What is a city budget?

A city budget is a plan for how a city collects and spends its money to operate and deliver public services for a given period. Budgeting is the process for writing a budget.

Budgets describe how a city spends the money it raises, called internally generated revenue. This is money raised by a city through taxes, fines, and fees it collects from you for services such as garbage collection, billboards, and burials. The City Charter describes ways a city is allowed to collect money.

The main parts of a budget are:

- Estimate of this year’s revenues (money in) and expenditures (money out)
- Estimate of next year’s proposed revenues and expenditures
- List of prior year’s actual expenditures
- Explanations of any changes in operations

What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory budgeting enables you to work with city authorities to develop a city budget. You provide your input into the city’s priorities and projects. For participatory budgeting to be successful:

- City authorities should see you as a partner in developing your community
- You should see city authorities as a resource to provide services, support development projects, and keep you safe and secure
- You and city authorities should see your relationship as respectful and positive. It is an opportunity for you to work together to make your community better

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How and when does participatory budgeting work?

Pre-Reporting: Before projects begin or money is budgeted for the next fiscal year, you can recommend that city authorities write summary financial reports of the previous year and their intended budget plans for the next year. These reports should be easy to understand. Some examples of these reports are budgets in brief, consolidated financial statements, end-of-year budget reports, and annual city performance reports.

Visioning/Planning/Budgeting: When city authorities are making decisions, you can participate in town hall meetings and public budget planning sessions. There, you can give input on:

- City vision and goals
- Ways to achieve these goals
- Priorities for the budget
- Spending decisions on specific projects or public services

It is important that city authorities provide you the reports described above. You should read the reports, so you understand the budget. This will help you ask questions, share comments, or convey concerns.

Implementation: You can be involved by sitting as a member of a task force or committee a city establishes to oversee certain projects or public services. When a development project is implemented or a service is delivered, you can also participate in monitoring and evaluation. This helps you understand the delivery of city services or the progress of a development project. Then, you can evaluate those results to help improve what the city is providing. This also allows you to be sure that the city is spending the money properly.

Post-Reporting: After a project is completed or after the launch of a public service, you can measure the performance of the city’s delivery of services or the results a project has achieved. Then, you can use a scorecard to record those results and share with city authorities and the community. You can also conduct a social audit to measure how your city is engaging with the community, promoting transparency, and sharing its responsibilities with citizens.

Citizen’s checklist for engaging in participatory budgeting

- Serve on a task force or committee
- Attend town hall meetings
- Actively participate in visioning and goal setting
- Review the vision and goals report that should reflect the discussions at town hall meetings
- Review annual progress reports to see if the goals are achieved
- Encourage city authorities to use the goals of the community when writing the internally generated revenue budget
- Be aware of the dates for public hearings in the budget calendar
- Ask for a copy of the proposed internally generated revenue budget when it is given to the city council
- Review the proposed internally generated revenue budget to understand the source of revenues (money in) and use of expenditures (money out)
- Attend public budget hearings to ask questions about the proposed revenues or expenditures

For more on the national budget, see A Citizen’s Guide to the National Budget 2017/18 at www.mfdp.gov.lr. For more on participatory budgeting, see the CSO Participatory Budgeting Handbook, USAID-LEGIT; copies are available at the Gbarnga, Gompa, and Zwedru city offices.