



**Commissioner
for Children**

**Submission of Child Government Monitors / Bitou Junior Town Councillors on the Bitou
Municipality Budget 2024/5, in partnership with the Western Cape Commissioner
for Children (WCCC) – 22 April 2024**

1. Introduction and Background

The Western Cape Commissioner for Children (WCCC) is responsible for protecting and advocating for children's rights in the Western Cape province. This independent institution serves as an oversight body for various social sector departments, including the Western Cape Education Department, the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, and the Department of Social Development. Since its establishment in June 2020, **the Commissioner has worked with a group of Child Human Rights Defenders known as Child Government Monitors (CGMs)**. These CGMs are either self-nominated or recommended to the WCCC by child rights organisations or community members. Weekly engagement between the Commissioner and the CGMs occurs through a WhatsApp group, where children are educated about their rights, how the government functions, and their lived experiences in the Western Cape are understood. The primary goal of the WCCC is to amplify the voices of children in discussions with decision-makers, as highlighted by the institutional mission hashtags:

#littlevoicesMUSTcount,

#amazwiamancinciMAKAVAKALE,

#kleinstemmetjiesMOETsaakmaak.

The WCCC worked with three (3) CGMs / (past and present) Bitou Junior Town Councillors (BJTCs)— Suné Coetzee (16 years old), Solakha Noyi (16 years old) and Ameera Gani (17 years old) — to develop this submission. These CGMs/BJTCs possess



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local knowledge of the Bitou municipality and have been trained in budget advocacy to assess whether the budget aligns with child-centered principles (fulfilling child rights) and is child-friendly (easy to understand). This mirrors the 2023/4 approach taken with national and provincial budgets submissions from CGMs and WCCC.

These CGMs/BJTCs participated in budget training workshops to acquire essential skills in budget analysis, advocacy, and monitoring. Suné Coetzee informs:

"Bitou Junior Town Council members received budget training from the commissioner 7 – 13 July 2023 (Suné Coetzee, Solakha Noyi, Drew Cunningham, Storm Teodosio, Aphelele Xwelesha, Ameera Gani) & 3 - 5 November 2023 (Suné Coetzee, Solakha Noyi, Drew Cunningham, Storm Teodosio, Aphelele Xwelesha, Ameera Gani, Achumile Matha, Malibongwe Mtila, Anoyolo Kallipa, Faith Scoltz, Chelsea Paulsen)."

Additionally, Solakha Noyi, a CGM//BJTC from Kwanokuthula, expressed:

"In July 2022 I attended a Budget Analysis Training Workshop, in October 2022 a Budget Advocacy Workshop and July 2023 a Budget Monitoring Camp."

This submission will focus on the following undergirding issues about budget fundamentals: child-centred budgeting; financial accountability to citizens including children; pro-poor budgets; budget priorities; and recommendations for child-friendly budgets. These inputs have been compiled in a WhatsApp consultation between the Commissioner and Sune Coetzee, Solakha Noyi and Ameera Gani.

2. Child-centered budgets

Children are entitled to rights in the Constitution and other international laws. Therefore, we look at how the Bitou Municipality Budget 2024/5 is child-centered



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(delivers on the rights of children). Children have rights to be protected from harm, provided with what they need to achieve well-being and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Thus, engaging children in budget processes is vital for inclusive community development and the fulfillment of their rights. Bitou's Municipality 2024/5 budget suffer these limitations. The children are hopeful that child-centred budget processes can be realised in Bitou due to the political will of senior politicians and technicians, Solakha notes:

"Last year we met up with the Municipal Manager and spoke to him about this matter. What we can do is do a follow up with him and the new Mayor [because] he worked closely with us last year. We can also ask for [or] attempt another meeting with the Senior Council again and raise this." - Solakha

"We need to persuade them that it is important for children to have a voice and that can be done by meeting with the children in the next IDP cycle in order to get the perspective of the youth." - Ameera

The children are impressed by the willingness of the adult decision-makers to work with children in governance. The WCCC believes that fostering child-centered budgeting practices are crucial for empowering children to engage in civic matters effectively, ensuring their active participation and understanding within their local environments.

3. Financial accountability

Financial accountability in municipalities refers to the responsibility of local governments to manage public funds transparently, efficiently, and in compliance with regulations. It involves tracking how funds are used, ensuring they are spent appropriately, and being answerable for financial decisions. In the context of child rights, financial accountability in municipalities is vital as it directly impacts the well-being of children. Effective financial management on local government level ensures



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that resources are allocated to basic services that benefit children's growth and development. The children were interested and intrigued by Bitou's financial accountability, as the municipality achieved its first clean audit in eight years. They remarked the following:

"That's shocking but fantastic news, right?" – Suné

"Does this mean money has been wasted for the past 8 years?" – Solakha

"I think that it is a good thing to hear, however, I wonder if we can truly believe it without any evidence." - Ameera

It is clear the children want to understand more about the financial accountability in the municipality.

Furthermore, the Mayor's assertion (in the budget) of providing top-class services despite limited funds prompted disagreement from Solakha, who pointed out specific challenges in communities like Kwanokuthula which related to waste management and Ameera commenting on citizen-involvement:

"No, some communities, like Kwanokuthula has a lot of garbage. Yes, they say they're trying to tackle illegal dumping, but those big green bins are scarce. We need more of them, and they should be emptied out regularly because some community members dump their things in there but because it's so full, it ends up overflowing and they just throw their stuff everywhere." – Solakha

"Bitou's local government has provided adequate services, however, the community does play a big part in maintaining Bitou's clean environment (parks and litter removal) in the form of weekly town cleanups and citizen's volunteering to redevelop the parks." – Ameera



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Children are keen to learn about how the municipality has managed to achieve a clean audit. They are also aware of the quality of service delivery impacting on children's well-being. The WCCC believes that the significance of financial accountability in municipalities for child rights is paramount and should be accompanied by the transparent and efficient management to ensure resources are directed towards essential services benefiting children.

4. Pro-Poor budgets

In examining pro-poor budgets amid the current economic challenges facing both the country and the municipality, the WCCC together with the CGMs/BJTCs assessed the budget's pro-poor nature. With the municipality heavily reliant on revenue sources such as rates and user fees, concerns were raised about the affordability of services for impoverished individuals. Suné highlighted the struggles faced by unemployed parents reliant on social grants, emphasizing the difficulty in paying for utilities like water and electricity:

"...so many parents are unemployed and dependent on the social grant and paying for water and electricity is the last thing on their minds, I know that after some time the municipality turns off the electricity if the account has huge arrears and people don't settle those debts — instead they use candles, gas stoves and fire." – Suné

Special pro-poor measures are acknowledged, but their efficacy in addressing the financial challenges faced by low-income families is also questioned:

"Yeah, I'm aware of the free 50 units every month, but 50 units don't last for a whole month and I remember when my granny didn't pay our bill, the units we bought [the next time] were decreased close to nothing." – Solakha



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Suné delved deeper into the issue, questioning the sufficiency of the measures provided and emphasizing the importance of considering factors like the area's cost of living, coverage of essential needs for poor households, and the multifaceted nature of addressing poverty beyond financial assistance. She expressed it as follows:

"I think while the provided measures offer relief, their adequacy depends on various factors like the cost of living in the area. Are other expenses (such as food, healthcare, and education) manageable for indigent households... Coverage: Are these provisions sufficient to cover the essential needs of indigent families?... And I think addressing poverty involves more than just financial assistance. Job creation, skills development, and social support are equally important." – Suné

The analysis by the CGMs/BJTCs emphasize the imperative for holistic approaches to poverty alleviation beyond grants, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies encompassing job creation, skills development, and robust social support systems for sustainable impact.

5. Budget priorities

The allocation of funds towards salaries and essential services, coupled with the municipality's revenue distribution, prompts reflections on financial sustainability and service prioritisation. Solakha acknowledged the challenges associated with providing services to a growing population, whilst Suné proposed exploring renewable energy sources and water-saving initiatives for cost reductions, advocating for transparency, efficiency, and strategic fund allocation after essential expenses. They said:

"I applaud them for using most of the money on the people but with Plett's growing population it's getting harder and harder to provide services for everyone." – Solakha



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"I understand salaries and service procurement are necessary, as it ensures that skilled personnel manage essential services. But we can always explore renewable energy sources and water-saving initiatives can reduce long-term costs. The municipality should be transparent and efficient, and regularly assess staffing needs to ensure that salaries align with responsibilities. And after salaries and essential services, the remaining funds should be allocated strategically." - Suné

Solakha commended the municipality for prioritising investments in its people, reflecting a commitment to their development and well-being:

"Allocating so much money to its people shows they care about their development and wellbeing." – Solakha

Questions arose regarding the municipality's loan funding sources —R50 million — and the need to ascertain if expenditure increases surpass inflation rates, with Suné emphasising the importance of official inflation data for accurate assessments.

"This is a summary of revenue and expenditure. We see that it increases year on year. Can we ask whether the nominal (numbers in the books) mean real increases (that beat inflation)?" - Commissioner

"I think we'll need to see official inflation data to determine whether the increases are truly beating inflation." – Suné

The CGMs/BJTCs also expressed concerns regarding capital expenditure projects directly benefiting children, prompting considerations about child-specific facilities in different areas like parks. They highlighted discrepancies in available child facilities between regions like Kwanokuthula and Qolweni, emphasizing the importance of equitable resource allocation to address children's needs comprehensively.



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"... Kwanokuthula has a handful of facilities for children, but Qolweni has none that I know of." - Solakha

"It is an important question to ask [about real increases in the budget], as we can work to make a change if there are not sufficient or effective capital expenditure projects that directly benefit children." - Ameera

The evaluation on prioritisation of salaries, cost-saving measures, and importance of strategic fund allocation after essential expenses, demonstrates that the children are worried about the municipality's long-term financial sustainability and equitable resource allocation for children's facilities in all regions.

6. Child-friendly budgets

WCCC advocates for child-friendly budget formats to enhance children's understanding and involvement in civic matters. This includes the utilisation of engaging storytelling and visuals to nurture children's interest and comprehension of budgets. When asked whether children are currently interested in the budget, they responded:

"The answer is no because they simply don't understand it." – Suné

"I think children are naturally curious and care about bettering their communities, so therefore some are interested in reading budgets. if we teach children, normalize the budget, make it fun with friendly stories and pictures and use engaging ways just like the WCCC to let them grasp the information, most of them will be interested in understanding the budget therefore understanding what goes on around them from an early age." – Solakha

These CGMS/BJTCs would like to get more children involved in budgets. They have noted how child-friendly outputs and processes can enhance civic engagement, even from children.



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Conclusion

In this submission, the WCCC and CGMs/BJTCs emphasise the importance of child-centred budgets and the incorporation of children's perspectives in governance discussions to foster inclusivity. We highlighted the need for transparency, efficiency, and strategic fund allocation after essential expenses to ensure the well-being of children and the community at large. Additionally, we raise concerns about the affordability of services for impoverished individuals and the efficacy of special measures in addressing the financial challenges faced by poor families. The submission also recommends the development of child-friendly budget formats, the utilisation of engaging storytelling and visuals to nurture children's interest and comprehension of budgets, and the exploration cost saving initiatives to reduce long-term costs and ensure financial sustainability. Overall, the submission calls for a more child-centred and child-friendly approach to budgeting and governance in the Bitou Municipality.