The Municipality of San Isidro: Policy Influence in Local Education Governance
Capacity Building Documents

Anne Lan K. Candelaria, Ph.D. and Sonia R. Lorenzo with Jess R. Lorenzo

SUMMARY
This case study discusses the engagement between Ateneo Center for Educational Development (ACED) and the Local Government of San Isidro in the Philippines between the period 2004 to 2007. It serves as an illustration of the case study protocol by Anne Lan Candelaria published as part of the same series.
About the Authors

Anne Lan Candelaria was the former Director of Ateneo Center for Educational Development (ACED). Currently, she is with the Department of Political Science at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines.

Sonia R. Lorenzo served as Mayor in the town of San Isidro from 1998-2006. She is now the Executive Director of the Union of Local Authorities in the Philippines (ULAP).

Jess R. Lorenzo, son of Mayor Lorenzo, was Development and Partnerships Officer of the Local Government of San Isidro from 2004 to 2006. He is now cluster manager of Regions 10 to 13 for Municipal Leadership and Governance Program of the Zuellig Family Foundation.
Context

San Isidro is a small agricultural landlocked town 101 kilometers north of the Philippine capital city Manila. The majority of its people are mainly occupied in farming and poultry raising as well as small-scale home-based economic activities. It was classified as a fifth class municipality when Sonia Lorenzo was elected Mayor in 1998. She won despite her being a last-minute substitute candidate of her fellow party member who was disqualified three days prior to elections. As soon as she took over the municipality as its local chief executive, she noticed that there were five factors that impeded development in the town, namely: (1) low morale of local government employees, (2) absence of basic services programs, (3) bloated bureaucracy and finances were in disarray, (4) prevalent “dole-out” mentality, and (5) unresponsive citizenry.

Brief History of the Partnership

One of key priorities of the mayor was to improve the quality of public education in her town. This was anchored in a broader local development program called “The Total Family Assistance Program (TFAP)” that sought to improve the quality of life of its people through the integration of social and economic development. This program synchronizes the technological, production, post-harvest and marketing needs of farmers with the education, health, backyard food production and micro-enterprise needs of their families.

She decided to meet with Fr. Bienvenido F. Nebres, SJ who was president of the Ateneo de Manila University that time. She knew Fr. Nebres from a previous engagement, Gawad Kalinga (GK), which is a public-private sector type of partnership that aims to provide decent housing for the poor. Mayor Sonia had invested in two GK Villages in her town that benefitted farmers who were at the same time informal settlers. Ateneo de Manila University, through Fr. Nebres, was one of GK’s earliest supporters and an institutional partner. Fr. Nebres convened a follow-up meeting with Mayor Sonia, this time with the Ateneo Center for Educational Development

---

1 Local government units in the Philippines are classified based on their income, first class being the wealthiest and sixth class as the poorest.
(ACED) to further discuss this possible engagement. ACED was established by the university in 1996 to provide systematic education development programs for public elementary and secondary schools in the country.

Mayor Sonia knew she needed to improve the conditions of education in her municipality but she did not know “how” exactly to do it. It was through this ‘process’ question that the policy influence engagement between ACED and San Isidro started.

The Engagement Narrative: Two Viewpoints

Engaging San Isidro from the perspective of ACED

Like any of our previous engagements with other schools and communities, we formally started our engagement with an assessment of the state of public elementary and secondary schools in San Isidro. It was not hard to convince Mayor Lorenzo that the best way to proceed with education reforms in her town was to look at some important baselines that would serve as guide when planning and crafting possible programs. San Isidro had, at that time, a total of 16 public schools with a population that varied from 400 students to as much as more than 1,000. ACED deployed incoming senior Political Science university students to San Isidro for two weeks during the summer of 2004 as part of their internship program requirements. They were responsible in collecting and encoding the data that was needed for planning purposes. In San Isidro, they were teamed up with local college students who were under the municipality’s Special Program for Employment of Students (SPES). This in turn developed not only collaboration among students but trained both of them in the basics of data collection and handling for policy and research purposes. The boarding and lodging of students from Manila were provided by the Local Government. Meanwhile, the tool that was used was designed by ACED, based on their engagement experience with other schools and local government units.

2 At that time, ACED comprised of a full-time multi-disciplinary team— Political Science, Social Work, and Psychology trained members. We were also able to access other kinds of expertise from the academic and professional units of the university on a per-project need. This helped us look at the issue of education development from an interdisciplinary perspective. Hence, we were able to look
The Municipality of San Isidro: Policy Influence in Local Education Governance

The Municipality of San Isidro: Policy Influence in Local Education Governance

The ACED staff prepared the final report for San Isidro based on the data collected. We presented this report to the Local School Board (LSB) of San Isidro and requested their initial observations and comments. I remembered most of them were not aware of some of the student performance indicators as well as other critical information such as the low percentage of teachers who had access to teacher trainings. The data not only gave the LSB an overview of the situation of their town in terms of education. It also, in a way, unburdened Mayor Lorenzo from the usual policy negotiation politics because the data itself convinced the LSB to support her in this policy area.

The LSB unanimously agreed that a planning process with the school communities be facilitated by ACED using the data captured. One month after the data collection, the planning session (all paid for by the local government) was held. It was a full-day workshop attended by parent council officers, teachers, principals and representatives of student councils. The report was presented to the participants and ACED facilitators asked them to comment critically on the data and the overall situation of public education in San Isidro. The outcome of the workshop was a school plan with at least one priority area for immediate intervention and one medium to long-term problem that could be an input for the policy dialogues of the Local School Board (LSB). The most important needs identified during the multi-stakeholder planning were a principal renewal (values) program, teacher training, and additional textbooks and workbooks for students. Feeding programs for underweight children, special programs for slow learners as well as other more localized programs (such as backyard farming) were also identified.

The plans for each school were then collated by ACED and submitted to the LSB for budget deliberations. The approved plans were then jointly implemented and monitored for the rest of the duration of the engagement until 2006. The list of these interventions is illustrated in Table 1 below.

for more creative ways of solving community-based problems. San Isidro was our attempt at implementing a system-wide education reform program (meaning that we implement education reforms targeting the schools and their immediate communities in San Isidro). The first one was the reform program we executed with the public schools in Barangay Payatas, a very dense and depressed urban poor community adjacent to one of the biggest dumpsites in Quezon City. The many informal settlers’ main economic activity is garbage scavenging with an average daily income of US$3 at the time of the engagement (2001-2004).
Aside from school-based plans, ACED also made recommendations to the Mayor from a more macro-policy orientation. These include: (1) the expansion of the LSB membership to include those stakeholders who were identified by the communities as critical partners in education (such as leaders of religious institutions and school administrators of local colleges and technical vocational schools), (2) deliberations of LSB budget based on data, and (3) opening channels for principals to communicate their concerns directly to the LSB.

Mayor’s Narrative:

Education was not a priority during my first three years as Mayor. At that time, I was mostly fixing the LGU personnel since they were demoralized. During the next three years (my second term), I dedicated myself to understanding the needs of my constituency by going around the Barangays (or villages) to engage in dialogue. This in turn gave me information which indicated that our town was very poor in terms of human development. Farmers barely made ends meet. There was a rising OFW (overseas Filipino workers) phenomenon where 10% of the town’s population had relatives heading abroad to look for work. Education indicators were also low and dropouts increased because parents used their children as extra-hands during harvests. Education was of lesser priority compared to livelihood. The Local School Board was dysfunctional. There was also a breakdown of public health services. Health was a big problem and the people’s primary recourse was to ask financial assistance from me and/or borrow money.

I encouraged these dialogues to continue and institutionalized it by forming the Critical Coalition of San Isidro (CCSI), a multi-sector coalition of leaders among farmers, academia, youth, women, business, religious groups, non-governmental organizations and the department heads of the local government. Together with the CCSI, we formulated a shared town vision: “Better quality of life for the people of San Isidro”. This reinforced my desire to strengthen bottom-up governance through active participation. Among the governance objectives to attain this shared vision were: (1) to increase the income of households; (2) to improve provision of education, health and housing services to benefit more citizens; and (3) to create and sustain a set of mechanisms for institutional collaboration and citizen participation. The CCSI also served
as a conduit between the people and Mayor Lorenzo. They were responsible in communicating
the local development programs of the local government as well as getting regular feedback
from the people about these projects.

I started working together with the CCSI on projects that aimed to improve the yield of harvest
per hectare as part of the objective to increase farmers’ income. However, I realized that health
issues were eating up the farmers’ money for farm inputs, and hence we invested in massive
health insurance for the farmers and their families through the government’s PhilHealth
program. Later on, I ventured into providing decent housing through Gawad Kalinga (GK) for
the farmers who were also informal settlers. Then I started thinking seriously about education. It
was during this time that I was introduced to ACED through Fr. Nebres, S.J. whom I met
through GK.

In the process of realizing the vision we had for ourselves, we engaged various sectors and
partners (such as those listed above). We also rejected partnerships with some dubious non-
governmental organizations. The reason for rejection was because they lacked integrity,
meaning I could not trust them because their reputation was shaky. At this time, we already
knew that the kind of partnership we needed was with institutions who were respected among
development circles. In addition, we also took into consideration those institutions that placed
value on bottom-up governance. Hence, we concentrated on those who had strong human
development orientation and resource generating capabilities.

The partnership with ACED was a great learning experience for us in terms of governance. It
helped us find ways to engage the education system in order to create change. Though we
already had programs for healthcare, we did not have any platform for education. ACED was
able to help us a lot in this. The workbooks had the biggest impact together with the teacher
training.

The biggest obstacle was the community. They were not used to engagements that were human
development oriented because they were infrastructure-focused. Before ACED, they would
expect the LGU to just paint and repair school buildings and provide salaries for teachers. When
we started asking questions about education, the principals were initially elusive and defensive, particularly about their space. We had to run leadership training seminars that helped to create personal relationships in order to gain their trust.

ACED helped us understand the education metrics like participation, cohort survival, dropouts, as well as the National Achievement Test scores. In understanding these metrics and the dynamics associated with them, we were able to effectively utilize our leadership to pursue them. We expanded the Local School Board to better engage the education system. We expanded spending and leveraged the funds we generated towards deeper participation from the community. We built school buildings and libraries but these were very conditional to participation. This kind of policy was very transformative to the community.

We are happy to see the results of such engagements (please refer to Table 2 and 3 below). We now measure our improvement based on concrete indicators that prior to this were part of a language only educators understood. But education was part of a larger local development framework of San Isidro. Beyond education, we understood that we were able to realize our vision because our programs were integrated and our governance was bottom-up and participatory. Members of the CCSI and their respective sectors were continuously consulted. As a result, their involvement trained them as well in the many technical aspects of local governance. Some of them ran and won in the subsequent local elections and are now doing well in their respective policy advocacies. When I stepped down as Mayor in 2010, the farmers were able to increase their harvest by 250% per hectare, close to 100% were covered by health insurance, and the education indicators improved dramatically. San Isidro was upgraded to 2nd class municipality by the Department of Finance in 2009.

Results of the Engagement in Education

Table 1 lists some of the education-related investments made by the LSB of San Isidro together with their partners. In all of these interventions, the local government provided part of the funding as well as logistical support. These interventions were based on the consolidated school plans submitted to the LSB. Their outcomes are also outlined in Tables 2 and 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions/Programs</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Leadership Colloquium for Principals</td>
<td>All Principals</td>
<td>Better disposition of school leadership within the context of Local Government-driven education reform</td>
<td>ACED&lt;br&gt;Colloquium on the Ministry of Teaching (CMT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSI Training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Institute of Management (Bridging Leadership Program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writeshop for Workbook Writing</td>
<td>Master Teachers of San Isidro</td>
<td>10,000 workbooks in Math and Science distributed to 5,700 students</td>
<td>League of Corporate Foundation&lt;br&gt;Ateneo de Manila University&lt;br&gt;Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Training</td>
<td>Public School Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ateneo de Manila University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding Program</td>
<td>School Parents and Teachers</td>
<td>Tracking underweight children below 5 yrs old for 6 months. Parents became more aware of child nutrition which had an effect in education</td>
<td>Jollibee Foundation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional Teachers for Alternative Learning System (ALS)

ALS became more accessible to out-of-school children who have the option to continue with formal schooling later on or learn vocational skills that will help them find alternative livelihood opportunities

Local School Board of San Isidro

Hired mobile teachers whose task was to deliver learning modules for out-of-school youth and encourage dropout students to re-enroll in school

The following are selected student performance indicators during the three year engagement with San Isidro.

Table 2 - Comparative Student Performance Indicators of San Isidro

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School Year³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation Rate</td>
<td>93.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>94.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival Rate</td>
<td>89.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion Rate</td>
<td>88.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Rate</td>
<td>97.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>98.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The National Achievement Test is a nationwide test administered by the Department of Education of the country. This table reflects an overall improvement in the test scores of the students during the three-year period of engagement.

³ In the Philippines, school starts in June and ends in March of the following calendar year.
Table 3 – National Achievement Test Scores of San Isidro

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>70.84</td>
<td>70.78</td>
<td>74.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>53.91</td>
<td>63.42</td>
<td>69.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>72.02</td>
<td>71.58</td>
<td>81.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>72.95</td>
<td>70.78</td>
<td>75.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAKABAYAN</td>
<td>68.94</td>
<td>72.46</td>
<td>75.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Policy Influence Lessons: Turning Barriers into Stepping Stones

The achieved outcomes outlined above surpassed the expectations of all sectors concerned. There are great policy influence lessons that can be drawn from this experience that are worth mentioning:

1. **Integrity is key.** Mayor Lorenzo took it to heart that partners should be of integrity to be able to work seamlessly and efficiently. Politics, which is often marked by the lack of reliability among partners, take too much time away from discussing the more important aspects of policy making. It is critical that partnerships are built on integrity because the first step in policy influence is trust building. Trust is also the steppingstone for accountability and transparency that are important aspects of the policy process.

2. **Participatory governance works if it is properly designed.** One of the many myths about policymaking is that it will produce better policies if you include many stakeholders in the process. Unfortunately, the more people that you put together, the more that policymaking becomes unwieldy, even if the intentions were noble to begin with. In the case of San Isidro, participatory policymaking was operationalized through a scheme that was created to accommodate the democratic aspirations of the townspeople and at the same time manage the bureaucratic limitations of its government officials and employees. This is embodied in the creation of the Critical Coalition of San Isidro as well as the enhancement of its Local School Board to make governance more inclusive and responsive.

3. **Policy influence is different from policy peddling.** What differentiates genuine policy influence from policy peddling is perhaps how the former gives precedence to the ability (and sincerity) of policy makers in policy making. Regardless of how policy makers may present themselves, they are undoubtedly the experts on the needs of their own local communities. Hence, a good policy influencer should always listen and listen carefully. Policy makers appreciate the fact that they are given due notice and respect. However,
listening without any sense of how governance systems work is futile. Usually, policy advocates are experts in their own pet issues (i.e., education, health, environment, etc.) but are not comfortable or familiar with the nitty-gritty of government systems (i.e., how bureaucracy works). The challenge therefore is to strike a balance between issues and systems expertise. Achieving a good balance will not only build the confidence of policy makers to steer policies in the right direction, but also provide them with an incentive to consult you for possible redirection of policies and systems-related concerns when needed.

4. **Ownership is key.** Strategic in policy engagement is perhaps respecting what policy makers identify as their need (and not yours!). As seen in this case study, ACED was part of the larger policy network that was operating with Mayor Lorenzo at that time. It was, in fact, Mayor Lorenzo who held the baton and steered the partnerships to inform the local development programs of the town. She also made sure that her own team (CCSI) was also empowered to steer the boat with her. From a development organization’s point of view, the engagement therefore must revolve around the constructive understanding of your partner’s need and how best your advocacies can be of help to the community. Thus, the goal in any policy work is first and foremost, ownership of the work from all concerned parties.

5. **Leverage programs to incorporate transformative learning.** Sometimes, the community cannot understand the program with just one round of dialogue. Therefore, in the case of San Isidro, programs were tailored to incorporate learning while at the same time facilitate an atmosphere of continuing dialogues. These programs were purposeful in incorporating participation and learning to create ownership of targeted outcomes via a deep sense of policy process. San Isidro made use of these learning venues to enable the community to gain understanding at their pace. These are small engagements but nonetheless frequent and structured.

It was clear from the beginning that Mayor Lorenzo wanted to depart from compromise politics
and therefore she sought partnership with more reputable and established institutions. Aside from this, data-driven policy making was critical in furthering the priorities of the town without politics getting in the way. Overall, the San Isidro experience was successful because stakeholders respected each other’s expertise and integrity.

Reflection Questions:

1. For both policy advocates and practitioners: What traits do you find necessary that your potential policy partners should possess?

2. For practitioners: Who are your most trusted people in your organization and how can you organize them so that they can help you manage the change process as a result of policy reform work?

3. For policy advocates: Does your policy influence work include expertise in the issue as well as expertise in governance systems? If not, what kind of re-shuffling is required for these two critical forms of expertise to be part of your work?