

// STRATEGIC DILEMMAS IN CHANGING CONTEXTS: G-WATCH'S EXPERIENCE IN THE PHILIPPINE EDUCATION SECTOR

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On 19 April, the [Transparency and Accountability Initiative](#) and [Hivos](#) brought together funders, civil society organizations, and researchers to consider *the opportunities and challenges of linking state and civil society efforts towards greater transparency and accountability (T/A)* (see more [here](#)). At the roundtable, Joy Aceron of the Philippine NGO Government Watch ([G-Watch](#)) presented [some of the strategic issues](#) arising from [her organization's work in the education sector](#).



We want to thank Joy and other roundtable participants for taking on this conversation candidly and constructively. We all learned a lot and hope others can too!

Ghost books in the Philippine education system

In 2002 G-Watch conducted an audit of textbook delivery in 32 school districts across the Philippines. It found major flaws: 40% of books scheduled to be delivered to schools were unaccounted for, and those that were delivered were often late or did not meet official quality guidelines ([Majeed 2011](#)).

Corruption and government accountability in the Philippines.

The Philippines has long struggled with corruption and government accountability. When G-Watch first identified the problem of ghost books in 2002, the Philippines lay on just the 39th percentile of the World Bank's

World Governance Indicator for Control of Corruption. (Its ranking has worsened since then, falling to the 23rd percentile in 2011.) The Philippines lay on the 38th percentile for Rule of Law and the 54th percentile for Government Effectiveness. Its score on Transparency International's 2002 Corruption Perceptions Index was 2.6, placing it 77th out of 102 ranked.

As Figure 1A illustrates, there were 'ghost books' in the system. Many schools were not receiving the books they needed - on average, schools had just one textbook for every six elementary school students, or one for every eight high school students ([Chua 1999](#)). The system was failing and students were suffering as a result. With the encouragement of a new undersecretary at the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd), G-Watch set out to ensure the complete and timely delivery of quality textbooks to schools throughout the country.

The intervention

With the collaboration of DepEd, G-Watch set up a programme called Textbook Count. This used civil society groups with large-scale, nationwide, grassroots memberships - such as the National Citizen's Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) and the Boy and Girl Scouts - to monitor the timeliness and quality of textbook deliveries throughout the country. Once publishers were assigned a regular delivery schedule, G-Watch coordinated with civil society groups to monitor delivery sites to ensure that books were delivered on time, in full, and of the requisite quality.

G-Watch channeled information, political resources, and funding up and down the education delivery system (see Figure 1B). By linking stakeholders across the system – from international funders to DepEd to beneficiaries – the programme increased the chance of schools across the country receiving books. After the programme's first three years, textbook prices were 50% lower, quality was higher, the time from bidding to delivery had been reduced by 50%, and deliveries had become highly accurate (Majeed 2011).

It would be a mistake to consider civil society as the sole driver of change. The Textbook Count programme worked by linking state and non-state actors and by using both cooperative and confrontational strategies. It identified a specific problem of accountability in the education sector, established a relationship with reformers in government, and put together a coalition of existing local civil society organizations to monitor the commitments of government contractors at the grassroots level. It appears to have succeeded because it was able to identify and access decision-makers in the Philippine government who were willing and able to enforce the programme, and because it made use of the grassroots networks of partner CSOs.

As Figure 1B shows, G-Watch ensured that both state institutions and citizen groups had the information they needed to play their role in the process. Since the challenge of ghost books manifested itself at the local level, that is where G-Watch's response was primarily targeted. *By mobilizing local groups they also contributed to a broader agenda of citizen empowerment. However, it is not clear that the underlying causes of the problem lay at the local level and not at other points of the education system.*

Over time the programme took its toll on G-Watch's limited resources, and *the question arose of whether it could sustain its role as the key intermediary between government and non-government actors.* This question also provided a chance to step back from the immediate problem and consider the overall education delivery system.

From ghost books to the broader system

At the roundtable, Joy revealed that G-Watch

is concerned about becoming bogged down indefinitely with Textbook Count, and is looking for a way to hand over primary responsibility for it. Like other CSOs, G-Watch is having difficulty finding a way to make the transition without endangering the programme's success. *What other actors have the resources and incentives to operate the programme successfully? Who can continue to mobilize and coordinate local actors? One possibility is the government, but would government officials have the incentive to monitor themselves?*

The diagnostic is summarized in Figure 2A. However, *the fit between a 10-year-old intervention and the current context in the Philippine education sector deserves further examination. Groups need to remember that context changes and their strategies should be attuned to the new times.* Are there other actors, institutions, and processes outside of G-Watch's current control that could become the focus of G-Watch's interventions in the medium term? What about the power and authority of actors within and across levels of local, district, national, and international governance? Other questions to consider include:

- *What is the broader relationship between elected officials across different levels of government?*
- *Who in practice makes decisions about the allocation of resources in the education sector?*
- *Is there any organization with a formal mandate to control how state institutions spend resources in education and hence the ability to monitor book delivery?*
- *What was the relationship of G-Watch's planned intervention to these other stakeholders?*

Figure 2B brings a range of these potential stakeholders into the picture. These include the legislature, the judiciary, local politicians, state auditing institutions, and other transparency and accountability civil society organizations. These actors can interact in a variety of ways, providing many possible points of entry for an intervention. From this broader perspective, the sustainability of the Textbook Count programme no longer appears the sole or primary problem in the governance of the Philippine education delivery system. Other issues range from lack of sustained oversight from constitutional bodies on the spending of educational

resources to clientelist tendencies in national and local politics that interfered with the delivery of education across the system. This more complex and holistic analysis opens up the possibility of new interventions, including a series of options G-Watch had not considered in its initial diagnosis.

Strategic questions

Analysing the broader system in which a problem is embedded raises a number of issues with respect to strategy design:

- How do you decide which actors or processes in the system to target to achieve your intended results?
- How do you decide whether to target a particular actor or process, or to try and change the system as a whole?
- How do you decide whether to continue to use a tried-and-true model or adapt the model to different circumstances?
- How can the political economy literature – including work not explicitly framed as T/A research – inform CSO's decisions with respect to these strategic issues?

Looking at the system as a whole reveals a range of actors and processes that could be targeted in an intervention. Stakeholders may therefore need a strategy that targets multiple, related interventions across the system in a coordinated manner. Different actors could zoom into different aspects of the system. However, examples of multiple actors joining up interventions across a system are rare. The gains that can be made are tempered by the leadership and transaction costs involved in nurturing cooperation to provide public goods.

Which actors should you target to get the most from your investment? Local governments? National auditing institutions? Grassroots community organizations? National NGOs? Given the greater availability of state resources and legitimacy, and the permanence of state institutions, working with state actors might be best for long-term sustainability. Yet collaboration between CSOs and supreme audit institutions requires a distinct strategic pathway – as discussed in [another TALEARN case clinic](#). Working at the national level might be better for tackling underlying problems and achieving scale. Yet working with local community groups can harness on-

the-ground feedback and empower regular citizens. **By choosing one route over another stakeholders are taking a bet on how change is likely to happen.**

What about which processes to intervene in? In the case of ghost books, there are many options. Is it best to monitor book deliveries at individual schools and district offices, or to monitor the national procurement process? Checking local deliveries has the advantage of providing information on the outcome we care most about – the delivery of quality books to individual schools – but it doesn't provide a precise diagnosis of what has gone wrong in the chain of events up to that point. Factory or warehouse inspections might do this better. Should orders be inspected while they're in production? Should efforts be made to increase the capacity of government auditing institutions? (See the box for various strategies employed by G-Watch.)

Additional strategies employed by G-Watch's in Textbook Count

During the Textbook Count intervention, G-Watch encountered barriers to textbook delivery beyond those they had originally identified. One of its earliest responses was to monitor the procurement bidding process. In order to combat collusion between contractors and corrupt DepEd officials G-Watch and other NGOs observed bid openings and deliberations over bid proposals. Warehouse inspections were also conducted before deliveries were made to ensure that textbooks were of the requisite quality. Finally, after having improved the delivery of textbooks throughout the country, G-Watch discovered a new problem: books were not always getting from the district offices where they were delivered to the most remote elementary schools where they were needed. It launched two new initiatives to combat the problem: 1) partnering with Coca-Cola to use their trucks and supply chain to distribute books to remote areas, and 2) initiating a Textbook Walk event that brought community members together to transport books from district offices to elementary schools in the surrounding villages.

While other CSOs in similar circumstances have used a confrontational approach to hold responsible actors to account, G-Watch chose a mostly cooperative approach to dealing with government officials at DepEd. It also

Let us know if you are interested in research into joined up interventions or clusters. We want to break silos!

chose to take a lead role as the coordinator of the national effort, rather than forming a broader coalition of NGOs. We can't be sure whether one strategy or another was better suited to the ghost book problem, but **a holistic analysis of the education delivery system clarifies the range of alternatives available**, as well as their relative strengths and weaknesses. **This type of approach can help organizations make strategic choices when designing their programmes.**

Looking at the problem from this perspective has implications for G-Watch's work. In Joy's words:

"The context has probably changed now and we need to grapple with this change. Maybe there are changes in risks and vulnerabilities as well. There has perhaps also been a change in state-society relations in the Philippines."

G-Watch's initial strategy may no longer be the best one available. (See the box for Joy's new to-do list.)

Joy's to-do List	
1.	Identify the elements necessary to sustain practices on both supply and demand sides.
2.	Look at the vulnerabilities and risks in the governance of education. Maybe there are new ones. Every vulnerability entails different types of intervention. Having come up with these, we can look at different actors and mechanisms, and think about tapping the oversight agencies. Think about linking the intervention to political actors too. Another area may be to improve enforcement.
3.	Investigate financing. Look into experiences from abroad where there is state financing of civil society. How is corruption prevented?
4.	Having analysed the situation as an organization, where do we fit? Do we need to change our strategy?

When does it make sense to change strategy?

A change in context often requires a change in strategy and tactics. But there are risks to such a shift, and these often prevent organizations from making the changes needed to maintain a programme's effectiveness.

The Philippine context changed a few years after the Textbook Count programme began. The programme's main champion at DepEd left, new elected officials were in office, and G-Watch was looking to reduce its involvement in the programme so as to focus on other priorities. Given these changes, it's possible that adapting the programme's strategy by forming a civil society coalition to lobby newly elected leaders, for example, might have improved the programme's effectiveness and ensured that it responded to changing circumstances.

Changing strategies is never easy. Even if a new strategy has the potential to be more effective, it can have adverse consequences, so there is not always the incentive to do so. One potential disadvantage is the loss of expertise and experience that comes with a strategy that is well known. Errors in implementation are possible as the organization adapts to a new way of working. The organization's brand may also suffer as it shifts from an approach with which it has become closely associated. This could have negative consequences for both name recognition and funding.

The value of political economy research

The Textbook Count project was created in response to a specific problem and a specific context. Challenges were addressed as they arose. In general this approach worked well, but could G-Watch and other actors involved in the project have used findings from the political economy literature to inform their strategic choices?

G-Watch's successful implementation of the Textbook Count programme is admirable, but **a more systematic approach informed by the political economy literature might have helped it anticipate and address many of the challenges it has faced.** Many organizations learn well with regard to operations, but they can improve their use of existing knowledge in other fields to inform their broader tactics and strategies. **Research on the politics**

of contextual factors as diverse as decentralization, federalism, bureaucracy, and the separation of powers – topics that are not explicitly linked to T/A initiatives – have much to offer T/A organizations. Considering how context matters for the success of social accountability initiatives or the political economy of decentralization reforms will not provide a complete solution, but it may stop us from reinventing the wheel as we design and implement our own interventions.

Of course, researchers can also produce more research that is relevant to practitioners on the ground. Why isn't there more research on the experiences of organizations such as G-Watch, for example? Perhaps researchers from the South would be more interested in this and better placed, given their proximity to the issues at hand. The result may be more analytical, more strategic, and more effective T/A programmes around the world.

This is another collective action problem we are working to manage better, step by step. The TALEARN community wants to move this conversation forward – if you would like to help us, let us know here.

TALEARN is a community of Transparency and Accountability funders, civil society organizations, and researchers from all over the world who come together to engage and learn from each other. It is a safe space in which tough questions can be asked. Although TALEARN is only a few months old, its goals are ambitious. Nothing quite like it has been attempted before. We want to share some of the concrete research into the nexus of transparency, participation, and accountability that is currently under way. See [here](#).
Over the next few months we are planning collective activities on a range of issues that matter to TALEARNERS. These include themes such as how context affects T/A interventions, and how we can use user-centred design and other tools to incentivize learning within T/A organizations and networks.

Interested in joining TALEARN or following our work?

Please let us know on this form.



WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

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Figure 1: Starting from a concrete problem

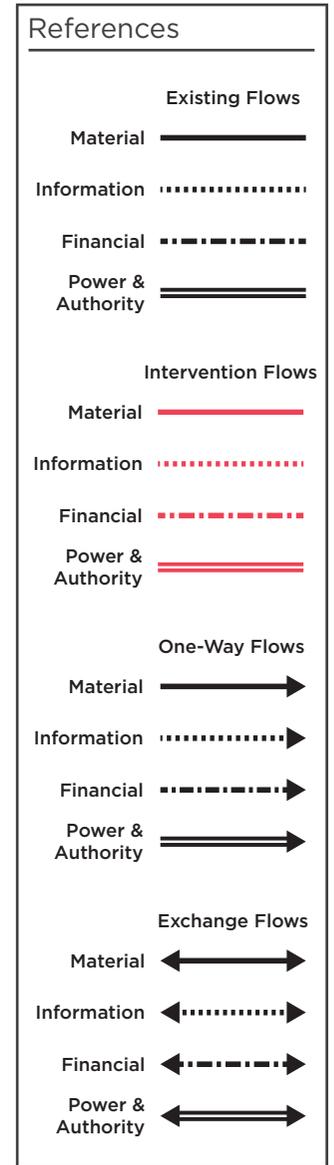
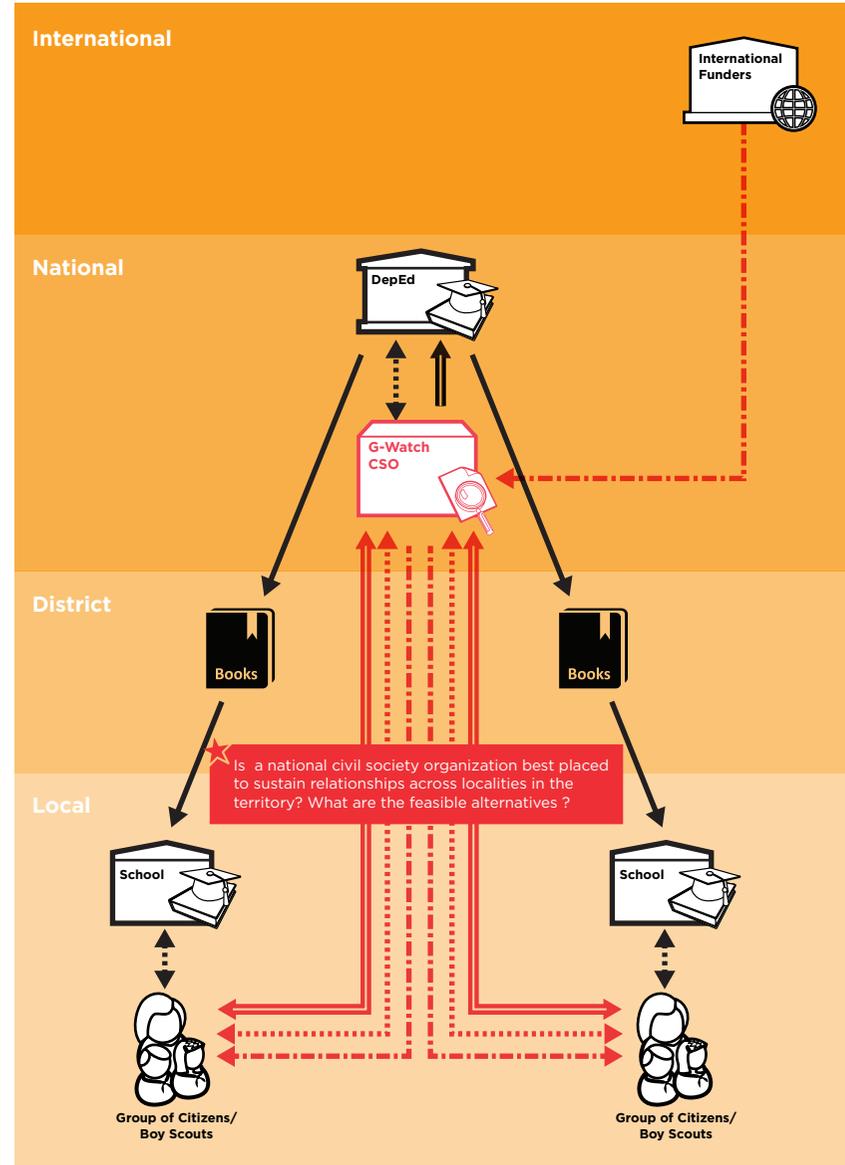
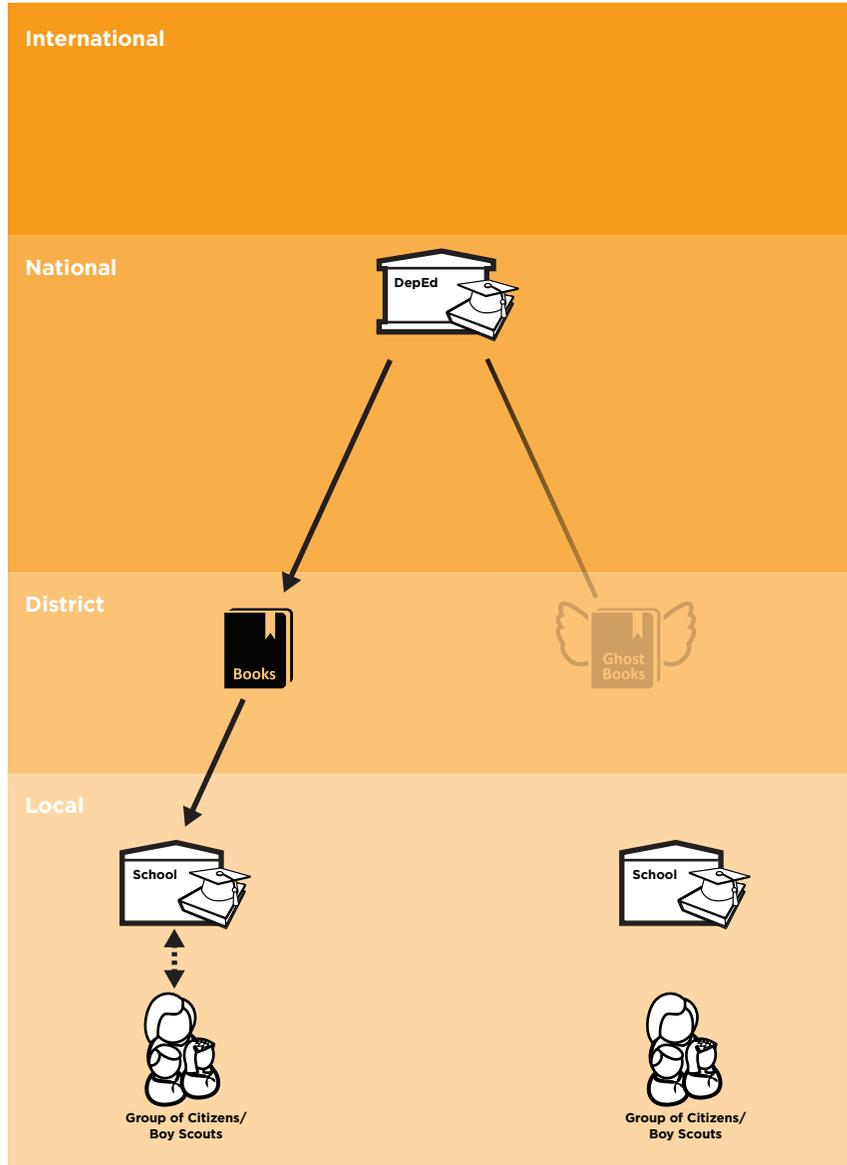


Figure II: Looking at the bigger picture

KEY DILEMMAS

A Pre-intervention diagnostic ——— • Who ensures the sustainability of the system? ———> Intervention in action **B**

- What is the entry point for G-Watch in the system?
- What are the intended/unintended consequences of alternative interventions?

