



## **Mass movement against corruption and for development**

*Position paper presented by IBON Executive Director Sonny Africa at the Senate Committee on Finance public hearing on budget transparency with Civil Society Organizations*

Corruption isn't really a secret – corrupt elected and appointed officials know they're corrupt. Those they work closely with likely also know they're corrupt but don't act on it.

The government already has all the information it needs to act on corruption. The test for anti-corruption sincerity and political will is if the government will share the information with those who will. Our main ask is straightforward – for the government to give full information to the people. This will unleash the strongest anti-corruption movement in the country's history.

Senate Committee Resolution No 4 already confirms the general rule that disclosure is mandated under Philippine constitutional and statutory law, with only limited exceptions. Moreover, the digital, internet and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies already exist for the government to genuinely involve the people if it wants more democratic and engaged governance.

The national budget is of immense interest to the public – it is a powerful expression of government priorities and a powerful tool for improving the lives of millions of Filipinos and for improving the economy.

Civil society, people's organizations, and non-government organizations (NGOs) like IBON Foundation have long taken up budget advocacies. First, to help prevent fund misuse – which is making sure that the **budget is spent correctly**, free of corruption. But also, second, to help ensure the development impact of every peso spent – which is making sure the **budget is spent well**. This is not just about the specific outputs or impact of infrastructure projects or social programs, but also about the overall impact of development approaches and policies, which is beyond specific projects and programs.

### **I. Our experience with budget participation**

The budget is a key tool for short-term relief but also for medium- and long-term development – hence, we are among the budget advocates who welcomed Congress' bicameral efforts since August for greater transparency and accountability and public participation.

We knew these were belated efforts spurred by the sensational flood control exposés, we knew the immense inertia from prevailing practices in the Senate and House of Representatives (HOR), and we knew the tight budget timeline was going to remain unchanged.

Two months and two resolutions later – one each from the Senate and the HOR – an honest assessment would acknowledge a few tentative steps but also admit that the results still fall far short of the promise of genuine reforms.

We can speak from our experience with people's participation that was formalized in the HOR through House Resolution No. 94 and its interim guidelines through a memorandum circular (HRep MC 20-002). We appreciate the efforts of the Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department (CPBRD) which tried its best to work within the operational limits they were given.

However, there was not really much more information available than before. The President's Budget – National Expenditure Program (NEP), Budget of Expenditures and Sources of Financing (BESF) and Staffing Summary – and CPBRD's Agency Budget Notes (ABN) have long been publicly available. The only new budget documents made available were soft copies of agency budget presentations and the HOR's General Appropriations Bill (GAB) committee report – the latter even only belatedly. The machine-readability of all these documents remains limited and, for instance, would have been more useful in Excel format.

Transcripts of House hearings were not made conveniently accessible – and on this point the Senate budget transparency portal does better. Hyped livestreaming is a show of transparency but can be as ineffective as machine-unreadable documents.

Key schedules were shared only belatedly – such as for the budget amendments review sub-committee hearing (BARSc) – which was made worse by many last-minute changes.

It is small comfort that this situation was not just for civil society but also for lawmakers. We realized that the poor systems for transparency perhaps indicate how most lawmakers are not really that interested beyond their parochial district concerns.

Notably, there was no new information on the distribution of projects by legislative district or on proponents of any amendments or insertions. These would have been useful to detect patterns.

There was really not much more access to lawmakers especially committee chairs and sponsors of agency budgets who, it seems, still went about the highly structured and opaque budget process as they always have. Many civil society organizations (CSOs) submitted positions and asked for even a few minutes to speak at committee-level budget hearings but these didn't materialize.

Democracy, transparency and accountability take time and resources but the process seemed more performative than substantial.

## **II. Our recommendation to combat corruption**

IBON Foundation is of the view that the most effective way to overcome systemic corruption in government is to mainly rely on forces outside of government. The tendency for the corrupt to protect the corrupt, or to fear the disruption if widespread corruption is truly weeded out, creates significant inertia. The people suffer the corruption, not government which institutionally coddles too many corrupt.

The most reliable outside force against corruption is then a mass movement against corruption. The public, mass media and civil society are potentially millions of eyes and ears, and of brains and boots on the ground to call out corrupt officials. Right now, the public is shackled and restrained from calling out corruption by the lack of information.

Anti-corruption champions in government need only have trust in the people and give information as vital ammunition. It's simply about the government sharing information that it already has and creating the pressure to act against corruption instead of keeping it in the shadows. The monopoly on information of corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and contractors has to be broken.

There are proposals to harmonize or simplify or untangle complicated government procedures and systems. This includes proposals for digitalization and streamlining processes, for reforms of procurement mechanisms, and for cutting red tape or integrating financial management platforms. Some of these may have value but they will take time, and for others the gains won't be meaningful if corrupt officials remain in power.

For current purposes, they are also unnecessary. **Full-cycle transparency across the entire budget process can be done immediately by making all relevant budget documents publicly accessible online.** Sharing all relevant information according to legally mandated disclosure is a very low hanging fruit that can be done right away with immediate and considerable impact.

The public already sees the NEP, BESF, GAB and General Appropriations Act (GAA). However, the changes between budget versions can be made more transparent in terms of quantities, rationale and sponsors. Similarly, the distribution by legislative districts or even voting precincts can be made clearer.

Also, much of the corruption, patronage, or inefficiency happens before and after the budget authorization. Documents from the budget formulation, execution, and audit phases need to and can be shared – starting from project plans and cost estimates, to bidding documents and approved contracts, including Budget Preparation (BP) Form 201 and disbursement records, and all the way to Commission on Audit (COA) reports.

This enables checking for suspicious patterns between estimates and allocations, as well as eventually between contracts and actual spending. If every contract, line item, and liquidation is online and searchable, it becomes riskier to overprice or fake accomplishments. Red flags can be spotted more easily or even early.

This is especially so if the data provided is complete, timely, and machine-readable. These will radically and immediately transform transparency and accountability in the Philippines' fiscal system for the better.

Transparency across the full budget cycle makes it harder for officials to hide irregularities or sudden fund diversions. With sufficient information: media can do investigative reports; communities can check if funds for schools, roads, or health centers actually reach them; and civil society can conduct independent budget tracking and analysis.

For instance, the *Sumbong sa Pangulo* website is conspicuously selective. However, even a cursory analysis already points to the possibility of at least 226 or more HOR members potentially involved in suspicious flood control projects in their districts. There are red flags of statistically impossible anomalies that point to systematic collusion between legislators, public works officials, and legislators.

Some 2,012 flood control projects worth Php112 billion, or over one-fifth (21%) of all uploaded projects, suspiciously share an exact cost with at least one other project. Some 3,049 projects worth Php218

billion, or nearly one-third of all uploaded projects, suspiciously cluster just below the Php50 million and Php100 million thresholds.

When everyone can see the same information, collusion becomes riskier and accountability becomes collective. This deters corruption and political patronage because corruption thrives in opacity and darkness – through ghost projects, padded costs, or selective fund releases, and much more.

Making all public officials' Statements of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCEs) and Statements of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALNs) available allows citizens and watchdogs to detect conflicts of interest between campaign donors and government decisions and to trace unexplained wealth. Such transparency helps deter officials from using public office for personal gain and strengthens accountability for corruption.

Transparency doesn't automatically end corruption, but it raises its cost and lowers impunity. Corrupt agency officials and legislators must know and fear that they're being watched not only by the COA but by the public.

### **III. Monitoring the budget's impact on development**

However, the budget not only has to be spent correctly but also spent well. Every budget season, the different line agencies report spending and their outputs in detail to give the impression of constant performance. And yet the majority of Filipinos remain poor and vulnerable, and the economy still remains underdeveloped.

Reporting outputs without context is misdirection. Agencies report outputs that are always too small compared to the magnitude of the problems at hand – always. Transparency must also include seeing the forest for the trees and not getting caught up or taken just by minor details.

To truly make every peso count, we also propose a **National Development Dashboard** – a single public platform that connects budget allocations to actual results on the ground.

Right now, government reporting often stops at *outputs* – classrooms built, roads paved -- without showing real impact. What the public and policymakers need is to see development *outcomes*: Is poverty really going down? Are decent jobs being created? Are students learning more? Are communities safer from floods?

The social welfare department reports 4.1 million 4Ps beneficiary families in 2024 – which is not even one-fourth of the 6.5 million families that SWS found rating themselves poor in June 2025. Similarly, the supposedly 6.7 million Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS) "clients" and 4.5 million Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/ Displaced Workers (TUPAD) beneficiaries are just a tiny share of at least 69.3 million self-rated poor Filipinos.

The Walang Gutom food stamps program supported 162,375 families and supplementary feeding programs some two (2) million children in 2024. This is just a fraction of 37.8 million food-insecure Filipinos in 2022-2024, and the 51 million Filipinos who, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2024.

PhilHealth reports nearly 103 million beneficiaries and nearly 16,000 claims worth Php165 billion paid in 2024. Yet the context missed out is that most of these payments go to private hospitals, where confinement costs are 2.5 times higher and outpatient care is three times more expensive than in public hospitals, according to the latest National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). It is also not mentioned that the country is falling behind on health sustainable development goals (SDGs), including those on neonatal mortality, communicable diseases, and non-communicable diseases.

It has become normal to think that infrastructure projects are always beneficial. But do infrastructure priorities push not just growth, which all spending does, but development objectives? What are their contributions not just to private profits but to equity and social goals, to agricultural and industrial progress, or to regional balance and climate resilience? Project planning, feasibility and appraisal, and approval reports need to be divulged.

A transparent dashboard linking the budget, procurement, performance indicators, and audit results would let everyone – from Congress to citizens – see where money goes, what it achieves, and where gaps persist. This can be connected to relevant data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and other official data sets, domestically and abroad.

This will strengthen evidence-based budgeting, reduce waste and duplication, and make agencies more accountable for both spending and results. Policy inconsistencies can be exposed, and promised versus actual spending priorities can be compared. This greatly facilitates data-driven critiques and evidence-backed alternatives to the budget.

It will also greatly strengthen legislative oversight because lawmakers themselves can use media and civil society findings in questioning executive agencies.

If we want budgets to stop going to the pockets of corrupt officials and their collaborators, and if we want every peso to work for the Filipino people – then we have to be able to see it, track it, and measure its impact from beginning to end.

#### **IV. Asks for the 2026 budget**

A transparent and participatory budget isn't just about numbers – it's about justice, equity and development, and the democratic right of every Filipino to know and shape how public money is used. Our immediate asks:

1. Make the **budget process more transparent** by immediately sharing all relevant information online and in machine-readable formats.
2. Immediately **assess all infrastructure and other projects for suspicious patterns**, immediately suspend and review dubious projects, and hold accountable all involved in any wrong-doing.
3. Increase **allocations to budget items directly providing relief to poor and middle-class Filipinos**. Adopting a rights-based approach means supporting the following:
  - a. **Universal health care** – Expand funding for zero-balance billing; improve the staffing (Department of Health Plantilla) and equipment and facilities of government hospitals (Health Facilities Enhancement Program, or HFEP); increase the national health workforce with fully staffed, equipped, and adequately paid primary health teams per barangay, and free medicines and diagnostics for priority diseases;

- b. **Universal education** – Improve the staffing, equipment and facilities of public schools (Department of Education’s Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses and Basic Education Facilities Fund) and State Universities and Colleges;
- c. **Universal pensions** – Increase the Department of Social Work and Development’s (DSWD) social pensions for indigent senior citizens and expand its coverage to include more poor and informal sector elderly; establish a universal non-contributory pension scheme gradually extending coverage to all elderly citizens regardless of income;
- d. **Universal housing** – Increase subsidies for socialized housing (National Housing Authority, Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development);
- e. **Universal social protection** – Increase funds for the DSWD (4Ps, AICS, Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP), the Department of Labor and Employment (TUPAD) and Department of Agriculture (farmers and fisherfolk support), but only after instituting controls against politicians abusing public funds for patronage purposes; establish a national guaranteed employment and livelihood program.

IBON Foundation supports all institutional mechanisms against corruption and genuine participation in the budget process for real and equitable development, and especially measures that give political power to a mass movement for the radical democratic changes our country so sorely needs. ###