

Reflecting both sides of the coin

The importance of gender-responsive budgets

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Traditionally a country's national budget outlines the government's view of the socio-economic state of the nation by declaring the government's fiscal, financial and economic objectives and identifying their social and economic objectives. This view, however, had been deeply gender-biased until the Commonwealth Secretariat's pioneering work in the late 1980s, which recognised the importance of macro-economic policy in shaping women's living standards and their prospects for economic empowerment. In most countries women constitute the majority of workers in the informal economy and since macroeconomic policies do not traditionally take into account the unpaid work contributed by women, women have subsequently been marginalised in the policy-making process.

In 1995, the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development (PoA) declared gender equality a fundamental commitment in the Commonwealth and embodied the vision of a world 'in which women and men have equal rights and opportunities in all stages of their lives'. In that same year, the Secretariat launched the first Gender Budget Initiative, which provided a means of assessing the impact of government revenue and expenditure on women and men and girls and boys, while improving economic governance and financial management. The work was piloted in several countries, including Barbados, Fiji, South Africa and Sri Lanka. In 1997, Australia became the first country to subsequently implement a Gender Responsive Budget (GRB). In less than two decades, GRBs have been implemented in over 50 countries worldwide, of which more than half are Commonwealth member countries.

GRBs seek to ensure that government budgets are equitably allocated; particularly when resources are scarce, the available resources are targeted to the most vulnerable as opposed to creating a separate budget to specifically address women's or gender concerns. Since women globally account for 70 per cent of the world's population living in poverty, they tend to have the most pressing needs, predominately in the areas of income, education, nutrition and health – especially maternal mortality and women and girls' sexual and reproductive rights. However, the PoA recognises emerging male gender gaps and issues such as

boys' underachievement in education, the issues of child soldiers and men in armed conflicts, the pivotal role of men in sexual and reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS and its prevention.

As a means of transforming a country's social-economic standards, particularly in terms of poverty eradication, a government's most important economic policy method is the budget. Therefore, when governments implement GRBs they assess the budget from a gender perspective and address the different needs of women and men, and girls and boys. For example, in terms of health, women will require more resources for reproductive issues, whereas both females and males will require equal resources for issues such as influenza and malaria.

In addition to creating a more inclusive budget, which equally reflects the needs of all its citizens, governments can better monitor the implementation and gender impacts of policies as a result of GRBs. Furthermore, GRBs improve governance through increasing accountability, participation and transparency, as well as offer a means of identifying government expenditures against commitments made to gender and development.

Implementation

At international, regional and national level, action plans and gender policies have been drawn up to clearly identify and define goals related to gender equality. Most notable are the Beijing Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Document, and the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development. In 2001, UN Women (formerly UNIFEM), the Commonwealth Secretariat and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) collaborated to establish an online portal to assist in the advancement of GRBs. While progress has been made on GRB initiatives, substantial achievements in full implementation have been lacking.

A major obstacle in reaching the implementation stage lies in a general absence of funding and technical capacity to design gender-responsive programmes. Since every country has different socio-economic priorities, no single GRB blueprint exists. Thus, in addition to international aid, GRBs

require strong collaboration between government and local civil society organisations (CSOs).

As a region, the Pacific has approached varying degrees of initiatives; however, several barriers to achieving implementation stage have confronted these countries. Because of the marginal representation of women in parliament across the entire region, cultural barriers to gender equality are proving challenging in advancing traction in the advancement of GRBs.

Overcoming male dominance

Women remain largely unrepresented in governance. In addition to a clear gender inequality, this gives rise to serious challenges to advancing poverty eradication, as key challenges are continuously being ignored in the absence of gender-balanced policies.

In light of these obstacles, the Commonwealth PoA 'advocates that the achievement of gender equality should be undertaken in partnership with men and boys. However, in identifying a role for men and boys in the achievement of equality for women, a principle that must be observed is the recognition of men's existing role in perpetuating inequalities and the need for men and boys to reshape their behaviour and transform their roles.'

With marginal representation of women in governance, particularly in countries seeking to advance to GRB implementation, a gender contribution to the budget development process is either minimal or absent. Since budgets are typically confidential until tabled in parliament, those most knowledgeable of the key gender issues are excluded from the budget development. While women continue to strive to reach the UN threshold of 30 per cent representation, another key area for increased gender influence is through establishing stronger relationships between governments and CSOs.

Expanding collaboration

The process of applying a gender analysis to a government budget development process has, from its inception, required varying degrees of collaboration. Although spearheaded by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the GRB initiative was developed in collaboration with partner institutions, including IDRC, UN Women, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In going forward, strengthening the financial and human resource capacity of national women's machineries and CSOs is vital to ensuring a country's long-term sustainability in its implementation of GRBs and advancement of gender equality. Particularly since socio-economic priorities differ from country to country, establishing the local knowledge and expertise will further serve to benefit citizens – particularly those most marginalised.

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