CALL FOR PROPOSALS:
COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH ON CITIZEN ACTION FOR EQUITABLE BUDGETS
INTERNATIONAL BUDGET PARTNERSHIP
Updated NOV 20, 2017

Background

The International Budget Partnership (IBP) has a long history of embedding learning in its approaches to supporting civil society engagement in public fiscal governance. This is part of a commitment to understanding how civil society can have the most influence on fiscal processes and outcomes, particularly for poor and marginalized groups, and what factors and approaches are most relevant to making progress in this area. Given the questions that still exist about achieving impact in this arena, IBP’s new approach to country work through the five-year Strengthening Public Accountability for Results and Knowledge (SPARK) program, will once again require a significant learning component in order to be successful.

The SPARK strategy is grounded in the lessons learned by IBP and our partners, but represents a new step forward for IBP’s work. The SPARK program will support work across seven countries to address the following central proposition:

SPARK will support and leverage public engagement around service delivery issues that affect citizens’ lives as an entry point to shaping budget processes and outcomes in the directions of justice, inclusiveness and democracy.

SPARK will focus on both broad public engagement, with a focus on marginalized groups, and on the underlying challenges that underpin exclusionary fiscal governance. In other words, it will focus squarely on the political economy factors that shape budget processes and outcomes, in addition to formal policies, to strategically support citizen action to engage in and influence these systems where possible. The starting point will be partnerships between IBP country teams and civil society partners (both professional CSOs and organizations and movements led by citizens). These collaborations will be oriented towards a tangible and relevant issue around service delivery. IBP will explore the budgetary reasons for poor service outcomes as well as provide multifaceted support to partners to build capacities to engage in fiscal governance processes, navigate the accountability ecosystem, analyze political dynamics, build wider coalitions and strategize, reflect and learn. The aim being to bolster the countervailing power of these coalitions to shape budget processes and outcomes in the direction of more equitable outcomes. Given that this is a new approach for an IBP program, and that there are major learning gaps in the field around these issues, learning will be a central component of SPARK.

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1 See https://www.internationalbudget.org/2017/11/struggle-for-democratic-and-accountable-budgets
2 See accompanying SPARK strategy concept note for a fuller discussion of these and other components of the SPARK program approach
**Action research partnership overview**

Learning will be essential to the SPARK approach as IBP and our partners navigate challenging institutional and political contexts, seeking to leverage citizen collective action for more equitable outcomes. IBP and our core partners need to learn more about analyzing and addressing the deeper causes of exclusionary fiscal governance, as well as in leveraging citizen countervailing power to engage governance processes. Indeed, although broader evidence does suggest some important elements of strategic approaches, there are still questions about how to put these into practice on the ground. This suggests an action research approach, in which we invest in testing and learning about complex change pathways as we go. An action research approach can provide us tactical insights, broader strategic lessons, and potentially comparative knowledge about the nature of change and impact for more democratic and equitable fiscal governance processes and institutions that can shape efforts by IBP and the broader field going forward.

IBP as an organization has prioritized learning both at the organizational and country team levels, however the SPARK program will involve strengthening and deepening learning across the program and in within each country. This includes generating more strategically-relevant data and insights to inform decision making processes (both ongoing program adaptation and higher-level strategy processes) and more systematic and independent tracking and assessment of IBP’s contribution to change processes and outcomes. We recognize that SPARK country teams spend a significant amount of time on reflection and reporting, and we want to maximize the strategic value of this investment by ensuring that they have the most useful analytical inputs and critical reflection partners. Action research can contribute additional perspectives and insights that will sharpen our analysis and decision making at all levels.

The learning themes IBP has articulated for SPARK (subject to further discussion with institutional partners for the action research collaboration) lend themselves particularly well to an action research approach to generate and incorporate emerging insights about change processes throughout the life of the program. In other words, IBP intends to not only provide answers to these questions at the end of the program with research findings and program learning, but also to ask these questions, test approaches, gather data, and reflect, on an ongoing basis. The overall purpose of the action research will be to provide tactical and strategic insights into the core programmatic challenge of SPARK: *leveraging collective citizen and civil society engagement at the front lines of service delivery and fiscal governance processes to address – to the extent possible – deeper causes of exclusion of which lack of resources and service delivery gaps are often only a symptom.*

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3 See for example:


Guiding learning themes

Preliminary learning themes based on the SPARK strategy have been developed. These will be refined in consultation with the action research partner. Proposed themes include the following:

Barriers to inclusive fiscal governance and equitable budget outcomes

Exclusionary fiscal governance has visible manifestations that are often symptoms of deeper structural causes. The immediate and tangible issues can be seen in the lack of public resources and services to address the needs of poor populations, with policies often skewed towards the priorities of more influential groups. The same is true with respect to domestic resource mobilization, particularly through taxation, which often favors well connected actors. Exclusion is also readily apparent in the processes of making budget decisions and monitoring the use of public funds, which do not enable the participation of the poor and are not accountable to them either.

The deeper drivers of these visible problems are often rooted in power and politics, and their reflection in formal and informal institutions that govern the use of public resources. Exclusionary fiscal governance is rooted in the ability of powerful actors and constituencies to influence decision making in an opaque, undemocratic and unaccountable manner, while other groups lack meaningful access and influence. Efforts that do not take into account some of the deeper causes of exclusion, may only address the symptoms and thus fail to make meaningful and sustainable impacts.

a. What kinds of concepts and language are most useful for discussing, analyzing and strategizing about these issues among SPARK’s core stakeholders?

b. To what extent are the deeper causes of exclusion related to formal processes or state capacities? To what extent are they related to power asymmetries in fiscal governance? To what extent are they even broader (social, cultural, economic, etc.)? What are the implications of this for SPARK?

c. In what ways are the causes of exclusionary fiscal governance related to weak accountability, particularly accountability that responds to marginalized groups? What are the drivers of weak accountability?

d. What are the most useful ways of learning about these deeper causes of exclusion and weak accountability? Formal political or technical analysis? Action learning through probing with different approaches and learning from advances and setbacks? What can we learn about combining these approaches?

Building and leveraging citizen collective agency in fiscal governance

We have some evidence about the kinds of civil society strategies that are, on the balance, more successful for shaping fiscal governance and outcomes. In general they should bring together a diversity of citizens and civil society actors, work across levels of governance, leverage complementary tactics, and are based on sound technical and political analysis. Yet examples of these kinds of efforts are still few, and they are still often blocked by influential actors who are invested in preserving the status quo.

4 See ‘You cannot go it alone’, ‘Connecting the dots for accountability’ and ‘Strengthening accountability ecosystems’, among others.
Which means we still have much to learn about leveraging citizen and civil society engagement to promote meaningful reform and direct outcomes of interest to citizens.

Evidence suggests that it is the insufficient collective political agency by the poor in budget processes that results in public resources not being used to address their needs. Collective citizen action through membership-based organizations and movements is the backbone of the countervailing power that can enable marginalized groups to engage and shape decision making, bolstered by the capacities of savvy CSOs to navigate fiscal governance and accountability processes. However, there are few examples to guide us with respect to how to leverage countervailing power in this way. In particular, we need to know more about how to balance or combine citizen action with supporting or engaging with internal government reform efforts.

1. How do we most effectively bring together the capacities of formal CSOs with broader membership-based organizations and movements representing the poor?
2. What strategic approaches best leverage these coalitions to effectively link citizen action around services to addressing deeper causes of exclusionary fiscal governance?
3. How can collective citizen action be leveraged to democratize fiscal spaces and bolster accountability? What kinds of resources, relationships and engagements can complement and bolster citizen action to deepen impact?
4. What kinds of fiscal governance and service delivery problems are best addressed by collective action approaches and which might require other tools or engagements?

**Key components**

IBP is looking to partner with a team from one or more institutions that can engage both at country level in seven SPARK countries and in cross-country strategy and learning. This would include one or more research leads from the partner institution(s) overseeing an action researcher in each SPARK country in close collaboration with IBP HQ and field staff.

Overall coordination of the action research partnership on the side of IBP would be shared by the SPARK and the Strategy and Learning teams, while SPARK country teams would coordinate with the action researchers in country. More specific roles and responsibilities include the following:

**IBP**

**HQ team**

- Negotiate and agree on research partnership design, including integration with overall SPARK strategy, M&E and learning approach
- Facilitate co-design of SPARK action research approach with other IBP stakeholders (research team, country teams, partners, etc.)
- Coordinate overall action research project with action research leads
- Liaise between action research and other IBP programs (particularly research team), SPARK reference group, and other stakeholders
- Support, review and approve country action research plans
- Provide ongoing support to country teams with respect to action research process
- Coordinate SPARK learning workshops
- Support integration of action research insights into country strategies and SPARK program design
- Collaborate on design and dissemination of overall research findings

**SPARK country teams**

- Undertake initial country analysis with support from IBP DC and country action researcher (in the case of new SPARK countries)
- Design country strategy with support from IBP DC and country action research team
- Co-design country action research plan
- Collaborate with action research team, including:
  - facilitating researcher access to SPARK partners and programs
  - coordinating reflection spaces with action researcher
  - integrating action research insights into strategy and planning in coordination with SALT and SPARK teams
- Participate in the design and implementation of country and international learning events

**IBP partners**

- Inform the design of the action research
- Collaborate with action researcher
- Participate in country and international learning events

**Action research partner**

**Lead researcher(s)**

- Provide consolidated evidence and insights for SPARK strategy design
- Co-design action research, support integration of action research into overall SPARK MEL approach
- Propose action research teams
- Oversee design of country action research plans
- Oversee in-country action researchers
- Facilitate and support researcher-SPARK country team engagement
- Review and approve research findings
- Consolidate insights and findings for strategic program reviews
- Oversee written products

**Country action researchers**

- Contribute to initial and ongoing country analysis, including collecting baseline data for research and M&E purposes
- Provide inputs to country strategy design/updating
- Co-design and update action research plan
- Lead research activities in country
- Contribute analytical inputs (from action research, context analysis, etc.) to reflection and learning spaces every 3-6 months serving as a critical friend to IBP teams
- Lead on documenting lessons and contributions to impact
- Contribute to cross-country research
As described, ideally this action research partnership will involve all phases of SPARK, from country analysis to strategy to implementation to assessing change processes and outcomes. The common thread will be providing evidence and insights about change processes and pathways, both potential and as realized in practice. Actual research undertaken will emphasize practical action research, drawing on a mix of methods, as appropriate. This confirms IBP’s commitment to embedding learning as a central feature of the SPARK program, based on our understanding of the complexity and uncertainty of navigating the political dynamics of fiscal governance – and particularly of encouraging shifts towards more accountability and inclusiveness.

Thus, at the action research team, at country level and internationally, will work in close collaboration with IBP over the course of the SPARK program. At a country level, researchers/teams will co-create action research approaches as appropriate, integrate research activities with SPARK programming, and will provide analytical inputs to SPARK country teams and partners. At the level of the SPARK program, research leads will draw together emerging insights from country research to enable periodic reviews (potentially including a final program evaluation) of change pathways, IBP and partner contributions, and overall lessons and insights relevant to SPARK’s strategy and goals.

**Sequencing of action research partnership**

1. Engagement on overall SPARK strategy framework
2. Co-design of overall action research approach, including integration into SPARK MEL framework, refining overall SPARK learning questions, and other research activities
3. Country research lead acts as ‘analytical partner’ for country manager to analyze country context and provide inputs for country strategy, in close consultation with staff in DC
4. Country research undertakes baseline evaluation, in coordination with country manager and SPARK MEL framework
5. Country strategy and baseline evaluation point to specific change processes to track through action research or to test through other research approaches
6. Country research lead joins change process tracking/strategy reflection session with country team on a regular (3-6 month) basis
   a. Action research acts as critical friend bringing in program-relevant insights from research and analysis
   b. Action research priorities and approaches are updated to fit contextual and strategic realities
   c. Data and insights are consolidated for periodic SPARK update/reflection and learning events
7. Country research lead consolidates yearly inputs for country annual report
   a. Regular SPARK learning and review workshops look at data and insights across the countries as part of work plan review process; overall action research leads help synthesize findings
8. At end of second year, bring together country researchers, overall action research leads, country teams, and relevant core IBP staff for workshop to review learning and insights and refresh SPARK framework, country strategies and research approaches
9. In years three and beyond, the tracking of change process at country level begins to focus more on impacts and contribution; initial impact/change stories developed; initial cross-country comparisons developed (if applicable).
10. In year five, more formal impact evaluation undertaken, drawing on evidence produced through action research and program data collection, and any additional research. SPARK learning workshop organized to explore impacts, change processes, challenges and implications for our work and learning – and that of the field more broadly – going forward.

*Note that the rolling out of SPARK countries will be staggered. An approximate schedule is the following:

South Africa – Country team and strategy in place January 2018
Kenya – Country team and strategy in place January 2018
India – Country team to be hired and strategy to be developed early 2018
Nigeria – Country team to be hired and strategy to be developed early 2018

Three additional SPARK countries will be selected by early 2018 from the following: Senegal, Tanzania, Indonesia, Ghana, Colombia, Burkina Faso; country team to be hired and country strategy development to take place late 2018/early 2019.

**Required capacities of research team**

A team of researchers, led by one or more research lead with action researchers in each country, should bring together to following experience and competencies:

- Expertise on issues of political analysis, public financial management, citizen engagement and organization, accountable and democratic governance, etc.
- Demonstrated experience with practically-oriented research or evaluation in the context of programming in the governance, advocacy, or development sectors
- Demonstrated experience with action research (and/or real-time or developmental evaluation) and mixed methods approaches, with a preference for previous track record of action research and/or other practical learning accompaniment with civil society organizations

A key challenge will be the relationship between country researchers and IBP country teams and CSO partners. In order to ensure that researchers add value to our work in the context of mutual respect and trust, the country researchers should demonstrate the following key characteristics:

- Demonstrated ability to work collaboratively with diverse civil society organizations
- Willingness to be flexible, adaptive, constructively critical, and committed to maximizing the effectiveness of SPARK programming
- Sufficient understanding of country and/or local context
- Demonstrated ability to provide practical lessons and insights from research and analysis

**Submission instructions**

*Proposal template*

1. Summary of the proposed action research partnership for SPARK (2 pages max)
2. Description and justification of approach to action research in the context of SPARK program (3 pages max)
   a. Analytical and methodological approach to generating and integrating insights on change processes into strategic decision making
   b. Relationship and engagement with stakeholders at country level (especially IBP staff and CSO partners)
   c. Contributing to program learning and wider knowledge for the field, including proposed SPARK learning priorities (including suggested refinements/additions)
   d. Other relevant aspects of the action research approach
3. Proposed research team (3 pages max)
   a. Team members and their roles, including proposed country researchers in South Africa, Kenya, India and Nigeria5 (CVs included separately)
   b. Capacities and expertise, including examples of previous or ongoing action research engagements and other programmatically-relevant analysis and research
4. Proposed budget for approximately USD 1.2-1.4 million over five years

Proposal Submission

Please submit proposals to Brendan Halloran at bhalloran@internationalbudget.org

Selection process

Selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Quality and Relevance of Proposed Research</th>
<th>Weight (points)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of proposed research to SPARK programmatic and learning goals</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity and appropriateness of proposed action research approach</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Quality of Research Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifications and experience of proposed research team</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational capacities and relationships to carry out the proposed action research</td>
<td>15</td>
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Timeline

Call for proposals launch: November 13, 2017
Deadline for proposals: December 22, 2017

5 Depending on the exact programmatic and geographic focus of SPARK programing in each of these countries, IBP and the research lead may agree that some initially proposed researchers will not be included in final research team
Selected research team notified: January 8, 2017
Research commences: February 2018