

By Lamia Moubayed Bissat

A cornerstone for transparency and citizen engagement

Lebanon releases the 2019 citizen budget

The 2019 budget law was subject to long debates that left citizens wondering about the ways the budget would affect their lives. It is a daunting task to make sense of the 1,000 plus black and white pages filled with complex tables, numbers, and graphs.

To help non-specialists understand the information in the budget law, for a second consecutive year, the finance ministry has committed to releasing a “citizen budget” that breaks down the country’s fiscal situation. The 2019 document is scheduled to be accessible as of early September on the Ministry of Finance’s website and the website of the affiliated Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan. It is also available in hard copies in Arabic, French, and English at the institute’s Library of Finance.

The citizen budget presents the following four core considerations in easy-to-understand language: economic assumptions underlying the 2019 budget—expectations about economic growth and inflation, and predictions about whether the budget will run a surplus or deficit; revenue collection—where the government’s money comes from; spending allocations—how the money is being spent and why (shown from three different angles, administrative entities, e.g. ministries; economic sector, e.g. salaries and benefits; and function, e.g. education and health); and significant policy initiatives and projects—an explanation of sizable increases or decreases in revenue or spending and of main projects planned.

The document also includes information about the budget calendar, how the budget is formulated and executed, and who is responsible at each stage. Practically speaking, this is the only

document developed by the government exclusively for the public on this particular theme.

VALUE OF A CITIZEN BUDGET

For governments, citizen budgets are an opportunity to enhance public knowledge about key financial information, communicate policy, improve budget transparency, and engage public participation, all with a view of strengthening the relationship of trust between the citizen and the state. For citizens and civil society, citizen budgets significantly enhance participation in policy debates around tax policies, fiscal decisions, and the spending habits of their governments, and they hold them accountable for how public money is managed.

This is particularly important for Lebanon, which scores just 3/100 on the budget transparency index published in 2017 by the International Budget Partnership (IBP), compared to a global average of 42. Citizen budgets are one way to improve this ranking, as seen in Egypt which moved from a score of 13 in 2012 to 41 in 2017 following the introduction of a citizen budget.


Improving Lebanon’s ranking is not the ultimate goal, however. By favoring more transparency, the government seeks to strengthen the credibility of the country’s fiscal plans and boost confidence. The government committed to undertaking major financial governance reforms in order to unlock funding pledged by international donors at CEDRE last year. Fiscal transparency is one instrumental pillar in moving forward on the commitments made.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s 2019 fiscal transparency code states that “fiscal forecasts and budgets

should be presented in a way that facilitates policy analysis and accountability.” Many international organizations, including the IMF and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development promote access to budgetary information and financial literacy as key elements of transparency, accountability, and good financial governance.

This accountability requires commitment. Minister of Finance Ali Hassan Khalil’s ministerial decision to publish a yearly citizen budget (No. 1/110 dated March 4, 2019) reaffirms the commitment made to improve citizens’ access to information, promote transparency, and enhance accountability.

This task was delegated to the Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan. Translating such a complex document and financial jargon into accessible language was a daunting challenge to our team who learned by observing, doing, and comparing to international practices. The learning facilitated by the IMF’s Middle East Regional Technical Assistance Center and IBP was instrumental. Visualizations and illustrations helped us articulate key information.

The challenge for the period to come is for citizens and civil society to make the most of this work, and to partner with us to disseminate the Citizen Budget 2019 as widely as possible, across all forms of media, so that Lebanese citizens are aware of and have access to information fundamental to their understanding of how the state is financed. 

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