

## **The Budget and Children in Ghana**

### **A Speech delivered at the Multi-sectoral Meeting on the National Programme of Action for Children (2003 – 2013)**

**By Vitus Azeem, Programme Coordinator (CBA)**

#### **Introduction**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child's right to an adequate standard of living, the highest attainable standard of health and education on the basis of equality of opportunity. In addition, the 1990 Summit for Children urged each country to review its budget to ensure that priority is given, in budgetary allocation and budgetary outcomes, to the welfare and rights of children, especially in relation to survival, protection, development and participation. Ghana has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and promised to place children's needs at the forefront of development. Further, the government has committed itself to specific goals for Child Health, Nutrition, Social Welfare Development, Education, Child Protection, Water and Sanitation in the national plan of action (NPA) for children.

The fulfillment of these commitments and the basic rights of children entails costs. This implies that the political branches which generate and re-allocate public resources substantially determine the value, scope, and predictability of the development, protection and survival of children and the attainment of children's rights. The amount that we spend decides the extent to which fundamental rights are protected and enforced. So, children's rights and welfare are intrinsically linked with public budgets. This is why budgets are very important when discussing basic rights not only of children but the entire citizenry.

#### **Why is the Budget Important?**

- The budget is the most important economic instrument of the government as it reflects a country's socio-economic policy priorities.
- It translates policies and political platforms into expenditures and taxations, emphasising constraints and trade-offs in policy choices.
- Policy reprioritisation towards socio-economic change in the country is indicated in government spending programmes in the national and district assembly budgets.
- The budget, therefore, is a powerful tool to redress socio-economic inequities and improve access to resources and opportunities for the majority of the people, including children.

#### **Why Children and the Budget?**

Government spending, particularly on social services, affects children directly. Yet, the government is not able or even willing to meet its policy commitments to children in the face of tight budget constraints. There are several reasons why the budget should give priority attention to children:

- *Children form a large part of Ghana's population about 44%. Yet Children are voiceless and are at a particularly vulnerable stage of life. They do not form a powerful political lobby, and cannot advocate themselves for more effective delivery of socio-economic services that meet their needs. Thus, the lack of a detailed assessment of what government is spending on children inhibits the effective improvement of basic living standards of children.*
- *Children still suffer from poor nutrition, inadequate health services, clean water, sanitation and basic education.*

- *Budgetary programmes, specifically socio-economic expenditures, affect the well-being and life opportunities of children directly.*

Government and civil society efforts to integrate the 'First Call for Children' into the national development policy by drawing up the National Plan of Action (NPA), recognise that the long run future of Ghana depends on the quality of its people - their knowledge, skills, health and well-being. Children are the majority of both today's and tomorrow's population in the country. Placing children at the centre of the development planning will allow for sustainable socio-economic development for all people.

### **Is there a Children's Budget?**

There is no separate budget for children. In fact, children are hardly mentioned in the annual budget. What is sometimes referred to as a children's budget may more appropriately be called a children's budget analysis. It is only an attempt to examine what resources government is allocating to programmes that benefit children, and whether these programmes adequately reflect the needs of children. This will enable both government and civil society to monitor the performance of government departments in an effort to meet policy commitments, such as the NPA, towards children.

1. A Children's Budget analysis should provide critical information and analytical resource for civil society children's advocacy groups to use as a tool for advocacy.
2. It should also provide the necessary information to policy makers and implementers to consider the particular needs of children. This will help decision-makers to be aware of the impact of policies when drawing up 'child-friendly' programmes for departmental budgets.
3. A children's budget should examine budgetary allocation to areas that impact the lives of children most, e.g. health, education, welfare and social security.
4. It should also include an investigation into what happens when the government does not provide the necessary services for children, particularly in the welfare sector.

### **What is the General Expenditure Pattern in Ghana?**

The following represent major trends with respect to the pattern of child-related expenditures over the first decade following Ghana's ratification of the CRC:

- Expenditures in the sectors critical to the attainment of Children's rights recovered impressively from the collapse in the early 80s.
- Increasingly, social sector expenditures are protected under fiscal reforms and restraint.
- *But as a % of GDP and in per capita terms, social sector expenditure has been declining since 1995 and has declined further in recent years.*
- In contrast, the share of public safety, especially defence and the internal security has been increasing since 1995.
- Within Public Safety, the poorest cousin is CHRAJ, which receives much less than the SFO.
- Allocation for sectors responsible for social protection of the most vulnerable children, e.g. the Department of Social Welfare, has been miniscule and declining.
- There is no mechanism to protect families from the effects of unemployment, or loss of the ability to work, the aged etc. and children suffer as a result.
- In terms of flow of funds, resources remain centralized and general disbursements of committed funds tend to be unpredictable and unreliable.

## **Social Sector Expenditure in the Decade**

In 1990, the year of the Summit, government's expenditure on the social service sector, covering education, health, social security and welfare, community water and sanitation and other social services, added up to 48.1% of total national budget expenditure. This expenditure had direct impact on the survival and development of children. However, the level of expenditure on social services, which was expected to increase over the decade, declined in relation to the other economic sectors and reached a low of 31.6% in 1998. This was because interest on public debt had grown significantly from 10% in 1990 to 36% in 1998 and reflects the shift in government priorities in favour of public safety. In the 2003 budget, ₵4,068.9 billion (39% of total discretionary expenditure) has been allocated to the sector. This is about one-third of total discretionary expenditure.

## **Education**

Constraints in education have also been considerable. There has not been a concerted shift of resources from the privileged to the disadvantaged sectors of the population. Education has received a high proportion of government discretionary budget over the last ten years. However, its share of annual public expenditure dipped from 33.5% in 1990 to a low of 13.5% in 1997 before rising to 20 % in 2002. It increased in nominal terms after the introduction of the FCUBE programme at a time of declining total public expenditure. Education expenditure as percentage of Gross Domestic Product has averaged 3.5 percent over the last decade. *This year, a total amount of ₵2,775.9 billion (68.2% of the sector allocation) has been allocated to education.*

The inadequate public finance of education has led to cost-sharing arrangements that are imposing financial burdens on poor parents and, therefore, putting basic education beyond the reach of their children. In fact, about 24 per cent of children of school age are still outside the school system. There are also major disparities in expenditures between urban and rural schools, and between better-endowed and poorer schools and even more dramatically among geographic regions. The three regions of northern Ghana predictably recorded the worst access and education quality performance. They also received the least per capita expenditure per child in basic schools. The Eastern and Volta Regions received the highest per capita expenditure over the period.

## **Health**

Improvement in government's commitment to children's welfare came in 1998 with the provision of free medical care for children aged 5 years and below as well as pregnant mothers. There was also the introduction of such initiatives as weanmix machines, the female condom, the exclusive breastfeeding programme, the impregnated mosquito nets and the establishment of an HIV/AIDS Commission for Ghana. Public expenditure on health during the last decade averaged 1.5% of the GDP. *The current year budget has allocated only ₵1,154.6 billion (28.4% of total social services sector) to the health sector.* More than half of this goes into salaries and wages and investment. In 2002, only ₵12 billion was voted for the provision of free medical care to women, the aged and other vulnerable groups, including children below five years. *We were expecting that 68% of all children will be fully immunised by the end of 2002 while 45% of deliveries would supervised by health personnel.* In the last decade the MOH has made significant innovations aimed at improving coordination, pushing out resources to the local level and ensuring that spending matches with local needs and capacity.

However, the health sector continues to be challenged by questions of quality and efficiency at all levels of delivery and more particularly with low-income families. Basic infrastructure is still inadequate in many areas just as most areas suffer from insufficient personnel to staff health institutions. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about available exemptions and the poor implementation of the exemptions policy, including delays in reimbursements for free services by government makes it difficult for the people entitled to free medical care to access the facility. Some district assemblies also lack the capacity to take advantage of the decentralisation of health service delivery. All these factors and the persistence of user-fees as a condition to access health service has meant that significant numbers of children from poor households or children living under special circumstances may have been denied their right to health services.

### **Justice and Protection of Children**

In the justice sector, policy transformation requires not only specific prioritisation of both juvenile offenders and children in need of care and protection but specific allocation in the justice budget for a separate juvenile justice system and/or special courts for the prosecution of child abuse cases. For the most part, children are subject to the same legislative provisions as are adult offenders.

Justice for children or juvenile justice involves the rendering of appropriate services to children in conflict with the law (offenders) and children who have become victims of crimes. The Ministries of Defence, Justice and Interior and the Judicial Service are collectively referred to as Public Safety in the Budget classification system. From 1995 to 1998 Public Safety spent a total of ₦851.0 billion. In 1999, the budget for the sector stood at ₦390.4 billion, rising to 474.6 billion in 2000. The current year budget has allocated ₦1,222.0 (11.7% of total discretionary expenditure) billion to the sector. This is inadequate considering the chunk that goes to the other institutions under Public Safety.

The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, which seeks to protect citizens' rights, especially the most vulnerable, receives the least and this share has been stagnating since 1995. The resource capacity of institutions such as CHRAJ and the Legal Aid Board to provide protection and free aid to children in need is, thus, severely constrained. Family tribunals, which have jurisdiction to hear and determine complaints about paternity, custody and maintenance of children, are not available in all districts and complainants have to travel long distances to get a hearing.

### **Social Welfare**

In the welfare sector, welfare is still heavily weighted towards the elderly rather than children. Children lose out of two counts: firstly, social security is largely directed at paying old age pensions. Children don't benefit directly from these payments. There are no maintenance grants for poor children.

The tasks of the Department of Social Welfare include promoting child survival and development, assisting street children, dealing with issues on maintenance of children, running of children's homes, adoption, supervision of day care centres, running of delinquency institutions and vocational training centres. The department is, however, handicapped in both human and material resources. The expenditure allocations made in the budget to the department are woefully inadequate and even they are either not released early or not released at all. *For example, the current year budget has allocated only ₦42.6 billion to the Ministry of Manpower Development and Employment to cater for a number of departments and agencies including the DSW.*

## Is there a Need for Budgetary Reprioritisation?

- Budgets plan how to allocate available resources in the most efficient way. However, in practice, reprioritisation of spending does not always follow changes in policy directives.
- Reprioritisation at the macro level, that is, between departments, is the responsibility of Cabinet and, therefore, predominantly a political decision.
- Reprioritisation of spending at the level of individual departmental programmes is more important to the targeting of children.
- What is needed is not just greater spending on children, but also more efficient spending.
- Budgetary reprioritisation involves re-allocation of expenditure *between* departments or spending agencies, that is, reducing expenditure on defence, administration etc. and increasing expenditure on social spending, such as health, education, etc.
- Reprioritisation *within* votes, such as moving from curative to preventative health services and from tertiary to basic education may also be necessary in the face of constraints.
- Moreover, the shifting of more funds to the District Assemblies Common Fund should lead to greater responsibilities to districts in key areas of socio-economic delivery - notably, health, education, housing, and policing services and improve access and quality of effective delivery of services to those who are often among the poorest and most in need of basic services, such as children.

## Policy Challenges in Service Delivery to Children

With limited budgetary resources, efficiency in government spending is very important. There are certain policy challenges in delivering quality services to children.

- A move towards primary preventative service delivery. Routine immunisations and community-based health care should be given more attention.
- Child development strategies are intersectoral - departments must jointly plan and budget for co-ordinated child-friendly programmes. Crimes against children must be prioritised. Police and justice budgets must be redirected towards improving specialised training for child protection personnel and creating more child-friendly courts.
- Improving access to education for marginalised children – Affordability of school uniform.
- Early Childhood Development for 5-6 year olds - Early childhood development (ECD) programmes go a long way to improving academic motivation for children and lessens the likelihood of school dropout.
- Rural Education needs to be improved. Rural schools are on the whole impoverished, and do not encourage a culture of learning.
- Out-of-school children from very poor rural communities and over-crowded cities need to be integrated into mainstream schooling.

Mr. Chairman, for an august body like this, I would recommend the following:

1. Identify specific activities for each of the years during the decade;
2. Determine the cost of carrying out those activities;
3. Use whatever powers and influence to demand that government makes the appropriate budgetary allocations to the relevant sectors to carry out the activities;
4. Monitor the release of funds for and the execution of these activities;
5. At the end of the period you would then be in a position to evaluate your performance.

It is not enough to come out with a National Programme of Action for Children. There must be a budget for the activities that you plan to undertake, otherwise it would remain a programme on paper.

As a country we would have to make some hard choices. We would need to decide either to provide public officials with well-furnished and beautiful houses that are renovated every two years or to have decent children and maternity wards in the hospitals throughout the country. We would also need to decide either to provide our public officials with expensive luxury cars on a regular basis or provide all communities with schools that are provided with furniture and adequate learning and teaching materials. These decisions would show our commitment to the development, survival and rights of children.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, despite the government's ratification of the CRC and its stated commitment to children's rights, development and welfare, both national and district budgets do not yet reflect government's visionary policies for children. There is, therefore, the need for children's advocacy groups and public officials working in the interest of children to put pressure on the government to re-prioritise its spending plans in favour of children.