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New Tool Raises Pressure on Governments to Open the Books

Washington, D.C. – With the launch of a new online monitoring tool, the International Budget Partnership is making it more difficult for governments to withhold information on what they are doing with public money from their citizens, donors, and oversight actors. The Open Budget Survey Tracker (OBS Tracker, www.obstracker.org) website went live today, allowing citizens, civil society, media, and others to monitor in real time whether central governments are releasing the requisite information on how the government is managing public finances.

Public access to budget information is inadequate in the majority of countries; and severely limited or nonexistent in far too many. This lack of transparency around the use of public money threatens to derail the next generation of development goals, efforts to adapt to and mitigate global climate change, and plans to use natural resource revenues to promote development in a number of countries. In order to understand and try to influence these plans for using public money, and to monitor how the government carries out those plans, the public needs to have timely access to budget information.

Maintaining the spotlight on open budgets

The OBS Tracker will allow citizens, civil society organizations, journalists and other stakeholders to know on a monthly basis whether their government is releasing a set of budget documents — key planning, implementation, and oversight reports — in a timely way as prescribed by international standards for public finance transparency and accountability.

Existing assessments take a more comprehensive look at government budget systems, but report on countries' performance much less frequently. In particular, IBP, an international think tank that promotes open and accountable public budgeting, is best known for its biennial [Open Budget Survey](#) — the only independent, comparative measure of how much budget information a government makes publicly available, whether it provides opportunities for the public to participate in budget processes, and the strength of formal oversight institutions.

“Covering over 100 countries, the Open Budget Survey is the gold standard for assessing government budget transparency and accountability,” says IBP Executive Director Warren Krafchik. “However, the research, analysis, and review for this comprehensive assessment takes two years, which creates significant gaps in monitoring and encouraging government improvements. So, we developed the OBS Tracker to provide certain fundamental budget information on a more frequent basis.” By providing monthly updates, the OBS Tracker allows governments to be recognized almost immediately when

they take steps to be more transparent and enable stakeholders to track progress, identify gaps, and press for improvements.

Using data collected by independent civil society budget experts in the countries covered, the OBS Tracker monitors and reports on whether central governments are publishing, on time, the eight key budget documents required by international standards on budget transparency. Initially the OBS Tracker will cover 30 countries that represent different regions. The countries, by and large, are drawn from among the least transparent as measured by the Open Budget Survey in order to see whether having more up-to-date information will be a useful tool for various stakeholders that encourage governments to improve transparency. Visitors to the OBS Tracker website will be able to get an updated snapshot of how countries are doing, look at trends for each country over time, and download the actual budget documents that governments are publishing.

The OBS Tracker uses the budget calendars of the countries it covers to highlight when key budget documents are due to be made publicly available, enabling transparency advocates to target their advocacy efforts around the publication deadline for each budget document. For example, the OBS Tracker reports that the government of Côte d'Ivoire did not publish the 2014 Executive's Budget Proposal and identifies October 2014 as the time for submitting the 2015 proposal to the national legislature. Those interested in improving budget transparency could then intensify their efforts during this period to get the government to publish the proposed budget when it is presented to legislators.

Julien Kouadio, who works in a local transparency watchdog group in Côte d'Ivoire, Social Justice, says, "The OBS Tracker provides practical suggestions for Ivorians, civil society organizations, and international donors to encourage the government to take immediate action to improve budget transparency. It shows us where the problems are, like the failure to the government to publish the budget proposal, and tells us when to push for change."

It is important to note that the OBS Tracker provides only information on whether a government has or has not made the key budget documents available to the public; it does not provide an assessment on the amount of detail or comprehensiveness of the information in those documents. The Open Budget Survey will still be the main source for that information, as well as for assessments of the broader public budget system within a country.

"The OBS Tracker complements but doesn't replace the full Open Budget Survey. It is like a thermometer or blood pressure gauge in that it can indicate the overall health of the system and identify where there might be problems, but it cannot provide a complete diagnosis," says Krafchik. "But now governments that are opening their budgets will get the immediate recognition they deserve, and those that limit information, or restrict it further, will not be allowed to escape scrutiny."

Early results show much room for improvement

Initial results from the OBS Tracker reveal that of the potential 240 documents that should be published by the 30 countries covered, 95 are not, including 37 documents that the governments are producing, but for internal use only. Further, more than one in four of the countries do not publish their Executive's Budget Proposals – arguably the most important budget document because it enables citizens to discuss and influence budget plans before they are finalized. And, almost half do not publish

Audit Reports, though these provide indispensable checks on the accuracy of a government's accounts and on the government's compliance with existing laws and regulations.

Transparency champions could use this information to pinpoint the specific steps individual governments can take to improve budget transparency. Often the easiest and least expensive step a government can take to expand transparency is to begin publishing the documents that it currently produces for its internal use but does not release to the public. Then a government can begin to produce and publish budget documents that are not currently produced even for its internal use.

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About the International Budget Partnership

The International Budget Partnership (www.internationalbudget.org) is an international nongovernmental organization that collaborates with civil society around the world to use budget analysis and advocacy as a tool to improve effective governance and reduce poverty. The [Ford Foundation](#), the [Open Society Institute](#), the [Flora and William Hewlett Foundation](#), and the [U.K. Department for International Development](#) (DfID) provide funding for the Open Budget Initiative at the International Budget Partnership. The International Budget Partnership is not affiliated with and does not receive funding from the U.S. government.