

Our Stake in the National Budget

The present administration deserves to be commended for the timely passage of the 2011 national budget. Worries about a reenacted budget and all its attendant evils were laid to rest. Also, the administration featured the use of zero-based budgeting (ZBB) as a basis for increasing, decreasing or even eliminating budget allocations for this year.

However, the 2011 budget still faces a major challenge, and that is — monitoring its proper implementation. As it is laden with special purpose funds, lump sum appropriations, automatic appropriations and all sorts of features which cannot be penetrated by the magic sword of ZBB, media, civil society and the public have to take up the challenge of monitoring actual implementation.

Where are the entry points for public participation and monitoring in the budget?

First, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has already announced that projects for 2011 will already be front loaded and funds will be released. This is a rich area for public monitoring and budget tracking. Networks like Social Watch Philippines have member organizations which monitor programs in education, health, environment and agriculture. Locally-based organizations can monitor projects implemented in their own localities.

Second, there is the upcoming challenge of the 2012 budget which DBM is already starting to prepare. DBM has been convening a round of consultations among various departments and civil society organizations. Participating agencies include the Departments of Health, Agriculture, Education, Public Works and Highways, and Social Work and Development. The event is a precursor of more opportunities for public participation in the budget process.

The budget process is not the exclusive turf of one department. Budget preparation requires the strong hand of the President, especially in the identification of priorities. Nonetheless, the public has to be consulted in the determination of such priorities. Since budget debates are generally associated with the legislature, the budget only comes to the attention of the public when the documents are submitted to both houses of Congress. It is unfortunate that the crucial process of budget preparation is largely unnoticed by the public.

We stress that the budget is too important to be left to the government alone. Beyond zero-based budgeting, there has to be participation of the people. After all, the budget is the articulation of what a country wants for itself, where it wants to go, and what kind of development it aspires for the people. This is what governance is all about.

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