

Alternative Budgets

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Tool summary

Alternative budget initiatives are advocacy strategies that seek to highlight the limitations of public budgets with regard to key sectors or issues in society. Alternative budgets accomplish this typically by first emphasizing the failure of the budget to serve the interests of specific groups such as women, children, people with disabilities and the poor or cross-sectoral issues such as environmental conservation and then by proposing an alternative budget that addresses the needs of specific groups or issues. Sometimes, civil society organizations (CSOs) also formulate a comprehensive parallel budget that is more socially equitable, inclusive and responsive.

What is it?

CSOs use budget analysis and alternative budget to: reveal the underlying priorities and biases of the government's actual budget; raise public awareness about both the positive and negative impacts of the government budget on certain groups or issues of public concern; and challenge the government to justify their budget allocations and explain how those correlate with stated policy priorities. Ultimately, alternative budgets can be used to influence budget allocations and to complement other public budget expenditure monitoring practices.

Compared to other tools for civic engagement in the budgetary process, alternative budget is one of the most comprehensive and also potentially, the most influential. However, they require high level of technical skills while being conceived as part of a long-term advocacy agenda. An alternative budget requires in-depth understanding of the current or proposed government budget, rigorous empirical research on its effects on society and specific social groups, and the capacity to not only articulate alternative proposals but also do cost computation... Alternative budgets are likely to have the greatest impact when developed and advocated by a broad coalition of CSOs with mid to long-term policy advocacy goals.

How is it done?

Key steps in implementing an alternative budget:

1. *Initiate the process*

- Identify or establish a coalition of CSOs working on the issues or sector of priority concern.

- Convene a workshop or a working group to initiate the process and define the scope of work.
2. *Clarify the focus and objectives*
 - Initiatives typically focus on a specific area, sector or issues of priority interest such as for e.g. poverty, gender, education or environment. In some cases, they may also provide a comprehensive parallel budget, based on a broader theme such as social justice.
 - Typical objectives are raising public awareness, capacity building and advocating changes in budgetary allocations.
 3. *Analyse government budget*
 - Enlist the support of qualified researchers and specialists to access information on the current or proposed government budget and analyse the budget's impacts on the sector/issue of concern.
 4. *Draft alternative budget*
 - Based on analysis of the government budget, identify alternative proposals, compute costing for them and draft an alternative budget.
 5. *Publicize alternative budget*
 - An important component of alternative budget initiatives is media dissemination.
 - The media should be primed to report on the government's budget and its implications before it is announced, as well as to widely publicize the alternative budget and its specific recommendations.
 - Alternative budget groups should use their own networks and constituencies to hold public meetings and organize public education campaigns to discuss and disseminate the alternative budget proposals.
 6. *Advocacy and effective follow up*
 - Conduct extensive work with the media, parliamentarians and key government officials in the relevant ministries to change budgetary allocations in favour of marginalized societal groups, redistribute resources and change the type and quality of policies and programmes.

Benefits

- Highlights government priorities and shortcomings.
- Firm basis to build advocacy campaign with specific targets.
- Useful tool to rally broad-based coalitions and to mobilize specific social groups.

- Highlights the unmet needs and/or neglect of specific marginalised or less privileged groups.
- Serves to build citizen and civil society awareness of budget process, content and issues.

Challenges and lessons

- Lack of information on the impact of budget on a given target group will limit the efficacy of alternative budget
- It can be a very challenging task to develop viable alternatives and compute the costing for them. Coalitions should seek to use the same information used by the government in formulating its budget.
- Civil society space to voice its concerns in the budgetary process is often limited. Coalitions need to utilise the media and other supportive organisations both domestic and international, to apply pressure on governments to open a space for CSOs to actively participate in the budgetary process.
- Where access to information is limited, it may be necessary to create alliances with supportive ministers and/or to lobby for freedom of information legislation.
- Parliaments often also have limited power to influence budgets. Therefore, advocating for greater parliamentary powers in the budget process may also be necessary and a strategic move.
- In addition to working with parliamentarians, it is also strategic to target and develop working relationships with a range of public sector actors.
- In many countries, the level of “budget literacy” of citizens and CSOs is generally low. Only a few specialised CSOs often have the capacity to carry out budget analysis. Organising ‘budget schools’ for activists in different sectors can help build knowledge and skills in budget analysis over time.
- It is difficult to validate the impact of alternative budgets since changes in budget priorities can rarely be attributed to specific campaigns or initiatives.
- It can be challenging to maintain momentum and keep a broad coalition together due to the open-endedness and the long timeframe of such initiatives. It requires key individuals/organisations that are committed to driving the process over a medium to long-term time horizon.
- Significant capacity and resources are required for a comprehensive initiative. Therefore, alternative budgets are often seen as ‘donor-driven’ since organisations like the [International Budget Partnership](#), the World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and other multilateral organisations provide financial support to such alternative budget initiatives.
- A full fledged parallel budget is often not feasible due to resource and time constraints and in most cases, can only be carried out by specialized research institutions or think tanks.

- Success in changing budgetary priorities is most often achieved in times of political change which may open up a specific window of opportunity.

Key resources

Budlender, D. Review of Gender Budget Initiatives. Community Agency for Social Enquiry. Johannesburg. (2000)

<http://www.internationalbudget.org/resources/library/GenderBudget.pdf>

☞ This paper provides a brief description of gender budget activities in more than forty countries, followed by a discussion of key issues and strategies.

Cagatay, N & Keklik, M. et. al. Budgets As If People Mattered: Democratizing Macroeconomic Policies. UNDP-SEPED Conference Paper Series # 4. May 2000.

<http://www.internationalbudget.org/cdrom/papers/analysis/budgetsAsIfPeopleMattered.pdf>

☞ This paper published by the UNDP analyses a wide spectrum of people-centred budget initiatives. It reveals how these have transformed economic frameworks and policies into instruments of people-centred development and resulted in more pro-poor and gender-sensitive budgets.

Loxely, J. Making and Disseminating Alternative Budgets – a paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Civil Society Participation in Fiscal Policy, UN-DESA, New York. 15-16 March, 2004.

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan014877.pdf>

☞ This brief paper by a leading Canadian practitioner provides an overview of how different types of alternative budgets are prepared and disseminated.

Gender Budget Project: What is Gender Budgeting?

<http://www.unpac.ca/gender/whatis.html>

☞ Providing an excellent summary of the importance and know-how on gender-sensitive budget, this project brief also provides links to additional information on case studies and tools.

International Budget Partnership

<http://www.internationalbudget.org/>; <http://www.internationalbudget.org/CSBI.htm>

☞ The International Budget Partnership provides comprehensive information and guidance on different approaches and examples of action by government to report and enhance public access to information.

South African Council of Churches (SACC)



<http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/campaigns.html#peoples>

☞ Along with [South African NGO Coalition \(SANGOCO\)](#) and [Congress of South African Trade Unions \(COSATU\)](#), SACC launched a People's Budget Campaign in 2000 as part of which it publishes an annual People's Budget document to coincide with the Minister of Finance's Budget Speech in February. It also comments on other major aspects of the budget cycle and has published a study guide to the budget issues.

UNDP: Gender Sensitive Budgeting: An Overview (2004)

<http://www2.gtz.de/gender-prsp/english/papers/keynotes/zaoude.pdf>

☞ This presentation explains the meaning and importance of gender-sensitive budgeting along with lessons learnt.

UNIFEM – IDRC Secretariat: Gender Budget Initiatives: Strategies, Concepts and Initiatives (2001)

(http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/gender_budgets_cd/Budgets%20CD%20subsection%204.1/4.1c%20Gender%20budget%20initiatives%20UNIFEM%20link%20for%204.4f.pdf)

☞ Based on an international conference held in 2001, this publication presents current concepts, tools and analysis and summarizes experiences of gender budget work in a variety of countries.

United Nations Development Fund for Women: Gender Responsive Budgeting Unit

<http://www.gender-budgets.org/>

☞ This site offers a wealth of information about gender responsive budgeting in five languages.

Case Studies

Comprehensive Budget Initiatives

- Alternative Federal Budget (AFB), Canada

Canada's Alternative Federal Budget is developed by a broad coalition of trade unions, NGOs, community organizations, as well as academics and activists and presented just before the government's budget. The alternative federal budget adopts a holistic approach based on a set of basic principles and commitments such as: full employment; equitable distribution of income; eradication of poverty; gender equality in economic life; protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; improvement in the environment; strengthening of public services; and creation of a more just, sustainable and peaceful world order. Prepared annually since 1995, the AFB is a complete parallel budget, presented within a coherent macro-economic framework. While most budget exercises focus on the analysis of expenditures and to some degree on taxation, the AFB also addresses macro-economic policies, thereby strengthening the link between fiscal policy and monetary policy.

Source: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/b0e2a12e/>
<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/index.cfm?act=main&call=b0e2a12e>

The AFB is also described and analysed in, *Budgets as if People Mattered: Democratizing Macroeconomic Policies*, a report by UNDP (2000) p 28-30.
Source:

http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/gender_budgets_cd/Budgets%20CD%20subsection%204.1/4.1b%20budgets%20as%20if%20people%20mattered.pdf

(http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/gender_budgets_cd/Budgets%20CD%20subsection%204.1/4.1b%20budgets%20as%20if%20people%20mattered.pdf)

- The Citizens' Alternative Budget, Kenya

Kenya's Citizens' Alternative Budget is prepared by the [Institute for Economic Affairs](#) which solicits proposals from the public and key stakeholders through organising pre-budget hearings and uses them to develop an alternative budget. The [International Budget Project article 'Careful Planning, Safe Spending'](#) also looks at Kenya's alternative budget for 2006 – 2007.

- South African People's Budget Coalition



The initiative of SACC, SANGOCO and COSATU in South Africa aims to stimulate public debate on economic and social policy, promote economic policies that fight poverty and unemployment and create new opportunities for popular participation in the budget process. It publishes an annual People's Budget document to coincide with the Minister of Finance's Budget Speech in each February as well as a range of other documents analysing the government budget.

Source: <http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/campaigns.html#peoples>

- Lebanese Physical Handicap Union

A coalition led by the Lebanese Physical Handicap Union (LPHU) undertakes budget analysis, awareness-raising and budget literacy training.

Source: <http://www.idasa.org.za/gbOutputFiles.asp?WriteContent=Y&RID=1857>.

- Alternative Budget, Philippines

The 2008 Philippine Alternative Budget focuses on how a government budget would look if it were targeted toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Source: www.internationalbudget.org/resources/library/Alternative_Budget2008.pdf

- The Legislative Analyst's Office, California, USA

California's non-partisan Fiscal and Policy Advisor overseen by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee of the Californian Legislature acts as "the eyes and ears" of the Legislature to ensure that the executive branch implements the legislative policy in a cost efficient and effective manner. As part of this mandate, it prepares an annual alternative budget.

Source: <http://www.lao.ca.gov/>

Gender Budget Initiatives

- Australian Women's Budget

The pioneering work of the Australian Women's Budget which has already become institutionalized in the Government Office for Women, publishes a Women's Budget Kit for each year's budget.

Source: <http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/budget2005/index.htm>

- The Tanzania Gender Budget Initiative

The Tanzania Gender Budget Initiative run by the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme succeeded in improving gender-equitable approaches in relevant government ministries by building the capacity and awareness of key government actors on gender budgeting and running civil society advocacy campaigns at the same time.

Source: http://www.tgnp.org/0gbi_intro.htm

- Women's Budget Group, United Kingdom

The UK Women's Budget Group is a broad-based coalition of women's NGOs, trade unions and researchers aiming to raise awareness and assist government in understanding the gender-related consequences of economic policy and in advocating for more gender-equitable budgets.

Source: <http://www.wbg.org.uk>

Children's Budget Initiatives

- IDASA's Children's Budget Unit, South Africa

The Children's Budget Unit of IDASA publishes briefs on the budgetary effects on children in South Africa and has developed a training manual to enhance children's capacity for rights-based budget analysis and self-advocacy.

Source:

http://www.idasa.org.za/index.asp?page=Programme_details.asp%3FRID%3D19

Environmental Budget Initiatives

- Green Budgets in Canada, the US and the UK

Environmental budgets or "green budgets" analyse a government's budget in terms of its environmental impacts. Examples of green budgets include those implemented by the [Canadian Green Budget Coalition](#), [Save our Environment in the US](#) and the [Institute of Fiscal Studies in the U.K.](#)