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AS A WAY TO MONITOR, EVALUATE AND INFLUENCE THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The 160 States Parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are legally bound to progressively realize the right to food and other socio-economic rights to the “maximum of available resources”. Budget analysis is a method to assess to what extent this obligation is being met.

Budget analysis is crucial in evaluating government decisions about allocation and distribution of scarce resources among competing priorities, and whether adequate resources are allocated to human rights. The analysis includes how funds are allocated and how revenue (e.g. tax) is obtained. Reliable data is vital to identify gaps between rhetoric and facts and to bring about the necessary changes required to fill these gaps.

The State budget is the most concrete declaration of a government’s national priorities. Budgets express government commitment to a policy and indicate the level of priority assigned to it. Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic growth in civil society organizations’ capacity to hold their governments accountable for decisions related to allocation of public resources. Improved budget transparency has increased public engagement in the budget process. This has enhanced pro-poor budget policies, allocations and outcomes.

Right to Food Guidelines

Right to Food Guideline* 12, “National Financial Resources”, advocates that states should allocate resources for anti-hunger and food security purposes in their respective budgets and ensure transparency and accountability in the use of public resources. The Guideline also encourages states to “promote basic social programmes and expenditures, in particular those affecting the poor and the vulnerable segments of society, and protect them from budget reductions”, and to “strive to ensure that budget cuts do not negatively affect access to adequate food among the poorest sections of society”.

Guideline 14, “Safety Nets”, complements this by stating that “States should take steps, to the extent that resources permit, so that any measure of an economic or financial nature likely to have a negative impact on existing levels of food consumption of vulnerable groups be accompanied by provision for effective food safety nets”. In the section on international measures, actions and commitments, the Right to Food Guidelines state that developed states should provide financial assistance and make concrete efforts towards the targets for overseas development assistance of 0.7 percent of GNP, including 0.15-0.20 percent of GNP to least developed countries.

Duty Bearers and Stakeholders

While states are the ultimate duty bearers in the realization of the right to food, civil society also has an important role to play. Civil society is well equipped to hold the government accountable for its actions and omissions. This can be achieved by monitoring government actions, assessing effectiveness of those efforts and using the findings to influence government policies related to the right to food. Other actors also have an important role to play in monitoring, defining and assessing the national budget. Government itself, parliamentarians and national human rights institutions monitor national revenue and expenditures closely and compare them with the national development strategy. These actors often face the challenge of developing the knowledge and skills that enable them to carry out these important tasks.

Budget analysis methodology

Within this broad context, the FAO Right to Food Unit assists these different actors to monitor, evaluate and influence the realization of the right to food. A study presently available in draft form provides essential guidance on how to use budget work to:

- identify policies and programs that are essential to realize the right to food;
- analyze the government's revenue and expenditures to determine how well these reflect and will help the implementation of the identified policies and programs;
- integrate this analysis into an overall perspective on government priorities and policy-making.

Country studies will enable the comparison of information from different contexts and develop accurate perspectives on what can be done and how it can be done in varying contexts.

The methodology shows how governments, NGOs, and civil society organizations can monitor, evaluate and influence realization of this human right by:

- identifying elements that are measurable in budgetary terms;
- examining fiscal revenue and expenditures as they relate to poverty and the realization of the right to food;
- presenting good practices to adequately inform citizens on planning and budget issues (transparency), facilitating meaningful participation of civil society (participation), and good and timely reporting (accountability);
- explaining techniques to monitor budget trends and evaluate whether a national budget complies with the ICESCR

** The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, adopted by FAO Council in November 2004 are available for downloading on the right to food website: www.fao.org/righttofood.*