



INTERNATIONAL BUDGET PARTNERSHIP  
Open Budgets. Transform Lives.

## The methodology for the Partnership Initiative Prospective Case studies

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One of the key components of the IBP's Partnership Initiative is a Learning Program that facilitates internal and external learning about CSO budget work. Within this learning program a center piece is a stream of rigorous, objective investigations to document the impact of campaigns and coalitions in which PI partner organizations take part.

Over the last few years, the IBP has started to focus on documenting the impact of our work and drawing the appropriate lessons from our experience. Apart from our own learning, we also hope that documenting impact in this way will demonstrate the value of our work to a wider, sometimes more critical, audience.

The first results of this new focus on impact were case studies of six of the core members of the IBP network.<sup>1</sup> As useful as these case studies were, though, they focused on the development of individual organizations and told us very little about the broader coalitions of CSOs that budget work is used in. The next round of research will therefore use campaigns or coalitions as unit of analysis, rather than budget CSOs (as was the case in the previous round).

We also hope that the new round of studies will generate evidence of the impact of campaigns and coalitions that is more reliable and stands up to external scrutiny. In what follows we address some of the key methodological choices that were made in the design of four case studies that will launch the new round of research.

### 1. 'Real time' case studies

One of the weaknesses of the previous round of case studies is that they told their stories retrospectively. This opened them up to a range of criticisms of self-selection. First, selection of organizations that have been successful. Second selection of areas of these organizations' work that has succeeded.

The new case studies hope to reduce the self-selection risk by documenting impact in real time, as it were. Research teams will document the impact of campaigns as they unfold rather than after they have been completed. This would mean that the risk of failures cannot be excluded from the research process.

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<sup>1</sup> The six organizations studied were DISHA (India), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the Institute for Public Finance (Croatia), Fundar (Mexico), the Uganda Debt Network, and Ibase in Brazil.

The case studies will be based on hypotheses by the relevant campaigns of how impact will come about *before* the start of the case study. Each of the participating organizations has formulated a Theory of Change that describes how they think their campaign will bring about the change that they seek. Over the 3-4 years of the case studies the research teams will document whether change comes about in this way or not. This will allow us to see whether organizations' hypotheses of how they influence decision makers hold true or not.

While participating organizations will formulate 'impact hypotheses' at the start of the case study process, they will not remain locked into these hypotheses for the duration of the case study. As their campaigns develop and they gather feedback on their work, they may adjust their strategies. From a methodological perspective these adjustments should not compromise the integrity of the case studies because any such adjustments, and the reasons for them, will be documented by the research team.

As a result of this 'real time' approach' these case studies will run for a longer period than the first set. They will potentially continue for the 3-5 years that it may take for partners advocacy work to come to fruition (or not).

## 2. External research teams

A large number of the documents that record the impact of CSOs on government policies and budgets were written by people that have a direct or indirect interest in the work of these organizations. These documents play an important role in disseminating the methodologies and strategies to other organizations. These rapporteurs also often have the advantage of a close working knowledge of CSO budget work. Their 'insider' status does however mean that their evidence of CSO impact is sometimes viewed skeptically by 'outsiders'.

For this reason we have chosen research teams that have an established reputation for quality research and that are not directly involved in the relevant campaigns or organisations. The intention is to have a researcher from outside of the relevant organizations lead the research, but to have them work closely with the organization.

While not completely without interest in the outcome of these case studies, we believe that the kinds of researchers that we chose and the nature of the contracts that we have with them will add to the credibility of the research results.

## 3. Focus on intermediate outcomes

With these case studies we ideally want to produce compelling evidence of the beneficial impact that civil society organizations and coalitions can have on people's lives. In most cases the duration of the case studies (3 years) is too short to pursue this ideal. In such cases the case studies will assess the impact of these CSO interventions on government budgets policies and processes. Obviously this leaves unanswered the question about the link between government budgets and peoples' lives.

The time limit is not the only constraint on monitoring the link between CSO budget work and the impact of government services on people's lives. The factors that impact on this link are also many and complex. The population's health status for example depends on their own behavior as well as the services delivered by government. As a result, even when CSOs manage to have impact on

government health budgets and service delivery, the link between CSO activities and the population's health status remains very tenuous and hard to defend.

As a result we think that one can get a better idea of the role that CSOs play in development by looking at the link between their campaign and government activity rather than the link between their campaigns and development outcomes.

#### 4. Qualitative, not quantitative methods

The quest to produce compelling evidence of impact makes the consideration of which method to employ an important one. Historically various versions of randomized control trials (RCT) have held the high ground as the method that could produce scientific and objective evidence of the relationship between specific interventions and the impact that they do or do not have. RCTs were originally developed in the medical field to test the effectiveness of new drugs but they have since been applied in a number of other fields.

In short RCTs require that a statistically representative sample survey of participants be taken as a baseline at the beginning of project or intervention and then periodically over the project's lifetime. These surveys attempt to isolate the impact of the intervention by comparing the changes in the project beneficiaries/treated patients and control groups<sup>2</sup>, and to generate evidence of whether benefits were caused by the project/intervention or not.

While impressive in the quality and nature of evidence that they produce, there are a number of reasons why these and other quantitative methodologies do not suit our purpose.

First, classical RCTs don't appear to be possible for most of the cases that we are interested in. It appears that the 'random assignment of treatments'<sup>3</sup> is not possible for these CSO campaigns. In fact there is little or no scope for varying how the program is implemented because the phenomena that we are studying are not part of an experiment that we are setting up. The organizations and campaigns that we are studying exist independently and it is not appropriate for research methodology considerations to drive the nature of the intervention.

The quasi-experimental alternative of at least choosing control groups based on their characteristics, is also difficult. Where feasible we will look at some data on possible control groups, but finding comparable contexts can be challenging. The environments within which CSOs work is complex and shifting and always impacting in different ways on intervention and control groups.

Second, RCTs do not suit our immediate purpose with these case studies. Quantitative methods like RCTs are useful for generating generalizations from large amounts of empirical data. But they are

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- <sup>2</sup> The 'control' in RCTs refers to studying a group of treated patients not in isolation but in comparison to other groups of patients that are similar to the treated patients, but that did not receive the treatment (the control groups). The theory is that if the intervention is the only difference between the control group and the intervention group, it would be possible to see the effects of the intervention clearly.

<sup>3</sup>In RCTs the choice of who the intervention is administered to has to be random in order to avoid 'selection bias'.

less useful for explaining why a specific intervention worked or not. It is valuable to have scientific evidence of causality. It is however also useful to understand the mechanics of such causality. We do not just want to know that CSO interventions in the budget process have had an impact. We also want to be able to understand *how* this impact came about. In these case studies we want to provide more detail on the role that the relevant interventions played, and start explaining why and how they were important in bringing about impact.

It would appear that a case study methodology would allow us to gather more detailed information about the mechanics of what happens between the work of CSOs and the budget and policy decisions that governments make. In order to understand CSOs' work and government's decisions, it is also necessary to build up a good understanding of the broader contexts within which these actors work. Their decisions are influenced by a complex web of political, financial and cultural factors that do not always allow for the neat separation of discrete variables. At this stage we think that a case study methodology is better suited to gathering this information.

In time these case studies could be supplemented with quantitative research that has greater geographical reach and allows statistical work that case studies do not. The reason why we are initially using a case study methodology is that not enough is known about the determinants of the impact of CSO budget work on government budget, policies and delivery. This series of case studies could contribute to a sufficient base of knowledge to enable more quantitative research in the future.

## 5. But still scientific

Qualitative case studies seem to be more appropriate to gathering the complex contextual data that is needed to understand and explain the impact of CSO budget work. They do however seem to run more of a risk of getting lost in the complexity of context and to not produce data that are scientifically verifiable. See for example Shaw's (in **Iverson** 2003): description of qualitative research as: "an imprecise, ill-focussed, descriptive, inductive exercise, strong on vicarious experiences, but chronically at risk of failed credibility in the eye of the people who count."

Some of the methodological choices that we made to mitigate this risk were listed above (external teams, real time case studies etc). In what follows we list some further measures that will be taken to ensure that the evidence that is gathered is as reliable as possible.

### a. Alternative hypotheses

The research teams will not just investigate the relevant campaign or coalition's hypotheses of how impact came about, but also alternative hypotheses of how the relevant impact came about. In some cases the work of other actors such as donors or the media may also have played an important in bringing about the sought after change. The research teams will also collect evidence on such 'alternative hypotheses'.

### b. Triangulation

Next the teams will also make extensive use of triangulation in their treatment of data. This might entail asking the same questions of a number of people, especially those with different interests in the story. Other sources such as newspaper reports and Hansard might also provide ways of cross

checking participants' views on events and the reasons for those events. This technique will ensure that the case studies are not distorted by the interests of individual actors in the policy process.

### c. Peer Review

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, these studies will be subjected to extensive peer review. The first level of peer review will take the form of an annual meeting of all the research teams and participating organizations where the work to date will be discussed and extensively evaluated. At further points in the case study process, and at least at the end of it, we will solicit extensive peer review of both the research process and the results of the research.

### 6. Space for local choices

We have listed some of the main methodological lines above, but given the differences between the campaigns that we will investigate; we are leaving significant room for research teams to develop a research approach suited to their own needs. Again these research approaches will be peer reviewed and tweaked right through the research process.

### 7. Areas of concern:

While we are confident that these case studies will make a contribution to the field of knowledge on CSO impact on government budgets, we do have a number of methodological concerns that would need further work.

#### a. Going to the general from the particular

Firstly, while case studies are useful for describing the particularities of each case and context, they are more limited in the generalizations and comparisons that they allow. This is a serious limitation, given our goal of building generalizable evidence on the impact of CSOs.

#### b. Dealing with causality

Secondly, the stronger case study methodologies like Outcome Mapping and Contribution Analysis make very modest causality claims because of the complexity of the budget and policy environment. While we want to take this complexity seriously, we do ultimately want to make a claim about the link between the intervention and the outcome. But as House (2001:312) puts it: [Causation] remains incomplete, unfinished business for the field, except to say that we do understand that social causation is more complex than we thought back in the old days.”