

Budget Monitoring as an Advocacy Tool
Uganda Debt Network Case Study
Paolo de Renzio, Vitus Azeem, Vivek Ramkumar
Executive Summary

The Uganda Debt Network is an NGO that uses a combination of research and advocacy to undertake campaigns aimed at improving governance and reducing poverty in Uganda. The organization's mission reflects this commitment: "To advocate for reduced and sustainable debt levels, accountability, and effective use of national resources for the benefit of all the people of Uganda." UDN originated in 1996 as a coalition of advocacy and lobbying organizations to coordinate the Uganda campaign for debt relief of extremely poor countries. Using the community networks and growing membership it established during the debt campaign, UDN has subsequently built a strong reputation for linking local budget monitoring activities with national-level policy processes. UDN membership now tops 100 organizations and the organization employs approximately 16 research staffers.

UDN's budget work is focused on monitoring budget implementation at local levels of government (35 sub-counties in 7 districts) sub-district levels in Uganda and building general awareness of budget issues throughout the country. The organization produces a number of publications that are widely disseminated to policy-makers and citizens, such as an accessible insert in a national newspaper that goes to 40,000 households. UDN strives to provide national-level visibility to the results of the work of the community monitoring committees it initiated in 2002—groups of citizens trained to track problems in the implementation of development projects at local levels. The community monitors report problematic cases to the local authorities to ensure appropriate action and resource allocations in line with budget provisions. Using this methodology, UDN has successfully brought the monitors' findings to national authorities for redress.

UDN's impact emerges in the coordinating role it plays in providing civil society inputs to the government in a number of policy areas. The organization's wide web of relationships across all stakeholders has allowed it to utilize different channels to lobby and exercise pressure on certain issues, particularly corruption and health and education spending. Observers have commended the quality and timeliness of UDN's policy analysis and socioeconomic research; and the credible nature of UDN's policy claims stemming from its collection and publication of solid, reliable evidence and information.

Through the monitors' findings, UDN has helped to improve the quality of government expenditure and service delivery spending. UDN's campaigns have, for example, eliminated shortages in medicines from some rural hospitals, led to improvements in the quality of school building materials, and lowered teacher absenteeism. In many cases, UDN's monitoring has also identified and reduced corruption.

UDN's experiences have many lessons for budget groups. In particular, the organization's ability to create a niche for itself using local-level checks to gain access to influence national policy is an important lesson for other organizations working in corruption-prone countries attempting to improve service delivery and decentralization simultaneously. The major challenges facing UDN currently are both internal and external. Internally, UDN is working through options for training and replacing the pioneering leadership that founded the organization; while externally the organization is threatened by a bill currently before parliament to restrict the rights of NGOs in Uganda.