Batalla, a professor from the De la Salle University in Manila, found that road project POWs sometimes are not based on actual onsite information and, therefore, do not match the situation on the ground. “Surveys are not conducted to determine the quantity of materials that will be needed. Instead, only estimates are provided. In many instances, the Program of Work itself is deficient,” Batalla said.

And then there is the actual budget to implement the project, which is sometimes reduced by up to half after commissions and kickbacks are deducted, with a long list of officials getting their shares—from the auditor, the district engineers, chairman of the barangay or village, the mayor, governor and the member of the House of Representatives. Over the years, various officials and agencies have exposed the huge losses from corruption, among them the World Bank, the Ombudsman, lawmakers, and whistleblowers.

Although much has remained the same in Abra, much has also changed since the case of the 11 engineers. Local officials agree that the CCAGG has done much to “straighten” the DPWH and that things would have been worse without the group around.

“Then we coordinate with them, inform them that we will be visiting the project site,” Brazuela said. “There we also seek out those complaining.” But those making complaints are not required to identify themselves or show up at project sites for CCAGG to take action.

Eventually, CCAGG developed the “participatory” style of monitoring, in which local residents were trained to take on this task themselves, since they would be the main end-users of the projects. “It was a product of reflection,” Sumangil said, as CCAGG members realized “we can’t be there all the time.” However, there were instances when DPWH refused to honor community monitors’ reports. The solution was for CCAGG engineers to confirm their reports.

Even housewives could be monitors, as all they had to do was observe the process. “Monitoring, you see, is preparing the community, empowering them,” Sumangil added. “The task of the community is not only to be passive recipients, but active ones.”

Dangers, Temptations, and Participatory Monitoring

The road to monitoring infrastructure projects was paved with all sorts of risks. Armed groups roamed the remote reaches of Abra, and CCAGG monitors had to tread carefully in such areas. Courtesy calls and constant communication with local officials and tribal elders became a must.

At first, government engineers who were supervising the projects and dealing with contractors belittled CCAGG reports because not all monitors were engineers. Additionally, CCAGG could not be at project sites at all times.

When questioned by engineers and contractors about their monitoring activities, CCAGG volunteers were told to cite Section 23, Article II of the Constitution, which states: “The state shall encourage non-government community-based or sectoral organizations that promote the welfare of the nation.” Monitors were also taught to commit to heart Sections 15 and 16 of the Constitution, which provide for people’s participation in the affairs of governance.

The CCAGG was apparently being seen as effective in getting errant contractors to implement projects properly. In a memo on 26 May 1988, the DPWH regional director instructed the Abra provincial office that henceforth, “no project shall be paid without the monitoring report of the CCAGG.” This meant that contractors could not collect their fees from the DPWH until the CCAGG had certified in writing that everything was in order.

The DPWH regional director also advised the Abra office to include the CCAGG in meetings of the bids and awards committee, to ensure that “bidding and awarding of projects are done honestly and efficiently.” This requirement placed contractors at the mercy of CCAGG monitors, who because of this faced the challenge of maintaining independence during visits to project sites. Monitors were (and still are) instructed to pack — aside from the standard steel tape, record book, camera, and voice tape recorder — their own lunches and snacks, and to refuse offers of food and money from government engineers and contractors.

“We didn’t like contractors feeding us, tapping our shoulders and saying, ‘*Bahala na kayo*’ (Take care of us),” said CCAGG chair, Pura Sumangil. There have been times when CCAGG monitors bore the brunt of project personnel’s frustration because they “wouldn’t take a bottle of orange.”

Weaker activists would have fallen for some of the offers. In one town, said CCAGG member and project coordinator, Belmore Pacapac, “we were even offered a percentage of the income from *jueteng* [the illegal numbers game rampant all over the country], so that we could have money for social development projects.”

Even when the group was at its neediest, said CCAGG founding member Aniceta Baltar, “we never asked for anything from them (contractors), even bond paper. If we needed bond paper, we bought bond paper on credit from the store outside our office, but we never asked them for any help.”

CCAGG has accumulated such a wealth of information and experience in monitoring that it eventually created a monitoring manual, “Laymanized Manual on Monitoring Infrastructure Projects by a Practitioner.” The manual incorporates information, techniques, and standards from different sources, including Republic Act 9184, also known as the Government Procurement Reform Act, and the National Economic and Development Authority’s Monitoring Tool.

Abra and Beyond

Among anti-corruption CSOs, CCAGG is the acknowledged leader and expert in monitoring, although Sumangil hastens to add, “Monitoring is not an invention of the CCAGG. It is a program of the government; it’s just that nobody bothered with it before.” In recent years, CCAGG has lent this expertise to national anti-corruption endeavors, including the *Bantay Eskwela* (School Watch) InfraWatch project of the Procurement Watch, Inc. CCAGG engineers also worked from October 2010 to January 2011 with Parent-Teacher Associations to monitor the repair and rehabilitation of 66 schools that had been devastated by typhoon Ondoy in September 2009 in Metro Manila.

CCAGG also chairs the national road project monitoring coalition, *Bantay Lansangan* (Road Watch), which kept an eye on expenditures made by the DPWH in implementing the second phase of the National Roads Improvement and Management Project (NRIMP-2) in 14 regions in the country. This was a US\$232 million project implemented through a World Bank loan.

CCAGG engineers, organizers, and project coordinators likewise have traveled to Bicol, the southern region of the main Philippine island of Luzon, sharing experiences and training prospective monitors to oversee government infrastructure. CCAGG is also a founding member of the Northern Luzon Coalition for Good Government that has brought together 30 organizations on anti-corruption issues.

Among the 30, one of the most promising is the Kalinga Apayao Religious Sector Association (KARSA), which has been monitoring the construction of public works projects in that province.

The Impact of CCAGG’s Monitoring Work

The impact of CCAGG’s monitoring work can be seen in policy changes relating to procurement and audits. For instance, the 1987 case against the Abra provincial office of the DPWH described above prompted the department to set up a Complaints and Action Center to receive information about the status of projects being implemented. On its website, the DPWH provides an online “complaints and feedback” mechanism, as well as a section listing civil society organizations with which it has worked in monitoring road projects.

“We can say that DPWH did a lot of shaping up,” said Pajara of the Commission on Audit. To this day, she said, inspection reports are a crucial prerequisite before contractors can collect from the government.

It was not only the DPWH that was forced to shape up, but also private contractors. In what is considered another CCAGG milestone, in 1990 the organization uncovered defective construction on a portion of the Abra-Ilocos Sur Road after being tipped off by student monitors from the Divine Word College of Bangued, who been observing workers at the job site. The matter was brought to the DPWH, and inspectors from its Quality Assurance Unit validated the findings, prompting the contractor to “remove and replace” the defective portion of the road at his own expense.

The government under Corazon Aquino, in part inspired by the type of effective monitoring that CCAGG was doing, took steps to institutionalize people's participation in the monitoring of government funds. She signed Executive Order No. 175, which appointed CSOs to sit as observers on procurement pre-bids and awards committees for government projects, and as regular members of the project monitoring committees. Aquino also signed Executive Order No. 376, which established a government structure for monitoring projects, the Regional Project Monitoring and Evaluation System (RPMES) under the Regional Development Councils, where the NEDA sits as secretariat.

Toward the end of Aquino's term, the Philippine Congress enacted the Local Government Code that made specific provisions for CSO participation in village, town, or provincial councils that were expected to draft and implement the multi-sectoral development plan of the local government unit. And, in 2003 congress passed the Republic Act 9184, also known as the Government Procurement Reform Act, which mandates the presence of CSO observers in procurement pre-bids and awards committees and in all stages of the procurement process.

The CCAGG also made an impact on the Commission on Audit when, in August 2000, it signed a Memorandum of Agreement with COA to undertake a participatory audit to review 23 road projects in Abra. The joint audit was part of a project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that sought to involve citizens in government audit activities to enhance transparency and accountability. It focused on value-for-money, also known as a performance audit, checking whether public funds were well spent and met planned objectives.

The participatory audit yielded crucial information that reinforced the value of CCAGG's work and validated the need for infrastructure projects in Abra's upland communities. Based on information from residents of affected areas, the Participatory Audit Report found that better roads meant less expensive maintenance of public utility vehicles, safer and more comfortable trips, shorter travel time, more flexibility and mobility for economic and social activities, the empowerment of women, and better goods and service delivery.

There was also a downside, CCAGG and COA auditors noted, in that vehicles were now driving too fast and causing accidents, landslides were occurring because of the "disturbance of the mountainsides," some embankments were not filled up, and the curing of concrete was neglected. Some residents also "feared the entry of capitalists," or the exposure of natural resource wealth, such as that extracted in mines once tucked away within the territory of the Tingguians (who also said that roads would mean an end to their simple lives).

The joint audit was considered successful and resulted in the COA publishing a manual, "A Guide to the Conduct of Participatory Audit." In October 2001 newly installed COA Commissioner Guillermo Carague authorized the continuation of participatory audits. However, the participatory audit stopped for two reasons. One was a difference over "audit methodology." According to the the UNDP. "The COA staff objected to demands made by the CCAGG staff to discuss preliminary audit findings with community members. In turn, CCAGG staff were concerned that restricting official audits to the post-project period increased the likelihoods of losing potentially valuable findings." The other reason had to do with "sustainability," or simply that participatory audits were no longer a priority of then newly installed administration of COA Commissioner Carague, raising doubts of whether such a project would enjoy official support.

The participatory audit remains an achievement for CCAGG. "We are the first NGO to have worked with the COA in doing government audits. So from Abra, because the results were good, it was replicated in Leyte, Camarines Norte, Baguio, and Benguet," said Sumangil.

Helping Communities, Building Peace

Monitoring infrastructure projects was a key activity of CCAGG, but not the only one. In 1993 the CCAGG general assembly listed seven other activities that would form part of its program, aside from participatory monitoring and auditing. These were:

- community organizing;
- concern for indigenous cultural communities;
- development programs;
- ecology;

- peace building;
- research; and
- “Allangugan,” CCAGG’s weekly radio program.

These activities came from what was by then CCAGG’s six years of experience in engaging in monitoring work and related efforts. Through the years, a number of involvements stand out in CCAGG’s history.

Disaster and Relief Operations

CCAGG was part of Operation Balik-Abra, a plan by the Catholic Church and civil society groups to rescue “provincemates” who were stranded in Baguio City when disaster struck on 16 July 1990. That day, an earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale hit the city, which was the main educational center of the north. The earthquake also damaged the city of Cabanatuan and other towns of the Nueva Ecija province in northeastern Luzon.

In Baguio the ground shook for 45 seconds, leveling buildings and killing more than 1,000 people. Most of the casualties were pulled out from under the city’s collapsed five-star hotel, the Hyatt Terraces. Elsewhere in the city, residential areas where students’ boarding houses and dormitories were situated were also affected.

Baltar wrote about the relief effort in a thesis she submitted as part of the M.A. degree in Development Management she was pursuing at the University of the Philippines in Los Baños. She noted that Operation Balik-Abra managed to send a team to Baguio, scour the city, and locate 200 Abreños — mostly students — fetch them, and transport them back to Abra. At the same time it provided food and other necessities to 100 other Abreño families.

Little did these Abra rescuers realize, however, that disaster had struck within their own backyard. “News about the destruction of the municipalities of Bucloc, Daguioman, Boliney, and Sallapadan in Abra came much later because these areas were isolated. Reports came only through villagers who came down after days of arduous travel,” Baltar wrote. The Philippine fault passes through these Abra towns, which, as it turned out, suffered scores of dead and injured, with hundreds of families displaced and in need of relief and rehabilitation assistance.

Various organizations, including CCAGG, formed the Inter-NGO Disaster Relief Services (INDRS) to implement a three-year program, starting with relief provision and ending by helping to rehabilitate communities by restoring damaged rice fields or roads. Baltar wrote that the project was an example of how a community rose up to rebuild after disaster with the help of CSOs.

To this day, said CCAGG founding member Irene Bringas, people in the once disaster-stricken towns still remember “the NGO,” referring to the INDRS and its members: the Abra Irrigation Project, CCAGG, the Divine Word College of Bangued, Diocesan Social Action Center, DZPA, *Abra Today*, and the Abra Gimpong Association. “We stayed and finished the project (from 1991) until 1993. Some of the staff who were with me are still with the CCAGG today,” Bringas said.

Facilitating Peace

CCAGG also counts among its landmark undertakings its involvement in peace efforts in the Cordilleras. In the 1970s the region was a hotbed of opposition to the Marcos dictatorship, which granted big businesses the permit to exploit the natural resources of the Cordilleras. The two most controversial projects were the Chico River Dam Project in Kalinga, and the logging concession awarded to Cellophil Resources Corporation to harvest pine trees or *almaciga* trees over thousands of hectares of forests in Abra and Kalinga.

Opposition to the Marcos dictatorship eventually took the form of an armed struggle, and in the 1970s the Cordillera region was home to a growing number of communist New People’s Army (NPA) cadres, including the SVD priest Father Conrado Balweg. From the late 1980s until the 1990s, CCAGG would encounter these rebels in its forays into the Abra hinterlands as it conducted monitoring work. CCAGG and these rebels eventually struck up a *modus vivendi*: CCAGG was allowed to do monitoring work in what was considered rebel territory as long as the group stayed silent about the NPA presence in these areas.

By the 1990s, the CCAGG became a logical choice for a conduit between the parties when leftist rebels engaged in peace talks with the government. CCAGG was tapped to act as the provincial secretariat of the National Unification Commission, the government body that was trying to make peace with various armed groups in the country.

CCAGG organized provincial consultations that inevitably touched on infrastructure projects. Minutes from one such consultation tell the story: “One participant wondered why infrastructure projects, poverty, injustices, etc., are the topics being discussed in peace consultations since these should be properly addressed on a development and planning council meeting.” The point would be made later that the absence of infrastructure projects was linked to poverty in the province’s remotest areas. “Results of the preparatory grassroots consultation overwhelmingly affirmed that these are substantive issues affecting peace . . . massive poverty, undelivered basic services, graft and corruption,” the report said. CCAGG later also played a crucial role in the government’s amnesty program, convincing rebels to come down from the hills and providing them with livelihood opportunities.

Decades later, CCAGG would earn back what it invested over years of working with the communities and the different forces that live and work in Abra. In May 2011, for example, CCAGG held one of the many consultations it organized for people’s organizations, this one titled “Consultation on the Cordillera Autonomy.” Attendees included former rebel leader Vicente Garcia, now a farmer and member of an irrigators’ association in the town of Lacub in the northeastern side of the province that borders the province of Apayao.

Garcia had been a commander of the Lumbaya company, the NPA unit responsible for the Cordilleras and parts of the nearby provinces of Ilocos Sur, Ilocos Norte, and Cagayan. In the 1990s the NPA was disintegrating, and a splinter group, the Cordillera People’s Liberation Army (CPLA), was on the rise. The charismatic Father Balweg broke off from the NPA and made the CPLA the armed force to contend with in the Cordilleras. In 1986 Corazon Aquino herself travelled to Mount Data in the Cordilleras to sign a peace agreement with Balweg.

At that time, Garcia said, he opted to avail himself of the government’s rebel returnee program. “When I came back, it was the CCAGG that took me in and helped process my amnesty papers,” Garcia recalled. It was also the CCAGG women who provided assistance when his wife gave birth to their first child. “I owe CCAGG a debt of gratitude.”

Garcia spends five hours travelling the 50-km distance from his village in Lacub to Bangué — a rough ride over roads that turn muddy when the rains come — to attend forums and trainings organized by CCAGG. Garcia and many others like him form the backbone of CCAGG’s network on the ground. Garcia took part in the CCAGG project to monitor the reforestation conducted by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in the 1990s and is now being trained to participate more actively in monitoring local government processes.

The peace that was to have resulted from the 1986 Mount Data agreement between the government and the CPLA did not materialize, and CPLA forces continued to exist within and control some villages in the Cordilleras. In 2010 when Aquino’s son, Benigno Simeon Aquino III, became President, he picked up from where his mother left off and resumed talks with the CPLA. In July 2011 the government and the CPLA signed another agreement, this time turning the CPLA into a socioeconomic organization. From 1986 until 2011, CCAGG stood as the private sector representative, working with various agencies of government, as well as community organizations to help forge peace in the Cordilleras.

Lessons and Challenges in Good Governance

Despite its 25 years of monitoring work and the national and international awards and honors that CCAGG has earned for its efforts, there are areas of anti-corruption work that remain out of the organization’s scope. One is litigation and the filing of cases against wrongdoing government officials and contractors. Although CCAGG members collect mountains of evidence, the group has stayed away from legal battles, which are costly and time consuming. “The agencies themselves will do the cleansing,” said CCAGG chair, Pura Sumangil. By submitting its monitoring reports, CCAGG passes on to concerned government agencies the responsibility of enforcing applicable rules on erring bureaucrats or contractors.

This was the case even in 1987 when it called attention to the 11 DPWH engineers. Since then, CCAGG has never been a party to any case or complaint. “We only serve as witnesses,” Sumangil added.

And then there is the difficulty of accessing certain local government units, which remain off limits to CCAGG. For instance, the CCAGG is still unwelcome in the provincial capitol where both the current and previous governors have refused to give the group access to information, and do not allow it to monitor provincial projects.

This obstacle, however, has not stopped CCAGG from doing its work. In 2009 an eight-member CCAGG team checked on the provincial government’s 13-km Pidigan-San Isidro Road, even though the governor’s office had denied them such documents as the Program of Work. CCAGG visited the site, conducted interviews, and wrote a report on the newly completed road, which was funded by a loan from the Land Bank of the Philippines.

“Diagonal and longitudinal cracks embroidered many parts of the road,” the CCAGG said in its unsolicited report to the governor. “A lot of these could be categorized as severely damage[d] and calibrated action would suggest that no amount of engineering remedy could be installed to arrest further decay.”

Further interviews with government engineers revealed that the reason for the cracks was that the 10-wheeler truck of a mayor had passed through on the road before the concrete could set and “attain maturity.” The team’s unsolicited advice to the governor was to refer to provisions of the law on procurement for infrastructure projects, which would hold the contractor responsible for failing to ensure that he deliver the road in tiptop shape. The governor did not respond to the report.

Abra provincial planning officer Philip Tingonong laments the attitude that the governor and most mayors have toward CCAGG. “They look at CCAGG as the enemy because they view monitoring as fault-finding and do not appreciate its value,” he said. This is why CCAGG may not have as large an impact on local officials as might be expected.

But CCAGG’s impact can be seen in communities, Tingonong said. “When people see something wrong, such as a badly built project, they give feedback to CCAGG, which then sends its monitors.”

Indeed, if there is a bottom line to CCAGG’s work, it is what Sumangil called “capacitation,” or “empowerment of the people,” a buzzword first heard when democracy heroine Corazon Aquino assumed the presidency in 1986 and sought to give back to those who helped put her in power.

That ideal eventually found its way into the 1987 Constitution. Article XIII, Section 6 states that “the right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political and economic decision-making shall not be abridged.”

Twenty-five years later in Abra, CCAGG keeps that ideal alive. “It just so happened that the vehicle to people empowerment is infrastructure monitoring,” Sumangil said. Holding government to account, with public participation, has always been the hallmark of CCAGG activities, she said. And so, even if on the surface little seems to have changed in Abra politics, changes have taken place among the people.

But a new generation of Abreños has grown up since 1986, and the challenge now is to transfer the ideals of public empowerment and good governance to them. CCAGG program coordinator Mary Mariano is one staff member who is working on the youth sector, having started as a member of the Young CCAGG herself in the 1980s.

“The strategy we will use is the law. What does the law say? We have a Local Government Code that says provides for people’s participation. Who are they? Are the youth represented? How does the local government spend the five percent youth fund?” said Mariano, describing the strategy CCAGG will use in inciting interest in good governance among youths.

CCAGG is also training civil society organizations to take a more active role in local development councils, where NGO participation is provided for by law. Through local councils, people are expected to not only take part in oversight functions of monitoring and assessing government performance but also to have a say in budget planning and helping decide best where and how to spend taxpayers’ money.

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Annex 1: Select Programs & Projects Implemented by the CCAGG from 1986-2011

Title of Program/Project	Period of Implementation	Funding Partner	Total Funds - Philippine pesos	Total Funds - USD
1. Conditional Cash Transfer Program Watch	June 2011 to May 2012	Partnership for Transparency Fund	P1479530	\$33,936.90
2. Social Mobilization, Participatory Investment Planning and Land Titling under the Cordillera Highland Agricultural Resource Management Project II (CHARMP 2)	June 2010 to May 2012	Department of Agriculture-Cordillera Administrative Region, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Asian Development Bank	P10045595.92	\$230,422.00
3. Institution and Partnership Building	August 2009 to July 2011	International Budget Partnership	P3096000	\$73,376.90
4. Abra Water and Irrigation Systems (AWIS) Watch	September 2009 to May 2011	Partnership for Transparency Fund	P1073000	\$24,689.70
5. United Nations Development Programme – Government of the Philippines (UNDP-GOP) Fostering Democratic Governance Portfolio: Expansion of Partnership in Southern Luzon and Documentation of CCAGG's Social Audit Processes	March 2010 to December 2010	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Partnership with CSC	P990000	\$22,552.20
6. Capacitating the Indigenous People's Organizations in the Cordilleras and Provincial Agrarian Reform Coordinating Committees as Community-based Program/Projects Monitors	July 2007 to June 2010	United Kingdom's Global Environment Facility through the British Embassy in Manila	P8000000	\$171,979.00
7. Support to the Operations and Sustainability of the Interfaced Indigenous Dap-ay and Modern Official Governance System for Peace and	15 June 2009 to 31 December 2009	Conflict Prevention and Peace Building Program under the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the	P449989.25	\$9,693.01

Development		Peace Process		
8. Fostering Effective Partnership for Good Governance: Strengthening and Expansion of CCAGG Partners and Replication of Community-Based Monitoring in Region I and CAR	May 2009 to December 2009	UNDP	P790000	\$17,017.00
9 Agrarian Reform Infrastructure Support Project (ARISP – II) Institutional development Component/Cooperative Development	July 2002 up to the present (ongoing)	DAR, ARISP II, Japan Bank of International Cooperation & Government of the Philippines	P350000	\$8,421.90
10. Participatory Project Monitoring	Three years – 1 st quarter of 2002 to December 2004	United Nations Development Program	P2242114.84	\$39,874.00
11. Community-Based Biodiversity Conservation Program for Buasao Watershed & Mt. Poswey	April 1999 to June 2003 July 2003 to July 2004	Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE)	P5360534 P1025080	\$99,638.20 \$18,278.90
12. Coalition Building for Good Governance	January 2003 to December 2003	Diocese of Rottenburg, Stuttgart, Germany	P842000	\$15,105.80
13. Continuing Tri-Media Approach for Good Governance	January 2002 to January 2003	Diocese of Stuttgart, Germany	P1488000	\$27,609.20
14. KALAHAI – Rural Monitoring Project	May 2003 to October 2003	National anti- Poverty Commission	P425000	\$7,674.25
15. Rapid Site Assessment of Malanas Watershed & other Mountains of the Cordillera Mountain Range	15 November 2001 to 15 February 2002	FPE	P250000	\$4,863.81
16. Participatory Audit-CCAGG/Commission on Audit (COA)/UNDP	24 October to 2 December 2001	UNDP & COA Central	P1875460	\$35,621.30
17. Pre-School Service Contracting	October 1998 to May 1999	DECS-CAR	P1500600	\$39,463.50

(PSC) Program				
18. Site Assessment & Advocacy for Buasao Watershed and Mt. Poswey	1 June 1995 to 31 March 1998	Foundation for the Philippine Environment	P3113688	\$82,263.90
19. Community Organizing for the Forest Lease Management Agreement (FLMA)	December 1993 to December 1997	DENR-CAR	P1205127	\$29,393.30
20. Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Boliney, Abra (Inter-NGO Disaster Response Services or INDRS)	1991 to May 1993	CEBEMO Netherlands & OXFAM, Canada thru PDAP	P7000000	\$162,790.69
Special Projects of the CCAGG in Areas Covered by the National Agrarian Reform Program, "Agrarian Reform Communities," Including Poblacion & Callao Villaviciosa, Abra				
Rice Mill Project of the Kibbasan	November to December 1995	Australian Direct Action program & Proponent Counterpart	P126000	\$4,800.00
Women's Multi-Purpose Cooperative				
Common Services Facility for Maguey	November to December 1995	Australian Direct Action program & Proponent Counterpart	P148280	\$5,648.76
Fiber & Fiber craft Production				
		TOTAL	P 52,875,999.01	\$1,165,114.22