

# Can civil society have an impact?

## Public spending: holding governments accountable

Author: Paolo de Renzio, Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute; London, UK< p.derenzio@odi.org.uk>, Author: Warren Krafchik, Director, International Budget Project; Washington, USA< krafchik@cbpp.org>

**Ten years ago a small number of civil society organisations began experimenting with methods to monitor and influence government budget policies and expenditures. Have these initiatives had an impact?**

In a number of developing countries civil society groups have initiated advocacy activities aimed at analysing and influencing public revenues and spending. Such groups include development NGOs, social movements and research organisations. Their activities range from training, technical analysis of budget documents and expenditure and revenue tracking, to building advocacy networks and organising campaigns.



The International Budget Project is an initiative of the Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities, an independent research and advocacy organisation based in the United States. The IBP, together with the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex, recently undertook a study of organisations in Brazil, Croatia, India, Mexico, South Africa and Uganda that have been engaged in such budget advocacy work for at least five years. These case studies provide examples which show that civil society organisations can have a significant impact on budget accountability, for instance increasing budget transparency, public awareness of budget issues and public engagement with budget processes. This advocacy work can also affect budget policies through improvements in budget decision-making processes and shifts in budget allocations.

## Examples of impact

Several civil society groups found inventive ways to access budget information, such as through opposition parliamentarians (in India) or by using freedom of information laws (in Mexico). They produced citizens' budget guides and analytical reports which were widely disseminated. Their documentation was enthusiastically received by other organisations, legislatures and the media, who then joined the lobby process for budget policy change. Groups in South Africa and Brazil used training modules and online distance education courses to increase awareness of government accountability issues.

In some cases, budget advocacy work had a direct impact on improving pro-poor budget allocations. In South Africa, budget lobby groups managed to push for substantial changes in government policies on child benefits. In Uganda, the groups sought to tackle corruption and inefficiencies in public spending by training community-based monitors to check the quality of local service delivery.

## Establishing relationships

There are a number of constraints which limit the impact that civil society groups can have on government budget processes. The openness of the political environment, the nature of the budget process, the stability of national legal and institutional frameworks, and the level of literacy of the population will affect the potential influence of budget analysis groups. Other factors are internal to the civil society organisation itself. For example, the organisation's structure, and the strength of its leadership, communication strategies and technical capacity influence the organisation's effectiveness.

A key indicator of success is the ability of advocacy groups to establish relationships with others from civil society and the media to the executive and legislative arms of government as well as donors. It is through these relationships that coalitions are built, information is passed, influence is exercised, and ultimately impact is achieved.

## Lessons

The variety of experiences brought together in the comparative study shows that budget lobby work can be used successfully by a variety of organisations, from policy think tanks to social movements and community-based networks. There are some inherent limitations to successful advocacy work that are linked to the nature of the budgetary process itself and to the level of national budget-related literacy. The greatest internal challenges faced by budget groups are their ability to build and retain trained staff, and to ensure effective leadership.

In terms of impact, the organisations in the case studies were most often successful in increasing transparency and civil society engagement in government budget processes. In some cases, structural changes in budget decision-making procedures and policies were also achieved through a longer-term strategy and commitment. The basis of effective budget work is analysis which is accurate (to ensure credibility), accessible (to guarantee a wide audience), and timely (taking into account the budget cycle).

Today, the staff at the International Budget Project is aware that organisations in over 60 countries have initiated projects that aim to ensure that public resources are used effectively for the public good. A continued review of civil society's engagement with budget advocacy will provide an essential contribution to global learning in this new field.

# Links

[Overseas Development Institute, governance and corruption](#)

[International Budget Project \(IBP\)](#)

## Further reading

P. de Renzio and W. Krafchik (2007)

[\*Lessons from the Field: The Impact of Civil Society Budget Analysis and Advocacy in Six Countries\*](#), International Budget Project.

P. de Renzio and W. Krafchik (2007)

[\*Budget Monitoring and Policy Influence\*](#), ODI Briefing Paper 16.

M. Robinson (2006)

[\*Budget Analysis and Policy Advocacy: The Role of Non-Governmental Public Action\*](#), IDS Working Paper 279.

For copies of the case studies, see [this website](#).