



# Country Overview Philippines

**VOICE OR  
CHATTER?**  
**STATE OF THE ART**

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MAKING ALL  
VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE  
FOR DEVELOPMENT

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# State of the Art: Philippines

This State of Art Report examines how the Philippines is using technology to complement existing structures of citizen engagement. This includes the government's own initiatives to spur public involvement, as well as its partnerships with civil society and other actors to drive active citizen engagement in the country. The paper starts with a section on the existing policy and regulatory structure of ICTs and citizen engagement in the country, including a brief history of e-governance and an overview of the current state of ICT use in the Philippines. The second section zeroes in more closely on ICT-mediated structures of citizen engagement. It lists relevant examples of ICT initiatives and describes how such initiatives impact government responsiveness and citizen participation. The third and final section analyzes whether and how ICT-mediated citizen engagement has caused shifts in meaning, norms, and power within the state-citizen dynamics.

## 1. Overview

The recent and rapid rise of digital technologies among citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) offers extensive possibilities of strengthening citizen voice not just on political issues, but also regarding the overall performance of the government in the Philippines, setting the stage for greater government accountability and transparency. With the advent of various state-of-the-art platforms and channels, the opportunities for political and social participation of citizens have significantly increased. Use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) has changed relationships among citizens, organizations, public institutions, and the government (National Democratic Institute, 2013).

The Philippines takes pride in being a democratic country. Its constitution embodies its democratic ideals and aspirations and includes provisions on people's rights and freedoms. It is a signatory to many international treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Optional Protocol. The introduction of ICTs has played a significant role in the exercise of these democratic rights.

In a democratic society, citizen participation is valuable in ensuring that people's voices are heard and factored into important decision-making processes. Such participation may be in the form of citizens' forums, participatory budgeting, and referendums, to name a few. In this day and age, technology provides more ways of engaging citizens. Governments are taking advantage of this by using ICTs such as the Internet and social media to deliver services to citizens and encourage them to actively participate in democratic processes.

At the same time, extensive ICT adoption was also enabled. Democratic freedoms of speech and self-expression have made the birth and growth of information-sharing and advocacy possible. These principles are expressed as individual rights in Article III, Section 4 of the Philippine Constitution, which stipulates the inviolability of a person's right to speech, expression, and peaceful assembly to complain or share grievance to the government and other people. Furthermore, democratic practices promote access to official records, documents, and research data, which are used as basis for policy development (Report on the Rapid Assessment of ICT Utilization for Participation in the Philippines, 2013). The Philippine Constitution provides the right to information, encourages non-governmental, community-based, or sectoral organizations to help promote national welfare,

recognizes the vital role of communication and information in nation-building, and mandates the state to adopt and implement a policy of full public disclosure of all its transactions involving public interest.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1. Policies and Regulatory Mechanisms for Citizen Engagement

E-Government in the Philippines started with the creation of the National Computer Center (NCC) in 1971. The NCC was established to rationalize the country's use of information technology for national development (Rye, 2002 and Siar, 2005, as cited in Alampay, 2005). National Information Technology plans were developed to include more specific programs and activities that delineate the roles and responsibilities of the government and the private sector. Such policy instruments were complemented by Administrative Order (AO) No. 232, instructing all government agencies and its instrumentalities including local government units to undertake electronic connectivity through the Internet (Alampay, 2005). The objective of the AO was to set in place an effective communication and information system among government offices for greater speed and efficiency in communications and transactions, and to ensure wider and faster public access to government information and services.

Later on, Republic Act No. 8792 or the eCommerce Act paved the way for national government agencies and local government units to embrace electronic systems in their daily transactions. The law further defined the government's policies on electronic transactions and provided the legal framework for the country to engage in e-commerce. The initial plan for this integration was to enhance the efficiency of the delivery of services to citizens while also generating more revenue (Siar, 2015, as cited in Alampay, 2005).

In line with the eCommerce Act, the NCC initiated the eLGU project, which marked the beginning of computerization in the Philippine government. As the government's desire to incorporate ICTs in governance continued, the Commission on Information and Communication Technologies (CICT) was created in 2004 to take into account the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting, and computer technologies (Alampay, 2005) in addressing the fragmented policy and program implementation of ICT initiatives in the country (Rye, 2002, as cited in Alampay, 2005). CICT became the primary institution for developing IT policies, programs, and projects for the government.

In July 2000, the Government Information Systems Plan (GISP) was approved and adopted as a framework and guide for all computerization efforts in government. In line with this, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) established the Full Disclosure Policy (FDP) in 2010, which requires the officials of local government units (LGUs) to fully disclose particular financial transactions of their respective LGUs to keep their constituents informed of how the LGU budget is managed, distributed, and used.<sup>2</sup> The FDP aims to (1) promote honest, transparent, and orderly management of public funds; (2) help minimize, if not totally prevent corruption and misuse of public funds; and (3) increase people's awareness of available public funds and the allocated amounts for development projects in their localities.

The DILG utilized ICTs in the implementation of the FDP through the FDP Portal, which allowed the public to view, download, and print financial documents of LGUs to allow the constituents to understand how their local government's budget are spent. Citizens are also encouraged to post comments on specific documents in the FDP online portal.

<sup>1</sup> Article III, Sections 7, 23, 24, and 28. The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines

<sup>2</sup> The FDP was created through DILG Memorandum Circular No. 83 in 2010 and amended through Memorandum Circular No. 141 in 2012

Another development on the sphere of government transparency is the Philippines' commitment to the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The OGP was launched in 2011 to provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizens. As one of the eight national governments in the OGP steering committee, the Philippine government is required to embrace the Open Government Declaration, deliver a concrete action plan developed with public consultation and feedback, and to commit to independent reporting on its progress (Philippines: Open Government Partnership).

One of the Philippines' commitments as part of the OGP was the creation of a central information portal. Initially, this was pursued through the creation of an online platform for the Official Gazette of the Philippines, which provided public access to speeches and laws. Because the portal did not include access to government datasets, the Open Data Philippines (ODP) portal ([data.gov.ph](http://data.gov.ph)) was launched in 2014. The ODP portal aims to "make national government data searchable, accessible, and useful." The website is a consolidation of datasets proactively disclosed by different government agencies and allows users to find specific information. According to the website, it also "encourages the public to participate by submitting applications and visualizations based on the public data."

When the ODP was established, it was governed by a task force composed of representatives from the Office of the Presidential Spokesperson, the Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office, and the Department of Budget and Management. This task force issued Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2014-01, which informs agencies of the ODP initiative and the roles and responsibilities of each agency. The JMC covers all Departments, agencies, state universities and colleges, and government-owned and controlled corporations. It mandates government agencies to develop and maintain a centralized online platform for the publication of government data. The ODP Task Force also issued Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2015-01, which provides agencies specific guidelines on open data implementation.

Through all these efforts and along with the rapid growth of ICT use in civil society and in the private sector, the Philippines continues to witness the increasing diffusion and extensive application of ICT in society, economy, and government. These developments highlight the potential of new technologies to improve governance, specifically in the delivery of services, administration, and promotion of democratic values and citizen participation (Sisk, 2001, as cited in Ilago, 2001).

The Philippines is considered a leader in mobile telephony and is an emergent ICT adopter. Today, 87% of Filipinos have access to mobile phones, leading to more than 119 million mobile connections in the country (We Are Social, 2016). As of 2009, studies conducted by various agencies had shown that ten% of global short messaging system (SMS) traffic is from the Philippines, with the average Filipino sending about 600 text messages in a month.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Philippines has been described as the texting capital of the world (Wilson, 2014).

Although Internet penetration rate is still around 47% (We Are Social, 2016), Internet use (especially via mobile) is rising rapidly. The country has consistently high levels of engagement with social media (especially Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram) in various metrics, thus making it fertile ground for innovation and experiment. However, there is still a dearth of research on the impact of ICTs, including the internet and social media, on democratization and empowerment in the country.

## 1.2. Assessment of ICT-mediated Citizen Engagement

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<sup>3</sup> Several studies were conducted by Reuters, Portio research, NY Times, CTIA.org in 2009

The use of ICTs in governance is expected to empower and equip citizens to participate in key government processes. By improving the knowledge and awareness of citizens through ICT-mediated information sharing, the public is able to hold their governments accountable and push the governments to improve the quality of public services, expand the accessibility of these services, and become more responsive to their constituents (Lallana, *et.al.*, 2002). However, whether such expected outcomes are fulfilled in the overall Philippine e-participation landscape remains unanswered. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ICT-mediated citizen participation in the Philippines can be gleaned from the country's performance in trusted democracy indices and available literature.

The 2014 Worldwide Governance Indicator (WGI) survey reported that the Philippines scored higher on five out of six indicators against its performance in the previous year on five out of six indicators, with the exception being control of corruption. From 47.9 in the previous year, the Philippines scored 52.7 in voice and accountability from a range of 0-100, with 100 as the highest score. This indicator measures the perception of citizens on how they are able to participate in selecting their leaders, as well as their perceptions on freedom of expression and association and a free media.

The country also improved in political stability or the chances of instability or violence, including the occurrence of terrorism from 16.6 to 22.8. The WGI survey showed the Philippines' score on government effectiveness<sup>4</sup> shooting up to 61.5 from 57.4 the previous year. Philippines also saw a slight improvement in regulatory quality, or the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies, from 51.7 to 51.9. As to rule of law or the enforcement of rules, the Philippines scored 43.3 in the latest survey from 41.7 in the year prior. However, the country was graded lower on the control of corruption indicator, dropping from 43.5 to 39.9.

In the 2014 Web Index report, the Philippines was ranked 41<sup>st</sup> out of 86 countries, with a score of 48.87. The country also placed sixth in the East Asia and Pacific region, next to Singapore, which scored 75.16. The Philippines garnered 51.03, 46.27, 52.84, and 40.66 points on Universal Access, Relevant Content, Freedom and Openness, and Empowerment, respectively (World Wide Web Foundation, 2014).

Compared with the 2012 Web Index results, the Philippines improved its overall score slightly to 46.81, placing the country 32<sup>nd</sup> out of 61 countries in the overall ranking (BusinessWorld, 2012).

The 2016 UN e-Government survey includes a section on e-participation that focuses on the use of online services to facilitate of the delivery of information by governments to citizens ("e-information sharing"), interaction with stakeholders ("e-consultation"), and engagement in decision-making processes ("e-decision making"). In the e-participation index (EPI), the Philippines ranked 67<sup>th</sup> out of 193.

In terms of e-readiness and IT uptake, the Philippines ranked 76<sup>th</sup> out of 143 countries in the 2015 Networked Readiness Index (NRI). It ranked 85<sup>th</sup> on the readiness sub-index, which covers infrastructure, affordability, and skills, and 84<sup>th</sup> on the environment sub-index that measures the political and regulatory environments, business, and innovation. The country placed 74<sup>th</sup> in terms of individual, business, and government usage of ICT and 62<sup>nd</sup> on the impact sub-index, which covers economic and social impact.

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<sup>4</sup> This indicator captures public perception on the quality of public service and how such quality is dependent on political pressures and the credibility of the government to commit to policies

The NRI report also cited that relatively greater connectivity has caused political empowerment in the Philippines, citing the 2001 mass protests in the country, which were organized via short message service (SMS) texts. The ability of protesters to quickly gather support using SMS aided in toppling the administration of then-president Joseph Estrada.

Other existing literature, however, express a less optimistic assessment of the current state of citizen participation in the country, particularly those initiatives that are mostly based online. Despite the country's satisfactory performance in the aforementioned indices, independent assessments of some specific e-participation projects and initiatives have shown less favorable results. A common result of these studies is the finding that e-participation initiatives often face both low uptake from civil society and limited compliance from government agencies.

For example, the two independent reporting mechanism (IRM) reports for the Philippines on the OGP process showed that country's OGP commitments were not implemented on schedule and that there was poor coordination and cooperation between the government and civil society.<sup>5</sup> Both assessments reported the lack of consultation and stakeholder participation in the Philippine OGP process. The first Progress Report also noted limited engagement with Congress during the OGP process and low compliance or uptake of individual government agencies.

Moreover, an assessment of the Bottom-up Budgeting (BuB) process for FY 2015 reported the failure to use available data in poverty situation analysis during CSO assemblies (Manasan, 2015). The report attributes this problem to lack of data, outdated data, and available data not used in an effective manner. Furthermore, the report pointed to the significant lack of adequate feedback/communication mechanisms between national government agencies on the one hand and LGUs and CSOs on the other. This is despite the availability of the Open BuB Portal as a reporting mechanism for LGUs.

The same problem of low uptake or usage level is echoed in the case of the FDP, as pointed out by Canares, Marcial, and Narca (2015) in their research on the use of open government data by CSOs in Bohol, Bulacan, and South Cotabato. The study reports that some CSOs are not even aware that the financial information from LGUs is publicly available and have no idea how they can use such information for their work. The study therefore suggests that open data efforts from the government side must be complemented by a relevant capacity-building program to encourage meaningful engagement from civil society. Such capacity-building programs should not merely inform citizens and CSOs about the initiative and the platform, but should be suited to the specific needs and circumstances of the users with a view towards enabling and encouraging their long-term use of the platform.

Ensuring uptake and compliance was also cited as a key challenge for the otherwise-successful Philippine Government Electronic Procurement System (PhilGEPS). Specifically, a 2011 study on the PhilGEPS noted that the Philippines' dismal state of broadband infrastructure and Internet access restricted both buyers' and suppliers' access and use of the system. Along with other barriers to implementation such as the lack of integration and interoperability of the platform with other government systems, limited resources for training of buyers and suppliers, and policy gaps in implementation, the study reported that the low e-readiness of buyers and suppliers, which reflect the Philippines' declining e-readiness ranking, was a constant challenge to PhilGEPS implementation (Bombay, 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> The first Philippine Progress Report covered the period 2011-2013, whereas the second Progress Report covered the period 2013-2015

This persisting barrier to Internet access is another noteworthy point of conflict in ICT-mediated citizen engagement. According to an account from Making All Voices Count, people in northern Luzon have to go through a two-hour commute over rough roads just to check their e-mails. This, along with other barriers to access, excludes a huge sector of the population from e-governance. As Suerte-Cortez (2016) noted, “e-governance seems far away when reliable connection happens once a month.”

In summary, although ICT is an important contributor to the economy and although the legal and regulatory landscape encourages the use of ICTs for citizen participation, the various assessments and literature mentioned above demonstrate that the Philippines still lags behind its neighbors in terms of broadband infrastructure and Internet access, thus precluding the full realization of ICT-mediated citizen engagement.

## 2. Exploring ICT-mediated Structures of Citizen Engagement

Although ICT-mediated citizen engagement is still a work-in-progress in the Philippines, it has provided a new arena for citizens to engage their government. The Internet and other online platforms have offered numerous innovative means for the public to access information and be involved in issues affecting the society (Alampay and Cabotaje, 2013). Citizens are now more empowered to form opinions and demand accountability from government since access to almost any kind of information lies at their fingertips. This new found sense of empowerment has translated to a more critical and curious public that wants to hold government accountable for the taxes that they pay (De Leon, n.d.).

The government, in cooperation with CSOs, has been in the thick of efforts to further promote ICT adoption and enhance citizen engagement and the delivery of public services. In this section, the landscape of ICT-mediated initiatives of both the government and civil society will be explored.

### 2.1. Government Initiated ICT-mediated Processes

#### 2.1.1. ICTs in Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is a way to manage public money and engage people in government. It is a process by which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. The process, which started in Brazil in 1989, has been adopted as well in the Philippines.

The *Bottom-Up Budgeting (BuB)* process<sup>6</sup> is one of the major reform initiatives of the administration of former President Benigno Aquino III. One of the aims of the BuB is to make the national government budgeting process more responsive to local needs. It is guided by three principles: convergence, participation, and empowerment, and it aims to achieve community empowerment by encouraging citizens to take an active role by articulating their needs to the government and determining what projects are responsive to their needs.

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<sup>6</sup> The BuB process was introduced in March 2012 through the issuance of DBM-DILG-DSWD-NAPC Joint Memorandum Circular No. 1-2012. More information about the BuB can be found in [openbub.gov.ph](http://openbub.gov.ph). In 2014, the Philippines received the Gold Open Government award for BuB in the inaugural OGP awards in 2014, and again in 2015, when it was recognized by the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) as one of five Best Practices in Fiscal Transparency from all over the world during the OGP summit in Mexico City.

The BuB process includes CSO assemblies that select their representatives to the Local Poverty Reduction Action Teams (LPRATs). The LPRATs are tasked to identify projects based on the poverty situation analysis of the CSO assemblies. The projects identified by the LPRATs are submitted to the Regional Poverty Reduction Action Team (RPRAT) for review and then forwarded to the concerned national government agencies for inclusion in their proposed budgets, which are then submitted to Congress and Senate for inclusion in the General Appropriations Act.

Making All Voices Count reports that 92% of the country's municipalities and cities are signed up to the Open BuB portal to share their data (Suerte-Cortez, 2016). As of January 2016, 42,221 BuB projects have been reported in the Open BuB Portal, 13,712 of which have been completed as of December 1, 2015.<sup>7</sup>

*Budget ng Bayan* is another form of participatory budget that is being implemented by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM). It is a website that serves as an interactive platform for citizens to explore, find information and learn about the National Budget. In this platform, citizens can also file reports on the national budget implementation. Included in this platform's features are Interactive People's Budget, Interactive Budget Cycle and Citizen's Portal.<sup>8</sup>

In the platform, one can explore details on how the budget is crafted, the spending distributions and budget allotment for each region and the rationales and philosophies behind government projects (Santos, 2012).

Both the Interactive People's Budget and Interactive Budget Cycle are presented and made available for public consumption. This enables citizens to granulate the national budget and their allocations. Meanwhile, the Citizen's Portal is linked to a Facebook page that is accessible to all citizens with Facebook accounts.<sup>9</sup> Citizens, however, do not have a role in the preparation of the budget.

### **2.1.2. ICTs for Citizen Audit**

*Pera ng Bayan* is a project of the Department of Finance (DOF) that allows users to track and monitor the Department's reports and their status. As of 2012, 196 unique cases have been reported on the project's website.<sup>10</sup>

The project provides an avenue for concerned citizens to report corruption, extortion and other types of violations committed by officials and employees of DOF and its attached agencies. The website also allows citizens to express approval and commendation for exceptional services provided by personnel under the Department.<sup>11</sup> This project invites the public to be active partners of the DOF in its campaign against tax evaders, smugglers and erring officials.

### **2.1.3. ICT for Bids and Procurement**

On November 22, 2000<sup>12</sup> the *Philippine Government Electronic Procurement System (PhilGEPS)* was launched as a pilot system for the government's purchase of common-use supplies, materials and

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<sup>7</sup> Bottom up Budgeting project extended to barangays (2016)

<sup>8</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines (2012) gov.ph

<sup>9</sup> Gov.ph Website, 2012

<sup>10</sup> DBM launches 2012 Peoples' Budget ng Bayan. Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines

<sup>11</sup> Pera ng Bayan Website

<sup>12</sup> PhilGEPS was established through Executive Order 322 and the Implementing Rules and Regulations of EO 262 issues on October 10, 2000

equipment. It is the single portal that "serves as the official system to advertise and distribute specifications for public bidding opportunities and also contains information related to doing business with the government such as rules and regulations, press releases, a directory of government agencies and contacts, planned and historical agency procurement, bid matching for suppliers, potential competitors, winning bidders, and a frequently asked questions section" and is considered to be "the bridge and source of information on the procurement of common goods, civil works and general support services."<sup>13</sup>

The objectives of PhilGEPS are as follows:

1. To establish an open, transparent, efficient and competitive marketplace for government procurement;
2. To get better prices;
3. To build the framework to continually improve the procurement processes; and
4. To maintain sustainability of its operations over the long term.

#### **2.1.4. Automated Election System**

Another effort where participation and engagement of the public are highly encouraged is the *Automated Election System (AES)*. Following Republic Act No. 8436, which authorized the Commission on Elections to hold automated elections for the May 1998 and in subsequent election exercises, Republic Act No. 9369<sup>14</sup> was passed to encourage transparency, credibility, fairness and accuracy of elections. An automated electoral process on a nationwide scale was first enforced on a nationwide scale in the 2010 elections. The AES is equipped with appropriate technology that will be responsible for accommodating and documenting public votes as well as counting, consolidating, canvassing, and transmitting election results and other electoral processes.

The core of AES is the election management system (EMS), which is responsible for setting up the automation of polls and managing election-related data including pre-election data files, geographical subdivisions, voting jurisdictions, number of registered voters, candidate details, and information on the members of board of election inspectors (BEI). In addition to this, the EMS also creates location-specific configuration files for the voting machines and canvassing centers and eventually, generates report templates for the results of elections (Bueza, 2015).

Such technology further harnesses citizen participation in elections as it provides an easier and more convenient means for the public to exercise voting.

#### **2.1.5. The Open Data Portal**

The *Open Data Philippines (ODP)* initiative is a key component of the country's commitment as a founding member of the OGP. Initiated by the Philippine government, mainly through the portal <data.gov.ph> it seeks to systematically publish public data for transparency and accountability.

The program stems from the right of the public to information and fundamentally subscribes to the general principles of the global movement on open data, particularly open government data. Some of

<sup>13</sup> See philgeps.gov.ph

<sup>14</sup> RA 9369 authorizes the Commission on Elections to conduct automated elections for the May 1998 national and local elections

the ODP's core principles are: access to public sector information, data-driven governance, public engagement, and practical innovation. The program adheres to the idea that opening government data demands beyond providing the supply of data; in order to fully blossom in various aspects of the public life, the ODP has to establish linkages outside of the government. Such circles include developers, CSOs, the private sector, academe and other stakeholders.

The ODP recognizes the existence of rich but untapped public data in the government, which is why in order to promote and encourage public engagement and participation, they have set up a platform that extends access to the vast public data. Populating data.gov.ph will be a wide and holistic effort of all government agencies as this portal will serve as a repository of government datasets. The program aims to make and achieve Philippine public government data searchable, understandable and accessible.

### **2.1.6. Use of ICTs as Feedback and Redress Mechanisms**

The use of ICT in gathering feedback and suggestions from the public has been jumpstarted by different National Government Agencies (NGAs) to encourage public involvement of the public in refining policies and monitoring the government's efficiency, accountability and transparency.

*Mamamayan muna, Hindi Mamaya Na* (literally translated as People first, Not later) is a client feedback mechanism spearheaded by the Civil Service Commission (CSC). It originated from the CSC's campaign to address the need for behavioral reforms in bureaucracy, particularly among civil servants that deal with the public. Launched in 1994, the vision of this campaign is to instill courteous behavior and responsive action as a habit in attending to the needs of citizens.<sup>15</sup>

The program has two basic components: (1) Bilis Aksyon or Quick Action and (2) Gantimpala Agad or Instant Reward.<sup>16</sup>

The objectives of this program include:

1. Institutionalization of courteous and quick service to the public as the standard norm of behavior among government employees;
2. Immediate recognition of employees for such behavior; and
3. Provision of a redress mechanism for grievances against discourteous employees and for red tape in government agencies.

Additionally, a radio program inspired by this campaign was also launched in 1995 in cooperation with the Bureau of Broadcast Services. The radio program tackled news and feature stories including commendations and complaints of the transacting public on services rendered by respective government offices.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> CSC MC 03, S. 1994

<sup>16</sup> Forms Philippines - Mamamayan Muna, Hindi Mamaya Na Program: A Client Feedback Mechanism. Retrieved from <http://www.formsphilippines.com/guide/329/mamamayan-muna-hindi-mamaya-na-program-a-client>

<sup>17</sup> CSC MC 09, S. 1995

In 2012, *Contact Center ng Bayan (CCB)*<sup>18</sup> was launched to provide a two-way feedback mechanism to serve as the government's main help desk where citizens can request for assistance and information on government frontline services, procedures, report commendations, complaints, and feedback. This technology is a voice-based service. Aside from voice-based support, additional contact channels including email and SMS are also implemented using customized forms and templates that make it easier to air complaints via web or text.<sup>19</sup>

CCB's main objective is to provide an avenue for the public to air their concerns on the overall quality of frontline services delivered by various government personnel, as prescribed under the Anti-Red Tape Act (ARTA).

Features of the CCB include a centralized contact point where all communications from the public may be routed, logged, responded to, and distributed to respective government agencies for proper handling and resolution. Additionally, CCB also acts as a data collector as it processes data from the communications made by the citizens. These data are converted to useful information and reports that are expected to help the government in conducting performance evaluation and in improving the delivery of public services.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, in offering a holistic approach in catering to citizens' concerns, the CCB will have the following components: hotline number, website, interactive voice response system, contact center agenda and customer relationship management system.<sup>21</sup>

From the pilot run of this project, the CSC gained valuable data that served as significant input for the implementation of ARTA. Success stories and commendations from clients are also being documented, published, and discussed over CSC's radio program *Serbisyong Todo-todo*, which is aired via Radyo ng Bayan and is simulcast over 32 stations nationwide.<sup>22</sup>

The *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program*, also known as *4Ps*, is the government's flagship social assistance program that was introduced in 2007 with a pilot of 6,000 beneficiary households. It was patterned after the conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs of other developing countries that target poor households as beneficiaries. One of the features of this program is the Grievance Redress System (GRS) that was designed to "facilitate due process in resolving the complaints and grievance of beneficiary households and citizens at large" and to meet the increasing queries, clarifications and problems related to program policies that affect poor households (Patel, et.al., 2014). The GRS also serves as a guide, for implementers and partners who are directly involved in the implementation of 4Ps, on how to handle and resolve grievances that inevitably emerge.

The Pantawid grievance redress procedure starts with the receipt of a grievance, through various channels. The grievance is then recorded in the logbook at the city or municipal level or into the program's MIS at provincial levels. Each grievance is assigned a tracking number and referred to a concerned official. After this, the grievance is investigated and the facts are verified. The grievance is resolved based on the 4Ps guidelines. Initial feedback is given to the person who filed the complaint. If the complainant is not satisfied with the result, they may file an appeal to the National Grievance

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<sup>18</sup> The Contact Center ng Bayan was established by the Civil Service Commission and the then ICT Office of the Department of Science and Technology (now the Department of Information and Communications Technology) to support the implementation of RA 9485 or the Anti-Red Tape Act of 2007

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum Circular No. 15 Series 2012

<sup>20</sup> Contact Center ng Bayan

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum Circular No. 15 Series 2012

<sup>22</sup> Contact Center ng Bayan

Committee, whose decision on the case is final and executory. Final feedback is then given to the complainant.

From 2009 to 2013, the GRS has received and recorded over 485,000 grievances.<sup>23</sup> Most of the grievances were aired face-to-face through personal interviews. With the activation of the Pantawid Text Hotline, the grievances are increasingly being reported via text messages. There is limited reporting of grievances through the Internet due to issues of cost and access. According to the department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), almost 100 per cent of grievances are acted upon.

### **2.1.7. Use of Social Media**

With the popularity of Facebook and other social media applications, government is using them to encourage citizen engagement. In 2012, the government's tourism campaign "It's more fun in the Philippines" was launched. Through social media, in particular Facebook, individuals were encouraged to share photos highlighting scenic spots and events in the country that makes it "more fun" to be in. The campaign became popular and the advertising agency tasked to head the campaign won an award for this. However, the popularity did not translate into the targeted number of visitors to the country (ABS-CBN, 2016). Although tourist arrivals increased, the Philippines still lags behind other Asian neighbors in terms of tourist attraction.

Many government agencies and local government units utilize social media platforms mostly for information dissemination. Such platforms allow government to provide an enabling environment for effective and efficient government, where there is two-way communication between government agencies and citizens. Social media also plays a key role in disaster and emergency response.

As of September 2016, the Official Gazette<sup>24</sup> lists 13 government-managed Facebook and Twitter accounts to follow during natural disasters. The directory also lists 14 social media accounts of local government units in Metro Manila, 77 in Luzon, 36 in Visayas, and 32 in Mindanao.

Each of the Philippine Information Agency (PIA) regional offices has their respective Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well. It is worth noting though that there is no existing government policy/guideline for social media use, although the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) is currently developing one for its internal social media practice.<sup>25</sup>

### **2.1.8. ICTs for Public Policy Consultation**

Aside from social media, other online platforms are used to gain and enhance citizen engagement and participation in policy consultations.

Public consultations on key laws and policies are ways for citizens to have their voices heard and their issues addressed. Recently, a few government agencies have been using technology to engage a wider public to use them. For example, the public consultations for the creation of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) law, and one IRR consultation on the Data Privacy Act were streamed live online. Copies of

<sup>23</sup> Grievance Redress System of the Conditional Cash Transfer Program in the Philippines, 2014

<sup>24</sup> Laging Handa - Social Media Directory. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ph/>

<sup>25</sup> On February 23, the PCOO held a town hall to consult the public in order to develop government's social media policy. For a copy of the draft policy, see <https://www.scribd.com/document/339999377/Draft-PCOO-Memo-on-Social-Media-Policy>

these policies are also accessible on their respective websites for citizens and other concerned individuals to view and read. They may also leave comments and suggestions on these policies if they wish to.

## 2.2. CSO Initiated ICT-Mediated Processes

Philippine civil society is one of the most vibrant in the world, and continues to be at the forefront in advocating for good governance, sustainable development, socio-economic and political reforms, and human rights. Many CSOs and other concerned groups and individuals have partnered with government or implemented projects on their own to promote active citizen engagement on various issues.

### 2.2.1. ICTs for monitoring government spending and budget

The *Citizen Participatory Audit* is an award-winning joint initiative between the Philippine Commission on Audit (COA) and the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP). The project built a partnership that opened COA's public audit processes to civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual citizens through joint audits of select infrastructure projects. Under this project, citizen representatives work together with the COA to conduct joint audits of projects that have an impact on a large number of beneficiaries, as well as community surveys and a community scorecard process (ANSA-EAP).

The program was composed of four main components: Partnership Building, Capacity Development, Public Communication, and Knowledge and Tools Generation.

One of the major elements/outputs of the program is i-Kwenta, the citizen feedback portal of COA and the official online repository of the CPA project.<sup>26</sup>

*Bantay Kita*<sup>27</sup> is a coalition of civil society and academic organizations that advocate for transparency and accountability in the extractive industry in the Philippines. It aims to build the engagement capabilities of civil society organizations and communities and secure the law on freedom of information, among others. Bantay Kita also has subnational transparency initiatives in partnership with select local governments, such as those in Compostela Valley and South Cotabato. In Compostela Valley, for instance, an Executive Order was issued by the Governor to implement the transparency program, which includes the creation of a multi-stakeholders' council consisting of representatives from the national government, local governments, large scale and small scale mining firms, CSOs, indigenous peoples' groups, and the academic community.

*Pera Natin Ito! (It is our money!)*<sup>28</sup> is a Philippine Public Transparency Project built on the belief that corruption will only ever be reduced when ordinary people are able to understand, monitor, and ultimately have a say on where and how public money is spent.

This project aims to put under the public spotlight important issues such as control and management of the nation's public wealth and keep them there. The Pera Natin Ito! project is the second collaboration amongst four media development organizations, namely: the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWRP), the Center for Community Journalism and Development (CCJD), the Mindanao

<sup>26</sup> The Citizen Participatory Audit. Retrieved from <http://www.i-kwenta.com/about/cpa/#.V8fv5Vt97IV>

<sup>27</sup> Bantay Kita Brochure. Retrieved from <http://www.bantaykita.ph>

<sup>28</sup> Pera Natin Ito. Philippine Public Transparency Reporting Project

News and Information Cooperative (MindaNEws), and the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP).

Their first project, the highly regarded Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project aimed to root greater human rights awareness into society via the media. For two years from 2007 to 2009, they delivered specialized training on human rights issues; commissioned, published and disseminated stories and investigative reports; and organized events and outreach activities.

The Caucus of Development NGO Networks(CODE NGO) and the Coalition Against Corruption (CAC) initiated the *Pork Barrel Watch / Priority Development Assistance Fund(PDAF) Watch* to monitor how PDAF and Congressional Allocation (CA) Funds of the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate were being utilized. Through this project, a policy agenda will be formulated to make sure that PDAF and CA funds are used responsively and effectively. It is common knowledge in the country that the pork barrel funds of legislators consumed a substantial amount of taxpayers' money, amounting to 20-billion pesos annually. This was often more than the annual budget of the Department of Agriculture and other major government agencies. Further, legislators themselves identify projects that are to be funded by the PDAF and CA, based on a pre-approved list or menu of project options. However, the public knows little about how these funds were spent.

Among the projects initiated by PDAF Watch were strengthening public participation in governance and ensuring proper use of public funds, which include procurement monitoring, textbook and medicine monitoring, internal revenue allotment monitoring in local villages (barangays), PDAF Monitoring, catching the big fish, and lifestyle checks on public officials.<sup>29</sup>

*Procurement Watch Inc. (PWI)*<sup>30</sup> is a citizen initiative that has become an important ally of reform-minded public officials seeking to improve transparency and accountability in the public procurement process. Established in 2001, Procurement Watch aims to combat corruption in public procurement by promoting transparency, impartiality, and accountability through research, training, partnership, and advocacy.

PWI also conducts a variety of monitoring and advocacy activities with different groups, including the Ombudsman, government agencies involved in large procurement, and civil society organizations and citizens. In particular, PWI has developed a very close relationship with Ombudsman, whose officials now receive training sessions on procurement from PWI.

PWI has also established a "Feedback and Complaint-handling Mechanism" to process and respond to reports and other information provided by observers.

### **2.2.2. Automated Election System**

*Automated Election System (AES) Watch* is an independent, voluntary, proactive, and nationwide network of citizens that promotes clean elections. The organization was initially formed in 2009 from a group of more than 200 signatories from different civil society organizations (AES Watch, 2010). It engages the Commission on Election on issues related to the readiness and trustworthiness of the AES.

From the above mentioned projects and initiatives spearheaded by both the government and CSOs in the country, it is clear that the Philippines has taken advantage of developments in ICTs, particularly

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.integrityinitiative.com/features/partner-projects/2-uncategorised/507-coalition-against-corruption>

<sup>30</sup> UNDP Global Center for Public Service Excellence

the Internet, for the delivery of services and information to its citizens in an open and cost-efficient manner.

Based on the cited examples in this study, the Philippine government is undoubtedly engaged in efforts that promote citizen engagement and participation. As they gear towards transparent and accountable governance, projects focusing on the creation of various platforms such as websites and social media pages and accounts have emerged over the past years. Through these portals, the state is able to reach out to its constituents, who are then enabled to access their right to public information and air their concerns. Civil society initiatives monitor various government projects, and provide feedback and suggestions on how to improve the delivery of government service.

With the support of the issued laws and policies, government and CSOs are able to adhere to transparency and accountability, therefore building an environment that stimulates effective and efficient governance. With the smart use of ICTs, the State is able to communicate, engage, and encourage public participation, which is one of the most crucial keys in realizing democratic good governance.

As mentioned in the study by Serafica (2015), some noted IT enabled trends for the next ten years would include: (1) Raising consumer expectations for instant access to information, transparency, customization, low prices and ease of use based on the model of Internet service; (2) The evolution of e-commerce with low-cost, high-speed, seamless exchange of information enables new types of online markets, payment systems and business models; and, (3) Transformation of government, health care and education with the use of growing power and reach of IT to boost productivity, improve service delivery, and increase transparency in these areas.

The government, with the use of ICT to provide more e-Services, will be able to optimize resources, save costs, and engage citizens. However, this is easier said than done. The use of ICT-mediated processes by both government and the public comes with challenges.

### **2.3. Challenges of ICT-mediated participation**

Filipinos, both in government and outside of it, have yet to be aware of and realize the potential of ICTs in influencing government (Siar, 2005; Alampay, 2007; Martin, Cabo & Nicolas, 2009, p. 29). The *e-LGU Project*<sup>31</sup> was established to revolutionize local governance by transforming local government units (LGUs) to electronically-enabled institutions. It was supposed to enhance the delivery of public service, promote transparency in government transactions, as well as increase public access to government information. Included in the e-LGU project are the Electronic Real Property Tax System (e-RPTS), which automates the four key functions in the real estate taxing operations of LGUs, Electronic Business Permit and Licensing System (e-BPLS) and the Electronic Treasury Operations Management System (eTOMS). The e-BPLS is responsible for the processing of business permit application, assessment, collection and release as well as report generation, while e-TOMS covers all business processes performed by the Treasury Office of an LGU. To help push for the success of the e-LGU project, a total of 110 eLGU Community eCenters were initially established in 2008 to pave the

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<sup>31</sup> The e-LGU project is an initiative of the then ICT Office in cooperation with pre-defined local government units. For more information, see [www.dict.gov.ph](http://www.dict.gov.ph)

way for citizens having access to the Internet allowing them to interact with the government through their websites.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, even with resources at the disposal of LGUs, citizen engagement remains lacking. There is little awareness among citizens of the online presence of their local government, and worse, some local chief executives did not even know that their own LGU has a website (Alampay, 2007, p. 12). Further, LGUs adopt different computer systems for their needs. Alampay (2007) laments the need for the development of a common standards for database architecture, one that uses an open source software to fit the different nuances of each LGU. Integrated and interoperable systems within and among government agencies need to be developed.

The findings of Siar (2005), and Alampay and Umali (2007) were echoed in the findings of Martin, Cabo and Nicolas (2009) who observed that while many government agencies and local government units maintain websites, they are unable to maintain them on a regular basis and some government sites were also rarely interactive (p. 27). Local government for instance still has a lot of work to do to enhance the content of their websites in order to promote the communication and linkage between government and citizens (Siar, 2005, p. 161).

On the one hand, this may be due to funding constraints. Some local governments do not have the ability to acquire ICT hardwares and softwares, or if they have the necessary hardwares and softwares, they are not able to maintain them. This is especially true among the poorer local government units. This is one reason why local governments cannot sustain ICT projects even if they are sponsored by outsiders. (Martin, Cabo and Nicolas, 2009, p. 29)

On the other hand, the bureaucratic culture that is averse to change also poses as a barrier to the success of e-government (Lallana, et.al., 2002, p. 50). There should be an inductive environment and structure that supports e-government initiatives, one where management is supportive of re-tooling the civil service and transforming government workers into knowledge workers.

The digital divide is another challenge that has to be dealt with. To date, Internet penetration in the country is a little less than 50% and those who are connected are mostly from the urban areas. Internet connectivity remains a challenge. The slow Internet, not to mention the high cost, does not bode well for the public. Going online takes one's time from other chores; a slow Internet is seen by people as a waste of their time (Martin, Cabo & Nicolas, 2009, p. 28). Siar (2005) says that poor technological access is a serious constraint to the adoption and application of ICTs for governance and it would take time to eradicate the digital divide because it is not simply an issue of connectivity, lack of access, or low computer and Internet literacy. It is a gap that is conditioned by traditional social divisions of class, income, education, gender, age, ethnicity, and social geography (Sy as cited in Siar, 2005, p. 159).

Martin, Cabo and Nicolas (2009, p. 27) observed that the generation gap was also a limiting factor in ICT use. The older generation is apprehensive in using computers and the internet, fearing that their unfamiliarity with it might cause them to ruin them. They also find some ICT terminologies incomprehensible and therefore daunting.

Considering the country's infrastructure and cost of communications, who actually gets to participate and have their voices heard? Internet penetration in the country is a little less than 50% of the

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<sup>32</sup> Philippine Community eCenter (CeC) Program / DICT. Dict.gov.ph. Retrieved from <http://dict.gov.ph/philippine-community-ecenter-cec-program/>

population. There is no sex-disaggregated data on this. Further, not all who are active in online space may be interested in surfing the websites of government agencies.

Only those who have Internet connection can access the websites of government offices, where valuable information may be sourced, including opportunities to bid. In the case of PhilGEPS, for instance, only those who are connected can bid to supply the national government with services and materials. This problem with Internet access has also stalled a smooth shift towards online-only forms of government service delivery, such as in the case of the Bureau of Internal Revenue where a requirement to file tax returns using their electronic filing and payment system was met with criticism.

The Philippine Community eCenter (PhilCeC) program was one government initiative that was meant to provide internet access and deliver e-governance solutions to previously underserved areas. A preliminary assessment of the CeC program published in 2007 describes the CeCs as “one -stop shops to address the ICT needs of the community,” providing access to a wide gamut of resources such as Internet access, office applications, printing, desktop publishing, photocopying, telephony and VoIP, ICT training, and others. However, the report also says that for CeCs to fulfill its important role in bridging the digital divide, it is not sufficient to provide equipment, software, and internet connectivity but should be holistic and community-based (Alampay and Umali, 2007). As with other e-governance initiatives, sustainability is key in ensuring the efficiency of CeCs. The technological resources and capabilities provided must be complemented by capacity-building efforts, as well as useful and quality content (Magno, 2014). However, CeCs in the Philippines were described as being limited to the provision of hardware and software but lacking in content development (Magno, 2014). That said, providing access is incomplete without efforts to improve digital literacy and capacity of communities. Further, it has to be understood that CeCs are subsidized in part by LGU funds, and the operational budget provided by LGU support is given on a year-to-year basis. There is the possibility that a change in administration could see a lessening of support for the LGU, thus it is important to find alternative funding options "to insulate CeCs from political whims" (Alampay & Umali, 2007, p. 27).

Digital literacy and capacity are necessary elements for people to actively engage with their government and to participate in different spheres of society. Even if people are connected, they may not know how to use technology and how to actually engage with government. Digital literacy is not just for the general public but also for government workers who provide the services.

ICT e-participation strategies are only as good as their existence is known by a larger number of people (Martin, Cabo & Nicolas, 2009, p. 39). Their presence and availability should be made known as well through other channels, such as print, TV and broadcast media. Making the public aware of existing e-government services would increase their use as well as increase demand for similar services (Lallana, et.al., 2002, p. 51).

Additionally, if the initiative is not relevant to the concerned individual or group, if it is not interesting to them, then there is no engagement. It is incumbent upon government agencies and local government units to inform the citizenry of their programs and advocacies, as well as make them realize their relevance to them. Which brings us to the relevance of content. Websites of government agencies for example, should contain information useful to the people; otherwise, people will not use them. It may also help to consider the local context of issues, and use of local language for easier understanding of the public.

It is the policy of the state to adopt and implement "a policy of full public disclosure for all its transactions involving public interest."<sup>33</sup> The right of people to information on matters of public concern is also recognized by the Constitution. Towards this end, "access to official records and to documents and papers pertaining to official acts, transactions, or decisions, as well as to government research data used as basis for policy development shall be afforded the citizen, subject to such limitations as may be provided by law."<sup>34</sup>

One common gap that comes up in most, if not all, assessments of citizen participation and e-governance in the Philippines is the lack of a freedom of Information (FOI) law. The prolonged lack of a state-wide FOI legislation has been critical in preventing ICT-mediated citizen participation in the country from shifting from government-initiated to citizen-led engagement. As Magno (2014) argues, FOI legislation is necessary to overcome the view that digital inclusion is limited to e-government (p. 267).

Making information immediately accessible to the public is crucial to transparency. The passage of a legislation on freedom of information (FOI) can provide, among others, that all information pertaining to official acts, transactions or decisions, as well as government research data used as basis for policy development, regardless of their physical form or format in which they are contained and by whom they were made should be made accessible to the public.

For more than two decades, the passage of an FOI law has been languishing in Congress. Complementing efforts of legislators who have filed an FOI bill are different groups and individuals, including journalists and media groups that lobby for its passage. These groups eventually banded together to form the loose network, the Right to Know Right Now (R2KRN) coalition that has been actively lobbying for the passage of the bill into a law. Recently, however, the coalition has seen a glimmer of light when the new President signed an Executive Order No. 2, S. 2016 on the FOI, mandating all Executive Offices to operationalize in the Executive branch the people's Constitutional right to information, subject of course to some exceptions. The R2KRN coalition worked with the Presidential Communications Operations Office to draft a People's FOI Manual to serve as guide for its implementation. At the same time, it continues to lobby for the passage of an FOI law and has remained vigilant on what exemptions government wishes to include in the FOI Manual.

As to the role of social media, David (2016), in a public lecture delivered on the social media policy of selected frontline government agencies, said that the government's presence on social media platforms benefits both the office and citizens. On the one hand, it provides a platform for government agencies to directly communicate with their constituency and saves them resources that would have otherwise been used to address the concerns of citizens. On the other hand, social media serves as a complaint center for citizens. The matter of how responsive government agencies are to queries and complaints is another matter and would be an interesting area to look into. Reports have said that social media played a big role in determining the outcomes of the recent Presidential elections held in the Philippines in May 2016 (Guerrero, 2016; Sinpeng, 2016). The supporters of then-Presidential aspirant and present incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte claimed that they utilized social media to the hilt to target the many millions of voters, both in the Philippines and overseas. Citing lack of funds, they found social media as an inexpensive way of campaigning and reaching out to people, irrespective of the credibility of information being shared. It was also social media that paved the way for the morphing of Duterte supporters into groups - I am OFW, I am for Duterte, OFW Global Movement Supports President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, the Diehard Duterte Supporters - all claiming to

<sup>33</sup> Art. II, Sec. 28 of the Philippine Constitution

<sup>34</sup> Art. III, Sec. 7 of the Philippine Constitution

have millions in membership.<sup>35</sup> These groups helped catapult their candidate to the Presidency.

However, social media is also an abused space. For instance, women who posted their criticism of the President have received not just abusive messages from the President's supporters but rape and death threats, as well. Human rights defenders who have been using social media for their advocacies have become targets of trolls and are receiving abusive, annoying and even threatening messages whenever they post messages critical of the new Administration. Social media has also been used by some government officials to publish fake news in support of the government's campaign on the war on drugs. Caution should also be used as social media likewise traps its users in an echo chamber. Findings show that users of social media connect with their friends, mostly like-minded people, and "unfriend" those who think differently (Hosanagar, 2016).

Electronic tools of participation are helpful but they should not totally replace the more conventional methods of face-to-face communication and paper technology, especially in a setting like the Philippines where the digital divide is still wide (Siar, 2005; Martin, Cabo & Nicolas, 2009). The need to contact government face-to-face remains significant because citizens still want to be able to talk to government and be assured that government is listening to them (Martin, Cabo & Nicolas, 2009, p. 27). ICT tools should be used to augment existing tools and strategies for eliciting participation. The goal should be to broaden people's access to decision-making by opening up more avenues by which they can participate, and giving them options (Siar, 2005, p. 162).

There are other equally critical issues that require serious attention, aside from the challenges posed by the use of ICT-mediated tools. These include the reluctance of government to provide information to the public. As mentioned earlier, the FOI bill has been pending in Congress for more than two decades. While there is now an Executive Order on FOI,<sup>36</sup> it is applicable only for all Executive Offices. Another issue is the need for a strong leadership that is supportive of e-governance efforts. Then, there is the issue of information and data that is shared. What happens to these data, where they are stored, and its privacy implications are also causes for concern. For example, Philippine elections are already automated. Voter registration is also done through electronic means, where biometrics are required and stored in computer servers. Prior to the last Philippine elections in May 2016, the website of the Commission on Elections was hacked, resulting in one of the biggest data leaks in history. Personal information of 55 million voters were compromised (Rappler.com, 2016). The incident showed government's lack of readiness to respond to such cases and that there is a need to review and strengthen existing laws, including the Data Privacy Act to better protect the privacy of citizens. Ensuring the privacy and security of information could encourage greater participation among the public.

The Philippines still has a long way to go in terms of ICT adoption and implementation in bridging the state and its citizens and in encouraging participation, but these startup efforts have definitely paved the way for more communication opportunities. The Philippines is a work-in-progress, but it has offered its constituents a significant systemic change in aspects of transparency and accountability.

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<sup>35</sup> The above-mentioned groups all have social media pages. To this writing, these groups are still active and support the policies of the administration

<sup>36</sup> Executive Order No. 2, S. 2016. (2016). Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ph/2016/07/23/executive-order-no-02-s-2016/>

## 3. Observing the Shifts in Meanings, Norms and Power in State-Citizen Engagement

### 3.1. Citizen Participation Through ICTs

Citizen participation and engagement are some of the necessary elements of a democracy. When we speak of citizen engagement, there is recognition of citizen's rights and duties. In a democracy, there are opportunities for citizens to actively participate in shaping the kind of society that they live in. Such participation is found in many ways and at various levels - at the community, in city, provincial, regional or national levels, and is a right protected by the Constitution.

Article XIII, Section 16 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution provides that:

The right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision-making shall not be abridged. The State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms.

As discussed in the previous sections, technology is increasingly being used by government to engage the public. The use of ICTs has made it much easier to engage citizens and promote good government (Lallana, 2002, p. 49). It has profound implications on local governance, particularly in engaging the participation of citizens. For instance, citizens can upload photos of an ongoing project to help an agency monitor compliance with the specifications of the project. By being able to monitor a project closely, unnecessary spending is discouraged and public funds are not wasted. But the extent to which local governments and citizens benefit from its potential and use will depend on their understanding of its nature and characteristics (Ilago, 2001, p. 17).

Earlier studies on the use of ICTs for public engagement focused on examining local and national government agency websites and the potential of the Internet. Ilago (2001) examined the use of Internet by local governments and how local government websites are being harnessed to promote participation. Lallana, *et.al.* (2002) examined the websites of different government agencies to gain an understanding of the prevalence of e-government in the country (i.e. how governments are delivering services to the public through their websites). Siar (2005) did an assessment of the content of city government websites to test how cities are adopting e-governance. The results showed the absence of substantial information and resources that "could enhance the quality and speed of service delivery, make government more transparent, facilitate public participation in decision-making, and ultimately bring government, citizens, business, community organizations and other groups in a society together in the governance process (p. 135)." Alampay (2007) analyzed the importance of people's participation by examining the e-LGU project (see Section 2 of this paper). Martin, Cabo and Nicolas (2009) did a rapid assessment of the extent of ICT's utilization in public administration. All these studies point to the opportunities to be gained by government with the use of ICTs. However, ICTs as tools for e-governance are underutilized.

When Benigno Aquino III won the presidency in 2010, fighting corruption was a focus of his administration. 'Daang matuwid' (straight path), was the battle-cry of the Aquino administration and during this time, most, if not all, of the citizen engagement carried out were efforts to promote transparency and accountability in order to combat the country's long-standing problem in corruption.

Part of the Daang Matuwid advocacy is the creation of the Medium-Term Information and Communication Technology Harmonization Initiative (MITHI) to ensure the coherence of ICT programs and projects, and at the same time be consistent with the five Key Result Areas of the administration: good governance, peace & rule of law, poverty reduction, inclusive growth, and integrity of environment (see figure below).<sup>37</sup> MITHI aims to encourage collaboration through open communication and sharing of data, and the development of an interoperability framework for the entire government. Managed by the Department of Budget Management, the Department of Science and Technology, and the National Economic Development Authority, its envisioned outcome is a digitally enabled, responsive and accessible government. ICT funds may be accessed under the e-Government fund of MITHI.

**Figure 1: MITHI**



Source: [mithi.gov.ph](http://mithi.gov.ph)

Another defining characteristic of ICT-mediated citizen engagement in the Philippines is the influential role of civil society organizations as intermediaries of engagement. The Philippines is known to have one of the most vibrant civil societies in the world, at one point even having the largest number of NGOs per capita in Asia (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Section 2 of this paper has shown several examples of how civil society has also used ICT to engage the government to demand for

<sup>37</sup> MITHI was created through Joint Memorandum Circular 2012-01

transparency and accountability.

Engagement, according to Gaventa (2012) is a way of strengthening a sense of citizenship, and the more aware citizenship can help contribute to building responsive states that deliver services and protect the rights of the people, and foster a culture of accountability (p. 2406). It can lead to increased capacity of action, to new forms of participation (p. 2402). In the case of the campaigns for land reform, they contributed to "a thickening of relationships and networks between state and civil society actors (p. 2402). And campaigns could be both offline and online.

While there are efforts to actively engage citizens online, the government should also improve offline services. For example, online payment of some taxes and employee contributions may now be conducted online. This saves on time and effort for many employees. But not all may opt or have the means or capacity to do such transactions online. Should others choose to transact payment in designated payment centers, the process should also be improved.

The examples of programs and initiatives of government show the government's desire to reach out to the people, consult and engage with them. Many good practices have emerged through these new initiatives, but the question is how to sustain them. In the case of the Philippines, politics has a lot to do with the continuity of a project. For example, the Bottom Up Budgeting initiative of the previous administration has been recognized by international groups as a good practice in participatory budget management. The new Administration, however, is not that keen on the implementation of the BuB and has questioned it. Government's thrusts and priorities change, depending on who is sitting at the helm.

Citizen engagement is important and should be encouraged, but it cannot be expected to automatically solve any and all delivery issues. However, if used effectively, it can help government improve the quality and accessibility of its services to the public. A successful citizen engagement also takes time and should not be expected to produce immediate success (UNDP, 2016).

In the same manner, ICT is an innovative tool for people to be able to exercise their rights more efficiently on a wider scale, including their right to participation. But ICTs merely provide an updated medium by which the principles of democracy may be further experienced and exercised (Lallana et.al., 2002, p. 49). To reach the marginalized "would require appropriate technologies that take into consideration social, technical and economic conditions" (Alampay, 2007, p. 15).

### **3.2. Empowering Citizenry Through Open Data**

One of the flagship programs of the previous administration is the Open Data project. Introduced during the term of former President Benigno Aquino III, the ODP was one of the reforms initiated to improve government transparency and accountability. The initiative was recognized as a tangible expression of the government's commitment to good and open governance. The novel idea of open data was leveraged to package and reframe the government's numerous transparency initiatives, especially those heavy on data sets. As former Undersecretary of the DBM Richard Moya says, they envision a government that is data-driven, a democracy that "basis its decision not only on political considerations but also on data coming from various sources" (Cited in Ona, 2014).

Openness is not just about government putting meaningful government data available but also making

the public meaningfully engage with government through the use of open government data. In order to achieve the potential of open data, enabling conditions should be present. Young and Verhulst (2016) identify them as follows: partnerships, public infrastructure, policies, and problem definition. These were the same conditions that were observed by Ona (2014) when he studied how open data can be used for the development of health care and small and medium enterprises in the Philippines. He also included data content management and human capacity component as necessary for promoting ICT for development initiatives (p. 19-20).

Open data is a new concept and knowledge about it is significantly low (Canares, et.al 2014, p. 18). On the supply side, LGUs do not make an effort to inform the public about the availability of data even if it is there. On the demand side, there is limited awareness on the part of the public and the intermediaries on the availability of data and its use. Even among civil society, knowledge about open data is low, or if there is knowledge about the availability of data, open data skills is lacking.

Overall, this review of literature points out that there is increasing use of ICT-mediated processes and tools for citizen engagement in the Philippines. But how effective this will be depends on the knowledge of citizens of the availability of such ICT-mediated processes, and the understanding and appreciation of such processes, including having leaders and champions within various government agencies who can make things happen (Lallana et.al., 2002, p. 50).

It can be said that although the initiatives described above introduce new platforms for citizen engagement, they do little to recast and redefine long-existing norms in Philippine governance. What these practices do is to merely reinforce traditional governance structures and norms of citizen engagement. One key factor in this is the persisting digital divide and gaps in access in the Philippines. These are indicative of how the country lags far behind technological development. Unless these basic-level issues are first addressed, there will be little to no significant developments in both the agency of citizens and the prevailing structures in Philippine society. In fact, these gaps may even increase the marginalization of certain sectors as ICT-mediated citizen engagement gains traction. In effect, existing structures of power in the public sphere are merely reinforced and validated.

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