

Getting a Seat at the Table: Civil Society Advocacy for Budget Transparency in “Untransparent” Countries

Edited by Albert van Zyl¹

1 Introduction

In September 2011 the International Budget Partnership (IBP) launched an advocacy initiative in 10 countries that have repeatedly ranked in the bottom quintile of the Open Budget Index (OBI). The consistently low rankings of these countries indicate the presence of persistent barriers to improvements in budget transparency. To address this challenge, the IBP provided modest funding support to civil society groups in these countries to work on advocacy projects that aimed at improving budget transparency through the publication of key budget documents that are assessed in the Open Budget Survey. In order to document and learn from these 10 projects, the IBP appointed an independent consultant to track the work done in these advocacy initiatives as the IBP partner organizations implemented them.

Impact and reasons for impact

This report analyzes the information collected by the consultant through interviews with representatives from each of the 10 CSOs at three different points in each of their advocacy projects. It finds that four of the 10 CSOs successfully achieved their advocacy objectives, while another two were partially successful. There were several factors that affected the achievement of advocacy objectives. The CSOs report that a key barrier they faced was gaining legitimacy with their governments, which were generally suspicious of nongovernmental

¹ This paper is based on a report by the project consultant, Verena Kroth.

organizations. The CSOs that managed to find ways of establishing direct lines of communication with the government agency responsible for disclosing budget documents were more likely to accomplish their advocacy objectives than those that could not. The latter generally depended on third parties, such as the media, to carry their messages indirectly to the government. In some cases the IBP played a role in providing legitimacy to these CSOs and in enabling them to establish lines of communication with their governments. CSOs with a solid reputation in public finance research or those that had experience in conducting advocacy campaigns also were more successful in achieving their advocacy objectives than those who lacked such experiences. Finally, the CSOs reported that staff turnover was a significant barrier to achieving their advocacy objectives.

Methodology

At the start of the advocacy initiative, the IBP worked with CSO partners to identify primary and secondary advocacy objectives that the groups would pursue during the period of the advocacy projects. In most cases partners identified goals relating to the publication of at least one of the eight key budget documents assessed in the Open Budget Survey that their government was not publishing. Seven of the 10 CSOs identified as their primary objective the publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal (EBP) in a timely manner and with sufficient information on the government's revenue and expenditure plans for the upcoming budget year.² The remaining three CSOs focused on either the publication of a Citizens Budget, which is a simplified presentation of the budget; national Audit Reports, which assess whether or not the executive has implemented the budget as authorized by the national legislature; or the Mid-Year Review, which discusses the impact for the remainder of the year of any changes in economic assumptions used to develop the original budget.^{3,4}

2 The IBP defines the Executive Budget Proposal as "a document that presents the government plans to raise revenues through taxes and other sources and spend these monies to support its priorities, thus transforming policy goals into action."

3 The IBP defines Citizens Budget as "a nontechnical presentation to enable broad public understanding of a government's plans for raising revenues and spending public funds in order to achieve policy goals."

4 The IBP defines the Mid-Year Review as "an overview of the budget's effects at the midpoint of a budget year and discusses any changes in economic assumptions that affect approved budget policies."

As discussed above, the consultant documented the advocacy projects as they were being implemented. This self-reporting format of the consultant's interviews provides a unique and rare perspective on how CSOs themselves experience the impact and difficulties of their own advocacy work. The interviews typically were conducted via telephone calls that lasted 30 minutes on average. The first round of interviews was carried out in December 2011 and focused on identifying the main objective and planned activities of each partner organization. The second round of interviews took place between September and November 2012. The main purpose of this round was to follow up on the partners' activities and find out how governments had responded to the CSO advocacy efforts. A final round of interviews was undertaken in June 2013 in order to assess whether or not partners had been successful in achieving their advocacy objectives. Questions used in these three interviews were developed jointly by the consultant and IBP staff members and can be viewed in the appendix to this report.

In addition to speaking with the partner organizations, the consultant liaised with IBP staff members to obtain background information about the project, including country reports from the Open Budget Survey. IBP staff members also provided the consultant with their impressions of the advocacy projects after they had met with the partners in the field to provide technical support. This information was used to corroborate the self-reported assessments by the partner organizations. In this way, some of the findings could be cross checked.

In this report, an advocacy project is deemed to be "successful" when the main advocacy objective defined at the beginning of the project (December 2011) was achieved by the end of the project (June 2013). An advocacy project is deemed "partially successful" when the partner managed to achieve a secondary objective or another significant transparency reform but was not able to achieve the main objective. For example, if the CSO had the publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal as its a main objective and the publication of a Citizens Budget as a secondary objective but was only successful in obtaining the second objective, the project was deemed to be "partially successful." The project status was determined as "no change" when no progress was made with any transparency reform.

Our methodology does not investigate the ability of those conducting these advocacy initiatives to attribute transparency reforms to their efforts. It is common knowledge that donors, segments of the media, and even government insiders also apply pressure for such reforms. Given the consistently poor transparency performance of these countries in the recent past, these CSO advocacy initiatives can at least claim to have contributed to the tipping point for these reforms being reached.

The following section of this report summarizes to what extent partner organizations were able to achieve the objectives that were set out at the beginning of the project. On the basis of the three rounds of interviews, the second section identifies the self-reported reasons for success or failure of the advocacy interventions. This analysis is intended to help develop an understanding of how advocacy interventions targeting transparency and public engagement in the budget process can be successful, especially when operating in adverse governance environments. We hope that such learning will support future civil society advocacy efforts, as well as donor and international organization efforts to support such advocacy.

2 Goals set and achieved by IBP partners

Based on the definition of success outlined above, four out of 10 advocacy projects were successful in achieving the publication of the key budget document that they identified at the beginning of the project. Two partners were partially successful and achieved their secondary advocacy objectives or some other budget reforms that they had not explicitly targeted. Four partners did not manage to achieve any success through their advocacy projects. However, many of these partners claim that their experience in implementing the projects helped improve their relationships with relevant government agencies. These intangible gains are significant if one considers that these advocacy initiatives lasted only 18 months and that transparency and accountability campaigns often take much longer to show an impact. While gaining access to budget documents would typically be only one part of a larger campaign, the publication of a key budget document after less than two years of advocacy work is still significant. These impacts are rendered even more impressive by the fact that these initiatives operated in contexts with persistent barriers to improvements in budget transparency: on

average, the 10 partners scored only 15 percent on the Open Budget Index (OBI) 2010, ranging from 0 percent in Fiji to 38 percent in Kazakhstan.⁵ Table 1 provides an overview of the goals set and the results achieved in the 10 countries that are part of this initiative.

Table 1: Overview of goals set and achieved				
Country	Primary Goal	Status	OBI 2010 (Out of 100)	OBI 2012 (Out of 100)
Bolivia	Publication of Citizens Budget	Partially successful	13	12
Cambodia	Publication of National Audit Reports (2008-2010)	No change	15	15
Cameroon	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	No change	2	10
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	Successful	6	18
Fiji	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	No change	0	6
Kazakhstan	Publication of Mid-Year Review	Successful	38	48
Mali	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	No change	35	43
Mozambique	Improved comprehensiveness of Executive's Budget Proposal	Partially successful	28	47
Niger	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	Successful	3	4
Rwanda ⁶	Publication of Executive's Budget Proposal	Successful	11	8

The [Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario's](#) (CEDLA) main objective was to get the Ministry of Finance to publish a Citizens Budget that presents the 2013 Enacted Budget in a simplified, broadly accessible way. Although this objective was not achieved, CEDLA was able to establish a good working relationship with the national legislature, which subsequently

⁵ The Open Budget Index is the only comparative, regular measure of how much information governments make publicly available throughout the budget cycle. Drawn from a subset of questions in the biennial Open Budget Survey (which assesses budget transparency, public engagement, and the strength of oversight institutions in countries around the world), the OBI assigns each country assessed a score between zero and 100.

⁶ The impact of the publication of the EBP is not reflected in the OBI for 2012 because it was published after the OBI deadline.

published the budget presented by the executive on its website. Although this document did not include all the volumes of the draft budget, its publication sets a precedent for more openness in Bolivia that can be leveraged to obtain greater budget transparency in the future.

The main advocacy objective of the National Budget Project (NBP) in Cambodia was the publication of the National Audit Reports for 2008, 2009, and 2010. These reports are produced for internal use only. While this objective was not achieved, the NBP's credibility improved substantially through a number of meetings with relevant ministries, including the Ministry of the Economy and Finance. This augurs well for the future in a country where the government is loath to engage with civil society.

The main objective of the [Budget Information Centre](#) in Cameroon was to achieve the timely publication of the Executive Budget Proposal for 2013 which is currently produced for internal use only. This objective was not achieved.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Economic Governance and Democracy Network (REGED) set out to secure the publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal. Through several meetings with high-ranking officials, this objective was achieved. Moreover, a number of other documents — the Enacted Budget, Citizens Budgets for two consecutive fiscal years, In-Year Reports, the Mid-Year Review, and the Year-End Report — were also published. Good progress has also been made regarding the second objective, which aimed at getting the National Assembly to hold public budget hearings.

The partner in Fiji (the [Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International](#), FSPI) chose the publication of the 2013 Executive Budget Proposal as its main advocacy objective. This was Fiji's top recommendation coming out of the OBI 2012, given that this document is already produced for internal use. As a result of the advocacy project, the government belatedly published the Executive's Budget Proposal for 2012 and the Enacted Budget for 2013, but did not publish the 2013 Executive Budget Proposal as requested by the FSPI.

In Kazakhstan, the Economic Research Evaluation and Monitoring Center's (ERMEC) main objective was to encourage the Ministry of Finance to produce and publish a Mid-Year Review.

Out of the eight key budget documents assessed in the Open Budget Survey, this was the only document that the public did not yet have access to, as the government did not produce one (not even for internal use). This objective was achieved, although the published document does not entirely comply with international standards.

The main advocacy objective of the Groupe de Recherche en Économie Appliquée et Théorique (GREAT) in Mali was to achieve the timely publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal for 2013. The 2012 coup d'état in Mali limited the ability of local CSOs to operate freely and the group was unable to achieve this objective.

The main objective of the Centro de Integridade Pública's (CIP) in Mozambique was to improve the comprehensiveness of the 2013 Executive Budget Proposal, which was one of the main recommendations in Mozambique's 2010 OBI report. This objective was not achieved, but progress has been made elsewhere in that a Citizens Budget was published.

The partner in Niger (Alternative Espaces Citoyens, AEC) achieved the publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal. AEC was also successful in getting the government to publish the Audit Report.

The main advocacy objective of the Budget Information Program (BIP) in Rwanda was the timely publication of the Executive's Budget Proposal for fiscal year 2012/13. This objective was achieved and positive relationships with key government officials were established by the IBP.⁷

3 Reasons for success or failure

A range of factors can lead to a successful advocacy campaign. In three rounds of interviews with the partner organizations, 11 factors were reported as important. These factors fit broadly into two categories: 1) contextual factors, which relate to the external situation in a country, such as the openness of the government to CSOs or the general political climate; and 2) organizational factors, which relate to the internal strengths and weaknesses of the partner organization. It is important not to look at any of the factors in isolation: none of them

⁷ While this advocacy initiative was successful, the government again failed to publish the EBP for the 2013/14 financial year.

independently determined the success of a project. Instead they combined with each other to contribute to whether the advocacy objective was reached or not. We present all 11 factors in table 2 below, after which we discuss three of the factors in greater detail.

Table 2: Contextual and organizational success factors	
Contextual factors	Organizational factors
Favorable political environment / change of government	Experience with advocacy work
Political openness toward fiscal transparency	Network / relationship with decision makers and donors
Successful advocacy precedents	Access to points of entry for negotiations
IBP involvement in advocacy process	Technical capacity for public finance work
Favorable civil society environment	Low staff turnover / organizational stability
	Reputation of the organization

1. Relationship between partner and decision makers

According to CSO partners, the most important determinant for success in these advocacy projects was the relationship between the organization and key decision makers in government. It is not surprising that partners that managed to build trusting relationships with key decision makers were generally more successful than those that did not manage to do so. Establishing a good relationship with a decision maker allows the partner organization to advocate for transparency reform at the source and make sure that their arguments are heard and taken seriously.

Building such trusting relationships is difficult in countries like these 10, because their government is often hostile toward civil society organizations, in general, and those pushing for budget transparency reform, in particular. Several partners had problems with building relationships with key decision makers. The advocacy projects in Cameroon and Mali, for example, suffered from bad relationships with the key decision makers. In Fiji, too, the lack of political will by the budget officials was identified as a main factor for the failure of the project. The intimidating political climate that civil servants were operating within was mentioned as a particular obstacle to the advocacy project.

The importance of the relationship factor is also illustrated by the experiences of the CSOs in the DRC and Niger. In both cases the IBP's regional launch of the OBI in Dakar in January 2012 was an important event: the attendance of high-level officials from the DRC and Niger enabled the partner organizations to build a relationship with these officials. This meant that after the event, officials were more willing to engage. This was particularly important in the case of Niger, where the official attending the Dakar meeting became the Minister of Finance shortly thereafter. This meant that the AEC was able to negotiate directly with the Minister of Finance and follow up with his advisers. In addition to the achievement of the key advocacy objective, an important consequence of this good working relationship was the invitation the minister extended to the partner to observe budget meetings in April and May 2012. This kind of access had never been granted to a nongovernmental organization in Niger before and presented further opportunities for advocacy.

A related obstacle that was identified by a number of partners was when decision makers disagree with the methodology of the Open Budget Index and think their low score is unjustified — or disagree with the OBI methodology because they are unsatisfied with their low score. This situation can often create a confrontational atmosphere during meetings between partners and key decision makers that is clearly not conducive to discussing reform. In Bolivia, for example, the Ministry of Finance rejected the OBI 2012 results and generally was very closed to discussing transparency reform.

While a trusting relationship between the partner and key decision makers is important, on its own it is not a sufficient condition for success. The experiences of partners shows that it is crucial to follow up with decision makers until the very end in order to obtain results. In the DRC, for example, the government promised to publish the Executive's Budget Proposal early on in the initiative. However, it still took several months of follow-up work before the document was actually published.

2. Advocacy experience and relationship building

A second success factor is the partner's previous experience with advocacy projects, i.e., the extent to which the partner has previously carried out advocacy activities and engaged with

relevant government officials. This factor is linked to the previous one in the sense that an organization's experience and good reputation among its target audiences helps in building relationships with decision makers. A number of partners were able to leverage their experience and capacity for advocacy to build their credibility and gain the trust and respect of decision makers. The partner in Niger, for example, demonstrated its technical competence to the government through a weekly bulletin and the operation of three radio stations focused on discussing budget issues.

ERMEC in Kazakhstan and the BIP in Rwanda named the credibility of their organizations as a key factor for the success of the advocacy projects there. Being perceived as competent, particularly with respect to public finance issues, made it more likely to get government officials to accept their invitations and sit down with them.

Conversely, organizations that are very small and relatively unknown found it more difficult to get the government to take their reform proposals seriously. This poses a challenge, particularly when there is no legal framework on which basis the information necessary to do budget analysis can be requested.

CSO partners reported a variety of strategies to engage government. The Kazakh partner, for example, reported that decision makers were more open to participating in informal engagements or training sessions than formal policy-level dialogue. Responses to invitations to technical trainings were generally positive, while responses to more formal policy-oriented negotiations were generally negative. Setting up technical trainings at the beginning of the project thus can be an effective strategy to start building a relationship with key decision makers because it gives them an opportunity to learn more about budget transparency, without any pressure. The Rwandan partners emphasized the same point: "We drafted a position paper on the implementation of the organic budget law, but this put too much pressure on our contacts in the Ministry of Finance. It was important for us to establish a trusting relationship first." They reported that an informal breakfast meeting worked well in building the relationship with key decision makers in the Ministry of Finance.

Another important aspect in building these relationships was the ability to formulate advocacy goals that seems realistic and constructive to officials. The partner organization in Cameroon found, for example, that government officials were more attentive to their demands when transparency reforms were proposed along with an implementation strategy.

Several partners reported that appealing to the collective voice of civil society drew the government's attention. However, this needs to be convincing when challenged. The Cambodian partner, for example, could not provide concrete evidence that there is demand for budget information, which undermined direct meetings with the Ministry of Finance. Other partners were more successful at rallying support for transparency reform from civil society, for example through social media campaigns or by engaging local journalists. The Fijian partner reports that "the activities that contributed the most [to the advocacy objective] included the media engagement in the print, radio, and TV sectors. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain whether these activities directly or indirectly influenced the Ministry's decision to upload the Budget Estimate onto its website, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Ministry reacted toward the media articles, including the 2012 Open Budget Survey press release." Alternatively, partners tried to integrate their transparency ideas with other ongoing reform processes. The Bolivian partner, for example, identified tax reform as an area for reform that can incorporate the theme of transparency.

3. Appealing to international standards and IBP participation

Another strategy that partners used to get a seat at the table was to appeal to the international image of the country. In Kazakhstan, for instance, the country's image in the region and internationally is very important to the government. When the partner organization offered regional examples of countries that publish a Mid-Year Review, Kazakh decision makers became more receptive to the idea of replicating this practice. However, this strategy did not work in all cases. The partner in Bolivia reported that this strategy was not successful there, as the government generally does not care as much about regional or international standards and practices.

Many partners called on the IBP to participate in this part of their strategy. Many governments are aware of the IBP's role in driving the international budget transparency agenda. CSOs reported that the IBP put weight behind the project and helped them to set up meetings with high-ranking decision makers. Leveraging the IBP's reputation through their involvement in the project, therefore, is a powerful tool to establish organizational credibility and buy in with the government. This is particularly important in countries where local civil society organizations have struggled historically to get the government to concede that transparency is important. In such cases, meetings with IBP staff members helped to convince the government of the growing international consensus of the value of budget transparency. In Cameroon, for example, the CSO partner reported that "the IBP visit helped to create awareness. There is now no one in the Ministry of Finance who doesn't know about the OBI."

The partner in Kazakhstan reported that during a meeting with the IBP, key decision makers were convinced that budget transparency reform is important and that the budget proposal should be published before approval. The Cambodian partner cites IBP involvement as the activity that contributed the most to influencing decision makers; "since the OBI regional launch in Cambodia in 2010 we have become a lot more successful at lobbying the Ministry of Economy and Finance on key issues. The government now listens to what we have to say." Moreover, the Mozambican partner argues that IBP staff members are in a position to ask questions that perhaps would not be acceptable from a "local."

All partners identified the IBP's involvement in the advocacy process through country visits or regional meetings as a key factor for success. However, as evidenced by the varying project outcomes despite relatively equal IBP involvement, the IBP's involvement alone did not determine the success or failure of the 10 projects.

4 Conclusion

These advocacy projects have had a nuanced but overall positive impact on budget transparency practices in the 10 countries where the project was implemented. Overall, this result is impressive given that the partner organizations operated in contexts with persistent barriers to improvements in budget transparency and adverse governance environments.

The key takeaway from this project is that a good relationship with decision makers can be a key success factor for advocacy. Partners that managed to build trusting relationships with key decision makers were generally more successful than those that did not manage to do so. The IBP's involvement in the advocacy process was identified as another key factor for success, because the IBP can enhance the partner's credibility and reinforce the importance of transparency reform.

These lessons demonstrate how advocacy interventions targeting improved transparency and public engagement in the budget process can be successful and how they may fail. Similar interventions can use these lessons to refine advocacy strategies.

Appendix

Interview questions

Round 1 (12/2011)

From your list of advocacy objectives, which specific budget transparency reform is the most important for you to achieve during the period of this advocacy grant?

Which activities will you undertake to contribute to bringing about this reform?

Who are the specific decision makers that you will try and influence through these activities?

What do you think are likely to be the main internal (organizational) and external (contextual) obstacles to your success in influencing these decision makers and contributing to this reform?

Round 2 (09-11/2012)

Which activities have you performed to influence the decision makers that you identified in our first conversation?

How have decision makers responded to these activities? Why do you think they have responded like this?

Have you made any adjustments to the activities that you planned to perform since our last conversation? What were the factors that you considered in making these changes?

Does your work still prioritize the same budget transparency reform that you indicated in our first conversation? If not, please indicate why your priorities have changed.

Round 3 (06/2013)

Do you think that your activities influenced decision-makers in any way? How do you think this happened? Please provide some examples that illustrate what you are saying.

Which of your activities contributed the least to influencing decision-makers? And the most? Give examples.

Please list the three main reasons why you think that you succeeded or failed to contribute to bringing about the budget transparency reform that you prioritized. Please choose from the list of organizational and contextual factors provided or indicate if other factors played a role. Again, please provide examples that illustrate the answers.

Looking back over the period of this grant, what would you do differently if you could start over?

Did you achieve the budget transparency reform that you targeted? Do you think that your work contributed to any other beneficial changes or reforms? Why do you think these changes/reforms are beneficial?