Concept Note

Project Title: Exploring the Potential Impacts Of Open Data In The Caribbean Through Participatory Budgeting

Project Duration: 12 months, Jan 2013 – Dec 2013

Background and Justification

Jamaica, and the wider English-speaking Caribbean region, have generally enjoyed a culture and tradition of openness in Budget information and approval processes. Indeed, annual parliamentary budget debates have become signature political events that attract considerable attention among political pundits, financial analysts and commentators, and the media. However the level of engagement with the average citizen in the national budget is fleeting at best. Budget presentations and debates are often exercises in political points-scoring, embellished with large numbers and an elusive vocabulary about macro-economics and fiscal policy that is lost on the lay-person. In Jamaica, budget details are published online in multiple pdf documents with the substance of programs, priorities and funding allocations obscured by hundreds of line item details.

Beyond the stage of presentation, debate and enactment, the remainder of the budget life-cycle typically disappears into the bureaucracy of government operational and administrative business, with little further opportunity for real civil society engagement until the following year's budget presentation.

About budget transparency

According to the Transparency & Accountability Initiative[1], the goal of **transparency** goes well beyond data or information disclosure, and emphasizes the release of information about government actions; plans and processes, in such a way as make it relevant, accessible, timely and accurate to the broadest set of constituents across civil society. On the other hand, while **accountability** mechanisms are often defined in terms of formal processes, and constitutionally appointed oversight structures, it is also acknowledged that civic participation is a necessary element of good governance and essential to realizing genuine accountability goals.

Budget transparency as a specific domain of interest has particular relevance within the wider sphere of emerging Open Data principles and practice. This is so because Budgets, by their nature, provide a tangible, quantifiable manifestation of how national policies and priorities are set. The budget essentially represents the principal management tool of government, and intersects with many aspects of governance including fiscal policy, administrative reform, service delivery, and development initiatives.

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[1] Fölscher, A. (2010). Budget transparency: New frontiers in transparency and accountability, Transparency & Accountability Initiative.

As such, initiatives geared at facilitating open, participatory budget processes are seen as a fundamental platform for a wider culture of Government-2-ciitizen transparency, accountability and engagement.

Furthermore, budget transparency initiatives that encompass the full budget life-cycle and incorporate public expenditure in addition to budget data, have demonstrated the less-expected impact of providing significant data sharing benefits to civil servants themselves by enabling faster access to relevant data within the government departments, and contributing to better interconnections between people working in indirectly related domains e.g. on labour policies and requiring fiscal data on income tax revenues and unemployment benefits[2].

Scope of this Open Data initiative
This project will seek to build on the Open Data capabilities and initiatives currently being implemented by the Caribbean Open Institute (COI), with a specific emphasis on open data applications in the upstream and downstream stages of the national budget cycle.

It will involve the following components:
a) Benchmark the current Budget governance process in Jamaica and one other selected Caribbean country, according to international best practice and standards and employing standardized instruments developed by the International Budget Partnership through their Open Budget Initiative[3]

b) Work with the relevant Government agencies to publish budget and expenditure data in an Open Data format, together with meaningful visual representations and APIs that can be used as the basis for increased visibility and participation of civil society in the budget process. This will be enabled using the OpenSpending platform developed by the Open Knowledge Foundation. Some preliminary work has already been done by the COI in budget visualization
    (See http://caribbeanopeninstitute.org/gojbudget_Functions)

c) Data Journalism Capacity building: Conduct training workshops with one or more media houses and journalists to create a cadre of journalists with the skills and interest to become key communication and infomediary resources in the process of participatory budgeting;

d) Work with select political representatives, advocacy and/or membership-based groups to plan for and implement Participatory Budget pilots in targeted constituencies and one or more functional domains (eg. education or health sectors). This exercise would be planned to coincide with the upcoming budget planning / preparation cycle.

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[2] The DataBC Open Data Portal of British Columbia - http://openspending.org/resources/gift/chapter2-2.html
[3] http://internationalbudget.org/what-we-do/major-ibp-initiatives/open-budget-initiative/

Research objectives

The primary objective of the one-year case study will be to demonstrate the potential for the use of open data principles and international best practice in participatory budgeting, to materially impact on the efficacy of national budget governance and life-cycle processes.

Tangible, measurable outcomes in terms of improvements in budget life-cycle transparency, civic awareness, engagement and participation in the budgeting process are expected over the course of the study. The Open Budget Index will be used as the basis for measuring the impact of the various initiatives.

Longer-term impact outcomes to be monitored and tracked will include improved budget allocation efficiency, budget performance and over time greater accountability and potentially, improved national tax compliance through enhanced civil society trust and engagement.

Methodological Considerations and identification of anticipated risks

There are several key aspects to the methodological approach being considered for this undertaking:

i. **Open Budget Survey:** In order to establish a baseline for current budget practices in the countries participating in the study, the Open Budget Survey from the International Budget Partnership Initiative will be adopted and administered. This is a comprehensive survey and analysis instrument that evaluates whether governments give the public sufficient access to budget information and opportunities to participate in the budget process at the national level. The survey will also make it feasible to conduct cross-country comparisons, both within the Caribbean region as well as internationally, using the Open Budget Index (OBI)

ii. **Open Data Publishing Process**: From the technical perspective, the OpenSpending project, from the Open Knowledge Foundation, is an open source technology platform that provides tools and processes geared at making financial data released by governments accessible and usable by a wider cross-section of civil society including the media, journalists, schools and ordinary citizens. This will be used as the basis for publishing budget and expenditure data in an Open Data format, together with meaningful visual representations and APIs. The visualization and query capabilities built into the openspending platform, and used for applications such as the UK's Where Does My Money Go?(http://wheredoesmymoneygo.org/), will provide the basis and illustrations for the data journalism component.

iii. **Fellows-based Engagement Model**: For the engagement process with public sector officials, and other participating civil society stakeholders (both in media and other kinds of representative organizations), we will be employing the fellows-based change agent model, inspired by Code For America, Commons for Europe, the

White House Innovation fellowship and other civic technologist initiatives. The fellows model is a recent, but rapidly emerging, approach to facilitating social innovations and engagement between government, citizens and technologists to improve service delivery and create new entrepreneurial opportunities. The model is based on the open development hypothesis that "*positive development can emerge through new models of engagement and innovation that are more participatory, more collaborative, and driven more by beneficiaries*". It will combine (1) broader collaboration between citizens and governance institutions#, with (2) open data and user-centric design principles, to build applications that create new and improve existing government services.

iv. **Budget life-cycle facilitation**: The project will seek to go beyond visibility and access to budget data, and will explore opportunities for technology applications and facilitation in each of the four phases of the budget process i.e. *formulation, approval, execution and monitoring.* An example of such an application could be the use of mobile applications to canvas citizen engagement in the budget formulation process, a mechanism that would be particularly applicable at the local, constituency level.

Two key risk factors to be managed are:
(i)   Willingness of the government and public sector officials, to participate in novel, experimental approaches to participatory budgeting, using mechanisms such as public forums, the media and mobile-enabled channels. While there is already an established culture of openness in terms of publishing official budget numbers, which makes it possible for some aspects of this initiative to be demand-side driven, it is likely that successful civil society engagement and participation will require visible signals of public sector endorsement

(i)   Availability of civil society stakeholders, both in media and other kinds of representative organizations, with a capacity and/or interest in budget literacy, data journalism and constructive advocacy, that are willing to participate in this initiative.