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Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education Carries Out Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys in Malawi

Organizational Profile

The Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSCQBE), created in 2000, consists of 67 civil society groups in Malawi, including non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, teachers' unions, religious-based organizations, and district networks. CSCQBE brings these organizations together in the common pursuit of the right to quality basic education. CSCQBE has made a long-term commitment to monitor Malawi's progress toward achievement of the Education For All goals agreed upon at the April 2000 Dakar Conference, as well as the Millennium Development Goals. (In 2000, the UN adopted a resolution recognizing eight Millennium Development Goals that are to be achieved by every country. They range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education by 2015.)

a. Introduction

From 1994, when Malawi introduced free primary education, through 2001, increased government funding for education did not translate into improved quality of education. Many citizens suspected that government corruption and mismanagement were the cause. In a widely reported 1999 case, for example, the Ministry of Education was defrauded of 187 million Malawian Kwacha (approximately US \$1.3 million) meant for school construction. Civil society groups believed that by closely monitoring government budgets and spending, they could help prevent corruption and encourage better management of public funds.

For this reason, CSCQBE decided to focus its attention on the education sector. Basic education funds approved by Malawi's parliament are disbursed from the national treasury directly to district accounts, where they are allocated at the discretion of the district assemblies. This decentralized system provides only limited accountability, as the national and district governments provide little information on the use of funds. CSCQBE tracking surveys, however, provide independent data on the use of education funds, which civil society can use to advocate for greater and more effective education funding.

CSCQBE also seeks to enhance public understanding of education and budget policies and the need for accountability. To that end, it has set up 13 district networks to decentralize the monitoring of education budgets. The networks support school budget monitoring by school-based or community-based groups, such as the school board or a parent-teacher association. CSCQBE, in turn, provides these networks with technical assistance to strengthen their capacity to support local efforts. It is hoped that once these district networks are fully operational, they will encourage member organizations to engage in budget monitoring in other spheres besides education.

b. Methodology

The Public Expenditure Tracking System (PETS) is a methodology for tracking public expenditures that presents revenues and expenditures in a format that enables users to reconcile budgetary flows. Using PETS, an organization can track the flow of resources through various levels of government to the end users and identify leakages. For example, PETS can be used to track education funds sanctioned by the central government for school repair as the money flows through the district administration to the school itself. First employed by the World Bank in Uganda (see Box 1), PETS has since been used by other multilateral organizations and national donor agencies in dozens of countries around the world.

Box 1: PETS – The Ugandan Experience

In the mid-1990s, the World Bank – a major donor to the Ugandan government – observed that despite a significant increase in Uganda's budgetary allocations for primary schools for more than a decade, enrollment in primary schools remained stagnant. It was suspected that leakages or diversion of funds might be causing less funding to reach primary schools than was budgeted to support them.

To uncover the truth, the World Bank conducted the first public expenditure tracking survey. Its findings confirmed officials' worst fears: between 1991 and 1995, only 13 percent of the annual per-student grants reached primary schools, on average. The rest was either misappropriated or used for purposes not directly related to education. The survey also showed that larger schools and schools with pupils from wealthier families benefited more from the grants than smaller and poorer schools did. In fact, half of the schools did not receive any funds.

These shocking findings prompted authorities to undertake a number of initiatives to enhance transparency and accountability. The central government began publicizing all fund transfers to districts and required schools and district offices to post information on the transfers they received. School committees also received training on how to use such information to hold authorities accountable. The effect of these efforts was dramatic: when the school survey was repeated in 1999, it found that schools received more than 90 percent of the funding budgeted for them (Sundet, 2004).

CSCQBE has used PETS three times between 2002 and 2007 to survey education expenditures, improving its methodology in each round.

As part of the PETS process, community-based members of CSCQBE administer a series of standardized questionnaires to teachers and education officials around the country. Questionnaires administered to the head teachers in a number of schools obtain information on students (enrollment, exam pass rates, drop-out rates, etc.), teachers (qualifications, teacher shortages, housing, etc.), salary pickup (teachers' salaries are often made in cash, especially in rural areas), availability of teaching and learning materials, facilities, and supervision and accountability. CSCQBE selects a representative sample of 500 schools (roughly one-tenth of those in the country) for its surveys, including both rural and urban schools.

School-level questionnaires collect data on student enrollment, staff levels, student and teacher housing, and teacher qualifications. These questionnaires include questions on the school's proposed recurring expenditure budget sent to the Finance Ministry, actual funds received from the ministry, and actual

recurrent expenditures in three sample months. Other questions address the adequacy of classrooms and learning materials.

CSCQBE also collects data from district assemblies, district education offices, division offices, the Education Supplies Unit, and teacher training colleges. District commissioners are given a questionnaire that seeks information on the amount of funding requested from the Finance Ministry for recurrent expenditures, the amounts subsequently allocated to the district, and the actual amounts the district received and spent on a monthly basis (including the purposes for which they were spent). Other questions ask about primary education projects that are planned in the current budget and projects that have recently been implemented, as well as their cost.

Similarly, district education managers are asked about recurrent expenditures in three sample months and monthly allocations in the primary education budget (as compared to funds received and expenditures). Also requested are data on enrollment, staffing, salary distribution, and transportation and facilities.

The supplies unit is surveyed to ascertain budget requirements versus actual funding allocations for teaching and learning materials, to assess the procurement and delivery processes, and to obtain information on the quantities of materials received.

The CSCQBE secretariat collects the questionnaires, enters the data into electronic spreadsheets, and analyzes it to produce its annual report. Particular attention is paid to:

- any increases in budget allocations;
- differences between the budgets for different levels of education;
- the amount of teaching and learning materials received by schools and colleges;
- the amount and timeliness of teachers' salaries;
- the number of teachers who were recruited and trained;
- the distribution of teachers across geographic areas;
- enrollment of pupils in each school, particularly with regard to gender; and
- enrollment of children with special needs and the availability of teaching materials for them.

A draft report is circulated among CSCQBE organizations and discussed at a special meeting for adoption. Subsequently, a final report is produced.

CSCQBE unveils the report during a public meeting with ministry officials, parliamentarians, development partners, and the media during the annual parliamentary budget deliberation. It then holds district meetings during which district assembly officials, district education officials, non-governmental organizations, and school officials can discuss the results and, if necessary, formulate action plans to address problems. The report receives news coverage in newspapers and on radio and television. CSCQBE also gives copies of the report to key stakeholders such as ministers, the office of the president, and donors and seeks commitments on how they will respond to the issues it raises. CSCQBE takes note of these commitments and then monitors their implementation.

c. Results Achieved

Successes

CSCQBE has achieved important successes through PETS. In 2002, for example, when the government closed teacher training colleges due to a lack of funding, civil society groups mounted a three-month campaign that compelled the government to reopen them. The coalition argued that closing the colleges violated the government's commitment to train 6,000 new teachers a year.

In 2003, it was discovered that a number of teachers received their salaries late or not at all. Civil society groups pressed a parliamentary committee to look into the issue. The committee returned a report to the National Assembly.

In 2004, the government undertook its own expenditure tracking survey after observing CSCQBE's successful work. Civil society was involved in planning and monitoring the survey.

Civil society groups have also pressured the government into making budget allocations aimed specifically at children with special needs, to purchase specialized materials for teachers who focus on these students.

In addition, the government is now seeking to address the educational disparities between rural and urban areas. It plans to introduce incentives to attract teachers to rural areas and construct housing for rural teachers.

In its activities, CSCQBE has worked closely with international organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, the Global Campaign for Education, and the Africa Network Campaign for Education For All. It also has been invited to participate in government meetings and working groups on education. The coalition has used these experiences to help widen civil society's space and influence in Malawian society and enhance its capacity for monitoring and evaluation.

Challenges

CSCQBE faces several challenges in implementing the public expenditure tracking surveys. First, government officials do not always fully release budget and expenditure data, which makes it more difficult to track expenditures and determine the extent to which the government is working to improve the educational system.

Second, in many instances officials provide information that is incomplete or refuse to provide it, claiming they are still compiling the information.

Third, many coalition members have only limited technical capacity to analyze education budget data.

Fourth, coalition members are busy with multiple commitments and can invest only limited time in the PETS process. In some cases, this affects the quality of the reports submitted by those who are collecting information for the survey.

Finally, as a nation, Malawi faces many challenges that it must overcome before it can meet the Education For All and Millennium Development Goals. Education constituted just 13 percent of the country's budget in the 2005/6 fiscal year – down from 28 percent in the 1990s. This falls well short of the internationally recommended 26 percent needed to achieve the Education For All goals by 2015. In spite of CSCQBE's important successes through its expenditure tracking surveys, the coalition faces a significant challenge in convincing the government to increase the education budget. Such an increase will likely be key to achieving the needed improvements in Malawi's education system.

This case was excerpted from Our Money, Our Responsibility: A Citizens' Guide to Monitoring Government Expenditure by Vivek Ramkumar (International Budget Partnership, 2008), available at www.internationalbudget.org.