

Children should be seen and not heard...especially not on budget issues

***“Some of our municipal officials are interested about this project, this will surely break the concrete I assumed was between children and government.”
(18 year old Khanyi from Life Hunters)***

Khanyi Mbhele is a peer facilitator for the Life Hunters children’s group in the Children Participating in Governance (CPG) project. The CPG project aims to: create opportunities for children in South Africa to monitor government budgets and to contribute to the alignment of government budgeting to rights realisation. The Life Hunters along with three other children’s organisations – Disabled Children’s Action Group, the City of Cape Town’s *Youth Development Programme* and Molo Songololo’s *It’s Your Move* – participated in a series of workshops to be trained as budget monitors. They were first guided to see the ‘link between budgets and rights’. Then they acquired budget analysis techniques in order to ‘use budget analysis as an advocacy tool’. Finally they engaged in a process to ‘develop a strategic budget advocacy campaign’. A core group of 20 peer facilitators participated in workshops that formed part of the training programme which stretched over one and a half years. Hereafter, peer facilitators would conduct 2-day workshops scheduled once every six months with constituency groups.

From the Life Hunters organisation they have a vibrant group of 4 peer facilitators who guide a constituency group of 20 budget monitors. The organisation operates under the auspices of Practical Ministries (a faith-based NGO) in Port Shepstone on the south coast of KwaZulu Natal. This dynamic children’s group has existed since 1998. The children say: “it (Practical Ministries) realized the importance of equipping and strengthening the voices of the voiceless children.” The youth in the Life Hunters group are part of families who are “survivors of trauma and stress” and communities that are rural therefore “underdeveloped in terms of development and skills”. This leads to social challenges that include: “poverty, excessive drugs and alcohol, primary and secondary school dropouts, child and women abuse, higher rate(s) of HIV / AIDS, high unemployment, child neglect, and higher rate of crime as well as higher rates of unskilled and educated people.” This affects the situation of children by making them feel “unprotected, have fear of not good future, fear of trusting their parents, lack of confidence and self esteem...result(ing) in children expressing themselves through frustration, anger and violence.” Thus the vision of Life Hunters is “To encourage the young people to participate in the activities involving them, especially in our communities for the purpose of understanding our dilemma. Sharing ideas and experiences we face as young people and look beyond and to invest in our future at an early stage.”

Within the CPG project the Life Hunters group proved to be the most cohesive and most ready to implement a budget advocacy campaign at local level. This is due in no small part to the support of Practical Ministries especially their Youth Coordinator, Patience Hlengwe. The group have been able to participate in projects ranging from leadership and lifeskills initiatives to knowledge-building ventures as well as projects priming them to engage in participatory governance. In terms of participatory governance they can already site several successes: members that are active in local youth unit structures, community meetings, meeting with local government officials and strong links with ward councillors.

Therefore, the CBU made a strategic decision to assist the Life Hunters group to plan and kickstart their budget advocacy campaign during the week of 10-14 July 2006. The week was set aside to gain insight into spaces for participation in the budget and planning processes in the Ugu district, building a coalition with adult groups who had been trained in budget analysis as well as formulating a strategic plan for a budget advocacy campaign with the larger constituency group. The meeting with the IDP manager for the Ugu district provided much needed guidance to the peer facilitators in relation to spaces for participation that was to form the basis of the strategic planning workshop. In addition the willingness of two adults, who resided in their community, to help link them to opportunities for making their concerns heard as well as championing the cause of children gave the Life Hunters a boost in their campaign. The constituency group had enough information and support to commence planning their campaign.

During the 2-day strategic planning workshop they named their project: *Local Children's Development Project*. This project would aim to:

- *To protect children from financial/exclusion in the budget*
- *To promote awareness about the dangers of drugs and alcohol*
- *To promote a child friendly community.*

The group was also able to settle on the following advocacy strategies: research (which would include a situation, budget and IDP analysis); lobbying (LG Mayor, Youth Coordinators/Councils/Youth Units; Ward Councillors; Municipal Managers; EXCO); profiling issues in the media (drama, radio, local newspapers) and building coalitions (LoveLife, Children First, Child Protection Unit).

Life Hunters definitely has the drive, ambition and skills to be able to profile the situation of children and fight for more and better spending of resources that will realize the rights of children in their communities.