

Incentives research

On Incentivizing Useful Budget Transparency

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I. Introduction

What can international actors, such as those in the GIFT network, do to incentivize budget transparency that increases government accountability? After two decades of excitement at the potential for transparency to improve government responsiveness to citizen needs and demands, one inescapable lesson is that transparency—of budgets or anything else—does not lead automatically to governments efficiently and effectively responding to their citizens' needs and preferences. But from this accumulated experience, lessons are emerging about the factors that help make the connection between transparency and accountability more likely. Recently, Khagram, Fung, and de Renzio (2013) analyzed the relationship between budget transparency, citizen participation, and government accountability both cross-nationally and with a set of in-depth case studies. Two interrelated patterns stand out in particular from their review. Budget transparency has a better chance of leading to accountability when:

A structural condition or change helps pave the way. Khagram et al. find that the most reliable predictors of budget transparency leading to participation and accountability were political transitions to democracy, political competition, and fiscal or economic crises.

The government discloses more or more useful information than it intends—in the course of adjusting to a political opening or economic shock, in a hasty attempt to quash public anger at a corruption scandal, or to gain the favor of an important international donor—and has a difficult time reversing course. (Though of course reversals frequently occur.)

These patterns leave international actors in a tough spot. The dynamics that have the greatest potential to help budget transparency lead to accountability are exceedingly difficult for outsiders to improve. Democratization is difficult to engineer from the outside, to put it mildly. And regardless of the benefits of fiscal or economic shocks to transparency, international actors wisely seek to ease, not encourage, the turmoil they create. International actors have put more effort recently into exposing corruption, but the evidence gathered by Khagram et al. shows corruption scandals to be an unreliable catalyst of effective budget transparency, as the resulting transparency is generally closer to lip service than empowering of true citizen oversight. Finally, efforts of international actors to influence governments directly to increase their disclosure have often had a limited effect, and not always a positive one, since they encourage government responsiveness to donor, not citizen, demands.

So how should outside actors incentivize budget transparency that leads to accountability? Given the difficulty of affecting head-on the structural dynamics that help budget transparency lead to accountability, I propose that a more effective approach is to work at the margins. The key question is how outside actors can nudge things in the right direction—helping to distinguish disclosure of budget information that is truly useful to citizens and their advocates in civil society who are seeking government spending that is more accountable to their needs and preferences, and aiding and incentivizing the disclosure and use of such information. That is the question I will consider here.

I will make three points. First, the sort of information that is useful to active citizens and organizations generally varies with particular features of the context. But influencing the context is, in a word, difficult. Much of the relevant context involves citizens' experiences and values as well as features of domestic politics, such as those that the Khagram et al. results point to—political transitions to democracy, political competition, and fiscal or economic crises. Intervening in these areas is not typically the comparative advantage of international actors. Thus while it is important for international actors such as those in the GIFT network to take account of differences in context and how those influence the usefulness of budget information, they should take

these contextual differences largely as given, and concentrate on their comparative advantages in enabling and encouraging the disclosure of budget information that is useful in its particular context.

Second, one comparative advantage international actors—particularly those in the GIFT network—have is distinguishing useful information. Current standards for fiscal transparency often fail to take into account of those who can use the information to improve government accountability—typically citizens or their advocates in civil society. Thus governments can score well by current standards for budget transparency while releasing little or no information that is geared toward being useful to their citizens. International actors can help this situation by developing clear standards for budget transparency that is clearly focused on being useful to citizens, as well as encouraging a norm around the disclosure of that kind of information. I argue below that some key ingredients for a standard of more useful information are already in the data currently collected by international organizations such as the IMF and the IBP. More user-focused standards can help citizens more easily identify when governments are disclosing useful information. A norm around the disclosure of information that meets these standards can establish such disclosure as an expectation of responsible governance.

Third, another comparative advantage international actors have is supporting and rewarding the disclosure of useful information and its use by active citizens. International actors can take an active role supporting and rewarding governments that meet the user-focused standards for budget transparency. While releasing useful budget information carries risks for governments, it also can provide substantial benefits—among them, signaling, feedback, efficiency, and resource benefits. International actors are in a position to identify the benefits that a given government may gain from the disclosure of useful information and then help them receive 1) support and assistance so they can accomplish the disclosure of that information and 2) as much recognition and other benefits as possible from such disclosure. They are also well-placed to help active citizens—journalists, activists, researchers, and others in civil society—find this information once it is disclosed and

collaborate across borders to develop new capacities and strategies to use the information. While this approach will not impel every government to release useful budget information (that would entail risky meddling in domestic politics), it would help to ensure that all the useful budget information that governments are willing to release, given their domestic politics, is released, that CSOs and citizens are aware of this information and its usefulness, and that they have the opportunity to learn from each other on the most effective ways to use the information. This would be a substantial improvement over the status quo, while avoiding the interference in other countries' domestic political affairs that often produces backlashes and that, even when it works, risks undermining the very accountability relationships between citizens and their government that budget transparency seeks to nurture.

II. Context and Useful Information

Useful information varies with the context, and the relevant features of context are often political or the result of accumulated citizen experience and values.

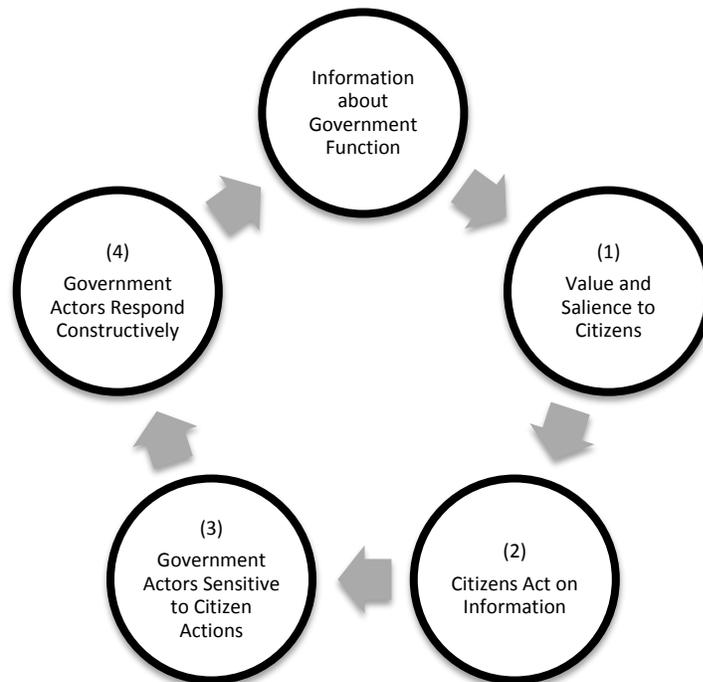
In other work, colleagues and I have tried to understand the relationship between context and useful transparency (Kosack and Fung 2014). At the most basic level, our review concluded that transparency programs were most likely to be successful when the information disclosed was useful in its particular context. Of course, “context” is complicated, and advising “take account of context” in designing a transparency program is not very helpful (any more than advising that a government should “be more transparent”). Every place is unique, and abstracting from that uniqueness involves wrestling with context’s myriad dimensions and facets—education, ethnicity, political history, religion, cultural attitudes, economic characteristics, political and social networks, to name a few—any of which could be important to exactly how the information provided by transparency is useful to citizens seeking to hold their government accountable. To come to a useful understanding of context, we focused on a few basic questions about how information is useful to accountability, and then sought to understand which features of context are important enough to change the answers to those questions. Our focus was on transparency for improved government service delivery (of health or education, for example), but some of the same questions and considerations apply to budget transparency.

The most basic question is “what makes information useful?” A helpful framework for thinking about this question is provided by Fung, Graham and Weil in their book *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency* (2007) in which they argue that transparency policies that are successful in inducing public authorities (and private companies) to improve their products and practices provide information with four main elements:

1. the information is *salient and valuable* to citizens or users,
2. the information helps citizens or users *change their decisions or behavior*,
3. the disclosers of the information are *sensitive* to these changes in behavior, and
4. the disclosers *respond* constructively.

These four elements form a transparency “action cycle,” a version of which is depicted in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1 - The Transparency Action Cycle



Put simply, the action cycle implies that for a government transparency program to be successful, it must release information about a government function that citizens care about and would like to see improved, and that this information must lead citizens to act in ways that elicit a constructive response from actors in the government. In the case of budget transparency, for example, the action cycle might be triggered if

1. citizens care about what the government is spending and would prefer that the government spend differently,
2. the information helps citizens put demands on politicians or public officials to spend in the way they prefer,
3. politicians or public officials care about these citizen preferences, and
4. politicians or public officials respond in ways that alter government spending so that it is more in line with citizen preferences.

The cycle can then begin anew, if these changes lead to incentives or pressure for further releases of information about how spending had changed in response to citizen demands, helping citizens assess them and determine whether they would like the government to spend still differently.

The way this action cycle plays out is likely to differ in different contexts, and these differences put different demands on the information itself. Understanding what kind of

information is likely to be useful in a context entails asking several additional questions about the context.

The first is: how exactly is government spending important to citizens? Budget information is often opaque even to seasoned observers, and although the budget has an enormous impact on government services and functions that citizens may care about deeply, relating the budget to government services and functions is often a difficult exercise. In the U.S., for example, recovery.gov, the spending data dump of projects from the post-crisis stimulus package—a heavily promoted effort to make the stimulus spending as transparent as possible—proved of little interest or use to most U.S. citizens.

For citizens, answering a seemingly simple question such as “should the government spend more on education?” may entail a complex set of subsidiary value judgments and analytical questions, such as

- do we gain skills that we value from the existing education system?;
- would we earn more or otherwise benefit if we had more of those skills?;
- are there better uses of our children’s time than sending them to school?;
- what is the relationship of government spending to the quality of schooling and the skills students learn from it?;
- where would additional resources for education come from?; and
- are there other uses of government resources that would make us even better off than putting them into education?

To have a chance of being valuable and salient enough to citizens to get them to act on it, the information released by budget transparency must either help citizens answer questions like these or must connect easily to citizens’ existing understanding of the answers. At a minimum, whether a group of citizens finds information about how their government is spending to be valuable and salient has to do with their sense of the value of the functions and services on which the funds are being spent and the trade-offs of that spending, all of which is context-specific.

In our examination of transparency programs intended to improve government services, we reviewed 16 studies that evaluated transparency programs experimentally. This review uncovered several patterns in the kind of information that seemed to be most salient and valuable. Altogether these patterns show the importance of presenting context-specific information in ways that help citizens understand its implications and integrate them with their existing experiences and values:

1. Most interventions that provided information on service provider *inputs* (such as teacher absenteeism) were successful; most of those that focused on outputs (such as test scores) were not. One reason may be that teacher absenteeism is observable and targetable, whereas it may not be clear to parents receiving information about low test scores in their children's school what they should do to push for improvements or what they should monitor to know that those measures are working.
2. All but one of the unsuccessful interventions presented only absolute information on performance (for example, test scores), rather than *comparative* information that allowed users to see how their service providers were performing relative to other villages or to national standards.
3. All of the unsuccessful interventions provided information only about the performance of the provider, not about the *rights* of citizens to a certain level of access or performance, so that they could compare performance to what they are entitled to or had been promised.
4. The interventions that presented objective alongside *subjective* information (for example, both medical stocks and citizens' perceptions of waiting times at clinics) were successful.

Information that is salient and valuable to citizens is only the first step from transparency to accountability; citizens must also act on that information in ways that eventually provoke a constructive response from the government. Determining the kind of action that has the best chance of that entails answering several additional questions about the context.

One is "do citizens have an exit option?" This is an important question in considering transparency for improved public services, because in many situations citizens have a choice among service providers. Where there is competition among providers, transparency can provide citizens with information they can use to make better choices among these providers. A number of the most successful transparency programs we reviewed were successful through this mechanism, by providing only very basic comparative information about provider performance, such as test scores to parents who had a choice of where to send their children to school (Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja 2009; Hastings and Weinstein 2008).

Budget transparency may occasionally offer citizens information about competing government services, parties, or politicians, but citizens choose only a small minority of their government in even the most democratic countries. Thus typically budget transparency provides information about the spending decisions of the only government

that citizens have. Where there is no competition, transparency must provide citizens with information that can help them improve existing public spending and services—a higher bar.

Where citizens have no exit option, the next question is whether citizens can work with allies in the government. Governments are anything but unitary actors, and among their diverse branches, agencies, levels, and individual politicians and civil servants there are often powerful actors who are concerned about making the government as responsive as they can to citizen demands, for whatever reason—desire to be re-elected, personal commitment, incentives provided by some government accountability agency or mechanism, etc. Where there are such actors, budget transparency has the potential to trigger *collaboration* between citizens and these actors, exposing areas in which the budget can be brought more into line with citizen preferences. Some notable successes of transparency programs for improved public services make use of collaboration, such as the famous Uganda community scorecard health intervention, which improved infant mortality by a third (Björkman and Svensson 2009).

Where citizens lack such allies—or these allies are not powerful enough to be able to alter the budget on their own—the role of transparency is different: it must help citizens pressure the government to take account of their preferences. A good example of this approach is the social audit, developed by the MKSS (Workers’ and Farmers’ Power Organization) in Rajasthan, India (Jenkins and Goetz 1999). Collaboration is generally easier than pressure, so it is unsurprising that the Khagram et al. review finds political transitions to democracy and political competition—dynamics that increase the political incentives to respond to citizen demands, and thus increase the likelihood that citizens have allies in the government—do the most to increase the likelihood that transparency leads to accountability.

(In the case of transparency for service provision, there is the additional possibility of confronting or collaborating with either providers directly—the “short route” of accountability—or supervisory politicians or policymakers—the “long route” of accountability. In budget transparency, however, most relevant decisions are made by supervisory politicians and policymakers, so the “long route” is often the only relevant accountability channel.)

The result of our analysis of this series of questions is a framework of five “worlds,” in each of which information is useful in a different way, and thus the mechanism through which transparency leads to accountability is different. The framework was designed to understand transparency for service delivery, but can be a starting point for thinking about context for budget transparency.

The bottom line is that how information is useful varies with the context, and the relevant features of context are often both political and related to accumulated citizen experience and values. Budget information provided by transparency is unlikely to be useful to citizens unless they can understand its implications and integrate them with their existing experiences and values; only then can they weigh trade-offs and make a determination about whether they would like to government to spend differently. How citizens can make productive use of that information depends in turn on features of domestic politics, such as whether citizens can collaborate with allies or need to put pressure on the government to change its spending.

All this makes the context very difficult for outsiders such as international actors to improve. Instead, a more productive path is to help citizens and their advocates in civil society to distinguish budget transparency that is useful, and to assist and incentivize the disclosure of such information wherever possible.

III. Improving the Information: A User-Focused Standard

While international actors have difficulty altering the context in which budget information is disclosed, they have a comparative advantage in helping citizens and their advocates in civil society determine if their government is disclosing budget information that is useful. They can do this through developing a more *user-focused* standard for budget transparency. This standard can then become the basis for a norm around the disclosure of user-focused budget information, so that such disclosure becomes an expectation of being a reasonable government.

Current standards for budget transparency are the result of considerable effort, first by the OECD and IMF and more recently by the IBP and its Open Budget Survey and Index. These standards naturally focus on the availability of budget information: whether governments are releasing key budget information consistently, on schedule, and with sufficiently disaggregated detail to reveal government taxing and spending plans.

But by its nature this information is often highly technical. The Open Budget Survey does measure whether a government has released a “citizens budget”—a simplified summary of seven other core budget documents that is designed to be more accessible to average citizens—and includes several questions about whether budget documents relate spending plans to government policy proposals and priorities. But these elements make up only a small proportion of the survey. A country can therefore score highly on the Open Budget Index while releasing only highly technical information that is likely to be relatively difficult for most citizens to understand, let alone use to influence how the government is spending its resources.

Khagram et al. identify “participation” as the key intermediate step between budget transparency and accountability, and portray the relationship between the three elements as a funnel: not all budget transparency programs produce participation, and not all those that produce participation lead to accountability. In the cases they examine, it is clear that at least part of the reason has to do with the usefulness of the information that is released. Exceptionally useful information is one notable feature, for example, of Brazil—long the archetypal example of the potential for budget transparency:

More than any of the other countries examined in this volume, with the possible exception of South Korea, Brazil's transparency reforms have been accompanied by greater popular participation and accountability in fiscal decisionmaking. Sophisticated CSOs possess the capability to incorporate budget information into their agendas. Furthermore, arenas of voice and contestation—not least participatory budgeting programs—enable them to translate this information into policy and public action. The private sector seeks and uses fiscal data, and political parties dig up and expose the fiscal malpractices of their political opponents. Bureaucratic rules and capacities to disclose budget information have been strengthened at all levels of government, and the national media's watchdog role has become more proactive and extensive. And a new transparency “portal” powered by twenty-first-century information and communication technologies has been launched (p. 23).

Many observers have noted that Brazil's context—particularly its politics—clearly plays an enormous role in how budget information is useful to citizens and civil society. As I argued above, useful information differs with the context, and Brazil's unusual context, particularly its participatory budgeting mechanisms and the politics around them, have provided an outlet for citizens and CSOs to use budget information that most countries lack.

But Brazil's budget transparency has also succeeded because it produces budget information that is engineered to be useful to citizens and civil society actors. Indeed, Brazil's participatory budgeting involves substantial training for participants in the budget process and the technical details of budgets and budgeting trade-offs (Baiocchi 2006).

The contrast to other examples is stark—starker than OBI scores would suggest. For example, in 2010 Tanzania scored a 45 out of 100 on the Open Budget Index (for comparison, Brazil scored a 71 out of 100) and its openness has increased substantially in recent years. Yet this improvement in transparency was driven not by any desire to make budget information accessible and useful to citizens; it was driven by “the efforts of a relatively secure ruling party to legitimize itself in the eyes of demanding international donor organizations that finance a considerable share of public spending” (p. 28). Thus “there are substantial provisions for budget information, but that information is rarely used by countervailing political agents or CSOs.” In 2010 Tanzania did not publish a “citizens budget”—the one document of the eight tracked by the Open Budget Survey that is designed to be accessible to citizens.¹

¹ Tanzania has since produced a citizens' budget.

What would a user-focused budget transparency standard entail? In the previous section, I argued that useful information is context-specific and helps citizens easily understand its implications in light of their experiences and values. With budget information, one crucial aspect of context is the level or part of government where citizens have influence. Current standards for budget transparency focus mostly on the national level, but in many countries citizens are most able to influence budgets at the local level. (For example, in Brazil most participatory budgeting happens in municipalities, and only over a part of the budget.) A user-focused standard would take account of whether the government is disclosing budget information for any level where citizens might have influence.

Beyond this, a user-focused standard should be geared toward making it as easy as possible for citizens to understand the information and its implications and to integrate this understanding with their experiences and values. Above I offered some patterns in the sort of information that appeared to be useful in transparency programs intended to improve government services. Several of these may be promising avenues for assessing the usefulness and accessibility of budget information. For example, one clear pattern is that information is more useful when it is *comparative*. For budgets, relevant comparisons might be to previous years' spending, trade-offs among different policy options the government is considering, or performance goals the government is using to assess the effectiveness of its spending. Another clear pattern is that more effective transparency programs included information about the *rights* of citizens—which, in budget transparency, could include constitutionally required levels of spending or other government targets.

A number of existing component questions in the Open Budget Survey deal with exactly these issues, including policy goals, performance targets, and comparisons to previous years' spending. Thus incorporating them into a user-focused standard might not entail much new data collection, but rather a reworking of existing data to create a measure of how focused budget transparency is on users among citizens and civil society.

Of course, these patterns are only a starting place; a comprehensive understanding of relevant aspects of a user-focused budget transparency standard will require additional research and experimentation. On the one hand, this work could draw from global scholarship and other work in transparency, as well as from the generation of work in medicine and communications on how to make public information useful and accessible. On the other, however, it must take account of how difficult it is for outsiders to understand what makes information useful and accessible in a particular context. To have the chance to be useful across contexts, any standard must take account of what is useful in particular contexts. That understanding requires the tacit

knowledge of lived experience—the experience of citizens and civil society organizations, not outsiders. Those who live with the context have far better information about it, and about how budget information will be useful in it, than any outsider. Integrating the insights of these two perspectives—the international and local—is often difficult, but it is essential.

Finally, a user-focused standard would not be a ranking, like the current Open Budget Index. Rather, it would be a threshold: a level of user-focused disclosure that signals to citizens and others that they might find useful as they seek to understand and influence how the government is spending its resources.

A more user-focused standard could in turn become the basis for a new norm around useful budget transparency. By allowing citizens and civil society to know whether their government is disclosing budget information that is engineered to be useful to them and judge them accordingly, over time the standard can become an expectation of responsible governments. To push that process in the right direction, international actors can work to enable countries to meet the new standard and ensure that they receive all possible benefits from doing so.

IV. Supporting and Rewarding the Disclosure of Useful Information

Much of humanity lives, and will continue to live for the foreseeable future, under governments—both democratic and autocratic—that do not need their support to stay in power, and will thus resist the disclosure to them of useful budget information. There are risks to a government in disclosing useful budget information, and regardless it is not generally in a government's interest to try to empower—with information or anything else—citizens whose support it does not need. Rather than trying to change these politics—which is not the comparative advantage of international actors and often undermines the very accountability relationships between citizens and their government that budget transparency seeks to nurture—international actors can instead work to identify any benefits that a given government might receive from the disclosure of useful information, and ensure that they 1) receive as much support and assistance as they need to accomplish the disclosure of that information and 2) gain as much recognition and other benefits as possible from that disclosure. On the other side, international actors can also work with those in the society who are most likely to be the primary users of the information—such as civil society organizations, journalists, researchers, and community or movement activists—to ensure that they gain access to the information and are equipped to use it. With this combined approach, international actors can aid in the release of all the useful information on taxing and spending decision that governments *are* willing to release, given their domestic politics, and increase the opportunities for this information to be used by key societal actors.

To some extent, the disclosure of useful budget information is a technical problem. Even governments with a commitment to disclosure can bungle the disclosure itself (again the U.S.'s *recovery.gov* is an instructive case). And governments that have managed it—such as Brazil's—have generally taken years of trial and error to get it right. The technical side of useful disclosure is right in an international organization's wheelhouse. International actors have tremendous convening and diffusing capabilities: they can help relevant actors share experiences and lessons learned, and can offer them expertise and best practices. Just offering help with the technical problem is an important step toward incentivizing the disclosure of useful information, ensuring that any country whose domestic politics favor such disclosure is not limited by its capacities.

The challenge, though, is that many governments will not initially perceive disclosing useful information to be in their interest. This problem is far thornier. The basic political

difficulty in incentivizing the disclosure of useful budget information is that information that is useful in holding a government accountable is often threatening to a government's hold on power. Even a government that is doing its best to respond to its sense of citizen needs and preferences might be inviting citizen dissatisfaction by releasing budget information, as budgets inevitably involve difficult trade-offs that disappoint some citizens—disappointment that opposition parties and actors can exploit particularly easily if they can point to the government's own budget data to make their point. Thus disclosing useful budget information inevitably exposes a government to domestic political risk.

Governments may still wish to disclose useful budget information if the political benefits outweigh the risk. But governments may not always perceive these benefits, or may lack confidence that they will receive them, making them unwilling to accept the downside risks even if the benefits may outweigh them. International actors can help with both of these.

First, they can help governments to be fully aware of any benefits they might gain from disclosing useful budget information. There are at least four types of such benefits:

Signaling benefits. Governments that disclose useful budget information are demonstrating to their citizens that they are 1) willing to open themselves to scrutiny, indicating that they have nothing to hide, and 2) interested in citizens making use of that information so that they can be more responsive to citizen needs and preferences. Both channels can increase a government's popularity, particularly among skeptical constituencies. For example, South Africa, which in 2010 had the world's highest score on the Open Budget Index, used fiscal transparency “to signal to both the domestic and largely white business elites as well as international financial market actors (rating agencies, foreign investors) that the governing black political leadership could manage public finances efficiently and effectively” (p. 21). As South Africa illustrates, governments may gain internationally too, if the disclosure of useful budget information is a signal to other governments or foreign investors. Hameed (2011) finds that greater fiscal transparency leads to higher sovereign credit ratings and lower risk premia on government bonds.

Feedback benefits. Governments that disclose useful budget information have the chance to observe how their citizens react. By observing what citizens like and don't like in the information disclosed, governments can gain a better understanding of how to improve their popularity (the positive side of scrutiny).

Efficiency benefits. To the extent that disclosure of useful information increases participation, it can lead to far more effective government services. When the sort of transparency programs designed to improve service delivery that I discussed above work, it is often by improving the utilization of existing resources—sparking collaborative problem solving between citizens and government actors, exposing corruption or waste, etc. This positive engagement by citizens in improving government services, combined with the feedback benefits that disclosure can provide, may explain why Fukuda-Parr et al (2011), Bellver and Kaufmann (2005), and Islam (2006) have all found a strong positive correlation between transparency and human development, such as literacy or life expectancy, controlling for other factors.

Resource benefits. Disclosure of useful information can bring not just international approval and lower borrowing costs, but also additional resources from donors. The case of Tanzania in the previous section illustrates the rewards to governments that donors perceive to be opening their books.

There are undoubtedly other types of benefits that governments may gain from disclosing useful information; developing a complete understanding of them would be a useful effort. The eventual object is an analytical framework and the capacity to apply it to any given country, thus helping its government see and understand the benefits that they might get from disclosing useful information. This knowledge, combined with an effort by international actors to make sure that the government in question receives as much benefit and recognition as possible from disclosure, could be a powerful tool for incentivizing governments to disclose useful budget information. Any government that would benefit more than it would lose but was not aware of those benefits would certainly be more likely to open its books. And the help of international actors for governments to gain recognition and benefit from useful disclosure may be enough to tip the benefit-cost analysis for other governments toward disclosure.

The transparency action cycle introduced above (Figure 1) cautions that even the most useful information will not lead to improvements in government accountability unless it is actually used. This is another area where international actors can contribute.

First, they can help to spread the word about where useful budget information can be acquired, helping active citizens to find and access it.

In addition, they can leverage the same convening and diffusing capabilities I argued above can help governments with the technical side of useful disclosure. Journalists, researchers, activists, and the rest of the broad set of individuals in the civil society who might potentially engage in a representative, democratic conversation around

government spending decisions, are all potentially members of larger internationally networks. By bringing together journalists from different countries who are all interested in better telling the story of their governments' performance for average citizens, or activists from different countries who are all interested in developing reforms to make their governments work better for average citizens, international actors can allow invaluable technical capacity-building, peer learning, and experience-sharing. Thus they can help engaged citizens and organizations from different countries share methods for using budget data—methods that they can then explore in their own settings, adapting them as, for example, in the trial and error through which municipalities in Brazil developed their participatory budget process. In this way, international actors can help to enable the use of the budget information, not simply its disclosure.

There is always the risk that, in the process of offering these opportunities, international actors can end up shaping them and their motivations, or even creating them, as activists, journalists, or researchers begin to focus increasingly on their international network—with its superior resources and opportunities for personal advancement—and gradually disconnect from their societies. One particular risk of this nefarious process is purposeless isomorphism, in which, for example, civil society organizations analyze and make suggestions about the reforms to governments budgets without interacting with the average citizens that those reforms are ostensibly helping, or journalists report about budgetary information without investigating how the budget reflects or fails to reflect the needs and preferences of average citizens. This risk is all the greater in many of the countries that the incentive-based approach just outlined would tend to target, as these are environments in which there is less government disclosure of useful budget information to begin with and so little experience with meaningful conversation or debate around government budgets among either citizens or civil society groups, journalists, and researchers. International actors can guard against the risk by carefully involving only individuals and organizations that maintain a deep connection to their societies and an inherent, as opposed to strategic, interest in their government's budget, and reducing support as their connection and interest weakens.

Assuming that this risk can be avoided, the pairing of successful efforts to incentivize the disclosure of useful budget information with successful efforts to nurture civil society actors equipped to use that information in their particular context could open greater opportunities for budget transparency to improve government accountability. They together are a further ingredient in the approach of working at the margins that I argued earlier is the best path forward for international actors.

Over time, this approach may also help build a body of experience with the benefits of useful disclosure, helping both to solidify an international norm around useful budget transparency as well as to encourage governments to engage in further opening and citizens to pay ever-greater attention to the resulting information. Vietnam, while not a shining example of the disclosure of useful information, is an example of how accumulated experience with the benefits of disclosure can lead to further disclosure:

Gradual and minimalist improvements [were] driven largely by topdown, technocratic reforms promoted by the national government to demonstrate its adherence to global norms of good governance and to maintain domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis increasing domestic pressure to curb corruption. Vietnamese political leaders are keen to signal their willingness to move toward internationally accepted good practices as part of their ideological commitment to political and economic modernization. They are motivated by a desire to increase foreign aid and private investment and therefore the country's international legitimacy. In turn, donors such as the World Bank have continued to press and support the government to introduce fiscal transparency reforms" (p. 30).

It is important not to overstate the potential of this approach or take it too far. None of these benefits may be attractive to some governments, and for many others the benefits will be far outweighed by the increased domestic political risk that they would face from disclosing useful budget information. For other governments, the benefits of useful disclosure may be attractive only to one faction. Jonathan Fox's recent work on improving accountability has examined settings with divisions in the government between democratically reform-minded factions and more conservative factions (leading to his "sandwich" strategy of combining top-down reform with grassroots pressure). In such countries, the reform-minded faction may see substantial benefit in sharing useful information with the populace, but may only be able to realize those benefits if it can overcome the conservative faction's opposition.

Thus the cost-benefit calculation is not likely to work out for all governments. Moreover, those governments where it does work out are likely to be the most democratic governments—the easiest cases, which are relatively open already. Finally, there is the risk that many other governments may find benefit in *acting like* they are open, while doing little to engineer their disclosure to help their citizens actually use the information. Tanzania is one of myriad countries that illustrate this danger. Indeed, even South Africa—which, as mentioned earlier, had the world's highest score on the Open Budget Index in 2010, but which opened its books largely to signal competence to domestic business elites and international investors, not civil society or average citizens—have not seen citizens, civil society, or the media make much use of the information.

These complexities all lead back to the crucial focus on the standard of *useful* disclosure. As long as international efforts are focused on developing standards of useful, user-focused budget transparency, and enabling and rewarding the disclosure and use of such information, the approach will probably do more good than harm. The point of the approach is not that it will lead to useful budget disclosure everywhere. That, I have argued here, is impossible: useful information varies with features of citizen experience and values and domestic politics that are virtually impossible for outsiders to reliably improve. But that does not mean that international actors cannot do more to improve the usefulness of budget information where it is disclosed, and to assist and motivate the disclosure and use of that sort of information in places where it makes political sense. A first step is to identify governments that useful budget transparency would benefit but which have not become as transparent as they could be, because of limited technical capacities, lack of understanding of the benefits, or insecurity about whether they will realize those benefits. Likewise they can focus on nurturing the capacities and opportunities of the journalists, activists, researchers, and active citizens in the grassroots civil society who seek to make government more responsive to citizens, so they can access, understand, and assess the budget information released, and ultimately to use it in their work. Those are the governments and citizens that international actors can help. And in the process, over time, this assistance can provide the basis for a body of experience with the benefits of useful disclosure and a new international norm around such disclosure. The approach is far from perfect. It is not going to change fundamental features of the political or economic context, and it will take time to affect the most difficult, closed societies—if indeed it can ever reach them. But it may nudge things in the right direction. As the old adage says, the perfect should not be the enemy of the good.

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