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To Know is to be empowered

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If you want to effectively tackle gender inequality, you need to be able to measure it and identify its underlying causes. Putting local governments in the know is half the battle.

Celia Reyes is senior research fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, and is affiliated with the Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies at De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines. One of her major research interests is the impact of policies and programmes on poverty and equity. She directed the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) project in the Philippines, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

During that project, she and her colleagues developed the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS), which is an organised way of collecting information at the local level. This information can be used by local government units, national government agencies, NGOs and civil society organisations for planning, programme implementation and monitoring.

CBMS helps to improve transparency and accountability in resource allocation. Its proven effectiveness in improving governance has led it to be actively promoted by the Philippine Department of Interior and Local Government. Now CBMS is applied in three-quarters of the country's provinces. An integrated part of CBMS is Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB). Capacity.org interviewed Celia Reyes to find out how CBMS-GRB has impacted gender equality at the community level.

Who was the driving force behind the integration of gender/GRB into the CBMS programme, and what were the preconditions to make it possible?

We initially developed CBMS in 1994, and then piloted it in one village in 1995-96, but we really started scaling up CBMS in the Philippines in 2000. It was initially a research initiative funded by IDRC, but local governments now pay for the implementation of the system. CBMS was part of a project looking at the micro-impacts of macro-level adjustment policies. It was difficult, however, to trace the impact of these macro-level policies at the local level due to the absence of disaggregated information. So we needed to put in place a monitoring system that would allow us to capture the impact at the household and even at the individual level.

That is how CBMS came about. It was also very opportune because the Local Government Code was adopted and implemented in 1991. This resulted in a substantial push for decentralisation and a significant demand for information that could be used by local governments. Now CBMS actually generates gender-disaggregated information on the different dimensions of poverty, as well as the demographic characteristics of the population, access to programmes and other economic characteristics.

Initially, CBMS was not gender-disaggregated, but we noticed during focus-group discussions that there were differences in school attendance rates, for instance. We found that more girls, particularly teenagers, attended school than boys in some communities because the boys were asked to work to augment the family income. But there were also villages where girls did not attend school because they were asked to stay at home and help with household chores.

By that time, we also realised that in addition to facilitating planning and budgeting at the local level, we could use CBMS to facilitate gender-responsive budgeting as it provides a rich source of gender-disaggregated information. For example, we noticed that labour-force participation by women was very low in one community, mainly because they had to take care of the children. So they set up child-minding centres where women could breastfeed in between their work, and this enabled more women to enter the labour force.

Actually, many GRB initiatives around the world are being practiced at the national level following budget preparations. But people would benefit more from GRB if it were used to formulate local government plans and budgets. We have managed to fully integrate GRB into CBMS and local planning, saying that every local

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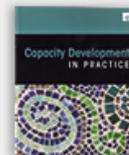
development plan should be gender responsive.

CBMS automatically generates gender-disaggregated indicators. In the Philippines, a 5% allocation of the total local government budget for Gender and Development (GAD) was in place before the CBMS-GRB initiative was launched. But we found that neither local governments nor the national government really knew how to use this budget efficiently. I think the 5% budget increased the demand for the CBMS-GRB programme by local governments, because now they had the information to plan programmes that could be classified under the 5% budget. Of course, in the Philippines we view the 5% GAD budget as just a tool to ensure that gender concerns are mainstreamed, also in the remaining 95% of the budget.

What factors contributed to the scaling up of the programme?

The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) has released several policy statements in support of CBMS. It has been implemented in about 59 of the country's 80 provinces and is still on the rise. We are quite surprised at this exponential growth. To think that we started out in just one province in 2000, and now it is being used in 59 provinces.

It is striking to note that the provinces fund the implementation themselves. Together with us, DILG provides free training, as well as the software and the system. They also spend money on data collection and processing. I think the demand for local information, which has not been addressed by the official statistical system, is one of the reasons why the programme is in such demand. And we have done our best to simplify the whole process.

One feature that has attracted local authorities to CBMS is the system's maps. Local chief executives respond better to information in colour-coded maps than to tables or figures. This has enabled them to appreciate the situation better and set the right priorities. Red areas on a map alert them to pressing needs. The second feature is a system that automatically generates indicators in a table format. This enables local chief executives to generate additional information and cross-tabulate it as they see fit. So it doesn't take much to learn how to use the system and generate the necessary information.

A third feature is that it's good value for money. The programme can easily be funded by creating savings through improved planning, budgeting and targeting. Finally, the system was designed so that it would not need new structural requirements. It has been incorporated into the Local Planning Unit, and the system is maintained even when there are changes in leadership – after elections, for example. CBMS is updated every three years through a census of all the households. Although the local development plan is an annual plan, CBMS data is reviewed every three years because local governments need time to respond to the problems identified by CBMS. For example, if there is no access to water and sanitation, they will need time to come up with projects and programmes to respond to the problem.

Have you been able to measure results in terms of gender outcomes?

We do have baseline information in the form of CBMS data taken a few years ago and data taken now. We have not used the data to assess the impact on GRB. Rather, we have used it more to look at the impact of shocks such as the financial crisis and the price shock we had in 2008. We have not yet had a close look at the impact all the programmes have had in decreasing gender disparities, but this is something that could be done. We have looked at some specific programmes, such as water and sanitation, but we have not looked at the scholarship programme yet.

But in general do you think that the GRB-CBMS programme has contributed to greater gender equality?

'When they find differences in school participation rates, they now have a way of explaining them.'
Yes, we see this in focus-group discussions, which are part of the CBMS process. Members of the community try to explain the situation and come up with potential solutions. When they find differences in school participation rates, they now have a way of explaining the differences in their situation. For instance, why were girls dropping out of school? That can be explained by the fact that in some villages girls leave school to work as maids. So the problem can be discussed and solutions found to keep them in school longer. We now have cash-transfer programmes to prevent girls from leaving school so early.

Local governments actually formulate plans based on CBMS. If they find that there is no access to water and sanitation, for example, they develop programmes to address the problem. After some time, they may see access rise by 20%, which gives women more time for things other than fetching water. This also positively affects their health status. There will be fewer cases of diarrhoea in the area, for example. The impact on the water and sanitation situation is quite easy to identify. But school attendance is also influenced by several other factors, so it's not possible to just look at the numbers and pinpoint one reason.

Is it true that CBMS has helped governors reject political favouritism?

Yes, the system of political favouritism used to make it difficult for governors to reject certain requests. In other words, they risked losing local political support at the next elections. But since they now have data for all the barangays (villages), they can easily argue that a given barangay does not need another water and sanitation project since there are plenty of others worse off that need the project more. This information might persuade a village chief that there is some basis for the governor's refusal and cause him to accept it more readily.

I think in certain places village chiefs are attracted to certain projects that do not necessarily address the community's needs. Basically, they just don't know whether one project is better suited than another. Since there is more capacity at the provincial level, the governor can say 'OK, what you need is not this project but this one, which will address your more pressing needs'. And since the information becomes more transparent, the project implementation is monitored and evaluated more effectively.

The CBMS process requires community involvement in terms of identifying priority problems and potential solutions. When a community knows what it needs, it becomes more empowered. It has relevant data to fall back on. For example, the community might be aware that 50% of its children are unable to go to school, but that better roads would go far to solve this problem. In other words, they are in a position to demand the services they really need.

What are the main challenges in institutionalising and scaling up this GRB-CBMS initiative?

I think the main difficulty initially is that local governments are reluctant to admit that their locality has a gender issue. 'We're treating everyone fairly' is a response we often hear. So I guess the real challenge is to be more specific. If you tell them that girls are leaving school to work as maids, then they start to realize that there are in fact issues that need to be addressed. I think there is a need for more advocacy and more information campaigns explaining these issues to make it clear that more gender disaggregated information can help solve these problems.

The difference between an ordinary CBMS and a GRB-CBMS is that we're trying to highlight the specific gender issues by providing more gender-disaggregated information. The challenge is to come up with more context-specific indicators because the issues could differ across locations, even within one country. In some areas, for example, male school attendance is low because they work as seasonal sugar cane workers, while in other areas the girls are the ones at a disadvantage.

Interview by Sylvia I. Bergh, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, the Netherlands (**bergh@iss.nl**).

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