

The role of
Civil Society Organizations
in ensuring transparency and accountability
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Fiscal and budgetary responses effected to provide immediate resources to control the pandemic as well as to minimise its direct negative impact on economic growth, whilst simultaneously forming the platform for future economic growth and development, encompass an unprecedented myriad of dimensions.

Substantial economic support packages targeting people and businesses have been launched worldwide in record time, challenging approaches traditionally used to ensure fiscal transparency, public accountability, and democratic legitimacy. The importance of these elements, however, remain paramount. These support packages utilise public resources, thereby placing huge burdens on future generations that will ultimately carry their costs. The immediate costs of inappropriate policies or policies implemented incorrectly, with leakages through waste and corruption, are also enormous, potentially leading to the loss of lives, poverty and inequality levels escalating, and associated increased levels of marginalization, helplessness and social polarization. Inequality challenges have been exacerbated under COVID-19, hitting the poor and vulnerable the hardest, in terms of the possibility for isolation, job and food security, as well as access to healthcare. The effects of inequality will span through generations and will have a differentiated impact among genders.

Fiscal transparency is of the utmost importance when responding to the pandemic, as explained in a recent [note](#) by the Fiscal Affairs Department of the International Monetary Fund, which stressed the importance of proactive disclosure, accountability and democratic legitimacy. In the following pages, I suggest that public participation is also indispensable for successful policy implementation and better use of public resources. Institutional checks and balances, democratic mechanisms and a free press, must be nurtured and strengthened through transparency and people empowerment. The public should be able to participate in the development and implementation of policies.

This note illustrates the important role that civil society organizations (CSOs) have been playing in contributing and supporting emergency policy responses. Despite uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of policy responses owing to the nature and constant evolution of the pandemic, it is evident that public participation and civic engagement have already driven some very positive developments. As a check on public authorities; independent media reports, citizen engagement and CSO intervention; fulfilling the roles of advocacy, contestation, adversarial journalism, and bottom-up leadership can generate collective knowledge and press public authorities to serve better (Archon Fung, Boston Review, April 23, 2020).

In many cases, the role of public participation and citizen engagement has complemented and increased the effectiveness of existing governance and accountability systems. Following the [GIFT Principles](#) of public participation in fiscal policies, public participation is an essential element of open government, strong governance, and a crucial element of a fiscal accountability ecosystem. There is strong [evidence](#) that public participation in fiscal policies can strengthen and improve fiscal performance and outcomes by increasing efficiency, equity, effectiveness, predictability, legitimacy and the sustainability of fiscal management.

Below are examples of how CSOs have performed critical roles in ensuring transparency and accountability in emergency policy response design, implementation and oversight. Finally, this note presents options to use digital tools enable participation and increase the potential and benefits generated from public engagement.

1. Designing the support package

To be successful, radical and extraordinary fiscal policy responses to the pandemic must be tailored considering relevant stakeholders, responding effectively to their needs while balancing the need for fiscal sustainability. Drafting policies in isolation without considering stakeholders is not only likely to lead to implementation difficulty but also undesirable consequences. Policy responses, including those targeting specific economic sectors, introducing subsidies, bailout or stimulus packages, corporate welfare, and public-private partnerships, all stem from ideas and proposals that lead to significant fiscal effects. Although the fast-paced nature of the COVID-19 pandemic does not lend itself to long consultation processes, effectively

responding to it requires input from the representatives of the social sectors concerned. For the sake of expediency, there are organizations representing directly concerned sectors, as well as experts and reputable CSOs that have the necessary expertise and footprint to rapidly provide inputs to improve the design of fiscal measures and/or help target them to specific constituencies. The following are examples of diverse organizations that have been able to do so:

Argentina- the Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ) published a document containing the recommendations of international human rights protection bodies and specialists in fiscal policy; responding to the emergency from a rights perspective. In light of these recommendations, ACIJ then analysed the first actions implemented by the government, identifying their impact on the budget. Additionally, ACIJ assessed the differentiated impact of schooling from home in poor sectors and minorities.

Brazil- the Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos (INESC), is showing the implications of austerity measures and constitutional amendments (spending caps) on social policies, and analysing ways to ensure that the most vulnerable members of the population are supported. INESC also led a CSO campaign advocating that the Brazilian Parliament approve a three-month basic-income guarantee for informal workers. More than 150 CSOs and social movements were mobilized, alongside a few politicians and political parties. The petition was used to press parliamentarians to prioritize and vote for the bill, which was then quickly approved.

China- a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report has assessed the impact of COVID-19 on large private-owned enterprises and small and medium enterprises and their ability to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report provides recommendations on crisis response and recovery so that companies can receive effective support and achieve a return to steady growth through sustainable solutions.

Colombia- DeJusticia, is working with rural subsistence organizations to develop proposals to respond to the pandemic, including specific implementation actions related to health, water, education, women, security and monetary support, as well as to provide tools for monitoring their implementation.

Croatia- the Institute of Public Finance analyses ways to enhance the set of measures responding to the emergency. The analysis acknowledges some positive actions, and stresses relevant additional work required to address key structural reforms --related to the health and pension systems, territorial reorganization, public administration and public procurement.

India- the Center for Budget and Governance Accountability has published an analysis and calls for action on COVID-19's implications for farming, as the harvest times will affect both supply-side and demand-side management

Mexico- the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Presupuestarios (CIEP) has produced a set of policy recommendations on the various policy alternatives to reallocate budget resources and provide economic stimulus. CIEP is also advocating the need for more information regarding the COVID-19 Emerging Program to calculate the budgetary impact of the measures announced accurately.

South Africa- a group of CSOs sent recommendations outlining how parliament could still proceed with online sessions and participation, despite it being in lockdown. Simultaneously, the Budget Justice Coalition also emphasized the need for clear standards for the disclosure of information regarding the COVID-19 responses.

United Kingdom- the Resolution Foundation examines the economic and fiscal implications of three different length of time scenarios for social distancing measures. It also discusses how the government can mitigate and manage the possible tensions between health, economic, and fiscal policy objectives.

United States of America- the Tax Policy Center has recommended four basic economic policy steps to address the effects of the COVID-19 --accept the health and economic costs of the epidemiological crisis, help individuals to overcome a sudden financial shock, assist entrepreneurs to maintain their production capacities and encourage domestic demand--. Another example is the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, which published that while providing needed support to small businesses and hospitals, the new US COVID-19 package fell short even as an interim measure, by failing to deliver crucial state and local fiscal relief and food assistance

International- the Resolution Foundation presents a set of recommendations on extraordinary steps to safeguard the financial health of countries through the protracted period of economic disruption that may be required to contain and eradicate the virus. The recommendations explore what policymakers can learn from how governments dealt with the financial and fiscal stresses associated with past viral outbreaks over the last century.

Gender responsive budgeting- Gender groups have highlighted the differentiated effects of stay at home measures, which could affect the design of measures, for example Apolitical at the international level, INESC in Brazil and the Mexican National University (UNAM).

2. Implementing the support package

Following and tracking the implementation of policy measures can be enhanced through the provision of sufficient relevant information and opportunities for public engagement. Examples of this are provided below:

Argentina- ACIJ, is working with allies to ensure that homeless people in Buenos Aires are protected during the pandemic, as these “invisible people” tend to fall outside of support packages. They have also adapted their IT tool for mapping the necessary basic services (e.g., food, hygiene, health, and basic services such as water) in informal settlements during the emergency. Regarding procurement, ACIJ is assessing the level of information on emergency public procurement publicized at the national government level and in some provinces and puts forward recommendations on transparency policies for public procurement identifying over-prices in food purchases.

Chile- Fundación Observatorio Fiscal has analysed controversial procurement decisions taken in response to the pandemic.

Guatemala- the Instituto Centroamericano De Estudios Fiscales (ICEFI) urged the government to speed up the formalities related to the implementation of the two recently approved budget extensions and, above all, the administrative procedures for implementing them in the budget. These budgetary modifications are required to enable the government to implement the approved emergency responses.

Nigeria & Pan-African- through iFollowTheMoney, individuals will be provided with online tools to monitor, drive conversation to spark actions and advocate for a transparent and inclusive approach, urging government stakeholders to publicize all funds released to mitigate against COVID-19 as well as the accompanying implementation plans. In addition, the International Budget Partnership (IBP)-Nigeria and partners organizations are producing basic health and sanitary information on the prevention of COVID-19 in various local languages, helping national and local authorities to disseminate vital information to communities.

South Africa- the International Budget Partnership-South Africa is providing data to the residents of informal settlements in the major metropolitan centres so that they can provide real-time feedback about government services during the pandemic. This information allows government officials to understand community needs and to assess the quality of services rendered. It also assists communities in holding government accountable.

Ukraine- the IT civil society platform for data analysis (Dozorro) provides a CSO perspective and independent analysis on the e-procurement system Prozorro, a platform for transparency procurement, enabling independent civil society to detect possible irregularities through machine learning algorithms

Parliaments role in Latin-America- the Directorio Legislativo CSO and ParlAmericas have developed a guide to support the adaption and strengthen the role of parliaments in the face of the pandemic. The guide explains how the parliaments of the Americas and the Caribbean are currently operating and adapting to the pandemic, and also provides a set of open parliament recommendations.

Procurement in Latin America- Transparency International has convened a taskforce from 13 countries to identify risks in emergency public procurement in response to COVID-19 and measures to mitigate them, including those related to opacity, hidden contracts, overpricing, collusion, and lack of competition. The coalition appeals to the private sector to avoid practices that affect the supply of goods and services necessary to face the health emergency.

3. Oversight of the support package

There are not as many examples related to the role of CSOs in the ex-post oversight phase of the emergency response – probably since we are still at an early stage in the crisis. However, past experience from other crises shows that CSOs can usefully supplement oversight mechanisms such as the Supreme Audit Institution (SAIs) by providing a “grass-roots vision”. The role of CSOs in this respect can be facilitated if SAIs take a proactive approach, using mobile tech to provide information to citizens and setting up additional hotlines for receiving tips from the public and for sharing information and photos that support complaints. Such welcome developments have notably been observed in the pre-COVID-19 period in Georgia, where the so-called “budget monitor” allows citizens to request online the State Audit Office intervention in case of possible wrongdoing of funds or abuse in public service delivery. Other examples show that CSOs can supplement the limited capacity within SAIs and other existing control mechanisms (GIFT examples of CSOs working with Supreme Audit Institutions -SAIs). CSOs have been asked in some countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana, to help provide information to citizens about the disease and prevention measures, with accompanying discussions of how this can be leveraged to keep citizens informed about policies and how to monitor them.

The International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (Intosai) is also contributing to the oversight and strengthening of accountability of governance in the COVID-19 era. To support country efforts to reach the SDGs, the Intosai Development Initiative (IDI) has produced a guide, based on SAI audits thus far, stressing the roles of government, policy coherence, public participation and inclusion. The goal is to address the pandemic challenges inclusively, without leaving anyone behind. The SDG audit model seeks to help SAIs to provide external oversight on the implementation of target 3.D of the SDGs, for managing national and global health crisis, including CSOs collaboration.

The role of digital tools

In times of social distancing and home confinement, it is crucial to inform the public about the preventive and response measures instituted, together with their rationale and their role in the implementation, as well as the array of relief measures available and how they can be accessed. This is key in ensuring that measures are effectively undertaken, reach all possible beneficiaries, and that buy-in from stakeholders is garnered. Many digital tools can be used to disseminate this information, such as dedicated websites like <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/> in South Africa and mobile messenger application systems. In respect to disseminating information on support measures, a dedicated portal that includes the precise eligibility criteria for accessing benefits, is recommended, such as the Australian portal where each financial support measure has a dedicated description. It is crucial that access to open detailed data is provided, such that aggregate information can be sufficiently disaggregated to allow tracing from design to implementation, and further to reporting, monitoring and evaluation.

Many governments are making efforts in this regard, at varying potential participation levels. While some governments have embedded restricted access to information regimes, or are limiting access to information available online (see a recount on the matter [here](#)), there are also numerous inspiring examples of how open government tools have been used to create collaborative efforts with civil society and address some of the challenges of the pandemic.

The Digital Government and Data Unit of the OECD, in collaboration with the NYU's The GovLab, have been collecting evidence on the release and use of Open Government Data in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. They have gathered an rich set of evidence on how different actors (such as entrepreneurs, media, researchers, CSOs, and the public sector) are innovating to support countries' policies and actions. The OECD's compilation of data, information, analysis and recommendations regarding the health, economic, financial and societal challenges posed by the impact of Coronavirus are [here](#).

The Open Government Partnership has compiled a chart of various open government approaches to COVID-19 ([here](#)). As an example, Brazil has a very informative [platform](#) that publishes collated up-to-date COVID-19 budget information. Open Knowledge Brazil has developed a COVID-19 transparency [index](#) to motivate local governments to enhance their transparency.

In France, over 60 members of Parliament ([lejourdapres](#)) launched a platform to collect citizen inputs related to the post-COVID-19 world, in order to start setting the reform agenda. Focusing on some of the long-term changes introduced by the pandemic, the public consultation addresses topics such as public health systems; labour challenges including in respect of universal income and working from home; consumption; education; democracy; and the digital world.

The South African National Treasury has set up an email address where members of the public can send suggestions on how best the National Treasury can deal with the COVID-19. This is in support of efforts by the rest of government to ensure interaction with members of the public on the virus.

The Australian Government has requested the public to download a [COVIDSafe](#) app to assist health officials in contact tracing by automating and thereby speeding up the manual process of finding people who have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19. The app was downloaded more than 1 million times within hours of its launch.

Citizen relationships with public authorities were significantly different merely a decade ago. Today, citizens' are generally online and able to access information quickly. Teleworking has multiplied exponentially in just a matter of days, family and friends now meet on virtual platforms, teachers and trainers are teaching online, and medical appointments are taking place with professionals through the internet. People are using digital platforms in all aspects of their lives, including in respect of how they access government information and track public services delivery. This has many advantages, including reducing the need and cost of physical mobilization, the ability to thereby expedite processes, and to broaden decentralized yet coordinated people and communities' control on governments.

It however also poses several challenges, the most obvious related to the digital divide and the general lack of access by the already vulnerable members of society, effectively leaving them out of the conversation. On the other hand, for those who do have adequate access to the internet, surveillance presents a problem that is now significantly exacerbated, with alarming privacy considerations. In this context, the need to recognize internet access as a fundamental right becomes very clear, as it is, more than ever, a vehicle to access other rights, such as education, work, and health, thereby strengthening the right to access to public information and to participate in fiscal policies discussions. Simultaneously, who can access and manage the information contained on the web, and what it can be used for, becomes a crucial question. Putting the focus on a freer, more accessible internet, with less surveillance and more privacy, becomes fundamental. This is not only key in responding to COVID-19 but also in moving beyond it.

In the relationship between governments and citizens, digital tools can help to target new and specific groups, enhance the implementation of processes, scale up participation in processes, and lead to practices of openness by default, creating cultures of participation in every organization. Digital tools can also be instrumental for participatory budgeting; citizen assemblies and other types of consultations; feedback, complaint mechanisms and engagement methods. Proactive data disclosure can provide timely, regular and broad access to larger important datasets. All these developments can become extremely useful governance tools for better public financial management.

Increasing the potential and benefits generated from public engagement

In this pandemic, as in other times, decision-makers in government can be inattentive or indifferent in attending to the needs of vulnerable workers and communities who bear the greatest burdens of COVID-19. As described, contentious mobilization by community organizations and vulnerable individuals can draw attention to these problems and press for more equitable policies. Even in developed countries, a great number of households have suddenly become vulnerable as layoffs mount and savings are drained. Calls for decisive central actions to stem the pandemic, local innovation and leadership from citizens, civic, and private organizations—sometimes in the face of centralized obstruction—have often led the response (Archon Fung).

In consultation with a broad community of stakeholders, initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the Global Initiative for Fiscal transparency, are showing concrete and practical ways in which openness — through transparency, citizen engagement and oversight — can help tackle the three stages of the pandemic - response, recovery and longer-term reform. The OGP has put forward a call to action which includes advocating for the proactive and accurate disclosure of information, open platforms to mobilize community assistance for healthcare workers and the vulnerable, open emergency procurement of medical supplies, and integrating transparency inclusion and oversight in safety nets.

The GIFT network has called on civil society expert organizations and ministry of finance, and international organizations representatives, to together develop a practical guide depicting emergency response user-centered fiscal transparency data needs. The guide will include a consolidated list of the datasets needed to track emergency spending, stimulus plans and revenue sources. Finally, it will include examples of practices, tools and schemas. The goal is to ensure that emergency responses, economic recovery packages and financial rescue plans include, from the outset, transparency requirements and that the datasets of such measures are open by design. The main objective of the effort will be to inform and support ministries of finance in their processes of identifying what data to collect to trace design and implementation for decision making, and to identify what data needs to be published to enable effective transparency and oversight. For civil society and advocacy groups, the goal will be to simplify the process of prioritizing the data required to enable tracking, analysis and informed participation.

In summation, CSOs have the capacity to research, inform and mobilize citizens who can eventually demand the accountability of leaders in protecting basic needs, including public health. In the case of COVID-19, public judgment and pressure has moved some governments to take more vigorous action and respond, while also assisting them in identifying needs thereby providing them with the information required to respond appropriately. COVID-19 clearly demonstrates the need for enhanced transparency, accountability and democratic legitimacy, even in the times of emergency responses.