

Citizens and Civil Society to Governments “Make Budgets Public Now!”

www.makebudgetspublic.org

DAR ES SALAAM – On 18 November 2011 nearly 100 civil society groups from as many countries and 12 international organizations, including the International Budget Partnership, Greenpeace, and the ONE Campaign, will launch a global effort to make public budgets transparent, participatory, and accountable. The effort centers on building an integrated and vibrant movement of organizations that will work at the local, national, and international level to promote government budgeting that is open and accountable to the public.

Budgets are the most critical tool that governments have to address problems like poverty, provide critical services like education and healthcare, and invest in their country’s future. When the political speeches end, it’s how governments actually manage funds to meet their promises and priorities that matters.

The organizations at the core of this initiative may work in different countries and on different issues but their shared experience shows that when civil society and the public are informed and involved they can improve budget decisions and outcomes, literally transforming lives in the process.

The global Civil Society Movement for Budget Transparency, Accountability, and Participation envisions public finance systems that make all budget information easily accessible, provide meaningful opportunities for citizens and civil society to participate in budget decisions and oversight throughout the process, and include strong institutions to hold governments accountable for how they raise and spend the public’s money.

Turning Opportunities into Reality

The timing of this effort capitalizes on a number of significant events that are creating a unique moment to substantially improve how governments operate, including how they manage public funds to meet their people’s needs and to address persistent challenges. The most dramatic of these events is the “Arab Spring,” which has created an unprecedented opportunity for democratic and responsive government in the region but also sent a wake-up call to oppressive, “kleptocratic” regimes around the world – and a beacon of hope to their people. However, turning these revolutions into effective and efficient government will require that strong institutions and systems be developed, including transparent and accountable budget processes and systems that actively engage citizens.

There are also important international, multi-stakeholder initiatives that have been launched in the last year to promote government that is open, democratic, responsive, and accountable. The first of these is the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which brings together governments, civil society, and industry to promote transparency, increase civic participation, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Co-chaired by the U.S. and Brazilian governments, the OGP calls on governments to commit to specific steps that will make their systems and practices more open and accountable.

The second of these is the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency. GIFT engages governments, international organizations, oversight institutions, foundations, and civil society organizations to advance and institutionalize significant and continuous improvements in fiscal transparency, engagement, and accountability in countries around the world. The initiative includes efforts to establish international norms for budget transparency, engagement, and accountability; harness new technologies to support such budgeting; and provide incentives and support for governments seeking to open their budgets.

Though each of these events and initiatives holds great promise, without an organized, skilled, and active civil society movement that can connect the institutions involved with the priorities and needs of ordinary citizens and play a critical oversight role, there is a danger that these opportunities will fall short of their potential.

What Comes Next?

The organizations meeting in Dar es Salaam to launch the global Civil Society Movement for Budget Transparency, Accountability, and Participation laid the foundation of the movement by signing a Declaration of Principles. This declaration begins with this statement:

“We are citizens and civil society organizations from around the globe, united by the shared conviction that inclusive and open public budgets are critical to achieving a world in which all human beings enjoy their full human rights – civil, political, social, economic, cultural and environmental.”

The participants agreed upon shared values that include recognizing public participation in budgeting as both a fundamental right and a responsibility, social equity, inclusion, nondiscrimination, and mutual respect. They also identified strategies that the organizations in the movement would use to engage in the OGP and GIFT initiatives, as well as other cross-national initiatives.

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