Closing the COVID Accountability Gap:

Senegal's Inclusive, Transparent Management in a Crisis Context

By Dieynaba Kane, Legs-Africa
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In 2021, the International Budget Partnership published an assessment of 120 countries’ management of COVID relief, which found that too many governments were using the excuse of urgency to avoid being as transparent, accountable or inclusive as they could be. These shortcuts and limitations, however, are neither necessary nor inevitable. IBP’s report showcased notable instances in which governments acted swiftly to put in place adequate transparency around their policy responses, where accountability institutions — such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) — stepped up to provide effective oversight and civil society organizations (CSOs) contributed information on the needs of the most vulnerable. In a series of briefs, we have taken a more in-depth look at these good practices — delving into government objectives in implementing the practices, the impacts achieved, and lessons that can be drawn from these practices for their replication in other countries. The main goal of these briefs is to provide governments with information on good practices in fiscal openness and accountability that they can incorporate into their own policies, to be implemented during periods of crisis and beyond.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating social, economic and political impacts, particularly on vulnerable populations. In order to deal with these negative impacts, the government of Senegal has taken several measures including the adoption of an Economic and Social Resilience Program (ESRP) with an envelope of 1000 billion FCFA, referred to as the Force COVID-19 Fund. It aimed to strengthen the health system; support the social resilience of the population; bolster macroeconomic and financial stability to support the private sector and maintain jobs; and ensure the regular supply of the population with hydrocarbons, medical and pharmaceutical products and essential foodstuffs. In order to monitor the implementation of the fund, the president created the Monitoring Committee for the Implementation of the Force COVID-19 Fund. The implementation of this committee was the result of several consultations with CSOs, led by the president of the republic.

Senegal was one of the few countries to create an inclusive body to monitor the expenditures incurred by its Covid-19 Fund. The creation of the committee was innovative, in that it reinforced the principles of transparency, citizen participation and accountability.

This brief will first analyze the operation of the Monitoring Committee of the Force COVID-19 Fund and then discuss the principles of transparency and citizen participation implemented in the management of the committee; the prerequisites and conditions that facilitated the development of the committee; and finally lessons that can be learned from the committee by other countries looking to build on this model.

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1This amount represents a quarter of the national budget for 2020.
Operation of the Force COVID-19 Fund Monitoring Committee

The role of the monitoring committee was to contribute to the good governance of the Force COVID-19 Fund, to ensure the transparency of its implementation, and to formulate recommendations aimed at improving the state’s intervention in the event of a similar crisis. The committee was chaired by a neutral personality appointed, as were the other committee members, by decree. The appointment of General François Ndiaye by the president reassured the population as to the committee’s impartiality and apolitical character, and the monitoring of the operations showed that decisions were made by consensus.

The committee was characterized by its inclusive nature. It had 30 members appointed by the president and included representatives of the government, the National Assembly and local authorities, as well as members of civil society, the private sector, consumer associations and other actors. The committee’s twin purposes were to monitor the expenditures of the fund and to evaluate the effectiveness of the ESRP among its beneficiaries. The goal was to create mechanisms that would enable feedback from citizens to reach decision-makers.

To this end, the committee visited Senegal’s 14 regions and 45 departments, interacting with administrative authorities, decentralized authorities and communities in order to discuss the four main components of the ESRP. It also consulted with communities to ensure that all promises were kept; the committee clarified specific situations and made recommendations to the public authority.
The principles of transparency and citizen participation

The committee became an intermediary between decision-makers and communities in order to strengthen the effectiveness and impact of the Force COVID-19 Fund. This was possible due to the composition of the committee which because of its diversity had access to various segments of the population. Indeed, the composition of the committee, which included CSOs, people with disabilities, parliamentarians and politicians, was one of its strengths. The committee was managed by taking into account various points of view, with committee members holding plenary sessions to determine the methodology to use for follow-up activities. Meetings, workshops and webinars were carried out with the participation of CSOs such as 3D NGO, Legs-Africa and the International Budget Partnership (IBP).

In addition, other mechanisms for participation and feedback have been implemented. For example, the committee proved surveyed citizens’ perceptions as a way of identifying problems, and a toll-free number was made available to receive complaints from citizens.

Two cases illustrate the impact of citizen participation. The first involved highlighting a problem with the Single National Register (SNR) that had resulted in the exclusion of people living with disabilities. Once the problem was identified, an additional 100,000 meal kits were provided to people living with disabilities, with the support of NGOs such as IBP. The second example regards a difficult situation in the Goudiry Zone. The committee met with a young doctor there who had a problem with an electrical transformer for his health center. The committee informed the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, which solved the problem.

In addition, the committee contributes to real transparency in regard to the fund’s activities by facilitating citizens’ access to information. In order to improve the transparency of ESRP implementation, an official government website containing all the information relating to the activities of the committee has been developed.

Furthermore, the committee provided the Ministry of Finance and Budget with monthly reports on the Force COVID-19 Fund management, drafted by each ministry. The final report was made public and made available to researchers, NGOs, civil society, journalists and other actors after monitoring the fund’s operations for one year. The same is true for the supporting documents for the fund’s management, which were made available for citizen consultation and evaluation at the Registered Office of the Committee for three months.

In terms of the quality of the information made available, the reports were informative, containing details of expenditures, budget allocations, dashboards and supporting documents for expenditures. The final report contains more than 300 pages with detailed and exhaustive explanations, in particular on the implementation of the fund’s operations broken down by components and by ministry and other bodies. The report attests to a considerable communication and data consolidation effort.
Conditions leading to the committee’s effectiveness

The committee was created and made effective due to government involvement, which had effects at various levels. The committee’s work resulted in 100 practical recommendations, ranging from the strengthening and empowerment of the health system and reduction of dependence on food exports to the establishment of more effective social safety net programs and the monitoring and inclusion of the informal sector.

The committee’s rigorous work was done on a voluntary basis. Its members were unpaid, which ensured the participation of legitimate and nonpartisan experts, especially at the rural and decision-making level. To cite one instance: since the committee traveled across the country, there were areas where they were forced to make decisions about the distribution of meal kits. In the town of Ziguinchor, social tension occurred when the local authority was slow in regard to distribution. The committee had to decide between making a distribution as quickly as possible or leaving the matter to be dealt with by the local authority. It was a difficult choice in the context of the health crisis context, but the committee ultimately decided in favor of stability, maintaining the power of the local authority.
Lessons learned from the Senegalese experience

The creation of a representative body to monitor public expenditure is in and of itself an innovation in Senegal. Although the monitoring committee was launched after the response fund had started, broad information and transparency efforts marked its mission. Four lessons can be learned from the committee's implementation.

Citizen communication relating to the establishment of the committee was very effective and is a model that can be a source of inspiration for other countries. This type of committee would have been more effective if it had been created at the start of the fund's implementation (in Senegal, there was a small delay). The Monitoring Committee's success proves that other committees of similar scope could be set up at the level of the budget process, perhaps with a view to implementing program budgets in order to promote accountability and effectiveness of services.

In Senegal, the establishment of the Monitoring Committee and of a fund representing a quarter of the state budget marked a real effort by the Senegalese government to improve inclusion, institutional accountability, and the population's living conditions. The work of the committee has enabled a deep analysis of the limits of Senegal's social systems, with recommendations that may ultimately improve the delivery of services.

The documents and reports made available by the committee proved that accountability and transparency are possible even during a crisis. All members and ministries that were beneficiaries of the Force COVID-19 Fund had to provide supporting documents (contracts, remittance slips and the like), which created accountability to the population, donors and the private sector, major actors in the fight against the pandemic and, more specifically, in the creation of the fund. The Monitoring Committee held meetings with several CSOs and other citizens in order to report on the fund's implementation; everyone involved recognized the committee's accessibility and flexibility. The information provided by the committee's members in the comprehensive final report is commendable.

Information was found to be essential in Senegal, even if provided through informal channels. For other countries, interested in learning from the Senegalese experience, an additional innovation could be to formalize some of the channels, in particular by digitizing all the information needed by the population. (To do this, a platform accessible to citizens could be created.) Finally, the government's close collaboration with CSOs was beneficial but could have been strengthened.
Accountability is the most complex dimension to implement for support funds, particularly the establishment of formal audits, even if ad hoc. Given the delays experienced by the Senegalese Court of Auditors in the preparation and release of audit reports (which is also the case in many other countries), committees such as Senegal’s Monitoring Committee could help strengthen accountability in public spending. The impact of the committee’s activities would have been greater if the committee had included experts in control and audit.

Crisis mechanisms are often innovative and can be seen as drivers of change; their success can lead to sustainable accountability and transparency mechanisms.

In Senegal, the committee’s inclusive approach towards the population was seen as a success and would justify the renewal of the committee or the creation of similar mechanisms beyond times of crisis. Although, the Monitoring Committee has been dissolved,\(^2\) but in order to more clearly inform citizens about the management of the exceptional budget devoted to pandemic response, accountability efforts should be continued by competent control bodies, such as the National Anti-Corruption and Fraud Office (OFNAC), which approached the committee after the release of its report, the State Inspector General’s Office (IGE), and the Court of Auditors. In addition, citizen control should be authorized to continue by making all administrative and accounting documents relating to the COVID-19 Fund permanently available to the public.

Finally, the experience of Senegal proves the importance of this type of participation mechanism, which allows representation and inclusion in order to ensure social cohesion, a key issue for many countries. Indeed, due to its composition, the committee was Senegal in miniature, with each social class represented. Political actors, whether in power or in opposition, united around the cause of fighting the spread of the pandemic in Senegal. This type of committee shows that it is possible to eliminate political, cultural, religious, economic and social differences in order to achieve common goals.

\(^2\)See Decree N° 2020-1317 dissolving the Monitoring Committee for the implementation of Force COVID-19 operations.
References


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