

Open Budget Survey (OBS) - International Budget Partnership



Objective and features

1. Objective

OBS is an independent, comparative, and fact-based research instrument that uses internationally accepted criteria to assess budget openness on three parameters at the national level:

- Transparency – public access to central government budget information.
- Participation – opportunities for the public to participate in the national budget process.
- Oversight – role of independent oversight institutions, such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions.

2. Institutional coverage

National governments.

3. Technical coverage

The Open Budget Questionnaire is composed of five sections:

1. Public Availability of Key Budget Documents assesses the public availability of a country's eight key budget documents: (1) executive's budget proposal, (2) pre-budget statement, (3) enacted budget, (4) in-year reports, (5) mid-year review, (6) year-end report, (7) audit report, and (8) the Citizen's Budget.
2. Comprehensiveness of the Executive's Budget Proposal seeks to assess the comprehensiveness of the information provided in the executive's budget proposal and its supporting documentation.
3. Comprehensiveness of Other Key Budget Documents assesses the comprehensiveness of the information provided in the other seven key budget documents that should be published throughout the budget process.
4. Role and Effectiveness of the Oversight Institutions in the Budget Process assesses the effectiveness of the legislature and Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) in overseeing the budget process.
5. Public Engagement in the Budget Process focuses on opportunities for public engagement during the budget process.

4. Application method

Custodian.

Methodology



5. Methodology

The results for each country in OBS 2019 are based on a questionnaire comprised of 145 scored questions that assess the public availability of budget information (109 questions), opportunities for the public to participate in the budget process (18 questions), and the role of the legislature and the SAI (18 questions). Once completed, the questionnaire responses are quantified.

All responses to the OBS questions are supported by evidence. This includes citations from budget documents; the country's laws; or interviews with government officials, legislators, or experts on the country's budget process. OBS is not intended to evaluate the quality or credibility of information that a government might provide.

The questionnaire focuses on the activities of the central government and does not address the role of subnational governments. In 2011 and 2013, IBP implemented two rounds of subnational budget transparency studies. There have been instances of IBP civil society partners and IBP country offices adapting the OBS to assess budget transparency at the subnational level (e.g., Metro OBS in South Africa). For the OBS 2019, IBP piloted an assessment of budget transparency in health and education sectors.

6. Benchmarking system

Benchmarking with scoring. Most of the survey questions require researchers to choose from five responses. Responses "a" or "b" describe best or good practice. Response "a" indicates that the standard is fully met or exceeded (score 100), and "b" indicates that the basic elements of the standard have been met or largely met (score 67). Response "c" corresponds to minimal efforts to attain the relevant standard (score 33), while "d" indicates that the standard is not met at all (score 0). An "e" response indicates that the standard is not applicable. Certain questions, however, have only three possible responses: "a" (score 100), "b" (score 0), or "c" (not included in the aggregate score).

7. Linkage to PEFA framework

OBS questions correspond to PEFA performance indicators: budget preparation process (PI-17), in-year budget reports (PI-28), annual financial reports (PI-29), and external audit (PI-30).

8. Complementarity with PEFA framework

OBS goes into more detail in many areas covered by a PEFA assessment, particularly with respect to public availability and comprehensiveness of budget information, role and effectiveness of oversight institutions, and opportunities for public participation in the budget process.

Development and use

9. Development and coordination

OBS was developed by International Budget Partnership (IBP) in 2006 in response to the interest of civil society organizations (CSOs) in promoting budget transparency, in order to access budget information and engage in the budget process. OBS was developed with support from Open Society Institute, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and UNICEF. Other private foundations and bilateral donors also provided support.

Various budget transparency tools were referred to at the time of development of OBS, including those from the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA) and Fundar Center for Research and Analysis. Assessment questions were based on international standards and good practices and were drawn from OECD's Best Practices for Budget Transparency, IMF's Code on Fiscal Transparency, and the Lima Declaration of guidelines on auditing precepts. Two versions of the questionnaire were tested between 2002 and 2004 before finally being launched in 2006.

The indicators on transparency were revised in 2015 based on IMF's Fiscal Transparency Code, PEFA Framework (A01), and OECD's International Budget Practices and Procedures Database (A04). Indicators on oversight (based on OECD's Principles for Independent Fiscal Institutions – 2014 and INTOSAI's principles and standards) and public participation (based on Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency's principles on public participation) were revised in 2017. IBP also drew upon its experience of conducting assessments and understanding of global practices. These revisions were carried out to best align the indicators with the changes in, or improvements to, international best practices.

For OBS 2021, IBP complemented the report with a rapid assessment of the transparency, inclusiveness, and oversight of the emergency fiscal policy packages that the governments had introduced in response to the pandemic.

10. Assessment management

The OBS is managed and led by IBP. The OBS is implemented through a collaborative research process in which IBP works with civil society researchers in countries - encompassing all regions of the world and all income levels - over a two-year period to conduct the survey research and disseminate the results. The questionnaire is completed by researchers typically based in the surveyed country, almost all from CSOs or academic institutions, with a significant focus on budget issues and a common interest in promoting transparent and responsive budgeting practices in their countries.

Custodian quality assurance procedures apply, including government consultations and independent peer review. Upon completion, IBP staff analyze and discuss each questionnaire with individual researchers over a three- to six-month period. IBP seeks to ensure that all questions are answered in a manner that is internally consistent within each country, and consistent across all surveyed countries. The answers are also cross-checked against published budget documents and reports on fiscal transparency issued by international institutions. Each questionnaire is then reviewed by an anonymous peer reviewer who has substantial working knowledge of the budget systems in the relevant country.

IBP also invites the governments of nearly all surveyed countries to comment on the draft OBS results. IBP reviews peer reviewer comments to ensure that they are consistent with the survey's methodology. Any peer reviewer comments that are inconsistent are removed, and the remaining comments are then shared with researchers. Researchers respond to comments from peer reviewers and their government, if applicable, and IBP referees the final responses to ensure consistency across countries in selecting answers.

11. Uses by the government and members of the PFM community

The survey is used for measuring and understanding budget openness by:

- governments, civil society, and development partners to understand where and how to improve budget transparency, public participation, and oversight;
- development partners to inform foreign assistance strategies and operations;
- governments to benchmark progress and guide their reforms;
- credit rating agencies and foreign investors for risk assessments;
- the World Economic Forum for its Economic Competitiveness Index;
- the Open Government Partnership to determine eligibility to join the partnership; and
- civil society to inform their campaigns and engage with governments on the use and reporting of public funds.

12. Sequencing with other tools

OBS data can be a useful input to a PEFA assessment. It can also add detailed information on budget openness to the discussions following a PEFA assessment.

13. PFM capacity building

A goal of the OBI process is to build the capacity of CSOs participating in the OBS to analyze budgets and engage national stakeholders in implementing reform through training, meetings, and technical support. Country researchers participate in an initial in-person methodology workshop and receive support throughout the entire process through a variety of mediums. Research partners also attend an engagement workshop prior to the release of the OBS to discuss strategies for disseminating the survey results at the national level.

Governments reach out to IBP for support in implementing the recommendations. Since it may not be feasible for IBP to work on per-country basis, IBP often connects governments with the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, institutions such as the WB and IMF, and local civil society partners in response to such requests. IBP may coordinate and support the finance ministry in implementing the recommendations.

14. Tracking of changes and frequency of assessments

Assessments are usually carried out every two years. The transparency scores calculated for each country as part of the OBS are part of a time series that allows for comparisons between countries and over time. The OBS report enables cross-country comparison in scores of all the evaluated countries, and comparison with previous assessments is available on IBP's website.

15. Resource requirements

Around US\$40,000 per country. The research process for the OBS spans about 18 months, and the OBS is typically released every two years.

Transparency



16. Access to methodology

Methodology is [available](#). All questionnaires are available on IBP website. Exchanges and debates between researchers and peer reviewers are published in the final questionnaire. Governments are also invited to comment on the questionnaire and their comments are also published on the website. In addition, IBP publishes a global report, individual country reports, and the OBS dataset. Survey instrument with instructions is [available](#).

17. Access to assessment results

A report repository is [available](#). IBP publishes the complete OBS dataset for each iteration of the survey on its website.