

# ASK YOUR GOVERNMENT

HOW MUCH IT'S SPENDING ON DEVELOPMENT



The *Ask Your Government!* initiative began in January 2010, when 100 civil society organizations launched an ambitious effort to document public access to budget information in 80 countries. The core question behind the effort is simple: What happens when citizens ask their government for specific budget information relating to key international development commitments to which the government is a signatory?

The answer is that most of the time, governments do **not** respond at all or with sufficient information. In fact, when governments were asked six questions by their citizens about how much money they spend on development priorities, only **one** of the 80 countries provided substantive answers to all six questions.

Citizens used official channels to request information from government agencies and were diligent in following up these requests. Many went to great lengths to insist that government make the required information available, often visiting ministry offices on multiple occasions. The majority of governments questioned in the *Ask Your Government!* initiative did not adequately respond to citizen demands for access to public budget information. This finding indicates a major problem for transparency and accountability.

## The Questions and Their Logic

*Ask Your Government!* partners identified six specific pieces of budget information that relate to established international development commitments on maternal health, the environment, and foreign aid. One local organization in each country took responsibility for going through the process of submitting and following up on the information requests to each government. The request process was guided by a carefully designed protocol developed by experts in access to public information. Governments were given up to three opportunities to respond to citizen information requests, including letters, phone calls and visits to government offices. The following six questions were asked of each government:

- Q1:** How much is spent on life-saving drugs to reduce maternal mortality?
- Q2:** How much is spent on training midwives (or equivalents), and how many are trained?
- Q3:** How much aid has been received (or provided), and when was notification about the amount given?
- Q4:** How much aid will be received (or provided) in the near future, and when was the government notified?
- Q5:** How much is spent on environmental protection and conservation?
- Q6:** How much is spent on subsidizing fossil fuel production and consumption?

For the exact questions, their rationale, and the protocol used in the initiative, go to [www.internationalbudget.org](http://www.internationalbudget.org).

## Government Responses to Budget Information Requests

The *Ask Your Government!* initiative was designed to reflect the fundamental guiding principle that citizens have the right to know how their government is spending public money. The first step toward ensuring this right is timely access to useful budget information that clearly explains how public funds are being invested. Governments are responsible for making this information available, and citizens are responsible for using it to hold governments accountable for their actions.

The goal of *Ask Your Government!* was to illustrate the real-life experiences of citizens going through the process of requesting budget information from their governments. The initiative offers concrete evidence on the problems civil society faces in accessing public budget information in a wide range of countries.

Government responses were assessed on two levels. First, whether or not the government responded at all to the query. Citizens gave government agencies up to three opportunities to respond to their inquiries. If no formal response was provided in a reasonable time frame, or officials refused to provide an answer to the question posed, the result was categorized as a failure to respond to the citizen information request.

Second, when governments did respond to citizen requests, the information provided was analyzed based on whether or not it substantively addressed all aspects of the inquiry.

Based on these criteria, government responses can be broadly grouped into four categories:

**1. All questions were answered, and all requested budget information was provided.**

This is the best possible outcome, where government responses were strong on both levels. They adequately attended to citizen information requests and provided substantive budget information that answered all the questions posed.

**2. All questions were answered, but not with all the required budget information.**

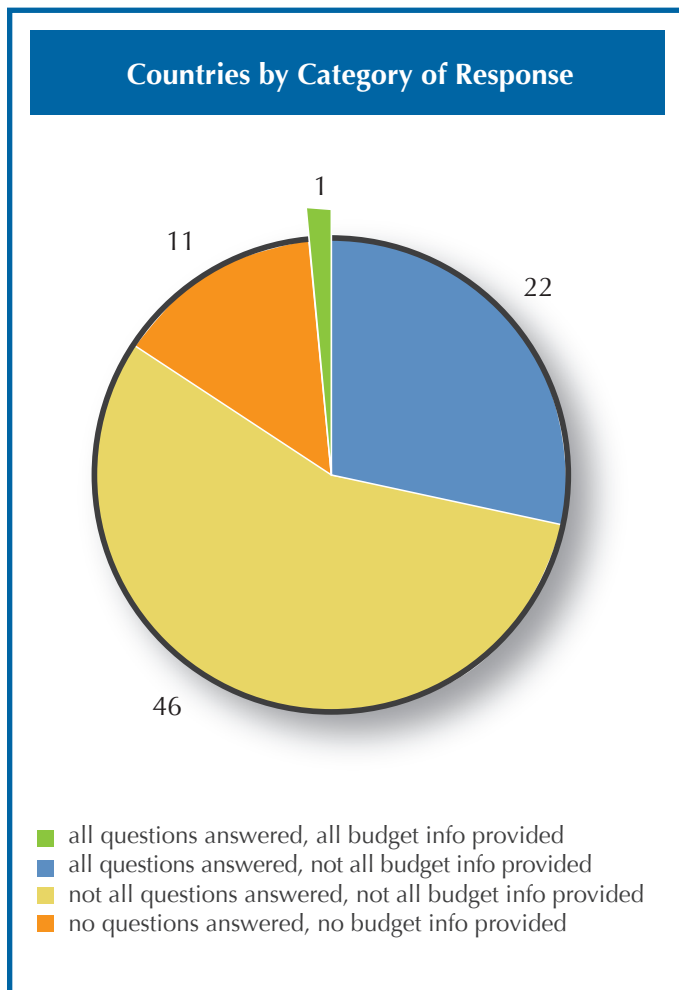
In this category, government responses were strong on only one of the two levels measured. While they responded to all of the citizens' formal requests for public budget information, the answers provided did not substantively address all aspects of the questions posed.

**3. Only some of the questions were answered, and not all budget information was provided.**

Here government responses were weak on both levels. In this category, governments only responded to a portion of citizen requests, leaving at least one question unanswered. They also did not provide all the required budget information requested.

**4. None of the questions were answered and, therefore, some of the required budget information was provided.** This is the worst possible outcome, as it implies that the government failed completely on both levels. In these cases, all six information requests went unanswered, and none of the required budget information was provided.

**Figure 1. Below, is a snapshot of Ask Your Government!**



**All questions answered and all requested budget information provided:**

Only one country, **New Zealand**, answered all six requests substantively, by providing budget information that clearly answers the questions posed. Requests to the New Zealand government needed to be submitted only once, and responses were provided quickly, in a succinct and easy-to-understand format. These answers included a response that New Zealand does not provide subsidies for oil, gas and coal (Q6); and that only Vietnam receives development assistance from New Zealand (Q3&4).

**All questions answered, but not with all the required budget information:**

An additional 22 countries (28 percent of the total) offered an official answer to all six information requests, though with varying degrees of comprehensiveness: Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, India, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Philippines, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, and Ukraine.

Despite responding formally to citizens' information requests, all of these countries struggled to provide some of the required budget information. Key pieces of the requested budget information were not provided, not available, not held centrally, or not organized in a way that allowed the responsible agencies to respond to the question as it was posed.

- **Serbia** answered all six questions but noted that train

ing for midwives is not performed through the Ministry of Health, and the information provided on fossil fuel subsidies was difficult to understand and did not fully respond to the question posed.

- **Germany** also responded to all six requests but could not provide data on the amounts spent on life-saving maternal health drugs, or training for midwives.
- **Armenia, Canada, Georgia, Guatemala, Namibia, India, South Africa, and Philippines**, to name only a few, responded in a similar incomplete way to several questions.
- In **Mexico** researchers could not get clear and comprehensive responses, although an attempt was made by government to answer all six questions. Agencies routinely passed responsibility for answering the question back and forth without providing much concrete data, and often responded that the requested information “does not exist.”

### Only some of the questions were answered, and not all of the budget information was provided:

In the majority of countries (46 countries, or 58 percent of the total), government agencies answered some questions, *but failed to provide any answer to at least one* of the questions posed: Albania, Angola, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, Chile, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Ghana, Honduras, Italy, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Macedonia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Mongolia, Morocco, Mozambique, Norway, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, United States, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Some countries provided comprehensive answers to a few questions, while ignoring others, or provided incomplete information to four or less questions. On balance, researchers were provided with only a portion of the budget information requested. In many cases, requests were met with answers promising that the information would be delivered, or that researchers should return (sometimes repeatedly) at a later date.

- In **Tajikistan** researchers were told over the phone not to address the Minister with requests for information on maternal health drugs.
- In **Chad** after six personal visits to the Department of Planning in the Ministry of Finance, the researcher was told, “Come back, if you want.”
- In **Ghana** researchers returned nine times to the Ministry of Environmental Science and Technology to request information on environment protection expenditures but were unable to obtain any information in response to the question posed.

Many responses indicated that the agency in question did not possess the information requested.

- In **Azerbaijan** the Ministry of Health declined to provide information on expenditures for midwife training, citing a lack of suitable statistics.
- **Zimbabwe** referring to the same question, replied that “it would be difficult to locate a person who could give such kind of information within the Ministry.”

- When asked about aid received during the last fiscal year and anticipated for the upcoming three years, the Ministry of Finance of **Russia** replied that this kind of information is “beyond the competence of federal executive governmental agencies of the Russian Federation.”
- In **Argentina** a response regarding aid received and expected was sent, but it referred only to funding from the World Bank, ignoring all other agencies specified in the request. On a follow-up attempt to obtain the missing data, the question went unanswered.
- In **Uganda** officials reported that information on the notification dates of aid was “practically” impossible to obtain, given existing information systems. According to the official, the request was “unrealistic.”
- On aid received during the last fiscal year, the official replying to the request in **Zambia** noted that the question was very complex and time consuming to answer. Some information on projects underway was provided, but no comprehensive answer was offered.

### None of the questions were answered and no budget information was provided:

In 11 countries (14 percent of total), government agencies *did not respond to any* of the six information requests: Algeria, Bangladesh, Cameroon, East Timor, Iraq, Liberia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela and Yemen. These included cases where access to budget information was explicitly denied, or where the requests were ignored, or where no response at all was made to the researcher who had posed the question.

- In **Nigeria** officials at the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Environment denied the researcher access to information, while the Ministry of Finance ignored the request. Nigerian officials were reluctant to put any response in writing, treated researchers with suspicion, referred in informal conversations to the requested health information as “sensitive” and “controversial,” and indicated that officials would not be willing to “expose themselves” by providing the data on environmental spending or fossil fuel subsidies. The researcher from Nigeria put it best when he wrote:

*It is always difficult to get any information from these ministries as they always view non-ministry staff or citizens as outsiders. They never see themselves as serving the people. They see themselves as being answerable only to their direct bosses.* (E-mail exchange, September 4, 2010).

- In **Yemen** researchers simultaneously submitted all six requests to the Ministry of Finance, as well as directing each request to the relevant issue-specific agency. For all six questions, the Ministry of Finance orally refused to provide any information, claiming that such information is private and cannot be requested. The issue-specific agencies did not respond to the requests.
- In **Nicaragua** and **Trinidad and Tobago**, where access to information legislation exists, repeated submissions using established procedures went unanswered.
- In **Venezuela** where information rights established in the constitution were recently severely limited by a Supreme Court ruling, no response was provided by the government to any of the questions.

## Ask Your Government! Results by question for each country

The results of the **Ask Your Government!** initiative also show a great deal of variation in how government agencies within a country responded to the information requests presented. The following table illustrates how each question was answered in each of the 80 participating countries.

The focus of this table is to demonstrate how often citizens were actually provided the budget information they requested. Often times, government agencies within a country handled citizen requests differently, and not all were equally responsive.

Government agency responses to citizen requests for budget information have been categorized using a “stoplight” system, breaking down their answers in to green, yellow, and red categories:

■ A response classified in green represents a positive response, and indicates that the government agency questioned not only answered the citizen request in a timely fashion but also provided budget information that substantively answers all aspects of the question posed.

■ Yellow responses are cases where something was missing from the answer the government agency provided. This category shows instances where requests were answered in a timely fashion, but the information provided does not substantively address all aspects of the question posed. This includes cases where the agency questioned responded that they could not provide the requested information, where the response was incomplete, or other responses that —while timely— did not fully answer the question.

■ A response in the red category is a negative response. These are instances where the government agency questioned either failed to respond to the request in a timely fashion or refused to provide the requested budget information.

Country	Spending on maternal health medicines	Spending on training of midwives and number of graduates	Aid received (or given) last fiscal year	Aid to be received (or given) next three fiscal years	Spending on environmental conservation and protection	Spending on fossil fuel subsidies
Albania	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green	Green
Algeria	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Angola	Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Yellow
Argentina	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green
Armenia	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green
Azerbaijan	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Bangladesh	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Bolivia	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Green	Red
Botswana	Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Green	Green
Brazil	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
Bulgaria	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green
Burkina Faso	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Cambodia	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green
Cameroon	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Canada	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Red
Chad	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
Chile	Red	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
Columbia	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
Costa Rica	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green
Croatia	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
Dominican Republic	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Red
East Timor	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Ecuador	Yellow	Red	Green	Green	Green	Yellow
El Salvador	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow
France	Red	Red	Red	Red	Green	Yellow
Georgia	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
Germany	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green
Ghana	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
Guatemala	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Red
Honduras	Yellow	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow



## Implications for budget transparency and accountability

The *Ask Your Government!* results show that good practice is possible even in contexts of low capacity and scarcity.

- **Namibia** provided answers to all six questions, albeit with incomplete answers for some.
- **Guatemala** provided substantive answers on the amount of money spent, the drugs purchased, and the number of midwives trained during the last two years.
- **Malawi** and **Ecuador** responded substantively to questions pertaining to past aid disbursements, and Ecuador also responded comprehensively with information on future aid commitments.
- While the process for obtaining information was convoluted, **India** ultimately provided a good answer to the question about fossil fuel subsidies – one of the most complicated questions to answer.

Ultimately, *Ask Your Government!* is a test of government responsiveness to public enquiries for budget information. Unfortunately, the majority of governments – across the development spectrum – performed poorly. When governments fail to respond or provide incomplete responses to their citizens' requests for information, the implications for budget transparency and accountability are of great concern.

Public debate about the investment of public funds in development is enriched by informed citizen participation. After all, informed citizens are best positioned to make demands on how the government can be more responsive to their needs. And they hold information that can improve the quality of public service delivery. If the government limits citizen participation by restricting access to information, citizens forgo their right to participate, and the quality of service delivery is likely to be compromised.

Whether officials declined to provide the information, or the government agency was not able to produce a timely or complete response, the end result is that citizens are not informed about how public funds are spent. This gap is particularly troubling when the information sought relates to governments' investments in development. Questions related to public investments in reducing maternal mortality are revealing in this respect. Many Ministries of Health reported that information detailing public expenditures on life-saving maternal health drugs is not held centrally. Ten African countries with the highest maternal mortality rates in the world did not even bother to respond to these questions.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the reason, without accessible information about what governments are investing in key maternal health interventions, it is impossible to evaluate whether those actions are producing the desired effect. It is impossible to hold governments to account over their actions if they cannot produce information on how they are using public funds.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Governments should proactively publish timely, accessible, and useful budget information in formats that reflect the international commitments they make.

Far too often, government agencies responded that the requested information was not available in the formats it was requested. The six questions posed through this initiative were carefully crafted to reflect international commitments that each government had made to advance development. Whenever a government makes a commitment, citizens have the right to know exactly how those commitments are translated into actions and investments. If the government does not maintain information that allows citizens to track what is concretely being done to meet these commitments, it is impossible to know whether public funds are being channeled toward realizing them.

### 2. International institutions overseeing and monitoring development commitments should require budget information in their reporting requirements.

International development commitments are often monitored through an international body; for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) it is the United Nations. Detailed budget information on what governments are spending to achieve the MDGs is not clearly included or prioritized in the existing reporting structures. Where reporting requirements exist, or in cases where international agencies commission studies and evaluations directly, concrete and detailed budget information about how governments are spending public funds to meet development commitments must be included. All the information included in these reports should be presented in accessible formats and made available to the public.

### 3. People must Ask Their Governments! what they are spending on development, and how those investments are being applied in practice.

Citizens must take a proactive role in holding governments accountable for their commitments. It is not only about government responsibility. If citizens do not take the initiative to ask questions and demand answers, the availability of information about development investments is unlikely to improve. Only through active citizen participation will public spending on development be made transparent, enabling citizens to hold their governments accountable for the use of public funds.

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The *Ask Your Government!* initiative is coordinated jointly by the International Budget Partnership (IBP), Access Info Europe (AIE), and the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD). Campaign partners at the international level are White Ribbon Alliance, Family Care International, the Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program at Columbia University, Publish What You Fund, Oxfam America, Development Initiatives, World Resources Institute, and the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

1. Sierra Leone, Chad, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Zambia (in decreasing order of 2010 MMR rates). Source: World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank, Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2008, available at <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/monitoring/9789241500265/en/index.html>, last accessed October, 2010.

## Implementing partners at country level are:

COUNTRY	ORGANIZATION
Albania	Centre for Development and Democratisation of Institutions (CDDI)
Algeria	Association Nationale des Finances Publiques (A.Na.Fi.P)
Angola	Episcopal Justice and Peace Commission of Angola and S. Tome Bishops Conference (Comissão Episcopal de Justiça e Paz da CEAST (CEJP)
Argentina	Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ)
Armenia	Association "For Sustainable Human Development"
Azerbaijan	Public Finance Monitoring Center (PFMC)
Bangladesh	The Hunger Project-Bangladesh
Bolivia	Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario (CEDLA)
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN)
Botswana	Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (BIDPA)
Brazil	Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos (INESC)
Bulgaria	Access to Information Programme (AIP-Bulgaria)
Burkina Faso	Centre pour la Gouvernance Démocratique (CGD)
Cambodia	The NGO Forum on Cambodia
Cameroon	Budget Information Centre (BIC)
Canada	Center for Law and Development
Chad	Groupe de Recherches Alternatives et de Monitoring du Projet Pétrole Tchad-Cameroun (GRAMP-TC)
Chile	Fundación Pro Acceso
Colombia	Corporación Foro Joven
Costa Rica	La Fundación para la Paz y la Democracia (FUNPADEM)
Croatia	Institute of Public Finance (IPF)
Dominican Republic	Fundación Solidaridad
DR Congo	Reseau des Organisations Partenaires de FIFES (ROPI)
East Timor	Lalenok Ba Ema Hotu (LABEH)
Ecuador	Transparencia Ecuador
El Salvador	Jaime López
France	Association de Journalistes Européens
Georgia	Transparency International Georgia
Germany	Netzwerk für Osteuropa-Berichterstattung n-ost
Ghana	Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC)
Guatemala	Asociación Centro Internacional para Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos (ACIIDH)
Honduras	Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPDH)
India	Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA)
Iraq	Iraq Institute for Economic Reform (IIER)
Italy	Transparency International, Italy
Kazakhstan	Sange Research Center
Kenya	Social Development Network (SODNET)
Kosovo	Organizata për Demokraci, Antikorrupsion dhe Dinjitet "Çohu"
Kyrgyz Republic	Reproductive Health Alliance Kyrgyzstan
Liberia	Actions for Genuine Democratic Alternatives
Macedonia	Florozone-Association for Protection of Natural Environment and Sustainable Economic Development
Malawi	Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN)
Malaysia	Centre for Public Policy Studies, Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute
Mali	GREAT (Groupe de recherche en économie appliquée et théorique)
Mexico	Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación
Moldova	BIOTICA Ecological Society
Mongolia	Open Society Forum (OSF)
Montenegro	MANS-The Network for the Affirmation of the NGO Sector
Morocco	Transparency Maroc
Mozambique	Centro de Integridade Publica (CIP)
Namibia	Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)
New Zealand	Transparency International New Zealand
Nicaragua	Centro de Información y Servicios de Asesoría de Salud (CISAS)
Nigeria	Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC)
Norway	Chr Michelsen Institute (CMI)
Pakistan	Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation
Papua New Guinea	Institute of National Affairs
Philippines	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ)
Poland	The Gdansk Institute for Market Economics
Portugal	Amnistia Internacional Portugal
Romania	Centre for Independent Journalism
Russia	Foundation for the Support of Information Freedom Initiatives
Senegal	Universite de Dakar
Serbia	Transparency Serbia
Sierra Leone	Konima Development Association and Freedom of Information Coalition
Slovenia	The Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies
South Africa	Institute of Democracy in South Africa (IDASA)
Spain	Access Info Europe
Sri Lanka	Public Interest Law Foundation
Tajikistan	Jahon
Tanzania	Women's Dignity
Trinidad y Tobago	The Sustainable Economic Development Unit (SEDU), The University of The West Indies
Turkey	BilgiEdinmeHakki.Org
Uganda	Uganda Debt Network (UDN)
Ukraine	International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS)
United States	International Budget Partnership
Venezuela	Transparencia Venezuela
Yemen	Cultural Development Program Foundation (CDPF)
Zambia	Economics Association of Zambia (EAZ)
Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA)



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