

Unlocking the budget's development impact

The role of citizen-led accountability initiatives

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Recognising that transparency, accountability and participation around budgets and service delivery enhance their efficiency and effectiveness, national governments and the broader development community have deepened efforts to make government more open. While these initiatives are laudable, they typically lack true ownership and accountability. Similar efforts led by citizens and citizen organisations bridge this gap by emphasising ownership, practical solutions and advocacy for real and sustainable change. They improve the efficiency and effectiveness of spending and services, curbing the waste of limited resources and enhancing beneficiaries' human development. To truly recognise the benefits that these transparency and accountability efforts can have to spending efficiency, the development community should take it on itself to carry out further research to measure the savings produced by these interventions and to determine the circumstances under which funding for accountability initiatives has a greater development impact than the same resources being channelled into additional health and education programmes.

Wasted potential

No government action has the potential to improve the daily lives of the poor more than the budget. This is because the national budget, including donor aid, finances services essential to human development, such as basic education and health. However, in many places, the budget's development potential is not fully realised. While insufficient resources undeniably contribute to this, in most cases the budget's impact on human development is also limited by inefficiencies: budget funds may not be allocated to priority sectors or successful interventions, or the funds may be diverted from their original purpose and intended beneficiaries. Too often, services funded by the budget are not delivered in an efficient, effective way and therefore fail to produce the desired human development outcomes.

While the lack of efficiency in public spending and services is an issue in countries at all levels of development, its repercussion is felt most strongly in those countries where a greater proportion of the population relies on public interventions and where systems to identify and rectify

these inefficiencies are weak or non-existent. Preventing and correcting inefficiencies requires transparency, accountability and participation. Transparency, or the availability of information about the budget and services, makes it possible for the wider public to understand government actions, their successes and limitations. Participation – in elections, the budget process, and the design and assessment of services – allows stakeholders the opportunity to voice their priorities and satisfaction (or lack thereof) with government spending and services. Finally, accountability – which requires both transparency and participation – entails a mechanism through which the government is ensured to correct ineffective actions.

Importantly, while transparency, accountability and participation are each valuable independently, they must all be present concurrently to ensure efficient and effective spending. A famous illustration of a successful combination of the three elements is the 1996 Public Expenditure Tracking Survey in Uganda. The study, which found that on average only 13 per cent of the non-wage spending allocated to schools actually reached them between 1991 and 1995, also had an accountability and participation component. It increased transparency by publicising its findings nationally and by publishing the exact amounts intended for every individual school in local newspapers. This facilitated participation and accountability: better informed citizens were empowered to identify inefficiencies and to exert pressure on relevant actors to ensure they received the government funds they were entitled to. Partly as a result of this project, the rate of capture decreased from almost 80 per cent in 1995 to just 20 per cent in 2001¹.

In the light of this and other evidence that investments in health and education were failing to deliver proportional improvements in services and human development, governments and donors have sought to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending and the aid that contributes to it. As part of this, national and international actors have spearheaded initiatives and reforms designed to strengthen transparency, accountability and participation. Independently or as part of the Open Government Partnership or the International Aid

Transparency Initiative, donors and governments have made more data available about aid flows and budgets. Reforms to improve monitoring and evaluation of aid and government spending have been adopted. In some cases, the independence and oversight role of different branches of the government have been strengthened, and greater and more direct participation in policy design and assessment have been encouraged – for example, through participatory budgeting and the institutionalisation of whistle blowing. These initiatives are laudable and necessary, but they lack two elements essential for change: ownership and accountability. Both of these components can be introduced successfully by civil society monitoring.

CSO accountability initiatives

In addition to engaging in government- and donor-led initiatives, citizens and citizen organisations (civil society organisations, or CSOs) design and implement their own accountability efforts. These efforts, sometimes called social accountability projects, involve a range of activities, such as monitoring spending and services and identifying issues limiting their effectiveness; enhancing transparency by disseminating information about government actions and their impact; working to hold governments accountable by advocating for issues to be addressed; and encouraging citizen participation in decision-making, monitoring and developing solutions to inefficiencies. CSO-led accountability efforts vary widely, ranging from analyses of the national budget and high-level advocacy campaigns to the monitoring of community budgets and services. However, these efforts share a common advantage over government and external efforts: they more directly represent beneficiaries and have a greater focus on ownership, accountability and change.

The distinguishing feature of CSO accountability initiatives is that they are led by beneficiaries of government spending and services. They are the group most directly affected by the quality of government actions and the group to which the government is ultimately accountable. Unlike government and donors who face competing pressures such as showing short-term results, these organisations are independent and have clear incentives to identify and address obstacles to quality spending over the long run. In addition, citizen organisations have a number of practical advantages over external actors. Based in-country, they have a deeper understanding of the local context, needs and constraints, and are able to develop practical, appropriate and sustainable solutions.

As representatives of citizens, particularly those whose needs are not adequately addressed by the government, CSOs' approach and tools emphasise citizen ownership and real accountability. Beyond increasing transparency, these initiatives involve active efforts to improve the efficiency of spending and service, either through advocacy campaigns that pressure the government to adopt reforms and/or

through the facilitation of dialogue, participation and the development of joint 'action plans' within communities.

Many efforts have been introduced in recent years to strengthen the ability of CSOs to take on the role of government monitors and accountability agents. As part of the Results for Development Institute (R4D)'s Transparency and Accountability Program (TAP), CSOs effect change at both levels described above through increased transparency and actions to strengthen accountability. In Ghana, the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) led a tracking exercise that found that nearly half of all teachers were regularly absent from classes but that simple measures such as relocating teacher training programmes and rescheduling pay days could cut down on such absenteeism. CDD led an advocacy campaign promoting these policy changes, and the Ghanaian Education Service has now adopted and scaled up these approaches nationwide. Similarly, in Kenya, the Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) led a project that uncovered serious irregularities in the award and disbursements of bursary funds. A successful advocacy campaign led to the government adopting reforms developed by IPAR to ensure that the neediest student received funds, and to avoid funds being wasted on 'ghost' and well-off students.

Other TAP-supported CSOs have focused on change at the community level. In India, the Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS) has curbed health worker absenteeism by convincing facilities to post the staff schedule and contact information in a visible place. Empowered by the knowledge of which health workers should be present at the time of their visit, patients can now practise direct accountability by phoning the absent workers. While these types of citizen-led accountability are generally of a smaller scale, their process and solutions can often be scaled up to other communities and districts. In Uganda's Iganga district, for example, the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), trained students to monitor and report teacher attendance in an effort to reduce the high rate of teacher absenteeism (about 43 per cent). This system, combined with increased oversight by district officials, reduced absenteeism to 10 per cent. ANPPCAN's model of student monitors of absenteeism was so successful in the Iganga district that authorities in other districts have started to replicate it.

As these examples show, CSO-led initiatives typically involve citizen participation – both as a means to better results and as an end in themselves. In the short run, seeking out citizen feedback and participation helps CSOs ensure that their assessment and recommendations are appropriate and effective. In the longer run, these efforts empower individuals and raise their awareness that they have the right and responsibility to play an active role in holding government and service providers accountable for efficient and quality services. This strengthens citizen engagement in transparency, accountability and participation initiatives of all types.

The way forward

In light of citizen organisations' comparative advantages in preventing vast resources from being squandered and in achieving efficient and quality spending and services, governments should be receptive to their work and recommendations, and donors should support these groups' work with financial and technical support (where appropriate). Finally, and most importantly, serious work needs to be done to better measure the financial savings and the additional development that these interventions produce. Specifically, evaluations should look at the relative cost-effectiveness of investing resources into such accountability efforts. Evidence suggests that in some cases, the pay-off for investing in CSO-led monitoring and accountability efforts can be greater than channelling the same amounts into additional education or health services.

Endnote

- 1 http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/15109_PETS_Case_Study.pdf

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