I. Introduction

The ultimate objective of the Learning Program of the Partnership Initiative (PI) is to help achieve the outcomes identified in the IBP Theory of Change. The IBP and its partner organizations seek a range of social justice outcomes, including reduced poverty, improved health status and improved governance. These social justice outcomes are what we believe are necessary to achieve a better quality of life for poor citizens.

Areas of specialization may vary, but IBP partners agree that reforming budget processes and policies and the rules and institutions that frame them, will contribute to the realization of social and economic justice outcomes. By reforming budget processes, what we have in mind is the transformation of the budget-making process, so that it is more participatory and transparent. By reforming budget policies we mean increases in critical allocations, improvements in the expenditure of allocations, and better oversight to ensure that allocations reach the intended targets. In our theory of change, reforms in budget processes and policies and the related rules and institutions contribute to social and economic justice outcomes.

The real challenge, though, is to work from the left-hand side of the ToC diagram to the point where reforms are taking place in budget processes and policies (steps 1-5). Here we begin with the activities of the IBP and its partners. These activities include training and technical assistance, efforts to provide access to information, policy analysis, and public education, building civil society networks, advocacy and campaigns, working with the media and other partners, and raising funds for all these activities.

In our theory of change we believe that the IBP and its partners engage in activities that have both a direct impact on policy makers and an indirect impact because of our work with civil society. We argue that these activities build the capacity of our partners and our allies in civil society (step 2). These activities also create a better informed citizenry, and in this way foster greater citizen participation in governance. These empowered citizens and civil society organizations, in turn, are better able to influence the people who have the power to reform budget policies and processes (policy makers).

Through our work, and that of our allies, policy makers are also convinced directly to reform budget policies
and processes in ways that contribute to social justice outcomes (Step 3). The IBP is also exploring a more direct advocacy role in international debates and campaigns (step 4). We use the IBP theory of change here only to illustrate these points. Each of the PI partners has been developing their own theory of change and the partners’ learning agendas will be situated within their own theories of change.

The overarching goal of the Partnership Initiative is to enable a substantial increase in the effective impact of budget work on citizen’s lives through budgetary analysis and advocacy. In order to improve the rate at which the activities of the IBP and its partners translate into the social justice outcomes that we seek, we need to learn more about each of the intermediate steps of the Theory of Change. Some examples of the questions that we want to learn more about include:

- What are the most effective ways to build civil society budget advocacy and analysis capacity?
- Which advocacy techniques are most influential with policy makers?
- What kinds of comparative budget research are needed to influence international debates and campaigns?

This document will only focus on the learning activities of the PI and its work with coalitions of organizations in 10-15 countries. The PI is however at the core of the IBP and the benefits of the Learning Program will spill over into the broader activities and strategy of the IBP.

II. The Purposes, Audiences and Attributes of the Learning Program

The Learning Program of the PI will help the IBP achieve its ultimate outcomes in three main ways.

First, PI partners will undertake self-assessments which seek to document the impact of each organization’s work. This approach addresses the need to monitor how effective they are and to make ‘mid-stream’ adjustments to their advocacy and analysis where necessary. The Learning Program will therefore support PI partners to put in place self-monitoring systems that give feedback on progress towards their advocacy goals.

Second, the IBP Secretariat will develop a program to learn from and assess the impact of its own activities. This could include incorporating lessons from partners’ work into training and mentoring activities as well as assessing the impact of activities implemented by the IBP such as training programs, technical assistance and the management of research projects.

Third, rigorous, objective studies conducted by external researchers will document the impact of larger campaigns and coalitions in which PI partner organizations take part. The target of these campaigns may be, for example, the reform of a particular budget policy or an increase in a particular budget allocation. In these examples, the PI partner may not be the only organization active in the campaign and it may not even be the most important active organization. The goal of the research is to document what budget analysis and advocacy can add to broader campaigns for social change. This will allow PI partner organizations to learn more about when, why and how certain kinds of CSO budget work succeeds or fails.

This work is envisioned as a series of case studies and other interventions that will build knowledge about when and how civil society budget work has an impact. It is expected that these case studies will not only help CSOs already doing budget work, but also new entrants into this kind of work. In this way the Learning Program will allow existing organizations to have a broader impact and it will increase the number of CSOs engaged in budget analysis and advocacy. It could also assist donors and others in the field to provide more effective support to CSOs.

Fourth, a limited number of cross-national, comparative research projects will be implemented. The subject matter of the research will most likely be national policy and budget trends, institutions or practices, but the
methodology will be comparative. This approach is useful when international findings can reinforce national campaigns or when comparative findings can contribute to international advocacy. To illustrate, there are an increasing number of countries where members of national legislatures are allocating funds for local development projects. By law, many of these local funds are controlled by the legislator for an individual district and the funds are known as Constituency Development Funds. If an international comparative research project is able to demonstrate that these funds are almost uniformly captured by local elites, then the findings may make a valuable contribution to an international campaign against this type of devolved fund.

The proposed activities of the PI Learning Program described above can thus be grouped into four components:

- Self-monitoring systems to ensure progress towards organizational goals.
- The IBP Secretariat’s learning activities.
- Objective, rigorous case studies of civil society campaigns.
- Cross-national, comparative research that contributes to either national or international advocacy strategies.

III Components of the Learning Program

Component 1: Self-monitoring mechanisms

The IBP has been working with the first 6 PI partners to formulate plausible stories or ‘theories of change’ (ToCs) for the work that they are planning for the next 3-5 years. Being able to formulate a realistic story or theory and targeting interventions to realize these stories is however only the first step in the process. The fluid nature of the policy environment means that these stories and the requisite interventions need to be adjusted regularly.

In order to make the adjustments, each organization will need access to regular information about the impact of its budget research and advocacy. When the information gathered suggests that the organization is not reaching its objective, then it is time to change the ToC. Enabling PI partners to obtain such information about their ToC and adjust their advocacy strategies accordingly, is the objective of this component of the Learning Program.

What kinds of indicators?

The budget work of PI groups is aimed at progressive societal changes such as poverty reduction or improved health status. They endeavor to bring these changes about through changes in the budget process or budget policy of their country. As the PI partners begin to think about their theory of change and how to monitor the impact of their work, they typically find that they need to convey a coherent message to policy makers, that the policy makers must then make the desired change in budget allocations or policies, and that finally, the reforms must contribute to achieving some concrete improvement in the material conditions of poor people.

Changes in budget processes and policies often take 3-5 years. Broader social changes take even longer. All of these changes depend on a large number of environmental factors that lie beyond the immediate control of civil society groups. For these reasons indicators of change in these two areas (societal change and reforms in budget processes) may be useful but are not the best means of calibrating strategy for most organizations. Our PI partners find that they need to adjust their strategies far more regularly and therefore need more fine-grained indicators.

For example, HakiElimu seeks to bring about quality education by reducing under-spending. In pursuit of
this goal, HakiElimu works through the media to reach policy makers. In their case changes in the quality of education and reductions in under-spending would take a year or more to measure and would depend on a number of factors beyond their control. HakiElimu can obtain much more immediate feedback by checking whether the media is reporting on the stories produced by HakiElimu and its partners; whether their primary audience is in fact exposed to these media reports, and how the policy makers respond.

Admittedly such ‘intermediate’ indicators are not sure indicators of whether the sought after change will come about as a result of the advocacy work done by civil society. These indicators do however give regular feedback on whether some vital links in Haki’s theory of change are in fact working in the way that they are assumed to work. So these indicators can tell you whether the media are reporting on the material given to them, whether decision-makers are reading these reports and how they are responding to them.

Primary audiences for the research

This research will be carried out by the PI partners and these organizations will be the primary users of the information generated. A secondary audience will be the IBP staff members who work on training programs and provide technical assistance to CSOs around the world.

The next 6 months

The immediate next steps post October 2008 are for the majority of the first 6 PI partners to start collecting information based on their identified indicators of impact. At the March 2009 partners meeting, data for 3-4 months would have been collected. We hope that this will provide sufficient raw material for a reflection on whether the chosen indicators are useful, how resource intensive the task is and how this data may be used to recalibrate theories of change. In the period between October 2008 and March 2009, the IBP will also continue to work with new PI groups to define their ToCs and associated indicators of impact.

As the number of groups increase, we hope to develop some guides and ‘How to notes’ that will facilitate the entry of new groups. More importantly as the number of PI partners increases, it should allow sub-sets to emerge among the organizations that monitor their own work in this way. Working together these organizations should be able to build a peer network and to share experiences and lessons learnt. A number of non-PI groups and other organizations have expressed an interest in this methodology. Over time we may consider putting in place mechanisms (seminars, blogs and exchange programs) to support this emerging network.

What could go wrong?

Developing these 'self-monitoring' instruments has been a long process of trial and error. Arriving at the point where the first 6 partners can start monitoring some feedback information will however give significant momentum to the process. At the March 2009 partners meeting, PI groups will get the opportunity to reflect on their experience to date. This reflection will serve the dual process of further refining their self-monitoring as well as introducing the next group of PI partners to this area of work.

As discussed at the first Reference Group meeting, the two main risks with this first component are that PI partners may not have the capacity to collect the information needed to engage in self-assessment, or the organizations may not be flexible enough to incorporate the research findings into revised work plans. Because of the potential capacity constraints in self-monitoring we have in most cases worked towards a very limited number of indicators. Most organizations will monitor fewer than five indicators. While such a small number of indicators can be very constraining, they have been chosen to give an indication of the accuracy of key parts of the relevant organisation’s story. Thus, the indicators may not explain everything about the
theory of change, but they can tell organizations something about the most important parts of their ToC.

The second area of risk is that groups may not be able to use the information collected to adjust and develop strategy. The annual PI partners meeting can be used to facilitate such reflection, but this process needs to be taken further at the level of each organization. Some of the PI partners such as HakiElimu have developed their own mechanisms for digesting information produced by their monitoring and evaluation framework. Some of these mechanisms will also be presented and discussed at the March partners meeting.

Component 2: The IBP Secretariat’s learning activities.

The IBP aspires to become a learning organization, and there are also many lessons that must be learned in the process of implementing the Partnership Initiative. Some of this work will entail measuring the impact of activities and products generated by the IBP. Examples would include efforts to assess the impact of IBP publications or to track participants in training programs as they return to their place of work to see the degree to which they use new skills acquired through training. However, project level learning also includes efforts to assess how well the international network of Partners is working, or what must be done to raise the profile of international advocacy work. The Partnership Initiative will also be fostering new approaches such as South-South mentoring and it will be important to document lessons learnt and to integrate the lessons into future IBP and PI activities.

These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list, they are rather indicative of the range of learning activities we have in mind. This component is in the process of being developed and will form a central part of our December strategic planning event.

Component 3: Documenting broader campaigns for reform.

Over the last few years, we have started to focus more carefully on documenting the impact of our work and drawing the appropriate lessons from our experience. The first results of this new focus are the case studies of six of the core members of the network. As useful as these case studies have been, though, the research tells us very little about broader coalitions of CSOs that may be working for social reform or how social movements can be strengthened through the use of budget analysis and advocacy.

We will seek to remedy this problem in future case study research by using a more varied set of units of analysis. For example, in cases where budget groups are part of broad civil society coalitions seeking reforms in policy and budget allocations for critical social safety nets, the unit of analysis will be the country campaign and the goal will be to document how budget groups can best work in broader advocacy campaigns. Or, in a real-world example drawn from Brazil, we will work with research specialists and with IBASE to explore the way in which IBASE contributes to a campaign to make the national development bank more socially accountable and more transparent.

Even as we focus more attention on the campaign or social movement as a unit of analysis, the concern we have for the impact of our partners will not disappear. We expect that the case studies will generate much helpful data about how partners’ budget analysis and advocacy has been received and the kind of contribution the partners are making to broad patterns of social reform.

For the first series of this new kind of case studies we intend to continue using a methodology that looks at

1 The six organizations studied were DISHA (India), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the Institute for Public Finance (Croatia), Fundar (Mexico), the Uganda Debt Network, and Ibase in Brazil.
partners’ work and its impact in the broad environment in which it is conducted. The intention is to have a researcher from outside of the relevant organizations lead the research, but to have them work closely with the organization. We also intend to link the self-monitoring work done by organizations in component 1 very closely to these case studies. While the information gathered from the self-monitoring indicators will not be sufficient for the case studies, they should be an integral part of it.

These case studies will also run for a longer period than the first set. They will track the development of PI partners’ research work and potentially continue for the 3-5 years that it may take for partners advocacy work to come to fruition.

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

Primary audiences for the research

The research findings will be used by several audiences. The PI partner organizations will use the findings to assess their own contribution to campaigns. The case studies will have the potential to make a significant contribution to the literature which discusses how civil society may best engage with government in the pursuit of social reform. Academics interested in civil society, citizen participation and democratization should also benefit from these case studies. Finally, the case studies may benefit donors thinking about how to conceptualize strategies that promote social reform.

The next 6 months

The first step in the development of this third component of the PI Learning Program is to draft the ToRs for the first series of case studies and to identify researchers to lead each of these. Draft ToRs will be discussed and finalized at a methodology workshop planned for February 2009. These case studies will be launched shortly after that. More case studies will be identified and added to the program as more PI partners join and results from the first case studies become known.

Over time we will plan events and publications to share and distribute the findings of this research. The findings will also be distributed through the IBP’s existing channels such as the Open Budget Blog, IBP Briefs and the Newsletter.

Component 4: Supporting civil society advocacy campaigns through cross-national research

While the country is the strategic focus of PI and our partners, we realize that many international actors have an impact on what happens inside the countries where PI is being implemented. We also understand that international debates and broader dialogues around development policy shape the environment in which we all work. Component 4 seeks to generate research findings that will have an impact on these international actors and help to shape the nature of international debates about the role of civil society in good governance and poverty alleviation.

To illustrate, there is a growing consensus about the value of decentralization in ensuring government accountability. Yet, in two cases (Tanzania and Mexico), PI partners have found that in practice programs of decentralization have led to less accountability because local officials have not recognizing the right of citizens and CSOs to participate in local governance and because weak elected representatives lack the capacity to administer effectively. The fragmentation of fiscal flows and documentation that results from
decentralization has also challenged already poor financial management systems and resulted in less transparency. We remain convinced of the potential of decentralization to lead to greater citizen participation, more effective planning and more responsive use of scarce development funds. Research on the conditions under which decentralization can have positive outcomes could therefore be a very useful contribution to the decentralization debate.

Another way to examine this issue is to explore how the decisions of international actors may have a direct impact on the countries in which PI partners work. The impact of policy recommendations and conditionalities of donors and technical assistance is well documented in this regard. In these cases, PI partners obviously have an interest in influencing these decisions and debates directly and to try to convince these international actors to do the right thing. One example is debates around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) that impact on the development targets that are pursued in developing countries. Recent research in Tanzania has found, for example, that the quantitative nature of the education MDG has reduced the quality of education provided in Tanzania.

Another example can be found in many oil-producing African countries where the World Bank and other infrastructure investors insist that a portion of oil revenues be earmarked for development spending in oil producing regions. IBP partners have however found that this mechanism has resulted in extensive corruption and has not generated the local participation and empowerment that was intended.

For the above reasons, PI partners have expressed an interest in ‘internationalizing’ aspects of their research and advocacy. At the first partners meeting in March this year a number of partners also expressed a need for partners to work together more closely and support each other in influencing international debates and policy makers.

The PI Learning Program will thus collaborate with partners on comparative, cross-national research projects that generate findings that will allow partners to participate in relevant development debates and support advocacy by PI partners and others that target the decisions of international actors. The main criteria for choosing such projects will be that it have a comparative dimension as described above and that it has close links to the advocacy objectives of more than one of our partners. As was mentioned above, this work will not be designed to replace the research done by partners in their countries. The intention is rather to supplement their work through cross-national research that contributes findings relevant for international debates and campaigns.

Where necessary we will draw on policy experts and practitioners to conduct this research. Given the health bias of the PI, these experts and the resultant research will include substantial work in health related themes. As was the case with the other two components, we will organize the meetings and dissemination events to ensure that these research findings are thoroughly communicated and reviewed. This may include attending conferences and meetings organized by other organizations and publishing more broadly in journals.

**Primary audiences for the research**

This research will strengthen the advocacy campaigns of partners within individual countries because it will bring to the table cross-national findings. The research will also amplify the voice of the network in international debates. Further, we expect that other stakeholders, whether they be international civil society organizations, or staff members at international donors, or the international financial institutions will find the results of this research both useful and interesting.

**The next 6 months**
The next step in activating this component of the PI Learning Program is to identify 1 or 2 appropriate research projects in consultation with PI partners. This will be done in the period after October 2008 and finalized at the partners meeting in March 2009.