



IPU/UNICEF Background Note

The role of parliament in assessing the impact of legislation and budgetary decision-making on children.

Issues of prioritization in the allocation of resources to implement the international commitments for children.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the outcome of the World Summit for Children in 1990, and the UN Millennium Declaration revealed the need to accomplish institutional and societal transformations to meet the challenges of child survival, development, protection and participation. Putting children first on the financial agenda of both developed and developing countries is one of the most substantial expressions of a will to implement the high level political commitments then taken.

In recent years, the IPU, UNIFEM, UN Programmes and Funds, the Commonwealth Secretariat and numerous women's organizations, have demonstrated that the integration of a gender perspective into national budgets has powerful economic, social and fiscal pay-offs. Today we can borrow from this experience to see how to incorporate a children's perspective in the national budget.

UNICEF and others have developed the concept of "investing in children" which argues that the child rights perspective compels societies to obligate the required resources to fulfil these rights. More specifically, the working hypothesis is that integrating the child rights perspective in national budget-making processes transforms the way societies act for desired institutional and social change.

Investing in children – in every child - is the foundation of a more just society, at all levels, e.g. local, national and global, and contributes to long term economic growth and development. Investing in children is a fundamental prerequisite to provide equal rights to girls and boys, to achieve international peace and security. Within this framework, parliaments and their members have a unique responsibility: guaranteeing the required human and financial resources for the fulfilment of the rights of every child.

This paper sets the basis for such an approach and highlights key issues for debate during - and after - this Parliamentary Forum, a supporting event of the May 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. It aims at sensitising MPs to the tools at their disposal to influence - and monitor - the impact budgets have on children. It suggests that further work is needed to fully demonstrate that the best guarantee for achieving equitable and sustainable human development are investments in children.

Budgeting from a child rights perspective

Taking into account how children and youth are - or are not - protected in society, sheds light on the real potential of their right to participate in shaping their world. Furthermore, the child rights perspective allows decision makers to understand and deal with the causes of social and political marginalization, gender discrimination, and the nature of all forms of violence that have debilitating effects on child growth and development.

Sustainable basic services for all children – i.e. communities' access to and quality of health, education, water and sanitation -- as well as child protection and participation, are fundamental to poverty reduction and the fulfilment of human rights. Without the availability of adequate sources of financing, this goal will remain elusive. The corollary of good governance and sound policies are increased financial commitments.

The National Budget is the most important policy statement made by the Executive in the course of the year. Budgets are not neutral: they reflect the fundamental values underlying national policy and are a declaration of the government's fiscal, financial and economic objectives, reflecting its social and economic priorities. They further provide a valuable measure of the government's future intentions as well as past performance.

The budget is more than a financial document: it is a major social policy document. In that regard, many investments that benefit children can be indirect: they are not necessarily synonymous with monetary investment and can simply mean, for instance, changing the rules throughout the social safety net and other services so that they apply to children first. The Convention on the rights of the Child provides the conceptual framework for such changes.

In considering the budget-making process, several questions should be addressed, such as:

- What are the specific roles of parliamentarians – as legislators, opinion makers, and community leaders – in ensuring that the child rights perspective drives the manner in which resources are allocated?
- What are the tensions that parliaments must resolve to take into account the needs of children and reflect them in the budget? In other words, when lawmakers debate the hierarchy of priorities, do they use all the arguments child rights offers to them?
- Once the national budget is presented to Parliament, what instruments do parliamentarians use to analyse the coherence of the policies set forth, and to scrutinize them from the child rights perspective?
- Is the child rights perspective adequately combined with a gender perspective?

From knowledge to practice: key sets of issues

Prioritisation in budgetary decision-making: the need for global and specific situation analyses

- How can parliamentarians reconcile the many demands for children, older people, women, unemployed etc? The child rights perspective cannot always be dissociated with other societal priorities and issues. For instance, failure to address the underlying causes of poverty, malnutrition, gender inequalities and other social ills, negatively impacts on children.
- Of overriding importance is a comprehensive and correct analysis of the impact on children of the legal, economic, social and cultural context. For example, the integration of the sociological dimension of norms and practices of child-rearing, in particular the social construction of inequalities between boys and girls, adds the kind of qualitative measure which is indispensable for lawmakers to introduce meaningful child-specificity into budget-making.
- Decisions should take into account the given policy environment and cross-sectoral comparisons to understand the limitations of existing concerns for children. Other perceived priorities may be incompatible with the exigencies of the child rights perspective.
- Children, as a category, need to be disaggregated. While all children have inalienable rights, not all children in the same age-cohort or sex have the same needs. It is particularly important to fully evaluate what happens when children fall “below” certain health, nutritional and educational thresholds. Defining vulnerability for budget prioritisation can therefore be a useful approach, especially when this is done with participatory methods.

Impact of economic and social policies on the budget and resources allocated to children

- Macro-economic decisions that ultimately expand or shrink the total budget, are to be studied with care as they often determine how much one can ultimately invest in children-related programmes. Concomitantly, the challenge lies in moving the emphasis from the amount of financing to the goal of financing; for what purpose are the resources going to be used; who will it be channelled and distributed through; how will the effectiveness and – in the final analysis – the legitimacy be judged?
- In many emerging economies, budgets are subject to structural adjustments and conditionalities. It is against that background that MPs have a responsibility to determine the degree of overall “priority” given to women and children. This also applies in countries where budgetary austerity policies or war-related difficulties may relegate such issues to a lower level of priority.
- Budget deficits, which are the norm in most countries, require judicious management. They are not necessarily a burden on future generations provided that a commensurate portion of the required government borrowing is invested, directly or indirectly, in the development of children. Some of such investments have very direct economic returns and should be considered priority in a deficit situation.
- Macro-economic policy should be made more sensitive to child rights. This child rights sensitivity should particularly apply to issues relating to debt relief. International organisations, and more particularly UNICEF should therefore be encouraged to strengthen advocacy in this field.
- Investments in children can be made not only through expenditures but also by paying close attention to the revenue side of the budget. The tax system in particular must be structured so as to provide maximum sustainable support for children of all ages. The two sides of the budget, revenues and expenditures, must be made to work together so that what is given with one hand is not taken away with the other.

Access to information and development of practical tools for MPs

- Comparative analyses should be made available to MPs to give them the relevant elements needed to lead budget debates. For example, there exists a growing body of knowledge on different thresholds – in preventive health, education for all, community leadership – which are key in setting targets, and in costing for sustainability. Of great help are “typologies of situations” – sets of scenarios in which desired results for children [sector wide and across sectors] can be delivered, with different synergies, according to different sub-national needs.

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides parliaments with a holistic and comprehensive child perspective: it is both conceptual and practical for parliamentarians to go through the motions of child-specific target-setting with their constituencies, at all levels.
- Access to Guidelines/checklists for parliamentarians could facilitate their commitment to influence the budgeting process from the child rights perspective. References to medium term expenditure frameworks, which for example demonstrate how benefits for the poorest segments of the population actually reverse trends of human insecurity, should be made available to lawmakers.
- An important kind of analysis that complements the discussion on the budget pertains to the cost effectiveness of various options to meet child-related goals. The most expensive models of service delivery are not always the most effective at certain stages of economic and social development, so information about all possible options must be supplied to decision-makers. For example, studies show that for many young people, non-formal education is at least as effective as formal education but considerably more affordable to deliver, so that more youth can benefit.

Parliamentary and other institutional mechanisms – including the consolidation of public support – to monitor the impact budgets have on children:

- Once the budget is adopted, parliament should go a step further to monitor its impact on children by setting up the appropriate institutional mechanism. Various best practices have already proven their effectiveness in this regard. They include:
 - the establishment of a parliamentary committee on child rights, that would follow and monitor the implementation of the child rights budget;
 - the setting up, where it does not exist, of an institution of an ombudsman for children who would be appointed by Parliament and accountable to it, and who would follow the budget's impact on children;
 - the holding of an annual debate in Parliament on progress made and constraints met in furthering society's full respect for the rights of children.
- Individual members of parliament should be encouraged to publicly discuss with their constituencies the place of child rights in social and economic change. Grass roots support is important for MPs when advocating for the integration of child rights in lawmaking in general, and at every step of budgetary decision-making in particular.