

Exploring New Frontiers of Fiscal Transparency in India

A Roundtable

India International Centre (Seminar Hall 1, Kamla Devi Complex)

Lodhi Road, Delhi

28th March 2019 (Thursday, 1.00 p.m. – 4.30 p.m.)

Concept Note

It can be argued that most parts of government and civil society efforts around fiscal governance in the country, over the last two decades, have focused on ‘supply’ side of the problem, i.e. what kind of budget information should be publicly available, and how should spaces for participation and mechanisms for accountability be put in place. But the focus on enhancing such ‘demand’ for greater transparency, participation and accountability in fiscal processes directly from people has been relatively much weaker.

In this context, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), in collaboration with civic technology groups like CivicDataLab, DataKind Bangalore and a number of other organisations has developed and launched [Open Budgets India](#) (OBI), an open data platform on different tiers of government budgets in India in January 2017. The primary objective of this initiative has been to make India’s budgets open, usable and easy to comprehend. In its journey over the last two years, the data platform has evolved as a comprehensive source of fiscal data covering the budgets of the Union Government, States and Municipal Corporations as well as treasury data from select districts. In addition to facilitating access to fiscal data at different levels, OBI also hosts interactive [dashboards](#) for exploring budgets of different tiers through visualisations, machine-readable data, easily searchable data-tables, etc. In this on-going initiative, we have substantially expanded the coverage of data on OBI in the last two years and have witnessed more than one lakh and fifty thousand users of the platform. As part of the advocacy efforts with the Union and the State Governments, Open Budgets India has shared a few best practices in standardising and publishing fiscal data on online platforms which have also been implemented by states like Assam as part of their fiscal reforms.

In this journey of developing the data platform and upgrading it, we have gained valuable insights on the challenges faced by researchers, policy analysts and journalists who use budget data on a regular basis. We are also focusing on how it needs to be improved so as to address some of these core challenges and cater, more effectively, to the demands from potential users of fiscal information in India. The Roundtable, in the given backdrop, will discuss important insights from the experience with [Open Budgets India](#) platform over the last two years. It would also reflect upon the process of CBGA’s formal collaboration with the Finance Department of Assam, which has led to an open source [dashboard for Assam Budget](#) for 2019-20 on the data platform.

Further, the Roundtable will also focus on the improvements in fiscal transparency (at different levels of government, in different parts of the country) in the recent years as well as the challenges that persist. The meeting would deliberate upon the digital drive for information sharing witnessed

in a number of States, the emerging trend of collaboration of Government authorities with non-state actors for bringing about fiscal reforms, and the changing policy scenario in the country on data sharing and data standardisation.

In terms of fiscal transparency, different tiers of government are at different levels of progress, with access to relevant information diminishing drastically as one goes deeper from the level of the Union Government to the subnational levels. Although, in the recent years, the Union Government and a few State Governments have focused on adopting technology driven solutions for facilitating access to fiscal information, the efforts still remain few and far between. Some of these initiatives, for instance, are development of an open data platform by the Union Government, publishing digital (HTML) versions of budgets in several of the states, publishing online budget portals with data analytics in states like Assam and Andhra Pradesh, and publishing online district treasury information of states like Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, etc. with real-time updates. However, a lot still remains to be achieved. In this context, the Roundtable will also discuss the key developments pertaining to technology-enabled initiatives by governments at different levels for improving fiscal transparency.