

Government of Lesotho

GUIDEBOOK: **PUBLIC TRANSPARENCY** **PLATFORM**

A GUIDEBOOK ON CREATING A PUBLIC
ACCOUNTABILITY PLATFORM IN LESOTHO



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This guidebook was developed for the Government of Lesotho, funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Government or United States Department of State.



Institute for
State Effectiveness

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDEBOOK

Over the past year, the Government of Lesotho (GoL) has embarked on an ambitious set of actions aimed at strengthening fiscal transparency and public sector performance for effective public services that deliver for all in Lesotho. This builds upon the commitment of the Government to "enhance accountability in the public sector through the establishment of a transparent system that defines and reports on the expected performance of all public officials and encourages social participation in evaluating the performance and delivery of services."

With the support of the Institute for State Effectiveness (ISE) and under the Fiscal Transparency and Innovation Fund (FTIF) provided by the United States, the GoL has used digital tools to improve tracking of Government actions and budget performance. The Government is interested in exploring further how these tools and others can be used to increase accountability and engagement with citizens.

Used as a central tool for sharing information with citizens in a variety of countries, a public-facing transparency platform could help the GoL deliver on its promises by providing citizens with comprehensive information on Lesotho's national budget as well as performance information on the reform actions implemented under the National Development Strategy Plan (NDSP II).

This guidebook outlines the features of a public-facing transparency platform and how such a platform could be designed for Lesotho as well as key design principles drawn out from international best practices for transparency platforms. The note also offers global examples of public platforms that can be used as references. Finally, it provides a range of technical options for the design, implementation and rollout process of the platform.

BACKGROUND

WHY GOVERNMENT SHOULD DEVELOP A TRANSPARENCY PLATFORM

Enabled by the growing access to digital ecosystems, citizen public-facing dashboards and transparency platforms have become a helpful instrument at the disposal of local and national governments to communicate their fiscal priorities, be more transparent about the allocation of public resources and build trust with citizens for improved civic participation. Creating a digital data portal is usually the initial step towards a more ambitious open government strategy, which would aim to achieve two objectives:

- i. Facilitating civic engagement by providing easier access to budget and performance information,
- ii. Building trust with citizens by offering transparent progress updates on the implementation of reform priorities in real-time.

The section on global examples illustrates how public transparency platforms in South Africa, Canada and Uruguay have met these objectives.

A public-facing accountability dashboard and associated transparency platform could help Lesotho meet these objectives. The targeted audience for the platform would be Basotho citizens, local civil society organizations, media organizations, and all individuals interested in how public resources are used. It is recommended that the public-facing

dashboard be available in the two official languages spoken in the Kingdom of Lesotho: English and Sesotho. The platform would help Lesotho meet its transparency and citizen engagement objectives in the following ways:

- i. **Providing easier access to budget and performance information** – In addition to publishing data, a transparency platform would replace or supplement the current individual figures, tables, and graphs that GoL is already making available to the public online and in printed form. It would enable citizens, civil society and media organizations to easily view, navigate, download and reuse the open data and their interactive visualization in a simple and easy-to-use manner. To ensure that the information is understood by the widest audience possible, pedagogical and explanatory materials (e.g., videos and glossaries explaining key terms, government processes, etc.) would be accessible throughout the platform. The South African *Vulekamali* budget transparency portal, for example, includes explanatory videos on the importance of the budget in South Africa's domestic political life as well as the consultation processes for budget formulation.



Figure 1: A explanatory video available on the South African Vulekamali dashboard

- ii. **Building trust with citizens** – Transparency portals are recognized as important tools for civil society and media organizations to better communicate government actions to citizens. While the current individual visualizations in publicly available documents (i.e., audit reports and public budget documents), they lack clarity and accessibility for citizens. Engaging the widest audience possible would require carefully selecting and visualizing budgetary and performance indicators that are the most important to citizens in consultation with the Ministry of Finance and Office of the Prime Minister. For example, Canada's digital infographics on the federal budget sets out high-level budgetary indicators deemed important for citizens such as overall expenditures by budgetary program, the execution rate for investment spending, estimated revenues levied for various taxes, etc. In accordance with its own public financial framework, Lesotho will have to decide the appropriate level of information to be made available to its citizens so they can engage more easily in the budgetary consultation carried out every year by the Budget Office. It is recommended that GoL supply citizens with adequate performance data so the link between public expenditures and the results of reform actions and programs are established transparently. In this way, the

transparency platform could support citizen budget consultations conducted annually by the Ministry of Finance and feed into the Community Parliament system coordinated by the Lesotho Council of NGOs.

CONTEXT OF TRANSPARENCY PROGRAMMING IN LESOTHO

While GoL does not currently have a formulated and explicit open government strategy, it does make budgetary and non-fiscal performance data available to citizens that could be used as the foundation of a Citizen Accountability Dashboard. For example:

- i. The Office of the Prime Minister maintains a Government Accountability Dashboard that tracks the progress and performance of Government priority programs, activities, legislative priorities and reforms. However, this dashboard is not made available to the public.
- ii. At the outset of the fiscal year, the Ministry of Finance publishes annual budget speeches and multi-year budgets with extensive information about the macroeconomic environment, national growth strategy, main fiscal priorities for the upcoming year, and estimation of budget allocation programs and estimated revenues.
- iii. Following the fiscal year, the Office of the Auditor General makes available to the public its audit reports assessing the budget execution of the past year alongside the GoL's financial statements.

Civil society and international partners recognize these efforts as crucial and promising steps toward promoting citizen engagement and transparency in public governance within GoL. Nonetheless, after consulting with local NGOs and the Government Secretary, it has been acknowledged that improvement in Lesotho's open government actions would be possible. A public-facing transparency platform is a possible solution to improving Lesotho's open government efforts in line with the needs of GoL, citizens and local NGOs.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSPARENCY PLATFORMS

To successfully prepare a transparency portal hosting an interactive citizen accountability dashboard on budgetary and performance information and explanatory materials, it is recommended that GoL consider the following design principles drawn from international best practices.

ENSURE A STEADY AND RELIABLE SUPPLY OF INFORMATION.

To guarantee that the information is always up to date, it is important during the design phase of the dashboard to clearly set its content and scope. Identifying the right body (or bodies) within Government that will provide the connection with data is a crucial milestone before establishing a data pipeline. The data must be rightly formatted and structured during production, and if not, a step of data processing should be established to ensure that the flow of information is consistent with the expected content of the dashboard.



CONSIDER THE DIVERSITY OF CITIZENS' DATA LITERACY.

Because citizens have diverse financial and data literacy, it is important to ensure that the dashboard design is user-centered: the needs and capabilities of its users should be explicitly considered during the design phase. The Basotho NGO ACT has conducted a survey collecting the opinions and expectations of Lesotho's civil society for a potential dashboard. The findings of this study (attached) lay the foundation for a discussion on the scope and content of the dashboard by providing GoL with clear expectations from citizens and civil society.

PROVIDE CITIZENS-CENTERED EXPLANATORY MATERIALS.

It is important that GoL integrate pedagogical, explanatory materials of dashboard elements that are both accessible and up to date. Those materials will have to be further defined during dashboard development but may include: the definition of all financial metrics and indicators displayed in the dashboard, an explanation of the budget process, videos on how to navigate the transparency portal and all additional information that GoL, civil society, media organizations and citizens might find helpful.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT BUDGETARY INDICATORS.

Because some financial and performance information must be protected for matters of political or national security, it is important to define early in the design process the information that can be publicly shared via the dashboard and transparency portal. It is recommended that GoL scope dashboard content to the information already made available to the public in the budget speeches, performance contracts and audit reports.

BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE.

An important factor of trust between citizen users and Government data providers is to openly disclose the source of the data as well as the methodology of its production. Therefore, it is recommended that GoL add a methodological page detailing how the Ministry of Finance, Office of the Prime Minister and other departments produce the data and that the data be downloadable from the portal.

ENSURE USER FEEDBACK AND CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT.

The reuse of data by citizens is an important advantage of open data initiatives. The ability for citizens to provide feedback on the dashboard and propose new analysis or visualization useful to their purposes is acknowledged as a meaningful feature to promote citizen engagement and participation. It is therefore recommended that the Lesotho dashboard should integrate such features.

GLOBAL EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE TRANSPARENCY PLATFORMS

SOUTH AFRICA'S VULEKAMALI PORTAL

South Africa's *Vulekamali* Portal is a comprehensive portal that enables the user to drill down within each program and sub-program and monitor spending. Citizens can also

access the state of budget implementation and spending. Visuals and budget data should be downloadable, which promotes re-use by citizens and users.

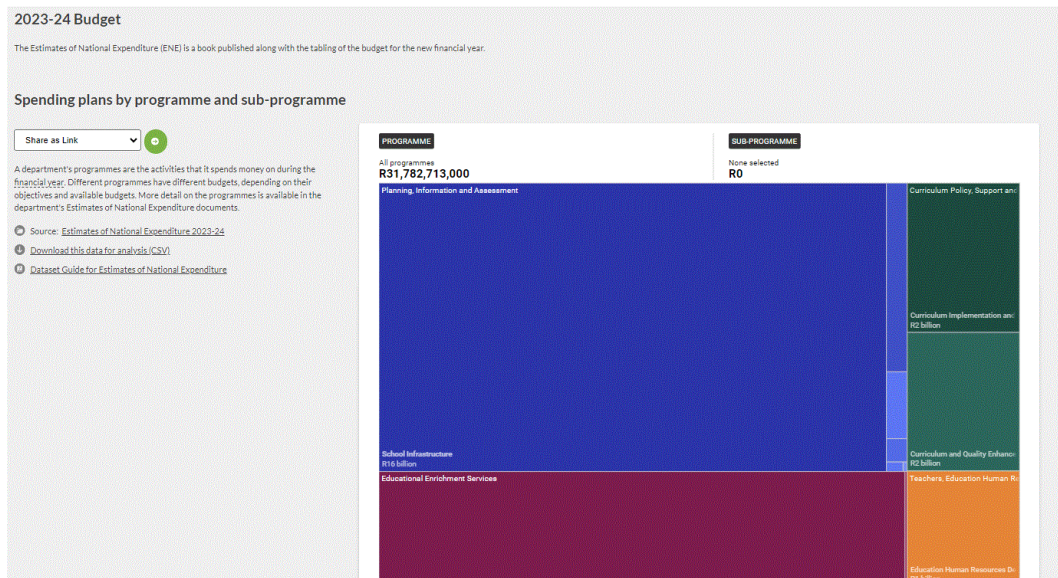


Figure 2: Interactive tree map indicating spending programs

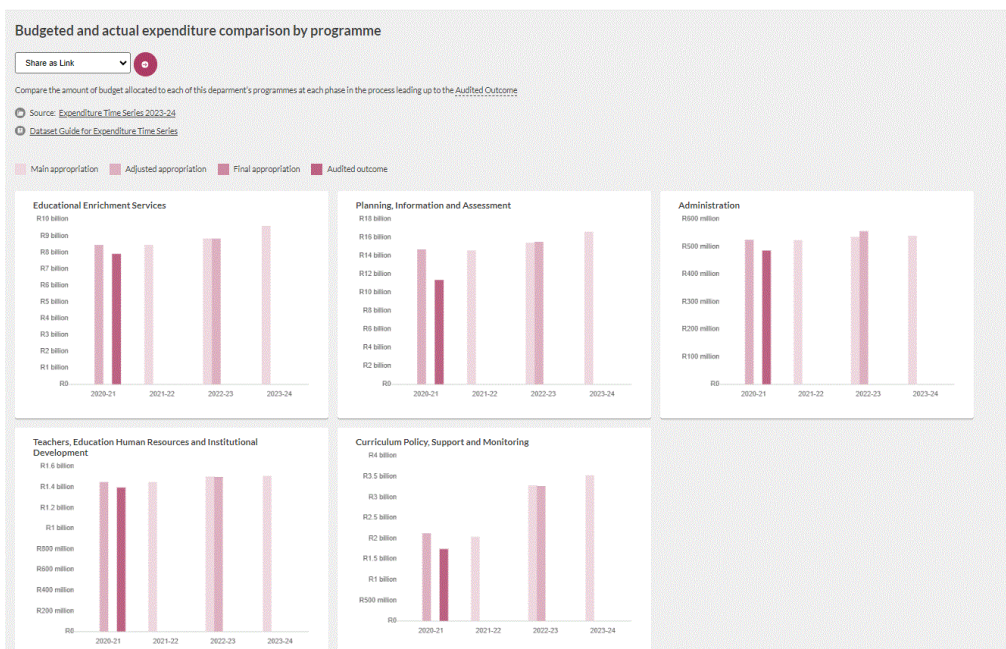


Figure 3: Budgeted and actuals expenditures by programs over time

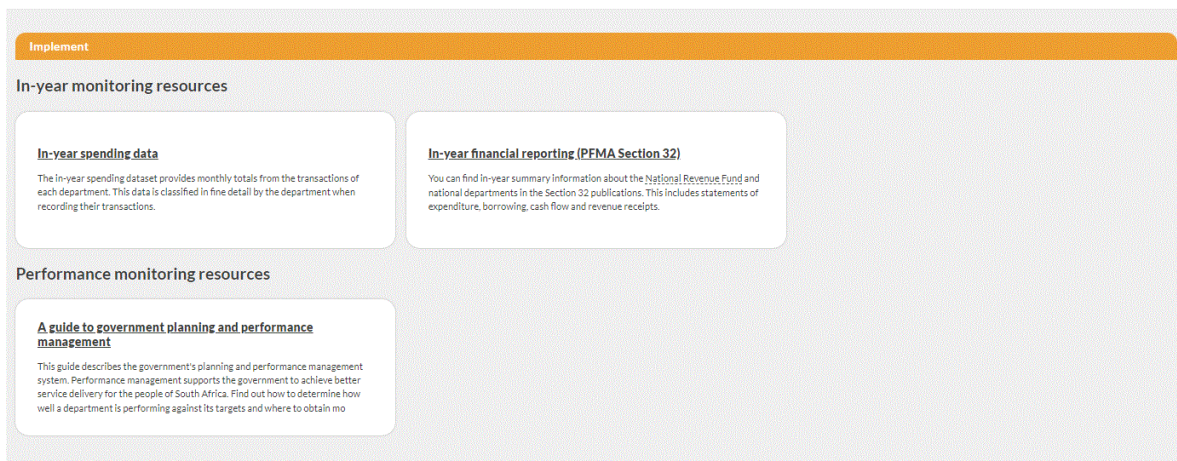


Figure 4: Downloadable materials on the implementation of each program

Key features of the South Africa Vulekamali Portal:

- Includes pedagogical explanatory videos on the budget process and its importance in South African public life as well as a guide on how to use the dashboard.
- Hosts guides, infographics and pedagogical cartoons on the planning, implementation and oversight stages of the policymaking process. It also includes quarterly reporting information at the end of the fiscal year.
- Though the dashboard displays only financial information, each program has a set of downloadable materials informing citizens on the progress made.

CANADA'S GC INFOBASE

The Government of Canada (GC) InfoBase is a far-reaching open data portal providing information beyond the annual budget. Citizens can find open data related to finances, people (government personnel), public services and results. Citizens can also find general information on the functioning of the government and current reforms. On the Finances tab, citizens can find a range of information from the status of bills, public spending, revenue estimations and trends over time.



Figure 5: Main page of Canada's open data portal GC InfoBase

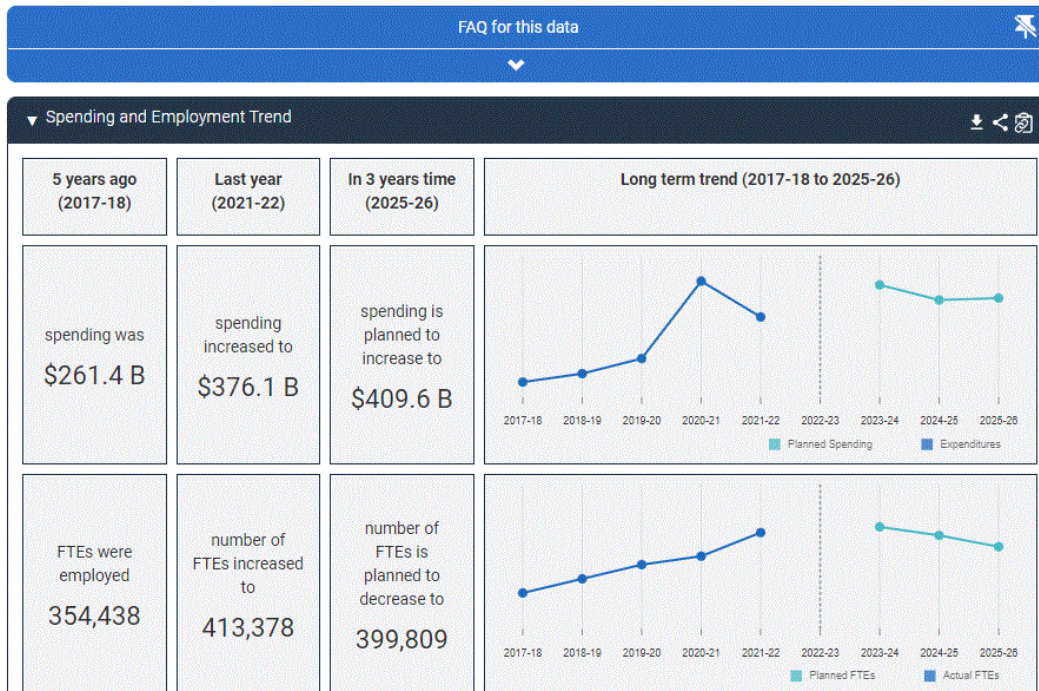


Figure 6: Long-term trends in expenditure and employment levels

FAQ for this data

► Why does a year seem to span over two in GC InfoBase (e.g. 2017-18)?
► Where does the authority to spend public funds come from?
► What are the Main Estimates?
► What are Supplementary Estimates?
► What are 'expenditures'?
► If GC InfoBase provides information on government spending, why can't I find information on how much my province or territory spends?
► What types of spending are included in GC InfoBase?

▲

Figure 7: Explanatory FAQ for citizens to understand the budget process

Key features of Canada's GC InfoBase:

- High-level and easy-to-read budget information.
- Pedagogical explanatory materials provided through a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list.
- Concise explanations of performance indicators and quantitative targets
- Includes performance information alongside budgetary information
- Includes a glossary of budgetary and public financial management terms

URUGUAY'S PORTAL DE TRANSPARENCIA PRESUPUESTARIA

Uruguay's public transparency portal is less comprehensive but provides precise information on budgetary performance indicators and their evolution over time (even if the link between performance indicators and expenditures is not obvious). Citizens can view detailed data by year, and entities that are recipients of public funds. However, the portal does not provide explanatory materials or a glossary.

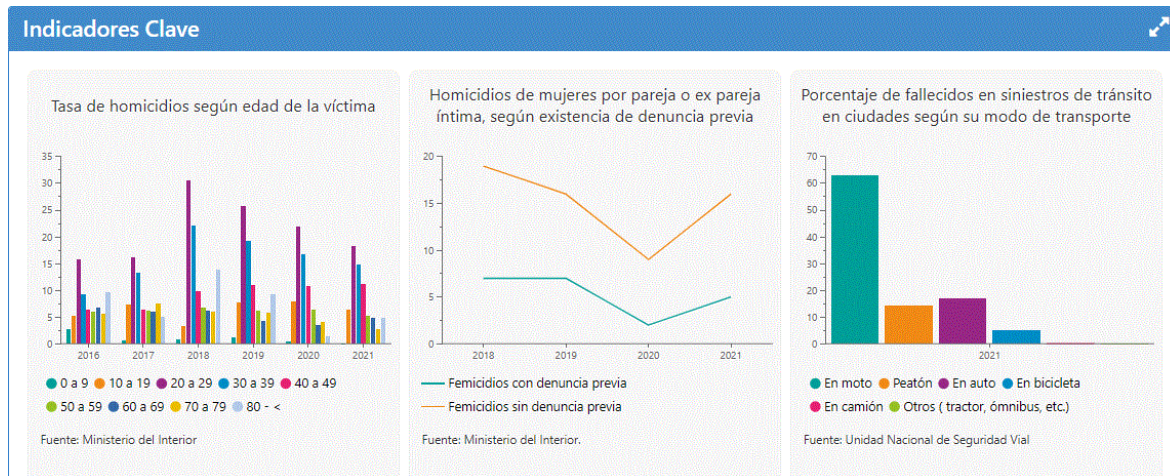


Figure 8: Each KPI is displayed over time

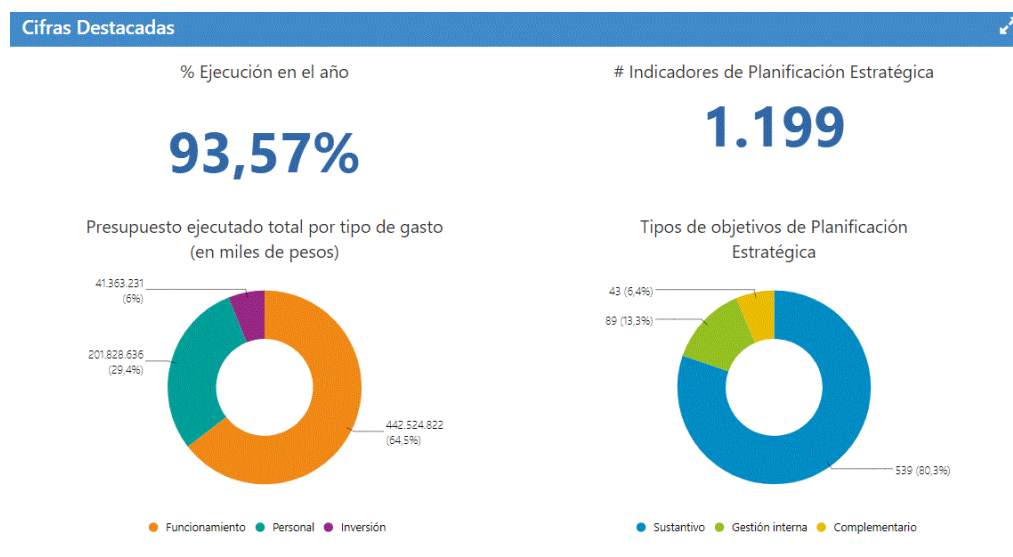


Figure 9: Financial and performance indicators are displayed side-by-side

Key features of Uruguay's Portal:

- The information on budgetary Program Areas is clear and easy to read.
- Citizens can navigate government performance indicators both at the macro and micro levels.
- Detailed overview of the performance indicators is included for each program.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS: LESOTHO TRANSPARENCY PLATFORM

Following consultations with the Government of Lesotho (GoL) and recognizing the interest expressed both by the Government and civil society in the creation of a public-facing dashboard and transparency platform ("citizen accountability dashboard"), this note lays out the technical options available to the Government for producing the platform's key features. Key functional specifications for the platform—based on priorities expressed by Basotho civil society organizations and global best practice—include:

- The **scope of the platform**, that is, the parameters of financial and non-financial information available to the public.
- The **types of visualization** to display financial and non-financial information.
- The **explanatory materials to accompany the platform** and give users fundamental knowledge about policymaking and public financial concepts and processes.
- The **citizen feedback functionality** enabling users to provide the Government with comments, remarks or considerations.
- The **rollout process and governance arrangements** for the platform within Government.

All stakeholders have acknowledged the need for the dashboard and transparency platform to be accessible to a wide audience, to include explanatory and user-friendly materials, and to put forth the right level of information to avoid overwhelming users with highly technical and unnecessary information.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: SCOPE OF THE PLATFORM

The scope of the public-facing dashboard is the primary decision GoL will have to make. The definition of the scope includes considering the information and features requested by Basotho citizens and civil society and the Government's operational needs to ensure the final product satisfies its objectives for both groups. Following consultations with GoL and civil society counterparts, three options for scope have emerged: (i) the same scope as the current internal-to-government *Government Accountability Dashboard*, (ii) a narrower scope in which the current *Government Accountability Dashboard* would be simplified, (iii) a full-fledged open data portal hosting several datasets from the Government.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: FEEDBACK FEATURES IN THE PLATFORM

A baseline survey of representatives from Basotho's civil society found a strong demand for a functionality on a citizen accountability dashboard that would allow users to send requests and suggestions to the Government as well as opinions on public service performance. It is recommended that GoL create a dedicated functionality within the dashboard to address this demand. The feature may take the form of a questionnaire posted directly on the website or an email address to reach out to a Government official. Regardless of the option chosen, having a feedback feature on the dashboard indicates to citizens that GoL is interested in citizen feedback and will be responsive to citizen input.



Importance of Committing to Uptake of Citizen Feedback

Though a feedback feature is a meaningful functionality to collect users' perceptions of the dashboard and of public services, the government will eventually have the obligation to respond to citizens' input. Adequate capacity to process, filter and respond to feedback will be necessary; otherwise, citizens' engagement will falter.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: EXPLANATORY MATERIALS IN PLATFORM

The Government and Basotho civil society representatives have all stressed the importance of providing users with pedagogical materials to explain various elements, data and functions included in the citizen accountability dashboard—as these materials may be difficult to comprehend without proper explanation. Options for the addition of explanatory materials in the dashboard include a glossary, explanatory video, frequently asked questions (FAQ) page, and citizen budget guide. These options can be complementary and are not exclusive.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: ROLLOUT OF THE PLATFORM

Once the Citizen Accountability Dashboard is developed and deployed, a calibrated communication campaign to publicize and disseminate the dashboard will need to be designed by GoL to ensure that citizens are aware of and interested in using the new platform. There are several options for how to proceed, although it is expected that GoL will take advantage of the online version of the dashboard via a transparency portal as a key option.

CONCLUSION

This guidebook outlines a range of possible options for the Government of Lesotho's citizen accountability dashboard, building on the important work of the Government in its existing Government Accountability Dashboard and efforts for greater citizen engagement. These options respond to the functional requirements recommended in a baseline survey of Basotho civil society as well as the needs and objectives formulated by the Government. Nonetheless, these recommendations do not exhaust all possibilities, and fit-for-purpose solutions might be adopted according to the technical constraints and additional specifications that would emerge during the implementation. Further consultations with relevant Government and civil society actors are needed before design and rollout can commence.







Government of Lesotho