

## Open Budget Survey (OBS) 2019

### Key Findings

**The Open Budget Survey (OBS) 2019 finds weak transparency and oversight in government budgeting as well as few opportunities for the public to participate in shaping budget policies or monitoring their implementation. These findings are particularly concerning at a time when governments around the world have launched significant spending measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic.**

- While OBS 2019 was completed just before the pandemic hit, it provides a telling snapshot of current government practices in 117 countries related to budget disclosure, opportunities for public engagement, and checks and balances through budget oversight.
- The OBS 2019 finds modest improvement in global budget transparency scores, reversing the decline seen in the last survey round (OBS 2017), and restoring the upward trend shown since the survey began (OBS 2006). But faster global progress is constrained by failure in many countries to sustain improvements in transparency practices over time or stagnation at low levels of budget transparency in other countries.
- The global average transparency score in OBS 2019 is 45 out of 100, meaning that global levels of budget transparency remain insufficient, as a score of 61 is considered the minimum threshold to foster an informed public debate on budgets.
- Few countries provide meaningful opportunities for the public to participate in the budget process, which undermines the public's ability to effectively use available budget information. But innovative practices in some countries demonstrate how governments can initiate and strengthen public engagement.
- Problems associated with a lack of budget transparency are compounded by gaps in oversight by the legislature and supreme audit institutions (SAI). While countries tend to score higher on the OBS assessment of SAI oversight as compared to legislative oversight, only 30 of the 117 surveyed countries score at adequate levels of oversight from both institutions.
- Rapid progress on the open budgeting agenda is possible, but it will require all stakeholders to unite around a common agenda. The OBS 2019 includes a 'Call to Action' to promote sufficient levels of budget transparency, increased public participation in the budget process, stronger monitoring and oversight of budget execution, and sustained improvements over time.

**On budget transparency, the OBS 2019 finds modest improvements in global average scores, which has been the predominant trend since the launch of the OBS in 2006.**

- The average global budget transparency score increased by three points from 42 in 2017 to 45 in 2019 for the 115 countries surveyed in both rounds.
- OBS 2019 has the highest global average level of budget transparency, with each set of comparable countries surveyed providing more budget information than in previous rounds. For instance, the average score for the 77 comparable countries since OBS 2008 increased by eight points – a 20 percent increase.

- Stronger budget transparency practices are associated with better outcomes in governance and development. Countries with better practices on budget transparency tend to have stronger democracies, lower perceived corruption, higher levels of development, and lower levels of inequality.

**Yet, the global average transparency score in OBS 2019 is 45 out of 100, meaning that global levels of budget transparency remain insufficient.**

- For sufficient levels of information to be available in a country so that the public can understand and engage in dialogue on budget issues, a budget transparency score of 61 and above is likely needed. Only 31 of the 117 surveyed countries meet this benchmark.
- One-third of the eight key budget documents that the OBS 2019 assesses are not made available to the public. Of these documents, 19 percent are actually produced, but not published online or published too late to be useful. Thus, improvements in transparency can be easily achieved if governments commit to releasing these documents online in a timely manner.
- Governments release fewer reports on budget execution and oversight as compared to other stages of the budget, such as formulation and approval. This limits public access to information on whether governments are executing budgets as planned and approved.
- Even when budget documents are published, they frequently lack the types of information that citizens want to see, such as how spending has changed over time, how actual spending compares to planned spending, and how policies, budgets, and performance are linked.

**For some countries and regions, consistent positive trends show that rapid progress on budget transparency is possible.**

- Examples of strong budget transparency are found in nearly all regions of the world. Every region, except for South Asia, has at least one country that scored 61 or higher.
- Six countries surveyed release extensive budget information by scoring 81 or higher. These top-tier countries are New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Mexico, Georgia, and Brazil.
- Countries can make rapid improvements on transparency in a relatively short timeframe. For instance, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kyrgyz Republic, and Ukraine all reached the threshold of 61 within the last two OBS rounds by responding to public demands for greater information.
- Three regions – East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean – stand out for achieving consistent improvements in comparable countries since OBS 2008. If the current rate of progress seen over the last decade continues, these three regions are on track to reach average levels of budget transparency above 61 within the next decade.

**Faster global progress is constrained by the failure in many countries to sustain improvements over time.**

- Many countries struggle to improve budget transparency due to irregular document publication, regression in transparency practices, or stagnation at low levels of budget transparency.
- While the largest gains between 2017 and 2019 are from Sub-Saharan Africa, this region also saw the largest declines in OBS 2017, and the regional average for comparable countries has

not yet recovered to OBS 2015 levels. Nearly half of comparable countries in Sub-Saharan Africa – 48 percent – have scores in OBS 2019 that are below their OBS 2015 score.

- Progress is hampered as countries stop publishing documents that they had made available to the public in the past. For instance, even as governments started publishing 96 new documents in OBS 2019, they stopped publishing 42 documents that had been available to the public in OBS 2017.

**Few countries provide meaningful opportunities for the public to participate in the budget process, which undermines the public’s ability to effectively use budget information.**

- Only two countries out of the 117 surveyed offer participation opportunities that are considered adequate (a score of 61 or higher): South Korea and the United Kingdom. The average global score is just 14 out of 100, with 113 countries having weak scores (lower than 41).
- Countries with better performance on public participation – scores at 41 or above – are among the most transparent countries in the OBS, however not all countries with high levels of transparency have meaningful public participation in the budget process.
- Public participation is stronger during the budget approval process when legislatures often hold public hearings or solicit feedback from the public on the budget proposal before it is approved. Participation practices are weaker during the implementation and oversight of the budget, which compound accountability issues due to lower transparency in these budget stages.
- Even in countries with some form of public engagement during the budget process, most mechanisms are not designed to be fully open or inclusive. For example, of the 66 surveyed countries with an executive participation mechanism, only 23 countries open these engagements to everyone, while only seven countries make a specific effort to include vulnerable and underrepresented groups.
- Emerging and innovative practices in some countries demonstrate how countries can initiate and strengthen public engagement mechanisms. South Korea and Portugal have launched participatory budgeting at the national government level. In Sierra Leone, the government has expanded public consultation when drafting the budget proposal through policy hearings and budget discussions with civil society organizations. The New Zealand government used public input to inform the development of the country’s first ‘Wellbeing Budget.’

**Problems associated with a lack of budget transparency and few opportunities for public participation are compounded by gaps in oversight by the legislature and supreme audit institutions (SAI).**

- Of the 117 countries surveyed, only 34 have adequate oversight from the legislature, while 71 have adequate oversight from the SAI. While countries tend to score higher on the OBS assessment of SAI oversight as compared to legislative oversight, only 30 surveyed countries score at adequate levels of oversight from both institutions.
- While legislative oversight is strongest when legislators are approving the budget, the OBS finds that some legislatures may be rubber-stamping budgets. Of the 108 countries that have the authority to amend the budget, 31 countries – one in four – do not exercise this right.
- Once approved, many legislatures have limited follow-up and monitoring of the execution of the budget. A challenge for some legislatures is that executives may disregard the budgets approved by legislatures: three out of five executives shift funds between ministries or departments without advance approval from legislatures.

- Most SAIs have legal independence but other shortcomings prevent findings in audit reports from being used to correct the issues identified. For example, there is a striking lack of information on how the government responds to audit recommendations: 59 percent of surveyed countries do not have any report on remedial steps taken in response to audits.

**Rapid progress on the open budgeting agenda is possible, but to accelerate the pace of improvements a new approach is needed – one that unites all stakeholders around a common agenda to achieve the most urgent open budgeting goals. The OBS 2019 includes a ‘Call to Action’ to achieve four ambitious, but attainable, targets within the next five years:**

1. **Provide sufficient levels of budget transparency.** Countries score 61 or higher on the OBS budget transparency measure, the benchmark for providing sufficient levels of information. Governments make at least six of the eight key budget documents publicly available, and budget documents contain meaningful and relevant budget information that is guided by public demand. Budget information is fully accessible to the public, including online access to real-time, open data that is easy to understand, transform, and use.
2. **Increase public participation in the budget.** Countries score 41 and higher on the OBS public participation measure, the benchmark for moderate levels of public participation. Governments offer at least one opportunity for public participation in the budget process in the executive, legislature, and SAIs, and apply the GIFT Principles of public participation in fiscal policy.
3. **Strengthen monitoring and oversight of budget execution.** Countries take steps to ensure that their budgets are fully implemented in line with their objectives and any deviations from the approved budgets are properly explained to the public. Legislatures enhance their oversight of budget execution and invite public input and engagement. Auditors investigate deviations between planned and executed budgets, with public input where possible, and publish their findings. Legislatures and auditors follow-up and ensure that the executive governments take remedial measures to address audit recommendations.
4. **Sustain improvements on open budgeting.** Countries accelerate and sustain progress on open budgeting reforms. Governments institutionalize budget transparency and participation practices, make public commitments on open budgeting, embed new open budgeting practices in law and regulation, and invest in capacity and institutions for open budgeting reforms.

## **About the Open Budget Survey**

- The Open Budget Survey (OBS) is the only independent, comparative, and regular measure of budget transparency and oversight around the world.
- The OBS 2019 was conducted in 117 countries and measures government practices against international standards on the timeliness and amount of budget information made publicly available, on the extent of meaningful opportunities for public participation in the budget process, and on the role of formal oversight institutions.
- The OBS measures observable facts using 145 scored indicators. The OBS is produced by independent budget experts with no ties to the government and undergoes a rigorous review process to ensure accuracy and comparability across countries.
- This is the seventh round of the OBS, with earlier assessments in 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2017.
- The OBS assesses whether the basic conditions needed for democracy and accountability – the free flow of information, robust oversight, and opportunities for public participation in decision making – are being met in the budget sphere.