

New Budget Work in Pakistan, Omar Foundation

In Pakistan an established civil society organization has recently begun to incorporate budget analysis into their set of core activities. With support from the International Budget Project, the Open Society Institute, and the Civil Society Budget Initiative, new projects are underway to increase citizen awareness and involvement in issues surrounding government budgets.

The Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation (www.oakdf.org.pk) has initiated the pilot year of a new project: "Putting Money Where the Needs Are: Matching Money with People's Priorities." The foundation was founded in 1999 to promote the human rights of the poor and vulnerable through advocacy, social mobilization, and service provision. It works to create opportunities for people to work collectively towards human and livelihood rights by building asset bases and making institutions and policies more pro-poor.

The new project will further that mission through citizen activism to push for more effective use of resources and an expansion of the political space for participation in the development process, basing its arguments on evidence from local communities. The project's goals are to make government policies more responsive to the needs of affected populations (particularly the marginalized) and to improve government accountability and transparency.

In pursuit of these goals, the foundation has developed an ambitious five-year plan for "demand side" budget work through community-based needs assessments, government engagement for appropriate allocations, implementation monitoring, and budget and policy advocacy. The new project reflects a citizen-centered approach to budget work that engages citizens directly in gathering and analyzing information as a way of organizing and building participation, in contrast to a more policy-centered process where "expert" civil society policy researchers produce analyses for a government audience.

Activities in the pilot year (which began in July 2006) are focusing on urgent community needs associated with earthquake relief and reconstruction in the mountainous North-West Frontier Province. The project is beginning work in 11 of the worst-affected union councils, each of which consists of 20 to 30 villages. This initial focus on the reconstruction process is expected to build capacity — in both the foundation and local partners — for future work around other development needs.

Of necessity, many of the foundation's recent activities have centered on relief to victims of the devastating 2005 earthquake, which was focused in a region where the foundation is already very active. The foundation used local contacts and knowledge to join in relief efforts and emergency service provision through its regional offices. Also, it continues to be active in the routing of funds and policy implementation in ongoing rehabilitation efforts, working with local groups. Donor funds for this work are provided through the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund and the government reconstruction authority.

An estimated \$5.2 billion in foreign funds has been pledged for future reconstruction efforts, which raises important questions about transparency and public accountability. Numerous recent international efforts to mobilize resources in

response to disasters and conflicts risk generating “donor fatigue” in the absence of accountability and demonstrated results for those funds. One of the best ways to hold governments accountable for rehabilitation and rebuilding is by having the very people who are meant to receive the aid monitor and advocate for its effective and fair distribution.

The core element of the foundation’s budget project is helping communities develop village-level rehabilitation action plans (V-RAPs). The foundation has selected representative villages in each of the initial 11 union councils and is facilitating with local partners a five-day process in each village to identify and prioritize needs with local groups. Individual V-RAPs are then consolidated into a single action plan for each union council, and then further consolidated into district-level action plans for affected areas by representative analysts from village groups. The resulting action plans, which detail the steps required of government and other stakeholders (including estimates of the necessary budget allocations), are validated in local meetings and at broader “people’s assemblies” convened by the foundation.

Finally, the action plans will be presented to government decision-makers in meetings organized to ask officials how those priorities are being addressed and to press for more action in both rehabilitation budgets and recurrent budgets. The foundation will provide participating citizens’ groups with advance training in budget processes and effective advocacy techniques.

To monitor local implementation of the plans in selected union councils, the foundation will help create local organizations that will fill out “citizen report cards” comparing government promises with observable outputs. The report cards will be released to the media and stakeholders in order to promote citizen engagement with government. A strong program of media engagement is also planned.

At the end of the pilot year, the foundation will review the results and consider expanding into other geographic areas and development budget issues. Work is expected to continue in the earthquake zones, though rehabilitation monitoring efforts in these areas should require less intensive support and permit expansion of the project elsewhere.

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