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Dominican Republic Progress Mixed on Transparency and Participation

by Crosby Girón

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The organization International Budget Partnership (IBP) says the Dominican Republic has made progress in improving government transparency. IBP's Open Budget Survey 2015 evaluates relevant information that makes it possible to understand and transform the budget process.

The survey was published with support from Fundación Solidaridad and Participación Ciudadana, the Dominican chapter of Transparency International (TI). The survey aims to boost citizen participation, with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups, in budgetary issues.

The Dominican Republic has improved its position in this global survey, even though public budget information is still limited. In the previous survey, published in 2012, the country scored 29 points, whereas this year it scored 51, which places the Dominican Republic slightly above the global average of 45.

Weaknesses persist regarding the public information provided by the government. The survey found that this information is limited and opportunities are limited for participation as the possibilities of accessing the budget are 26/100. Added to this, oversight by the Comptroller General's Office is also limited.

Part of the methodology used by the Open Budget Survey measures the availability of public information and the comprehensiveness of eight documents related to the budget: the preliminary budget, the executive's budgetary project, the approved budget, the citizen budget, reports produced during the year, the midyear review, the end-of-year report, and the audit report.

The Dominican Republic performed well compared to other countries in the region such as Costa Rica, which scored 54 points, and El Salvador, which scored 53, both of which continue to offer limited public budget information. Nicaragua and Guatemala scored 46 points, respectively, Honduras scored 43, and the lowest score was obtained by Trinidad and Tobago, with 34 points.

Although, since 2012, the Dominican government has improved in the availability of budgetary information, there is still room for improvement regarding specific documents such as annual reports and audit reports. The IBP says these documents contain less publicly available information, and information on the approved budget has become less comprehensive.

Citizen participation: a pending task

Although the government has made some progress in improving budget transparency, citizens still face many limitations when it comes to requesting information that is supposed to be publicly available; making information available doesn't always go hand in hand with meaningful improvements.

For this reason, the IBP has included citizen participation in its Open Budget Survey. The survey took into account the extent to which the government offers citizens access to the budgeting process.

The executive, Congress, and the Chamber of Courts are deemed responsible for offering the public these opportunities during the budgeting cycle.

The survey estimated that Congress provides adequate public access during the budget-planning phase but that the executive and Congress do not carry out regular consultations on budgetary issues. Added to this, Congress is not consulted on the legal or practical issues involved in the transfer of funds that were not included in the approved budget.

The same occurs with the Chamber of Courts, which offers a limited budgetary oversight, even though it is legally allowed to carry out audits as it sees fit and the president of the court cannot be dismissed without the approval of Congress or the Judiciary.

Under the watchful eye of the Department of State

A few months ago, the US Department of State criticized the Dominican Republic's lack of budgetary transparency. In fact, it placed the Dominican Republic, together with Nicaragua and Haiti, on a list of countries that have shown the least progress on this issue.

The US report on fiscal transparency examined 140 countries in 2014 and specifically noted "the presidential office's excessive expenses in the Dominican Republic." It meant the 9% assigned to the presidency in the annual budget and the amount budgeted for intelligence services are not subjected to public scrutiny.

The list drawn up by the US includes 50 countries that fail to publish substantial and trustworthy budgetary information. The report points out that in 2015 the amount budgeted for the Dominican presidency is higher than the amount budgeted for the interior minister and is only exceeded by the budget assigned to the Ministerios de Salud Pública and Educación.

Although the list does not have any direct consequences, it's understood as a standard by which the US Department of State holds Latin American countries accountable, which explains why many of the IBP's recommendations are in line with the standards established by the US.

The IBP recommendations focus on greater public access to budgetary documents. Special emphasis is made on the need to increase the comprehensiveness of the executive's budget proposal by simultaneously publishing the multiannual planning budget for the Ministerio de Economía, Planificación y Desarrollo (MEPyD).

The IBP says that establishing believable and efficient mechanisms to improve citizen participation entails carrying out public meetings, carrying out surveys, and organizing discussion groups so that the public's perspectives on budgetary issues can be taken into account.

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