



Turning children's **rights** into children's **realities**

Why open, inclusive and accountable budgets are important for children

"Today's investment in children is tomorrow's peace, stability, security, democracy and sustainable development"
- Declaration and Plan of Action of Africa Fit for Children 2001

▶ 1. Introduction

Children constitute over 30% of the world's population. Effective public policy and service delivery are essential to realize their rights. Budget systems that are transparent, open to public engagement and scrutiny, and that have robust oversight institutions help to ensure that governments manage public funds destined for children effectively and equitably.

This document discusses why open, inclusive and accountable budgets are important for the sustainable realization of children's rights. It starts by discussing the relationship between governance, children's rights and open budgets as well as the relevance of budget transparency and participation for the realization of children's rights. It then draws attention to new research on budget transparency and participation that was conducted in relation to key child nutrition interventions in five African countries. The document concludes by outlining recommendations to governments on how budget transparency, participation and accountability can be improved and how civil society and other actors, including children themselves, can contribute to this.

▶ 2. Governance, children's rights and open budgets

Since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted in 1989, governments have made important progress in realizing children's rights. Many more children go to school, access health care services and have escaped the traps of poverty. Despite these significant achievements, 18,000 children under five still die every day from preventable diseases. Around 120 million children either never make it to school or drop out of school before their fourth year.¹ One of the biggest barriers to realizing the rights of these children is the lack of sufficient allocation and efficient use of public resources.

¹ Save the Children (2012), UNICEF (2012) *Committing to Child Survival: A promise renewed* and UNESCO (2012) *Youth and Skills: Putting education to work*, EFA, *Global Monitoring Report, in Ending Poverty in Our Generation – Save the Children's vision for a post-2015 framework*

Article 4 requires the States Parties to the UNCRC to 'undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures', including resource allocation to realize child rights. Without access to budget information, it is difficult for the public to meaningfully participate in public spending decisions and to hold governments accountable. Lack of transparency, participation and accountability often fertilises corruption and leakages shrinking resources available for governments to spend on children.

Citizens, including children, want their governments to be honest, accountable, and responsive to their needs. The My World Survey, which so far has been completed by more than 1.1 million people from 194 countries, asks respondents to rank a list of 16 priorities based on their own and their families' priorities. 'An honest and responsive government' ranks fourth out of 16 across the world².

Recent research from Save the Children also shows that certain dimensions of poverty could be eradicated by 2030 if governments address income inequality and improve governance. For example, improvements in access to and utilization of services and opportunities that could be brought about by reducing inequality and improving voice and accountability could save 1.8 million lives, and bring global average mortality down to around 20 deaths per 1,000 live births.³



Illustration: Policy Forum, Tanzania

▶ 3. What is the relevance of budget transparency and participation for children?

There is a growing global consensus that the best way to manage public funds effectively and equitably is through budget systems that are transparent, open to public engagement and scrutiny, and that have robust oversight institutions and mechanisms. Over the past decade, civil society organizations around the world have begun to analyze government budgets and the impact of these budgets on social programs. Their efforts have often been hampered by limited access to budget information and few opportunities to participate in government budget decision making. Nevertheless, civil society organizations have participated in budget-related decision-making processes and used data available in the public domain to analyze budgets; in some cases, they have successfully used the resulting evidence to advocate for improvements in government programmes. A few examples of such successes are listed below.

- In Tanzania, Save the Children has supported children to establish over 900 Children's Councils in seven districts. More than 25,000 children come together to learn about their rights and influence national and local decision-makers. In preparation for the 2011/2012 budget, these children met with district officials to present their budget priorities. Their participation helped to increase budget allocations to programmes that enabled 455,000 pupils in Arusha and Same districts to benefit from school feeding programmes. 576 children in Same district benefitted from the construction of 15

2. <http://www.myworld2015.org/?page=results>, accessed on 30 September 2013

3. Save the Children (2013), *Getting to Zero – How we can be the generation that ends poverty*

hostels enabling them to attend secondary education. In Ruangwa district 1,750 girls and 2,600 boys enjoy better quality of education thanks to the recruitment of 52 additional teachers.⁴

- In 2007, the Dutch government stopped funding a major school feeding program in Ghana after suspicions that the program suffered from corruption were confirmed by a financial audit. Soon after the financial audit report was published, a Ghanaian civil society organization, SEND, began its own investigation and published a series of reports on weak governance of the school feeding program. SEND's reports pointed to deficiencies in the program, specifically in the provision of potable water, sanitation facilities, and hygienic food in schools and in faulty procurement procedures that prevented the purchase of foodstuffs from local markets (a secondary goal of the program). Responding to the public debate that resulted from the release of the financial audit report and the SEND reports, the Ghanaian government implemented major reforms in its school feeding program that mitigated many of the deficiencies that had been identified.⁵
- In Nicaragua, Save the Children has supported the establishment of the Network of Municipal Governments Friends of Children. 81% of the municipalities in the country are part of this network. Children engage with these municipalities to develop and resource different child policies based on their own analysis of available information. Their participation has helped to bring about an average 92% increase in municipal investment in children, including in education and recreation, over the last eight years.⁶
- The Legal Resources Centre (LRC) is a South African non-profit human rights organization that conducts public interest litigation. In response to the South African government's delay in replacing 'mud schools' with more permanent structures in the Eastern Cape Province, the LRC together with the Centre for Child Law assisted seven 'mud schools' to take the government to court in 2010. It used evidence generated by the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), a civil society organization that specializes in budget analysis, to show that the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education had underspent its infrastructure budget. This evidence was useful for countering claims by the department that they did not have money to replace the 'mud schools'. As a result of the mounting legal pressures, in 2011 the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education signed an agreement to improve school infrastructure in the province.⁷

The successes of these organizations illustrate the importance of greater openness in government budget systems. Yet, according to the latest Open Budget Survey published in January 2013, the state of budget transparency and accountability around the world is generally dismal. Only a minority of the 100 governments in the Open Budget Survey publish significant budget information. Fewer still provide appropriate mechanisms for public participation, and independent oversight institutions frequently lack appropriate resources and leverage. Multiple rounds of the Open Budget Survey show that a large number of countries have made no efforts, or made only minimal ones, to open their budget systems, thus they continue to provide insufficient information for civil society and citizens to understand or engage in budgeting public resources. Some countries are even headed in the wrong direction; their systems have become more closed.⁸

But what does it mean for a government to be open with its budget? A typical government budget cycle includes four stages: budget planning, approval, implementation, and evaluation. At each of these stages, governments produce budget documents about their plans, how they are implementing those plans, and the results. According to international good practices, governments should produce eight key budget documents during their annual budget cycle. These include budget plans, execution reports, and audit reports. Some of these documents should provide comprehensive information on how revenues will be collected and resources will be allocated among various ministries and programs. Others should contain information on whether the intended spending and revenue collection plans have been realized or not, and - if not - what the discrepancies are and why.

This information is necessary to track what governments are doing with the public's money. Transparency facilitates meaningful public participation in decision making (where mechanisms for this are in place). It strengthens oversight and limits the opportunities for governments to hide wasteful and corrupt spending, which ultimately reduce the resources available to fight poverty. Transparency can also assist in promoting support for the most vulnerable parts of the population, including children. When members of the public have regular access to timely, comprehensive, and understandable budget information, they can monitor the success (or failure) of specific programs and activities in any sector that affects their lives.

To facilitate meaningful public participation in the budget formulation and decision-making process, the public should have access to budget information at all levels of government, including at sub-national level where public services to children are often delivered. It would also be important that the information is provided in simplified formats and different languages to cater for the needs of different segments of the population. A man or a woman with limited literacy skills or a child might need access to

4. Save the Children (2013), *Impact on Child Rights Governance*

5. More information on SEND's work can be accessed at <http://internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/Long-Final-SEND-case-study-English.pdf>

6. Save the Children (2013) *CRGI Annual report 2012 – Improving good governance for children globally*

7. More information on the work of the LRC can be accessed at <http://internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/LP-case-study-LRC.pdf>

8. International Budget Partnership (2013), *Open Budget Survey 2012* (<http://internationalbudget.org/what-we-do/open-budget-survey/>)

budget information in a different format compared to a civil society organization conducting regular budget analysis. Production of a Citizens Budget with simplified information about the annual budget, or any other budget document, would be an important first step in this process.

Children often remain invisible in the debates and decisions on allocation of public resources and have limited opportunities to participate in the different stages of the budget cycle. Yet, children know their own situation best. As illustrated by the examples above from Tanzania and Nicaragua, involving children in the budget process, and helping them access child friendly information, can assist governments to design more accurate and relevant interventions for children and allocate resources for its most effective use.

▶ 4. Evidence from a study on Budget Transparency and Child Nutrition

A recent study on Budget Transparency and Child Nutrition (BTCN) revealed the degree of budget transparency and public participation in relation to key child nutrition interventions in Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The project was developed by the Accountability and Transparency for Human Rights Foundation and implemented with the assistance of universities and civil society organizations in the five countries⁹ as well as the International Budget Partnership and Save the Children.

More detailed information about the research can be found in the research report “*Budget Transparency and Child Nutrition – Research findings from Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe*” (http://at4hr.org/BTCN_Study.html). A methodology guide - *Conducting a survey on budget transparency and human rights* - has also been developed to assist governments, universities, civil society organizations and others to replicate the research in other countries. The guide can also be used to conduct research on budget transparency and participation focusing on another child rights issue, such as education or health, or another development sector (http://at4hr.org/BTCR_Guide.html).

4.1 What are some of the general findings from the BTCN research?

Both the cross-country and country specific research findings points to good practices in budgeting for child nutrition, which governments could build on. They also point to specific challenges and weaknesses that governments need to address in order to improve the public's, including children's, access to budget information. Such improvements would enable more informed public participation in decision-making around child nutrition and increase the public's ability to hold their governments accountable at national and sub-national levels.

The BTCN research identified the following cross-country findings:

- Citizens who want to know what their governments are doing to combat child malnutrition can obtain a fair amount of information about their government's intentions and plans. However, they will have a much harder time trying to track whether and how those plans were put into practice.
- Looking at the national level, the average cross-country score when it came to information about policy and planning for child nutrition was 46 (out of an ideal 100). The information most often lacking included data on the distribution of child malnutrition, the sources of revenue to finance child nutrition interventions, the detailed costing of policies and narrative explanations of budget allocations.
- The average cross-country score for transparency about the implementation of child nutrition interventions was a dismal 29 (out of an ideal of 100). Very little information was available on the roll-out of child nutrition interventions, including whether service delivery targets were met or not, or whether targeted beneficiaries had been reached.
- Access to actual expenditure information about child nutrition interventions was very poor in most of the countries.
- The lowest scoring indicator was the one concerned with public participation, including opportunities for children's own involvement, in governments' child nutrition decisions.

4.2. What positive practices emerged from the BTCN research?

The research in the five African countries also pointed towards some positive practices that these countries could build on to strengthen budget transparency and participation, including the following:

- Kenya fared well in providing public access to information about the government's planned expenditures on child nutrition interventions – for the budget year and at least one year beyond. The government also did well in providing information about its service delivery targets in relation to child nutrition, at both the national and sub-national levels.

9. Researchers from Children's Legal Action Network (CLAN) in Kenya; Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) in South Africa; Uganda Debt Network (UDN); Department of Economics at the University of Zambia and the Zambia Civic Education Association (ZCEA); and the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) in Zimbabwe contributed to the research.

- South Africa's budget documents provided extensive details on the sources of revenue that would be used to finance child nutrition interventions. South Africa was the only country in the study that could provide access to audited expenditure information less than two years after spending took place.
- Uganda's budget documents at the national level revealed attempts to cost some of its child nutrition interventions. Information also existed in the public domain about the government's service delivery targets in relation to child nutrition. At the national level, reporting documents compared results achieved against the delivery targets that were set.
- Zambia's documents reflected some consideration of co-ordinated planning, budgeting and service delivery to advance child nutrition. In Chingola district, some fairly detailed actual expenditure information could be accessed more often than on a yearly basis. Comparisons were also provided in that district between planned and actual expenditures.
- Zimbabwe fared well in providing public information about the intended beneficiaries of its child nutrition interventions, including the targeting of vulnerable children. There was also a fair amount of transparency around the role of development aid in financing child nutrition interventions.

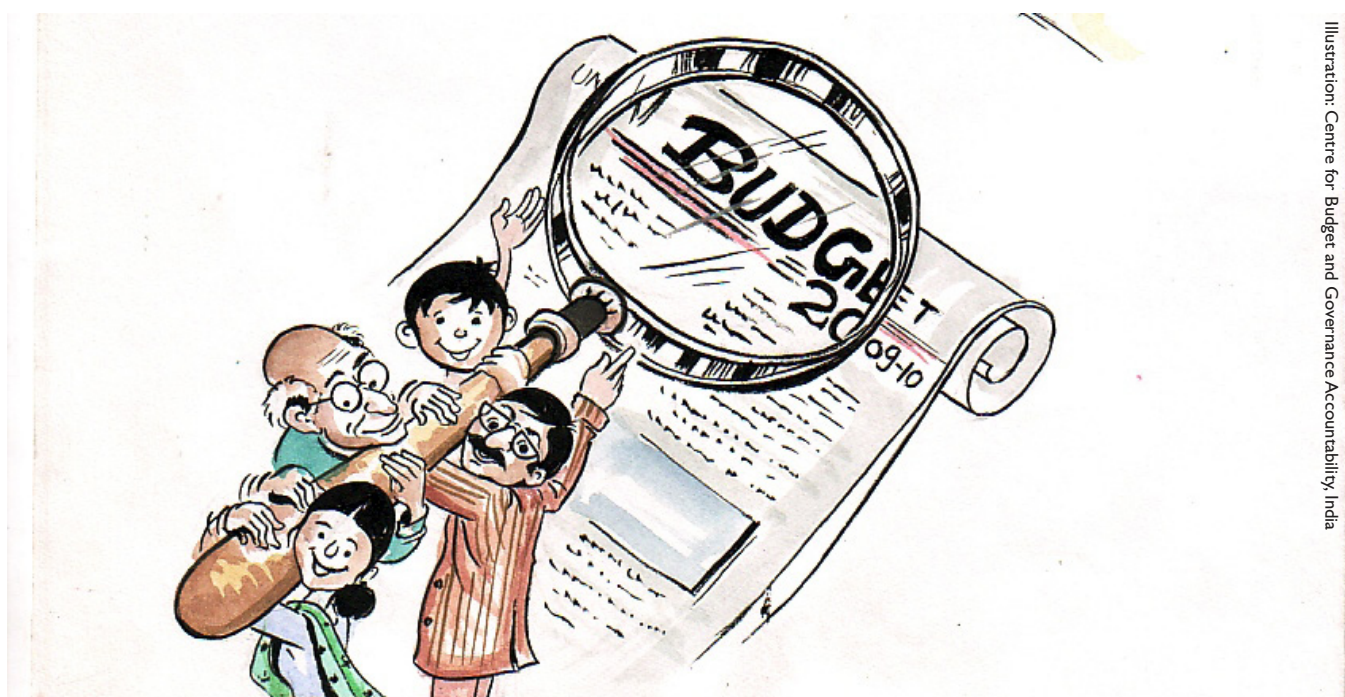


Illustration: Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, India

► 5. Conclusions and recommendations for the way forward

Transparent public budget systems that are open to public engagement and scrutiny, and that have robust oversight institutions and mechanisms, are crucial to ensure better outcomes in public spending and service delivery to children. At the same time the Open Budget Survey 2012 as well as the research on Budget Transparency and Child Nutrition in Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe show that governments need to address a number of challenges and weaknesses to make their budget systems more open and participatory to provide opportunities for engagement and accountability.

As a starting point **governments should make publicly available key budget documents** – the pre-budget statement, the executive budget proposal, the enacted budget, in-year reports, a mid-year review, a year-end report and an audit report from the supreme audit institution – during their annual budget cycle in a timely manner¹⁰. Governments that already publish key budget documents should focus on increasing their timeliness and comprehensiveness, in particular focusing on the documents mentioned above. They should also consider some of the specific recommendations emanating from the BTCN research. Even if these recommendations are related to child nutrition interventions, they could also be considered for other interventions. The recommendations include the following:

- Governments should publish more detailed information on the geographical spread of children at risk of malnutrition, as well as on the geographical allocation of resources, to ensure that adequate funds are disbursed to the parts of the country with the greatest need.

10. More information and good practices can be found in the Guide to Transparency in Government Budget Reports: Why are budget reports important and what should they include, International Budget Partnership <http://internationalbudget.org/publications/guide-to-transparency-in-government-budget-reports-why-are-budget-reports-important-and-what-should-they-include/>

- Governments should publish information on planned spending on child nutrition over multiple budget years (i.e. beyond the upcoming budget year), including narratives to explain and contextualize budget figures - this would give a better picture of the time span of programme funding, and the actual commitment for its implementation.
- Governments should provide adequate information on actual expenditures on child nutrition, actual service delivery data, and a comparison between planned and actual spending and performance. Quantitative information should be complemented by a narrative illustrating the discrepancies between planned and actuals and explaining the reasons for them.

To ensure that the **public can engage in the budget process**, the right to participation should be obligated under law or policy and occur throughout the budget process with all parts of the government. The purpose of public engagement should be publicized in advance, appropriate forums should be used for public engagement and the public should be provided with feedback on their inputs. Governments should publish a Citizens Budget with simplified information about the annual budget, or any other budget document, to facilitate the public's understanding of, and engagement with, the governments' plans and actions during the budget year.

The **legislature plays a critical role** in the management of public finances and should be involved in the budget process prior to the submission of the executive's budget proposal, have access to research and analytic capacity, have amendment powers and sufficient time to discuss amendments as well as powers to approve shifts of funds during budget implementation, supplemental budgets and contingency funds.

In addition to the legislature, the **Supreme Audit Institution** is another oversight institution that should be established and/or empowered as an independent body to scrutinize the use of public funds. Governments should submit timely annual accounts to this institution. And the Supreme Audit Institution should play its part in making its audit reports public much sooner after spending has taken place.

To facilitate for **children to participate in the budget process**, governments should also develop child-friendly information about the budget that could be distributed in schools and communities and published on the internet and in social media. When organising public hearings and other events to discuss the budget, governments and the legislature should make sure that the events also cater for children's specific needs.

For its part, **civil society has an important role to play** at international, regional, national and local levels to demand greater openness from their governments as well as formal spaces for public participation during the budget process. With public access to budget information, civil society can facilitate for adults and children to use public spaces for participation to inform the budget process and to hold governments accountable for their decisions. However, a pre-condition for civil society to play an active role in demanding greater transparency and accountability is legal and political space for the free and independent operation of civil society.

Finally, the **post-2015 development framework** that will replace the MDGs, and the stakeholders involved in it, will play an important role in realizing children's rights. A stand-alone goal to advance open, inclusive and accountable governance within the post-2015 framework would contribute to sustainably improve the lives of children in both rich and poor countries.

For more information

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