



The Tax Justice Alliance (of which Ech Phu Ho is a member) came together to develop a joint influencing strategy having identified transparency as the key issue uniting the seven participating organisations. Photo: Vu Naoc Linh/Oxfam

# YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND TRANSPARENCY IN NATIONAL BUDGETING

## Learning from a youth-led partnership in Vietnam

**Oxfam partnered with Ech Phu Ho (EPH), a youth-led activist group and online community in Vietnam, on a Budget Transparency campaign to call for more participatory planning within the Vietnamese national budget. Traditionally, the budget has only been open to the public once it has been approved.**

EPH's grassroots approach to mobilising young people is grounded in capacity-building activities and online awareness-raising campaigns on social justice issues, including tax justice. Given its unique set of skills and approaches, its established following on social media and its reach to young people aged 16–35 in Vietnam, Oxfam invited EPH to join a coalition of organisations working to promote a conversation around the national budget and to call for a more participatory planning process. The campaign had three components: advocacy, an online campaign and coalition building. Given its expertise, EPH led the online campaign.

### Youth participation approaches

**Reaching consensus:** Oxfam shared its ideas and research behind the campaign with EPH. This included information on the state budget system, the current discourse around the national budget, and the budget's impact on young people in Vietnam. Oxfam and EPH discussed and debated the detail and approach, and jointly agreed on a final concept for the online campaign. This approach enabled Oxfam to give up some of its power, space and decision making to EPH, ensuring all parties had equal buy-in to and ownership of the campaign.

**Youth-led proposal:** Following initial discussions, Oxfam invited EPH to submit a proposal outlining how they would engage young people in the campaign. A joint meeting was held where EPH presented their initial ideas to Oxfam. Through this meeting, Oxfam identified a need to provide more strategic support to EPH, and subsequently shared guidance to enable EPH to further analyse young



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A still from a cartoon clip by Ech Phu Ho. The clip is part of Ech Phu Ho's campaign calling on Vietnamese youth to speak out their rights regarding state budget/Ech Phu Ho

people's online habits and to articulate the change they wanted to see. Oxfam also provided EPH with a proposal template to help the team narrow its focus.

**Youth-led design:** EPH took full ownership over the design and planning of the online campaign, deciding on the most relevant messaging for young people in Vietnam and when and how the campaign should be launched. The campaign centred around sharing key messages through specially created animation videos, which were uploaded to EPH's YouTube channel.

EPH formed a working group, dividing roles and responsibilities based on each member's skill set and experience. One young person led on the strategy development and communication plan, liaising with the coalition members to seek input and regularly updating Oxfam on progress. Another led the design, creating illustrations and stories which would be used for the animation. A third team member managed the technical side of the campaign, including managing the website and coding the avatars for the animations.

Over three months, EPH designed and developed the content, activities and products that would make up the online campaign. This included visual imagery to cut across the campaign – the use of a blindfold over one eye of the characters (symbolising lack of transparency on tax). This would run through all the online media content, avatar design, social media posts, videos, quizzes and comic book products, giving the campaign a clear visual identity.

While EPH kept Oxfam informed about the planned approach, Oxfam did not hold final sign-off on the products being developed by EPH, as they were in the coalition as equal partners. While this challenged Oxfam's working style, it was essential to trust and respect the value and expertise that EPH brought to the project, to ensure the true success of the partnership.

**Evaluation and exit strategy:** At the end of the project, EPH joined Oxfam and the other organisations in the coalition for a day of reflection. Built into the initial project planning, the evaluation day enabled all partners to identify the successes and challenges of the project, reflect on key issues that arose during it, and to mark its close.

## Key youth participation successes

**Equal respect:** Engaging EPH as an equal member of a wider partnership and coalition working on the same issue was key to the project's success. While EPH and Oxfam had different perspectives on tax justice, it was important for both parties to listen to each other to understand how the campaign could have the most impact on young people in Vietnam.

## Lessons for others

**Allow enough time:** Working with youth-led organisations requires consistent communication and at times this can require a lot of capacity. Tax justice was a new issue for EPH, so Oxfam needed to be available to answer questions and discuss the nuances of the campaign. While this was time-consuming, the rewards were a more balanced partnership and a sharpened understanding of the issue.

Allow time in the initial project planning stage for youth-led organisations to pilot and test their own initiatives so that they are comfortable with the tools and products they will be using in the campaign. This will ensure that the best approach has been identified in a participatory and meaningful way.

**Recruit technical expertise:** Oxfam held the technical expertise across the coalition. Investment in training EPH staff on the technical components of tax justice and budgetary policies was needed for the campaign to be effective. When working in partnership or across a coalition, it is essential to ensure that there are enough technical experts to support grassroots movements and organisations and manage the responsibilities for training those who may not have the technical knowledge required. This was a learning curve for Oxfam and EPH during this project.

**Be open to challenge:** Young people are thought-provoking and bring wider public perspectives and experiences to the table. EPH raised important questions which challenged Oxfam to think and work outside its comfort zone.

**Know youth organisations' core values:** Each youth organisation has its own core values and



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approach. It is very important to understand the motivations and values of the youth organisations or individual young people you are working with, and identify where your values align.

**Manage differences in opinion:** When youth organisations are viewed as partners, no one view should be imposed. Diversity and differences of opinion and approach should be acknowledged, and each party respected for their contribution.

#### Identify effective ways of working within

**Oxfam's financial structures:** As with many youth movements and organisations, EPH was not registered as a formal youth group or organisation and therefore did not have legal status. This meant Oxfam could only partner with EPH via a consultancy agreement, which required consistent, in-depth reporting on progress to Oxfam's Finance team. Similarly, Oxfam could not list many of the project costs under the consultancy, so administration costs were difficult to cover. Oxfam was also required to set a financial penalty should the objectives of the overall campaign not be achieved.

Work with Finance and Partnership colleagues to identify more effective ways of working with and supporting informal movements without the need for the detailed reporting responsibilities and funding restrictions of consultancy agreements.

**Manage risk and security:** Ongoing security and risk assessment played a major role in the implementation of this project. EPH team members were followed down the street by local police; their Facebook page was shared by a dissident group which tried to distort their message; and EPH faced temporary censorship by the government due to the wording of their campaign materials.

Oxfam supported EPH in drafting a short statement for the EPH website explaining that they were part of a coalition working with Oxfam, as a show of solidarity and to prevent further harassment. Similarly, EPH staff attended a dialogue organised by another coalition member, the Budget Transparency, Accountability, and Participation Alliance (BTAP), where there was presence of both the government and National Assembly. Photos of EPH members were taken with government representatives and posted on their website to add legitimacy to their work.

When designing campaigns around sensitive issues, safety and security should be paramount and where possible should be planned for with robust risk assessments and mitigation plans.

**Work to ensure internal buy-in:** Many Oxfam staff initially viewed the young people at EPH as beneficiaries of the project, as opposed to partners. This attitude was immediately challenged and space was created internally for young people to be seen as experts in their own right – especially in mobilising the public in Vietnam. A shift in mindset is required to move away from a view of working on projects *for* young people to working *with* them and on projects led *by* them. Ensuring buy-in for this approach at the outset will enable a smoother and more impactful project.

**Decide what to measure:** This project saw EPH engage their audience on tax justice issues for the first time. This meant there was no existing baseline data on which to build a solid Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) plan. During the evaluation day, participants reflected that it would have been beneficial to have monitored engagement levels throughout the project, particularly any increase in interest from previously unengaged groups.

Many of the coalition partners felt that EPH's online platform and campaign was a constructive space to enable young people's voices to be heard at a national level; however, there were no measurement indicators for what triggered young people to engage with the campaign. Knowing what you want to measure – and how this will indicate the project's impact – is crucial, and should be considered as part of the MEAL planning at the beginning of the project.

This case study forms part of a series of case studies exploring how to go from programmes developed *for* young people, to working *with* them and on projects led *by* them.

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This paper was written by Oxfam's Youth as Active Citizens Community of Practice. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Youth Policy and Programme Advisors across the confederation in its production. It is part of a series of case studies written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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