



The Impact Of Liberia's Open Budget Initiative

About BudgIT Liberia

BudgIT Liberia is a civic organization driven to make the Liberian budget and public data more understandable and accessible across every literacy span. BudgIT's innovation within the public circle comes with the creative use of government data by either presenting these in simple tweets, interactive formats, or infographic displays. Our primary goal is to use creative technology to intersect citizen engagement with institutional development to drive societal change in Liberia.

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Executive Summary

Access to information is critical for enabling citizens to exercise their voice, monitor and hold the government accountable, and engage in informed discussions about decisions that affect their lives. Citizens' ability to demand and use information, as well as the willingness of the government to be transparent, are potential contributors to good governance.

Through the Open Budget Initiative, the government hopes to end Liberia's history of financial mismanagement and engender greater trust in it. In this study, we will critically evaluate the effects of the Open Budget Initiative in Liberia to provide information on the initiative's impact since its inception in 2013 through an interview with key stakeholders and a review of the Open Government Initiative report related to the Open Budget Initiative (Independent Reporting Mechanism—IRM—report).

The results of the qualitative

research using key informant interviews show a need for more population awareness and understanding, restricted access to budget information, and low public participation. Also, the Open Budget Survey (OBS) has repeatedly reported the legislative oversight of the budget and audit process. It describes public participation in Liberia's budgeting as weak, with an open budget index score of 38 out of 100 in its 2019 report. Where a 61 score or higher indicates that a nation is likely to publish enough information to support informed public debate on the budget, it received a measly six out of 100 for public participation.

This study offers recommendations to strengthen the capacity of governmental institutions in charge of disseminating public information, to help enhance public participation, and to expand engagement and outreach activities that will improve the impact of the Open Budget Initiative (OBI) system.



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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Liberia has endured significant political and economic instability over the past few decades due to the crippling effects of the civil war from 1989 to 2003, which left behind a legacy of corruption, impunity, and bad governance. Since the end of the civil war, the government has worked to rebuild the country and establish democratic institutions. This prompted the Liberian government to declare its intention to begin participating in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in September 2011 while Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was president. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a voluntary, international effort that aims to secure pledges from governments to their citizens to advance transparency, give citizens more power, fight corruption, and use new technologies to improve governance.

As an OGP member, Liberia created its first set of commitments for a two-year action plan (2013–2015), focusing on

steps to increase budget transparency and public participation, which led to creating and implementing of the Open Budget Initiative on Wednesday, January 23, 2013. The Open Budget Initiative's commitment goal is to make government expenditures and revenue widely available to Liberians. It will foster transparency in government expenditures and give citizens a valuable tool to monitor and track how the government spends on development projects to improve their lives. Additionally, it will increase public trust and narrow the gap between the government and most people living in rural areas.

The government also planned to collaborate with civil society transparency advocates to continue implementing the open budget process alongside traditional leaders and the nation's media, notably the community radio sector, to serve as important channels



The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a voluntary, international effort that aims to secure pledges from governments to their citizens to advance transparency



for disseminating information about the forthcoming budget process.

Despite adopting the Open Budget Initiative, Liberia still lacks open access to public fiscal information and data to enable awareness and critical discussions, which continues to jeopardize

public confidence and deter citizens from seeking service delivery and holding elected officials accountable. In light of Liberia's political economy, transparency and accountability are essential for effectively using the country's limited public resources.

1.2 Research Objectives

The research aims to assess the impact of the Open Budget Initiative (OBI) in Liberia.

1. To evaluate Liberia's Budget transparency and accountability level
2. To identify key challenges and opportunities for improvement in Liberia's budget practices

2.0 Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach to collect data.

2.1 Criteria for Sample Selection

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their knowledge and experience with Open Budget Initiatives in Liberia to accurately represent the insights into the questions our research poses regarding the impact of the Open Budget Initiatives (OBI) in Liberia. The sample for the study consists of 100 participants within the capital city of Monrovia,

including government officials, members of civil society organizations, and well-known individuals who are all significant contributors to Liberia's Open Budget Initiatives. The OGP report, especially from the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM), was reviewed to assess and give a true picture of the level of completion of the key commitments under the Open Budget Initiative.



The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their knowledge and experience with Open Budget Initiatives

2.2 Conduct Key Informant Interviews (KII)

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with key stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organizations, and members of the public, to generate in-depth information and ascertain the impact of the OBI process in Liberia and how to improve it.

























2.3 Data Validation and Analysis of Results from Desk Research, KII, and Tools

Data and responses were collected using qualitative techniques and triangulated for increased quality and reliability. The qualitative data from the focus groups was evaluated using a comparison analysis, which was done using Microsoft Excel as the tool of choice.




3.0 Summary and Visualization Of Findings

3.1 Open Budget Initiative Commitment Specific Goals and Activities

This session assesses the effectiveness of specific commitments under the Open Budget Initiative.²

SPECIFIC OBI'S GOAL	2013–2015	2015–2017	2017–2019	Current Progress (2023)
Regularized publication and dissemination of a 'Simple English' version of the 'Citizen Budget Guide'				
Establish a dedicated website for the Open Budget Initiative to host updated information about the budget process and execution				
Develop a platform that provides regular budget updates to all citizens via SMS and other associated technologies through various local languages in Liberia				
Provide periodic support to the rural radio stations to broadcast the message of the Open Budget Initiative				
Provide a quarterly update on the implementation status of all projects in the National Budget				
Communicate the Budget Performance Report to the public via existing communication channels				

Color Code

-  The Liberia government didn't complete the commitment implementation
-  The Liberia government completed the commitment Implementation
-  The Liberia government had limited success

2. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/liberia-action-plan-2013-2014/>



According to the IRM report, the government implemented four out of five activities outlined for the Open Budget Initiatives in their first action plan (2013–2014).³ However, based on our observations afterward, the government has not demonstrated the same commitment and passion for continuing the initiative. For instance, the 2023 approved National Budget information was only available to the public on the Ministry of Finance website six months into the 2023 fiscal year.

Reviewing the second action plan (2015–2017)⁴ reveals that increasing open budget efforts have only been partially completed. Pledges such as

publishing the Citizen's Guide on the National Budget and discussing budget procedures on radio, television, and town hall meetings were all implemented. In contrast, the SMS platform, which would have allowed the transmission of budget information and citizen feedback on fiscal concerns, and the Open Data Portal for online publication of quarterly budgets and all audit reports were not implemented. Besides, a study of the Third Action Plan (2017–2019)⁵ reveals that the commitment to publish budget documents, which will improve citizens' understanding of how public resources are used and managed has only been partially fulfilled.

3. https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IRMReport-Liberia_final_0.pdf
4. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/liberia-end-of-term-report-2015-2017-year-2/>
5. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/liberia-implementation-report-2017-2019/>

3.2 Insight From Participant Responses

In agreement with the Open Budget Initiative's six commitments, responses from stakeholders were grouped.



Regularized publication and dissemination of a 'Simple English' version of the 'Citizen Budget Guide'

85% of the participants said they are unaware of the citizen budget guide and are not engaged with any such document. 15% of participants who are financial experts are aware of the citizen budget guide but agreed that they are delayed in publishing. This suggests that the majority of Liberians are not informed about citizen guides' availability and are not engaged.

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60% confirmed that a dedicated electronic billboard that was embedded into the Ministry of Finance website was implemented in 2013–2015. Since the initiative encountered problems, nothing has been done to restore the program. This suggests that the government is not prioritizing or devoting resources to maintain the program.



Establish a dedicated website for the Open Budget Initiative to host updated information about the budget process and execution

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Up until the interview, 95% of the participants had never heard of or knew nothing about this Initiative via rural radio broadcast.



Develop a platform that provides regular budget updates to all citizens via SMS and other associated technologies through various local languages in Liberia

90% of participants have never received budget information via SMS or any other method, and the only medium used to access budget information is the Ministry of Finance's Website. Also, CSO participants occasionally request public information called Freedom of Information (FOI), which doesn't seem active because they never receive responses to their requests.



Provide periodic support to the rural radio stations to broadcast the message of the Open Budget Initiative



Provide a quarterly update on the implementation status of all projects in the National Budget

100% of participants are unaware of the quarterly report of public projects that have been and will be carried out in their county.

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According to 60% of participants, the government doesn't release or convey budget performance information.



Communicate the Budget Performance Report to the public via existing communication channels



Based on the participants' responses and a review of the IRM's report above, it is clear that the Open Budget Initiative in Liberia has not been as effective as hoped in improving the availability and accessibility of budget information, increasing public participation in the budget process, improving accountability, reducing corruption, empowering marginalized groups, and fostering dialogue on the budget, civil society organizations (CSOs), and citizens.

4.0 Recommendations

Here are recommendations to enhance the Open Budget Initiative in Liberia:



Enhance Awareness and Outreach:

There is a need for improved awareness and outreach efforts. Utilize various communication channels, such as traditional media, social media, community engagement, and partnerships with local organizations, to disseminate information about budget formulation, implementation, monitoring processes, and other public information.



Strengthen Availability and Accessibility of Budget Information:

Ensure timely and comprehensive disclosure of budget information in understandable and accessible formats to the public via digital platforms and local languages.



Enhance Public Participation:

The government should focus on strategies to increase public participation in the budget process. This can be achieved through public consultations, feedback mechanisms, and platforms for engaging citizens and civil society organizations in the budget formulation, implementation, and monitoring process. It is essential to expand and diversify outreach activities. The government should conduct

targeted awareness campaigns, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives to engage a broader range of stakeholders, including marginalized groups and vulnerable populations.



Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms:

To improve accountability in public resource management, the government should work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders to enhance transparency, oversight, and monitoring mechanisms. This includes promoting accountability practices, facilitating citizen participation in oversight processes, and strengthening institutional frameworks for accountability.



Allocate Specific Budget Lines to Open Budget Initiative:

Funding was one of the reasons the government ceased various open budget projects to expand the public's access to budget information, according to the stakeholders we interacted with. Therefore, the government should consider designating a particular budget line in each fiscal year to finance this program.

