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POWER OF VOICES
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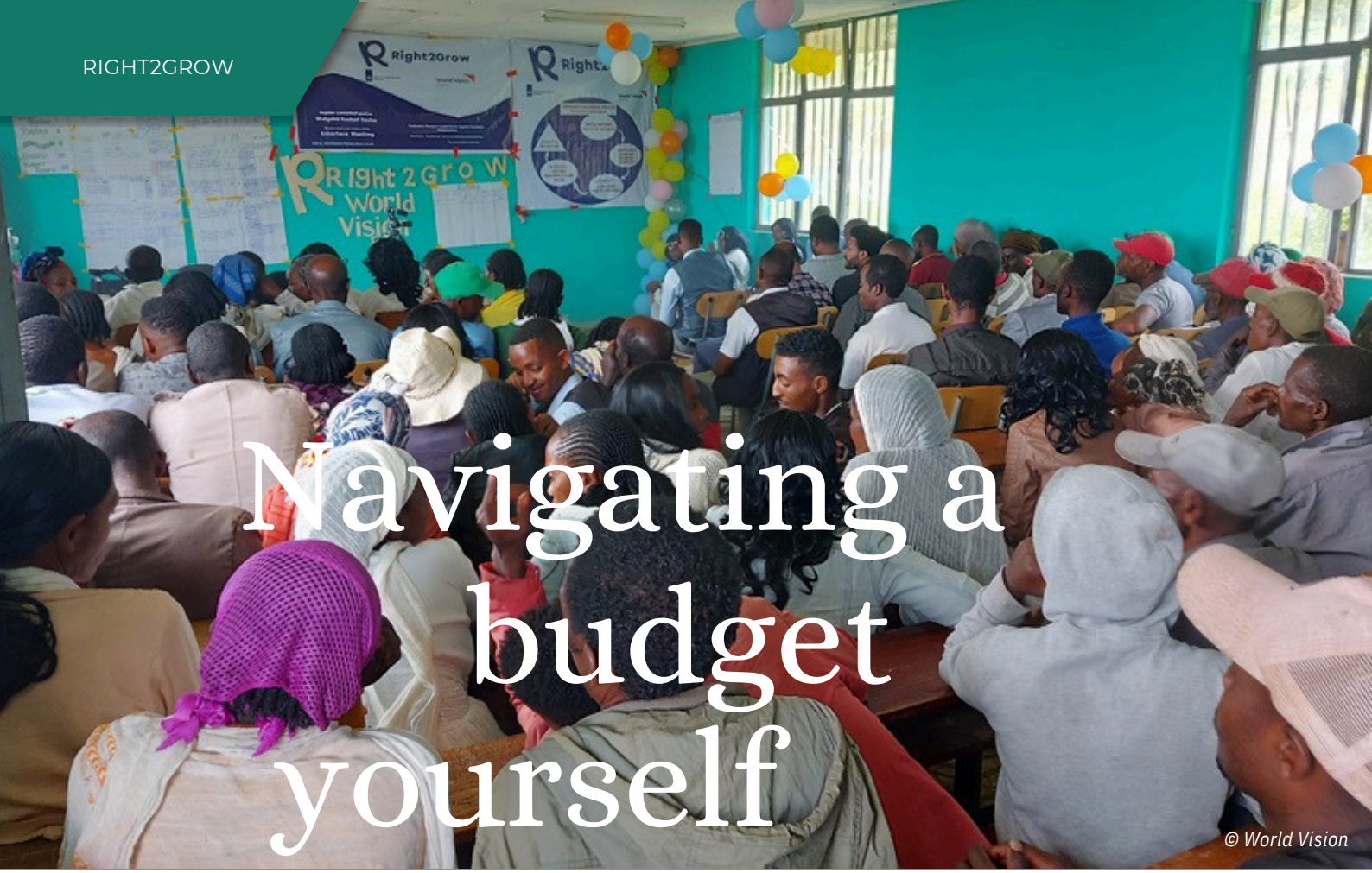
Revolutionising seventeen partnerships to build a stronger civil society globally



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Navigating a budget yourself and so securing the promised toilets

In Ethiopia, citizens now keep government on track

Every child has the right to grow up in health - and you need good nutrition and WASH facilities for that. When people hold their own administrators accountable when these are lacking, things change: their data analysis proves to be an effective way to check that money is getting to where it needs to go. 'We teach them that anyone can do this: it's not complicated, you just need to pick up a few skills for it, so that's what we do.' Text: Joris Tielens (translated from Dutch)

It used to be a long journey for pregnant women around Fendika, in Ethiopia's Amhara region, if they wanted a safe delivery and proper care for their newborn child. There was a health centre, but there was no ultrasound machine or the ability to do blood tests - those who needed care had to go to a town further away.

And that had to change, the women themselves decided, and first they discussed what were the biggest problems for them when it came to the health of their children. In Ethiopia, this is not a given: infant mortality is high, malnutrition is common and 37 per cent of all children are immature. The priority for the group of women was to improve maternity care at the Fendika health centre.

They succeeded: after a series of meetings and talks with local administrators, the women managed to convince the centre to invest in an ultrasound machine and a device that allows you to test blood. The money needed for it - 15,300 euros - was mainly raised by thousands of people from the community, but the local government also contributed, to a smaller extent.

'As women among themselves, they felt more comfortable: *they could discuss their problems... and they got to influence them'*

A whole process preceded this, Abdoelhafiz Hassen tells us by phone from nearby Debre Markos, a town in the region's south. He is a local employee of the Right2Grow partnership and is employed by the Organisation for Rehabilitation and Development in Amhara (ORDA), a local NGO.

He has spent the past two years training people in the community, including these women, as well as grassroots organisations, local administrators and religious leaders. The trainings make people aware of the importance of good nutrition, as well as the importance of clean water, sanitation and hygiene, says Hassen.

These things are all necessary for children to grow up healthy. 'In the trainings, they learned in the community to develop a vision and set priorities together,' he continues, 'and then to advocate their goals to local administrators and the health centre.'

Right2Grow is a strategic partnership between Action Against Hunger, the Centre for Economic Governance and Accountability in Africa (CEGAA), the Max Foundation, Save the Children, World Vision and The Hunger Project, with the latter acting as pen- feeder. It receives funding from the Dutch government from the Power of Voices programme.

Right2Grow works with people from hundreds of communities and with 25 community organisations (or: local civil society organisations), in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Uganda and South Sudan. The aim is to strengthen the capacity of national organisations and local communities to advocate to their own governments for better nutrition and clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) so that children can grow up healthy.

The women in the community are now better at standing up for their interests, says Hassen: 'In the past, women and young people were still somewhat reluctant to challenge the head of a health centre or a director on the functioning of that centre. Success required the women within Right2Grow to have the opportunity to come together among themselves. 'As women among themselves, they felt more at ease: they could discuss their problems ... and they got to influence them.'

The community's voice is now much better heard by local administrators, Hassen concludes. 'On the other hand, the head of the centre is also happy with it: the community is now more involved and raised the money. People even volunteered to help with the renovation.'

The story of the health centre in Fendika briefly demonstrates the approach of the Right2Grow programme in Ethiopia, which is all about strengthening the local voice, by mobilising and empowering local communities and their organisations and the NGOs to hold the government accountable.

Men and women are given roles in collecting data, monitoring government spending and engaging and persuading policy makers. Right2Grow works in Ethiopia with three local partners in three regions and 21 districts - although it has been suspended or relocated in some parts due to the security situation, but it continues in most areas.

Sindu Dessie

Sindu Dessie lives in Kirakidamin Zuria village, also in the Amhara region. She was already working as a health promoter in her community, but the trainings she received before were mostly only about taking vaccinations or children's personal hygiene. 'By participating in Right2Grow's trainings,' she says, 'we learned the importance of healthy food, such as breastfeeding and healthy meal.

By participating in the trainings of Right2Grow,' she says: we have we learned the importance of healthy nutrition, such as breastfeeding and healthy meals for our children, including food of animal origin - that has an impact on their growth.'

Farmers in the area grow vegetables and keep chickens and cows for milk. Earlier, the women sold the vegetables, eggs and dairy at the market, now they primarily give them to their own children so that they are better nourished.

You can call Seida a pioneer in women's development, and she has started her own vegetable production, making her no longer dependent on the market. She sells some, so she can use the money earned to buy other produce. She has participated in trainings of the Right2Grow programme and now knows how to prepare a nutritious meal, providing her children with four meals a day. Furthermore, she notices that the health of the children in her commune has improved: in particular, there are fewer cases of malaria and, after the trainings, 25 households have improved access to water, because they knew how to influence their local authorities.

'It starts with the community building a vision,' says Misrak Admasu, who is the Right2Grow project manager in Ethiopia for The Hunger Project. She trains people from local organisations, who in turn train people in the community.

'We bring together groups of the same people: women, young people or people with disabilities, but also religious leaders or service providers, such as teachers or health educators. In such a group, people work on a vision for nutrition and health, and we teach them leadership skills.' The community develops a vision, sets itself goals and takes action. 'We see that it really changes mindsets. Women and young people, as well as others, become a change agent of themselves.'

'We see that it really does change mindsets. *Women and young people as well as others are becoming a change agent of themselves'*

The method, called Vision, Commitment and Action (VCA) and developed by The Hunger Project, leads to concrete visions, says Admasu. 'A community can set itself a goal of no malnourished children after five years, or that everyone has access to a toilet everywhere.' An action plan emerges from the vision, after which they often start raising money in the community themselves - to build a latrine, provide clean water at a health centre or plant a vegetable garden.

Apart from a vision and action by the community, more is needed to bring about change: that the local government takes action, or the people of the centre, a teacher or the agricultural extension worker. That is why Right2Grow has combined different methods and the one of vision building goes well with another one, says Admasu, developed by World Vision: Citizen Voice and Action (CVA).

This gives local communities the opportunity to address their own administrators or service providers about the lack of facilities and advocate for improvements. The same groups receive a series of monthly trainings. The first is about what rights adults and children have when it comes to nutrition and WASH issues.

The second gives the community information on what standards the government has in that area. Existing policies often already spell out what should be regulated: that you should have a health centre with access to clean water, and that there should also be staff there to provide health or nutrition education.

In the third step, each group goes to see how facilities are doing in practice. "A group from the community," says Adma- su, "visits the health centre with service providers to compare the situation on the ground with how it should be according to the management. In addition, focus groups of young people, women, people with disabilities or religious leaders visit and use a scorecard to keep track of how the facility is performing. The people responsible for the facility, and local government officials, also proceed in the same way.'

In the final stage of the CVA process, the community, local government and service providers meet in a meeting, with each group presenting its findings. 'Together they make an action plan on how to solve the demonstrated deficiencies and the community's voice is also presented to the district councillors, as they are the ones who decide on policy.'

The talks often create a dialogue between citizens and policymakers for the first time, says Admasu. The reason why things are often not as they should be is also discussed, and that reason may be that the government says it has no money. That is where lobbying using budget figures comes in.

Budget monitoring and expenditure tracking, as the method is called in full, involves civil society organisations and local communities themselves checking the government's budget to see how-much money has been set aside for healthy food and clean water, sanitation and hygiene - and then also checking whether that money is actually being spent.

Admasu: 'At the local level, it means knowing how much money the local government has available for health educators, for clean water and toilets and latrines, and that you can hold the government accountable if that money is not spent. To have this data, we also need to work on understanding budgets at the regional and national level.'

Right2Grow has spent the past two and a half years collecting data on how much money is available in budgets at national, regional and district levels in Ethiopia for food and clean water, sanitation and hygiene. Budgets were organised by sector, such as agriculture, health or education, and tracked in each.

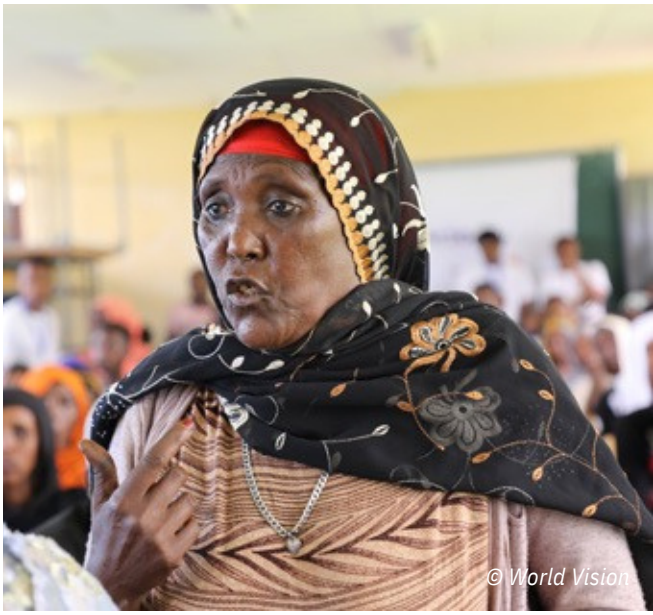
But reading a budget and understanding what it means for you, in your village or town, requires quite a bit of knowledge. It is also difficult for policy-makers themselves to know which expenses are relevant to nutrition and WASH - which is why Right2Grow's partners, local organisations and also government staff in Ethi- opia, have been assisted by CEGAA: a South African-based organisation that provides that kind of training throughout the continent.

At the district level, the data Right2Grow brought out were validated by the government, Admasu says. The data from budgets was then linked to data on what is actually being spent in all sectors, and from that analysis it becomes clear where the gaps are between what was promised in budgets and what was spent in practice.

Then Right2Grow organised a public meeting in the district with all heads of sectors and community representatives, and the press was also invited to it. And it worked: at that meeting, government representatives made concrete commitments.

As a result of the work, more money was allocated to healthy eating and WASH issues in 2022, Admasu says: in one southern region, for example, over $20,000 more was allocated. 'There, it is a new approach,' she says. 'Before, the budget for those issues came from donors and not from the government - now, for the first time, state money is coming for it, and that at a time when the country was in conflict.

'It is long-term work because it takes a lot of time, but this promises to give many more results in the future. Because we have strengthened and empowered the community to hold its own administrators accountable, something it can do itself from now on.'



'Lobbying with budget figures is not complicated - anyone can do it'

"When you lobby for something, you are often told by the government that there is no bud- get... we decided to check whether that is true," says Nhlanhla Ndlovu, director of the Centre for Economic Governan- ce and Accountability in Africa (CEGAA), one of Right2Grow's international partners.

It turned out that in almost all countries in Africa, there is budget within existing policies for things like education, health care and good nutrition, but the money does not end up where it should. From that observation emerged the approach of budget monitoring and expenditure tracking (BMET).

In it, civil society organisations and communities are trained to read government budgets and keep an eye on how money is spent on the ground, and then hold politicians and service providers accountable.

CEGAA trained international partners and local organisations in all six of Right2Grow's project countries in the approach these past few years, who in turn use that knowledge to train local partners.

It is about reading budgets and working with Excel, but also about what exactly those abstract figures from national or local budgets mean for residents of villages and towns. Ndlovu himself and his organisation CEGAA have been providing such training for six- ten years, also for other programmes, across Africa.

The organisation grew out of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, which was involved in the negotiations between Nelson Mandela and the apartheid regime.

After Mandela's release, the institute continued to work on improving democracy and constitutional obligations of the South African government. 'At its core, our work is about democratisation.'

There is a lot of enthusiasm for BMET among the people who have learned to work with it within Right2Grow, says Ndlovu: 'Money is the language that policymakers understand. Many lobbyists feel this is what they were missing before.'

You can work on advocacy as a lobbyist, he says, but changing policy does not mean much in practice if there is no budget allocated for it. 'Therein lies the gap - focusing on this and finding one or two key people you can talk to about it is much more effective than other advocacy work.'

At first, many people think that budgets and calculation tables are too wrapped up for them. 'We teach them that anyone can do this: it's not complicated, you just need to pick up a few skills for it, so we do that. At the local level, it's simply about people asking questions, like: where is the toilet that an amount of money was set aside for?'

However, it is important to frame the approach properly when talking to politicians, says Ndlovu. 'The aim is not to demonstrate corruption or embarrass the government - we avoid using the words "corruption" or "investigation" because then administrators and politicians will become defensive.

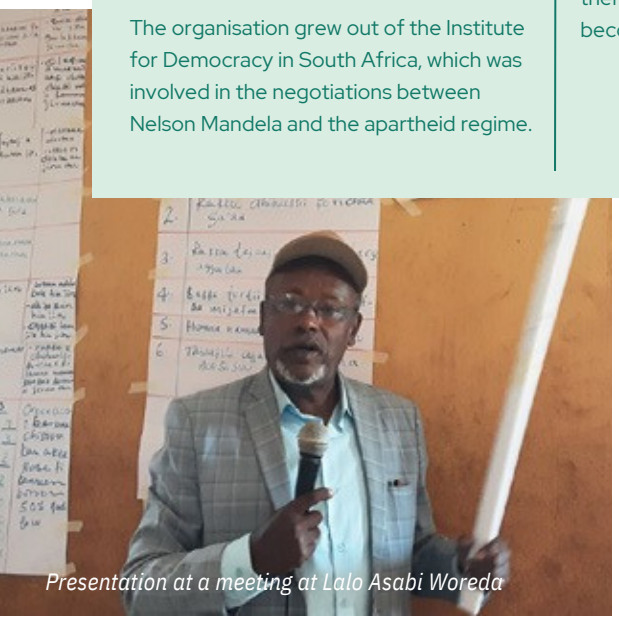
Nhlanhla Ndlovu

'On the contrary, we stress that it is a win-win situation for everyone. Through BMET, the government gets to know what policies are needed, what the needs of the community are, and that makes policy much more effective. Because the people are behind the policy, policy goals are also achieved much sooner.'

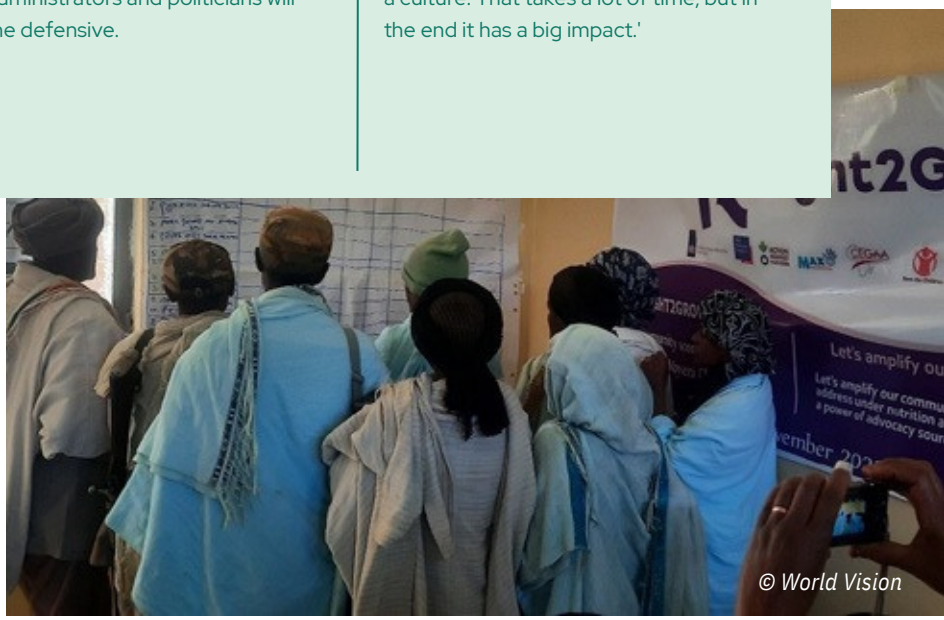
CEGAA also trained many civil servants and parliamentarians, including in South Sudan. 'It helps them become more accountable and have a more meaningful dialogue with ministers, while civil society organisations bring in evidence from budget analyses to improve dialogue.'

BMET is more than a method, it is also about cultural change, says Ndlovu. It takes a while before someone in a village dares to address a local politician. We make it clear that from that detached and unreachable government, they are also just people of flesh and blood, whom you know from the church you attend yourself.'

It is a long-term process, he concludes: 'We have to train people who in turn train others, who then take action and change a culture. That takes a lot of time, but in the end it has a big impact.'



Presentation at a meeting at Lalo Asabi Woreda



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For communities, the approach mainly brings a change in the mindset of people, Admasu stresses: 'They get the feeling that they themselves are in charge of their lives and can bring about change themselves.'

Don't local administrators or service providers feel that they are being scrutinised by the people? 'No, no, they actually welcome the method,' says Admasu. Ending malnutrition is an explicit goal of the Ethiopian government and Right2Grow is helping to put the focus on that at all levels.

'Officials and politicians,' continues Admasu, 'know much better what is going on in the community this way: they learn which goals are important in practice and which have popular support - there are now antennae in the community that they did not have before.' Administrators and service providers, such as the head of a health centre, also participate in many of the trainings Right2Grow provides and they are enthusiastic about the method.

Tangible results are also there. In the south, a health centre has running water and taps that were not there before. New toilets and latrines were built in many places, for men and women separately and also for people with disabilities. Around another centre, vegetable gardens were planted, where women grow healthy vegetables - and these greens are used in cooking demonstrations for the women, so they can make more nutritious food for their children.

What is also new: there is more collaboration between sectors: the district's agricultural extension officer provided the seeds for the garden, the health extension officer explained which vegetables are healthy. Promoting such cooperation is a sub- part of the Right2Grow programme in Ethiopia, says Ayichalem Goshu, advocacy specialist and advocate for the partnership.

'To combat child malnutrition and underdevelopment,' he says, 'we need a more integrated, "multisectoral" approach, in which attention to WASH goes hand in hand with attention to healthy nutrition.' In government and also NGOs, feeding and agriculture on the one hand and clean water and sanitation on the other are often treated as separate issues, but it is precisely the combination that determines children's health.

Goshu works on several fronts to integrate the two branches: it promotes cooperation between Ethiopia's more or less three thousand civil society organisations. 'Many of them,' he says, 'do something in the field of WASH or nutrition and food security.' The NGOs work together within a platform, and in doing so we share examples of methods that have proven themselves and we advocate the importance of linking the two pillars.'

Around another centre, vegetable gardens have been established, *where women grow healthy vegetables*

Within the government too, Goshu seeks that consistency, from national to regional and district levels: 'There is a platform within the state for cooperation in these areas, and it includes 11 government sectors, including education, health, agriculture and finance.'

All these sectors are involved in Right2Grow's work, he continues: representatives attended trainings on monitoring the government budget and on integrating nutrition and clean water and sanitation. Visibility on where state investments end up and monitoring of commitments by the government are important steps in engaging the sectors, says Goshu.

It was previously unclear to many officials which investments for nutrition and clean water and sanitation were relevant. 'The integration is giving results: all sectors that are part of the platform have now included integrated activities in their regular policies that contribute to healthy nutrition - and they have allocated budgets for them.'