Empowering Citizens through Budget Transparency in the North-West and Adamawa Regions

Background

Citizens often lack information on the use of public funds. They are usually left out of allocation decisions and do not have opportunities to provide adequate and timely feedback on the use of scarce resources. Transparency in budgetary processes reduces opportunities for wasteful and corrupt spending. As a consequence, and because it can increase trust in authorities and lead to enhanced tax collections, budget transparency could increase resources available to fight poverty.

Therefore, with support from the World Bank, two regions in Cameroon (the North-West and Adamawa) piloted an initiative to promote greater budget transparency with three objectives:

1. Simplification, analysis, and disclosure of budgets at multiple levels (national, regional, divisional, municipal, school, and health center);
2. Awareness and capacity-building of government officials and local/regional institutions to promote public dialogue about public expenditures by encouraging demand-side governance;
3. Documentation and dissemination of activities.

In both the regions, steering committees under the chairmanship of their governors spearheaded and coordinated the activities under the initiative. Two local nongovernmental organizations with expertise in social accountability approaches facilitated the community mobilization and budget dissemination process.

Activities

A number of activities were implemented to promote budget transparency at multiple levels—from schools and health centers to local councils, divisions, and regions in Cameroon. The pilot activities included gathering budget information at appropriate levels, creating simplified budget templates, training facilitators and concerned officials to accurately fill out the templates, and, finally, widely disseminating the collected information through brochures, public meetings, and the media.

In the course of both phases of the Budget Transparency Initiative (BTI), the budgets of 237 pilot institutions were read aloud at public budget dissemination meetings in each of the two regions. The objective of the meetings was to inform citizens about the available resources of institutions, what they were spent on, and how they were obtained; the meeting also provided citizens with an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on the divulged information. Simplified budgets were posted on notice boards of the target institutions as well as at other prominent public places prior to these meetings.

A variegated strategy was pursued to sensitize citizens and officials about the importance of budget transparency and to mobilize people to attend the budget dissemination meetings.

In light of the radio’s unmatched reach, more than 100 radio programs were produced, featuring discussions with directors of schools and hospitals as well as debates with civil society organizations. Most programs were interactive, allowing listeners to call in and participate in the discussions. The radio programs were designed to sensitize people on a number of budget related issues (e.g., how to hold traditional leaders accountable for funds entrusted to them) and were used to announce the budget dissemination meetings to maximize attendance. The programs were broadcast in both the official and local languages.

Conscious of the limitations of budgets to mobilize and engage people, plays were staged during the budget dissemination meetings to promote budget transparency and citizen interest in public expenditure matters in an engaging way. Lured by prizes for the top three performances, secondary-school theater clubs developed plays based on storylines written for them. The use of theater added some spice to an effort that otherwise risked being a dull, deliberative affair.

At the school level, an open book certification scheme was introduced to ensure minimum standards of budget transparency. All schools conforming to certain criteria related to budget transparency were awarded an open book certificate. Secondary school students also formed budget clubs that provided forums for interested students to discuss issues related to governance and budget transparency at their schools and in their communities. In several cases, the clubs asked local community radios to host discussions.

To benchmark the transparency of local council budgets and budget processes, the BTI developed and implemented a local budget transparency index. In 2012, councils from both regions...
Some of the most interesting results produced by initiative are related issues was also conducted. In 2013, independent nongovernmental organizations gathered the same information in a second round of surveys, and the results and lessons learned from the exercise were published in a learning note.

In addition, modern information and communication technologies were harnessed to sensitize people and generate discussions on budgets and to make them more accessible to citizens. In the North-West Region, a Facebook page was created under the initiative that currently has 2,138 “friends”; it allows interested citizens to exchange views on budget transparency. To make the national public investment budget more accessible to citizens, a website called the Cameroon Budget Inquirer was developed that visualizes the public investment budget data using appealing graphics and that enables its downloading in Excel format.

In order to build capacity, over 30 workshops were organized for training heads of schools and health centers on how to fill out simplified budget templates and to explain the roles of different stakeholders—principals, health center managers, local officials, and mayors—during budget dissemination meetings. A workshop to train journalists on how to investigate and report on budget-related issues was also conducted.

Results

Some of the most interesting results produced by initiative are summarized as follows:

- **In at least one local council, tax revenues increased.** The local council of Ngaoundere III managed to raise XAF 763,400 (US$1,527) in cattle tax for the first time after a budget dissemination session. The mayor attributes the change to greater awareness of the population on the importance of tax revenues in funding local development projects as well as increased trust in the authorities.

- **Parents reduced contributions to the parent-teacher association (PTA) in one school after its budget was disclosed.** The BTI gave parents of the Government Primary School Military Camp Bamenda insight into the school’s funding, after which they collectively decided to reduce their contributions by 50 percent (from US$4 to US$2) because they determined that the school’s official funds could cover most of its needs.

- **Disclosing budget information and directly engaging citizens increased trust in officials.** According to several school headmasters and local council mayors, their relations with constituents improved after publicly discussing financial management issues. For instance, the mayor of the council of Ngaoundere cited an exchange during a BTI-sponsored radio program that allowed him to clarify a caller’s question about a bridge he had promised to build. The mayor assured the caller that the construction was underway and invited all listeners to join him on a visit to inspect the work.

- **A school principal was forced to return misappropriated funds.** When the simplified budget of the North-West’s Government Bilingual High School in Bafut did not display all fees collected by the school (e.g., home economics and examination fees), students and parents raised questions during a dissemination meeting. It was revealed that the principal had raised fees for items that were already covered by the lump sum registration fees. He was forced to return XAF 10 million (US$20,000). However, it is difficult to conceive of such a result in Adamawa where—in contrast to the North-West—only a few people showed up for dissemination meetings at schools. The lack of attendance was probably due to the lower capacity of officials, the absence of a tradition of social mobilization, and higher levels of poverty and illiteracy.

- **Secondary school students used dissemination meetings to express their priorities and voice their concerns.** For instance, students of the Government Technical High School in Bamenda objected to the construction of a fence around the school, pointing out that buying additional benches would be more beneficial to them. Students also repeatedly complained about being obliged to buy a medical booklet every school year that is of no use whatsoever to them or to their doctors. Officials took notice of the complaint and will explore abolishing this requirement.

- **A civil society organization galvanized by the BTI exposed a corrupt health official.** After Tubah District Hospital’s administration refused to disclose its budget, the Regional Delegation of Public Health investigated the hospital’s accounts. Action Foundations Common Initiative Group (AFCIG), a civil society organization, was also galvanized into action, mounting a whistle-blowing campaign. It succeeded in obtaining the hospital’s financial information, which revealed misappropriations of state funds by the director, who was subsequently replaced. However, mobilization around hospitals was generally low compared to schools and local councils.

- **A module on budget transparency and social accountability will probably be included in the national secondary-school curriculum.** After the results of the initiative were presented to the ministry of secondary education, the officials responsible for the curriculum decided to introduce a lesson on budget transparency into the civic education class, the modalities of which are currently being finalized.