

The Commonwealth Secretariat: The role of external agencies

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Introduction

Gender-responsive budget (GRB) initiatives have caught the attention of the gender and development community. Governments, intergovernmental organisations, development agencies, and civil society groups are promoting the use of such initiatives as a central part of their strategy to advance gender equality. This enthusiasm reflects the varied purposes gender-responsive budgets can serve. These include, among others:

- ◆ improving the allocation of resources to women;
- ◆ supporting gender mainstreaming in macroeconomics;
- ◆ strengthening civil society participation in economic policy making;
- ◆ enhancing the linkages between economic and social policy outcomes;
- ◆ tracking public expenditure against gender and development policy commitments; and
- ◆ contributing to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (Budlender et al, 2002: 12).

Although the focus of implementation and analysis of GRB initiatives has been at the country level, there is a need for attention to the role of external agencies. This chapter examines the involvement of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the development and implementation of these initiatives. In so doing, it attempts to identify how external agencies can get involved in work in this area and the role they can play at national, regional and international levels. A useful analysis of the role and challenges of donor involvement in these initiatives can be found in *Global Assessment of Gender-Responsive Budget Initiatives* (Budlender et al, 2002: 91).

There are two qualifications which are relevant to this case study.

First, the Commonwealth Secretariat did not provide support to all the GRB initiatives within the Commonwealth. Many were autonomous, in some cases supported by other agencies. Second, the Commonwealth Secretariat's initial approach in implementing initiatives advocated for a government-led process at the national level. However, a feature of many of the Commonwealth initiatives has been the leading role of civil society.

Commonwealth countries which have sought to implement gender-responsive budgets include Australia, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Canada, Fiji Islands, India, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, St Kitts and Nevis, Tanzania, Uganda, UK, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Background

The Commonwealth is an association of 54 independent states, working together in areas of common interest. With a total population of 1.7 billion people, the Commonwealth represents a third of the world's population and a third of the membership of the United Nations. One of the features of the Commonwealth is the articulation of a developing countries' perspective.

The Commonwealth has been closely associated with GRB initiatives. This is due in part to the number of initiatives – nearly half of the fifty known to have been implemented – that are from the Commonwealth. Additional factors include:

- ◆ The Commonwealth Secretariat has been centrally involved in the production of tools, methodology and capacity building materials for this programme area;
- ◆ The Commonwealth has contributed to the international advocacy for the implementation of GRB initiatives; and
- ◆ The Commonwealth Secretariat has sought to encourage partnerships and collaboration between agencies interested in supporting work in this area. The most significant outcome of this has been the programme partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Why Gender-responsive Budgets?

Building on existing strengths

Although some agencies within the international community have sought to be leaders on a broad range of gender and development issues, the Commonwealth Secretariat, due to limited human and financial resources, has concentrated its efforts in specific areas where it has been able to demonstrate a comparative advantage. One such area of advantage has been in encouraging governments to integrate gender into economic policy.

The Commonwealth was, for many years, involved in raising awareness of the impact of macroeconomic policy on women. The 1989 Commonwealth Expert Group *Engendering Adjustment for the 1990s* examined the negative impact on women of inappropriate structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989: 6). It emphasised the importance of social equity and economic growth as well as efficiency, and recommended the full integration of women into decision-making processes.

The report, endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in the 1991 Ottawa Declaration on Women and Structural Adjustment, included a seven-point programme of action (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1992: 3). This advocacy, along with others, played an important role in getting the Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund and especially the World Bank – to begin to review their lending policies and conditionalities from a gender perspective.

This prior work gave the organisation the networks, knowledge base and confidence to again commit to playing a pioneering role in a largely undeveloped and uncharted area. Other agencies have adopted similar strategies of linking gender-responsive budgets to existing institutional capacities. For example, UNIFEM has drawn on its civil society focus to support the work of women's organisations in strengthening economic governance. Similarly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has incorporated this work into its programming on improving the participation of elected representatives of the people in the budget process.

Responding to an enabling environment

The existence of an enabling environment was significant to the Commonwealth's work. The GRB programme was supported by the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development (PoA) which was endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government as a reaffirmation of their commitment to gender equality as a fundamental value of the Commonwealth.

Many agencies now have operational policy statements on gender and development. The main thrust for the majority is gender mainstreaming. Gender-responsive budgets were seen as an important tool for achieving this. The synergies between GRB initiatives and gender mainstreaming were apparent from the onset. GRB initiatives could serve as a mechanism to match policy commitments with available resources. They could also serve as a tool to monitor expenditure for the Commonwealth's gender management system (GMS), a holistic and system-wide approach to gender mainstreaming. Also, as budgets involve all government ministries and department, these initiatives could provide a practical opportunity for officials across sectors to integrate a gender analysis in their areas of work. Finally, given the central role of ministries of finance and planning in budget management and general governmental decision-making, GRB initiatives were seen as capable of introducing gender issues into the epicentre of government operations and financial management.

The 'How' of Gender-responsive Budgets

Gender-responsive budgets are inherently political. One dimension, which has been borne out in the Australian, South African and UK initiatives, is the association of gender with a specific political ideology or platform, rather than it being seen as an essential component of any development strategy. Another reality is that, while there are efficiency and equity arguments which justify the need for a gender analysis of government budgets, given the scarcity of resources and the competing demands that exist, politicians determine their strategic priorities based on their own understanding of the needs and preferences of their key constituencies. In the absence of gender-disaggregated data, the determination of gender needs or gaps can become largely arbitrary or be overlooked completely. A crucial factor, to the advancement of gender equality, therefore, is the effectiveness of the gender lobby.

The 1995 PoA was hugely significant in political terms within the Commonwealth Secretariat. Beyond the requirements for governments to take action, it mandated the Commonwealth Secretariat “to focus on and enhance its own experience and expertise in the critical areas of concern to play an effective coordinating role, provide leadership and assistance, and be an example of good practice” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995:16). It also required that the Secretariat send progress reports to the Commonwealth Heads of Government.

To ensure compliance in the Commonwealth Secretariat, a steering committee on gender and development, chaired by a deputy secretary-general and comprising all directors, was convened to monitor the performance of the organisation. All programmes were now required to implement gender projects. It was within this enabling environment that work on gender-responsive budgets took root. The economic programme divisions provided tentative support to the programme as a demonstration of their support for the organisational directive on gender mainstreaming. The Gender Section of the organisation was able to utilise this support in establishing the programme as an economic initiative in its own right.

By no stretch of the imagination did the commitments made under the PoA simply translate into the Commonwealth’s GRB programme. The Commonwealth Secretariat had to confront the general belief in the Commonwealth and beyond, especially among most economists and finance officials, that gender was not a concern of, or relevant to, their work. Against this traditional wall of resistance, the Commonwealth Women’s Ministers were of invaluable assistance.

At the 1996 Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs, the Ministers agreed that government budgets were the strategic entry point for engendering macroeconomic policies. Ministers called on Commonwealth countries to pilot this programme. They also undertook to work closely with their colleagues in finance to integrate a gender perspective into fiscal policy, and requested that the Commonwealth Secretariat develop tools and provide technical assistance to countries. This strategy seemed to pay early dividends as the 1996 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting endorsed the Women’s Ministers’ recommendation to support an initial pilot programme.

Although the mandate from Women’s Ministers was significant in mobilising support for country pilots within the Commonwealth,

neither this nor an operational directive on gender mainstreaming could guarantee broad-based support in the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Gender Section had to develop a separate internal campaign to secure meaningful support from the economic programme divisions.

A key component of trying to generate commitment to the programme was the participation of prominent experts in the field who were able to supply the economists and finance officials with the economic justification, operational processes and expected results from implementing GRB initiatives. Diane Elson, a leading feminist economist, developed the conceptual framework for the integration of gender into macroeconomic policies (Elson, 1998: 41–52). Rhonda Sharp, one of the key ‘femocrats’ from the pioneering Women’s Budget in Australia, and Debbie Budlender, a founding member of the South African Women’s Budget Initiative, provided guidelines on how such a programme could be implemented.

The benefit of having champions for this cause in the organisation should not be overlooked. The evolution of the programme was driven in part by the passion of the then head of the Gender Section. It was further facilitated by the fact that senior managers in the organisation responded to the practicality of the programme. The support of two leading economists in the organisation, one of whom is now the head of the economic affairs programme and Secretary to the Finance Ministers’ Meeting, also provided opportunities for the programme that many other gender and development initiatives have not benefited from.

What’s Happening in GRB Initiatives?

The Commonwealth’s international advocacy was largely successful. The Fifth Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs in 1996 was the first time that the issue of gender-responsive budgets was included on the agenda of an intergovernmental meeting. It will be discussed again as an agenda item of the 2002 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in September. This is the first time a meeting of finance ministers will discuss gender concerns as a specific agenda item. The Commonwealth Secretariat has also worked to raise awareness of the value of gender-responsive budgeting in different arenas, including at the United Nations and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD), and on a regional basis with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Pacific Islands Forum and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

One of the strengths of the Commonwealth Secretariat's programme was to concentrate on one strategic area of fiscal policy. Government budgets contain two sides: expenditure and revenue. For reasons of both resource constraints and direct impact on the needs of women, the decision was taken to focus in the first instance on the expenditure side of the budget. The concentration of resources on a single, manageable area allowed for the development and refinement of the approach.

From the outset, one of the Commonwealth Secretariat's aims was to develop resources that could be utilised around the world in the implementation of GRB initiatives. These efforts culminated in the development of expenditure tools with different entry points for applying a gender analysis to government budgets (Elson, 2002: 44–47) and a methodology for implementing a country programme (Budlender & Sharp, 1998).

The Commonwealth Secretariat, in collaboration with its new programme partners, recently published *Gender Budgets Makes Cents*, an overview of the conceptual framework, methodology and outcomes at the country level. This book, *Gender Budgets Makes More Cents*, complements the earlier one by highlighting select country case studies and good practice. These publications on understanding GRB initiatives, which should be useful to a broad range of stakeholders, will be followed by a comprehensive reference manual and the development of a methodology for the analysis of the gender impacts of the revenue side of the budget.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's ability to encourage governments to implement GRB initiatives emerged as a result of the following organisational factors:

- ◆ The responsiveness of governments to its international advocacy;
- ◆ The access to ministers and senior officials of key ministries due to the organisation's nature and consensus-building mechanisms;
- ◆ The work of the technical assistance arm of the organisation which promotes gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting theme of its development cooperation programme; and

- ◆ The effective networks between staff and government officials due to the size and purpose of the organisation. A related factor is the fact that many staff are seconded from their home civil services.

The initial success of the programme was also due to the strategy employed by the Commonwealth to introduce the initiative to governments. Requests for technical assistance from governments had to be submitted as a combined request of Finance and Women's Ministries. This requirement was a response to the realisation that, while Finance Ministries were best placed to coordinate implementation, their staff were often unable to make linkages between gender and economic issues. Similarly, Women's Ministries, while usually lacking knowledge of economics and budget processes, had the experience in gender mainstreaming and advocating for action within government on gender and development issues. This was often the first opportunity for these ministries to acquire an understanding of each other's portfolios and to work together. This was a significant outcome in itself.

The Australian and South African initiatives, and lessons learned, were used as the basis for the design of the methodology and training programme to build capacity at the country level. The value of these two country experiences, which were among the few known initiatives at the time, was not only their rarity but also their diversity. Having the participation of the two leading experts from Australia and South Africa involved in the capacity building also meant that these experiences were not used as a blue print but rather as guides, adapted to meet the situation of each country in terms of the prevailing gender issues, the resources available and the level of commitment.

The countries initially involved in the pilots were selected based on their diversity in terms of size, economic base and regional distribution. However, common factors were also sought including the governments' commitment to gender and development and the capacity of the Finance and Women's Ministries.

Despite the care taken in the design and implementation of the programme, the Commonwealth country initiatives never attained sustainability. Governments were ambivalent about continuing with gender-responsive budgets without a clearly articulated demand. With finance officials largely unconcerned with gender issues and gender officials wary of getting into budget processes, external pressure in the form of advocacy, binding international agreements and development

assistance was insufficient to maintain a commitment. The lesson learned was that civil society has a crucial role to play in this regard.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's primary function as an organisation providing assistance to its member governments was invaluable in terms of advocating to governments the need to adopt GRB initiatives. However, its primary function has been equally constraining in trying to access and involve non-government stakeholders in the implementation of the programme.

This constraint was overcome through the formation of the inter-agency partnership with the IDRC and UNIFEM. These new partners brought critical resources to the programme. UNIFEM works towards enhancing the role, capacity and participation of women, whereas IDRC focuses on building capacity in research, documentation and the sharing of experiences.

One of the most significant outcomes of the partnership has been the organisation of a high-level conference in October 2001 to share lessons learned and to mobilise political and financial support to meet the increasing demand from governments and civil society organisations to implement GRB initiatives. The conference was organised in collaboration with the Belgian government, the OECD and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Conclusions

Gender-responsive budgets have been and should remain in the ownership of national stakeholders. Nonetheless, external agencies have a crucial support role to play. There are clear opportunities for them to engage in advocacy, produce resource materials, collaborate with stakeholders in the country on programme implementation, and support the adaptation of the programme to incorporate related development concerns including poverty reduction and civil society participation in decision-making.

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