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UNICEF SOUTH AFRICA
Social Policy Section

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UNICEF South Africa's Public Finance
Events in 2023

REPORT

For more information visit <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/>

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Acknowledgements



UNICEF South Africa takes its convening role seriously and believes that forthright and robust dialogues could help foster a consensus on key public finance and development issues in South Africa. This is important not only for the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but for enabling the country to chart a path that maximises cooperation among government, social partners, development organisations, and academia.

This summary report reflects on some of the key public events hosted and coordinated by UNICEF South Africa and its social partners. Key to these meetings was a desire to understand how public finances could facilitate the realisation of important social and economic rights. Although not explicitly addressed, having access to timely, reliable, and quality budget data is seen as a prerequisite for engaging meaningfully with government and all other social partners.

These annual events have now become part of the public finance calendar in the country and could only be successful due to the ongoing support of social partners. Special thanks is due to our colleagues in UNWOMEN, who with UNICEF, conceptualised the idea of public finance webinars, given the significance of public budgets for the work that both agencies do. Our civil society and academic partners continue to enrich our work, and here we want to thank the Social Policy Initiative (SPI), the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), and the Public Economy Project (PEP) for their ongoing support. 2023 also saw further cooperation with the National Treasury via its Communications Branch and more work is expected to be done jointly in 2024.

A special thanks should go to all the colleagues who attended the different events and for their commitment to actively engage in these public debates. We are also grateful for many government officials who continue to make time to take part in these important discussions.

Internally, Thobile Mthiyane provided excellent organisational leadership, and we are grateful for the Consultant, Ms Kgaugelo Mojapelo, for pulling together this report. Russell Wildeman, Social Policy Manager, has anchored these efforts with commendable patience and persistence.

Our public finance work will continue to be an important pillar of UNICEF's contribution to all children in South Africa and we remain committed to work closely with the Government of the Republic of South Africa so that no child is left behind.

Christine Muhigana

Country Representative, UNICEF South Africa

January 2024

INTRODUCTION

The following report encapsulates the rich insights gleaned from a series of seminars and discussions hosted by UNICEF South Africa. These deliberations brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, including government officials, experts, civil society representatives, and UN agencies, to delve into critical dimensions of South Africa's fiscal policy, socio economic rights, and standards of living.

The topics covered spanned public spending choices, parliamentary accountability, and an exploration of the possession of socially perceived necessities (SPNs). Collectively, these discussions underscore the nation's commitment to transparency, robust social protection, and the ongoing pursuit of a more inclusive developmental agenda.

UNICEF strives to ensure that no woman or child is left behind by working to support the South African Government, families and communities in reducing child poverty and improving education, health care and child protection within our societies.

Ongoing partnerships are the strength of UNICEF with the commitment and support of partners in civil society, businesses, the media and academia in ensuring that the organisation's impact is tangible and long-lasting.



UNICEF SOUTH AFRICA'S
PUBLIC FINANCE EVENTS

TA

UNICEF in collaboration with PEP
host the Public Seminar on SA's
spending choices

TA



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UNICEF in collaboration with PEP host the Public Seminar on SA's spending choices

The Social Policy Section at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Southern Centre of Inequality Studies (SCIS) Public Economy Project (PEP) hosted a public seminar in Pretoria on Tuesday, 28 June 2023, to facilitate a debate around the South African government's public spending choices right at the start of the preparations for the 2024-2025 annual budget process.

Kicking off the first session, **Michael Sachs**, Adjunct Professor at the Public Economy Project stated that “we don't have consolidation because real economic conditions have changed, the growth outlook is worse and because financial conditions are tightened, the goal of that stabilisation is now further away than it was before the pandemic and so the question we have to ask then is what is the path forward are we going to see even further tightening austerity.”

Macro-Fiscal Context

Sachs explained that the largest government expenditures are towards servicing debt, at R367 billion, followed by public health and education sectors.

Using available economic data, Sachs predicted that debt servicing is likely to get more expensive as both inflation and interest rates either stay stagnant or increase in the short to medium term and the government continues to further accrue debt.

The speaker made an important note that, of the billions provided to public healthcare, a portion of that assists trainee doctors to complete their required training and work experience which further strengthens our overall public health system.

“More kids than we thought there would be”

Martin Gustafsson, Researcher and Advisor, commended the presentation and said that it is worrying that “we are not looking in sufficient detail into what is happening with the demographics of the country.” He further pointed out that there has been an unexpected and unpredicted increase in primary school admissions over the last decade due to the lack of such projections in the NDP.

These unpredicted increased numbers have led to a spending crisis in basic education and part of it has to do with “fees that must fall” and post-school education.

Gustafsson noted that in his research, it was evident that, due to the lack of accurate provincial geographical data, certain provinces were being “short changed” in terms of budget allocation for education and possibly other sectors as well.

Measuring Quality

Jodi Wishnia, Senior Researcher at South African Transdisciplinary Consultancy, Percept, kicked off the second session with a discourse on research reviewing the link between the quality of public health services and public health spending between 2016 and 2021, particularly on child health services.

The research made use of data obtained through the department of health facilities within all nine provinces, national policy documentation and peer-reviewed literature with analysis focusing on total expenditure and then analysing more detailed per capita expenditure with the final output being a brief on the health budget itself.



Infant immunisation coverage saw a positive uptake from 2016, peaking in 2020 and then falling to a low of only 70% in 2021.



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Trends in Public Financing of Health

Gauteng and the Western Cape have the lowest number of children who are not on some form of medical insurance. This is due to higher incomes per capita which allow more parents to afford medical aid and lower fertility rates with people having fewer children.

In general, South Africa's population is ageing with non-communicable diseases associated with old age projected to place an increased burden on already constrained healthcare facilities and budgets forcing the government to shift spending away from child healthcare to adults, possibly further exacerbating negative neonatal and infant outcomes.

South Africa's total public healthcare expenditure, which represents 8.5% of GDP. Even though our total public expenditure is relatively high compared to other developing nations, our infant mortality rate is significantly high at 32 deaths per 1,000 live births. Brazil and Mexico, our closest sister-countries in terms of development, sit at 15 and 14 deaths per 1,000 live births respectively. This clearly indicates the importance of quality.

The research found that although total provincial spending on primary healthcare increased from 30% in 2021 to 32% in 2022, proportional spending on hospital services decreased over the five-year study period.

Based on these key findings, health departments both national and provincial are encouraged to ensure that funding is allocated through evidence-based methods, introduce a risk-adjusted capitation fee to reduce provincial inequity, immediately implement a national targeted immunisation campaign and institute electronic health records for a streamlined, efficient patient management system.



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Quality Education vs Budgetary Constraints

This was the simple question posed by UNICEF Social Policy Manager, **Russell Wildeman**, who presented the latest research on educational outcomes using a 2022 systemic review. Apart from school inputs, the systematic review also examined infrastructure, facilities, structural reforms such as the district development program, community and family involvement and integrated school development.

In essence researchers sought linkages which tied together the systematic review and key factors that are likely to mediate quality education and then find out whether these key factors are present within the existing budgetary frameworks in provincial education.

One of the key findings coming out of the review was that interventions in one context do not always produce the same effect in another context. For example, research done in the early 2000s found that investing in infrastructure did not have a noticeable impact on quality outcomes in the United States but, in South Africa, fixing educational infrastructure which was not in place, would be an important stepping stone to fixing the entire system.



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Looking at key financing trends within basic education found that spending increased by just 3% from 2009 to 2018 in terms of purchasing power with salaries within the education sector accounting for an estimated 3.5% of South Africa's GDP.

In the late 2000s, the Department of Education at the time proposed a system in which quality teaching would be rewarded through an increased pay of the teacher concerned but, after objections from teachers unions, the additional funding allocated for this purpose was used instead to fund three-yearly increments based on years of service.

Nationally, the number of active teachers has been in a steady decline since 2013 while pupil enrollment increased in line with population growth which has led to the subsequent increase in teacher-learner ratios, predominantly in schools within the lower quintiles.

Personnel budgets were found to be much lower in lower quintile schools which served poorer communities. This led to lower pay offers which in turn attracted less-qualified, inexperienced teachers and reduced the overall quality of education received by pupils.

Wildeman stated that the “upgrading of teacher competence cannot rely only on the production of new teachers through the bursary schemes, serious efforts are needed in respect of in-service training for the much larger numbers of existing teachers.”

The review suggests that more focus and budget should be aimed at education at the primary level but anticipate strong pushback to this as there is a higher demand for quality secondary education as this is seen as the gateway into tertiary education. Wildeman predicts an ignition point for the South African economy, has stalled.



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UNICEF and SPI Launch of the Decent Standard of Living Report

17 August 2023 marked the launch of the "Decent Standard of Living: Findings on possession of the socially perceived necessities in 2022" report. The event was a convergence of diverse voices, including representatives from the South African government, United Nations agencies, civil society, academia as well as various research institutes.

The report, a collaborative endeavour between UNICEF, the Social Policy Initiative, and partner organisations, aimed to illuminate the non-income dimensions of poverty in South Africa, concentrating on socially perceived necessities (SPNs) that shape individuals' lives.



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Thobile Mthiyane, UNICEF's Social Policy Specialist steered the session, facilitating the discourse.

Isobel Frye, Executive Director of the Social Policy Initiative underscored the profound significance of grasping the context and repercussions of poverty. She stressed the pervasive implications of income and wealth inequality, shaping power dynamics based on race, class, gender, and geography. Frye accentuated the necessity of addressing inequality and nurturing well-being for all segments of society. The report's findings demonstrated a positive trajectory in the possession of SPNs, signifying improvements in living standards.

"Our commitment extends beyond data and numbers. It's about redefining policy frameworks, amplifying marginalised voices, and forging a future where every individual's dignity is safeguarded."

The Decent Standard of Living Report: The report delved into the concept of SPNs, classified into social networks, commodities, and the social wage. It unveiled that over 25% of surveyed households possessed the majority of essential items necessary for a dignified existence.

Moreover, possession of SPNs witnessed an upward trend from 2015 to 2022, reflecting an enhancement in living conditions. Additionally, the cost of acquiring all SPNs had diminished during this period.



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Opening Remarks by **Aleta Miller**, UN Women South Africa Multi Country Office

Aleta Miller extended a warm welcome to the esteemed gathering and acknowledged the presence of the Minister of Social Development and other dignitaries. She highlighted the collaborative essence of the report and its pivotal role in comprehending the impact of poverty on human dignity.

Miller applauded the employed methodology, which combined qualitative research with survey data, categorising SPNs into social networks, commodities, and the social wage. This approach, she emphasised, "resonated with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and directly addressed the call for a measure of adequate living standards."

"Today, we gather to unveil insights that hold the power to drive policy change, foster inclusive growth, and uplift vulnerable communities. This report underscores the multifaceted nature of poverty, extending beyond income metrics."



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Among the most significant SPNs were cell phone ownership, access to mains electricity, and possession of a refrigerator. The report notably underscored disparities in SPN possession across various demographic groups.

Helen Barnes, Director and Senior Researcher at SASPRI

Barnes furnished a comprehensive overview of the 2022 SPN possession findings. In comparing these findings with previous years, she accentuated shifts in possession patterns. Certain SPNs, such as access to police presence and a clean neighbourhood, became attainable only when a certain number of other SPNs were in possession. Barnes also emphasised variations in possession trends based on demographics, including distinctions between urban and rural residents and variations in household income.

"Our data unfurls the intricate tapestry of living conditions, where the possession of one necessity can spell the difference between access to safety and vulnerability to crime."

Lindiwe Zulu, Minister of Social Development

Minister Zulu acknowledged the significance of Women's Month and championed women's equitable participation in the economy. She urged for research and policies that champion inclusive development, addressing poverty comprehensively. Minister Zulu shed light on vulnerabilities accentuated by recent events, urging the utilisation of evidence from reports like this to steer policies enhancing living standards.

"As we celebrate Women's Month, let us remember that true development encompasses the empowerment of women, eradication of poverty, and creation of an environment where every citizen thrives."

Commissioner Phakama Ntshongwana, National Planning Commission emphasised the report's role in evidence-based planning and policy formulation. She stressed its potential in gaining insights into people's daily lives, advocating integrated management and intersectoral coordination.

"Effective policies are born from a profound understanding of the people they serve. This report lends a vital lens to envisioning policies that leave no one behind."

Concluding Remarks

Isobel Frye reiterated the importance of partnerships and collaborations in tackling poverty and enriching well-being. She underscored the necessity of continuous research, especially in the realm of child-specific policies, understanding social networks' role, and exploring the ramifications of an enhanced social wage.

The session concluded with gratitude to all participants, accentuating the significance of sustaining networks and partnerships to drive transformative change.

"This launch isn't an endpoint, but a beginning. Together, we embark on a journey to translate insights into action, weaving a fabric of equitable opportunities."



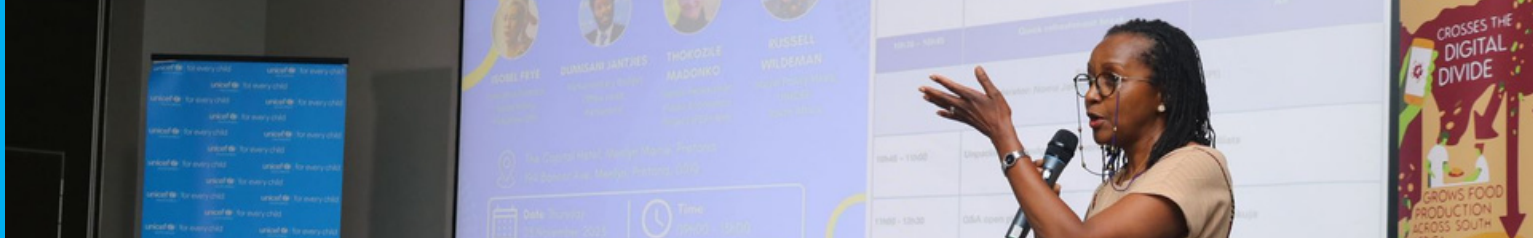
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Closing Comments by Russell Wildeman

Russell Wildeman extended appreciation to participants and underscored the significance of persistent networks and collaborations in addressing poverty. He emphasised the indispensability of multifaceted measures to capture the intricate facets of poverty and well-being, advocating for unceasing efforts in research and policy evolution.

The launch of the Decent Standard of Living report marked a pivotal stride in comprehending the complex interplay of poverty and inequality impact on individuals in South Africa. The exhaustive findings illuminated both encouraging trends and ongoing challenges in manifesting a dignified standard of living for all.





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Fiscal Policy and Socioeconomic Rights in the Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) 2023

UNICEF partnered with the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) and the Social Policy Initiative (SPI) to lead a discussion on fiscal policy and socioeconomic rights in South Africa. A comprehensive overview of the country's budgetary landscape, highlighting both achievements and areas for improvement was presented. Notably, the conversation focused on the successes of the social protection system, with particular emphasis on the extension of the child support grant and the pivotal role of activists in promoting fiscal transparency.

"South Africa is somewhat of an outlier because its GDP per capita, which is the broadest measure of productivity in the economy of incomes in the economy, has stagnated and fallen, even while other countries in the world have seen their per capita income maybe not shoot the lights out but at least continue to grow."

Michael Sachs from WITS University mentioned that the debate underlined South Africa's commitment to fiscal transparency, often ranking among the top nations in this regard. Parliamentary engagement was recognised as a significant factor, with specific reference to the ability of Parliament to amend the budget, reflecting a protracted process of negotiation and debate.

On the social protection front, the expansion of services and achievements in combating HIV and AIDS were acknowledged. The discussion also delved into the complexities of corruption, advocating for a more intentional approach to address corruption as a risk in implementation rather than a broad, amorphous challenge.

"The path being followed currently within the medium-term budget policy statement 2023 is not one that has a legitimate aim of realising people's human rights."

Thokozile Madonko researcher at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at Wits University mentioned that education emerged as a key focal point, with improvements in enrollment levels and overall educational outcomes. However, concerns were raised about potential losses and the importance of not regressing from these accomplishments.

A critical area of reflection was the necessity for further transformation of the economy. Emphasis was placed on using fiscal policy to drive industrialisation, with a commitment to build on past gains and move towards a more robust economic framework.

"Separating the accountability of the government from the state in implementing the Constitution is crucial for building a new consensus."

"Fiscal policy can play a crucial role in fostering growth and development by ensuring the sustainable delivery of essential public services, building a common society if managed effectively."

- Thokozile Madonko



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Russell Wildeman highlighted the fiscal crisis in South Africa, attributing it to the chronic stagnation of the economy since 2012. He pointed out that South Africa's GDP per capita has stagnated and fallen, making it an outlier compared to other countries experiencing income growth. He emphasised that the spending growth since 2012 has been curtailed to manage the rise in debt service costs.

"At the root of South Africa's fiscal crisis is the chronic stagnation of the economy since 2012."

- Russell Wildeman

Russell expressed concern about the intensified austerity measures proposed in the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), stating that it would have three significant effects: moving the fiscal impulse into stronger negative territory, causing disruptions in government operations, and potentially damaging the quality of public finances.

"Expenditure growth has been very moderate, and there have been conditions of fiscal consolidation for more than a decade."

- Russell Wildeman

Dumisani Jantjies, Director of the Parliamentary Budget Office underscored the need for a national consensus on fiscal priorities, advocating for a constructive role in advocating for social sector expenditures. He also touched on the importance of building a new national consensus about South Africa's priorities, particularly in light of the upcoming elections in 2024.

In her closing remarks, UNICEF South Africa Country Representative **Christine Muhigana** Acknowledged the participatory nature of the discussion, and mentioned that the report commended South Africa for its unique confluence of government and critical voices.

She further commented that the involvement of various stakeholders, including activists and organisations, was recognised as a strength in sustaining a vibrant democracy.

Muhigana additionally mentioned that the report highlighted the call for a collaborative, competent, and realistic approach to addressing pressing issues, urging a shift away from an "us vs. them" mentality. The engagement was seen as an opportunity to improve the lives of the most vulnerable, with a commitment to furthering these conversations and platforms.

She further emphasised the importance of aligning the education system with the needs of the labour market to enhance the quality of education.

According to her, quality education is not just about acquiring degrees or qualifications but ensuring that the knowledge and skills gained are relevant to the demands of the labour market.

In collaboration with SAP, she highlighted a specific program launched in Johannesburg. This initiative focuses on selecting youth who are not part of the formal education system, providing them with training tailored to specific positions. Upon completion, these individuals receive certification qualifying them for particular roles at SAP and its clients.

"Quality education means that, at the end of the day, you can go out and find a job. It's not about having a degree or a number of qualifications; if there is a mismatch with what you know and the labour market needs, then it really isn't quality education."

- Christine Muhigana



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Conclusion

Isobel Frye

The report underscored the importance of a human rights-driven approach to budgeting, with a call for budgets that clearly articulate outcomes and prioritise the realisation of socio-economic rights. The need for a path that demonstrates visible progress and allows for course corrections was emphasised, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals.

"Fiscal policy can play a crucial role in fostering growth and development by ensuring the sustainable delivery of essential public services, building a common society if managed effectively."

In summation, the amalgamated insights derived from these seminars offer a comprehensive snapshot of the multifaceted economic and social terrain in South Africa. Notable accomplishments in the realm of social protection, strides in education, and a nuanced understanding of poverty through the lens of SPNs were spotlighted.

The discussions echoed a resounding call for sustained collaboration, a human rights-driven approach to budgeting, and a concerted focus on addressing persistent challenges such as corruption and the imperative of economic transformation.

The commitment demonstrated by diverse stakeholders towards continued dialogue and actionable strategies stands as a testament to a shared aspiration—to foster equitable opportunities and uplift the lives of the most vulnerable in South Africa.

This consolidated report is proffered as a substantive contribution to UNICEF's ongoing endeavours in shaping policies that champion the well-being and rights of children and families across the nation.



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UNICEF SOUTH AFRICA'S
PUBLIC FINANCE EVENTS

2A

The role of the budget process in
public financial management

2A



The role of the budget process in public financial management

In May 2023, **Andrew Donaldson**, a Research Associate in the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, addressed UNICEF and UN WOMEN as part of the Brown Bag series, focusing on South Africa's budget process and challenges in public finance management. Key aspects covered include constitutional provisions, fiscal architecture, and institutional reforms.

Joachim Wehner's presentation in July 2023 for UNICEF South Africa provided insights into global and South African parliamentary budgeting. Historical struggles, constitutional reforms post-apartheid, and the 2009 Money Bills Amendment Procedure Act were discussed, highlighting crucial issues like amendment powers and making use of OECD country comparisons.

Donaldson outlined institutional reforms, beginning with the 1998 budget process overhaul. The introduction of MTBPS, MTEF, and the Public Finance Management Act in 2000 aimed at enhancing fiscal transparency. Reforms also tackled state asset restructuring, PPPs, and modernisation of accounting and IT systems.

Wehner's presentation emphasised South Africa's top-down 2009 reforms, involving finance and appropriations committees. The creation of the Parliamentary Budget Office aimed to provide independent advice, aligning amendments with fiscal frameworks and principles.



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Donaldson highlighted South Africa's economic challenges, including an investment decline, global economic slowdown, rising public expenditure, tax reform limitations, and financial management weaknesses. Regulatory overreach and inertia in reforms were identified as additional hurdles.

Wehner's presentation compared South Africa's parliamentary budgeting with OECD countries, emphasising the influence of non-institutional factors such as the political environment and partisan control. Concerns about profligacy were addressed, suggesting institutional safeguards and fiscal rules.

Both presentations stressed the need for private sector investment and economic diversification. Donaldson advocated for market-driven initiatives in skills funding, housing, electricity, and infrastructure, while Wehner emphasised the importance of carefully designed institutions in South Africa.

Donaldson presented a comprehensive approach to re-imagining funding models, including the District Development Model and a Social Employment Fund. Wehner discussed industrialization through localisation and sector master plans, promoting import replacement and access to export markets.

In conclusion, both presentations underscored the challenges faced by South Africa in managing its public finances and parliamentary budgeting. While Donaldson focused on economic challenges and institutional reforms, Wehner provided insights into the global context, emphasising the delicate balance required for effective parliamentary involvement.

This summarised overview provides a holistic perspective on South Africa's fiscal challenges and potential pathways for economic progress, combining insights from Donaldson's public finance focus and Wehner's parliamentary budgeting analysis.

UNICEF SOUTH AFRICA'S
PUBLIC FINANCE EVENTS

2B

Understanding the role of Parliament in
public finance issues in South Africa and
the Region

2B



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Understanding the role of Parliament in public finance issues in South Africa and the Region

An online seminar recently hosted by the Social Policy Section at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) brought together esteemed government officials, experts, civil society representatives and UN colleagues to discuss the critical role of parliament in budget scrutiny and strengthening parliamentary accountability for public finance.

The seminar aimed to expose a wider audience, particularly in South Africa, to the importance of transparency and accountability in public finance as well as global best practices in parliamentary budget oversight.

The event commenced with warm welcomes to all participants, including representatives from the South African Government, IMF, World Bank, civil society, and UN agencies.

Thobile Mthiyane, UNICEF Social Policy Specialist, emphasised the role of legislatures in ensuring government mandates are met and highlighted the significance of accountability in resource mobilisation and utilisation.

Accountability in government resource management and mobilisation is of utmost importance in South Africa to ensure effective and transparent governance. With a history of corruption and mismanagement, accountability measures play a crucial role in promoting trust between citizens and their government.

By holding officials accountable for their decisions and actions, it helps prevent the misuse of public funds, encourages responsible resource allocation, and promotes equitable distribution of resources across the country.

This accountability fosters economic stability, social progress, and the realisation of key development goals, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and prosperous society for all South Africans.

The highlight of the seminar was the keynote address delivered by **Joachim Wehner**, an associate professor in public policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Wehner provided an in-depth analysis of the global context surrounding the role of parliament in the budget process.

He began by tracing the historical roots of parliamentary involvement in budgetary matters, referring to the Magna Carta of 1215 as the foundation of democratic institutions around the world.

Wehner emphasised that different countries have varying approaches to parliamentary budget scrutiny, ranging from limited powers to unrestricted authority. He underscored the importance of carefully designing institutional frameworks to strike a balance between executive flexibility and legislative control.

Providing the executive branch of parliament with a certain degree of flexibility is essential to enable timely and decisive decision-making.

In times of emergencies or rapidly changing situations, the executive needs the capacity to act swiftly and efficiently without being bogged down by excessive bureaucratic procedures or delays.

This flexibility allows the executive to respond to crises and implement policies efficiently, which is vital for effective governance and addressing urgent issues.

On the other hand, legislative control is necessary to prevent abuse of power and maintain a system of checks and balances. The legislature plays a critical role in representing the interests of the people, scrutinising government actions, and ensuring that policies align with the needs and values of the population.

Through legislative oversight, parliament can review executive decisions, hold government officials accountable, and ensure that public resources are used responsibly and transparently. A robust legislative control mechanism helps prevent potential abuses of power and enhances democratic accountability.

Turning to the South African context, Wehner discussed the challenges faced in ensuring parliamentary accountability for public finance. He acknowledged the positive aspects of South Africa's budget system, such as the Open Budget Index score and the comprehensive information provided in budget documents.



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However, he highlighted the need for effective political leadership and the right individuals in parliament to maximise the system's potential.

Wehner also addressed concerns regarding the sustainability of debt and the quality of public expenditure in South Africa. He stressed that electing capable and principled individuals to parliament is crucial for overcoming these challenges and achieving effective budgetary oversight.

He commended institutions like the Auditor General for their resilience in upholding transparency and accountability, despite external pressures.

Q&A Session and Participant Contributions

Following Wehner's presentation, participants engaged in a vibrant question and answer session.

The discussion covered various topics, including the relationship between parliamentary committees and government departments, the impact of the electoral system on the quality of parliamentarians and the potential for peer learning among parliamentarians from different countries.

In a South African context, parliamentary committees play a critical role in overseeing government departments and their activities.

These committees are composed of members of parliament from different political parties and are tasked with scrutinising the policies, programs, and budgets of specific government departments.

The committees act as a check on the executive branch and ensure that the government is accountable and transparent in its actions.

Through regular engagements, questioning, and investigations, committees hold government departments accountable for their performance and spending, identifying areas of concern or inefficiencies.

This relationship strengthens parliamentary oversight and fosters a more efficient and responsive government, as it allows for closer monitoring and evaluation of the executive's actions.



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South Africa employs a proportional representation electoral system, where citizens vote for political parties rather than individual candidates. This system can have both positive and negative impacts on the quality of parliamentarians.

On the one hand, it allows for greater representation of diverse voices, including those from historically marginalised communities, as parties are encouraged to present candidates from various backgrounds. This can lead to a more inclusive and representative parliament that reflects the country's diversity.

However, the system also creates a degree of party control over candidate selection, potentially prioritising party loyalty over individual competence. This might result in some parliamentarians being less qualified or experienced in legislative matters, impacting the overall effectiveness and expertise of the legislature.

Nonetheless, parties can mitigate this issue by implementing rigorous candidate selection processes and providing ongoing training and support for their elected representatives.

Peer learning among parliamentarians from different countries can be a valuable mechanism for sharing best practices, experiences, and knowledge.

By engaging in forums, workshops, and international conferences, South African parliamentarians can learn from their counterparts in other countries about effective legislative strategies, policy approaches, and governance practices.

This exposure to diverse perspectives can broaden their understanding and help them develop innovative solutions to local challenges.

One participant raised concerns about the slow approval of committee meeting minutes, highlighting the need for timely access to information.

Wehner acknowledged the importance of transparency and efficient communication between parliamentary committees and government departments. He also emphasised the significance of the electoral system in ensuring the selection of dedicated and capable parliamentarians.

Another participant discussed the challenges faced by Parliament due to the recent shift to remote work and the reliance on the City of Cape Town for meeting spaces.

Wehner acknowledged the changing dynamics brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the need for adaptability in parliamentary processes.

He commended the efforts of parliamentary staff working from home but highlighted the importance of maintaining effective communication as well as something as simple as access to the internet.

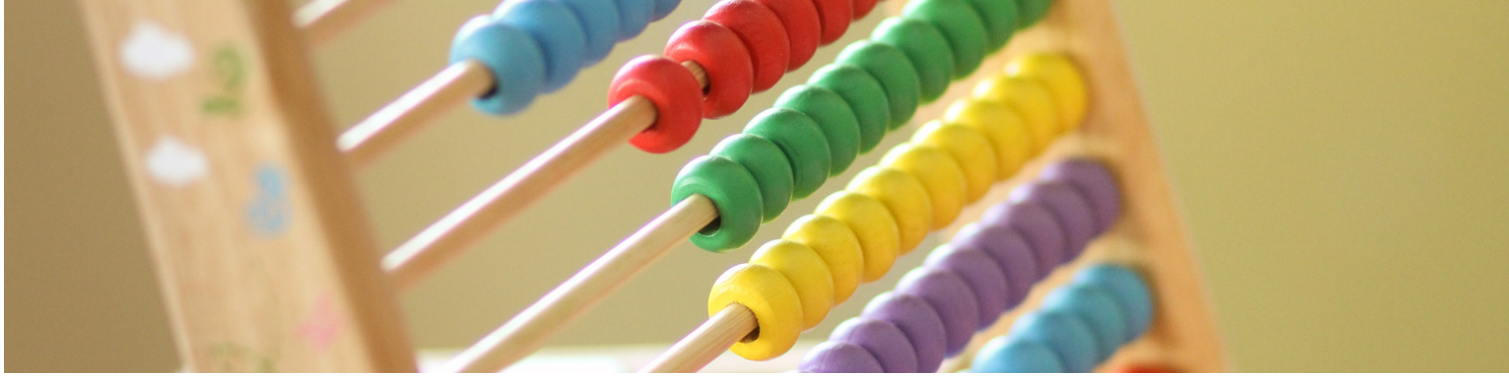
The discussion also touched upon the role of civil society in holding Parliament accountable and the importance of peer learning among parliamentarians. Wehner praised the SADC Parliamentary Forum for its adoption of the SADC Public Financial Management Model Law, which fosters peer learning and raises human rights and gender concerns. The seminar provided valuable insights into the global context and the South African experience.

Wehner's keynote address shed light on the historical foundations of parliamentary involvement in budget scrutiny and emphasised the need for carefully designed institutional frameworks.

The seminar highlighted the importance of electing principled and capable individuals to Parliament to ensure effective budgetary oversight. It also underscored the role of civil society in holding Parliament accountable and the potential for peer learning among parliamentarians from different countries.

Moving forward, participants acknowledged the need to leverage existing platforms and collaborate across UN agencies, civil society organisations, and governments to strengthen parliamentary accountability for public finance.

The seminar concluded with a call for continued investment in the capacity of Parliament and a commitment to transparency, accountability, and sustainable public expenditure in South Africa and beyond.



Gender-responsive budgeting

The third of the public finance webinar series was hosted online on 30 November 2023. It dealt with the issue of gender-responsive budgeting in Canada and South Africa. The two guest speakers were **Trinish Padayachee** from the Treasury in Canada and **Thokozile Madonko**, who is a researcher at the Wits University Public Economy Project.



Padayachee mentioned the fact that the reality of an effective gender-responsive plan and strategy is largely based on the political will of the government of the day. This, she argued, enabled the building of institutions and the readiness of government partners to comply with data requested and deadlines for submission of relevant gender-responsive data. She also emphasised that a successful implementation of this policy requires good, disaggregated data, which is not always available for all departments and regions.

Finally, she referred to the government's core analytical tool, namely the Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus), which "looks at who is impacted by an issue that the government is trying to address, how they are impacted, how initiatives could be tailored to meet diverse needs, and how barriers can be mitigated to accessing initiatives or benefitting from them."

Another important impetus to the development of full-blown gender-responsive budgets has been the enactment of the Canadian Gender Budgeting Act, 2018. This Act enabled the federal government to make "gender budgeting a permanent part of the federal budget-making process." It also developed reporting requirements for new budget measures; promoted the principle of gender equality and inclusiveness; and, made information available to the public on the impacts of government's decisions in terms of impact etc.

Thokozile focused on the importance of partnerships and singled out the existence of the Vulekamali initiative, which is driven by CSOs and the National Treasury. The idea is to make as much budget information accessible to as many individuals and audiences. She also indicated that at this stage, South Africa does not yet have the data infrastructure to enable a fully gender-responsive budgeting response and plan. This also related, she argued, to the idea of building consensus on what issues must receive special attention in the national and provincial budgets, such as women, children, and people with disabilities etc.

Respondents urged the meeting to seek further dialogue with the National Treasury and Padayachee was able to point out who the relevant National Treasury focal points on this issue are. The meeting resolved to try and set up a meeting with these focal points, but to keep the initial meetings private so that sufficient trust is established between social partners and the National Treasury. UNICEF was tasked with the request to contact the focal person in National Treasury in the early part of 2024. Also, a follow-up workshop was planned for 2024 where some of the issues raised will be covered in greater detail.

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