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Indonesia – A Civil Society Budget “Movement”? By Debbie Budlender, Community Agency for Social Enquiry, Cape Town and Hana A. Satriyo, The Asia Foundation Indonesia

Why We Say that Indonesia has a “Movement”

The emergence of budget organizations in Indonesia occurred around the “reformasi,” or democratic reform era that began in 1998, when the popular movement led by students and non-governmental organizations ended the 32 years of Soeharto’s rule. Over 100 organizations across Indonesia are now reported to be doing budget-related work.

Indonesia is unusual among the countries with which IBP has contact in the sheer number of organizations that engage in budget work in the country. What is also perhaps unusual is that very few of these organizations focus only on budget work. The vast majority of the organizations do budget work because they perceive that it can strengthen the other activities in which they are involved.

While we must be cautious of generalizations—especially in a country as large and diverse as Indonesia—the Indonesian organizations that do budget work also tend to be more grassroots-based, and more activist than in many other countries. Many, for example, would have “members” rather than, or alongside, “staff.”

Indonesia’s civil society budget work is being done by organizations that have been formed to take advantage of and strengthen the new opportunities offered by the political change. Many of the members and leaders of the organizations have their background in the student movement, which—as in many other countries—was a key actor in the political change.

Civil society budget work in Indonesia has been concentrated at the local rather than central level. This reflects both the perception that change is more likely to happen at this level and these organizations’ taking advantage of the opportunities provided by what is one of the most rapid and far-reaching decentralization processes to have occurred worldwide. The focus on the local means, in turn, that the budget work is not concentrated in the capital, Jakarta. Instead, it is found in cities and towns across the country.

The issues addressed by the organizations in their budget work differ widely, as is appropriate given the locally-based, bottom-up approach. However, most of the organizations would describe themselves as having a pro-poor and gender-sensitive approach, and the types of issues they take up, as well as their mode of operation, reflect this. A common theme across many organizations has been the focus on corruption. This is an area where civil society has had impressive successes at both national and local levels in

calling corrupt politicians and others to account—including having some sent to jail. Having achieved successes in this area, many organizations then moved on to considering how the money “saved” from corruption could be used to address the problems of poor people.

The budget work of the different organizations is not coordinated in that most of the organizations are autonomous from one another. In the case of FITRA and PATTIRO, locally based organizations form part of a network. However, even here the member organizations are largely autonomous in raising money and choosing their activities. Nevertheless, one can speak of a “civil society budget movement” in Indonesia because of the strong networking and collaboration that occurs across organizations, and the broad similarities in approach.

Possible Reasons for the Emergence of a Movement in Indonesia

What explains the size and shape of the budget movement in Indonesia?

As in many other countries, civil society budget work has flourished after significant political change. The fact that the political change in Indonesia included a serious and rapid decentralization process encouraged the local focus. The first organizations to do budget-related work in Indonesia were anti-corruption groups. Their work provided the first public discussion on how budgets should be treated as public documents and not as secret government papers.

When support for civil society budget work was first being considered by donors, it seemed clear that such work would have little chance of success at the still heavily controlled center. While the budget work in Indonesia is firmly located within the *reformasi* era, in terms of process it also has been able to build on and adapt some practices from the Soeharto era—such as the community-based planning process called the *musrenbang*.

The Ford Foundation’s “Forum Warga” (community forum) programme, initiated around 2001, contributed to shaping the subsequent development of civil budget work. A project initiated by The Asia Foundation (TAF) around the same time also had an influence. TAF’s project focused on encouraging pro-poor, gender-sensitive budget work. Fourteen organizations, spread across four cities, were invited to participate in the project, which spanned about two years. The organizations included one or two that specialized in research, but most were more activist-oriented. Each organization was asked to choose one issue that was important for poor people—and especially women—in the area in which they worked, and they were then supported to do budget research and advocacy related to this issue.

This approach of building budget work around an issue rather than seeing budget work as the core focus emphasised the use of budget work as a “tool” rather than an end in itself. When it came to the advocacy stage, one of the organizations learnt the important lesson that choice of an issue that interests an organization’s leaders but that is not a major concern for ordinary people will mean limited support for your work and thus limited pressure for the budget changes for which you are advocating.

Many—but not all—of the organizations that were involved in this project continued with budget work after the project ended. Their example seems to have encouraged others to take on this work and also to have influenced the type of organizations taking on this work and the overall approach. Meanwhile successes in corruption work in the early years provided evidence that having an impact was possible and thus inspired further engagement. Today there is much further evidence of how budget work beyond corruption

can have an impact. This ranges from changes in budget processes to make them more participatory, to changes in the “numbers” in budgets that make them more responsive to the needs of the poor and marginalised.

The fact that civil society in Indonesia is relatively “young” in terms of the age of the organizations, as well as the age of members and leaders, has encouraged the activist approach. Naturally, over the years the original members and leaders have become older. In general, however, the more senior and experienced activists have been good about encouraging younger people to get involved. The relatively non-hierarchical nature of most of the organizations has also encouraged the emergence of new leaders. And it has allowed the movement to benefit from the ideas and energy of a greater number of people.

Possible Weaknesses

The Indonesian budget movement has, until recently, been relatively isolated from civil society budget work elsewhere. One practical reason for this might be language, in that many of those doing budget work in Indonesia do not speak or understand English well. Thus they are not easily able to benefit from the international literature or from international conference and workshop opportunities. The more grassroots rather than elitist nature of the movement exacerbates this problem. The up-side of the isolation is that it has probably stimulated local inventiveness. The down-side is that Indonesian activists have not been able to learn as much as they might have from experiences elsewhere, and those doing budget work elsewhere have not been able to learn from Indonesia.

A further weakness is that the budget work in Indonesia is, for the most part, not as technically sophisticated as that done by civil society organizations in some other countries. The fact that the organizations see budget work as a tool means that they seldom specialise in developing deep expertise, for example, in a particular type of budget analysis. Instead, they will use a type of budget analysis to address a particular issue at what seems the appropriate time but then move on to another tool as the situation in which they are advocating changes. Organizations thus tend to have a wide range of skills, but at a relatively shallow level.

The lack of specialization of organizations on budget work, and on particular types of budget work, combined with the large number of organizations who want to use budget work, means that there is a scarcity of “experts” on whom to draw for assistance. Again, this stimulates creativity. But it also could result in unnecessary repetition of mistakes that could have been avoided.

Despite these weaknesses and the relative youth of Indonesia’s budget movement, the international community of budget organizations could learn valuable lessons from Indonesia, as Indonesia has been learning from the rest of the world for the past decades. It also will be interesting to see how the country benefits from the balancing act that budget organizations are doing to combine grass-root activism and budget analysis for policy advocacy.