Fiscal Openness Accelerator Meeting

15th December 2020

Minutes of the meeting (materials and video of the meeting are [here](http://www.fiscaltransparency.net/foaproject/#toggle-id-11))

Message from the GIFT Director

After expressing gratitude for joining the meeting and acknowledging the support from the U.S. Department of State and the Open Government Partnership trust fund for the implementation of the Fiscal Openness Accelerator [project](http://www.fiscaltransparency.net/foaproject/), JPGA identified some of the challenges related to continuing the project during the pandemic. He also expressed confidence in the GIFT stewards and partners resilience and adaptation capacity to find together new ways of technical collaboration and peer learning. He explained that the general objective of the meeting was to assess the current state of the FOA in each country, so that the FOA coordination team could devise specific strategies for the continuation of the activities in 2021.

The specific objectives:

* Understanding challenges that the FOA project is facing in each country,
* Report on progress in each country (establishment of the Advisory Groups),
* Discuss the IBP/GIFT guidance for selecting public participation mechanism.

JPGA also explained that each country representative was expected to address the following points:

* Changes in coordination teams per country (if any),
* Main challenge faced up to this point and if you have identified a way forward,
* Updates on the establishment of the country Advisory Groups,
* News in the implementation of the FOA (if any),
* Expectations for the project for the first trimester of 2021 (Where are we heading? What activities do you have planned?),
* Expectations for GIFT/IBP support in the first trimester of 2021 (How can we help?).

Benin

Rodrigue Chaou, General Director of the Budget (DGB) of the Ministry of the Economy and Finance (MEF) of Benin, explained that his country has made major progress in implementation of FOA project in two aspects: ensuring that the transparency efforts have an impact in the budget process, and addressing the challenge of implementing a mechanism of participation. The DGB team presented the case (the presentation can be found [here](http://www.fiscaltransparency.net/foaproject/#toggle-id-11)).

1. There is no change in the national coordination team: project is coordinated by MEF-Budget Director, under the supervision of the MEF Cabinet Director, and remains unchanged.

2. There are no major changes to the Advisory Group (AG) – same as it was set up in July. DGB Chaou is in charge, with Mireille Codjovi covering the transparency and communications workstream and Pierrot Sego addressing budget elaboration and implementation (and the public participation efforts). There are two CSO members, Social Watch Benin (Dieudonné Houinssou) & Changement Social Benin (Ralmeg Gandaho).

The main challenges regard strengthening citizen engagement in every phase of the budget process, with analysis of the opportunities for the development of a real mechanism of public participation. Since the first meeting of the AG, the task has been to take a new look to the Benin’s budget process, including as much as possible civil society engagement in each phase. For the AG, it is essential to first take a fresh look at the budget process and then understand the scope for public participation. The AG wants to find ways to ensure that non-government organizations will be able to participate effectively and influence the process, not being mere spectators. As such, the AG outlined a few steps where public can participate.

At the same time, the Benin government has set an online tool for increasing transparency and participation. A description of three features of the tool was presented. The design of a BousProB computer tool ensures the accessibility to budget information and activities of the budget cycle, mechanisms for alerting, interacting and sharing alternative proposals. The main characteristics are the following:

1. The tool is developed and accessible on the internet and downloadable on most online enabled devices. The app has a fiscal calendar tool, where users can choose what they are interested in and can also choose what alerts they would like to receive. As such, users can stay on top of the budget calendar through this app.
2. Second feature is the Support Service – the user engagement mechanism includes document library, with all data readable even on a mobile app. It allows users to have access to the entire fiscal year budget document and library. Users can document, read, comment on any of the budget documents.
3. The third feature is Newsfeed – this section of the app allows users to inform themselves in real time on with activities that are previously planned. If there is interest through the app on certain planned activities, and these events change, the app informs the users. MEF expects to continue the development of this tool in 2021.

Demonstration (Roland Badji): The goal of this app is to take advantage of everything that technology can offer, aiming at making budget more accessible for all. The app allows users to follow budget features and information. It will send notifications, is connected to budget schedules, and it sends and receives updates, improving user experience. All budget documents published are made available on this app and users can download documents from the app. The option of sharing documents also available.

The MEF of Benin is planning to get the word out on this app in the first half of 2021 and test it in context of FY 2022 budget activities. The government hopes to conduct trainings on the use of the tool, work together with CSO on the accessibility aspects of this app, and also defining how the app can be used to encourage public participation. So far government has created a methodological sector by sector guide which will help invite the participation on sector related issues.

According to the MEF, CSO are learning significantly about budget processes in this moment in Benin. From there, they are creating alternative public participative mechanisms (CSO led).

So far, the app has developed three ways to respond –

1) frequently asked questions will be automatic replies,

2) Videos, for general information on the public, more of an educational tool,

3) Ensuring maintenance and adding new functionalities.

Regarding the need of support from the GIFT/IBP teams during the first quarter of 2021, the MEF would welcome technical support for the selection of the public participation mechanism for public participation, financial and logistical support for the popularization of the tool and financial and logistical support for the training of civil society actors, local authorities and the Executive for promoting participation.

Senegal

On behalf of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) of Senegal, Mor Diouf, Executive Secretary of the Project for the Coordination of Budgetary and Financial Reforms, briefly presented their situation. He informed that the MEF has taken some delay in the progress of the project due to the pandemic. However, his team has continued consultations both internally and with representatives of civil society for the formation of the advisory group. It is estimated that the group could be formed in the first quarter of 2021. The MEF has also continued to explore possibilities for public participation in the budget process and continues to be fully committed to the FAO project, as it allows learning from other experiences, challenges and opportunities in comparable countries.

Nigeria

Dr. Anne Nzegwu, Director of the Reform Coordination and Service Improvement Department of the Nigeria Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning (MFBNP) / Nigeria Focal Person, informed that the advisory group has been set up and has had a few virtual meetings. The Advisory Group is looking at narrowing down to three project proposals during the first quarter of 2021. So far, the Budget Office has not been very active in the Advisor Group Meetings, which has been communicated to the Director General of the Budget, who might consider replacing the representative. That said, the Budget Office has been active on activities related to transparency in the FOA project. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) nominee who has been active in the group is moving onto other duties, so the Statistician General is expected to inform about his official placement and communicate the new nominee to GIFT/IBP. During the first quarter of 2021, the AG will have in person engagement and meetings as well as virtual meetings to start developing proposals they intend to recommend to the MFBNP and will also have some consultative forums for CSO and the public in general to get their views. The AG is expected to have their recommendations in place and approved by authorities in schedule. At this moment, the Nigeria team could use all technical, financial and logistical support from IBP/GIFTs that they can get.

South Africa

Prudence Cele, from the Expenditure Planning Office of the Budget Office of the National Treasure, explained that the advisory group was set up with 5 CSO members and 4 government representatives. So far, all meetings have happened virtually. The AG faced a number of challenges given that the pandemic hit at the very start of this project and the Treasury was occupied in tackling the emergency through fiscal measures.

It was a challenge to have all members attend the meetings virtually, lockdown added complications, group leaving organizations, took a long time to finalize ToR. Managing group expectations remains a constant challenge.

The biggest takeaway for the group was the different dimensions of public participation – treasury so far mainly focusses on the “inform” dimension and less on the “consult” dimension as seen through the participation spectrum. We have learnt that with the existing participation, people have not seen the results and communities do not feel empowered by the process. The AG focused on sharing information on different existing forums for participation and how they were limiting in that citizens inputs were not really taken into account.

Through deliberations in virtual meetings and online voting, the group came to three proposals –

1. Scope for pre-budget hearings: Advisory Group members discussed piloting pre-budget hearings around the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement process, which takes place around May and June of every year. The pros are that this process is within the Treasury, however, it may remain exclusive to those who understand fiscal policy.
2. The second option would focus on the Department for Performance Monitoring and Evaluation’s (DPME) existing partnership with service delivery departments to develop the community-based monitoring (CBM) model, and piloting integration of the monitoring report into the budget process. The hope is that this would allow for informed allocations based on performance and feedback from beneficiaries. The pros are that there is already buy-in for this methodology, we may not have to go into a massive marketing strategy to get people on board, but, this will take us beyond Treasury and so we may not have full control.
3. The Performance Expenditure Reviews (PERs), conducted by the Government Technical Advisory Center. As part of this project, a potential pilot could be the introduction of citizen engagement aspect to the process. (e.g. through satisfaction index or external policy analysis) and integrating results into the budget planning process. Some of the cons are that this may be too technical for citizens to understand.

Liberia

The Liberia Ministry of Finance representative was travelling in December 18 during the meeting and could not attend. But he expressed to the GIFT director his willingness to follow up in January with the meetings and activities agreed on.

Next steps

The meeting participants agreed that during the month of January, one-on-one bilateral meetings would be held between each Advisory Group and the GIFT/IBP team to determine the modalities of support in the first quarter of the year.

The Advisory Group shall agree on the timeline for the development and implementation of the public participation mechanism in each country.

* If agreed by the Advisory Group, the IBP/GIFT coordination team can facilitate a [co-creation work-shop/think-shop](https://docs.google.com/document/d/15jhC_cQkhfi9oRCDAd2JgxwbJUgC6ytNEkOX93FJGm0/edit) during the end of January or first two weeks of February, and from this effort, a maximum of 3 project proposals will be identified.
* When possible, there will be broader public consultations about the project mechanism selection.
* Project selection would happen no later than February 2021.

This exchange will include the revision of the Guidance Notes on the Co-Creation of Public Participation Mechanisms in Fiscal Policies, with general considerations on public participation in fiscal policies and specific ideas to select a public participation mechanism based on GIFT experiences.

This document also includes project templates that will ensure all the necessary information on the project/s and the development process are well-documented.