

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON THE BUDGET

Why integrate a gender perspective?

We are all familiar with the rhetoric...non-sexism, gender issues, women, equality, non-discrimination...

However what does it all mean and why waste our time with this discussion when really we have more important business to discuss...the budget, the deficit, the MTEF etc ...really, we mustn't lose our focus on the key macro-economic perspectives and get distracted into side issuesfamiliar responses??

It's time to end the ghettos - we are not some tired country ...we are supposed to be the great miracle nation not afraid of the challenge of change, even possibly transformation!...prepared to stand on our heads ...let the blood flow to dead areas ... awaken new perspectives... or are we doomed and resigned to becoming part of the slow, bureaucratic beast which is government in this country, in all countries

In this workshop there are those with expertise on gender and there are those with expertise on the economy.. it is time to end this division of expertise - to integrate our objectives, theory, analysis and solutions to meet the challenge of the South African reality, using as the yardstick - the measure of our collective success or failure, change in the lives of the poorest and least powerful in our country.

The false analysis that lumps womens oppression with all other 'problem areas ' in our country...the youth, the disabled, the rural...misses the point that those at the very bottom of each of these groups are women...young women, disabled women, rural women etc. Women are not a homogenous group - patriarchal oppression is experienced in the matrix of class, race, ethnic, sexual orientation, age, disability, rural/urban, marital status, cultural and other divides.

In a country where a key economic objective must be to move towards ending poverty, women are disproportionately represented among the

poor, (they are the majority of the homeless, the landless, the violated, the illiterate, the unemployed and underemployed, the majority in the lowest paid sectors and the survival sector of the 'informal' or micro-enterprise, etc.)

Targetting women can thus be an effective strategy for reducing poverty.

The World Bank's Report : Toward Gender Equality, argues the case for governments to invest in women: "Gender equality is not only a matter of social justice but also good economics. It is of foremost importance to woman's well-being and development. Discrimination means losses in productivity and lower welfare of women, their families, and society at large. Although the gender gap is narrowing in education, health and many other areas, women are still less educated than men, work more hours and are paid less.

The reason why gender disparities persist are complex, having to do with social and institutional norms, relationships within households and even lack of information about the benefits of educating and employing women...

Govts can work towards greater gender equality - one of the best investments a society can make. Public policy can affect investments in health, education and infrastructure through laws and regulations. It can also affect land ownership, financial services and access to employment. Not least important, public policies can affect macroeconomic performance and create a favourable climate for economic development... '

The report concludes: ' Govts can no longer afford not to invest in women. The evidence on the high private and social returns to investments in women and girls cannot be ignored. By directing public resources towards policies and projects that reduce gender inequality, policymakers not only promote equality but lay the groundwork for slower population growth, greater labor productivity, a higher rate of human capital formation and stronger economic growth...."

The report is available for anyone interested in the specific data and case studies used in reaching this conclusion.

Is it possible and has it been done?

The initiative to integrate gender planning and economic planning w.r.t. the budget can draw on international experience in countries such as Canada, Australia and Sweden. The Australian budget is an example of an attempt to address and integrate gender concerns effectively. A Women's Budget Statement published as a formal budget-related paper identifies budget initiatives and measures which have a particular impact on women. It includes gender equality indicators which are statistical measures of women's situation in 14 aspects of Australian social and economic life. they show changes over time and assist in monitoring progress towards equality.

The reality in our country

In this country we inherited a parliament designed many decades ago for a different vision and objectives; with a set of power structures, hierarchies, culture and values that were fundamentally different to those on which this government was elected. The process of democratic transformation of this institution has skimmed the surface and has to present alternatives on each of the above to ensure that it goes beyond a fancy public relations exercise.

At present the workings of this parliament reflect that it is expected to do little more than rubber stamp the decisions of the executive on the important decisions around the budget ...of course we have lent the process credibility with our sincere belief in and attempts to 'open' up the process ...we have busy committees...we hold public hearings...we spend time writing our reports ...our chair and the co-ordinator of the budget working group sit in the function committees and attend the budget hearings, we have seven whole (!) days to decipher the budget which provides little useful information in it's present format...

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the lack of seriousness with which the role of the legislature is taken is the complete lack of substantial support to be competent in analysing and researching the enormous amount of legislation and reports which flood us from fully-fledged departments with massive staff and millions of rands worth of consultants (according to Alec's figure quoted in the Sunday Times) who have months to research and develop what we are expected to sift in minutes.(some poetic licence!)

By comparison, elected representatives in countries like America have about 30 full time staff (admin, legal, research, media etc.) in their

parliamentary offices and about 10 in their constituency offices - clearly we should not add to the bloated bureaucracy but there must be something between that and one secretary to service 81 MPs and 1 secretary between several committees

In this context, taking further new challenges on eg. women and poverty are fraught with the difficulties of developing the political will and developing the capacity to concretise and give meaning to 'integrating gender planning and economic planning'

An initial attempt has been made to develop a limited research project with NGOs on gender and the budget - the initial year will serve as a pilot and will focus on taxation, public service, housing, education, welfare and work. It will raise the question of the gender impact on the budget and hopefully contribute to guiding future allocations. In future years, the project aims to cover all the budgetary votes.

In addition a process is underway with women in their own organisations and in organisations such as trade unions to create an understanding of the importance of the Budget and the need for women to be aware of the issues and processes around it so they can put forward what changes they want prioritised.

In parliament itself, we need to establish a working group on gender planning and economic planning to develop expertise in each area and the combined expertise necessary to ensure the issues are effectively integrated in the work of each of the portfolio committees and in the proposed Budget Committee and are not ghettoised.

Mainstreaming gender and the budget - a collective responsibility - not just the women's

This workshop, is intended, as Barbara has indicated, to go beyond dissecting the 1997 budget to helping us focus on what we need (in terms of information, the process, and the necessary powers) to make intelligent decisions about the allocation of resources beyond 1997 - and as we do that hopefully we will all begin to give voice to the normally invisible and silent (particularly in the economic arena of national budgets) over 54% of our country's people. (to look at what jobs are created and who gets them, who works the land and who gets

the land, the houses, the contracts, the education... who gets what, who and what is valued and who and what is forgotten...) We cannot hope that change can come for some and not for others...our lives are inter-dependent and we cannot afford to ignore that totality

I am sure that there is no need to motivate the challenge to ensure that the resources of our country are used to build a strong economy which moves towards ending poverty. To that end I am sure the dialogue of this workshop will build a commitment to integrate gender planning and economic planning wrt budget - through the discussions on the current budget process, *the RDP fund*, the medium term expenditure framework, *how the provinces link into the budget process*, *the FFC formula*, budget deficit management, *the public sector*, and budget reform.

I thank you

Pregs Govender - 13/11/1995: JSCOF Budget Workshop