Remarks of Adil Abababou, Senior Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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IBP is a key partner to engage with civil society and partners, including INTOSAI and UN, in country and highlight some key notions that would have relevance for the global community.

COVID put the question of budget credibility at the center and we are really pleased about the work IBP has accomplished to highlight the gaps since we have started working together on the topic.

Underspending, where less is spent than what is approved in the budget, is a particular challenge for low-income countries, where up to 14 percent of the approved budget remains unspent, which can amount to more than the entire national and education budgets. Even more so on social spending > CAR example and didn’t have a strong SAI to rely on, so it took additional work from motivated civil servants. In lower capacity setting making the issue salient across many horizontally and vertically can go a long way.

At a time when the fiscal squeeze runs deeper, countries are really wrestling with a trilemma - debt service, low domestic resource mobilization and more spending priorities, without saying anything about inflation (imported) and subsidies.

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) are at the core of the response and the closest ally to making progress possible on making credible budgets a reality. J PAL study > rigorous assessments of audits / weighed against alternatives such as community monitoring.

And they have a mandate > 80% do have one, but not all do so as 57% audit budget deviation. The focus is largely on budget execution, often specific analysis of a sector or program – and feels like data is not always helpful enough to fully do the job. But it appears there is a need to go one level deeper to do more on understanding the difference between intention and execution in sustainable development – which is really the core of what citizens care about.

And it’s hard to accomplish, this is just additional work > more data, deeper analysis, focus on downstream sustainable development – and the resources are limited or hard to get by. But the great news is that SAIs might have more allies than initially thought sometimes to accomplish the work, including civil society, parliaments. My call for this discussion is to open up avenues for more external engagement and coalition building.

Back to the handbook, we view this as a key public good for a movement towards better engagement around budget credibility. Its emphasis on key step by step engagement and experience sharing will, I believe, be very valuable part of the handbook and this is where the commitment of SAIs will be critical. My call is to make it as operational, relevant as possible and work towards making it a basis for some community of practice to engage on how and when to adapt it to local context.

I wish you all the best as you start tackling the chapters and get into the specificity of what it takes to achieve credible budgets.