

Definition of SPARK

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.

The SPARK approach is in recognition that advances in civil society engagement in fiscal governance have still fallen short of the impacts needed to democratize budgets for more equitable outcomes. Whilst many gains have been made in terms of fiscal transparency and CSO capacity it has not brought us change in budget accountability or meaningful outcomes for citizens. Ordinary citizens especially the most marginalized are still excluded from the budgeting process whilst other groups in society are given preferential treatment and governments do not feel pressure to change this status quo. The result is a set of outcomes that benefit the better off and perpetuate poverty and exclusion. The budget is the greatest expression of political will and exists within a broader political economy and set of power interests. In order to shift budgets we must engage with those root causes. In order to shift governments we need to build countervailing power to put them under pressure to change.

Countervailing power is defined as the capacity to “select, reward and sanction the leaders, institutions, policies, formal rules and informal norms that directly affect their lives”.¹ Collective organizing and action often happens around local issues and particularly service delivery outcomes. Spark believes that by using this as an entry point we can more likely transform lives as well as transform systems.

The starting point will be partnerships between IBP country teams and civil society partners (both formal CSOs and organizations and movements led by citizens). These collaborations will be oriented towards a tangible and relevant issue around service delivery. IBP will expose 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.

What success would look like in SPARK?

We identify four interrelated areas of outcomes: countervailing power of marginalized groups in the fiscal domain, democratizing fiscal governance spaces, producing more equitable outcomes (£ and services), and contributing to more meaningful accountability.

Specifically we will seek to contribute to the adoption of improved budget policies for services targeting poor and marginalized groups in each SPARK country as well as the improved implementation of said budget policies. In addition SPARK will seek to increase both the capacity of civil society to influence budget policies and service delivery and the participation of civil society in decision making processes

¹ Desai, R. (2010). The Political Economy of Urban Poverty in Developing Countries: Theories, Issues, and an Agenda for Research. Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Wolfenson Center for Development.

relevant to budget policies and service delivery. SPARK will also strengthen reform coalitions and civil society relationships with influential state officials who are able to address budget and service issues.

The Context

The past several decades have been ones of expanding democracy and prosperity around the world. Yet, despite these improvements, hundreds millions of people around the world continue to live in conditions of deprivation and vulnerability, and unable to meaningfully influence government decisions that affect their lives. Although most countries in the world now have the domestic resource potential to meaningfully improve public services, particularly for the most marginalized groups, progress has been uneven. The processes, institutions and outcomes of fiscal governance are not oriented to those populations, and in fact often exclude them, formally or informally. Furthermore, countries around the world are taking actions to reduce the space for civic society and citizen organizing and expression.

This exclusion is a product of formal and visible policies and institutional features that limit the engagement of citizens, particularly from marginalized groups, and does not reflect their priorities. The structural drivers of these visible problems are 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 groups to influence decision making in an opaque, undemocratic and unaccountable manner. This is a reflection of the lack of countervailing power, particularly on the part of poor groups, and the weakness of the accountability ecosystem of fiscal governance and service delivery.

The International Budget Partnership

Two decades ago the fiscal transparency and accountability field barely existed. In most countries, budgets were developed within a tight circle of the finance ministry, to be adopted and implemented without public inspection or debate, or even meaningful input from other parts of government. Today there is widespread belief among international institutions, donors, and within a sizable number of governments, that governments, donors and the private sector should be more fiscally transparent, that citizens have the intrinsic right to understand and assess fiscal transparency and accountability issues and that their voice can add value to discussions and outcomes in this field.

Contributing to these shifts, there has been a rapid growth of independent organizations around the world that enable citizens and civil society organizations to better trace how public money flows throughout the public resource chain at local, national, and international levels. Yet we know that CSO engagement in monitoring and advocating for improvements in public expenditures runs up against powerful interests and must navigate an – often weak – accountability ecosystem. This reality has led to increasingly sophisticated civil society strategies for engaging decision makers and the public around budget issues, often by building wider coalitions, adopting multiple tactics, and working across levels of governance to effectively influence government decisions and processes.

Lessons and evidence from the fiscal governance sector and our work that informs SPARK:

1. The route to desired reforms is more likely to be navigated by changing underlying governmental systems AND by changing particular policies or service delivery that have direct impact on people's lives. Both are important and can occur simultaneously.

2. Citizens are most likely to mobilize around public programs and services that affect people's quality of life. Collective organizing and action is essential to enable them to engage and shape decision making, bolstered by the technical capacities to navigate PFM and accountability processes.² People are also most likely to do so without focusing on technical issues or broader fiscal governance issues.
3. Shrinking civic space demands a different approach. We must work with civil society organizations with credibility and legitimacy which is why we are moving towards new partnerships with unions, faith based networks, and other membership-based organizations that are increasingly representative of citizens. We are engaging on issues such as service delivery outcomes that are hard to refute and citizen mobilization that is hard to shut down.
4. The IBP is not best placed to do grassroots organizing rather will play a brokering and strategic accompaniment role for networks, coalitions and campaigns.
5. If you really want to build civil society capacities, technical assistance must reflect the specific needs of those partners in the context of their campaigns and engagements. One-off generic trainings have limited value, rather an intensive accompaniment model including peer learning and engagement is much more effective.
6. Feasible and sustainable reform will often not be driven by individuals or small groups, nor will it necessarily be a product of civil society advocacy. Rather, it will require broader and more diverse coalitions that include organizations with dedicated/deep technical experience in public budgeting but also grassroots movements, progressive elements in government etc.³
7. Context is everything and context is complex and constantly changing. Robust analysis, ongoing monitoring, experimental approaches and adaptive program planning is therefore essential to achieve impact.
8. There have been very few examples of citizen movements shifting fiscal systems. We believe that a budget tool as well as a broader understanding of root causes can add value and power to the work of these movements that will achieve deeper outcomes. For example we know that deep reasons why there isn't enough money for health may not have anything to do with health, and everything to do with the larger PFM system.
9. Building sustainable budget advocacy skills takes a variety of forms. In some countries they can be focused in a central institution that services the needs of other civil society and grassroots organizations. In other context they need to be embedded in service delivery campaigns. Important to learn more about these options.

Strategic components of a Spark country strategy

1. ***Bolster agency from the bottom up:*** Ensure, through tailor made support that poor and marginalized groups can meaningfully engage in shaping fiscal and service delivery decisions and implementation that affect them through strengthened collective political agency and technical capacities. In other words, democratize fiscal governance and service delivery from below. The sustainability of such agency will be ensured by building the people, institutions, resources and

² Gaventa, J. and G. Barrett (2010). "So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement." [IDS Working Paper 347](#): 1-72.

³ This goes beyond our core CSO partners to include reformists within government, more progressive elements of the elite, social movements, international actors, etc. See Sidel, John T. "Achieving Reforms in Oligarchical Democracies: The role of leadership and coalitions in the Philippines". The Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, UK.

repertoires of collective action that can hold and develop this work over the medium to long term.

2. **Support broader reform coalitions:** involving actors inside and outside the state, from formal CSOs and broader citizen movements, with incentives and capacity to pursue meaningful reforms to strengthen and democratize fiscal governance institutions and processes. Depending on the issue, this will involve vertical integration of partnerships up the fiscal system to more effectively monitor and engage fiscal governance and service delivery processes. These partnerships should help achieve scale by impacting systems as well as by bringing much larger numbers of people into engagement with the state.
3. **Deep analysis of the root causes of the service delivery problems behind partners' campaigns:** Understanding the root causes of funding or service delivery gaps means careful analysis that follows the money through the PFM system and understands the political economy dynamics that shape those systems. For example, the reasons why there isn't enough money for health may not have anything to do with health, and everything to do with the larger PFM and political economy system. IBP will undertake such analysis in support of partners' campaigns around service delivery, but also to connect those campaigns to deeper systems change, which may go beyond partners' immediate agendas.
4. **Strengthen and leverage the accountability ecosystem:** Support partners and campaigns to navigate the budget accountability ecosystem (through an ecosystem of formal and informal actors and mechanisms, including media, formal oversight actors, CSO watchdogs, etc.), to bolster their engagement in fiscal governance and service delivery. Contribute where possible to meaningful oversight of decision making and implementation through direct and indirect support of and engagement with oversight actors, as well through support of citizen-led accountability efforts.
5. **Improve the enabling environment:** for the engagement of poor and marginalized individuals in the budget process. This can include more granular information disclosure, more meaningful participatory mechanisms, resources and other facilitation, and other enabling factors that encourage inclusive and meaningful engagement in fiscal processes. This can also include negotiating with and supporting governmental actors to undertake or bolster participatory mechanisms.
6. **Influence ideas and discourse:** Produce evidence, narratives, etc. to shape information, ideas, norms and discourse around fiscal governance in a way that supports our work with partners towards tangible outcomes and deeper structural shifts in the direction of inclusion, democracy and accountability. This will involve engagement with media, traditional and digital, to shape decision makers ideas and incentives. This will also involve information and narratives that helps shape citizens' understanding and, more importantly, engagement around key service delivery, fiscal governance, and accountability issues that connect to our partners' campaigns and systems change efforts.

o Learning

IBP has a long history of embedding learning in our approaches to supporting civil society engagement in public fiscal governance. Learning in SPARK will be embedded in a holistic strategic thinking, planning, assessing, and learning framework. This framework will provide tools and guidance to ensure that learning is driven by strategic priorities and practice-oriented. A key feature of this strategic learning

approach will be embedded action research at the country level, in partnership with an academic institution(s).

An action research and learning partnership makes intrinsic sense as a complement to the SPARK strategy. IBP does not have much evidence or experience with respect to analyzing and addressing the root causes of exclusionary governance and institutions, nor is it alone in this regard as many organizations share similar gaps. Indeed, although broader evidence does suggest some important elements of a strategic approach, including expanding our work with grassroots organizations and movements representing marginalized groups, there is little guidance about how to put these into practice. Thus, an action research partnership will give us an opportunity to work with thought leaders on the governance challenges and change approaches we are proposing for SPARK. Furthermore, it suggests an action research approach, in which invest more resources in testing and learning about complex change pathways as we go. An action research approach will 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. In terms of more comparative or even generalizable knowledge, some kinds of quantitative and/or experimental research approaches will likely be appropriate.