

CHILD-FRIENDLY BUDGETING IN AFRICA: What's involved

Children's rights and wellbeing are intrinsically linked with public budgets. It is a government's budget that reveals how much money it intends to raise, from whom and how that money will be spent across sectors. As such, it is the single most important instrument at the disposal of governments for investing in children.

Governments that "budget for children" produce budgets in which the best interests of the child permeate macroeconomic policies and are routinely scrutinised vis-a-vis their effects on children. It entails the deliberate decision to address children's issues in the budget – both as a process and as an outcome – ensuring that the political bargaining that typifies the budget process does not surrender the needs and rights of children who lack opportunities to voice their requirements and exert pressure on decisions.

Why monitor the child-friendliness of budgets

Budgeting for children is closely linked to the concept of child-friendliness as part of determining the aggregate measure of overall government commitment towards its children.

The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) believes that budget allocations for children should be given priority attention because;

- If internationally recognised treaties and conventions calling for improvements in the wellbeing and rights of children are to be more than just promises, sufficient budgetary allocation needs to be given to areas that impact on children's lives
- Despite improvements, Africa's children continue to suffer from poor nutrition, inadequate health services and a lack of basic education, all of which require investment
- Trends or changes in budgetary allocations for children serve as proxy measures of the extent to which governments are truly committed to realising the rights of the child.

Key issues for consideration in budgeting for children

Determining whether a budget is child-friendly involves examining the extent to which the needs of children are being addressed in the overall budget and looks at four key issues;

- The overall allocation of resources to programmes that affect children
- Are the resources adequate
- Are the resources being used efficiently
- Do these programmes realistically reflect the needs of children.

Transparency in budgeting in Africa – possible or a pipedream?

Budget transparency improves the ability of politicians and citizens to scrutinise government actions by creating a space for understanding and questioning the basis on which decisions are made and priorities formulated. Whilst Africa is a continent of contrasts, for the majority of countries the budget process lacks transparency and are formulated and managed by technocrats with limited participation by the wider public, including children.

In an ideal situation, the government's budget should be a people-centred instrument for generating and equitably allocating wealth and opportunities. However, open budgets are more often the exception. In reality, there is usually limited space for consultation and participation by citizens and children in defining priorities and ensuring governments are held to account for delivering what they have promised;

- In an International Budget Project (IBP) survey of 25 African countries, South Africa was rated the best performer in terms of providing extensive budget information for public use
- Botswana also performed better than others in providing significant budget information
- More than half (13) of the countries covered in this survey in Africa provided scant budgetary information or none at all.¹

A Participatory Process

For a budget to be pro-poor and pro-children, the participation of citizens and children in its formulation, implementation and monitoring is important. Children's participation is not only possible and practical, it is an effective instrument to ensure budgets address their needs.

Public participation in the budget process can take various forms including;

- Sharing and disseminating information, putting it in the public domain
- Organising forums, hearings or referendums to gather information on citizen preferences
- Establishing mechanisms for joint public/state decision-making
- Stakeholder ownership or control of the collection and disbursement of funds.

In Africa, public participation in budgeting is far from uniform practice and very much at the embryonic stages. However, some countries, such as Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda, have laws explicitly providing for people's right to participate in local government.

Drawing from the global experience, South America has made impressive advances in the involvement of children in budget processes showing just what can be achieved. Initiatives such as Brazil's *Children's Participation Budget Council* involves children elected by their peers working through children's neighbourhood assemblies to ensure municipal council's address their needs/priorities. Attempts to incorporate children's voices into budget processes have to be continuous, formal and structured.

Challenges in the budget process

Producing child-friendly budgets takes time, commitment and resources and there are many challenges inherent in improving budgetary systems in Africa including;

- Poor macroeconomic planning
- Limited technical expertise
- Ineffective budget implementation and poor quality service delivery
- Resource leakages and corruption
- Inadequate legal frameworks
- Lack of transparency and accountability within budgetary processes and systems.

Priorities for making African budget's more child-friendly include;

- 1. Reviewing budgets to ensure that priority is given in budgetary allocation and implementation to the realisation of children's right and wellbeing**, including a focus on areas that impact most on the wellbeing of children (such as health and education). Governments must make their intention to promote children's rights explicit when developing budgets and not renege on commitments that benefit children.
- 2. Putting in place participatory and transparent budget frameworks and processes** to ensure efficient use of resources, including the participation of children or their representatives in budget setting, monitoring and implementation. Governments must be transparent and make information widely available to the public, with disaggregated information to demonstrate the extent to which allocations reflect the needs, rights and wellbeing of children.
- 3. Prioritising early childhood development** including investing at least 6%ⁱⁱ of their education and health budgets in early childhood development programmes and abolishing user fees to ensure greater access to health and education from an early age.

ⁱ International Budget Project, *Open Budgets Transform Lives: The Open Budget Surveys 2008*, IBP Washington DC

ⁱⁱ A Jaramillo and A Mingat 2008, *Can early childhood programmes be financially sustainable in Africa?* In *Africa's Future, Africa's Challenge: Early childhood care and development in sub-Saharan Africa*. Garcia, M. Pence, A. & L.Evans, J. (eds), Washington DC, The World Bank; UNESCO 2000 and UNESCO 2010.