



Mobilising citizens for transparency and accountability in education through Textbook Count

A new generation of strategies for government accountability is needed, one that fully considers entrenched, institutional obstacles to change. Vertical integration of coordinated civil society policy monitoring and advocacy is one such strategy. Engaging each stage and level of public sector actions in an integrated way can locate the causes of accountability failures, show their interconnected nature, and leverage the local, national and transnational power shifts necessary to produce sustainable institutional change (Fox 2001). This case study summary is one of seven that reflect on civil society monitoring and advocacy initiatives in the Philippines – all of which aim to improve government accountability in different sectors – through the lens of vertical integration.



Ateneo School of Government
The Graduate School of Leadership and Public Service

GOVERNMENTWATCH
Citizen Action for Accountability



ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH CENTER

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Textbook Count was a joint programme of the Department of Education and Government Watch (G-Watch), a programme of the Ateneo School of Government that implements accountability initiatives with CSOs. The programme aimed to ensure that the right quantity of textbooks, with the right quality, reached public school students at the right time, following the right processes. With support from donors including UNDP, the Asia Foundation and the Partnership for Transparency Fund, G-Watch coordinated civil society organisation (CSO) participation in Textbook Count for four rounds between 2003 and 2007. The Department of Education covered other direct expenses, particularly those involving government officials and staff.

Numerous studies have noted the success of Textbook Count and have attributed it to three factors: (1) leadership or the presence of champions in the Department of Education; (2) the presence of civil society monitors; and (3) engagement between state and non-state actors. While these factors are indeed critical, such explanations of the success of Textbook Count are rather too broad and general. They give very little attention given to the specific campaign strategies behind Textbook Count, which enabled the actors behind it to achieve success.

This case study summary reflects on some of processes, mechanisms, actors and activities at play at various stages and levels of the programme, which made it possible for civil society monitoring to cover all the Textbook Delivery Programme's possible vulnerabilities

to corruption and inefficiency. It attempts to unbundle processes at every level, and measure the intensity of the actions / tactics per level using vertical integration as a framework for analysis.

Keys to success

Textbook Count prided itself on contributing to the achievement of a number of significant results. It contributed to reducing the unit price of textbooks from between 80–120 Philippine Pesos (Php) in 1999 to Php30–45 in 2006–07; it shortened the average textbook procurement cycle from 24 months to 12; and it improved the Department of Education's trust rating.

Textbook Count's vertical integration is considered pivotal to its success. CSO monitoring in Textbook Count, coordinated by G-Watch from 2003 to 2007, covered the Department of Education's entire textbook delivery programme, from procurement at the central office level to distribution at the district / school level. This was accomplished by building a coalition with various national / broad-based and local CSOs for the mobilisation of volunteer-monitors on the ground, covering up to 80% of textbook delivery points – in high schools and district offices – across the country.

Because CSOs covered all the critical stages of the Department of Education's Textbook Delivery Programme, there was a proactive effort to ensure compliance with standards of quantity, quality and processes. This prevented or minimised the kind of non-compliance with standards that led to pilferage, inefficiencies, anomalies or corruption. What enabled this was the nationwide and vertically integrated mobilisation of CSOs from national to school

levels. The coordination and communication among G-Watch and CSOs in Textbook Count paralleled the structure of the Textbook Delivery Programme, particularly in terms of the flow of information and reporting. This also ensured that reports were easily consolidated at the national level, from which data and information were generated to serve as the basis for recommendations that were responded to by decision-makers in the Department of Education.

Among the CSO participants in the Textbook Count initiative were the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections, which is a clean elections watchdog group, and the Boy and Girl Scouts of the Philippines, an organisation that undertakes voluntary service. Scouts and volunteers from local CSOs would gather at designated delivery points to 'count' the textbooks upon delivery by suppliers that had won tenders. Textbook Count monitors would also check the physical quality of the textbooks and note their monitoring findings on a report form and an Inspection and Acceptance Report, which were collected at the national level by G-Watch to prepare the CSO report.

Turning the Textbook Count over to the government

In 2007, G-Watch implicitly 'turned over' Textbook Count to the Department of Education. The programme's level of operationalisation, particularly the participation of CSOs, has been unclear since then.

Many of the reform-oriented officials in the cabinet who had championed good governance either left or were quickly removed from office when, in 2005, the administration of former president Gloria

Macapagal-Arroyo started to be implicated in several large-scale corruption scandals that caused political instability and crises in the country. One of these reform-oriented officials was the Department of Education Executive who had championed Textbook Count. The absence of a strong reform-oriented champion in the Department of Education in the midst of a corruption-haunted administration presented challenges in continuing to undertake a high-profile and nationally celebrated CSO-government good governance undertaking like Textbook Count.

Meanwhile, there were growing expectations that social accountability initiatives such as Textbook Count should become self-sufficient or self-sustaining after years of donor support. This prompted the donors, such as the United Nations Development Programme, to end their support for G-Watch to continue coordinating CSO monitoring in Textbook Count after four rounds of renewal. One of the funders, an intermediary donor, could no longer mobilise resources to continue supporting Textbook Count, and the other was expecting that the programme would already have been 'institutionalised' after years of implementation.

At the same time, however, donors continued to support G-Watch by funding it in its subsequent engagements with the Department of Education. Other donors supported similar and related initiatives. This may indicate the tendency for donors to favour initiatives that are new and innovative, rather than continuing with existing processes that have been shown to work.

These two factors drove G-Watch to 'turn over' Textbook Count to the Department of Education and embark on a process of

exploring more strategic and sustainable ways to ensure accountability in the department. Since then, G-Watch has undertaken social accountability initiatives covering strategic processes and projects / programmes within the Department of Education, in an effort to sustain CSO engagement with the department – albeit to a limited extent.

G-Watch is also exploring ways to strengthen the ‘supply side’ of accountability, particularly through strengthening control and accountability mechanisms inside the Department of Education, in collaboration with the middle management allies that G-Watch has mobilised over the years, and a number of national and local partner CSOs. Thus far, this type of collaboration is yielding ways forward for social accountability that enable CSO monitoring to engage with the government’s own control and accountability systems.

Lessons for vertically integrated campaigning

- Relatively speaking, Textbook Count’s weakest link in terms of scope and scale, was at the provincial level, and its strongest monitoring capacity was at local and national levels; this pointed to the need for deliberate efforts to build coordination at the intermediary level, between the local and the national.

- Textbook Count served as an indirect advocacy initiative, supporting Department of Education officials who favoured enhanced participation, transparency and accountability, while providing evidence which could be used to constrain corrupt officials.
- In accounting for the results or gains of a given initiative, it pays to understand the complexity of the multi-level and multi-faceted actions that have to be undertaken, the wide variety of actors that need to be engaged, and the scope and limitations of the gains in light of the changing context in governance.

References

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Background to this summary

This summary is based on a case study by Joy Aceron, who wrote it based on her own involvement in G-Watch and Textbook Count, which she headed from 2007. She is an independent researcher and her views do not represent those of all stakeholders involved in Textbook Count. A longer version of the study was published in 2016 as a U4 issue paper (Fox and Aceron 2016). Further reflections on the Textbook Count case will be included in a forthcoming report on the theory and practice of vertically integrated civil society activism, edited by Joy Aceron, and including a contribution by Jonathan Fox. Please visit the Making All Voices Count website (www.makingallvoicescount.org) for the latest information about the publication of this report, and to find the other six case study summaries in this series.

About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

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