



## Enabling a Strategic Shift

*The Case of IWPR - WATCH North Cotabato - MAVC Partnership*

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How can ordinary citizens pressure local officials to respond to their demands? The people from the province of North Cotabato in Mindanao seem to have found a solution and are attempting to further enhance it.

This case is about how an organization attempts a strategic shift: from pressure/ protest-only approach to employing an integrated approach: pressure politics and constructive engagement. This case investigates what were the enabling factors were of such a strategic shift and the challenges in going through with it. Since the strategic shift involved the use of digital technology as facilitated by a global program (Making All Voices Count), the case also reflects on when and how digital technology worked (in this case, did not work) to support the work of an organization.

At the center of this case is a citizen watchdog group based in Kidapawan City, North Cotabato, the WATCH North Cotabato (Watchful Advocates for Transparent, Clean and Honest Governance in North Cotabato). WATCH North Cotabato is among the local groups involved in the 17-month scale up project of the Citizen Action Network for Accountability (CANA) implemented by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), with support from Making All Voices Count (MAVC).

## The actors and their partnership

IWPR is a non-profit international media development and governance network with operations in the Philippines where it supports grassroots citizen reporting and organizing to help build openness and accountability in local governments and national service delivery agencies. Around the world, IWPR has engaged and built the capacities of local journalists, activists and civil society groups in creating spaces for advocacy on issues like conflict and democracy, accountability, and social justice. CANA was initiated by IWPR in 2010 and was continued in 2016 into CANA-Scale Up project through MAVC.

CANA-Scale Up had the objective of further building the fiscal literacy and capacity among community-based citizen groups to make their local governments responsive and accountable, helping “transform citizens from passive spectators of local government behavior into active agents of positive change through community organizing, advocacy, capacity building and mentoring, information, education, media and technology.” The assumption is that “ordinary Filipino citizens can more effectively monitor, shape, and engage their local government if they know how it works” (IWPR PowerPoint presentation, August 17, 2017). CANA-Scale Up sought to introduce Interactive Voice (and keypad) Response (IVR) system as a technology that bridges government and citizens regarding service delivery and to enable citizens to participate in local governance.

MAVC supported the CANA-Scale up as part of its commitment to promote transparency, fight corruption, empower the marginalized, and harness the power of new technologies for effective and accountable governance.

It can very well be said that WATCH North Cotabato is an “unusual suspect” that MAVC, as a program, wants to engage with the group having at its core a community media organization in a conflict area, with a vast experience of pressure politics using conventional media. Community radio station DXCA Charm Radio, through its program director, Abner Francisco, has served as a feedback platform for WATCH North Cotabato. People send information to the group either through the radio program, or through the social media account of Mr. Francisco. WATCH North Cotabato then follow up with more information gathering leading to exposés and eventually legal cases.

The radio program traces its beginnings as *Tinig ng Bayan* (Voice of the People) that was then followed by *Pulso ng Bayan* (Pulse of the People), doing human rights advocacy and bringing together community media and citizens for campaigns. Their work does not end when a news report about corruption is broadcasted; they follow through on the actions done by the government on complaints, or file cases when needed.

## Defining the Strategic Shift and the Rationale for it

For the CANA-Scale UP, WATCH North Cotabato is attempting a “strategic shift” from its protest/ adversarial approach that worked for the group in the past, to one that integrates pressure politics with constructive/ direct engagement.

Invited spaces are defined as arenas for dialogue between authorities and citizens in which the terms of engagement are set by the authorities. “Claimed” or “created spaces,” in contrast, are spaces which have been “claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders, or created more autonomously by them” (Gaventa 2006; Cornwall and Schattan Coelho 2007).



The use of a particular approach depends on who uses it. The *Going Vertical Report* (Aceron and Isaac 2016) discusses this: “Different traditions are associated with different approaches. Campaigns from the progressive social movement tradition are more inclined to use pressure politics or policy advocacy as their main approach. They are, therefore, less inhibited from using collective protest actions and other adversarial methods to elicit state response and influence government decisions. This does not mean, however, that they do not intervene in policy implementation. Rather, policy monitoring and policy implementation intervention are both included in their toolbox. But they prefer to use the first in most circumstances, rather than the second.”

Political contexts also dictate which kind of approach is used by civil society. In certain contexts, it may be helpful to use a blend of approaches. This is discussed by Fox (2016) in the *Going Vertical Report* (Aceron and Isaac 2016):

“Constructive engagement may be most relevant in more closed political contexts. In countries where there is little-to-no political space for autonomous civil society, subordinated alliances with more enlightened elements within government may be the only avenue open for CSOs to address governance failures; and the creation of modest ‘free spaces’ for even very constrained collective deliberation and action may turn out to be significant in the longer term.

Though constructive engagement partnerships are quite common, they are justified more often on the grounds of political pragmatism than on extensive empirical evidence that identifies the conditions under which they actually lead to lasting institutional change. Indeed, it would be useful to apply a political economy analysis to a wide range of cases in order to identify the interests and incentives that make successful state–society collaborative problem-solving possible.”

WATCH North Cotabato has earned a reputation as a government watchdog for its many exposés on corruption leading to many cases being filed against government officials. Recently, they have felt the need to try to engage the government in response to feedback towards the group about it being anti-government or oppositional. Francisco shared how this came to be: *“May perception, pinakinggan ito. Tama din naman, baka naman nagiging overly critical na kami, mas magiging effective din naman kung magiging partner, mag-engage sa ibang program ng gobyerno tulad ng pag-highlight ng mga success stories.”* (There was a perception, and we listened to it. It could be right; we may have been overly critical. We can be effective also if we become partners, if we engage other programs of government, highlighting success stories.) (FGD notes, 10 August 2017).

Given this, WATCH North Cotabato aimed to employ what we refer to as an “integrated approach:” a combination of protest/ adversarial politics and constructive/ direct engagement. IWPR shares that “WATCH North Cotabato has evolved such that it applies both the old approaches and the constructive engagement approach on a case-to-case basis. The tradition of ‘exposing and opposing’ is still there, while taking into account that the local government has some reform-oriented members who recognize the importance of the citizens’ voices” (Fajardo-Jarilla, e-mail response, 31 August 2017).

In this shift, IWPR deemed it important that WATCH North Cotabato’s engagement is done in a professional, disinterested, and fact-based manner so that government sees it as a partner for change, and does not shut its doors on them. Citizens who are mobilized are provided with educational materials and simple tools to arm themselves when they are dealing with the government (Fajardo-Jarilla, e-mail response, 31 August 2017). There is also care in protecting the group’s independence and in shielding its work from bias on particular campaigns or issues. When potential conflicts of interest arise, members are asked to “abstain,” as in the case of a member who became part of the Provincial Advisory Council. (Notes, FGD, 10 August 2017).

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## Enabling Factors: Partnership, the Organization and Learning

A convergence of interests enabled this strategic shift for WATCH North Cotabato: IWPR's efforts to scale up CANA's citizen budget monitoring and its plan to make use of digital technology in the scale up; MAVC's agenda to advance citizen engagement with the government North Cotabato to try to engage government in response to feedback.

The said strategic shift was also enabled by the capacity-building and linkage provided by partners. Part of the scale up were the trainings that CANA provided on constructive engagement for WATCH North Cotabato, the introduction of new technology, coordination with local governments, and a demonstration to local government units of the value of engaging citizen groups like WATCH North Cotabato.



IWPR provided training and mentoring on citizen budget monitoring, with the thinking that people are able to effectively engage governance when they know how the government should work and what its responsibilities are. On the part of the citizens that they have mobilized, the motivation to get involved in the initiative comes from wanting to improve their quality of life through the services that the government delivered to them as service consumers, wanting to be contribute to the success of government work.

The support from MAVC included a linkage with an ICT developer brokered to help CANA create its digital system of generating responses or reports from citizens through SMS. However, WATCH North Cotabato for various reasons did not use this ICT application.

Another enabling factor for the strategic shift to happen is the very organization itself: WATCH North Cotabato is a volunteer-based activist organization. Some of the leaders came from and are still linked with the progressive movement, which provides them with a bigger picture perspective. The *Going Vertical Report* (Aceron and Isaac 2016) also points to the orientation of organizations as a factor for the approach the organizations opt to use. In this case, WATCH North Cotabato has members from the old progressive movements, and new ones coming from associational civil society, which give them the abilities needed to employ both protest/ adversarial and constructive/ direct engagement.

The strategic shift of the group is its way of adapting AND learning as it grapples with the realities of its current engagement, referred to as 'adaptive learning' defined as "a structured, data-driven, problem-focused and iterative approach to learning by doing, which engages with local political realities while drawing on experiences from elsewhere – at the heart of their efforts to design and implement effective governance reforms" (Hudson 2016).

For WATCH North Cotabato, its adaptive learning was not exactly "learning for learning's sake" wherein the thinking and reflection processes are heavily top-down and overly systematized. IWPR provided capacity-building intervention centered on

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the action to be undertaken, harnessing the local knowledge and capacity that already exist for the learning process of WATCH North Cotabato. This allowed the local organization to set the learning agenda and process, doing away with the top-down technical process usually dictated by those from the national level. The way that local actors make adjustments based on what is needed on the ground increases the ownership and groundedness of the action.

## Initial Gains

The strategic shift of WATCH North Cotabato, though still being processed and not yet completed, has allowed the group to engage local governments directly. Citizens were mobilized/ organized to engage the government on the issue of budget. The group has provided valuable inputs on the budget of LGUs engaged, and has also shared to various audiences good practices that it noted in one LGU (Makilala's free college education, pension money for senior citizens and fund for fuel of an ambulance for public use – all coming from the LGU's local budget). A dialogue with the new mayor of Tulanon was also conducted where they secured the commitment to ensure public transparency and accountability. A national government agency was also engaged on the allocation of an infrastructure project, prompting a positive response as a result.

WATCH North Cotabato was able to operationalize the role of media in budget accountability. The group's beginnings traced back to the use of community radio in galvanizing people for accountability campaigns manifest highly in the key role of media for the group's work at present. Francisco's radio program and personal Facebook page are the very venues where people send in their feedback, complaints, and other information for the group to pursue. Their stories became the source of (being picked up by) national media organizations for local corruption issues that may be brought to the national attention as part of bigger issues.

Their experience demonstrates an integrated approach to accountability work – pressure politics with constructive engagement. Additionally, WATCH North Cotabato has had a positive experience of speaking about working with their “champion” in the government – a colleague who ran and won as City Councilor of

Kidapawan who helped stir the abolition of the local pork barrel and establishment of the Common Welfare Fund.

While the reception of many LGUs within the province of North Cotabato may not be as warm as that in Makilala and Tulunan, WATCH North Cotabato hopes to see a change in perception of LGUs towards groups like them. Their current engagement with partner LGUs may pave the way for others to be more open to citizen engagement. The group has already won the public over (their expansion from Kidapawan City to the rest of North Cotabato shows the positive impact they have had on citizens); they are now starting to gradually win over local government officials.



## Challenges

Meanwhile, the initiative by IWPR in the CANA-Scale Up to introduce an ICT application to WATCH North Cotabato, as mentioned earlier, met challenges, and therefore, did not yield a positive result. The use of new technology in the locality was not strategically located or situated in the need/ situation of the local actors. WATCH North Cotabato was already doing well with the use of mainstream and social media. The challenge is to be able to determine how the new technology plays a part in the strategic shift, perhaps in budget engagement.

The experience of WATCH North Cotabato in the non-use of the technology introduced also points to the trust and familiarity needed. People and

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government use tools and technologies, which they understand and trust. Mr. Francisco receives information from the people through his radio program and Facebook account (which has the most number of followers among all media personalities in North Cotabato) because he is familiar to the people, trusted by them. An unknown character on the other line of the interactive voice response (IVR) does not have the people's trust because of unfamiliarity. Context is key in this case.

WATCH North Cotabato also has to contend with an increased demand among the members for greater credibility. As WATCH North Cotabato leader Abner Francisco said, "We also need to watch ourselves while watching on how government does its job" (FGD notes, 10 August 2017).

The agenda of the group must also be fully articulated and pursued at different levels (sub-national and national). Their engagement at the higher levels of government (resulting to positive responses) is a start, but this may not be sufficient.

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Photos courtesy of WATCH North Cotabato and Abner Francisco

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### About G-Watch

G-Watch is an independent national action-research organization embedded in a constituency of advocacy and civic organizations all over the Philippines that aim to contribute to the deepening of democracy through citizen empowerment and the scaling of accountability.

See more at [www.g-watch.org](http://www.g-watch.org)



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