

Responding to Reality: People, Politics and Technology in Facilitating Local Involvement in OGP

A Case Study from the Philippines



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Web: www.makingallvoicescount.org | **Email:** info@makingallvoicescount.org | **Twitter:** [@allvoicescount](https://twitter.com/allvoicescount)





INCITEGov and ANSA-EAP

Patrick Lim and Gladys Selosa

Setting the scene

The Philippines is one of eight founding member countries of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which is “a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.”¹ From January 2012 to June 2017, the Philippine government crafted and implemented three OGP National Action Plans (NAPs). Under the Aquino Administration (2010–2016), the Philippines was commended for being ahead of the curve in terms of OGP implementation, with several of the country’s OGP commitments receiving international recognition.²

However, the process of crafting OGP NAPs has also received criticism that “[civil society organizations] and citizens did not play a significant role in the development process of the Philippines’ second action plan.”³ Additionally, observers stated that approved action plans did not reflect “the everyday concerns of citizens and persistent issues confronting civil society.”⁴ While ambitious commitments have been made towards attaining greater transparency, accountability and participation, the majority of commitments in the first three action plans appealed only to a subset of civil society organizations (CSOs) that were primarily focused on governance issues. Issues of service delivery and policy/sectoral issues important to other segments of society were not responded to directly.

The crafting of the first two action plans was mostly driven by the national government, even if the process was overseen by the Philippine OGP (PH-OGP) Steering Committee. The committee had an equal number of government and non-government representatives, and included members from four sectors: civil society, business associations, public sector unions and the academe. The process improved during the crafting of the third

¹ Open Government Partnership, “[About OGP](#),” 5 September (OGP, 2017).

² The Philippines was awarded the Bright Spots award for its Citizen Participatory Audit commitment at the 2013 OGP summit, third prize for its commitment to Bottom-up Budgeting at the 2014 OGP awards and the 2016 EITI Chairs Award for its commitment to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.

³ Mangahas, Malou, [Independent Reporting Mechanism: The Philippines Progress Report 2013–2015](#) (OGP, 2016).

⁴ Acheron, Joy, [Independent Reporting Mechanism: The Philippines Progress Report 2015–2017](#) (OGP, 2017).



action plan, as non-government stakeholders jointly decided with their government counterparts on which proposed commitments would be included in the plan. Business representatives also included two new proposed commitments from their sector.

Despite these improvements, CSOs and stakeholders outside the Steering Committee gave little input in the commitments proposed by the Philippine government and were unable to secure concrete OGP commitments that were well aligned to their priorities. Out of the 40 OGP commitments made by the Philippine government in its first three action plans, only two commitments—those proposed by business associations—were not proposed by the government. Commitments proposed by civil society and local stakeholders have not been included in previous action plans. This reflects their weak influence in shaping the Philippine National Action Plans. Such outcomes lead to low ownership by these stakeholders in the process, and heighten the risks that may affect the sustainability of OGP reform. For OGP to attain relevance beyond the Steering Committee and a few implementing agencies, this important issue needed to be addressed. The Philippines' fourth OGP National Action Plan needed to include commitments that directly addressed issues and concerns identified by local stakeholders—local governments, local CSOs and communities—if OGP was to attain deeper and broader ownership by stakeholders in the country and ultimately contribute to changes that matter to citizens across the Philippines.

Our theory of change

To address this issue, INCITEGov, ANSA-EAP and ULAP collaborated to take advantage of their respective organizations' strengths and pursue three complementary pathways through which local stakeholders could influence and shape the commitments that would be included in the next NAP.⁵

The first pathway strengthened civil society leadership in the PH-OGP Steering Committee by establishing an independent non-government secretariat to support proactive engagement of non-government Steering Committee members. This involved dedicated staff working hand-in-hand with the government secretariat in designing the process for crafting the action plan and organizing its related activities, particularly the subnational consultations on the action plan. INCITEGov—a Steering Committee

⁵ See [this diagram of the project's theory of change](#)



Member since 2014 and informal leader among non-government Steering Committee members—led this component.

The second pathway piloted open government initiatives at the local level. This entailed piloting a harmonized local planning and budgeting process, linking the process in a village to its municipality and its corresponding province, which included capacity building for civil society leaders and local government officials. Our aim was to provide a proof-of-concept that would generate ownership in the initiative among the communities and local governments, which they could later propose as a commitment in the provincial or national action plan. In parallel, the province would also pilot the crafting of a provincial-level OGP action plan, the first such attempt in the Philippines. Through these two pilot exercises, we hoped that several initiatives or a provincial-level action plan could be proposed to the Steering Committee for inclusion in the next National Action Plan. ANSA-EAP, with its extensive experience in community-level participatory budgeting (e.g., Check My Barangay), led the component on participatory budgeting, while ULAP administered the component on crafting a provincial OGP action plan. For this pathway, a major assumption was that the project would be implemented in a province where the provincial government was open to OGP and where local CSOs had the capacity to engage with the provincial government. The project team implemented the pilot initiatives in the Province of Bohol, which met these criteria.

For the third pathway, ULAP—an umbrella organization of local government associations—oriented a broad section of local governments on OGP, presented the experiences in the pilot exercises undertaken under the second pathway, and proposed policies or initiatives that could be undertaken by national government to encourage local governments to identify and implement their own OGP commitments.

These three pathways were expected to generate at least four new proposed commitments not included in the government's previous draft, with at least two of these commitments being included in the approved fourth OGP National Action Plan. The inclusion of locally proposed commitments would serve as proof of stronger local influence in the process. Aside from the adoption of proposed commitments, the project was also expected to formally establish a government-recognized non-government secretariat, as well as increase the number of local stakeholder representatives to the Steering Committee from the current two to four.

A key assumption of the project design was that the newly elected national government would continue its engagement with OGP given its nature as an international commitment, as well as campaign pronouncements made by President Rodrigo Duterte in support of government transparency and



accountability. During implementation, however, we quickly discovered that the risk was not as minimal as initially presumed.

Practicing adaptation in context

Although a new president from a different political party was elected in the May 2016 national elections, initially we perceived a minimal risk of the new government discontinuing OGP, given the high level of support from within the bureaucracy, the appointment of key officials supportive of citizen participation and the nature of OGP as an international commitment. However, the appointment of Dr. Benjamin Diokno as Secretary of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) shattered our confidence in that assumption.

Secretary Diokno had been a vocal critic of his predecessor, Secretary Butch Abad, who had served as OGP lead minister and had been its primary champion within the country since 2011. It was feared that Diokno would discontinue many of Abad's initiatives, particularly the Bottom-up Budgeting program, which the former had strongly criticized and opposed. Furthermore, in the first few months of the new administration, the new secretary had asked whether OGP was a worthwhile investment for the government.

We identified an immediate need to ensure that the new government would understand, appreciate and commit to continuing OGP. Thus, we, together with other OGP champions within the bureaucracy and the OGP Support Unit, shared information and carried out timely interventions, including:

- Inviting the new DBM Secretary to give the keynote address at the OGP regional conference, which was held at the Asian Development Bank's Manila office in the first month of the new administration, which facilitated Diokno's participation in the event.
- Engaging persistently with the secretary through briefings on OGP from DBM bureaucrats, meetings with the OGP Support Unit and participation in international events, such as the OGP side event at the United Nations General Assembly and at the OGP summit in Paris.
- Regular dialogue between the secretary and the civil society co-chair of the PH-OGP Steering Committee.
- Inclusion of the Office of the Cabinet Secretary in the PH-OGP Steering Committee, considering their leadership over the new administration's participatory governance efforts.

Except for the invitation to the regional conference, these interventions were undertaken during the project's implementation in response to the



uncertainty of the government's commitment to OGP and were not part of the project's initial design. The various interventions succeeded, as Diokno publicly stated at the OGP regional conference that the Duterte administration was committed to sustaining its engagement with OGP. The secretary's commitment was also affirmed by his presence in all Steering Committee meetings and consultation activities for the OGP National Action Plan⁶. Furthermore, the Philippine government ran for a seat in the global OGP Steering Committee.

The unexpected challenges brought about by the change in administration required timely and coordinated intervention from different actors inside and outside government, as well as in and beyond the country. The coalition of OGP champions from DBM, INCITEGov, the OGP Support Unit and other international partners collectively made use of opportunities relevant to the situation to carry out timely interventions. This convinced the new administration to continue actively engaging with OGP and to develop new OGP champions, especially at the upper levels of political leadership under the new government.

At the provincial level, major adjustments in project implementation also became necessary. During the presentation of the project to Bohol Governor Ed Chatto, the governor requested that voting on priority provincial projects—a component of the pilot participatory budgeting initiative—be conducted in all barangays, rather than in just a number of selected municipalities. This expanded the initiative's coverage from around a hundred barangays to over a thousand. Such an effort involved major realignments in the project budget and required project staff to remain in the province for several months, rather than a number of weeks. The leader of this component, ANSA-EAP, took advantage of the opportunity to implement the pilot initiative on a massive scale.

The project staff's hard work paid off, as the governor was pleased with the results of community voting on priority projects. The voting was indeed conducted in all villages, during which 104,398 citizens cast their vote. Governor Chatto thus committed to repeat the process the following year. Local CSOs engaged in the process also showed strong ownership of the initiative and to date have already written the provincial government to pass legislation to institutionalize this process within the province.⁷ Other governors also responded favorably when the results of this exercise were presented to them during the national policy dialogue; many of them

⁶ Secretary Diokno attended and chaired all PH-OGP Steering Committee meetings as of this publication, which were held on 3 October 2016, 27 February 2017 and 21 June 2017. He also attended all open government dialogues during which the draft National Action Plan was presented for consultation. These were conducted in Davao City on 22 March 2017, Cebu City on 25 April 2017 and Metro Manila on 18 May 2017. These activities are explained and presented in detail in the fourth OGP National Action Plan which can be downloaded [here](#).

⁷ See [video of this pilot exercise here](#).



expressed surprise that such an initiative could be undertaken across a whole province at minimal expense.

Lastly, two proposed uses of technology in the project were not executed. Initially, it was proposed that voting for the priority projects in the participatory budgeting initiative was to be conducted through online voting and Short Messaging System (SMS). However, many areas did not have Internet access, and SMS signals were weak in some of the more remote areas. Instead, with the support of the provincial government, the project proponents were instead able to conduct face-to-face and door-to-door voting. Second, crowdsourcing and consultation activities on the OGP action plan using social media were not implemented. This was because communications consultants hired for the project advised against this, given the proliferation of pro- and anti-government trolls online, unverified social media accounts and identities, and a contentious social media environment⁸. As a result, the project expanded the number of consultations and round table discussions on OGP commitments.

Overall, the project succeeded in proposing two new commitments, which are now included in the approved action plan: “Shelter Development for Informal Settler Families through Community Organizing and Community Development Approach,” which was proposed via the subnational consultation held in Mindanao, and the “Institutionalization of Open Legislation” in three provincial governments, which was proposed by Bohol Province, as a result of the project’s pilot initiatives in that province. When this proposal was presented to the national government, a decision was made to expand this initiative to cover two other provinces.

Our thoughts on the adaptive learning approach

Implementing donor-funded development projects often feels like a tick-box exercise, where the project implementer is fixated on implementing one activity after another, based on what has been committed in approved project proposals. The adaptive learning approach gave us space to ask whether activities in the original project design were still strategic, and whether they would contribute to the intended project outcomes—especially in the face of contingencies and changing political realities. The assurance of flexibility by the partner donor made this possible, so that changes, if necessary, were permitted and indeed encouraged.

⁸ See “Trolls and triumph: a digital battle in the Philippines,” BBC News, 7 December 2016; Ressa, Maria A., “Propaganda war: Weaponizing the internet,” Rappler, 3 October 2016; Almarion-Gonzalez, Chi, “Unmasking the trolls: Spin masters behind fake accounts, news sites,” ABC CBN News, 20 January 2017.



For this project in particular—on the strengthening of local stakeholder influence in OGP initiatives in the Philippines—the emphasis on reflection and learning allowed us to ask insightful questions, not only among ourselves, but also with project stakeholders. Asking such questions throughout project implementation—rather than at the end of the project—allowed each of our organizations to make timely strategic shifts in our activities. We discontinued planned interventions that, due to changes in the social and political context, no longer seemed viable, such as using social media to solicit inputs for the next action plan or using online voting for priority projects. Instead, we responded to the context, focusing resources on urgent developments, such as the risk of the government halting its OGP engagement.

The quarterly face-to-face workshops also proved invaluable in helping us to identify problems that were not immediately obvious, or to reframe certain situations using a different perspective. For example, the design of our consultations for the NAP had focused on making the process more inclusive. However, we initially failed to recognize that most of the inputs from the consultations were on sectoral and policy matters, which did not fit neatly into the OGP template for commitments. At first, we informed the project participants that these proposals—such as increasing funding for organic agriculture or completing the land reform program—could not be included as OGP commitments. It was only upon further discussion and reflection that we realized that it was possible to come up with commitments that supported such policy objectives. Unfortunately, this would require facilitation and a long discussion with government agencies for which the project proponents had inadequate time. However, this insight was communicated to the new Steering Committee members who were elected at the end of this project, in the hope that this insight will be pursued.

The future

Civil society members of the PH-OGP Steering Committee have always recognized that OGP is an invited space for civil society actors to collaborate with and challenge government on programs and initiatives where there can be agreement and cooperation. When the board of INCITEGov set new priorities for the organizations—priorities that the project implementers recognized could not be pursued through OGP—the organization decided to no longer run for another term in the Steering Committee. Consequently, it was deemed necessary to transfer the secretariat to another organization.



Nonetheless, INCITEGov still recognizes the need to preserve the space of collaboration between the government and civil society actors that was made possible by OGP, and it has invested time and resources to ensure a smooth transition of civil society representatives in the Steering Committee. A new set of representatives was elected in August 2017, and they have subsequently elected a new co-chair, Andrea Patricia Sarenas, chair of MINCODE. The non-government secretariat will be transferred to CODE-NGO. The adaptive learning component of this project contributed to ensuring that collected learning from this project was documented, which has in turn facilitated a smooth handover to the new leadership and secretariat. ANSA-EAP continues to be committed to engaging OGP in the Philippines, despite its unsuccessful bid for a seat in the PH-OGP Steering Committee. Meanwhile, ULAP continues to have a permanent seat in the Steering Committee as the local government representative.

We have imparted two major lessons from this project to the new leadership. First, there is a need to further localize OGP, which is also in line with the thrust of the global Steering Committee. Civil society actors and local governments should help the national government design a mechanism to encourage local governments to collaborate with local CSOs in identifying their own OGP commitments. Second, more technical work and better preparation is needed to craft OGP commitments that support broader policy and sectoral advocacy among civil society and citizens. Therefore, the new leadership should already begin the work of preparing proposed OGP commitments for the next action plan.

In Bohol, the future of what INCITEGov, ANSA-EAP and ULAP started looks bright, despite a few challenges. Although the local government was satisfied with the results of the participatory budgeting exercise—and committed to repeat the process in the next budgeting process—the team felt that their commitment needed to be strengthened further. Thus, local CSOs drafted an ordinance stating that the process would be adopted and included in the regular planning and budgeting process, and that civil society would continue to advocate for the institutionalization of this program in the budget process at the provincial level. The team agreed that preserving this process, as one of the Philippines' commitments to OGP, could be a strategy to reinforce the project's sustainability at the local level. This is why we are also working on amending the open legislation commitment of Bohol province in the fourth National Action Plan, so that it includes the participatory budgeting process.



Remaining Questions

As we—INCITEGov, ANSA-EAP and ULAP—conclude this project and its attendant chapter in OGP’s history in the Philippines, we pose the following questions to the global OGP community for further reflection:

- Has civil society ever successfully used OGP to contest government policies/programs?
- What models are available to localize OGP in the context of national action plans?