PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR IBP CASE STUDIES
International Budget Partnership, 16 September 2009

Since its inception in 1997, the IBP has been documenting Civil Society Organization (CSO) budget work. This process culminated in six in-depth case studies of core members of its network, which both served as examples of successful CSO budget work and generated evidence that this work can have a positive impact on government budgets and development more broadly.

From these case studies and our reflections on their significance grew a Learning Program that the IBP will pursue over the medium term (Appendix 1). The dual objectives of the Learning Program are:

a. To document CSO budget work and its impact in a rigorous manner, and
b. To draw the lessons from this research that can help to make CSO budget analysis and advocacy more effective.

CSO budget work takes place in a range of dramatically different contexts, in terms of political systems, levels of economic development, and the strength and capacity of civil society. At the same time, the IBP and its partner organizations implement programs that have sufficient similarity for us to begin to assess which strategies work best in which contexts and, therefore, contribute to systemic learning and improvements in the quality of our work over time. Among the common elements of our programs are the focus on budget analysis, the training programs that are being implemented in many different countries, the efforts to develop broad civil society coalitions to seek reforms, and the more sharply focused advocacy strategies being undertaken. It is this set of core elements of a common strategy that drive our interest in the following overarching questions, which we will seek to answer through the Learning Program:

• How and under what conditions do CSOs and the coalitions in which they work have an impact on budget processes, budget policies, and institutions?
• What kind of civil society budget work is most likely to bring about change in government budgets?
• How does country context influence the likelihood of civil society impact on government budgets?
• What kinds of support do CSOs need in order to have the maximum impact?
• What kinds of impact can CSOs achieve?

One of the next steps we will take to help us reflect on these questions, is to launch a second round of case studies to monitor the kinds of impact that IBP partners achieve and to uncover the nature of such impact and the factors that shape it. These four case studies will in due course be supplemented by further case studies and comparative investigations. The next four cases will examine:

• An alliance which seeks to improve health service delivery by advocating for improvements in the planning and budgeting process in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The associated advocacy campaign involves a partnership between the Public Sector Accountability Monitor (PSAM) and a number of community groups and trade unions.
• An initiative which seeks to improve health service delivery in a number of states in Mexico by creating a network of state-level citizens organizations and working with those organizations to gather data on health care service delivery and advocate for better quality and more responsive service delivery. This network is coordinated by Fundar.
• A network that seeks to mobilize the media and a network of citizens in order to pressure the government to improve the quality of education in Tanzania. This network is coordinated by Haki Elimu.
• The BNDES Platform which seeks reforms that will make the Brazilian national development bank

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1 The term “civil society” is much disputed, but for the purposes of this document, we define the organizations under study as non-partisan entities that promote more participative and pro-poor government budgets. They are largely donor funded and often have strong organizational links with broad citizens networks or social movements. Further, we define “CSO budget work” as efforts by such organisations to influence their government’s budget process or budget policies.

2 The six organizations studied in 2006 were DISHA (India), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the Institute for Public Finance (Croatia), Fundar (Mexico), the Uganda Debt Network, and Ibase (Brazil).
BNDES) more transparent, more democratic, and more responsive to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged by means of a large CSO coalition called Ibase is a key member of this platform.

Below, we describe the methodological approach that we intend to follow in these case studies. The first section presents the refinements in our case study methodology, while subsequent sections discuss the central hypothesis of the case studies, our definition of impact, and how we will consider attribution claims.

The methodological choices that we make in these case studies will have a major bearing on the credibility of the evidence that we collect, so we consulted a wide range of impact evaluation experts in order to inform and refine our choices. These consultations were launched at a workshop convened by Sanjeev Khagram at the University of Washington in December 2007. Subsequently we have submitted drafts of this and previous documents for review and comment to several experts, including John Mayne (advisor on public sector performance), Paolo de Renzio (University of Oxford), Charles Griffin (Brookings Institution), Ray Struyk (National Opinion Research Center), Julia Coffman (Harvard Family Research Project), David Devlin-Foltz (The Aspen Institute), and members of the staffs of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the IBP. We received further input on the terms of reference for each case study from the case study research teams, as well as Jeremy Holland and Terry Smutylo (evaluation experts and independent consultants).

1. Refining our case study methodology

While the first series of case studies provided valuable resource documents for others who do similar work, they suffered from a series of shortcomings:

a. They were retrospective;

b. They included only successful cases; and

c. They used organizations as the unit of analysis.

To move beyond these weaknesses, the next round of case studies will be:

a. Prospective and long term (3-4 years), with clear ex ante hypotheses

One of the main weaknesses of the IBP’s previous round of case studies is that they were retrospective in nature. This opened them to a range of selection-bias criticisms, i.e., the IBP may have selected organizations that had been successful or selected areas of these organizations’ work that had succeeded.

The approach to this next round of case studies hopes to reduce the selection-bias risk by documenting the impact of campaigns as they unfold, rather than after they have been completed. The prospective nature of these case studies allows us to formulate hypotheses at the start of the case studies that research teams will investigate for the 3- to 4-year research period (see Section 2 below).

b. A focus on interesting interventions that may fail

The prospective nature of the case studies will also make it harder to exclude failures from the research process. To reinforce the independence of the research teams and enhance the credibility of the case studies, we are encouraging them to document campaigns’ failure to impact as thoroughly as they do success. Detailed descriptions of failure to impact have the potential of being as useful to understanding impact as their opposite.

c. A focus on specific initiatives and campaigns rather than organizations

IBP’s first six case studies focused on the development of individual organizations and told us very little about the broader coalitions that use CSO budget work. One of the lessons from the initial round of case studies was that most CSO budget work is situated in a broader campaign or network. For this reason the next round of research will use such campaigns and networks as the unit of analysis, rather than individual “budget CSOs.”

2. Testing the central hypothesis: Did impact occur?

The main hypothesis underlying all four case studies, and IBP’s work more generally, is that CSO interventions using budget analysis and advocacy can contribute to improvements in budget processes
and policies. Therefore, the four case studies will seek to test this central hypothesis: **CSO campaigns using budget analysis and advocacy can lead to improvements in government budget processes and policies.**

We define “improvements in government budget processes and policies” as:

- Changes in budget processes that make them more participative or more representative of the preferences and needs of the majority of the population (or of particularly vulnerable sub-sectors that might not be the majority); and
- Changes in the formulation or execution of the budget that result in more and better services being delivered to the poor and marginalized.

Each of the campaigns that we will study use different strategies and focus on different aspects of government budgets, so each case study will investigate specific hypotheses within this central hypothesis. Two examples are:

- “The activities of the BNDES Platform contribute to the increased transparency of and increased social participation in the activities of the BNDES, and ultimately to the reorientation of BNDES investment toward human development objectives.”
- “The work of the PSAM coalition contributes to better public resource management and service delivery in health.”

Despite variations in the specifics of the campaigns’ individual hypotheses, we are confident that these case studies together will start to generate evidence of whether, and under what circumstances, the central hypothesis is true.

The value of such changes in budget process and policy is that they contribute to development outcomes, such as improvements in governance and more effective anti-poverty initiatives. In all four cases, the intended impact of CSOs on governance and poverty is channeled through government budgets and the processes followed to formulate and implement them. Therefore, we will focus on the impact that CSOs have on these processes and policies rather than on governance and poverty outcomes directly.

While the assumption that improved budget processes and policies ultimately make a positive contribution to governance and poverty outcomes is key to our work, generating evidence for it will not form an explicit part of the investigation in these case studies. However, we will draw on secondary data to provide support for it.

### 3. Intermediate, unforeseen, and unintended consequences.

While these campaigns target changes in budget process and policy, they often produce important intermediate outcomes, such as empowering citizens to engage with government or enabling CSOs to understand technical budget documents. While such outcomes are valuable in their own right, these case studies will primarily focus on the extent to which CSO campaigns manage to bring about changes in budgets. Any intermediate outcomes will be considered only to the extent that they contribute to changes in budget process and policy.

Given the complexity of the environment within which these CSO campaigns are conducted, they are also subject to a multitude of both positive and negative unintended consequences. These may include strategic opportunities to engage with government departments that had previously resisted such engagement or government backlash against campaigns, such as banning orders or withholding key information. Campaigns typically respond to such events by adapting part of their strategies. Such strategic adaptations to their environment will be documented in detail in each of the case studies.

At another level, achieving impact on budget process or policy could also have unwanted impacts on other parts of the budget, such as reductions in education allocations in order to fund the health allocations that the campaign requested. Documenting and analyzing such unwanted impacts could be

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valuable in building understanding about the risks inherent in these campaigns and what would be required to mitigate against them. It could also start to build our understanding of which kinds of impact these campaigns are best placed to pursue: sectoral or global changes, national- or local-level government budgets, or changes in allocations or implementation practices.

Our discussion of impact speaks to the nature of the relationship between what CSO coalitions do and governments’ budget decisions and practices. The next section comments on how we understand this relationship and what sort of evidence we will use to investigate it.

4. Addressing the issue of causality and attribution

Our central objective of finding and weighing evidence about the impact that CSO budget work has on government budgets implies some link between the two. However, many researchers and impact evaluation specialists are cautious about causality claims because of the complexity of the social and governance environment and the variety of factors that might affect such a link. As House (quoted in Iverson 2003:62) says, “[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.”

Some observers conclude that this complexity makes it impossible to make any causal claims, however modest. However, while we want to take this complexity seriously, we do want to learn more about the nature of the relationship between CSO interventions and the changes in budgets that they seek to achieve.

Recent debates in the social sciences have emphasized how quantitative methodologies based on regression analysis of a large number of observations, or so-called Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), are best suited to testing causal hypotheses. Cook (quoted in Iverson 2003:45) says that RCTs had promised “unbiased, precise estimates of the causal consequences of programs.” However, the nature of our research does not easily lend itself to this kind of analysis. First, because of the small number and the specific nature of the existing cases of CSO budget work, and second, because of our interest in documenting complex contextual factors and in “process tracing.” We think that claims of impact can be strengthened if one can discuss and analyse the causal process that connects intervention and impact—not something that RCTs can provide. The Contribution Analysis approach that we describe below does however allow for the use of some elements of quantitative and RCT techniques, where appropriate.

Third, the kind of phenomena we investigate are not “randomisable”—the process of randomly allocating the interventions across the treatment groups—in any simple or acceptable way. For example, if an experiment compares a new drug against a standard drug, then the patients should be randomly assigned to either the group that receives the new drug or the one that gets the standard drug control. In the cases that we are investigating such assignment is not possible. As discussed above, we will take other measures to mitigate against the selection bias that randomization is designed to prevent (see Section 1).

We considered a number of approaches to dealing with causality and found Contribution Analysis to be best suited to our needs. Contribution Analysis’ point of departure is that in most cases of any complexity, there will never be absolute certainty about impact. The approach proposes a more modest


5 “The process tracing method attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable,” in George, A. and Bennett, A. (2004) Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, page 206. In our case, CSO campaigns are the main independent variable of interest, while government budget processes and policies are the dependent variable.

6 “[quantitative methods] do not typically shed any light on why a program worked or did not.” (HRDC quoted in Iverson 2003: 46).

goal of “reducing the uncertainty in our knowledge about the contribution of a program” (Mayne 1999:5). It does this by considering multiple sources of data and building a case where these data confirm one another. Contribution Analysis, therefore, aims for what Hendricks (quoted in Mayne 1999:7) calls “plausible association”—a situation where “a reasonable person, knowing what has occurred in the program and that the intended outcomes actually occurred, agrees that the program contributed to those outcomes.”

Largely following the Contribution Analysis approach, we plan to “reduce uncertainty” in these case studies in the following five ways.

4.1 Presenting and analyzing the logic of the campaigns

For our case studies, one of the first steps in reducing uncertainty about the contribution of the relevant CSO campaign to its specified outcomes is to describe and analyze the “program logic” or theory of change (ToC) of the campaign. The presentation and analysis of theories of change make two contributions to building a case for the impact of CSO budget work:

− First, they state publicly what these interventions seek to achieve at the outset. This protects against selection bias in the choice of case studies;
− Second, they appeal to the “common sense” of the outside observer by showing that the intended outcome has occurred (in cases where it has), and how it has occurred.

In order to make their underlying logic explicit, we identified the following elements, and the relationships between them, as the basis of each campaign’s program logic:

− The desired change in the budget process and policies;
− The list of actors or institutions within government (executive or legislature) who are involved in the decisions or practices that the campaign wishes to influence; and
− The activities that will be undertaken to influence the above people or institutions so that they do what the campaign wants.

We refer to graphic presentations of the relationships between these elements as the campaign’s theory of change (ToC) because it shows how the outputs and activities of the campaign are meant to lead to its intended outcomes (i.e., changes in budgets or budget process), and it brings to light the main assumptions and hypotheses that underpin each CSO campaign. Of course there will not be consensus on the credibility of all parts of a campaign’s theory of change. In such cases, the ToC has the further value of helping the research team isolate the specific links in the program logic that would need additional evidence to make them credible, if possible.

Each of the four campaigns have formulated a ToC 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 as envisioned in the ToCs. This will allow us to see whether organizations’ hypotheses of how they influence decision makers hold true or not, while at the same time documenting other intervening factors.

As the strategies of each campaign develops, the actions or target audiences in their ToC may change. If the targeted outcome remains stable, the case studies can continue to provide evidence toward the central hypothesis, despite any strategic changes in CSO campaigns. However, if the targeted outcome changes the ToC would need to be reformulated and the accompanying case study redesigned and started from scratch.

4.2 Collecting evidence about intermediate steps

Research teams will collect evidence on whether the intermediate steps in a ToC are occurring as planned. For example, if a campaign seeks to influence a legislative decision by targeting legislators, then its contact time with legislators and the number of information requests, invitations to hearings and other forms of feedback the campaign get from legislators should increase. In the same way, if an organization hopes to put pressure on government by generating adverse media coverage, the amount and nature of media coverage should increase. Additionally, there could be an increase the level of government response to such coverage.
Apart from providing evidence on intermediate steps in the ToC, such information also provides useful feedback to the relevant campaign, which is why the IBP has been working with each of the four campaigns to develop an indicator framework. The research teams will also use such data to investigate the credibility of the ToCs.

4.3 Using case study information to provide further credibility

The above methods will provide some useful information about impact but will not generate “hard” evidence. Therefore, in order to build a stronger case, we will collect further evidence in the form of case study information.

As indicated above, the nature of our research does not easily lend itself to quantitative analysis. For this reason we will place a heavy emphasis on case studies that will not only describe each of the campaigns and their outcomes in detail but also collect evidence through interviews, focus groups, and opinion surveys drawn from people who were involved in or observed the campaign closely (CSOs, parliamentarians, journalists, bureaucrats etc.). The logic is that if most observers agree that the campaign had an impact on bringing about the desired outcome, that would strengthen the credibility of impact claims.

Obviously the relationship that the relevant observers had with the campaign would have a major bearing on the value that can be attached to their opinions. This will compel the research teams to interview both people who were involved in the campaign as well as those who were close enough to the campaign to follow it, but removed enough to allow them some impartiality. This may mean, for example, that senior journalists are interviewed in addition to the political office bearer or CSO that was directly involved in the campaign. Obviously these choices depend on context and will differ for each of the case studies.

4.4 Tracking and comparing performance over time and location

The fourth source of evidence will be derived from investigating the correlation between the time or location of the relevant campaigns’ activities and the time and location of the outcomes. This may take various forms, including examining whether:

- Outcomes appeared after the campaign began and not before;
- Outcomes appeared only in the sector or location where the campaign occurred, not in others; and
- The biggest outcomes correlate in time or location with the biggest efforts of the campaign.

Each of these comparisons are between a time and place in which the campaign was active and a time and place in which it was not active or less intensely so. The latter situations can be used as a control situation to help isolate the impact of the campaigns. In order to use such comparisons, each case study also will identify the baseline from which the campaign starts. This will allow each comparison to isolate the extent and nature of the campaign that is meant to bring about the desired impact.

The regular contact that case study teams will have with these networks and coalitions will facilitate such comparisons. In two of the cases the research teams live in the same city as the relevant CSOs, in the other two cases they will have contact at least 4 times per year.

4.5 Taking account of other influences

CSOs are not the only agents for budget process and policy reforms. Therefore, in order to understand the specific impact of CSOs on such reforms, one should also document and analyse the contributions of others to these reforms. The drivers of budget reform, where they exist, will obviously vary across different contexts, but often include:

- Reform-minded politicians and bureaucrats (including those in legislatures and supreme audit institutions);
- Donors, through processes such as Public Expenditure Reviews, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and a variety of budget reform initiatives;
- Regional and international organizations, such as the European Union or the West African Economic and Monetary Union;
- International NGOs, such as Transparency International, Action Aid, and Oxfam; and
- The media in all its electronic and traditional forms.

These drivers of change do not operate in isolation of one another or CSO initiatives and often form an integral part of their campaigns. However, their specific role in budget process and policy reforms does need to be monitored and understood if the contribution of CSOs is to be isolated and understood. Thus identifying and tracking the contribution of non-CSO drivers of budget reforms will form an important part of the work of each of the case study teams.

By the same token there are a variety of actors, factors, and mechanisms that try to keep budgets closed, elite-oriented, etc. These are also context specific but often include many of the same actors listed above. In order to document and explain the impact of CSO campaigns such countervailing factors will also be documented in each of the case studies.

In the above ways each case study will provide a rich contextual analysis that will allow for a) ruling out certain possible alternative hypotheses, and b) accounting for existing interactions between CSO campaigns and other intervening factors/actors and investigating alternative hypotheses, etc.

We have listed some of the main methodological lines of the next round of case studies 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. While the methodologies of the four case studies will vary as a result of their different contexts and campaigns, all four will use these five broad kinds of evidence. In this way, they will contribute data that will test our central hypothesis.

5. Ensuring independence and rigor

A central objective of these case studies is that they provide robust evidence to verify or falsify the central hypothesis. In addition to the changes to our case study methodology described above, we also propose the following measures to ensure the maximum rigor in gathering and evaluating this evidence.

*External research teams*

A large number of the documents that record the impact of CSOs on government policies and budgets are written by people with a direct or indirect interest in the work of these organizations. These documents play an important role in disseminating the methodologies and strategies used by these groups to other organizations, and these rapporteurs also often have the advantage of a close working knowledge of CSO budget work. However, their “insider” status does mean that the evidence of CSO impact their work provides is sometimes viewed skeptically by outsiders. For this reason we have chosen research teams that have an established reputation for quality research but that are not directly involved in the relevant campaigns or organizations. The intention is to have an external research team lead the research, but to have them work closely with the relevant organization.

While not completely without interest in the outcome of these case studies, we believe that the caliber of researchers whom we have chosen and the nature of the contracts that we have with them will add to the credibility of the research results. Two examples of the research teams that we have chosen are:

- Peter Spink, who is professor and coordinator at the Centre for Studies in Public Management and Government Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-SP) in São Paulo. He also coordinates the Program on Public Management and Citizenship, supported by the Ford Foundation.
- John Kruger, a consultant with Oxford Policy Management who has more than 10 years’ experience in the South Africa Treasury, and Alta Folscher, a senior consultant with public expenditure consultants, Mokoro, who also has extensive CSO and journalism experience.

The contract between IBP and the research teams gives authors ownership of the final case study and complete intellectual independence. The contract only asks that the teams produce a professional, publishable study.
Peer review

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. The seniority of the research teams and the associated IBP staff will lend further rigor to this review. External experts will also be invited to these annual meetings.

At further points in the case study process, at a minimum at the studies’ completion, we will solicit extensive peer review of both the research process and the results of the research. We also expect case study authors to attempt to publish their work in peer-reviewed policy or social science journals, which will add another level of independent review.