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Documentation and Assessment of ERV Response in the 2010 Elections

Abra Multisectoral Group (AMSG) Profile Report

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Background

Abra is negatively known for its reputation as the killing fields of the north. In fact, the new millennium saw Abra's election-related violence incidences (ERVIs) increasing and worsening in nature. Since 2001, entrenched political families have dominated the elections using various media of force, i.e. guns and goons, and the situation keeps escalating every election. As the stakes get higher due to the yearly increase in Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), the number of victims killed and harassed increase as well—all in the name of securing political power. Abra caught the nation's attention when the currently seated Congressman was assassinated in 2007, not in the province, but in the country's capital.

The glaring violence in the province is perpetuated by competing political dynasties allegedly having their own sets of private armies. The problem is sustained by weak institutions, loose firearms proliferation and the involvement of rouge communist insurgents. Making matters worse is the poverty that colludes with institutional and cultural underpinnings of electoral violence in the province. In fact, political violence, in general, has become a staple subject integrated into the normalcy of its life as a province and killing has become the people's source of livelihood—it can even come as cheap as P 2,000. The local government does absolutely nothing about it and there seems to be nothing that the national government can do to improve the situation, with national leaders 'overlooking' the problem due to political ties.

People of Abra, on the other hand, are afraid to testify since history has taught them well that if somebody speaks about any of the killings, his/her house will be sprayed with bullets. Police forces of Abra, on the other hand, are biased towards the politicians seated in power, and vote-buying is extremely rampant. In other words, if you do not have the three G's—goods, guns, gold—you might as well bid goodbye to your political career and dig your own grave.

Despite these, the civil society in Abra recognizes the problem and is not about to accept the political violence in the province as fixed and irrevocable. Various organizations and institutions have, thereby, formed a group that will take a stand against election-related violence (ERV) in the province. Initial efforts started in 2006 when the Diocese of Abra, through Bishop Leopoldo Jaucian, met with different organizations to ask for support and response to the potential outbreak of electoral violence in the coming 2007 elections. Despite the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) tagging Abra as one of the election hotspots for 2007, thirty (30) high profile politicians were killed plus many of their supporters. This may be attributed to the fact that some elements of the security institutions colluded with local politicians and that partisan armed groups roamed the province during election day brandishing loose and high-powered firearms. As it clearly shows, something more serious has to be done to address the problem.

Creation Stage

The intermittent meetings among stakeholders, which began prior to the 2007 elections, eventually became regularized. They slowly felt the imperative to connect and coordinate strategies to address ERV in Abra, given the worsening situation. The Church initially made efforts in calling for unity and peaceful elections but bore limited capacities to instill change. On the other hand, there were elements in the security institutions that wanted to address the problem but lacked the moral ascendancy to gain citizen support. With the coming together of the Church, security forces, and other stakeholders in the society, it is hoped that the void of a citizen-government engagement shall be addressed. Bishop Jaucian said that the group would try its "best to change the traditional political image of Abra" as a collaboration of efforts would surely be more effective and influential. When the group was beginning to form in 2006, it was already involved in conducting candidates' fora and election

monitoring. Meetings, however, were on and off and there was really no sense of integration among sectors at that time.



Abrenians went out to air their sentiments towards the political situation of Abra, armed with the determination to end the “traditional image” of the province.

In March 2009, through the inspiration of Bishop Jaucian, the Abra Multi-Sectoral Group (AMSG) was finally born. AMSG now serves as a coordinative, consultative and working non-partisan body of peace and good governance advocates. Although it has yet to be formally organized, AMSG is currently composed of different representatives of the following organizations:

a) Religious Sector

- Diocese of Bangued (Bp. Leopoldo Jaucian)
- Bangued Evangelical Church
- Diocesan Youth Ministry (Jetrax Tenebro)
- Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (Fr. Drexel Ramos)
- Simbag/BEC
- Diocesan Social Action Center
- Social Development Center
- Bangued Parish

b) Civil Society Organizations

- Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government (CCAGG) (Pura Sumangil)
- Abra Students Federation for Peace (Youth Sector) (Joanne [P](#))

c) Media

- DZPA Radio Station (Merla Ruiz)
- Abra Today weekly newspaper (Fr. Carmelo Gonzales)

d) Academe

- Divine Word College of Bangued (DWCB) (Fr. Cirilo Ortega)
- Abra State Institute of Sciences and Technology (ASIST)
- Abra Valley Colleges (AVC) (Francis Bergonia)
- Data Center College of the Philippines (DCCP)
- Holy Spirit Academy of Bangued (HSAB)

e) Private Sector

- Abra Filipino-Chinese Chamber (Antonio Go)
- In-hand Abra Foundation (Carmelita Bersalona)

f) Government Agencies

- Commission on Elections (COMELEC) (Atty. Vanessa Roncal)
- Philippine Information Agency (PIA) (Ma. Teresa Beñas)
- Philippine National Police (PNP) (P/SSupt. Charlo Collado/SPO1 Garry Gattud)
- Philippine Army (PA) (Ltc. Ignacio Madriaga)
- Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) (Crescencio Calina)

Three main factors that led to the creation of AMSG were: a) the culture of fear thriving in the province, b) citizens' lack of awareness about the situation, and c) need for a political organization that would serve as a catalyst for change in the society. Majority of AMSG's members came from the CCAGG founded way back in 1986 after volunteering for NAMFREL. The AMSG, then, was formed to extend CCAGG's initial efforts relating to the development of Abra. While CCAGG was focused in monitoring of infrastructure projects, AMSG was instituted to be an organization that would cater to political issues, especially with regard to elections and governance, and bring peace and security in the area.

AMSG moves along its vision of "a peaceful and developed province, sustained by leaders of political will and citizens collaborating harmoniously in pursuing peace and development." It is a vision that pushes the AMSG to function not only during election time but to work even after the elections to monitor the implementation of government platforms. The group, thereafter, formed the following objectives:

- To conduct voters education (through the media) and *barangay* consultations to counter-act the perceived hotly contested elections;
- To conduct Leaders and Candidates Peace Summits;
- To document actual experiences related to election violence (at least during 2007 elections);
- To campaign for the eradication of traditional practice of politicians in using guns, goons and gold;
- To prevent crime occurrences even during non-election period;
- To document candidates' proposed platform of government and monitor its implementation;
- To research and document the root causes of ERV in the province;
- To foster a strong non-partisan coalition through a horizontal and vertical membership and/or partnership expansion;
- To conduct intensive advocacy on values, ethical and moral ascendancy seminars and activities;
- To formulate AMSG strategic plan indicating short-term and long-term programs and activities;
- To continually exist and function as collaborators and active partners for the realization of Abrenios' efforts for peace and development.

Given these objectives, AMSG was able to form a four-phased program to address ERV. The first phase (August to December 2009) includes a detailed documentation of all ERV accounts in the last 2007 elections and aims to: (1) build trust and confidence among AMSG members; (2) identify possible higher levels of risk and violence and corresponding responses; (3) recognize systematic or structural flaws that restrict security forces in optimizing their efforts; and (4) ascertain support from the credible civil society in building trust with the security forces.

The second phase (January to March 2010) was called the ‘planning phase’ and shall take off from the results of the first phase. Here, specific plans for resource allocation, inter-operability for enhanced situational awareness and formation of a command and coordinative group, were established. These plans were implemented in the third phase (April to May 2010) during the last weeks of the campaign period. Finally, the fourth phase or the ‘post-election phase’ will run from June onwards.

Three initial ERV prevention activities were identified by AMSG. First is the voter’s education which aims to create awareness about the process of elections at the *barangay* level, second is the candidates’ fora which aims to mediate between opposing candidates in the hope that agreements not to engage in violence shall be met, and third is election day monitoring to prevent any form of violence during actual election day itself. This third initiative shall be done in coordination with NAMFREL and the PPCRV.

As a strategy, AMSG created three separate committees to further address the problem of ERV. It created the *Committee on Education* whose main objective is the education of the electorate and prospective politicians with regard to elections. The members of this committee include representatives from the academe and CCAGG. The second committee is the *Research Committee* whose task is to conduct research about the ERV situation in the province to better understand it. Composing this committee are representatives from organizations like the media, PNP, AFP, COMELEC and DepEd. Finally, the third committee, composed of the CCAGG, is tasked with Secretariat work and the responsibility to come up with a set of agenda, based on pressing issues and concerns, for the monthly meetings. The media provides the necessary information dissemination mechanisms by publishing AMSG’s minutes of the meetings in *Abra Today*, a local paper, and by announcing their programs and advocacy activities in a DZPA radio program entitled “Turay ti Bontanteng Abreño” (Power of the Abrenian Voter).



Several Candidates' Forum were held over local radio station DZPA to inform the public about candidates' platform as well as candidates' commitment to a peaceful elections in 2010.

Organization structure and leadership

AMSG has no formal structure since it is a relatively new, multi-sectoral organization. It is currently chaired by the Diocese of Abra, Bishop Leopoldo C. Jaucian and Ms. Pura Sumangil of the CCAGG. The two stand hand-in-hand in providing the group's direction and serve as the major decision-making personalities during emergencies or on-going ERVIs. In normal times, however, decisions are made collectively on all matters. The group welcomes a diversity of opinions from all AMSG members in settling a common decision.

While it is the CCAGG who leads in the agenda-building and planning activities of the group, it is the Church who provides the necessary guidance and inspiration to AMSG. Bishop Jaucian bears a lot of important insights as an active advocate for peace since being ordained in July 2008. CCAGG, meanwhile, has a comprehensive understanding of Abra's concerns and experience in dealing with issues on electoral violence. Given that, CCAGG, with support from the media and the academe, serves as the group's main implementing unit.

Communication and coordination is done through formal communiqués and personal networks. Every time AMSG has a meeting or an activity, the CCAGG through Manang Paz Bumogas sends a formal letter to each member stating the proposed agenda for the upcoming meeting. Food and venue for the meetings take up most of the group's operational expenses although Manang Paz Bumogas sometimes apply a KKDB policy: "*Kanya-kanyang dala na lang ng baon tuwing may meeting.*" Given the situation, activities are performed based on the available budget while a division of financial expenses among members has not been set. The Asia Foundation provides funds for AMSG with resource augmentation from the Diocese of Abra.

Aside from providing the group's inspiration, Bishop Leopoldo Jaucian, being a prominent leader of the Catholic Church in the province, also leads the way in mobilizing public support. He is assisted by Ms. Pura Sumangil of CCAGG in terms of mobilizing funds and resources. Being prominent figures in Abra who wield influence in different organizations of the province, they were able to reach out to political actors that were notorious for performing ERV activities (i.e. incumbent politicians in the Ladalaga area).

ERV Responses of AMSG

The AMSG convened early in 2009 to plan for the upcoming 2010 elections. Government institutions to be highly involved in the conduct of elections were invited to meetings, as well as those individuals and/or groups interested in supporting the advocacy. Prior to its founding, all the responses of concerned organizations in Abra were aimed at achieving "Clean, Honest, Accurate, Meaningful and Peaceful Elections" or CHAMP. For the 2010 elections, however, the AMSG chose to adopt a battle cry for "Honest, Orderly and Peaceful Elections" (HOPE) that aims to prevent more killings as experienced during the 2007 elections.

So far, AMSG ERV responses involved advocacy, research, monitoring and gathering high-profile personnel for open dialogues. Voters' education, for instance, has always been the group's priority since they believe this will empower the citizens with the necessary information and awareness regarding the conduct of elections and encourage them to participate directly in combating ERV.

Pre-election Initiatives

AMSG was able to organize and implement the following activities in preparation for the 2010 elections

- Leadership Summits (August and December 2009)
- Research study on cause and effect study of election-related violence by the ASoG
- Eucharistic celebration for Peaceful Elections attended by the candidates (March 23, 2010)
- Paralegal Trainings in coordination with LENTE (April 2010)
- Prayer Rally for Peace attended by candidates (May 07, 2010)

Leadership and Peace Summits

One of the major activities of AMSG during pre-election was the conduct of two leadership summits. The group was able to organize the summit through the cooperation of the PNP, AFP and NGOs in Abra. The first summit brought all the local chief executives of the province together, where they were able to listen to Dr. Alex Brilliantes' lecture on governance and discuss issues and concerns regarding Abra's peace situation. The second summit, however, featured the crafting of mechanisms to prevent violence by participants themselves, both election-related and otherwise, and the signing of a position paper against political violence. The event became a success as almost all public officials and running candidates came to participate. The second Leaders' Peace Summit complemented other peace advocacy campaigns conducted by the local government for the "Abra Week for Peace".

Paralegal Training

AMSG partnered with PPCRV and LENTE to implement a training program for paralegals. Funding for this particular training was requested from The Asia Foundation. The objective of this training was to equip its volunteers with the technical know-how in court proceedings and in the documentation of ERV cases. This was participated in by forty (40) people, including Special Task Force members, and was deemed a significant activity since most cases that were filed on ERV were thwarted or dismissed due to technicalities. The training also enabled the group to organize its own paralegal team to assist communities in documenting their ERV experience. Proper documentation allowed these communities especially the victims to gain attention in the proper forum. However, the 2010 elections has passed and none of the filed cases has been resolved; while there have been documented ERV incidents, families have yet to file cases that would prosecute the perpetrators.



Paralegal trainings were conducted in April 2010 in coordination with LENTE

Peace Campaigns

AMSG also helped the provincial government in organizing the “Abra Week for Peace” as part of its peace advocacy campaigns. This was actually a project, initiated by the AFP and most of AMSG members, until it was institutionalized two years ago. Now, being a program of the Provincial Government of Abra, it has become a yearly activity for AMSG to contribute in planning and implementation of activities while the LGU would give logistical support.

Other activities conducted by the group include a dissemination of promotional materials for peace advocacy in Abra and close coordination with COMELEC-AFP-PNP Joint Security Control Centers (JSCC) to look at harassment cases filed by concerned citizens. Prayers for peace, on the other hand, were helpful in encouraging the candidates to honor their covenant.

ERV pre-emption through conflict mitigation

Another success story of AMSG’s preemption of ERVI was its prevention of the conflict between the two camps of JR Seares and Paking Guzman in Poblacion, Dolores that could have led to a violent outcome. The AMSG, through Manang Pura and Bishop Jaucian, conducted conflict mitigation over the radio and was able to acquire both parties’ commitment to observe peaceful elections in their locality. This only reflects the significant contribution that the media plays in conducting dialogues with ERV perpetrators and its effective coordination with leaders of the AMSG. It also shows the value of AMSG’s monitoring mechanisms as the group was able to quickly detect and respond to a brewing conflict.

Election Day Initiatives

Monitoring and quick responses to situations instigating ERV outcomes

The major prevention strategy of AMSG during Election Day was to preempt ERV cases from happening by stringent monitoring of the environment, quick detection of ERV symptoms and quick resultant responses (varying from dialogue to law enforcement). Most of AMSG’s members, for instance, joined and participated as volunteers for PPCRV and/or NAMFREL while the joint AFP-PNP Force, headed by Mr. Gary Gattud, reported regularly to the Special Task Group created by AMSG for Election Day. No AMSG civilian members got involved in these initiatives as the task was deemed too sensitive and dangerous.

AMSG credits its effective performance during the recent elections to the dedication of its members, good multi-sectoral coordination and the group’s ability to plan ahead. AMSG representatives, however, feel that internal weaknesses in the group led to some failures to prevent some ERV incidences from happening; one case is the killing of Mario Acena. They admit that they have overlooked the situation and failed to sense Acena’s murder despite receiving initial reports.



AMSG members served as NAMFREL and PPCRV volunteers come election day in May 2010.

Post-election initiatives

AMSG helped in ensuring that tallying of votes were conducted smoothly immediately after Election Day. The group, however, admits that they have yet to conduct any activity to deal with post-election ERVIs, such as the murder case of a staff of Tineg Mayor Edwin Crisologo. It also became difficult for the group to gather all its members due to allegations of partisanship against each other and the lack of zest in some to participate in post-election undertakings. These problems of trust and confidence among its members were exacerbated further by the emergence of new groups with the same advocacy (i.e. CAPI). Presently, however, they have plans to help the military out in improving the recruitment process for Citizen Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs).

Lessons Learned

Strengths and Achievements

The AMSG has been recognized by various sectors in the society for adopting a holistic approach in mitigating and preventing ERV in the province. They opted to undergo varied activities in line with their vision-mission of a peaceful and developed Abra with “leaders of political will” and “citizens collaborating harmoniously”. For instance, they conducted political dialogues and peace summits directed at candidates, trainings for paralegal volunteers, and prayer rallies for the general public. It is definitely a commendable effort, especially on the part of the Church who organized it and the CCAGG who acts as Secretariat, to create and keep a multi-sectoral group together that aims to address political violence during and beyond the elections. Indeed, they were able to utilize a host of strategies, including research, advocacy and dialogue with stakeholders and beneficiaries, to address the problem. They have also tapped the necessary partners in the academe, media, government and civil society for a stronger, more collaborative effort. Partnering with LENTE in terms of providing technical assistance to paralegals was in fact very creative and can be considered highly valuable in ensuring that politicians violating the law are held accountable for their actions.

Representatives from the group also note the internal strengths inherent in AMSG, especially among the active members, and these are: 1) determination and 2) dedication. This can be traced back to a long history of AMSG member organizations working independently for the objective of peaceful elections. ERV prevention activities during the 2004 and 2010 elections involved monitoring with PPCRV, candidates’ fora and peace covenants between political parties. These member organizations, despite the consistent political violence in Abra, never lost hope and became tired of pushing for peace and

development. Instead, these member organizations became even more vigilant and active in pursuing their mission and synchronized with each other to form a coalition that is AMSG.

The CCAGG, for instance, has been active since 1986 after volunteering for NAMFREL and is now leading AMSG with a pocket full of expertise and experience. Its leadership, along with that of the Church, can be considered one of the group's biggest strengths in the way its representatives Manang Pura and Bishop Jaucian were able to guide and inspire other members in pushing for their objectives. Meanwhile, increased participation of media and the academe can also be considered a strong point of AMSG since it is highly involved in implementing the group's plans and activities. Aside from contributing to the project's sustainability, their participation also holds the potential to gather more support from the general population.

Partnership between the Joint Special Task Force (STF) of PNP and AFP and AMSG has been another big feat. Both groups were able to complement each other's efforts and initiatives in mitigating ERV with AMSG doing the advocacy activities and STF doing the hard-line security roles. Indeed, without STF's collaboration with AMSG, the civil society organization's efforts to initiate peace rallies, hold candidates' fora, conduct political dialogues and document ERV cases will be insufficient. The success of AMSG is highly dependent on the support of security forces who, at the end of the day, sits in the best position to implement the law and hold perpetrators responsible.

Lastly, while activities are based on the budget the group holds, it is quite blessed to receive most of its funds from The Asia Foundation. This is not only AMSG's strength but also a significant opportunity for growth and improvement. Financial resources are extremely important in a civil society organization's sustainability so having a donor agency to religiously support them is something that must be valued and be put to good use.

Challenges Ahead

ERV mitigation initiatives shared by the group, however, reflected a lack of internal synergy and effective coordination among the members. Efforts by Bishop Jaucian and Manang Pura Sumangil of CCAGG were, indeed, notable, but more participation from its other members is needed in order to come up with stronger and more sustainable initiatives. This can, perhaps, be attributed to some government agencies in the group who, as some AMSG members say, joined only because they felt it was their mandate to do so. Other member organizations, meanwhile, displayed waning interest in the effort as evidenced by a decline in attendance to regular meetings. This might have been one of the reasons why the group failed to respond to the killing of Mario Acena despite opportunities that they felt were available for them to prevent it. In fact, post-election responses were weak, if not inexistent, that it could not address issues and problems sprouting after Election Day.

Meanwhile, there have been allegations of partisanship among its members for certain political dynasties that can be very dangerous to the growth of the organization. This is something that AMSG must strongly monitor and look out for as it would be impossible for a group advocating for good governance to be successful if the group doesn't walk the talk. Incidentally, a group that is supposed to be multi-sectoral in nature cannot be so and act so if memberships are half-bait. This may also be related to the perceived threat of emerging new groups with the same advocacy.

Furthermore, although some members of AMSG are determined and dedicated to the group's cause, and this is considered one of the group's key strengths, there is still a lack of volunteers to help them out in implementing their plans. AMSG is, in fact, lucky to have the Asia Foundation to fund for their efforts, and yet they seem to have failed in maximizing the support given to them. There have been no concrete work and financial plans as activities were said to be performed based only on what they have.

Concluding Notes

AMSG has yet to announce its future plans and initiatives as they have not really planned for these activities yet and the group is still in the process of conducting a post-election assessment. However, they are currently looking at doubling efforts to strengthen relationships between and among members, to conduct activities directed towards citizen awareness and participation even after the elections, and to continue lobbying for serious government action, both in the national and local level, towards the attainment of peace and development in Abra.

The group also recognizes the important role of the civil society in providing for long-term solutions to ERV. Through their advocacy activities, it is their hope that more people will stand up and speak up against the serious political violence prevailing in the province. The group strongly believes in good governance as its main thrust and that this is the key to sustainable peace and development. It is, therefore, crucial for others to show support and join the effort.

This is precisely what AMSG had in mind when they, themselves, declared the need to conduct a more comprehensive plan of action for their post-election initiatives and strengthening of the public's participation. While the group had no initial plans to go forward, they surely have no plans to end their initiatives. Members are very much aware of the need to push harder, especially in the group's advocacy work and voters' education program which have not really prospered much this 2010 elections. Indeed, an absence of a clear framework that would link its short-term responses to long-term ones will prove to be problematic for AMSG and may cause the death of an otherwise beautiful project. Band-aid solutions in the form of short-term responses are not enough to address the long-term, entrenched problems of political clan rule.

However, it is also important for the group to first make sure that its members are, indeed, serious in this endeavor. With some members showing a decline in interest, whether out of fatigue or influence from politicians, it is crucial for AMSG to maintain their multi-sectoral structure and values of non-partisanship. Because the AMSG has just been formed quite recently, it will have to face issues of achieving unity and trust like any other budding multi-sectoral group. However, when a real synergy has been achieved and when this becomes the organization's strongest foundation, the potential to instill real change in the society shall be unlimited.