# E-market as a tool against corruption

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Getting rid of the scourge of corruption may be just an ”add to cart” away, following the launch by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) last week of an online marketplace on the government’s central portal for public procurement.

At least that is what is envisioned for eMarketplace, a component of the enhanced Philippine Government Electronic Procurement System (PhilGEPS), through which government agencies and procuring entities such as local government units (LGUs), government-owned and -controlled corporations, state colleges and universities, and government financial institutions can browse, compare prices, and purchase their regularly used supplies and equipment requirements from vetted, competent, and reliable suppliers.

The DBM’s long list of commonly used supplies and equipment covers most everyday items used to keep government agencies, LGUs, and other government institutions up and running, from toilet cleaners to brooms, batteries, envelopes, hand sanitizers, alcohol, bond papers, printers, inks, laptops, toilet papers, and trash bags.

## Few clicks

“With only a few clicks, we can now purchase the same way we would shop in Shopee or Lazada using our digital devices, shortening the tedious process of regular procurement from three months to just 60 days,” said Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman.

For the DBM, the eMarketplace can also help combat corruption by verifying merchants and suppliers to ensure that they meet the required technical and budget requirements set by procuring agencies and LGUs.

The actual merchants and suppliers will be disclosed for transparency and accountability in case the sold products do not meet the agreed-upon standards and specifications.

The virtual mall is designed to be inclusive, providing micro, small, and medium enterprises, women-led businesses, and social enterprises opportunities to participate in government procurement by becoming an accredited supplier.

Rommel Rivera, deputy executive director of the Procurement Service of the DBM, said he was confident that eMarketplace would not only help speed up the often cumbersome procurement process but also become “a catalyst for good governance, economic development, and social progress.”

These declarations are certainly fine and dandy, but they are the same ones that Filipinos have grown so tired of hearing as it had also been used to describe PhilGEPS itself, the single portal that serves as the primary source of information on all government procurement, and where bid opportunities are announced and suppliers are registered.

The belief was that with the procurement process recorded and posted electronically for all Filipinos to see, including the evaluation of bids, awarding of contracts, monitoring of performance, and delivery of goods and services, corruption—estimated back in 2019 to cost Filipino citizens at least P700 billion yearly—will be minimized if not eradicated.

## Procurement scandals

However, corruption continues to eat away at government resources, with procurement scandals at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic alone negating any such claims.

Recall in 2021 how little-known Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corp., which was established in 2019 with a paid-up capital of only P625,000, managed to edge out other more established suppliers to snag 15 negotiated contracts totaling P10.85 billion to provide the government with pandemic-related supplies.

This was part of the whopping P42 billion worth of pandemic supplies that the Department of Health had allegedly irregularly purchased just as the country was suffering from the devastation caused by the unprecedented pandemic. Then there is the P2.4 billion worth of overpriced laptops procured by the Department of Education also during the pandemic. The list goes on and on.

## Foolproof systems

These lay bare the cold, hard reality that having supposedly foolproof systems and platforms as well as proper laws, such as the New Government Procurement Act, in place are not enough.

These measures should be complemented with constant vigilance from both the Filipino public and government officials to ensure that these hard-won reforms will deliver what they promise and the system is not manipulated to benefit the few.

Consider that over the past four years alone, the World Bank estimates that an average of P121 billion worth of infrastructure, equipment, materials, supplies, and services went through the government procurement process, accounting for as much as 15 percent of the country’s annual budget.

Gaming the procurement system therefore has dire implications on the public that may be hit by either overpriced or substandard products and services.

As such, citizens and the government must work together to ensure that laudable initiatives such as the eMarketplace will deliver the expected results to ensure that Filipinos will be able to extract the best value for their money and get the products and services that they richly deserve.