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Editorials

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GHANA FAILS BUDGET TRANSPARENCY TEST

...Scores zero percent in four out of six indicators

As the Finance and Economic Planning Minister, Mr. Kwadwo Baah-Wiredu presents the 2007 budget statement to parliament on November 9, he will be confronted with the bare facts that Ghana scored zero percent in four, out of six indicators on providing information on the budget to Ghanaians.

Of the six indicators, Ghana scored 0% for providing no information at all on pre-budget statement, in-year reports on execution, end-of-year review and the auditor General's report. Ghana however scored 64% score alongside Malawi, and the Czech Republic, the country the Black Stars whipped 2-nil during this year's world Cup tournament, for providing "significant information" on the budget proposal.

This was contained in a study on Budget Transparency based on past budgets up to 2005. This is the first ever index to rate 59 countries on how open their budget books are to their citizens.

The Open Budget Index, produced by 59 civil society organizations in 59 countries rates countries on a scale of zero to a 100 percent depending on whether their respective governments have provided "extensive information, significant information, some information, minimal information or scant or no information" to their citizens on their proposed national budgets. The countries are also rated on whether they make available to the public pre-budget statements, in-year reports on budgets' execution, mid-year reviews, year-end reports or the auditor's report.

The index, which is an initiative of the International Budget Project, Washington DC in collaboration with CSOs around the globe, aims to provide citizens, legislators and civil society advocates with comprehensive and practical information required to gauge a government's commitment to budget transparency and accountability.

The index assesses the availability of key budget documents, the quantity of information



they provide and the timeliness of their dissemination to the citizens in order to provide reliable information on each country's commitment to open budgeting.

Launching the report in Accra on Wednesday, Mr. Vitus Azeem, Programmes Coordinator of the Centre for Budget Advocacy (CBA), the budget unit of the Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC), said that the study showed that Ghana's proposal provides substantial information to public.

He said the government has for instance, produced copies of the 2006 budget statement and these are publicly available for purchase by the public. Additionally, it has posted the budget statement on its official website, (www.ghana.gov.gh), which can be downloaded by any one. By making these efforts to get the budget to all stakeholders, the country scored 64% on the scale of "providing significant information."

UK scored the highest (95%) on this index, followed by New Zealand (89%), France (86) and South Africa (83%).

On the pre-budget statement rating, Ghana scored zero percent for not releasing any pre-budget statement to the public before the main budget proposal is presented to parliament. According to the study, apart from Brazil, France, Kenya, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Poland, Slovenia, South Africa among others that scored hundred percent, the rest of the thirty six countries, including Ghana, do not produce pre-budget statements.

"In most of these countries, it is only after the budget proposals are presented to parliament that the public gets to know what is in the budget," the study indicated. Similar findings were made about in-Year reports on the budget's execution. According to the study, 12 countries, again including Ghana, do not provide in-year reports on how well or otherwise, the budget's execution is on track to their citizens. But as the report articulates, reporting regularly to citizens about spending, revenue collections and borrowings during the budget year is an important test of budget openness since that allows for greater accountability.

Ghana does not also make the auditor's general report available to the public, neither are Ghanaians provided any end-year reports. Failing this, the study scored Ghana zero. But all was not bleak for the country. Ghana scored 42% for providing some information on mid-year reviews, particularly with reference to year 2003 when then Finance and Economic Planning Minister, Mr. Yaw Osafo Maafo presented a mid-year review of the budget to parliament. According to Mr. Azeem, though the review lacked important details and the practice not regular, the attempt has placed Ghana above over 33 countries that scored zero on the index. Apart from Slovenia and South Africa and Bukina Faso, which Ghana shared the same score; the country did better than the rest of the 59 countries. Overall, Ghana performed below average since it passed only two of the six tests. According to Mr. Azeem, the results are indicative that Ghana has not fared well at all on the quest for budget openness and transparency.

"There is, therefore, a need for us as a nation to work to improve the situation. The advantages of transparency, especially under a democratic dispensation, are very many and Ghana stands to gain if we provide information and records on public activities and transactions frequently on a timely basis and in understandable formats. In this regard, we call on all stakeholders, especially the government, to expedite the passage of the Right to Information Bill. The Press can also serialize audit reports that they lay hands on and radio and television stations can promote debates of these reports on their stations," he appeals.

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