

Public budgetary consultations

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Parliament's Finance and Budget Committee is reviewing the draft 2019 state budget. However, it is a concern for every citizen, as it sets the national priorities. Various public policy experts have stated that in the absence of a plan, the budget is the plan. Public policy issues should be the concern of all society members, but some of the issues are sectoral and of specific interest to a limited target group. The national budget must be considered and promoted as a national concern due to its impact on all the national priorities, projects and governance system.

We have been following the protests and various analyses on the budget without a clear understanding of its aspects and details. The main reason for rejecting certain sections is a lack of awareness and consultation on the budget. Consultation is an interactive process between the state and citizens; therefore, the state and the participating members of society are the two pillars of this process.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has set 10 principles for policymaking in a consultative and integrative manner. These principles deal with the aspects of commitment, rights of access to information, clarity, timing, integration and containment, sources, coordination, accountability, evaluation, and effective citizenship. Community consultation is an evolving concept that is being used as a prerequisite for good governance, social stability, active citizenship and the overall civic tradition of the society. This leads to gaining the trust and ownership of community members and having social immunity from chaos and instability.

Various countries have implemented models and programs of participatory budgeting, such as France and South Korea. A participatory budget program with high school students was launched in western France in 2005. Public high schools had the responsibility of allocating 10 million euros (\$11.3 million at today's rate) - equivalent to approximately 10 percent of the regional budget for high schools. In the Buk-gu district of the city of Gwangju, South Korea, a Citizen Participatory Budgeting Study Group and Participatory Budgeting Council were created to ensure the institutional engagement of community stakeholders. An e-Budget portal was also established to enhance citizens' engagement in the budget process through advanced information communication technologies.

As for Lebanon, reaching a draft 2019 budget in such critical national and regional circumstances is considered by some as an achievement in itself, after the failure of budget formulation for many years. As long as the draft budget aims for reform, decreasing public expenditure, increasing revenues and taking concrete actions toward more effective and efficient public institutions, certain steps must be taken in having structured participation in the national budget and priorities to enhance the good governance in this essential state function.

Consultations and discussions must not be limited to members of Parliament and a restricted number of consultants and experts. The doors of the Parliament must be opened to the community in order to engage them institutionally during the fiscal process and formalization of the national budget.

Political parties and members of Parliament must also take the initiative on consulting with the community in order to engage citizens in the budget process and hear their comments and interventions through large-scale community participation. This can be achieved through organizing sectoral meetings and forums that discuss local and national priorities. Thus, community participation will be institutionalized through forums where citizens will have a platform to inform and be informed, to share their comments and perceptions, and to participate actively in the public arena. Such models will help transform the grievances of those who are protesting in the streets into constructive input and expertise that are needed in reforming public institutions.

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