

Government budget monitoring: as easy as child's play

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This 'tips for trainers' is slightly different to the usual training tips published in *PLA*. Here, we provide some insights and share experiences with other practitioners who may want to build children's capacity to engage in governance. We explain the different approaches we used to develop children's skills as peer facilitators; support them to understand and share information about governance; and build their confidence to do advocacy. We conclude with tips for adult facilitators and child advocates, and a discussion of some of the critical challenges faced in this type of work.

Children participating in governance project

From 2004 to 2006, the Children's Budget Unit (CBU) of Idasa implemented a capacity-building initiative with children in South Africa to support them to engage in government budget monitoring and advocacy. The project used learning through games to make difficult governance issues accessible to children. It showed that children, including those with disabilities, are

able to share and learn knowledge and skills relating to governance.

Twenty-five children aged 12 to 18 years from four local and national organisations were selected for training as peer facilitators. These peer facilitators implemented activities with their own constituency groups, reaching a total of approximately 100 children.

The training included the following topics and sub-topics:

- **Linking budgets and rights:** understanding rights, progressive realisation of rights, household budgets, how government works;
- **Budget analysis as a monitoring tool:** the integrated development plan, organisational budgets, basic budget analysis tools, and personal experiences of rights and empowerment;
- **Developing a strategic budget advocacy campaign:** advocacy concepts and strategies, engaging in the budget presentation process in parliament, preparing responses to the budget, planning an advocacy campaign.



Photo: Shaamela Cassiem

Children depict the changes they would like to see in their communities.

Building young people's peer facilitation skills

We may move differently but inside we are all the same.

Alex, 7 March 2011.

The impact of integrating children with disabilities and those without as equal peers in a group of facilitators made an immediate and indelible impression on everyone. Children with disabilities were challenged to believe in their abilities to make equally valuable input to that of their peers. Children without disabilities were given the opportunity to engage on a very personal level with children with disabilities – learning firsthand about the prejudices they face from society. The level

of camaraderie in some cases translated into meaningful friendships.

This ease of engagement amongst the children and with the adult facilitators meant that the children felt comfortable to raise their views and opinions at any stage. For example, the children were key contributors to the development of the materials, including the testing process. Games were devised cooperatively and then tested by peer facilitators with their constituency groups. An example of a unique contribution by the children to the activities was the use of an orange (having ten segments) to explain percentages. This activity created a bridge to understanding budget percentage share calculations. The adult facilitators were very open to the input and suggestions from the children.

We learnt that adult facilitators working with children need to critically interrogate their notions of power over children. It is the children – rather than the adults – who should set the learning outcomes, pace, and level of engagement.¹ The more adults let go of their notions of superiority, the more children will actively engage in and guide the initiative. In this project, adult facilitators, for example, trained the peer facilitators but then merely acted as a reference point during the trainings led by the youth facilitators – demonstrating confidence in the children's abilities.

Using games to support learning about governance

For a person with cerebral palsy to mentally challenge themselves with difficult abstract concepts and control their body at the same time, this is an out-of-body experience that can be compared with developing the ability to walk – a moment of triumph!

Alex, 7 March 2011.

Understanding how government works is potentially a very complicated topic to discuss with children. It was imperative that the adult facilitators used innovative, child-friendly and novel ways to communicate this to children. The content included socio-economic rights, the government budget process, gender and child rights budgeting, as well as advocacy techniques. These concepts were shared in three one-week workshops.²

The guiding principle during the workshops was to build on what children already knew. For example, when adult facilitators wanted children to understand government budgets they started by reflecting on pocket money or household budgets. Once there was a basic under-

standing of a concept, the adult facilitators built on this knowledge by changing the context. After children understood household budgets, opportunities were provided for them to visit community projects to interview staff to understand the budgets of their organisations. By using this step-by-step approach, understanding government budgets was a natural progression.

For some children with disabilities, even the concept of money was unfamiliar. Children with disabilities, many of whom are 'shut-ins' at home, are seldom allowed to manage their own money or even understand the role of money in society. We created a simple game, making purchases with pretend money at a 'shop'. This was an empowering experience for the children. Even if they were not able to go on to understand government budgets, their worldview had already altered significantly.

It was also a significant shift for children to learn through an outcomes-based, experiential manner. Instead of the dry and boring learning methods employed in most schools, children were acquiring knowledge and skills through play. Through the project, children took part in treasure hunts to learn about budget books, did puzzles to understand their constitutional rights, and played the game Jeopardy to learn about human rights instruments. Experiential learning tools included using a cake to demonstrate the levels of government. Instead of talking about stereotypes as 'labels', adult facilitators assigned labels to individuals who had to guess from the way people interacted with them who they were and what power they had in society. Through these simple experiences and games children understood power dynamics in society, which is useful for advocacy. Box 1 shows an example of an activity.

¹ For a discussion on notions of power, see also Shutt and Mvurya (this issue).

² See the peer facilitators' training manual *Children participating in governance: budget monitoring from a rights-based framework* produced by Idasa.

Box 1: Levels and functions of government

Purpose: To facilitate an activity on levels and functions of government that caters to varying learning styles

Activity plan:

1. Divide participants into competency groups.
2. Provide each group with picture puzzles that depict the functions of each level of government (e.g. parks as a local government function or schools as a provincial government function). The puzzles are cut according to the level of competency within the group, i.e. a greater number of smaller pieces for a more competent group. The backing board of each of the puzzles should be a different colour so as to distinguish easily the different levels of government.
3. The groups then do the puzzles.
4. The words for the different functions are written on the back of the puzzles. The words for each function are in the various languages used by the participants. This will contribute to their increased governance vocabulary.
5. Reflection: what was new information? Check that the concept of different levels of government is understood. Clarify unique government competencies for each level of government.



Children piecing together their puzzle on different functions of government at local, provincial and national levels.

Photo: Shaamela Cassiem

Source: Nomdo and Cassiem (2007).

Enhancing knowledge and confidence for advocacy

I just made a call (for invitations to the budget speech) and we were connected.
Alex, 7 March 2011.

Most children in the project were already involved in advocacy and were selected from organisations that had an advocacy mandate. This project merely enhanced knowledge and skills relating to policy and budget advocacy. However, the manual produced also includes sessions on understanding who has power in society and how to influence people. These more basic concepts, as well as building the self confidence of children to articulate their opinions, would need to be discussed if working with a group of children new to advocacy.

After the training process, children took opportunities to use their new knowledge and skills. The children with disabilities ironically had easier access to parliamen-

tary processes. The South African government makes a special effort to include marginalised groups. For example, organisations focusing on children with disabilities receive invitations to the budget speech. Two children with disabilities were given the opportunity to attend the budget speech and also the subsequent public question and answer session. The children took the opportunity to lobby for accessible transport and employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. They also asked about the implementation plan for fee-free schools which was discussed in the project workshops. These issues were televised and broadcast nationally.

Other children watched the budget speech on television – this was no longer considered long, dreary and of no importance. Using their new understanding of inflation, the children eagerly listened to whether their predictions for increases in social grants, for example, the child support grant would be accurate. A group of chil-

Photo: Shaamela Cassiem



Children involved in a budget analysis exercise.

dren volunteered to read the budget books to find out what changes were anticipated that might affect children. The children then compiled a budget brief which was released on the Internet the same night that the budget speech was made. Public benefit organisations applauded this achievement.

A group of children, including two children with disabilities, participated in an exposure visit supported by Idasa to a children's budget project run by Cedeca (Centro de Defesa da Criança e do Adolescente do Ceará – Ceará Children's and Youth Defence Centre), in Fortaleza, Brazil. This broadened their horizons even further, with the children exchanging experiences despite language differences.

Recommendations to adult facilitators and child advocates working on budget advocacy

Adult facilitators should:

- Be aware of the power dynamics between themselves and child advocates, and try to

be approachable rather than forcing an adult culture (e.g. dancing was frequently enjoyed by all).

- Allow children to shape the path of the project rather than entering an engagement with preconceived ideas of learning outcomes and/or sticking rigidly to project plans.

- Use games and experiential learning to communicate complex concepts.

- Build knowledge and skills in budget advocacy from what is already understood by and familiar to children, e.g. starting with a spending plan for a child's allowance.

- Provide a space for children with disabilities to engage as equals which may mean having an open discussion at the outset about prejudices.

Child advocates should:

- Reach out to children from marginalised groups such as children with disabilities in order to learn about realities different from their own.

- Treat children who are different, such as children with disabilities, with respect.

- Build partnerships with adults that are based on mutual respect in order to achieve shared goals.
- Believe in their ability and capacity to understand and influence governance systems and the people working in them.

Critical challenges

The critical challenges in the project related to non-attainment of the ultimate project goal, working with children with disabilities, inequitable impact on individual children and child protection issues.

The goal of the project was to facilitate children's participation in governance in a structured manner that would result in systems change. Unfortunately, the project was prematurely terminated due to changes within Idasa and only the KwaZulu-Natal participants were able to implement their advocacy strategy in a structured manner. However, the system did not really shift permanently within this province or at the national level to accommodate children's participation in governance.

This was the first time that the Idasa facilitators worked on governance issues with children having disabilities. There-

fore, there was a steep learning curve that was mitigated to some extent by having a child leader within the Disabled Children's Action Group who acted as a key resource to the adult facilitators. The impact of the project on individual children was also inequitable. Especially in relation to children with disabilities, some children were not able to be independent advocates on governance issues due to their limited experience of the world, resulting from being 'shut-ins' as well as their poorer socio-economic background.

Child protection issues are always paramount when conducting work with groups of children away from home where they are not under the supervision of their caregivers. The project included many adults who acted as caretakers of the children, but still the children were exposed to violations of their rights. For example, at one hotel the children were accused of stealing a phone and the accusing adults were quite intimidating towards the children and adults caretakers in the project. It remains challenging to balance children's protection and participation rights in practice.

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