



FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR INEQUALITY REDUCTION: EVEN IT UP!

Oxfam in the Occupied Palestinian Territory
and Israel (OPTI): Citizen mobilization and
increased transparency for better budgets

Knowledge Hub on
Governance and Citizenship



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INTRODUCTION

The OPTI remains a difficult place for NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) in which to operate. Palestinian citizens are not easily engaged or incentivized to act on public issues, and at the same time the various authorities are not very open to citizens' input. However, through continuous engagement in citizen-led campaigning, capacity building of civil society and engagement with different authorities and ministries, much has been achieved in the past two years in the areas of tax, budget accountability and active citizenship. Oxfam and its partners have combined strategies on both the demand and supply side of the governance process: strong public campaigning to mobilize citizens on the one hand, and pushing for increased transparency and accountability in government budgets for social services on the other. Together with partner organizations the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (**AMAN**), the Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (**ARIJ**) and the Palestine Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue & Democracy (**MIFTAH**), Oxfam has continued to build on previous budget transparency wins to support the meaningful participation of citizens in government budget processes. At the same time, public campaigning efforts, which were built on amplifying citizens' needs and voice around budget allocation for access to medicines, rallied more than 42,000 people in Palestine to support the campaign, contributing to public pressure for ministerial budget allocations to make medicine available.

CITIZENS' BUDGET

Oxfam has supported MIFTAH and ARIJ to promote budget transparency and to increase citizens' involvement in various government budget processes. The organizations developed a number of citizens' budgets with different ministries and have been exemplary in facilitating dialogue with the government. A citizens' budget is a simplified version of the government's published budget that summarizes the policies of the government in terms of allocations and expenditure for the upcoming year. This simplified version provides citizens with easy-to-understand information on the budget allocation of that specific

ministry, spelling out the source of the funding, the structure of spending and the amount of spending per planned programme and beneficiary. [Click here](#) to view the citizens' budget produced in partnership with the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), published in March 2017.

In addition to providing an easily accessible overview of the Ministry's budget to citizens, MIFTAH organized technical assistance and training for public servants on participatory and inclusive budget processes. Particular attention was given to gender-sensitive budgeting, and how to increase the involvement of the voices and needs of citizens in the formulation of the next fiscal year's budget. The result of this engagement was the creation of a platform to enable more consultation with civil society in the setting of policy priorities for the next fiscal year. This pilot project has increased the fiscal transparency of the MoSD. The importance of citizens' involvement in the budget process on the national level has been recognized by other ministries as well, and a partnership has also been created with the Ministry of Education. This partnership has resulted in the first citizens' budget for the education sector. The experience with these two ministries is a positive sign that there may be increased political will among the ministries of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to endorse inclusive, participatory and gender-sensitive budgeting, as well as the mainstreaming of budget transparency.

'The ministries are actually listening, they are not only open to cooperate with us, but also listen to us and engage in discussions. It is a collaborative, healthy relationship between a CSO and an official institution. We are not attacking them, but influencing their decisions, in an amicable way.'

Tamara Tamimi, MIFTAH

By mid-2018, MIFTAH had created and published citizens' budgets with the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, and ARIJ had created and published a citizens' budget together with the Ministry of Local Governance. This means that together with Oxfam, MIFTAH and ARIJ have managed to move the entire social sector in the OPT towards being more transparent and accountable, opening up space for dialogue



between government and citizens, with the citizens' budgets serving as a platform for engagement.

MONEY 4 MEDICINE CAMPAIGN

Once budget information is in the public space, a logical next step is to campaign on certain budget allocations that have proven to be insufficient. After conducting a baseline study/perception survey, Oxfam and partners found that Palestinian citizens saw access to health services as extremely important; however, they found it difficult to get the medications they needed from public health institutions. Feedback from respondents showed that people prioritized 'shortage of medicines needed for safe treatment or operations' as their number one issue.

'The health services are not sufficient, they are not always there. Some kinds of medications are very expensive, and therefore the authority does not provide them for free to the citizens of Palestine. I personally experienced such a problem, as my husband has a problem with his kidney and we have seen up close and personal that not all the needed medicines are available, forcing us to go and buy these from the outside market. I do not know what the cause is of the problem, why it is happening. It is just not organized well.' Manar, female community member of Bethlehem, 37 years old.

Together with AMAN, ARIJ and MIFTAH, Oxfam concluded that to best contribute to a functioning healthcare

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system and make it affordable for citizens, there was a need to ensure that the Ministry of Health would receive enough budget to make medicines available. In addition, the PA's budget process lacks transparency and mechanisms for fostering accountability, which makes people feel they cannot influence the direction of public spending.

The specific objectives of the *Money 4 Medicine* campaign that started in 2017 were:

- To engage and activate the Palestinian public on the issue of health care budgeting.
- For citizens' needs to be taken into account in the budget allocation process.
- To make affordable medicine available for Palestinian citizens.

Oxfam and its partners decided that a public campaign would be the best way to engage citizens on the issue and to encourage them to voice their concerns and needs around health financing. Building on lessons from Oxfam's global Even it Up! campaign, Oxfam and its partners began a national public campaign called Money 4 Medicine. The target group for the campaign was Palestinian youth, considered most likely to have energy and ideals to actively engage in a public conversation.

The team used both online and offline engagement to start conversations on the issue of budget allocation for health services and medicines in the OPT. Online, a *Money 4 Medicine* Facebook page was set up where people could sign a petition. Offline, people were approached at music festivals where the campaign had a stand, with volunteers explaining how the issue had emerged as a priority and sharing what could be done about it. From these conversations, this group of volunteers grew and soon an additional 80 people expressed a desire to support the campaign, volunteering their free time and energy. At the same time, online engagement became more difficult due to the implementation of the Electronic Crime Act the PA.¹

What explains the success of this campaign?

The campaign had three main strengths. Firstly, focusing on both online and offline engagement ensured the campaign had a wider reach. The mix of strategies helped the campaign to connect with many

more citizens across the country than would have been the case otherwise. Offline, the engagement between volunteers and other citizens increased the reach of the campaign enormously. In different cities and at several festivals, volunteers talked to citizens about the shortcomings in healthcare services. This was an issue many citizens could personally relate to, having experienced these shortcomings themselves or in their families. The volunteers were simply asking citizens to support the call for action on Money 4 Medicine, instead of, for example, asking them to support a specific CSO and its whole agenda for change. Focusing on the issue at hand made it easier for citizens to connect and support the campaign. Online, the campaign had to adapt as it went, since a few weeks after its start it became clear that citizens did not feel free to sign the campaign/petition with their full names and details. To help potential supporters feel more comfortable, Oxfam and its partners had to change the petition so that anyone who signed it could remain anonymous and was not required to enter their Facebook information. The offline part of the campaign turned out to be the strongest, and most signatures were collected through volunteers. Most importantly, the campaign empowered citizens to collectively voice their needs to the Ministry of Finance – it gave them the feeling that this was indeed possible.

“There is some space to do campaigning, but to a limited extent. The proof of what I am saying is that the vast majority of signatures were collected offline, through the efforts of volunteers who were in the streets of cities. We only managed 1,500 signatures online. However, in the cities and fieldwork we managed more than 19,000 signatures. This proves that many of our local persons do not focus a lot on social media when it comes to campaigning or pressuring.” Nizar Abu-Aita, ARIJ

Secondly, the campaign put the issue at the centre, and did not focus on the organizations behind it. The brand of the campaign was *Money 4 Medicine* and there was a deliberate choice not to put other logos of supporting organizations on display. Oxfam and its partners made this choice because they understood that it was easier for citizens to align and connect to



the campaign, since many had experience with the lack of access to medicines and appropriate healthcare. Heavy branding would have detracted from the issue-focused message and citizens might have been more hesitant to speak out on the subject. Moreover, Oxfam also learned from its baseline survey that in general, Palestinians have low trust in public institutions as well as CSOs and NGOs. This was something that had to be worked around in order to promote citizens' participation in the campaign.

'There is more openness amongst the official (health) sector to engage with civil society. Even though there was a period of [friction] and tension, nonetheless the campaign has fulfilled its purposes and now we see that the Ministry of

Health has stated that medication warehouses are open for inspection by CSOs. I think this shows openness. This improvement will take a lot of time but I see a lot of potential for this improvement.' Tamara Tamimi, MIFTAH

Thirdly, the campaign strengthened the partnership between Oxfam and AMAN, ARIJ and MIFTAH. Fruitful cooperation emerged through co-designing and implementing the campaign. Oxfam has also supported these organizations in further developing their digital skills, and they are now using these skills in local-level campaigning. Increased cooperation means more citizens can be reached, and the organizations can build on each other's networks across Palestine and with the different ministries as well.



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ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACT OF THE MONEY 4 MEDICINE CAMPAIGN AND CITIZENS' BUDGET WORK

Money 4 Medicine campaign

Despite the complex context and somewhat restricted space for citizen engagement, the campaign was supported by 42,000 citizens in the OPT. The campaign was able to create positive momentum with citizens in a context where the democratic process is generally lacking. Citizens expressed their support either through the online petition on Facebook, or by signing the petition after engaging with volunteers in the streets. Because of the considerable reach of the campaign, it became clear that the lack of appropriate medicine

was widely recognized as a major issue by citizens and the government. The Ministry of Health issued a statement which said that they did have the appropriate budget to provide medicine, and in fact that they had already done so. Oxfam and partners decided to check this and found that the budget gap that had caused medicine shortage of medicine was indeed now covered. An extra 65m NIS (Israeli new shekels) (approximately \$17.5m) was made available to pay medical suppliers, which made the requested medicine affordable and accessible again for Palestinian citizens. At this point, AMAN, ARIJ and MIFTAH together with Oxfam decided to stop the campaign because it had succeeded in its aims.



Citizens' budget

Together with the MoSD, a joint platform was created for citizens' and civil society's participation in formulating next year's budget process. The process ensured gender-sensitivity by using gender-disaggregated data and focusing attention on women's access to services provided by the MoSD. This will support further action to bridge the gender gap in the Ministry's service provision.

The project has successfully influenced the Ministry of Finance to increase the budget allocation to the MoSD. This positive track record in improving fiscal transparency and participatory budgeting paved the way to approach other ministries as well. ARIJ has now reached out to the Ministry of Local Governance which

has agreed to allow several of its public servants to undergo training in participatory budgeting. The Ministry of Finance has even demonstrated political willingness to improve transparency by using MIFTAH's Citizens Budget Manual, and also publishing their own citizens' budget in 2018.

There has been an increase in fiscal transparency in all of the ministries that have worked together with the team to produce citizens' budgets, and they have also taken up policy recommendations on improving transparency and participation. Citizens have a greater understanding of the ministerial budget and are able to voice their needs and interest in the creation of the next fiscal year's budget.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THIS WORK?

- Flexibility is key. Even though campaign planning is important, the response from audiences and the authorities is what determines how the campaign continues. In the case of the *Money 4 Medicine* campaign, the greatest threat was its success. The team had to reassess and adjust the campaign because of the pushback received from the government.
- Considering the limited space for CSOs to operate in the OPTI, it was vital to the success of the campaign that the focus was on the issue of *Money 4 Medicine* not Oxfam or the partner organizations behind it. No logos from any of the organizations were used in campaigning. This provided the campaign team with the space to act, and citizens with the space to engage with the topic.
- Citizens felt freer to engage and to support the *Money 4 Medicine* campaign when they could do so anonymously. As soon as the team realized that signing the petition with name and email address was not considered confidential, they changed the petition so that citizens could give their anonymous support.
- Cooperation between Oxfam, its partner organizations and the different ministries shows that increased fiscal transparency is possible, and is an important way to ensure that Palestinian national and local budgets are more responsive to the needs of poor and marginalized people.
- Creating a positive track record of cooperating with a specific ministry can help in building relationships with other ministries. Showing that increasing citizens' involvement in the budget process helps improve the service delivery and fiscal transparency of a ministry makes it easier to engage with other ministries as well.

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For more information please contact the author:

ROSELIE SCHONEWILLE

Roselie.Schonewille@oxfamnovib.nl

F.A.I.R. Knowledge and Learning Officer

Knowledge Hub on Governance & Citizenship

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This case study is part of Oxfam's Fiscal Justice Track Record. This series is a continuation of Oxfam's **Global Track Record on Fiscal Justice** (2016) and provides an in-depth update on Oxfam and partners' fiscal justice and inequality work in selected countries. Oxfam's F.A.I.R.-EiU program aims to ensure that citizens are empowered to redress inequality of power and influence, so fiscal systems are more progressive, and governments implement tax and spending policies that benefit the many not the few. The **F.A.I.R.- EiU program** unites the work of Oxfam and partners in over 40 countries.

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NOTES

- ¹ On 24 June 2017, the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) issued a presidential decree entitled the 'Electronic Crimes Law'. This law further curbs Palestinians' freedom to express themselves online, placing internet users, the majority being youth, vulnerable to prosecution by the PA. The legislation has been criticized by local and international civil society for allowing authorities discretionary right to: impose prison sentences and heavy fines solely for peaceful online criticism of authorities; to conduct surveillance; force service providers to retain consumer data, and block websites without sufficient safeguards for the rights privacy and free expression.

PHOTOS

Page 1: A volunteer collecting signatures at the M4M stall in Qalqilia. Photo: Lotfi Hasanin

Page 3: A volunteer collecting signatures on the street in Qalqilia. Photo: Saed Zaid.

Page 5: Volunteer in Qalqilia talking with citizens about the issue of money for medicine. Photo: Saed Zaid.

Page 6: Two young men collecting signatures on the street in Qalqilia. Photo: Lotfi Hasanin.



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