

Budget Analysis and Social Activism: The Case of DISHA in Gujarat, India
Laura Malajovich and Mark Robinson
Executive Summary

Located in the western Indian state of Gujarat, DISHA is a social movement based on unions of tribals and laborers which developed budget work as a means of supporting claims for land and labor entitlements. Having evolved into a leading NGO, DISHA is engaged in budget analysis and advocacy work primarily in the eastern tribal belt of India. The organization employs 140 staff members, most of whom are based in the field working directly with various unions and people's organizations. Measuring the effectiveness of DISHA's work on budgets requires taking into account the very difficult political and bureaucratic context in which it operates.

DISHA provides the only source of budget information in the state, and it is recognized for ensuring accuracy and timeliness in preparing budget data for use by legislators and the media—in an environment where a lack of legislation permitting access to information and the government's refusal to publicize budget data limit transparency. DISHA's provision of budget figures to the media is widely recognized as a key contribution in this context. DISHA seeks to guide legislative debate by highlighting the needs of priority, pro-poor areas—particularly agricultural development, social sectors, and tribal affairs—and to secure budget allocations for these concerns. In addition to improving transparency and accountability, DISHA works to monitor the efficiency of budget implementation in priority areas of tribal issues, health, and education, tracking local government expenditures and acting as a bridge between local and state authorities.

Aside from its significant impact on building budget awareness and budget transparency, DISHA's main impact is its role in tracking budget commitments for programs geared toward the poor and local-level investments, and underscoring shortfalls in government expenditures. Its efforts helped contribute to a steep increase in the level of implementation of a state budget line designated for the socioeconomic advancement of the tribals—from a 20 percent under-spend of the 1993 budget to an over-spend of 20 percent in 1996, settling down to level implementation thereafter.

As it moves forward, DISHA faces a central challenge: how to promote budget work among a far broader group of stakeholders and how to use this coalition to encourage the executive to provide far better access to budget information. To do this effectively, DISHA is working to employ the latest technology in its analysis and dissemination efforts, and to build relationships directly with government bureaucrats responsible for the budget.