

Seeing from our perspectives: youth budget advocacy in Ghana

12

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Introduction

Budgets are extremely important documents. They act as instruments for implementing the provisions in the international, regional and national conventions leading to achieving the promotion of the welfare of children.¹ Better outcomes in any sector, for instance in education, health, water or rural development depend not just on allocations but also on actual execution and proper use of those allocations. The execution and proper use of budgeted funds can be improved through social accountability.² Citizens, including young citizens, can involve themselves in participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring public service delivery, lobbying and embarking on advocacy campaigns.

Poor investments on child welfare, protection and gender equity reflect the low priority many governments attach to

these issues when it comes to budget planning and implementation. The neglect of vulnerable children and youth – street children and youth, orphans, migrant children and youth, those trafficked and/or sexually abused – in our policy and budgeting could become a thing of the past, as youth gradually become part of planning and budgeting processes.

In Ghana, the idea of budgeting at the national level was seen as very technical and remained in the domain of the economists and financial experts. National budget processes were seen to have little to do with youth and children. The National Youth Policy of Ghana (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2010) defines youth as persons aged between 18 and 35 whilst the 1992 Constitution also defines children as those below the age of 18.

Recently, Plan Ghana has sought to enhance youth participation in budget

¹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children and the 1992 Constitution of Ghana are just some documents which have been approved by Government and make provisions regarding children's welfare.

² For a definition of social accountability see the glossary, this issue.

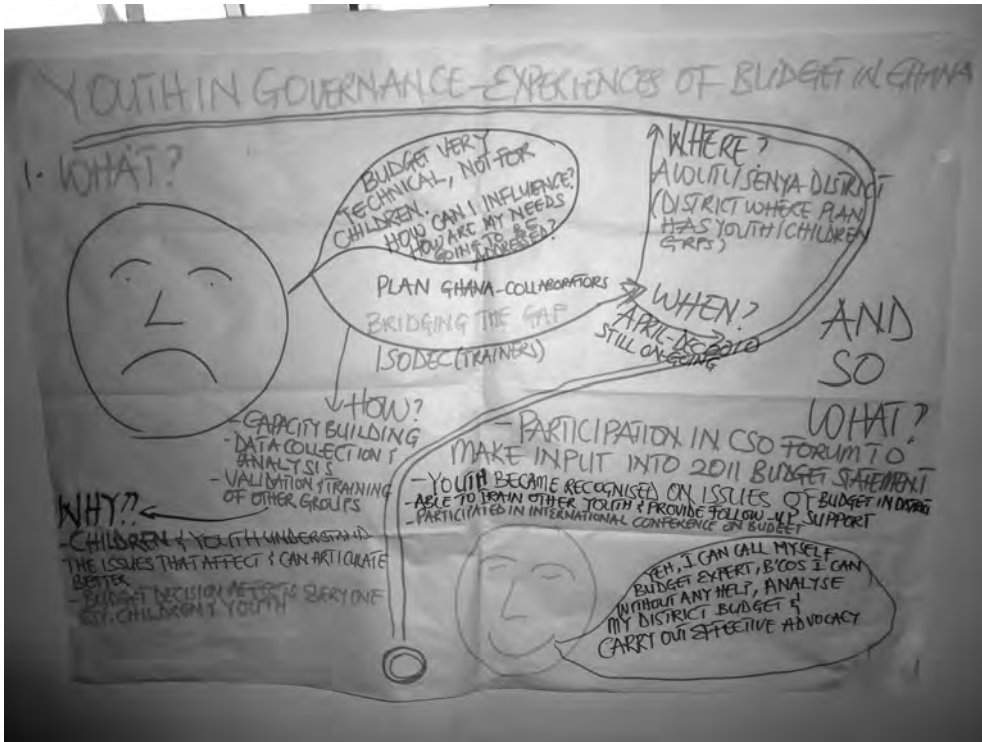


Photo: George Yorke

A mindmap presented to writeshop participants by Charlotte Bani-Afudego and George Yorke on youth and budget advocacy issues in Ghana.

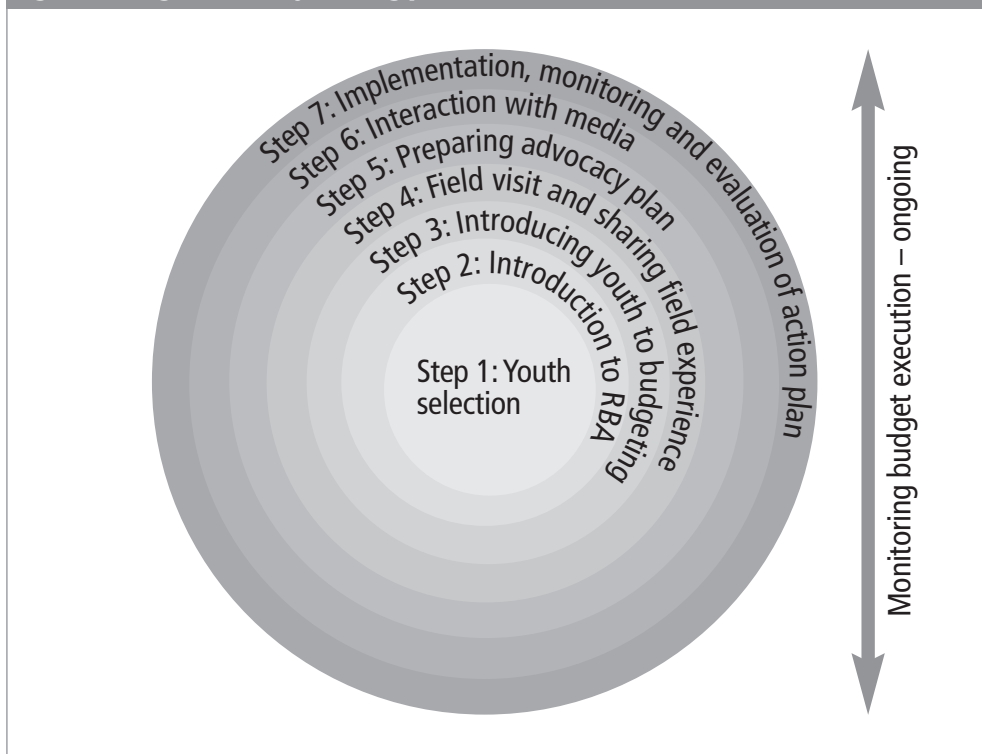
preparation and tracking. Being concerned about children and young people's rights, the organisation is concerned with whether and how rights-fulfilment is budgeted and planned for. In collaboration with the Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC) it began a youth budget advocacy project in January 2010, as a pilot for replication in other West African countries. It has proven a fulfilling experience for ISODEC and Plan and the youth involved.

The project trained young people in budget advocacy, giving rise to a group christened the Youth Budget Advocacy Group of Awutu-Senya District (Y-BAGAS). We the authors of this article have been closely involved in the training programme and the preceding activities of the youth group. Charlotte Bani-Afudego and two other trainers from ISODEC trained the youths. Charlotte and George Yorke (from Plan Ghana) have monitored and coordi-

nated the activities of these youth since the training. Some other Plan staff, including Anastasie Koudoh, have also made input.

In this article we outline first the need for more youth participation in budgeting. We then go on to describe a participatory youth budgeting training process, and how the youth went on to apply what they learnt in the training. Finally, we explore the possible impacts of this process. The article offers the opportunity to learn from the experiences of these youth groups and their evidence-based budget advocacy, as well as explore the best strategies to widen the horizon and increase opportunities for youth engagement with policy makers. It points to the need to monitor consistently the impact of youth participation in budgeting for their communities. It also demonstrates that in order to become active citizens, children and young people need to learn in ways that promote their own sense of empowerment by being

Figure 1: Budget advocacy training process



proactive and initiating their own activities – so that the learning process itself becomes a form of active citizenship.

Learning new skills for effective budget advocacy

As a prelude to the start of the project, a stakeholders’ meeting was organised in the Awutu-Senya district. This was intended to introduce the local authorities, traditional heads and community members to the project concept and help the authorities understand our objectives and the need to involve youth in their budgeting processes.

The proposed methodology hinged on a training of trainers (ToT) (see Figure 1). So we wanted to identify as training participants those with the best starting level knowledge on budgeting. We applied a selection process based on a questionnaire sent to twenty youths. Five young women and five young men, aged between

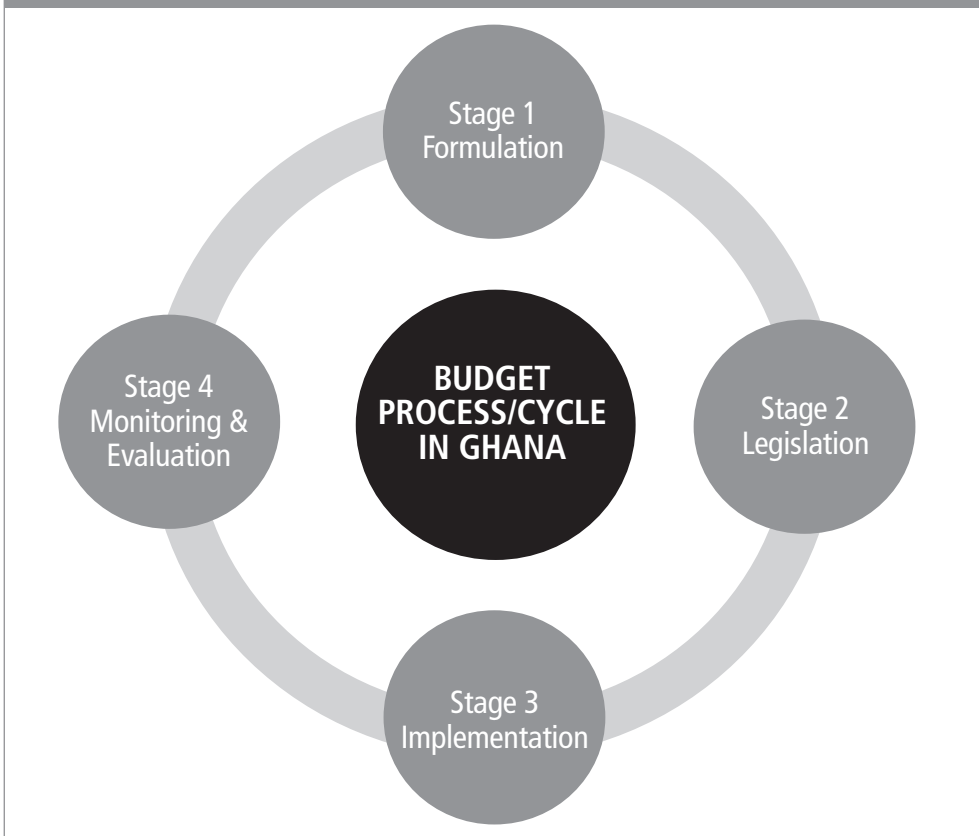
12 and 30 were selected. The training was hosted in a different district so that activities could be piloted there and replicated by the youth later in their own district. Charlotte and ISODEC colleagues developed a training manual and a toolkit for budget advocacy training.

Training of trainers

The week-long ToT workshop was practical and participatory. Its main aim was to build the youth’s capacity to advocate for key changes in their communities for development to be achieved. We first introduced the participants to the rights-based approach (RBA) as the basis for budget advocacy.³ International, regional and national legal instruments were explored as the justification for budgeting for children’s rights. We then exposed them to the essence of family budgeting and the relevance of considering everyone’s needs in

³ For a definition of a rights-based approach, see glossary (this issue).

Figure 2: Budget process



the family before making any plans or budgets. We introduced them to the budget cycle (see Figure 2) and budget documents at the local and national level and how these can be influenced at each stage. Participants also learnt some calculations of growth rates and how to make trend analysis of budget figures. Brainstorming and group exercises highlighted the implications of budgets for vulnerable groups especially women and children.

After interviewing the local authorities in the host districts, the participants felt equipped to design questions to ascertain the needs and problems affecting children, as well as how much community members participate in planning and budgeting. They interviewed children, especially those selling on the streets, as well as adult men and women. Returning from familiarisation visits, they shared findings which

reflected how children and youth were not given opportunities in developmental programmes and activities in their district.

After the training of trainers, the youth participants who exhibited the greatest confidence and knowledge replicated their skills during the five-day training workshop with 15 other youths. Youth participants were fascinated to have the opportunity to use the training manual and workshop contents to train other youth participants. Five out of the ten who became trainers admitted that it was the first time they had stood in front of their peers to engage them in participatory learning approach. Ellen A., a 22-year-old participant who became a trainer, said:

When you first informed us that we were going to train other groups after our training, I doubted the possibility of having to

explain issues of budgeting for my peers to understand, but the participatory approach helped to realise how I can contribute and allow others to also contribute to discussions to enhance their understanding.

Involving the media

Plan Ghana also invited host district media personnel to the training for a simulation exercise. The youth groups presented their familiarisation visit findings and advocacy statements in the form of a press statement or press conference. The invited media actors reacted with the best strategies for engaging with media and decision makers. The media actors broadcast the youths' activities and findings during a morning radio show which received several commendations from listeners during a phone-in session.

Putting budget training into action

On returning to their own districts, the engagement of the 25 trained young people was at the local level. It was based on a budget advocacy plan establishing objectives and timelines, which they developed at the end of the training workshop.

Their first activity was to embark on field trips to various communities to

gather empirical data to ascertain the issues affecting children. This enabled them to set a baseline and situational analysis that could be periodically monitored in relation to budget allocations and execution. The first of its kind for most of the youth, this experience proved very interesting and revealing. Youths from different communities divided themselves into council areas of their district, to interview children, male and female adults about issues affecting the welfare of children, like education, health, water and social protection. This enabled them to make grounded assessments of the adequacy of specific budget allocations and executions relating to these essential services

Having confirmed through the field survey the importance of these sectors to children, the youth analysed the respective District Assembly budget allocations. We helped them to organise a validation meeting at which they shared initial findings of field survey work with some community members and the local authorities.

The theme for the 2010 African Union Day of the African Child – 'budgeting for children's rights' – happened to coincide with budget advocacy post-training activi-



News article by Adnan M. Adams in Ghana's *Economy and Times*. 'Budget advocacy group releases report on children's rights.'



Photo: ISODEC/Plan Ghana

Youth groups conducting research in their communities to ascertain issues that affect the welfare of children.

ties. This provided an opportunity to engage with local host-district decision makers. An advocacy statement was presented by the group at a mini-*durbar*, which is an official gathering hosted by a local chief. This was organised by Plan Ghana in a local district and brought together school children, District Assembly officials and parents as well as some traditional leaders. The youth groups put on a role-play activity depicting how their

District Assembly budget could address the basic needs of children especially in education, health and water. All these activities were interpreted in the local language, thereby reaching more participants. This activity generated a lot of interest and questions, and the youth responded with practical examples using preliminary findings from their field survey.

Some of the youth groups were also invited to participate in a forum of civil

society organisations (CSOs) to make inputs into the 2011 Ghana budget statement. They strongly supported the continuation of the Youth in Agriculture programme, which was approved, although we have no way of knowing how much this was due to the youths' advocacy.

The youth have continued to hold meetings as necessary and conduct periodic monitoring to track changes on government spending and programmes in their communities. Some of them had to travel long distances to remote communities where children lack basic social services. But visiting such places helped them to understand and analyse the inequitable distribution of scarce resources. Philomena H., an 18-year-old girl, said:

I am very glad I took part in this survey because it helped me to be more conscious about how some children are denied access to basic educational facilities, although government and local authorities are mandated to meet these needs. This situation boosted my morale to advocate more for these voiceless children to be heard.

In order not to forget the knowledge they acquired, these youth groups voluntarily conduct workshops on budget advocacy for other groups. So far, 70 children and youth (31 females and 39 males) from central and eastern regions have participated.

Reflecting critically and learning from the experience

In terms of the process, we feel that the training was imperative not only for the youth but for the coordinators too, since it tested and validated the manual designed for the process. After the first training we made a lot of revisions to the manual, in particular including more exercises to enhance knowledge and practicality of the training, since we observed that the participants were well capable of absorbing more than we had anticipated.

Initially, the participants were not comfortable with the participatory approach. They felt they knew nothing of the subject and expected the usual teacher-pupil methodology. Their contributions during discussions made them see that they had a lot to offer to the learning process. For instance, participants embarked on familiarisation visits during the training to some local assemblies within the purview of the host district. They interviewed planning officers and budget officers and raised concerns about the medium term development plans and objectives of the district which inform the budget. The budget officials took account of some of the concerns they raised and invited them to the next meeting about the medium term development plan.

We were struck by the way participants in the replica training workshops responded to their peer trainers, who were creative and innovative in their approaches. Charlotte and colleagues provided guidelines, monitored the replica workshops and made some interventions. They also met with the youth trainers after each day's training to evaluate their presentations and methods.

The participatory approach adopted for the training clearly helped the youth to understand the concept more than they would have from a less participatory methodology. It boosted their confidence to share their ideas and contribute to discussions.

The youth groups undertook continual follow-up with the communities they visited, which helped them to track changes that had occurred since their initial survey.

Most of the youth have articles and stories which they want to project to policy makers to prompt them to act. Providing them with better access to avenues like the media would increase their sense of fulfilment and encourage them more to take up initiatives. Facilitators have therefore planned with youth groups to visit radio

Photo: ISODEC/Plan Ghana



A young girl that the children interviewed, who was selling goods during school hours.

stations to discuss findings from the budget analysis. Some youth groups have been encouraged to write more articles to be published in news journals.

Critiquing ourselves, we think we left these youth groups to operate independently a bit too early, without providing them with the necessary reinforcement to arm them for the task ahead. Providing refresher training would help them stay focused on their objectives, as well as addressing already-noted challenges, such as difficulty in accessing information at district level and in generating media interest in their advocacy work. Also, we still have a major guiding role to play by monitoring the youths' activities. We therefore plan to organise another major training on budgeting for all beneficiaries of the first training, to identify any weaknesses, enhance their knowledge and support their multiplication of the training activities.

In terms of emerging impact, the introduction of these youth to budget advocacy has brought about some remarkable changes in the youth themselves, their communities, and to some extent the nation as a whole. Hitherto, the youth were oblivious of what informed their district's

medium term plan and budget. They knew they were not considered important stakeholders when it came to district planning. The knowledge they acquired in this short time was immediately put into action, and the rights-based approach they used in their budget analysis made the local authorities attach greater importance to their findings and recommendations.

The participatory learning process used in the training (and later on in the training of trainers) has been very effective in empowering these young people to engage in local budgetary processes. These youth groups now carry out their own initiatives like visiting schools, organising debating competitions and participating in community *durbars* to use the opportunity to call on local government to address the needs of children and youth in their communities. These youth are now consulted occasionally by the District Assembly on issues concerning them. As the programme is extended from this initial district into other districts, the prospects for impact are increasing.

These achievements have happened not because adult child rights activists published journal articles on issues that affect children, but because those who were most concerned and affected by the situation provided evidence and demanded that their economic, social and cultural rights be met by duty bearers, and were empowered by the process of doing so.

At the initial stages of engagement with the local assembly during the validation meeting, the district Chief Executive – the political head of the district – did express interest in engaging more with the youth, but also offered some resistance. He pointed out anomalies in data presented, contested some advocacy statements in the report, and asked the youth to contact his unit so that they could update their report with some current data. He then tasked all the department heads in the district to prepare their outstanding annual reports and present them to the youth to use in their analysis.

Photo: ISODEC/Plan Ghana



The trainees surveying other youth and children. For most of the youth, this experience proved very interesting and revealing.

Beyond this, the impact of these activities on the districts' budget allocation remains to be seen since – as we write – the analysis was done six months ago and the next budget is only due in eighteen months' time. Moreover, allocation is not the same as actual budget implementation. The onus lies on the ISODEC trainers and Plan Ghana project initiators to keep supporting these youth to continue monitoring and analysing their budgets yearly. This will enable them to weigh up the impact of their budget advocacy and to learn and overcome challenges in advocating for developmental changes in their district.

Conclusion

Budget advocacy training, exposure and experience has not only built the youth's intellectual capacities but has also increased their confidence level. They now feel part of the development process, worthy of being invited to participate in the District Assembly meetings or consulted on issues concerning children and youth in the district. Mohammed A., aged 21 and a member of Y-BAGAS, evaluates himself:

Ever since I was exposed to the concept of budgeting, I am able to write articles and contribute to some policy discussions. I am proud to call myself a budget expert,

because I can without any help analyse my district budget and carry out effective advocacy for children's issues to be considered in budgeting.

In future, as well as more systematic monitoring of budget execution, it will be critical to involve youth in national as well as local budget processes. We have visions of youth participating during national budget planning and hearings and even taking part

in international debates. Some of the youth groups are now part of some national budget platforms, which may provide these opportunities. Youth groups could also lobby on children and youth through the relevant parliamentary select committees, which are very influential. This scale-up of youth empowerment via budget advocacy would breed a specialist youth budget network, and go a long way to increase budget accountability to children and youth at all levels.

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