

Synopsis

NGO engagements in ODA: A reflection from within

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I. NGO Engagement

*You may say I am a dreamer,
but I am not the only one.
-John Lennon*

MANY nongovernment organizations (NGOs) remember having a forward-looking attitude when they first engaged in projects funded through official development assistance (ODA). NGOs' attitude and engagement are part of their strategic move to deliver services and assist in the development process in areas where they operate.

They are forward-looking because it is an option for a "claim-taking" that allows critical collaboration. For others, the term "strategic engagement" is important because previous experiences in relation to ODA gave them reasons to be wary.

This vigilance stems from a view that ODA was used by then-president Ferdinand E. Marcos as an instrument of repression. Some viewed donor countries using ODA as a tool to promote their foreign policy or support their economic and political interests in the region.

Some NGOs' initial disposition towards ODA was rooted from their experiences with Marcos's repressive rule that was largely supported by ODA. Some of these groups, however, also got their share of aid funds that were mostly channeled through religious organizations.

In the latter part of the 1980s, the donor community increased ODA to support the administration of President Corazon Aquino. Large ODA funds were channeled through NGOs; a lot of it became donor-driven given the context of a government in transition and an over-eager donor community.

ODA management at this period was complex and overshadowed by government suspicion that funds channeled to NGOs were used to support activities against the state. NGOs remained marginal in their ODA engagement until the early 1990s.

Despite problems, the late 1980s to early 1990s could be seen as the beginning of NGO engagement of ODA facilities. It was also at this time that delivery of ODA funds was through debt-for-equity and debt-for-nature schemes. These were products of advocacy and networking of Southern NGO coalitions with Northern NGO networks e.g., government and aid delivery institutions like Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It also helped that, within the bureaucracy, there were champions or policy "fixers" with activist backgrounds.

In 1992, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) came out with an ODA handbook that contained guidelines on collaboration between NGOs and government organizations (GOs). To accommodate all strands of NGOs, the handbook gave broad criteria, namely: no umbrella organization should be formed to accredit NGOs, and simple and less bureaucratic accreditation criteria should be adopted by specific agency.

The minimum set of criteria for NGOs included broad-based membership; integrity; commitment; track record; complementarity of program goals and objectives; management capability; financial viability; absorptive capacity; ability to provide counterpart fund; and, can share overhead and administrative expense of about 20-30 percent.

The handbook also included this qualifier¹: "The process described ... represents what is perceived to be generally applicable. The sequencing of activities and the decision/action points does not necessarily apply in every case. Neither has it been officially adopted or prescribed by NEDA, ICC or any government agency."

In the 1990s, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) funded many projects with ODA. This was also the time when agrarian reform scholars and activists proposed key factors for a successful agrarian reform program: strong and vibrant rural movement, strong state and international pressure. These, they said, should be supported with expansion and consolidation of civil society and support of aid agencies.

Also at this time, a confluence of factors provided for a more favorable environment for agrarian reform and rural development projects. Policies were updated and bureaucratic support in the agency was arranged. NGOs started to open more on the use of ODA engagement as a tool to push their agendas. Agrarian Reform and Rural Development and Democratization (ARRDD) sector workers started to use the buzzword "tripartism," or partnership between GOs, NGOs, and people's organizations (POs).

NGOs that engaged ODA as contractors and for service delivery saw this as a form of "claim-taking" and used this role to influence program implementation. Other NGOs saw this as co-optation.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

*"You don't need a Weatherman
to see where the wind blows."
-Bob Dylan*

Congruent with the opening of more NGO participation from the bureaucracy, the latter part of the 1990s was also a period of changing world economic perspectives. Even multilateral donor agencies like the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) were advocating for more NGO participation in their projects.

In 1997, the WB released their widely cited World Development Report ("The State in a Changing World") stating that the government should be more realistic in their roles in development – essentially, government should perform roles according to their capacity. Parallel developments were the influences of participatory process and their advocates in the policies of big organizations like WB. It was not a hard convincing process because for WB, even using the lens of neo-liberal framework – participation makes sense: lower costs of project implementation with better outputs and outcomes.

If this was true for institutions like WB, this was more prevalent for more open-minded organizations like International Fund for Agricultural Development and to some extent European Commission (partly due to the advocacy works of both Southern and Northern NGOs).

Interestingly, the trends resulted in conservative organizations (ie, those that are not participatory in their processes and tend to impose projects and programs to the detriment of environment or livelihoods of communities), churning out remarkable documents and policies on civil society participation. Some of these documents would even shame some NGOs because these appear better than their documents and policies.

Contemporaneous to these events was the increasing number of Philippine NGO participation in ODA funded projects –not just big national NGO networks who serve as a broker for smaller contracts but also smaller locally-based NGOs who saw the opportunity as a way to develop their organizations and expand their operations.

NGOs started with tenacity in their ODA engagement and proceeded despite the arbitrary procedures of engagement through bidding that reeks of patron-client relations. Confluence of

¹ on administrative process of securing loans, p.12

factors (from the donor side, government and pro-active stance of NGOs) paved the way for NGO engagement in ODA funded projects.

III. THE ODA WATCH RESEARCH

*"A world free from want and fear,
where peoples and nations respect each other as equals; and,
where solidarity and cooperation result in mutual benefit."
-ODA Watch Vision*

ODA Watch, a group of development-oriented civil society organizations, conducted this study to provide a deeper understanding on ODA as a development tool and how it is implemented in the Philippines.

ODA Watch convenors began this project with a two-month formative research that defined and delineated the areas of inquiry. The initial research resulted in a review of literature, which provided insights on the constant themes permeating studies sponsored by donor countries, their governments, and civil society. Some of these themes include: ODA as tools for development and in foreign policy; effectiveness and delivery systems of aid; what works, what doesn't and why; ODA and development framework; donor countries; and, donor agency policies.

The review of literature also contains studies and reports on ODA in the Philippines by government, NGOs, and analysts. Major themes running through in these documents include evaluation studies; project evaluation, role of ODA in rural development; tied-aid; administrative and bureaucratic capacity; trends in ODA flow; and, advocacy.

IV. ACTION RESEARCH

*"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember.
I do and I understand."
-Confucius*

Through this action research, ODA Watch aims to explore and develop more understanding on the following areas:

1. Experiences of NGO engagement, which provides insights on handling ODA policy advocacy.
2. Development frameworks and partnerships, which reviews different development frameworks and partnerships and perspectives on ODA engagements.
3. Policy formulation, which stems from a view that NGOs lobby for policy changes but are weak in formulating policies.
4. NGO engagement guidelines, which aims to help NGOs planning to engage ODA projects.

In addition, ODA Watch expected actions along the process were initiated in the course of the action research.

Based on criteria, ODA Watch convenors selected the following cases:

PLACE DIAGRAM OR TABLE HERE

After the case selection, ODA Watch hired one researcher per case in a total of six projects in six provinces. All researchers were independent consultants. While they worked independently from ODA Watch convenors, a coordinator and a Manila-based researcher supervised the research. These researchers have backgrounds in economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, community development and development administration. They all have development work experience background and have basic knowledge of the NGO sector in the Philippines.

The formative research provided inputs to clarify the research direction and questions. The research team decided that an implementation study would provide additional contribution to

an understanding of ODA implementation in the Philippines. The focus, hence, was more on the why's rather than the what's of each project. Along the process, and using Van Meter and Van Horn's policy implementation framework, what occurred in the projects also became prominent. Still, the analytical focus and the emergent discussion of implementation factors focused on the reasons for such occurrences in the ODA program.

Van Meter and Van Horn's project implementation framework uses the input-conversion-output scheme. Inputs in this research included project standards, objectives, and resources. The conversion here included characteristic of implementing agencies; communication of different stakeholders; socio-economic, political and cultural factors; and, the disposition of different project actors. Output includes project outcome.

After considering the input-conversion-output interplay, the researcher analyzed the performance of the ODA program.

The research team had a workshop before doing the actual case studies. Speakers from government, the academe and the NGO sector provided additional inputs on ODA issues in the Philippines. There was also sharing of ideas regarding tools, techniques and methodologies on how to enhance each researcher's research design.

While researchers gathered data, the coordinator and the Manila-based researcher conducted additional activities, including production of working papers on ODA².

The research team also conducted interviews and discussions with donor ODA implementing agencies, government implementers, and ODA programmers.

V. HIGHLIGHTS

*"To know that we know what we know
and that, we do not know what we
do not know is true knowledge."
-Henry David Thoreau*

WHILE the six researchers used different styles in presenting their reports, they all verified their analysis with different stakeholders they interviewed. ODA Watch members and government staff critiqued the initial reports. The researchers presented their revised reports to a much bigger audience that included representatives from NGOs, media, government and the academe.

The following are highlights of the researchers' reports and the insights culled from presentations in various fora:

Wesamar Retrospections, written by researcher Joven Descanzo, largely focused on the NGO experiences an ODA program in Western Samar as told by various stakeholders. He juxtaposed this with the shift in project strategies and the roles of key program operators. Descanzo also underscores the interplay of different NGOs's orientation with other project implementation factors such as: innovative project components, strong-willed European managers, and community organization's capacity and development framework of different stakeholders.

Roles and Rules of Engagement in WMCIP, written by researcher Maisie Faith Dagapioso, underlined the roles and rules of engagement narrated using the experience of NGO Ipil Development Foundation in Zamboanga del Sur. Her report presents the rich insights on how the project conversion process takes place. Just like Wesamar, WMCIP project is a clear case

² These papers used mainly in discussions of ODA Watch members, included: "An Assessment of ODA Policies in the Philippines" Garcia, Leonora and Lumilan, Eden Grace [May 2004]; "ODA Trend Updates: Donors and NGO experiences" Antiporta, Juvena [May 2004]; "Local NGOs-Funding agencies: More prospects or introspection" Antiporta, Juvena [August 2004]; and, "ODA: Along time and policy changes, perspectives and challenges" Garcia, Leonora [October 2004].

where NGOs played a big role from project design to project implementation. Dagapioiso cites the factors leading to tired and disappointed NGO workers, one of who quipped that a year doesn't contain the days required for them to meet project requirements.

Shared aspiration is possible for NGO and government in ARCP implementation, written by researcher Janette Taga-an, has an interesting case of government-NGO partnership. The researcher and other participants in the validation and research presentation process showed surprise that NGO and government officials she talked to heaped praises on each other. Taga-an's case study proves the possibility for mutual trust and cooperation among NGOs and GOs.

Enablers and constraints of ARSP in Agusan, written by researcher Nikki Philline de la Rosa, is an account of the interplay of program implementation factors: people's organizations (POs), NGOs, decision-makers, personal interests, and politics. In terms of the decision-making and dispositions and interpersonal dynamics of key leaders, de la Rosa emphasized the role of the European manager as affecting the program.

Partners or competitors: NGO and Government in Biarsp, written by researcher George Evangelista, revisited the still on-going BIARSP implementation in Canlaon, Negros Oriental. BIARSP has been viewed as a project that offers highly comprehensive package of agricultural support and even promoted as a very good model by the government. Evangelista attempts to show how the program fared in Canlaon, a village that contains fundamental issues on land reform and power dynamics of strong and highly influential landowners. Given the political context of the area, it is evident that official information went through both formal and informal channels.

Dimensions of capacity: How capable are the communities in ARISP 2? was the question that researcher Jermaine Bayas attempted to answer in his implementation study of ARISP II in Pampanga. There, Bayas discovers that the project is predilected against a people-centered development strategy in a program that had infrastructure as its main component. It appears that the social infrastructure development is geared towards the support on how to sustain the infrastructure. Bayas also points out the role of the national NGO partner in monitoring and evaluating the project using 14 dimensions with about 80 indicators. Bayas said this was biased against generating participation from the community and for making people secondary to infrastructure.

VI. SYNTHESIS OF PROBLEMS AND ISSUES RAISED IN THE CASE STUDIES

*"The significant problems we face cannot
be solved at the same level of thinking
we were at when we created them."
-Albert Einstein*

The following persistent and emergent points are the cross-cutting issues that bring about the drawbacks and challenges of NGO engagement in ODA projects. These issues and points were culled from discussions after the presentation of the case study results.

Operational

1. Delay in fund release impacts on schedule of deliverables and penalty for ODA loans
2. Low transparency in bidding process
 - Rooted in political patronage/accommodation
 - Poor implementation of existing policies and procedures
 - Poor transparency in criteria used, selection body, application, disclosure of decision and basis

Policy

3. Inappropriate / failed technology imposed on community stakeholder
 - Rooted in difference in development framework that guide funding agencies (e.g., high yielding-input dependent technology) and NGO/Pos (low input-sustainable agriculture)
 - Tied loans
 - Donor-driven monitoring by government that puts emphasis on financial and quantitative aspect while weak in monitoring process and quality of outputs, impact; time consuming due to report requirements
4. Agricultural credit inaccessible to farmers and remain idle
 - Restrictive Land Bank policies
 - Fungible credit
 - Limited to cooperatives
5. Non-inclusion of Land Tenure Improvement as component in ODA
6. Conditionalities of donor countries
 - Donor country's commercial interests
 - Debt burden
 - Entry of international consulting firms that compete with local NGOs for ODA contracts

Institutional

7. Weak role of LGU vis-à-vis DAR/DA in PIME and in ensuring that project is mainstreamed in local development plan
 - Perceived low stake of barangay and municipal LGU in projects vis-a-vis other concerns
 - Weak LGU development orientation and/or capacity in looking at projects in a more integrated way
8. Unrealistic project objectives given the timeframe
 - Delays not factored in planning
 - Institutional support not available
9. Project management structure returned to regular DAR structure
 - Tends to marginalize the NGOs in the design, planning
10. Gaps in communicating and using lessons learned from ODA projects, thus repeating the same mistakes
11. Poor financial transparency of GO and NGO to community stakeholders

Political dynamics

12. Power play at various levels (GO-NGO/PO, NGO-NGO, NGO-PO, PO-PO)
13. Disposition of key personalities from donor agency
 - Impatience over process vis-à-vis results; results-oriented
 - Lack of sensitivity to cultural/social milieu of project (e.g., community development process)
 - Killer assumption re institutional context (i.e., institutions are working well)
 - Rooted in the "power of the purse"

Emergent

1. Tripartism: DAR-NGO-PO as a dominant model - should be expanded to state-civil society-market
2. Ethical issues in NGO practice
 - Lack of "social accountability"
 - Lack of transparency vis-a-vis POs
 - Overestimation of actual competency in conducting ODA projects
 - Absence of a code of ethics that can guide NGOs and POs
 - Consulting firms posing as NGOs that compete with local NGOs in getting ODA contracts and are perceived as profit-seeking
 - NGOs being co-opted in the process of ODA engagement; advocacy role eroded
 - Who qualifies as NGO in the NGO component of ODA?

VII. DRAWBACKS AND CHALLENGES

*"The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names."
-Anonymous*

1. Government's budget problems.

In many cases, the budget for NGO services in ODA projects comes from the government counterpart fund. Project implementation delays occurred because of budget problems. In Mindanao's Sultan Kudarat, the operators experienced waiting for three months for the budget so they could continue project implementation. The NGO there provided the salary of the staff in charge of the project while waiting for government's fund release.

2. Highly politicized process.

Some NGO leaders said the reality remains processes in ODA would always be political. This could happen in the pipelining, bidding and implementation of projects. However, preparing more effective guidelines that could make the process less arbitrary could mitigate problems. In the case of Wmcip, the impasse caused an 18-month delay.

However, President Joseph Estrada's assumption to office resulted in government favoring groups of NGOs over others. Even for those deemed favored, this appears unethical and ineffective. They maintain that selection criteria should always be based on merit and clear-cut guidelines and policies and the selection process should be done in a transparent manner.

3. Role of highly influential individuals.

In the Samar and Agusan del Sur cases, the disposition of foreign consultants and managers prevailed. In Samar, the project shift from community development to enterprise development was attributed to the consultants and donor agency. This occurred without the consent or ineffective protests of other actors.

4. Ineffective communication process.

In all cases, exchange of information was ineffective. In Pampanga's case, the review of a training design by national level implementing NGO delayed the local NGO's training activities. In Zamboanga, the management style of top officials resulted to NGOs doing voluminous paper work. In Agusan, while farmers mulled goat raising in their area, project managers already bought the goats. In Sultan Kudarat, the NGO workers trained people on organic farming while government personnel distributed chemical fertilizers.

5. Development framework.

In all cases, too, differences in development framework affected the project implementation. In Sultan Kudarat, NGO workers taught people the value of a strong co-operative while government officials released livelihood funds without considering the organizational process. In the case of Pampanga, the NGOs said social infrastructure building was the last agenda in every meeting, when most participants have already left.

6. Development partnership.

In Agusan, PO members' suggestion not to tap a local bank that exacts a higher mark-up for channeled funds was rejected as the bank was the project manager's bank of choice. In several cases, POs said they were less informed about the financial transactions and decision-making in the project.

7. "Fungibility" of ODA.

Beneficiaries of three ODA projects could not access funds due to highly restrictive policies of the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP). In all the cases, project stakeholders could not implement activities like training on livelihood and enterprise development because, they said, the bank's policy refused to recognize Philippine co-operatives' reality.

8. NGO orientation.

Are NGOs capable enough to influence ODA projects? Do they know the channels on how to influence the project design? Is there a room for them to influence at the project level or

should they engage in networking with Northern NGOs and other national networks of NGOs to influence to policies?

These questions lead to the importance of self-reflection, with questions like: "Is our engagement based on a well- thought out project environment analysis? What is our motivation in the engagement?"

9. NGO capacity.

The cutting-edge of NGOs is their flexibility, ability to innovate, compassion, reach, targeting, and value-oriented process they bring in the project. Were these enough?

At least in two cases (Samar and Agusan), some NGOs bid and get to implement rural development projects even if their background and experiences do not suffice. If only good intention and hard work were enough, then NGOs could be more effective in their ODA engagements. Unfortunately, ODA project implementation exacts more than that.

10. Ethical standards.

To whom NGOs are accountable? Government agencies have the authority and the legal mandate to implement projects: the law provides their accountability. Donor agencies, on the other hand, are answerable to their respective government. NGO workers say they are answerable to communities where they operate. They add that the group would lose credibility and risk being banned in the community. This research bares the need to emphasize that NGOs are not exempt from a set of ethical standards.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS: POINTS TO PONDER

*"Begin challenging your own assumptions.
Your assumptions are your windows on the world.
Scrub them off every once in awhile,
or the light won't come in."*

-Alan Alda

The study provides the reasons that projects fail or succeed. In addition, the study shows people appreciated the ODA programs that intervened in their communities.

The people of a program in Agusan del Sur enjoys the electricity while in Western Mindanao it was the opportunity to continue work with indigenous peoples. In Sultan Kudarat, the NGO can now sustain their work after the ODA program's end while people in Pampanga appreciate the roads built through ODA.

Indeed, NGO participation provided ODA programs the cutting-edge advantages NGOs have.

However, the end of ODA programs also created operational problems.

How can people continue gaining access to government services? How would ODA agencies help address government financial institution's negative assessment of people's credit-worthiness? In a cash-strapped area like Canlaon, what will be the implication for communities when the government project implementers consider NGO financial service as competition?

For NGOs planning to engage in ODA programs in the future, the study reveals such engagement is a tricky process. Hence, they should check their motivations. They should also clarify if they would be selling-out along the process or if they are capable enough to buy-in the other project actors. Can they actually deliver? Do they know the ODA delivery landscape in the Philippines and how affected it is by the fiscal and other budgetary problems?

For the funding agency, imposing their development framework would clearly result to project failures. Even the well-meaning donor agencies can commit fundamental errors in project implementation. The disposition of individuals who call the shots in project implementation affects the direction and eventual failure or success of the project.

IX. CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS FROM WITHIN

*"Even those who fancy themselves the most progressive
will fight against other kinds of progress, for each
of us is convinced that our way is the best way."*

–Louis L'Amour

"All is connected ... no one thing can change by itself."

–Paul Hawken

"I'll go anywhere as long as it's forward."

–David Livingstone

1. Six cases of ODA projects.

The case studies are a compilation of NGO experiences on ODA engagements. Each research provides a glimpse on how operational, policy, institutional, political and even cultural dynamics affect multi-million dollar projects. The studies show that benefits from ODA engagement come with costs.

NGOs that were engaged in the program had to prepare for such costs by clarifying motivation and goals and availability of money, people, skills, ethical standards, and the ability to deliver based on a contract. The study bares that NGOs also have to identify willingness to compromise and what they would give up for something in return. Likewise, the study explains NGOs have to identify leverage points in negotiating with government.

2. Development framework and partnership.

An ODA project is fraught with tensions and, hence, focusing on sources of conflict is moot. What is more important is how each stakeholder handles partnership. When Confucius said "Life is really simple but we insist on making it complicated," he must have been thinking of the ODA project implementers.

Development partnership should be based on trust and respect. If farmers say they want some livelihood projects that are feasible given their circumstances, then other stakeholders must listen. This means a dialogue on innovation and external resources that could complement the community resources and testing the viability of an idea. For NGOs and POs, there should be some re-thinking of relationships.

In the case of Sultan Kudarat, the government and NGO were transparent in dealing with each other and with the PO and the community. Budgetary constraints and operational glitches become sources of distrust if not properly or openly communicated and affect disposition of other implementers. The principle of transparency is based on a sound partnership that values respect, trust and openness. A researcher recommended: "Watch yourself."

3. Policy formulation.

The case studies point to several areas of policy improvement and policy change. A prominent and persistent issue cited was access to finances that are part of the ODA loan package. A review of the history of cooperatives in the Philippines shows it is not surprising that the cooperatives within the projects would not pass the stringent policies of the Landbank of the Philippines (LBP). Rural cooperatives died or suffered from comatose because of previous supply-driven policy on rural finance. Those forming new co-operatives end up being asked for track records.

In the case of bidding process and awarding of contracts, many ODA projects experience delays because of contentious process. In the case of giving more space for NGO participation, there should be policies that will provide more space for NGOs in terms of ODA programming and pipelining. The existing policies provide broad strokes but NGOs should be given role in formulation of implementing rules and regulations.

This is predicated with a reminder that the role should not be given as a token participation in a "participatory event," like calling for presentation of policies without giving NGOs enough time and information to fully and effectively participate in the process.

This is not the kind of participation asked by NGOs; rather, participation is a process that guarantees quality inputs and communication process. Another side of the coin is for NGOs to be prepared for policy formulation processes.

Policies, once made, are not self-implementing things. Formulating implementing rules and regulations is one area where NGOs should be prepared and effectively participate in the process. Policy advocacy is one thing, policy formulation is another. NGOs should be ready to influence both.

4. NGO engagement.

NGO engagement in ODA projects should be a shrewd decision. These cases show that those who tend to benefit more from their ODA engagements are those who have clear ideas on what they want to achieve from the process. Those with clear ideas and substantial support are the ones who can become more flexible and more willing to review their role vis-a-vis their partners. An NGO who engage otherwise would either end up sidetracked by arrogant donor agency consultants or left wondering what went wrong.

For the government, there should be a rethinking on their recent move of limiting NGO participation in ODA program implementation. The case studies show that NGOs clearly fill the gaps that could not be delivered by government. The ten-year record of RDI-SK facilitates smooth implementation of projects in a multi-ethnic and conflict-prone area. The case of IDF's previous partnership with the indigenous groups in Zamboanga adds to the extensive reach of the project. Hence, these NGOs warn against being eased out by government in ODA program implementation. The Philippine government cannot justify such move on the reason of fiscal prudence.

The cases showed that NGOs should have ethical standards in their project engagements, which include having a realistic assessment of their capacity and limitations. They should also improve the reflection skills among themselves and think on how they contribute to projects by participating in sector consolidation, by enhancing the learning elements from their engagements, by sharing information and taking the time to reflect together.

5. Actions along the process.

ODA Watch organized at least five roundtable discussions alongside research.³

Other actions along the process are the activities carried out by each researcher in the case study areas. Those activities, hopefully, would enhance collective building of commitments among stakeholders for well-coordinated decisions and actions to better understand ODA program and project implementation in the rural development sector.

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³ These roundtable discussions were: ODA Watch convenors forum on how to clarify the issues of "ODA NGO engagements: Reflections from within"; Philippine ODA policy assessments, with a representative from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC); Case study presentation to ODA Watch members; presentation of research results; and, a forum where three cases in Mindanao were shared with the NGO community in Mindanao.

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