

Launch Activities in Egypt

Partners in Development (PID) for Research, Consulting and Training organized a seminar to present the findings of the Open Budget Initiative to the Egyptian public. The two-session seminar was held at the Pyramisa Hotel in Cairo on December 11, 2006. Speakers included University Professors, a member of the opposition, Parliament staff, and a journalist. The speakers discussed budget transparency in Egypt, highlighting recent progress, but also faulting the government for the continued lack of transparency. A number of them also called attention to the difficulty in understanding the budget. Journalists attended the event, which was covered in major Egyptian papers.

Kamel Al-Sayyid, Professor of Political Science at Cairo University and Director of PID, opened the first session with a description of PID's activities around budget issues, including an international conference on budget transparency in January 2006, and the translation of a budget work training manual. The second speaker to address the first session was Dr. Lobna Abdel Latif, an Economics Professor at Cairo University and an Adviser to the People's Assembly Plan and Budget Committee. As the lead research for the Egyptian survey, he presented the questionnaire's major findings and explained the reasons for Egypt's low score. He also highlighted the progress recently made by the Ministry of Finance, who now posts budget items on its internet site and makes the budget available to citizens as a government publication. Dr. Abdallah Shahata, Assistant Professor of Economics at Cairo University, was the session's third and last speaker. He explained the importance of the budget as a tool for government to respond to people's social needs and to promote economic development.

Mr. Mohammed Naguib Khaled, Deputy Head of the Plan and Budget Committee of the People's Assembly, opened the second session by describing the Committee's role and the difficulty it encounters. According to Mr. Khaled, the Committee is responsible for presenting the proposed budget to the People's Assembly, a responsibility rendered difficult by the government's refusal to give the budget to the Committee early enough. The second speaker was Mr. Mounir Fakhry Abdel-Nour, Deputy Leader of the new opposition Wafd Party and a former member of the People's Assembly. He pointed to problems in the budget process, including the government's lack of responsiveness to proposals coming from members of parliament and the National Accounting Office, and the fact that few members of the Plan and Budget Committee attend meetings. Finally, Abdel-Nour argued that so long as the Egyptian political system remains an authoritarian one, there is little hope for budget transparency to improve. Indeed, the Assembly cannot change budget allocations without government consent, and if it rejects the budget, it risks dissolution. The final speaker was Mr. Essam Ref'at, Editor-in-chief of Al-Ahram Al-Eqtasadi, an economic weekly. Lamenting the difficulty of deciphering the budget, he suggested that PID and

Al-Ahram Al-Eqtessadi could cooperatively prepare a content analysis of what is published in Egyptian newspapers about the budget.

A number of major Egyptian dailies, including Al-Ahram and Akhabr El-Yom, covered the seminar. Speakers were also interviewed by an Egyptian weekly and by CNBC, an Arab television channel that covers economic affairs. The Guide to Budget Work was translated into Arabic and distributed to seminar participants at the seminar.