Check My School
Linking ICTs and Citizen Monitoring

A Discussion of Initial Impact & Key Lessons

BEFORE

AFTER

A Project of ANSA EAP in the Philippines
A gap between government and schools

Araullo High School in Manila, Philippines, had a population of 5,000 students but only two functional toilets. “A lot of toilets are not working; they don’t flush well or at all,” explained student Maricar Dicdican. “Some of the students end up getting a UTI (urinary tract infection) because they would rather hold their urge to go to the bathroom than use the facilities in the school.” Parent Emma De Mesa observed that over her decade-long experience as a PTA president, the “fastest” response to a petition to the Department of Education to address school problems has been about a year. “If you are not so lucky sometimes, the request will outstay a number of principals and will last for several PTA president terms.”

Araullo High School is only one of thousands of schools across the country struggling with a range of problems, from the conditions of the toilets, to student-teacher ratios, to the condition and availability of textbooks, among others. The underlying cause is systemic: Philippines’ Department of Education is highly centralized, the largest organization in the government, thus it faces challenges in managing its resources. The Department of Education has a database that tracks the physical conditions of schools and related issues, but needs to improve the integrity of its data. Most importantly, there is a gap between the government and reality on the ground, with no institutionalized way to close it.

Check My School closes the gap

Out of this need, and through collaboration between the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – East Asia Pacific (ANSA-EAP) and the Philippines Department of Education, Check My School was born in January of 2011. Check My School is an interactive platform which enables citizens – especially school administrators, parents and students – to give the government direct feedback on any factor they observe to be weakening the quality of their schools. Check My School is a promising example of citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), and government working together to ensure that the services government provides are not only delivered to citizens, but delivered at an appropriate standard of quality. On Tuesday, May 1, 2012, WBI held an event, “Check My School – Linking ICTs and Citizen Monitoring” to take stock of the initiative’s first year and crystallize preliminary lessons for other, similar initiatives that are taking shape around the globe.

Dondon Parafina, network coordinator for ANSA-EAP and the driving force behind Check My School, explained how the initiative works. The website uses Google Maps technology and mobile phone messaging. By clicking on a particular school on the Google GPS (global positioning system) map, users can log a complaint if a teacher fails to show up, textbooks are falling apart, or they observe another problem that is the responsibility of the Department of Education. The website captures and tracks a variety of information on the condition of the school and presents the information in a clear format for both citizens and government. In building the initiative, ANSA-EAP emphasized identifying and mobilizing the right people in government, along with students, parents, teachers, recent graduates, and ensuring that stakeholders with various perspectives are engaged and collaborating throughout the process.
CHECK MY SCHOOL – LINKING ICTs AND CITIZEN MONITORING
Promoting social accountability one school at a time in the Philippines, Moldova, and beyond took place May 1, 2012, and was sponsored by the World Bank Institute, the Human Development Network, and the Open Development Technology Alliance.

PRESENTER:
Dondon Parafina, Network Coordinator, Affiliated Network for Social Accountability, East Asia and the Pacific Region (ANSA-EAP)

DISCUSSANTS:
Aleem Walji, Manager, World Bank Institute Innovation Practice
Oleg Petrov, Knowledge Coordinator, World Bank ICT Sector Unit
Michael Trucano, Senior ICT & Education Specialist, World Bank Human Development Network

MODERATOR:
Rachel Winter Jones, Senior Communications Officer, World Bank Institute

Positive preliminary results

Students, parents, and the school administration of Araullo High School used the platform to report the toilet problem, and make an overall assessment of the school across a number of critical categories, to the Department of Education. “Through Check My School,” Emma De Mesa reports in a video that documents problems in various schools that citizens and the government resolved collaboratively, “there was action done on our request within a week.” While still in the start-up phase, Check My School is already producing observable results.

Check My School has become one of the most cited citizen feedback initiatives within the World Bank. While the project is still evolving, trying to understand some of the key contributors to its initial success should be helpful to others who are gestating similar projects. Over the last decade, and with increasing intensity in the wake of events like the rise of Ushahidi after the 2007 Kenyan elections and more recently, the Arab Spring, there has been increasing focus on the possibility for new technology not just to give citizens a voice in fragile circumstances, but also as a practical everyday tool to help their governments work better. While technology holds exciting promise, the May 1 event demonstrated that by itself it does not cause change or solve problems. Aleem Walji, manager of the WBI innovation practice, emphasized that new technology employing citizen input interfaces does not always work at the outset, and needs to be developed over time so that it functions in the right way for each local context. At this early stage, it is hard to predict how far the impact of Check My School will reach – whether it will function as a short-term problem-solving tool for concerns like the toilets at Araullo High School, or whether it may become a component of broader reaching, more systemic change. But it is clear that the impact is positive, and that the positive impact is a function of much more than technology. Technology clearly improves efficiencies in the process, but in the end, Walji said, “the efficiency and effectiveness of [citizen feedback] initiatives depend on the people” behind the technology.
SELECTED RESULTS

- Gabaldon School Building rehabilitated, Alangalang Central School, Leyte
- Renovation of school building, Putik Central School, Zamboanga City
- Commitment to increase funds for school, Dumaguete
- Textbooks replenished, Sta. Fe Central School, Leyte
- Computer and internet provision, Dualing High School, North Cotabato
- Legal cases filed against anomalous transactions, Pagadian City
- Toilet donated by school alumni, Lt. Andres Calungsod, North Cotabato
- Renovation of toilets, Araullo High School, Manila

More than technology

Because the Philippines has just a 25% internet penetration rate, Check My School was hardly guaranteed success; the people behind the technology were centrally important. Parafina and his collaborators needed to innovate to give the schools the access they needed. ANSA-EAP created a network of “Infomediaries” (information intermediaries), capable and technology-literate volunteers drawn from the community who enable others to take action on problems they find in their local schools. The creation of Infomediaries also was part of a process of systematizing the review of schools both to make sure they are thoroughly checked, and to put the conditions in place so that Check My School can maintain ongoing operations.

Check My School’s initial success was won on the strength of a lot more than technology. One of ANSA’s important approaches was to leverage and align already existing local initiatives and knowledge. Similar homegrown initiatives (such as Textbook Count and Bantay Eskwela) that already had some isolated successes provided lessons and points of entry. ANSA wanted to create a program that took on problems in the schools from a more holistic perspective, to build economies of scale and aggregate impact.

Another key factor behind Check My School’s success was participants’ sense of motivation, along with the relationships and networks that ANSA helped to cultivate. ANSA provided broad support, particularly in cultivating the relationships with the Department of Education, and in mobilizing a diverse range of stakeholders. The government’s commitment both came out of and helped to reinforce an enabling environment that supports transparency initiatives and citizen engagement. WBI has nurtured the project, raising awareness about the Check My School model, building relationships for the project within the World Bank, and helping others learn how to incubate similar initiatives. WBI has also provided technical and financial assistance, and is continuing to support the planning for the next phase of the initiative.

The project already has produced concrete results beyond Araullo High School, ranging from investigations into financial anomalies to renovations of entire schools, but Check My School is still in the start up phase. Michael Trucano, Senior ICT and Education specialist, cautioned that intense early attention and rushing to measure results might “smother the project” before it has had time to mature organically.
Lessons for start-up projects

Many of the audience’s questions reflected other versions of the project or parallel projects springing up around the world, reinforcing that the idea is widely relevant. Stories from other countries highlighted the need to ensure that each version fits appropriately in the country context, where governments may be harder to persuade, CSOs may not be sufficiently supported, among other factors. These other evolving projects can learn from the challenges facing a pilot in Moldova pilot that Oleg Petrov (knowledge coordinator, ICT sector unit) described. Inspired by Philippines, the Moldova version of Check My School is in the incipient phase, and does not yet have the critical country ownership or momentum that will be necessary for its success. Parafina suggested that Moldova should map the key stakeholders and then target and nurture champions for the project. His experience in the Philippines illustrates that constructive engagement to create a collaborative partnership between civil society and government was fundamental to the project’s initial success.

Moving forward, WBI will play a role in facilitating South-South learning so that other partners can leverage ANSA-EAP’s knowledge and experience. Undoubtedly, this new iteration of Check My School will evolve differently, reflecting challenges specific to the individual country context. For example, with a diminishing population in Moldova, funding levels do not always reflect the size of the current student body. A Check My School project there could help stakeholders control the appropriate levels of funding for each school, and ensure that funding is in line with student population. Once the right people behind the technology are in place, connected to each other, and have established a collaborative relationship with the government of Moldova, this new initiative can look forward to its own success.

FURTHER INFORMATION

ANSA-EAP (http://www.ansa-eap.net)
The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) is a non-profit organization housed in the Ateneo School of Government, Ateneo de Manila University. ANSA-EAP helps improve governance by:

- linking civil society organizations in a network
- advocating and practicing social accountability

Check My School in the Philippines: http://checkmyschool.org/
Moldova Check My School initiative: http://afla.md/institutions/all/

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