



Training in Northern Luzon, Philippines (Nina McMurry).

LEARNING CASE / 2018

Exploring Civic Leadership Training with Partners in the Philippines

Over four years (2013-2017), MIT GOV/LAB explored the effects of civic leadership training on citizen engagement with a network of civil society organizations in the Philippines,¹ led by Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG), Responsible Citizens, Empowered Communities and Solidarity towards Social Change (RECITE, Inc.), and Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF). This GOV/LEARN case study focuses on how an iterative design process helped build a strong partnership, which, in turn, led to innovative research questions and the ability to adapt the research design to unexpected political changes.

This learning case discusses the research collaboration process. For research results see: MIT GOV/LAB Research Brief. 2018. "Examining the Impact of Civic Leadership Training in the Philippines." Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab.

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¹ Local civil society organizations including Diocese of Urdaneta, Project 101, Caritas Nueva Segovia, Molte Aires, Northern Luzon Baptist Pastors and Preachers Fellowship, Inc, and Kataguwan Center.

What is a learning case?

Bringing in voices from the field and the academy, the aim of the learning case series is to listen, process, and learn from how we approach practitioner-academic research collaborations and ultimately contribute to theory-building and change on the ground.

In political science and international development, there is often pressure to report positive results and change on the ground. Yet there is no single pathway or easy fix for improving governance, and, particularly, advancing tenets of transparency, accountability, and participation. Improved governance outcomes depend on us building robust evidence, and learning from failures and false-starts as well as successes.

In the hard sciences, a majority of experiments have null results or no significant findings. The scientific process can oftentimes be characterized as a series of failures, punctuated by eureka moments, which lead to advancements in knowledge. We recognize that the same can apply to our own field, where productive types of failure can come from hypothesis testing in complex contexts with high-degrees of uncertainty – failure that is necessary for organizations to learn and improve.

This is precisely what we aim to do at GOV/LAB by collaborating with partners to test underlying assumptions of their theories of change through experimentation and learning. Learning case studies are an opportunity to reflect back on our research collaborations and design process, and to integrate these lessons into our future work.

Key Takeaways

Recognizing that learning is a process, and some tension can make for creative collaboration, here are a few lessons from our project in the Philippines that we are working to put in practice:

- **Keep an open mind to new research questions.** The best research questions arise when researchers and partners work together. Instead of starting with a predetermined question of only academic interest, researchers and partners can share in the process and arrive at questions of mutual interest, together. Though it may take several iterations to arrive at the right question, the process results in more pertinent, insightful research. Plus, when research questions are relevant to practitioner partners, it helps sustain their engagement with the project over time, and builds their interest to see through to the results of the research.
- **A strong relationship with partners leads to better research.** “Partner engagement” is not a one-way exercise towards researchers gaining trust and buy-in at the beginning of a project. When researchers have a deeper understanding of their partners’ goals, realities, and programs, it strengthens

the quality of the research and sustains projects through challenging times. In this case, the long-standing relationship between GOV/LAB researchers and practitioners, developed over four years, made for a more resilient partnership that could adapt to political changes and seize new opportunities, while still staying true to academic and practitioner goals.

- **Match funding and feasibility.** Large-scale field experiments are expensive and require researchers to maintain a sustained in-country presence. In addition to the Making All Voices Count grant, about 50% of the overall project budget was supplemented with core funding from GOV/LAB. Core funding was essential to do the kind of careful, iterative work discussed here, which was tailored to the context, our partners' needs, and unpredictable pacing.
- **The iterative research design process has tremendous potential—and some challenges.** Both academics and on-the-ground practitioners have crucial roles to play in any iterative research process. Researchers provide the scientific rigor that practitioners need to legitimize their work. Practitioners provide insights and intuitive knowledge that help a research team home in on the most important questions. This type of collaboration can result in some of the most relevant research for policy-makers. Yet despite the potential, there are still some particular challenges,

especially when it comes to timelines. The typically long horizon of a large-scale study can be challenging for partners, who may be eager to translate and apply results as quickly as possible.

Starting with Context

This research collaboration was unique because of the amount of time we were able to spend with our partners to learn about their work. The project timeline spanned four years, from preliminary scoping trips through implementation, evaluation, and analysis. Below we highlight how this multi-year commitment helped us to build a strong partner relationship, a necessary condition to iterate and refine the research together.

4Ps and Project i-Pantawid

First, it helps to understand some context and background for our research. In the Philippines, over 4.4 million households considered “the poorest of the poor” participate in the Pantawid Familyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). This large-scale government conditional cash transfer program (CCT) provides cash directly to beneficiaries who comply with social welfare programs focused on child health, nutrition, and education.

In 2014, a coalition of civil society organizations started a new civic leadership training program for CCT beneficiaries. The training program, part of the larger **Project i-Pantawid** that introduced a social accountability approach to the CCT program,² trains existing community leaders to monitor CCT implementation, hold service providers accountable for its administration,

² Project i-Pantawid's official name is “Guarding the Integrity of the Conditional Cash Transfer Program for the Philippines.” The project was implemented with funding from the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability.

and to act as representatives for their communities in local decision-making.

The training specifically targets “parent leaders”—people chosen by their fellow CCT beneficiaries to act as liaisons between beneficiaries and the CCT implementing agency. The training program consisted of monthly workshops emphasizing civic skills and civic values. It was designed to train parent leaders as ‘community facilitators for change’ who can represent the interests of the poor, not just in the context of the CCT program, but in local governance more broadly.

Part of what sets Project i-Pantawid apart is its duration and its emphasis on putting skills into practice, rather than simply sharing information. In the training, parent leaders had a chance to practice their skills on a monthly basis over a year—from public speaking to community mobilization. Project i-Pantawid provided a unique opportunity for our research team to examine and try to measure the effects of civic training in poor communities.

Setting the groundwork

Starting in 2014, GOV/LAB took multiple trips to the Philippines to conduct open-ended exploratory research. During this first year, we focused on developing a deep understanding of our partners’ theory of change and their assumptions about their programs and context. We interviewed residents and village officials to understand local political dynamics, and we spoke to our partners’ supporters and critics to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. Based on these conversations, our joint research team identified a set of questions of operational, political, and theoretical significance. Most importantly, they were questions that both the academics and the practitioners were interested in answering.

While we worked with our partners to develop research questions, we also assisted with the design and implementation of their monitoring and evaluation tools. This was a valuable trust-building exercise, and it gave us a very detailed understanding of their constraints and motivations, and of the causal mechanisms in their theory of change. With every iteration, the proposed research project more accurately represented how they conceptualized what they were doing, and became more practically feasible.

Two Research Questions and Experiments

1) What impact does civic training have?

By November 2015, the first iteration of our research proposal was ready. We started with the research question: What effect does leadership training have on parent leaders? Does it help them engage more effectively on behalf of the CCT program beneficiaries, or does it lead to more political co-optation (elite capture), or both?

This question was motivated by a few different factors. First of all, training parent leaders was a central pillar of our partners’ theory of change, so it was important to know if it actually had the intended effect. The partners also wanted to show policymakers that trained parent leaders could help them implement the CCT program more successfully. The research question also addressed a concern of World Bank funders: that trained community leaders might be co-opted by clientelist politicians in vote-buying schemes and other forms of “elite capture.” Our partners did not expect elite capture to occur, but wanted to put their assumptions to the test using rigorous research.

The research design itself involved experimental interventions at two levels. First, Project i-Pantawid training was randomly assigned to eight municipalities out of a set of 16, yielding “control” and “treatment” groups to test the overall intervention. Second, to test more explicitly the relationship between training and elite capture, we planned to randomly assign *barangays* (villages) in “treated” municipalities to interventions that varied the visibility of parent leaders to local politicians during pre-election candidate forums.³

We summarize the results of the first part of this research in the GOV/LAB Research Brief, “Examining the Impact of Civic Leadership Training in the Philippines.”⁴

2) What happens when parent leaders and local officials are trained together?

In 2016, the new Duterte administration unexpectedly rescheduled the October 2016 barangay elections. This meant we could no longer test our hypotheses using candidate forums. Fortunately, our team quickly regrouped to change the research design. Our ongoing research to assess Project i-Pantawid continued at the municipal level (as described above), but we reframed our barangay-level research question to: Is civic training provided to officials and citizens *together* more likely than training citizens alone to lead to elite capture and/or improved social accountability?

This question followed from RECITE’s observation that increased engagement from

parent leaders often produced negative reactions from local officials—perhaps because officials didn’t realize the citizens’ requests had a basis in the law and thought they were unreasonable.

GOV/LAB researchers thought the research question was interesting, because most theories and interventions related to political accountability focus on information asymmetry between citizens and officials that favors the latter. RECITE’s observations raised a new question about whether lack of information on the part of officials, or the lack of a common understanding between citizens and officials about their roles and responsibilities, may also contribute to the problem. This question spoke to ongoing debates among accountability practitioners about the value of “constructive engagement”, as opposed to a more typical adversarial approach in which citizens are encouraged to make demands of officials.

To examine this question, we introduced a new barangay-level intervention, where parent leaders, their fellow CCT beneficiaries, and officials received joint training in a one-day civic skills session focused on barangay budgeting. We conducted a randomized control trial with three groups. In one group, parent leaders trained with officials and CCT beneficiaries. In another, parent leaders trained just with other beneficiaries. In the third (control) group, parent leaders and beneficiaries received no additional training (aside from the standard family development sessions that are part of CCT).⁵

³ This was the original barangay-level intervention. When elections were postponed in October 2016, we replaced the candidate forums with the co-training experiment described below.

⁴ MIT GOV/LAB Research Brief. 2018. “Examining the Impact of Civic Leadership Training in the Philippines.” Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab.

⁵ Half the barangays in each of the 16 study municipalities (both treatment and in each Project i-Pantawid municipality) were randomly assigned to receive this joint training on barangay budgeting. In i-Pantawid municipalities, in the remaining

The results of this research will be published once the collection of follow-up data is complete, in light of the May 2018 elections in the Philippines.

Lessons Learned

This multi-year collaboration highlighted the critical importance of choosing the right partners and investing in those relationships over time. This fostered an innovative and iterative research process that allowed for quick adaptations to change on the ground.

Fostering deep, resilient relationships with partners

A deep understanding that goes beyond the immediate concerns of the research project, and encompasses the evolution of their programs, their goals and realities, can substantively enrich research design. This is especially important in contexts subject to external flux, where a deep partner relationship makes it easier to respond to changes, while still staying true to both practitioner and academic goals.

For example, the co-training research was based on a separate pilot intervention on participatory budget monitoring that RECITE had already done, that GOV/LAB only knew about because of the time we spent in the field with partners, learning about their range of programming. It was not part of our original plan (nor even something we thought we could test), but it turned out to be a fortuitous development that resulted in some valuable academic research.

Finding research partners with the right mindset

Building relationships is also about finding the right fit for a collaborative research partnership. It is important to work with practitioner partners who want to challenge their own assumptions. In this case, from their experience, the partners were confident of the positive effects the training had on the participants, and didn't think that their program was encouraging elite capture, as some theorized, but they were open to a third-party institution undertaking objective, rigorous research that would substantiate (or challenge) their beliefs.

Keeping an open mind to evolving research

By not predetermining the research question, we could be more innovative in our approach. Instead of setting out to test a specific predefined question of merely academic interest, we found more value in finding shared questions to investigate with partners over multiple iterations. It allowed GOV/LAB, as practitioner-oriented researchers, to think differently and to derive theoretical questions from our partners' on-the-ground experiences that we might not have from existing theories of accountability. Our partners also reported that they greatly appreciated this iterative research design process.

The importance of in-country presence

It will come as no surprise that high quality, large scale data collection is difficult. And especially so, when the data collection team is decentralized, with little control over training

half of the barangays, this one-day barangay budgeting session were conducted only for citizens (attended by parent leaders and their fellow CCT beneficiaries). In the control municipalities, in the remaining half of the barangays, parent leaders and beneficiaries received no additional training (aside from the standard family development sessions that are part of CCT).

and direct monitoring, and when the nature of data collection may not allow for piloting.

That is why it was crucial for GOV/LAB researchers to maintain an in-country presence for much of the process. Large-scale field experiments ideally require local researcher presence through design and pre-rollout stages. Intervention design, survey instrument development, and data collection planning require close collaboration with practitioners, and being situated in the local context through these stages is invaluable. Fortunately, GOV/LAB was able to support research presence in-country for much of 2016 to adapt the design and ensure smooth implementation and management of the project.

The challenge of timelines

Additionally, the project raises questions about the different timelines of practitioners and academic researchers. GOV/LAB received a sizable grant towards the end of 2015 from Making All Voices Count, but only after a year of fundraising and applying to three different calls for proposals. This waiting period required patience and flexibility on all sides and an understanding of how to match the availability of funding to program timelines and to partner and researcher availability. A high level of trust and strong substantive interest on all sides made this possible.

Our partners recognized the value of objective academic research, implemented with integrity, and the need for evidence from an external institution. Nevertheless, there were times when they would have liked to run with promising results before external validation was complete. As Project i-Pantawid drew to a close, our partners needed to begin their advocacy and fundraising efforts. It is at this crucial juncture that research results would have most useful to

them. However, producing definitive, detailed results from the extensive primary data collected required a longer timeline.

Conclusion

A large-scale randomized research design requires much trust and discussion among implementing organizations; GOV/LAB partners CCAGG, RECITE, and PTF were willing to put in a lot of effort and political capital to make this happen.

Traditionally academics conduct research and then announce what policymakers should consider important. However, our experience on this project suggests that practitioner partners have a good sense of what policymakers should consider important, and may simply need the rigor of an independent academic viewpoint to legitimize their insights.

In this situation, academics have an important role to play in documenting the project according to the rigorous scientific standards, giving credibility to practitioner voices, and integrating “on the ground” knowledge with traditional academic social science. By working together so closely, academic researchers can discover and pursue new research questions, and practitioners can glean important lessons about their work as the research unfolds.

Then when results are published (even if it's long after the fact), practitioners can use the data to inform their work and legitimize what they already intuitively know. Yet despite the benefits of this kind of collaboration, finding a timeline that works for both academics and practitioners is still a challenge. This raises important questions about how an iterative research design process can most effectively contribute to interventions and on-the-ground thinking.

As GOV/LAB works to translate research results for practitioner audiences, and begins to think through the next phase of our collaboration in the Philippines, we aim to learn from this

experience in terms of building equal partnerships and understanding translation as function of context, not simply language.

Featured research projects:

Lily L. Tsai, Nina McMurry and Swetha Rajeswaran [2018]. *The effect of civic leadership training on citizen engagement and government responsiveness: experimental evidence from the Philippines*. Making All Voices Count Research Report, Brighton: IDS.

Nina McMurry and Lily L. Tsai [2018]. "The effect of co-training citizen and government officials at the village level: experimental evidence from the Philippines." *Work in progress*.

Partners:

This research was undertaken with a network of civil society organizations in the Philippines, led by Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG), Responsible Citizens, Empowered Communities and Solidarity towards Social Change (RECITE, Inc.), and Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF). Civil society organizations include Diocese of Urdaneta, Project 101, Caritas Nueva Segovia, Molte Aires, Northern Luzon Baptist Pastors and Preachers Fellowship, Inc, and Kataguan Center.



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