

PARTNERING TO MAKE BUDGETS WORK FOR THE PEOPLE

Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) – Uganda

ACODE is an independent policy research and advocacy organization based in Uganda, with operations in East and Southern Africa. Since its founding in 1999, ACODE has established itself as one of the leading public policy think tanks in Africa. Through its research, ACODE helps governments and international development agencies to expand the range of policy choices necessary to confront challenging and sometimes controversial policy problems. ACODE’s advocacy work contributes to the formulation of public policies that support sustainable development, thereby expanding livelihood and income opportunities for poor people. ACODE also empowers communities to demand their rights and promotes public participation in decision-making processes that affect livelihoods and the environment. Due to its expertise and ability to convene a variety of stakeholders, ACODE has become a leader in facilitating policy dialogue and debate on emerging and cutting-edge public policy issues. ACODE has been involved in budget work since 2006, which has taken the form of public expenditure reviews, analyses of government budget proposals, and monitoring of government processes and regulations related to civil society participation. ACODE also has played an active role in the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group in Uganda and has represented civil society at the Joint Budget Support Framework meetings with government and donors.

ACODE Leads Successful Advocacy Campaign to Save Protected Forest Reserve

At the end of 2005 the Cabinet of Uganda agreed in principle to allocate part of the Mabira Forest Reserve to the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL) for growing sugarcane. A protected area since 1932, Mabira is the most expansive natural forest in the Lake Victoria region and a major catchment area for the lake and the Nile River. In June 2006 the government decided to give away one-third of the 30,000 hectare forest reserve to SCOUL, whose parent company is the multinational firm The Mehta Group. The rationale behind the decision was that the free land would boost sugar production and increase government tax revenue and foreign exchange from exports.

This giveaway of Mabira Forest was not an isolated incident but part of a pattern of the government violating its own laws that prohibit the allocation of public and protected land, particularly forest reserves, to foreign investors. For example, in 2001 the government issued a permit to another sugar company to use the Butamira Forest Reserve for growing

sugarcane, the effect of which was to authorize an illegal change in land use policy regarding the reserve. The natural forest was cut down in a matter of months to make way for sugarcane plantations. In the case of the Mabira Forest, the government was determined to give away the reserve in spite of the ecological, social,

economic, and governance questions that were raised. This time it provoked an unprecedented public outcry.

ACODE decided to launch a campaign – the Save Mabira Crusade – to stop the giveaway of the forest reserve. The organization began



UGANDA
Open Budget Index 2010
Overall Score: 55
Government provides some information to the public on how it manages public resources.

Availability of budget documents critical for effective public input:	
Pre-Budget Statement	Yes
Executive's Budget Proposal	Yes
Citizens Budget	Yes
Enacted Budget	Yes
In-Year Reports	Yes
Mid-Year Review	Yes
Year-End Report	Yes
Audit Report	Yes
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by building a coalition of likeminded individuals and groups, including other civil society organizations (Environment Alert, National Association of Professional Environmentalists, Nature Uganda, Anti Corruption Coalition Uganda), faith-based organizations, cultural organizations, donor groups, lawyers, and journalists. All of these groups were invited to an initial meeting to discuss and agree on campaign strategies. ACODE and its partners then developed a number of strategic actions, including a massive awareness-raising campaign to mobilize public resistance; research into the corporate character of the investor; public interest litigation against the government and the investor; petitions to parliament; opinion letters in newspapers; and a massive public demonstration. Specific organizations took the lead on certain strategies and reported to the campaign partners at weekly review meetings on progress made and challenges met. ACODE and its partners also developed a number of campaign materials, including flyers, brochures, and cell phone text messages, which were widely distributed in both rural and urban areas.

In early April 2007 ACODE and its civil society partners filed a public interest lawsuit in

Uganda's Constitutional Court challenging the proposed giveaway of the Mabira Forest Reserve, arguing that the proposal to change the legal status of the reserve (from protected area to commercial use) violated the Constitution. The peak of the campaign occurred later that month when a massive public demonstration took place in central Kampala. The government tried to curb the demonstrations by arresting protestors, including members of parliament. In an unfortunate turn of events, the initially peaceful demonstration turned violent and took on a racial dimension when demonstrators turned on people of Indian origin to express their anger at the Indian owners of SCOU's parent company. At least three people were killed. The racial overtones of the demonstration, which were widely condemned, threatened to undermine the legitimacy of ACODE's campaign.

In order to counter this threat, ACODE continued to use its policy research and analysis to provide information to the media through press conferences, television, and radio talk shows. This public awareness campaign was extended to the international media through interviews with media houses

like the BBC and Voice of America. ACODE's U.K.-based partner, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), also worked to keep the debate going at the international level. Through IIED and other international partners, ACODE was linked to over 40 international journalists to whom they provided information and analysis. In October 2007, amidst all of these pressures, the government reluctantly announced that it had dropped its plan to give away part of the reserve.

ACODE's successful campaign strengthened the voice of civil society in the development debate and showed that Ugandans are increasingly willing to demand accountability from their government. The key lessons learned from the campaign include the need to create partnerships in order to build a collective voice; develop alternative approaches and multi-pronged strategies; involve the media; and develop and share empirical data and analyses. Overall, the Save Mabira Crusade demonstrated that effective advocacy is a systematic and rigorous process that requires partnerships, commitment, and endurance.

ACODE's Participation in the Partnership Initiative

Through its Citizens Budget Tracking and Information Centre (CBTIC), ACODE is working to build the demand side of budget accountability, so that citizens are mobilized around budget issues with access to appropriate information and analyses on government revenues, resource allocation, and utilization. The principal activities of the CBTIC are budget analysis (allocation through implementation stage), training, and outreach. The CBTIC will produce budget information and assist other CSOs in conducting budget tracking and generating information about their communities and sectors. The CBTIC plans to conduct sectoral Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys and Quantitative Service Delivery Studies in health, education, the environment, roads, and agriculture. To enhance its outreach ACODE has ambitious plans to work directly with mass membership organizations (businesses, farmers, etc.), other CSOs, the media, and information and communications technology (ICT) professionals to increase awareness of budget information in Uganda.

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The IBP's Partnership Initiative is a collaborative effort that seeks to enhance the impact of civil society budget work in selected countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The initiative strives to contribute to the development of sustainable institutions; to increase public access to timely, reliable, and useful information; to enhance the effective participation of civil society in policy and budget processes; and to establish a platform of good practices on which future generations of civil society can build.