

Spotlight

Open budgeting and contracting as trust-building vehicles in the time of COVID-19



Volunteers met with their community to provide them feedback about the results of health facilities monitoring in Jalalabad in April 2020. Photo credit: Integrity Watch

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As Afghanistan is juggling to deal with multiple threats including insecurity and political uncertainty following elections in 2019 and the pandemic corruption, it has to keep its head above the water while fighting COVID-19. As an aid-dependent country, Afghanistan has to raise funds to meet not only the growing demand for health services and equipment especially personal protection equipment (PPE), testing kits and ventilators, it also has to feed a growing number of people who were already living under the poverty line. However, both donor and public trust are at a very low level due to the prevalence of corruption making it very difficult for the Afghan Government to raise the funds needed and to spend the resources in a satisfactory manner. There are already wide-spread allegations of waste, mismanagement and corruption in handling the COVID-19 situation including purchasing of personal protection equipment and materials at exorbitant rates, the supply of substandard materials such as hand sanitizers and lack of access to personal protection equipment in many of the hospitals and health centers we have surveyed. Nevertheless, it is not a completely hopeless situation. The government can take certain measures to address the trust deficit with the donors and the public while raising, allocating, and spending the funds needed to tackle COVID-19 in the country. Open

budgeting and open contracting (including transparency and public participation) could greatly assist the government to overcome the situation.

According to the recently published [Open Budget Survey \(OBS\) results](#), Afghanistan only provides limited budget information to its citizens. The overall budget transparency score of Afghanistan is 50 out of 100 while the public participation score is 15 out of 100 and the oversight score is 31 out of 100. While the scores did not improve in the last two years, there are many low-hanging fruits that the Afghan Government can pick to increase budget transparency. This includes publishing budget documents in a timely manner such as the pre-budget statement which the government produced last year but did not publish on time. In addition, providing more details in budget documents and reports and allowing civil society and the public to participate in the budget-making process could turn the budgeting process into a trust-building vehicle. These reforms can go hand in hand while fighting the COVID-19 outbreak as the government can use budget transparency to build trust in these times of the COVID-19 crisis. Since the government is planning to amend this year's budget in response to the COVID-19 situation, it should publish the proposed amendments before they are finalized to enable citizens and civil society groups to engage in a meaningful discussion with the government. The government should gather inputs from civil society and other stakeholders for these amendments, especially regarding the health sector because improving the health system is a top priority at the moment. Data generated by independent sources such as civil society should be used to prioritize spending in the health sector. For instance, data from the Integrity Watch's study to assess the quality of health services in more than 50 hospitals and a survey of 1000 health centers could be used in the allocation of funds based on the needs identified through these studies. In addition, data generated through programs such as the Citizens Charter by the Afghan Government partners and the Community-Based Monitoring of health centers by Integrity Watch, which ensure public participation through monitoring of health services could be used to allocate resources based on the public identification of needs in specific health centers.

Afghanistan has made great strides in improving transparency around public procurement. However, there are still many steps that need to be taken such as initiating e-procurement and improving publishing contract data based on [Open Contracting Data Standards](#). More specifically to the COVID-19 situation, transparency and accountability around emergency procurement has to increase taking into account [civil society's recommendations](#) around this issue. The government should take the following actions:

- Emergency procurement should be minimized to only necessary situations and when such decisions are made, they should be justified, recorded and publicized to create transparency and accountability around such decisions.
 - The government should publish emergency procurement data through its procurement portal AGEOPS in a timely manner including all emergency procurements made by the provincial governments.
 - When publishing data, full publication should be the norm including publishing all documents such as price quotations, procurement decisions including justification for those decisions, invoices, prices, type and quality of goods, and receipts.
 - Carry out public audits of emergency funds and emergency procurement by the Supreme Audit Office, engaging civil society and the public in the audit process.
 - Enable civil society groups and journalists' participation through the provision of timely and detailed information and opportunities for meaningful participation in monitoring emergency procurement and carrying out social audits of such expenditures.
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Anti-Corruption Updates, April 2020



Kids in Helmand pose for a photo and smile in the midst of a country marred with conflict and corruption Photo credit: Meer Abdullah

M. Naser Timory, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

Anti-corruption strategy

The last National Anti-Corruption Strategy's benchmarks period ended in December 2019. However, the next round of benchmarks has not been developed yet. The government initially decided to opt for a one-year Anti-Corruption Reform Accelerating Plan (RAP) to bridge the gap between the possible changes in the administration and to make time for an evaluation of the first and second phases of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy for the years 2018 and 2019. We know that government has removed the RAP but it has not explained what it will do in the interval between the evaluation and the third phase. The evaluation has been further slowed down by the COVID-19 emergency but may be completed by the end of 2020.

The Anti-Corruption Commission

The selection of the Anti-Corruption Commissioners is in its final stage. A four-member committee of two CSOs and two government representatives has completed the technical review stage of the applicants and is about to make a decision about the shortlisted fifteen candidates who would then be introduced to the President for final selection. The process has been halted due to the COVID-19 emergency.

The Ombudsperson's Office

On February 25th, 2020 the Legislative Committee of the Cabinet referred the Ombudsperson Law

back to a special committee led by the Ministry of Justice for review. The committee has not yet met and this process is expected to be further delayed by the COVID-19 emergency.

COVID-19 emergency funds

The government is revising its approved National Budget FY1399 (2020) in response to the COVID-19 emergency. There is no news of any public consultation with the National Assembly or civil society on this issue. Furthermore, the government has released their Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for budget expenditure during the COVID-19 outbreak. The World Bank pledged \$100 million, EU \$117 million and the US \$13 million to assist the government to fight COVID-19. While the SOP mentions civil society participation and access to information, there is no mention of any specific accountability mechanisms for this aid.

Fighting corruption in times of corona can save lives



A community volunteer visited a health facility in Mazar-e Sharif in April 2020 to check its preparedness to respond to covid19 Photo credit: Integrity Watch

Naseer Aieen and Noorullah Elham, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

To respond to the Coronavirus outbreak, a training workshop to collect information on health facilities was organized in mid-April this year in five provinces. This workshop is a part of an initiative by Integrity Watch to enhance the preparedness of health facilities to tackle this virus by providing necessary information to civil society, people and their communities, as well as to government and the international community policymakers.

The survey will cover Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, Herat, and Kapisa in its first phase and will be extended to the rest of the provinces in the next few weeks. Data on the quality of service delivery,

capacity and condition, level of available resources, number of visitors - especially those with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID 19, number of personnel, observing social distancing guidelines, etc. is collected through a newly developed COVID App and uploaded to www.covid19.af on a real-time basis. The COVID App is developed by Vox Map a French start-up and the website is a joint endeavor of Integrity Watch and Vox Map.

“Fighting corruption in times of corona can save people’s lives.” said, Ezatullah Adib, Integrity Watch’s Head of Research. According to him, during the first phase of this project, a total of 1,000 healthcare centers will be surveyed in these five provinces.

The trainees are volunteers who used to monitor schools, courts and construction projects that have been halted at the moment due to the lockdown in the cities.

Ms. Aaliza Sultan who will do the survey in Kabul stated, “We learned how to monitor healthcare centers and submit reports on real-time basis along with photos using the COVID App.” Another volunteer, Mr xxx, confirmed that that the program taught them how to protect themselves while surveying the health centers and provided all of them with protective equipment. He said, “I am very proud that during these days when everyone else is in quarantine and at home, I can serve my people and my country.”

The volunteers are provided with hygiene kits including masks, gloves, sanitizer, protective clothing with instructions on how to use it and also smartphones with internet bundles and a transportation stipend.

Oversight of the Afghan National Budget backtracks over the last four years, survey finds



A webinar held after Afghan launch of OBS on May 3, 2020 to discuss how to implement the assessment’s recommendations. Thousands of people viewed the live streaming on Facebook and posed questions to the panel members. Photo credit: Integrity Watch

Ibrahim Khan Jabarkhail, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

Afghanistan failed to improve its global ranking in the Open Budget Survey's (OBS) biennial assessment that was published nationally and globally level last Thursday. The country's public participation score stalled at 15 out of 100, its transparency improves from 49 to a reprehensible 50 and its oversight dropped from 43 to 31.

The failure to publish one of the eight key budget documents known as the pre-budget statement which discloses breakdowns of revenue and debt of the Executive's Budget Proposal, and the failure to produce a citizen's version of key budget documents kept the transparency score stagnant. In a Webinar held this Sunday after launch of the survey, a deputy to the Ministry of Finance, however, pledged to improve transparency of the budget in the current and upcoming fiscal year. Habib Zadrani the Finance Deputy of the ministry stated, "We have improved on point on transparency but I recognize that fact we could have done more."

Afghanistan's score decreased to 31 from 43 in the Budget Oversight component of the OBS 2019. The score reduced because Parliament did not produce reports to the public on its oversight of the implementation of the National Budget and in addition because Parliament and the Supreme Audit Office (SAO) do not have any formal mechanisms to engage with civil society. Mr. Mujib Shirzad, Deputy at the SAO that spoke the same webinar, stated, "The SAO has now established some engagement protocols as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) after this assessment was completed. We have planned to speed up public engagement in the next two years." Also, in the past two years, the Ministry of Finance failed to engage with Parliament and the SAO to enhance their oversight involvement in the budget implementation.

Furthermore, the need to establish an Independent Fiscal institution (IFIs) that could advise the parliament on fiscal affairs was not taken into account during the last two years. Mr. Sayed Azeem Kabarzani, a member of the budget and finance commission of the Lower House, who also spoke at the webinar, explained how the house scrutinized contingency codes and limited executive powers in the fiscal year 1399 (2020). The SAO did not have the required independence standards including on the appointment of its head when the survey was completed and this has been partly rectified since that time.

Moreover, the score of Afghanistan did not improve in the public participation component of the Open Budget Survey. It remained at a low level of 15/100. Ms. Froozan Rasuly, Deputy Director of Equality for Peace and Democracy, a Kabul-based civil society organization, stated, "The score did not improve because the government did not hold any meaningful consultations with the people so that their needs would be reflected in the National Budget. It is not possible to collect people's view during a half a day consultation and report a whole year at a press conference." In addition to the MOF, the SAO and Parliament did not engage with civil society and the people during the implementation and evaluation phases of the National Budget.

With two years passed after the OBS 2017, the government has still not taken the public participation component seriously. For instance, the recent dismembering of the Ministry of Finance and the amendment of the National Budget 2020 because of Covid-19 occurred without any consultation with civil society organizations.