

SEND-GHANA: EXPERIENCES FROM GIVING GHANA'S GOVERNMENT A PLACE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT OF OUR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two or more decades in Ghana, the perception among citizens that government was insensitive to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), particularly Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in opening up spaces for engagement in governance was strong and continue to persist.

On the other hand, CSOs/NGOs were seen as antagonistic in their approach to dealing with government and, even if they did engage, they were often oblivious of government processes and when and how to engage to make the expected impact.

As government and CSOs/NGOs played the 'we' and 'them' game - rather than embracing each other as development partners through constructive engagement, with the common goal of bringing development to the doorstep of every citizen in an effective and efficient manner - good governance practices of transparency, accountability and equity suffered and the poor and vulnerable bore the brunt.

At SEND-Ghana, as an NGO having over a decade

experience in working with both local and national government, we can now acknowledge great lessons from hindsight.

We need to be proactive in thinking and engaging rather than being reactive; involvement in every stage of government cycle is key and, more importantly, the benefits of allowing government into the NGO space to understand its work through the provision of guidance and technical backstopping when needed should not be underestimated.

Formation

With such great learnings from past experience, SEND GHANA in the design of its proposal to respond to the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) call took the bold step and the risk of making government actors a core part of the guiding team for the 'Making the Budget Work for Ghana' Project. In August 2015, the Project Steering Committee (PSC) was born and continues operating today as the project advances. The

Steering Committee comprises of representatives of the sector ministries and their respective agencies relevant to the project, including the Ministry of Finance (MoF), Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGC&SP) the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) and the Regional Coordinating Council. Two NGO representatives - the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition and the Ghana Integrity Initiative are also members. The PSC is chaired by the Head of External Debt Unit, Ministry of Finance with the Executive Director of Ghana Integrity Initiative (an NGO) as Vice chairperson.



Steps in Forming a Steering Committee

Having espoused the steering committee in the project design, a well thought out approach towards its formation was initiated to make it a loose but formal, recognized and acceptable team by all sectors involved.

1. Preliminary Meetings

Preliminary meetings are held with each ministry and agency relevant to the project to share information on the project, including its objectives, components and expected outcomes. Furthermore, the Steering Committee concept was introduced to them, explaining the rationale, objectives and proposed roles and responsibilities. Finally, the project team then requested for representatives from the sectors, seeking for members of the senior management level to serve on the steering committee.

2. Formal Representative Request

After the preliminary meetings, a letter was sent to each ministry and agency, requesting for a representative on the Committee. The letter also reiterated some of the key ideas discussed at the preliminary meeting, especially describing the

caliber of persons fit for the Committee. The letter was then replied by these institutions with the names, designations and profile of the representatives.

3. Inception Meeting

This was the initial meeting with the representatives of the targeted ministries and agencies assigned to the committee. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the Making the Budget Work for Ghana project to Committee members, sharing the project's objectives, components, operational districts, and the various steps involved in SEND GHANA's Participatory, Monitoring and Evaluation framework employed to implement the project, among others. The occasion was also seized to introduce and explain the Steering Committee concept to members, explaining its strategic importance to the project, the role of the Committee, its mandate, among others. At the same event, the Terms of Reference (ToR) covering the Committee and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the project and sectors was shared and discussed, requiring members to study the documents with their respective ministries and agencies, making inputs and signing to seal the partnership. At the inception meeting, the structure to run the committee was also established, selecting a chair and vice chair person.

4. The Mandate of the Committee

The mandate of the Committee is to monitor progress in project execution; and provide strategic guidance for the successful implementation of the project. Specific functions of the Steering Committee include: Review of Project Status Reports; Endorsement of the final reports from project experts and consultants; Approval of the Annual Project Work plan and budget, respectively, and any changes there to, in accordance with World Bank guidelines; Annual review of project work plan to assess project development and any other business brought before the PSC by one of its members.

5. Signing of TOR and MOU

After studying the two documents, some of the ministries either call for a meeting or through a phone call to discuss the documents, seeking clarifications, making additions or taking away clauses completely from the document(s) before signing to formalize the relationship. Some ministries spent less than two months to study, review and sign the documents, while others spent close to two years to go through the process before signing.



Benefits of a Steering Committee to the Project

The PSC since its formation, remarkably, has been strategic to the delivery of project objective, accruing substantial benefits to the project.

I. The collaboration has resulted into ownership of the project by the members, where they provide guidance for implementation to ensure that the project succeeds.

II. It has opened up spaces for constructive engagement, which is of mutual benefit to the parties involved.

III. It has formalized the relationship between the project and government and their respective agencies.

IV. Provision of technical assistance to the project. The relevant sectors assist in the implementation of activities including the provision of gray areas for monitoring, development of monitoring tools, enabling project implementation with information to understand government business – providing guidance on how to deal with the bureaucratic processes of government and conforming with the procedural norms of various ministries and agencies to draw out the appropriate and immediate responses as well as leading budget education/sensitization in communities.

V. Ensuring easy access to information from the ministries and speedy response to issues. The Committee also shares vital information on key issues with the aim of helping the project achieve its objectives.

VI. Provides conference facilities to be used for meetings and validations and by so doing reduce project cost in holding committee meetings.



The Challenges

It should be noted that the PSC does not present a total panacea to difficulties in constructive engagement between CSOs and Government. But it does present useful opportunities for working together for the wellbeing of citizens. Notwithstanding the benefits the PSC have accrued to the project, there are still rough edges required to be straightened up.

I. Irrespective of broad acceptance of the project by relevant sectors, some may not see the need or there might be foot dragging in formalizing the partnership and keeping to agreed roles and responsibilities.

II. Although members of the Committee are high-level staffs of the ministries and agencies, comprising directors, planning officers and heads of departments, their capacity to commit or make decisions on behalf of their respective ministries and agencies are sometimes limited, requiring broader consultations mostly from superiors or often from political heads, such as ministers.

III. Another recognized challenge with the Committee is the difficulty in having all members attend meetings. As heads of units or departments, members' tight schedules makes it almost impossible to honor agreed meeting schedules and, thus, results in some delegating colleagues (without decision making rights) to represent them

IV. The Committee suffers when a member is changed, either through transfer or when the person goes on retirement. It might take several months to have a replacement. In addition, understanding the committee's work might take a while for a new member especially if the predecessor did not share documents or information, creating a gap in the work of the Committee. However, this situation can be averted when the out-going member shares information with the incoming member. For instance, when the committee member for the health sector was due for pension, he indicated so to the ministry. The ministry then provided the Committee with a new person, but to ensure continuity, the old member copied the incoming member on all communications with regard to the Committee.

by all members. The ToR should guide the work of the committee.

IV. Be transparent and accountable on project progress and financial expenditure to the committee. Accept and address all criticism raised for the success of the project.

V. Remain neutral and continue to hold government accountable for its actions irrespective of working together with government agencies. The ultimate is for the project objective to be attained and sustained.



Lessons learnt

Some of the lessons learnt in forming and working with the Steering Committee for this project are as follows,

I. Start the formation processes at the early stages, bearing in mind the delays associated with the bureaucratic processes of government institutions.

II. Formalize the partnership with an MoU to have a 'legal' or binding document for the partnership. It is also very important to allow inputs from each ministry and agency during the development of the MoU. Note that some of the ministries look at such documents from the legal perspective, while others view them as administrative procedures as such the period for accepting the term and signing may vary. The Implementing organization should follow-up till all parties sign their MoU. While going through this process, continue to work with the ministry or agency to strengthen the relationship between the institutions. This will help boost the chances for formalizing the partnership.

III. Ensure that the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the committee is a workable document and acceptable