

EAC budgets score card handed out, CSOs applauded for budget advocacy



CSO from Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Chad, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Chad, and Uganda pose for a group photo after the CSO Learning summit on the budget in Kampala on 26th July. © CSBAG2019

East African Budget Network CSO learning summit on budget kicked off earlier today with a call to strengthen budget transparency and accountability across the East African region. The call, which appeared to appreciate the work of Civil Society Organizations in the region, reminded participants from across continental blocs to take the fight of budget transparency and accountability at the regional stage and build on the successes and momentum already registered at national level.

In his remarks, the East African Budget Network chairperson, Nkurunziza Alexis, said budget transparency and accountability at regional level has become stagnant, rallying CSOs to intensify the fight, but this time aiming at the regional bloc headquarters.

"Budget transparency is not a one off activity as is the case in many of the regional countries. In reality, fight for budget accountability and transparency at all levels, including at the East African Community (EAC) secretariat should be a daily routine," he said.

For instance, he said, in Kenya and Tanzania, there is a concentration on budget analysis but players in these countries should pick lessons from Uganda where CSOs have made it a permanent fixture across all sectors.

"In my view, we should borrow a leaf from Ugandan CSOs and see how we can replicate what they are doing at higher level," he said.

With consistency, Mr. Nkurunziza also noted there will be a time when CSO efforts in this fight will be obvious for all, saying: "If we keep doing this, we will one day become the official voice that advises regional governments on issues of budget transparency and accountability."

Mr. Julius Kapwepwe Mishambi, a member of the EABN, said regional budgets should be able to speak to the aspirations of East Africans rather than politicians. The same, he said, should drive integration and all regional policies, including informing the regional currency which he said is long overdue.

Under radar

With the exception of Burundi and South Sudan where there has been political instabilities, all other regional countries have registered some growth, with Rwanda recording the highest growth of slightly over 7 per cent. However, the growth will only count if there are improvements in budget deployment across the region. According to Mr. Kapwepwe, who is also the Programs Director at the Uganda Debt Network (UDN), regional budget performance continues to be wanting, which calls for an enhanced approach to demand accountability at the EAC secretariat.

Mr. Patrick Rubangakene, a Budget Policy Specialist at the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group (CSBAG), agreed with Mr Kawpwepe's assertions.

Statistics

According to the presentations which examined regional budgets for the just ended financial year, Rwanda achieved the highest growth rate of 8.6 per cent in the previous financial year and is projected to grow at 7.8 per cent in the current one. Kenya grew at 6 per cent in the same period and is projected to grow at 5.8 per cent in this financial year, while Uganda grew at 6.2 per cent in FY2018/19 and is projected to grow at 6.2 per cent in FY2019/20. Lastly, Tanzania grew at 6.6% in 2018 and is projected to grow at 4 per cent in 2019. However, the high growth has not helped to reduce poverty and inequality, according to Mr. Reubangakene. This has been worsened by rising debt across East Africa, with Tanzania being the only country in the region with a low public debt to GDP ratio. Data indicates that Tanzania's debt is projected to be at 36 per cent.

"We must do better. And for that to happen, we must exert pressure at the highest levels including organs that have potential to shape our destiny and aspirations," Mr. Kapwepwe said.

The regional summit on revolutionary work on budget transparency and economic governance drew participants from six countries with representation from ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC. Issues around EAC member country budgets with special focus on the priority areas and recent trends in budget financing, engagements on the FY2020/21 budget process at both country and EAC level as well as learning from other regional blocks, in addition to understanding the implication of AfCTFA, were all discussed during the summit. Importantly, however, the discussion focused on people and how they will be impacted by decisions that shape or are contained in the regional budgets.

Mr. Rama Omonya, CSBAG's Program Advisor, summed it up succinctly, saying: "Budget is not about figures and statistics, but it is and should be about people."