

What is the 'SPARK' initiative?

The International Budget Partnership's **SPARK (Strengthening Public Accountability for Results and Knowledge)** initiative is a bold, innovative approach to advocacy that closely links budgets to grassroots, community-based campaigns and social movements working to improve the lives of poor and marginalized communities. In Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa, we are partnering with large, powerful civic organizations and social movements (previously overlooked in fiscal transparency and accountability work) and equipping them with the tools necessary to engage government on the fiscal reasons underlying the service delivery gaps faced by their communities. Through tailor-made technical assistance, training and financial support, we ensure our civil society partners have the capacities to meaningfully contribute and shape fiscal and service delivery decisions. Where appropriate, we connect partners to local budget-focused civil society organizations that can share their expertise and assist with advancing campaigns that can benefit vulnerable groups. By supporting and leveraging civic activism directed at service delivery that can affect citizens' lives, SPARK aims to shape budget processes and outcomes to advance justice, inclusiveness and democracy.

Accelerating SPARK during COVID-19

This paper provides an overview of the SPARK initiative's innovations, impacts and key learnings during the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis. As governments around the world acted swiftly to shift public resources to respond to the health crisis, our partners (large, powerful civic organizations and social movements) reacted fast to protect spending allocations for critical sectors as well as advocate for expanded COVID-19-related relief for vulnerable populations whose lives and livelihoods were devastated by the pandemic.

The impacts discussed in this paper happened during a period of accelerated decision-making as COVID-19 necessitated finding quick solutions in critical sectors such as health, water, sanitation, food security and social protections for poor and marginalized groups. While extending COVID-19 relief to those who needed it most was hampered by the governments' limited ability to identify eligible recipients based on reliable and accurate data, SPARK partners were already collecting valuable information on service delivery and potential beneficiaries in these areas. Our partners found ways to step up their efforts to gather information as the pandemic set in, making them ideal allies for governments managing their response to the health crisis. Governments are now working with these groups, not only because of the marginalized populations they represent, but also because of the important input they are able to deliver, clearly linking policy and outcomes, often in real time.

What is so encouraging about SPARK partners being invited to directly interface with government regarding COVID-19 response efforts is that this increased influence will likely have a lasting effect even after the pandemic subsides. Being embedded in public participation processes at this critical juncture helps our partners build trust with government allies and secure the social capital needed to sustain policy and service "wins" achieved during the health crisis.

It is important to acknowledge that while COVID-19 provided this opportunity for accelerated change, SPARK partners were only able to take advantage of this situation because they were prepared to do so. These groups had large, powerful bases and significant organizing and advocacy capacity before partnering with IBP. Through SPARK, IBP provides additional technical assistance, strategic guidance and training that supports these groups in gaining the expertise necessary for them to have more effective engagements with government on fiscal issues and service delivery – areas of policy from which they had previously been excluded. Through our combined strengths, we have created and deepened relationships with governments and the result has been improved voice, dialogue, budgets and public services.

Adapting SPARK under COVID-19: Innovations in Public Participation

SPARK has responded to the crisis in two ways: 1) developing new ways to deliver on its original country strategies, and 2) introducing strategic new activities that “lean in” to the global health crisis. The main COVID-19 responses and pivots consisted of opportunistic as well as strategic interventions focused on data gathering, advocacy and collective action to ensure that communities we are working with were not left behind by COVID-19 fiscal policies.

SPARK switched to virtual spaces to carry out advocacy efforts and opened new and effective ways for civil society to interact with governments. Data collection exercises, public participation, mobilization and advocacy moved largely from the ground to the digital space. The shift to online

platforms and heightened use of media disrupted and dislodged normal power dynamics between government and non-government actors, including citizens and their representatives, and that has played to our partners’ advantage.

In common among the stories discussed below is how SPARK has worked with partners to create and use new tools to overcome challenges and expand civic mobilization, as well as to increasingly engage with traditional and social media to shape ideas and dialogue around marginalized communities and public services. These strategic pivots have encouraged increased government responsiveness to the needs of vulnerable populations.

South Africa: Channeling the Health Crisis to Mobilize the Masses

In the face of the growing COVID-19 crisis in crowded informal settlements in South Africa, IBP and our partners (including the South African SDI Alliance, Planact and Afesis-corporation) scaled up community mobilization efforts to an unprecedented level, harnessing the strength of 12 local partners and hundreds of informal settlement residents to hold government accountable for addressing severe water, sanitation and soap shortages. To date, the campaign, called **Asivikelane** (“Let’s protect one another” in Zulu) has enlisted the help of residents from 217 informal settlements in the six largest cities and six smaller municipalities to conduct a biweekly “flash” survey to monitor whether residents have access to clean, functioning toilets and water taps that are stocked with hand soap – services which are essential to fighting the spread of COVID-19. The campaign has expanded to also monitor refuse removal and the availability of hand sanitizer and public lighting (in response to women not feeling safe using the sanitation facilities at night).

IBP South Africa has been consolidating the data in a biweekly “traffic light” scorecard that is disseminated through press releases to bring problem areas to the attention of the relevant city agency. The new “quick response” surveys have proven useful to governments as they prioritize water and sanitation improvements in informal settlements. Because information is published in near-real time, municipalities and other relevant agencies have been able to respond to these critical service delivery gaps faster and with an urgency not seen before. The campaign, which was launched in March 2020, has already achieved large-scale improvements including the installation of new water taps and tanks in 11 informal settlements, more hygienic and safe toilets in 16 settlements and improved refuse removal in eight communities. The sizes of informal settlements vary, but to give an indication of the significance of some of these impacts, 30,000 residents in Imizamo Yethu, Cape Town, and 20,000 residents living in Duncan Village, Buffalo City, have reported improved access to soap and clean water as a result of the Asivikelane campaign.

This campaign has both built on, and greatly strengthened, the relationships IBP South Africa and partners already had with municipal governments and at the same time bolstered collective action among settlement residents - forging a highly focused, dynamic reform coalition. Asivikelane monitoring reports have become a standing agenda item in a weekly COVID-19 meeting attended by the national Treasury, the national Dept. of Human Settlements and metropolitan municipalities. Afesis-corporation was recently invited onto the COVID-19

command councils of the Eastern Cape Province and Buffalo City Metro. IBP South Africa also has weekly interactions with city officials in eThekweni, Cape Town, Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg about the Asivikelane results. Abahlali BasemJondolo (an organization of over 25,000 informal settlement residents fighting for fair housing) recently joined the campaign and has lent renewed momentum to the effort.



(Left) IBP South Africa and SPARK partners are mobilizing hundreds of informal settlement residents to collect and publish data biweekly on the status of water and sanitation facilities. (Right) National Minister of Human Settlements Lindwe Sulu and her team examine the scorecard results in April 2020.

Nigeria: Taking Control of Shifting Narratives around Food Security

Rural women farmers constitute 70% of Nigeria’s agricultural labor force, and their work is critical to ensuring food security and incomes throughout the country. However, smallholder women farmers do not have adequate access to the government-provided agricultural inputs (subsidized fertilizer, seed and equipment) that men do. Our partner, the **Small-Scale Women Farmers Organization of Nigeria (SWOFON)** - made up of 500,000 members - works to hold government accountable for better consideration of women farmers’ needs in the budget. During the global health crisis, they rapidly sought to protect national agriculture allocations threatened by proposed cuts as well as to advocate for smallholder women farmers to be included in COVID-19 relief packages.

Unable to mobilize its powerful base in person, SWOFON began working with local media to shape narratives around the relationship between agriculture, economic recovery and food security, as well as to bring greater visibility to the needs of women farmers. We partnered with media groups such as the International Center for Investigative Reporting in Nigeria to share stories of how COVID-19 has impacted the women’s livelihoods. Local media also relayed IBP’s findings on the detrimental economic impacts of indiscriminate budgetary cuts on the agriculture sector. These efforts have been accompanied by a social media campaign and the production of a documentary exposing the harsh realities of women farmers’ lives during the crisis.¹

Media has now become powerful partners in Nigeria for amplifying the collective voices of women farmers and advancing advocacy that has led the government to include SWOFON members in various COVID-19 relief packages comprised of subsidized seed, fertilizers and other agricultural inputs.² Further, greater visibility has led to recognition of SWOFON as an ally by state governments and the organization is now being increasingly invited into budget decision-making spaces.



Amplifying stories of small-scale women farmers in Nigeria through social media.

1 The documentary, [Impact of Lockdown on Small Scale Female Farmers](#) was produced by Plus TV Africa, released August 19, 2020.
 2 See annex for specific numbers of bags of fertilizer and other inputs provided by the Nigerian government to women farmers.

Senegal: Elevating the Needs of People with Disabilities

In Senegal, sustained interactions by IBP and our partner, the **National Federation of People with Disabilities (FSAPH)** with the Ministry of Community Development, Social and Territorial Equity led to 55,000 additional people with disabilities (PWDs) being included in COVID-19 relief programs. As a result of FSAPH's advocacy, the government not only expanded the COVID-19 relief eligibility criteria to include PWDs, but also asked FSAPH to further advise on and monitor national and local responses to the health crisis. FSAPH members are now participating in the local and national technical committees for the COVID-19 resilience program and FSAPH's SPARK project manager was also appointed to the Monitoring and Execution Committee for FORCE COVID-19 Operations (a government initiative to track and improve public services during the pandemic). FSAPH's increased influence during the health crisis is likely to have enduring impact, enabling the organization to continue providing direct feedback to government on policies and public spending affecting PWDs for the long term.

"We are now starting to lead the disability policy and to frame the speech we want to hear about us. I had never thought that I would be telling bureaucrats how they should be thinking about us and how that should be reflected in budgets," said Bamba Diop, head of the National Albinos Association in Senegal.



FSAPH members meet to discuss advocacy strategies amid COVID-19.

Indonesia: Employing New Tools to Unlock Participation and Services

As the national government in Indonesia geared up to fast track access to existing social protection schemes as a part of its COVID-19 response, SPARK partner **Serikat Perjuangan Rakyat Indonesia (SPRI)** - a coalition of 20,000 members working to access social benefits for low-income urban families - made swift adjustments to planned strategies and tactics to safeguard and expand benefits for those living in poverty.

Inisiatif, IBP's long-standing budget partner in Indonesia, adapted the app it previously developed for face-to-face data collection so that SPRI could continue to mobilize its large membership to conduct virtual social audits of government social protection programs. The organization focused on (1) the impact of COVID-19 on urban poor households, (2) eligibility and access of SPRI members to social assistance packages distributed by government, and (3) ensuring the inclusion of its members in the expanded and enhanced government social protection programs. Data collected from May and June 2020 was sent to policymakers at the provincial and national levels as well as to the ombudsman and the Anti-Corruption Commission to inform their decisions on the social assistance programs.³ In response to SPRI's ongoing advocacy, the Ministry of Social Affairs allocated food aid packages to 1,200 SPRI families. Using the complaint reports collected at the 35 community information centers it established, SPRI also secured food assistance for an additional 1,259 families from the Jakarta Department of Social Services.



SPRI established community information centers in urban villages during the pandemic to help its members gain access to food aid and social assistance.

³ The first data collection in May 2020 covered 709 respondents. The second collection in June covered 3,400 respondents. 144 village auditors were involved in this monitoring.

Key Learnings

1. Broad-based civic organizations and social movements are powerful partners for public finance accountability.

Previously overlooked in the fiscal transparency and accountability space, large civic organizations and social movements contribute immensely to improving accountability of public services, especially when partnered with budget-focused civil society organizations. Highly organized groups with large, grassroots memberships have the ability to exert positive pressure on governments in ways that other, more professionalized civil society or technical specialists cannot. It is with this in mind that SPARK aims to channel the political influence of these organizations and movements to achieve broader reforms in budget processes and outcomes.

The COVID-19 crisis has validated SPARK's approach to working with large, broad-based civic organizations and social movements. Even amid unprecedented challenges, partners were able to pivot nimbly to not only continue advancing their advocacy, but grow their mobilization efforts, strengthen government engagement and achieve meaningful change – while improving the lives of poor and marginalized populations.

2. COVID-19 created opportunities for stronger and deeper partnerships between SPARK partners and government actors.

In most SPARK countries, COVID-19 has brought about increased alignment between governments' incentives and our focus issues, and this has led to governments being more responsive to communities' priorities and faster service delivery improvements (particularly related to agriculture, health, water and sanitation). SPARK partners, who had been working to generate credible data on service delivery gaps and potential beneficiaries prior to the pandemic, found themselves in the position of not only providing data to government initiatives around COVID-19, but also with an increased capacity to influence and monitor the response. This increased involvement in the governance structures surrounding the COVID-19 response has changed the way governments view and interact with them. This will likely benefit our partners long after the pandemic ends, as they are now seen as more credible and valuable partners to government on matters related to service delivery in vulnerable communities.

3. Governments are moving from isolated responses to the beginnings of responsiveness.

As this paper highlights, we are now seeing regular and significant responses from governments to the priorities of the communities where SPARK is working. Some of this is the result of foundational work that occurred pre-crisis to build the capacities of our partners and the openness of government officials, but COVID-19 created the impetus for them to work more closely together. Initial implementation of SPARK saw individual responses from officials to our partners in the form of meetings and declarations of support. However, we are confident that now we are seeing sustained and regular responses from government on our priority issues, suggesting a shift in attitude and relationships. Examples of this include government inviting representatives into officials monitoring structures (National Federation of People with Disabilities in Senegal), using agency reports to hold officials accountable in monthly government meetings (the Asivikelane campaign in South Africa) and soliciting formal input into policy dialogues (Small-Scale Women Farmers Organization of Nigeria, Indonesia Traditional Fisherfolks Union and Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana).

4. Diverse communication channels animate ecosystems.

Through our COVID-19 work, we realized how important it is to partner with media (traditional and social) to advance efforts to influence and shape narratives around key constituencies and service delivery. We had previously underestimated the pivotal role engaging the media could have in our SPARK campaigns. COVID-19 pushed our partners into using multiple communication and engagement channels, including Zoom, WhatsApp, community radio, print and social media, and to partner more actively with investigative journalists. While we are still exploring exactly how this multi-channel, online/offline approach has contributed to government decision-making and how it can be maximized, IBP and our partners have learned that this approach has increased the audience for our campaigns as well as pushed government stakeholders to scale and broaden their engagement in ways that will continue to benefit the program after the pandemic. In addition, using different types of media, including online platforms and local radio, has helped break down barriers to public participation – in some cases dislodging norms and hierarchies around interacting with government officials.

5. In emergency situations, grassroots civic organizations and social movements may be overwhelmed by more immediate needs in their communities.

During the COVID-19 crisis, some of our very grassroots, volunteer-based partners representing highly marginalized groups were overwhelmed by more immediate needs in the communities they serve. We witnessed this with one partner in particular, Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) in India, which saw its manual scavenger communities (those who clean latrines and sewers with basic tools) devastated by COVID-19, and put its SPARK strategies on hold to provide emergency food, shelter, transportation and other basic necessities to save lives. SKA is an ideal partner for SPARK due to its large, powerful base of grassroots, volunteer activist networks representing 3.5 million manual scavengers. However, because its membership is so marginalized, the organization felt compelled to focus on immediate relief services in its communities. How quickly a partner is able to refocus on the SPARK strategy will depend on the level of professionalization in its networks. In India, another partner, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), also provided emergency food aid to scheduled caste and tribe communities. However, within six weeks, NCDHR returned to advancing its SPARK advocacy campaign around higher-education scholarships for marginalized students. NCDHR is a broad-based civic organization similar to SKA, but with a strong secretariat, an evolved governance and funding structure, and a greater number of employed advocates within its networks.

Annex: SPARK COVID-19 responses by country

Ghana



PFAG members work with the director of crop services (pictured center) at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to improve poor farmers' access to fertilizer subsidies.

Our partners, the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFAG) and SEND (a national NGO that promotes good governance and equality) mobilized a coalition of 23 farmer-based organizations and civil society organizations to develop a proposal for the president of Ghana, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, and the Ministry of Finance to mitigate COVID-19-induced food insecurity (through enhanced investment in smallholder agriculture, food production and supply to poor households). All of PFAG's recommendations were addressed in the 2020 supplementary budget, including **subsidized fertilizer for an additional 300,000 poor farmers**.

India

As a recognized community representative of manual scavengers (those who clean latrines and sewers with basic tools), partner Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) received provisions to **distribute food aid to these communities in 11 states, reaching 8,000 households**. IBP supported relief operations in four states. Other recent national and state level advocacy efforts focused on including manual scavenger communities in COVID-19 relief efforts and improving working conditions for both these individuals and sanitation workers as they clean hospitals and quarantine zones.

Support for Advocacy and Training to Health Initiatives (SATHI) has been working with community social health activists and front-line health workers to collect information on **problems faced when delivering health services during the pandemic**. So far, 33 of the 82 issues identified (including **problems related to medication, food rations and health care salaries**) **have been resolved** by working with the local authorities.

The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights – which is working with IBP to secure improved access to higher education scholarships for scheduled caste and tribe students – are using the budget analysis and monitoring skills of trained student leaders to identify and **file applications of over 23,300 individuals to India's COVID-19 assistance schemes**, using its "We Claim" app.



NCDHR delivers food aid to Dalit and Adivasi communities during the pandemic, March 2020.

Indonesia



This graphic developed and circulated by KNTI features the results of its survey on the livelihoods of fisherfolk during COVID-19.

The Indonesia Traditional Fisherfolks Union (KNTI) surveyed the impacts of COVID-19 on small-scale fishers and conducted a media campaign, as well as briefed government officials. An estimated **1.1 million fisherfolk have been included in COVID-19 social assistance programs**. In parallel, credit facilities worth US \$4.2 million were set up for two state-owned enterprises to buy fish from fishers and aquaculture to avert fishers' economic losses and ensure food security.

Serikat Perjuangan Rakyat Indonesia's (SPRI's) use of virtual social audits on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 led to an additional **1,200 poor families in Jakarta receiving food aid packages**. An additional **1,259 families received food aid and social assistance** from the Jakarta Department of Social Services after seeking help at SPRI's community information centers.

Kenya

Advocacy by IBP and one of its partners, the Community Empowerment and Development Centre, led to the **restart of several stalled rural health care facilities** in Busia County. One is now open and offering health services to a community of 9,000 people. In Baringo County, advocacy led by the Centre for Enhancing Democracy and Good Governance contributed to **an increase in 2020/21 budget allocations for nine new water projects**. Four water projects were recently completed, improving access to clean water for several rural communities.



Partners in Kenya have turned to popular community radio stations as platforms for hosting weekly discussions (sometimes with government officials) about county-level budgets in which the public can call in and participate.

Nigeria



Women farmers march for more targeted investments in the agriculture budget that can improve their livelihoods, June 2020.

Justice, Development and Peace Caritas (JDPC) Nnewi's extensive messaging and media engagement, focusing on the need to improve access to healthcare contributed to a **6.4 % increase in the health allocation in the revised 2020 Anambra state budget**.

Small-Scale Women Farmers Organization of Nigeria (SWOFON) **secured farming inputs** for members including 3,100 subsidized bags of fertilizer, 20 maize farmer kits (containing inputs for a quarter hectare of land) and five tons of rice seeds from the Ministry of Agriculture. The national government revised the 2020 federal budget due to dwindling revenue and the effects of COVID-19 – proposing to reduce agriculture allocations from NGN 124 billion to just NGN 79 billion. However, SWOFON's advocacy **compelled the government to amend the budget upwards to NGN 102 billion (approx. \$267 million USD)**.

Senegal

The National Federation of People with Disabilities (FSAPH) campaign helped **55,000 more people with disabilities to receive COVID-19 relief**, including food aid and utility payments.

URBASEN-FSH, which was already working to monitor the implementation of new sanitation programs in Senegal's informal settlements, completed **a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19** on informal settlement residents' incomes and the effectiveness of government assistance, while also mapping housing in the city of Pikine. After engaging officials on the results, URBASEN-FSH was invited to participate in the design of a large government housing program (100,000 units) alongside state actors.



SPARK Senegal engages with local media partners to grow awareness about the plight of people with disabilities amid COVID-19, Sept 2020.

South Africa



IBP South Africa and partners mobilize residents in over 200 informal settlements to monitor water and sanitation facilities during the pandemic.

The Asivikelane campaign, launched in March 2020, has already achieved large-scale improvements in communities' access to **clean water and hygienic, safe sanitation facilities, including the installation of new water taps and tanks, more regular cleaning of communal toilets, and timely refuse removal**. The campaign has contributed to improvements in water infrastructure in 11 informal settlements, sanitation improvements in 16 and refuse removal in 8. The sizes of informal settlements vary, but to give an indication of the significance of some of these impacts, 30,000 residents in Imizamo Yethu, Cape Town and 20,000 residents living in Duncan Village, Buffalo City have reported improved access to clean water and soap as a result of the Asivikelane campaign.