

CITIZENS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Introduction

Citizens' access and right to information on local government budgets and accounts is often considered a necessary condition for good governance. Without basic information on public revenues and expenditures people cannot hold their leaders and executive officers accountable. This is most acute when formal processes for accountability, such as audits and legislative reviews, are weak, as is common among local government authorities in Tanzania.

How do local government authorities in Tanzania disseminate information to citizens on revenues and expenditures? And does the information reach the general public? We asked ordinary citizens these questions in a recently conducted survey. The survey was conducted in October 2003 and comprised of 1,260 respondents from six councils – Bagamoyo DC, Ilala MC, Iringa DC, Kilosa DC, Moshi DC and Mwanza CC; from 42 villages (in the rural areas) and mitaa (in the urban areas), at varying distances from the council's headquarters.

Survey Results

According to the Local Government Finances Act, No. 9 of 1982 and the Local Authority Financial Memorandum of 1997, local government authorities are obliged to disseminate information on revenues and expenditures to citizens, including the signed audited accounts. Councils use different ways of distributing such information. All six councils reported that such information was usually distributed through meetings organised by the councils, including full council meetings. Ilala MC, Kilosa DC and Mwanza CC reported that they also used newspapers. In addition, notice boards at ward and council headquarters are used in Ilala MC, Moshi DC and Mwanza CC. From this survey we assessed the effectiveness of these mechanisms employed by the councils to distribute such information.

Table 1: Access to Information (% of the respondents)

Have you in the past two years seen any of the following information posted at a public place?											
Local Government budget		Taxes and fees collected		Audited statements of council expenditures		Financial allocation to key sectors		HIV/AIDS prevention		How to report corruption	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
7	93	6	94	3	98	4	96	78	23	16	84

Evidently very few of the respondents reported to have seen any posted information on local government finances (Table 1). Only 6 % of the respondents said they had seen information posted on taxes and fees collected, and only 3 % said they had seen the audited statements of council expenditure. In contrast, the large majority (78 %) had seen posters on HIV/AIDS prevention. When correlating these responses with knowledge about the Local Government Reform (LGR) programme, we found that the respondents who had heard about the reforms seem to be relatively better informed. This is particularly evident with regard to information on how to report corruption, where 23 % of those who had heard about the LGR received such information, compared to only 10 % of those who had not heard about the reforms. As previously reported in this publication series, (Project Brief no. 6), those who had heard about the LGR included, in general, the most educated people in the community, and, not surprisingly, they were also the most informed citizens on fiscal issues.

There are large variations across the six councils. For example, with respect to information on tax revenues collected, the respondents in Kilosa DC and Iringa DC appeared to be better informed than people residing in the other four council areas. While 33 % of the respondents in Kilosa and 21 % in Iringa said they had seen information on tax revenues collected in their areas, only 6 % of the respondents in Ilala MC and Mwanza CC said they were informed. This does not imply that the information had not been disseminated in Ilala and Mwanza, but that the information was either disseminated in a way that did not reach the general public, or was in a form that was not easily understood by ordinary citizens.

Public meetings are important

The survey data do not provide us with a clear answer as to why the respondents in the two urban councils were more ignorant on this issue than respondents living in the rural areas. However, among those who said they had seen information on tax revenues, the Village Executive Officers (VEOs) were the most likely sources of information. This may indicate that the VEOs may function as a good channel of information between the council and citizens and that some councils use this channel more effectively than others. Our research showed that the Kilosa DC, and to some extent the Iringa DC, actively used village and ward meetings as a way of disseminating such information verbally to the public. For instance, Kilosa had introduced a system where information from the village accounts on revenue and expenditure were presented and discussed at the quarterly village assembly meetings. According to the people interviewed, there was a much higher attendance at these meetings. The experiences from Kilosa and Iringa might provide useful lessons for other councils. These two councils have had longer experience with bottom-up and participatory planning approaches than many other local authorities, due to the involvement of foreign donors over many years (Irish Aid in Kilosa and DANIDA in Iringa).

Local authorities publish information on the revenues collected and the allocations of funds, as they are obliged to according to the above-mentioned Local Government Finances Act and the Financial Memorandum. However, at present much of this information does not reach or is not understood by the general public. Public notices gazetted in newspapers or posted on notice boards at the council headquarters may be presented in relatively complicated and technical ways which ordinary citizens find hard to understand. Furthermore, the literacy level of some citizens is low.

Implications for policy

Improved information for the public on budgets and accounts might improve the opportunities for citizens to exercise their voice and demand accountability from local authorities. It is, important to stress that encouraging citizens and the civil society to engage in fiscal and financial monitoring at the local level does not imply that such measures should replace formal auditing and accounting mechanisms. Nor does it imply that such measures will weaken the formal accountability mechanisms. On the contrary, the measures could strengthen the legitimacy and standing of local government authorities in the communities.

The main challenge is to provide information on fiscal issues in ways which are understandable and which reach the general public. The successful dissemination of information on HIV/AIDS prevention may provide useful lessons on how to design and distribute information on budgets and accounts to the communities. Written and oral methods of dissemination should be combined, including information submitted at service outlets such as schools and dispensaries, and at village and ward offices. More active use of the VEOs and mitaa leaders to communicate such information to citizens might also prove successful, as the experiences from Kilosa and Iringa demonstrate. Urban councils will, in general, require additional measures compared to rural councils, due to the often high mobility and turnover of residents.

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