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Open Budget Index: Nine in Ten Countries Fail to Provide Budget Information Needed for Government Accountability

First ever budget transparency ranking released simultaneously in 59 countries

(Washington, D.C.) — Today 59 civil society organizations from around the world unveiled the Open Budget Index, the first index to rate countries on how open their budget books are to their citizens. While the index finds that most countries provide at least some information to their citizens about the budget, the vast majority fail to provide the basic information necessary for good governance.

“In 53 of the 59 countries examined, citizens are limited by lack of access to information. In 10 countries, government accounts are closed books,” said Warren Krafchik, executive director of the International Budget Project, which coordinated work on the index. “A country’s ranking on the Open Budget Index is a measure of that government’s commitment to accountability and transparency.”

The Open Budget Index provides citizens, legislators, and civil society advocates with the comprehensive and practical information needed to gauge a government’s commitment to budget transparency and accountability. Armed with this kind of information, lenders, development advocates, and aid organizations can identify meaningful budget reforms needed in specific countries, and increase the impact of their development work.

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The Open Budget Index 2006 was calculated by the International Budget Project based on detailed questionnaires completed by local experts in 59 participating countries from every continent. The Index assesses the availability of key budget documents, the quantity of information they provide, and the timeliness of their dissemination to citizens in order to provide reliable information on each country's commitment to open budgeting.

“Having access to information gives us a voice in our country's budget. It allows us to push for improvements in people's lives in Mexico,” said Helena Hofbauer, executive director of the FUNDAR Center for Analysis and Research, which conducted the research in Mexico. “Without information, we have no voice. The Open Budget Index provides accurate, independent information so that we know what reforms are needed.”

For the 59 countries surveyed, the major findings from the Open Budget Index 2006 include:

- Only six of the countries — France, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States — provide the extensive budget information necessary for government accountability.
- More than 50 percent (32) of the countries — fail to make public all of the seven key budget reports they produce. These governments produce this information for their own internal use or for international donors, but do not make it available to their citizens.
- Six countries keep their budget secret until after it is adopted by the legislature – effectively barring any public participation in the budget's consideration. (Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Egypt, Mongolia, and Viet Nam)
- Nearly half (25) of the countries fail to hold public hearings on the budget.
- In 16 of the countries, the executive can fire the head of the country's external auditing body without the consent of the legislature or judiciary. The failure to provide security of tenure to the chief of the national auditing agency indicates the lack of a fundamental institutional safeguard to guarantee the office's independence from the executive.

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“There is much work to be done around the world before budgets are an open book to citizens,” said Pamela Gomez, project leader of the Open Budget Initiative at the International Budget Project. “But countries could achieve major reforms simply by releasing all of the budget documents they already produce to the public. With that small change, more than half the countries would improve their performance and, more importantly, citizens would be significantly more informed about the budget.”

For the full 2006 report, high resolution images of the Open Budget Index findings, information on the participating civil society organizations from 59 countries, and press materials in Arabic, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, please visit www.openbudgetindex.org.

About the International Budget Project

The International Budget Project was formed within the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in 1997 to nurture the growth of civil society organizations to analyze, monitor, and influence government budget processes, institutions, and outcomes. The aim of the IBP is to make budget systems in developing and transition countries more responsive to the needs of poor and low-income people in society and, accordingly, to make these systems more transparent and accountable to the public. The IBP does not receive funding from the U.S. Government or its agencies. The IBP has its main office in Washington, DC. For more information, please visit <http://www.internationalbudget.org>.

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