

Improving civil society's participation in the budget process

Background

Namiland is a landlocked country with a population of just under 7 million, 2.5 million of whom live in the capital city. Namiland experienced ten years of stagnant growth from 2002 to 2012 as a result of a prolonged border dispute that discouraged investment and created approximately 200 000 internally displaced people.

In 2012, Namiland's economic fortunes changed with the discovery of the three Ts (tungsten, tantalum and tin), valuable in the production of smartphones. Since then, government revenue has increased on average by 18 per cent per year, but now concerns are being raised about the terms of the concession agreements and the long-term environmental impact of those that have been ratified. Since the discovery of the three Ts, the government has run a balanced budget year-on-year; however, both the size of the civil service and the debt portfolio have increased three-fold.

The current Parliament started its five-year term in 2013 and approved a five-year development strategy in 2014. A mid-term review of this strategy completed in 2017 found little in the way of tangible delivery of infrastructure projects, but confirmed some modest improvements in the performance of the health and education sectors. Most concerning was that there appeared to be little activity in the commerce or agriculture sectors, which had been deemed essential to create a buffer against commodity price shocks and to provide large-scale employment opportunities not generated by mining activities.

Namiland has a small but growing number of civil society organisations (CSOs) interested in influencing the budget planning and monitoring process. Various government initiatives and donor-funded projects have attempted to build relationships and enhance communication between CSOs and the line ministries, but despite some initial successes after the current Parliament took office, these efforts have stalled somewhat, with dissatisfaction on both sides.

The first CSOs established in the early 2000s focused on the provision of rural education. They worked to combine a grassroots mobilisation with national lobbying efforts to influence budgetary allocations. There were many causes for Namiland's poor education statistics, and it was determined that hiring new teachers and

improving training programmes was necessary for addressing issues of quality. In addition, the CSOs wanted to highlight localised problems of mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency. Although school facilities were available within 7 kilometres of most households, a 2007 survey found that the absenteeism rate was higher than 50 per cent and that less than 45 per cent of schools had a minimum stock of supplies.

In 2013, Parliament committed to spending 9 per cent of the national budget on education, but in the most recent budget, this had dropped to 6.4 per cent. The teacher–student ratio was at 1:64 in 2013, high above the regional average of 1:44. Since 2016, an increasingly adversarial relationship developed in policy discussions with Parliament and, as a result, CSOs have become more active in grassroots mobilisation. This has included:

- running a local petition drive in eight of the 12 counties in support of specific measures by districts to improve primary education in rural communities;
- increased work with media at the district and national levels, including targeting journalists on the education and parliamentary activity beats; and
- providing technical support and budgetary analysis at district and national levels, which has been shared with education officials and government technicians together with recommendations on reallocations.

These campaigns have not resulted in districts receiving new funding, but there have been reports of the reprioritisation of teacher training.

Environmental activism has increased exponentially since 2012 as an increasing number of communities are affected by the mining of the three Ts. Following intensive lobbying, the government has begun the formal process of signing up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). The first three steps of engagement on the part of the government, companies and CSOs have been completed. The plan is to move to step four, holding the first multi-stakeholder group (MSG), by April 2018.

The case

It is now February 2018, and sector working groups have started discussions on allocating the FY18/19 budget. Parliamentarians are also gearing up for their re-election campaigns, with elections scheduled for August.

As part of positioning themselves ahead of the election, the sitting parliamentarians have requested the finance minister, who is keen to retain her position after the election, to improve the engagement with CSOs in the education and environment sectors. To this end, she has set up a working group of parliamentarians, budget technicians and CSO representatives, which will be co-chaired by yourself and the newly recruited director general (DG) of budget.

You have been working in CSOs for more than ten years. Problems you encountered while working as a nurse initially focused you on maternal health issues, but recently you have moved into a position heading a CSO focused on environmental activism. This move came after your grandmother's home community in the north-west started having increasing issues with contaminated well water, possibly linked to a lightly regulated tin mine in a bordering district.

The DG of budget has invited you to a preparatory meeting ahead of the first working group. It is set up as an informal meeting; however, you know that it is an opportunity to set the tone for the working group's operation and content. Please prepare notes on what you think would be key items to have on the agenda of the first meeting, a suggested action plan for the next year and questions the DG would want to have his team answer ahead of the meeting.

The following are some questions to keep in mind as you draft your notes:

- What are some successes of the CSO work to date and how has this impacted on the government?
- What is the impact of the current breakdown in the relationship and who could stand to benefit or lose in its improvement?
- What might be the issues that the line ministries and CSOs would need separate support on to make their collaboration more successful?
- What are realistic expectations for effective CSO and public participation in the budget planning process?
- What is the potential effect of being in the run-up to the 2018 election and what might this mean for the CSO engagement strategy?

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