

ANSA-Africa

Strengthening accountability systems and institutions

Participatory budgeting was initiated in 1989 by the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, as a way to involve communities in making decisions about municipal budgeting and expenditure. It expanded rapidly to other Brazilian cities over the next six years, then to Latin America and Europe over the following five years.

Although in Africa participatory budgeting is gaining ground in central and local governments and other institutions, many countries are still plagued by poor transparency and weak accountability, because of closed-door budget processes, weak accounting and reporting systems, ineffective audits and the exclusion of civil society from dialogue.

By contrast, the participatory budgeting process gives a platform for everyone to have a say in the formulation and implementation of the budget. As a March 30, 2007 editorial in The Herald newspaper in Harare, Zimbabwe, says:

The concept of participatory budgeting is an annual process of democratic decision-making in which ordinary city residents and other stakeholders decide how to allocate part of a municipal budget. Embracing of this idea is most welcome ... It is, indeed, sad that most authorities running municipalities in developing countries dislike public scrutiny of their revenue and expenditure. Such authorities should be reminded that they are accountable to the ratepayers and must conduct themselves in a manner which dispels the notion that they have something to hide. Studies have shown that participatory budgeting results in more equitable public spending, higher quality of life, increased satisfaction of basic needs, greater transparency and accountability. Surprisingly, in Zimbabwe, only Ruwa Local Board is practicing visible participatory budgeting.

Participatory budgeting is divided into distinct stages. In short, the process involves debating, analysing, prioritising, mobilising resources, and monitoring and evaluating the expenditure of public funds and investments. Some of the major characteristics of this process are:

- The discussion of financial or budgetary issues, explicitly dealing with the allocation of limited resources;
- A continuous process accompanied by meetings on the mobilisation and allocation of resources;
- The inclusion of all citizens, directly or indirectly, in the formulation and implementation of the annual budget;
- The prioritisation of demands in a manner that supports the poor, including the needs of the socially marginalized groups; that is, to facilitate a fairer distribution of resources;
- The definition and shared understanding of the rules that apply to participatory budgeting; and
- The participatory process is often based on territorial and thematic divisions, and requires solid communication and information mechanisms to ensure transparent decision making and outputs.

Traditional budgeting is the preserve of municipal officials led by the treasurer or director of finance; participatory budgeting concerns citizens involved in the identification of needs and priorities to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The participatory budgeting method suggests that in order to have meaningful public input in the decision-making process, knowledge and awareness must first be built through public education and information. The involvement of beneficiaries during the entire process provides additional forms of control and improves budget transparency and accountability.

Through this process of dialogue, participatory budgeting improves communication between local government and citizens and helps to build solidarity and community spirit. It also increases public ownership of development programmes, as citizens better understand the need for paying rates and taxes because they can see where these funds are being spent in their communities. The value of the participatory budgeting mechanism has been demonstrated in African communities like those involved in the Local Authority Transfer Fund programme in Kenya, where municipalities involve community leaders in the distribution and spending of public funds.

This summary is an edited excerpt from "Participatory Budgeting in Africa: A Training Companion, With Cases from Eastern and Southern Africa", published by UN-Habitat and the Municipal Development Partnership for Eastern and Southern Africa, 2008. For more information, please download volume one of this document from www.ansa-africa.net, visit www.mdpafrica.org.zw, or email region@mdpafrica.org.zw. More detailed information on social accountability mechanisms is available in the growing collection of practical reports and articles compiled by ANSA-Africa. Please visit www.ansa-africa.net/index.php/toolkits_and_methodologies/.



About ANSA-Africa: The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in Africa (ANSA-Africa) was established in December 2006 as a joint initiative between the World Bank and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa, with the following goals:

- To develop collaboration across Africa on social accountability and demand-side governance initiatives;
- To provide technical assistance to greatly enhance the quality of social accountability initiatives in different countries;
- To deliver training programs on specific tools and techniques;
- To share country experiences and lessons from social accountability and demand-side governance initiatives, promote and build on Africans' expertise in this area; and
- To establish and strengthen a network of social accountability practitioners and the stakeholders drawn from government, research institutions and civil society.

Yours for the growth of social accountability,

The ANSA-Africa Team

Email: ansa@hsrc.ac.za

Website: <http://www.ansa-africa.net>

ANSA-Africa website: www.ansa-africa.net
ANSA-Africa is hosted by the [Human Sciences Research Council \(HSRC\)](#)