

Participatory Budgeting and Telecommunications to Build Transparency and Accountability

Summary

Project feedback mechanisms driven by participatory budgeting and new innovations in information communication technology are working to successfully build transparency, increase accountability and overcome a long history of mistrust in the Democratic Republic of Congo's South Kivu Province.

Challenge

Following decades of colonial rule, conflict upon conflict, mismanagement, and internal corruption, the Democratic Republic of Congo's national government was left with limited institutional capacity to provide effective services at the local level. This limited capacity has often prompted citizens' groups to view the central government as illegitimate, rent-seeking authorities uninterested in ensuring that resources filter down from the capital to far flung provinces such as South Kivu.

"At the local level, both the provincial government and the national government struggle to provide services," said Tiago Carneiro Peixoto, a World Bank Consultant on governance. "In many cases donors and NGOs take the lead in delivering most services. There was a clear need for a project that understood how to create incentives for improved relations between the local government and the provincial and national governments."

Approach

The project approach has focused on creating incentives to build trust between local level actors and officials at the provincial and national level.

"It became very clear early on that a great deal of mistrust stemmed from budgetary issues," said Peixoto. "When money did reach the grassroots level, community members felt they had no say in how it was spent. For this reason the ICT4Gov project focuses on empowering stakeholders to participate in the budgeting process. Plus, ICT4Gov has taken the traditional participatory budgeting methodology one step farther by integrating the use of mobile phones."

Initially the project provided training and on-going support to local stakeholders on the various steps of participatory budgeting that resulted in a consensus-driven list of how government money should be spent within the community. ICT4Gov then used mobile phones to ensure accountability and to promote community members involvement in new ways. Mobile phones serve four roles:

- In addition to using word of mouth and community postings to publicize when participatory budgeting assemblies were to happen, ICT4Gov sends SMS messages directly to households in the community announcing when and where the meetings would take place.
- Citizens are able to use their mobile phones to vote via SMS on what priorities they would like to see addressed in their community.
- Community leaders use SMS to announce voting outcomes. This has served to promote transparency and squelch misleading rumors.
- Finally, mobile phones are being used as monitoring and evaluation tools. Using SMS citizens are able to provide feedback in totally new ways about the projects being implemented.

"By combining face-to-face meetings with mobile SMS, we have been able to take participatory budgeting to a level of participation and deliberation that we had not previously experienced," said Peixoto. "This has helped get municipalities out of the habit of making unrealistic budgets. In the past there has been a tendency for local governments to inflate budgets to the point that they were no longer realistic. However, this often took the focus away from thinking about trade-offs, priorities and what the government could feasibly deliver."

Results

Early results indicate the participatory budgeting process in the DRC is working. Governments have become motivated to meet with community members to discuss needs for services and are currently developing strategies to institutionalize the process of participatory budgeting with civil society organizations. Most importantly, resources that were once absorbed by central governments are beginning to filter down to the community level.

"People have realized that funds are arriving and are being used to respond to their needs," said Councilor of the Ministry of Budget in South Kivu, Jean Bunani.

Secondly, preliminary findings from an external evaluation suggest citizens are more likely pay their taxes as they now associate paying taxes with tangible improvements in service delivery. In some cases, local tax collection has increased up to 20 times since the process began.

Thirdly, with resources now reaching the grassroots, community investment has shot up as communities have gone from not having any investment budget to devoting 40 percent of their budget to investments. Local budgets are no longer eaten up entirely by salaries, equipment, and other administrative expenses. As a result, communities now have the resources to deliver public services. For instance, in Luhinja 54 classrooms and a bridge are under construction, while in Bagira a new health center is being built and repairs are being

carried out on the sewage system; in Ibanda water fountains and public toilets are being installed at local markets.

Most importantly, citizens have taken early ownership of the process and news of this success is spreading. This is leading to increasing support for further participation from all segments of the community, particularly women.

"Beyond creating a more inclusive environment, the beauty of the ICT4Gov project in South Kivu is that citizen participation translates into demonstrated and measurable results on mobilizing more public funds for services for the poor," said Boris Weber, Senior Governance Specialist at the World Bank Institute and team leader for the ICT4Gov program.

"What I like the most about participatory budgeting is the participation... and the transparency," said one citizen of Bagira, South Kivu. "Before I did not know how much money our city made. Now I know how much we have collected in tax, how much we have spent, and we have a say in how this money is spent."

Bank Contribution

The World Bank played a key role in facilitating dialogue among stakeholders. This early discussions served to build the foundation of trust necessary for each party to take ownership of the project. Enhancing Governance Capacity program on which this work is built is financed by a US\$64.45 million IDA contribution. ICT4Gov provided the technical assistance to the approach.

Partners

Early in the process stakeholders were brought together to make up a new multi-stakeholder steering committee including representatives from government, CSOs, academia, and telecommunications service providers. While the World Bank provides financing and technical support, staffing needs are met by government officials familiar with the particular working environment and local CSOs.

Moving Forward

The ultimate goal is to ensure the long-term local sustainability of the project, which is currently expanding into other regions. A key obstacle to this will be local financing to cover the cost of SMS. In this respect, the ICT4Gov team is currently formulating strategies to continue expanding the tax base. Also, there are plans to expand the participatory budgeting process so that more community members can be involved.