



Welcome to the first edition of the *vulekamali* newsletter: *Open!* Through this newsletter, we will share vulekamali project updates, interesting new content and news about exciting events and related initiatives around South Africa.

We hope to contribute to building a community of people and organisations who are passionate about social justice and public resource issues in South Africa.

*Open!* newsletter will cover a range of subject areas;

open budgets, transparency, accountability and any social policy issues that have budget considerations.

This is also an express invitation to you to join IMALI YETHU and the National Treasury on this exciting journey! Are you keen to join IMALI YETHU? Are you interested in contributing content to the IMALI YETHU blog? Or are you interested in joining us at events scheduled in your province? Please visit [www.imaliyethu.org.za](http://www.imaliyethu.org.za) and follow us on [@imali\\_yethu](https://twitter.com/imali_yethu) for sign-up details.

## About IMALI YETHU

IMALI YETHU is a coalition of civil society organisations working with the South African National Treasury to make budget information more accessible, user-friendly and empowering.

The following civil society organisations are represented amongst the founding partners of the coalition: the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), Mobile Social Accountability Monitoring (MobiSAM), Equal Education Law Centre (EELC), Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC), Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII), Section 27, the Right to Know Campaign (R2K) and the Social Justice Coalition (SJC). These organisations also form the lead organisations of the IMALI YETHU Secretariat.

## Introducing vulekamali

Through an innovative partnership between the National Treasury and IMALI YETHU, an online budget data portal - vulekamali - is being developed to publish data in a user-friendly format and to enable more effective information sharing, analyses and research. vulekamali is part of National Treasury's continued commitment to transparency and budget participation reforms. The portal is intended to support involvement by civil society and the public in the budget process and foster informed public debate and discussions across a variety of government policy areas. Loosely translated to mean 'open! money' - vulekamali is an exciting opportunity for more direct engagement between government departments and South Africans in general.

Read the latest updates about the project progress on <https://vulekamali.gov.za/2017-18/about>

**Become a Beta User • Sign up to attend an engagement in your Province • Become a project champion**

## Naming and launch of vulekamali

Between December 2017 and January 2018, IMALI YETHU and the National Treasury ran a competition to name the online budget data portal (to replace this unwieldy, rather uninspiring title!). The brief for entries included a need to convey an ethos of openness and transparency and to reflect strong elements of South African or African heritage. Competition submissions were encouraged in any of the eleven official South African languages. Entries closed on 15 January 2018. We would like to thank every single individual that made an entry. The selection committee found it to be a

genuinely difficult process due to the quality of many of the submissions. It was also a fantastic reminder of South Africans' creative flair!

The winner of the competition attended the Budget Speech in Parliament on the 21 February 2018 at the invitation of the Minister of Finance. We are also particularly excited that that the winner will be featured as a character in an animated video about the online budget data portal! The vulekamali project was officially launched in Cape Town on 20 February 2018.

## The Data Quests

A series of Data Quests will be held throughout the project. These are workshops that bring together experts from government, civil society, media, academia, private sector and technical communities to explore how the relevance of budget information can best be displayed. Data Quests are run in an 'unconference' format, the agenda is not set ahead of time. Rather, topics are identified on the day based on interests and experience of the participants. On the day, sessions are convened by the participants and are typically self-organised. Convenors are not necessarily

experts or leaders on topics and their job is enabling dialogue, with all participants having equal input.

There were two main objectives for the first two Data Quest events. Firstly, they set out to encourage broad discussions around the challenges and benefits of publishing data. These insights will be used to inform the development of a useful online data portal over the next few years. The second objective was to raise awareness and to recruit a community of users who can act as champions for the portal. Future Data Quests will be held in all nine provinces during 2017 and 2018 to explore various aspects of the data and how it is used.

## The Pretoria DataQuest



Picture above: Michael Sachs making opening remarks at the very first Data Quest in Pretoria, 26 September 2017

On 26 September 2017, twenty-seven topics were put forward by participants and discussed. A number of overarching themes emerged from many of the sessions. An important thread emerged about public participation - through the conversations, it is clear that South Africans feel that they are not able to engage effectively with government. Another theme is the importance of ensuring information is understandable and useful to a broad audience with a wide range of backgrounds and skills.

[Download the session notes from the day.](#)  
[Watch the video from the Pretoria DataQuest.](#)

## Cape Town Data Quest



Picture above: National Treasury and civil society participants at a Budget Portal event themed “From Open Budgets to Open Government” in Cape Town

On 22 November 2017 the second DataQuest was hosted in Cape Town. The event was themed ‘From Open Budgets to Open Government’ - reflecting one of the core tenets of the portal. In total, twenty-four topics were put forward and discussed.

The topics covered a wide range of thematic areas including how to make the project appealing to young

people, how it can be a pilot for similar projects elsewhere in government, and maintaining the overall sustainability of the portal over time. Some key discussions also reflected on the role of civic stakeholders in ensuring that the objectives of public participations are promoted.

One session, for instance, focused on the ways in which budget data can contribute towards efficient service delivery, through relevant and up-to-date measures such as comparable expenditure data across services. Amongst the innovative suggestions made by participants was the use of a dashboard highlighting expenditure and performance data as a useful tool. In addition, issues requiring further research were identified. Notably - guidelines for such a data analysis tool.

*In essence - the discussions were ‘lit’!*

## BLOG

By: Zukiswa Kota

### **The Open Budget Survey 2017: South Africa Ranked #1**

On 31 January 2018, the news that South Africa<sup>1</sup> had been ranked number one on the Open Budget Index (OBI) offered welcome respite from the heavy news of recent months. A little celebratory jig was certainly in order and I imagine this was the case in the hallways of the National Treasury - even briefly.

The Open Budget Survey (on which the OBI is based) draws on internationally accepted criteria across 109 indicators to measure budget transparency. Amongst others, these indicators are used to determine whether the national

government makes eight key budget documents available to the public in a timely manner. The indicators also assess the usefulness and comprehensiveness of the data in these documents. The OBI is a composite ranking of each country out of a possible score of 100. According to the International Budget Partnership (2015) - the OBS is “the world’s only independent and comparative measure of budget transparency.” In 2017 the survey looked at 115 countries.

<sup>1</sup> South Africa and New Zealand were jointly ranked #1 on the 2017 OBS



While this transparency score is a veritable achievement for all advocates of open government and fiscal transparency in South Africa - the ultimate objective remains somewhat elusive. The OBI also measures the degree to which the government creates opportunities for the public to engage in budget processes throughout the fiscal calendar. Importantly - this also includes engagements with supreme audit institutions (the Auditor-General) as well as the legislative and the executive sectors. Here the news is dismal. Scoring 24 out of 100, South Africa is not the worst in the world but is certainly not a shining example of public participation in budgeting.

It is commonly acknowledged that transparency is not an end in itself but it constitutes a vital step towards achieving the goals of greater accountability and improved public resource governance. As proponents of both fiscal transparency and public participation - one of IMALI YETHU’s missions is to ensure that we progressively go *#beyondtransparency*. Thus the emphasis on inclusive, participatory processes.

There are several interesting examples of public participation or participatory budgeting around the world. Kenya and Mexico are noteworthy. The Kenyan Constitution enacted in 2013 makes some provisions for citizen participation within its devolved budget process. This means citizens are afforded opportunities at the county level to have their voices heard on fiscal issues affecting them. While elements of participatory budgeting can be identified in the Mexican context as early as the

1980s, the enactment of the Citizen Participation Law of the Federal District in 2010 introduced greater state investment in participatory budgeting processes at the local government level. This law stipulates, for instance, that 3% of each local authorities’ budget must be spent on participatory budgeting activities. In both these countries - there are clear benefits of participatory budgeting but the authors of a 2018 [study by mySociety](#) that explores these in greater depth - highlight the importance of interrogating the objectives, methodologies and outcomes of these processes. The knowledge that these processes are inherently political, interest-driven and complex should inform the design of participatory budgeting interventions - digital or otherwise.

The Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency ([GIFT](#)) recently devised new principles on public participation which include accessibility, respect for self-expression, inclusiveness and timeliness across the various stages of the fiscal policy cycle. It is these principles that were used to inform the questions pertaining to public participation in the 2017 OBS. These ten principles are now globally accepted norms on public participation in national budget processes and constitute an important strengthening of the OBI indicators.

GIFT’s Lead Technical Advisor, [Murray Petrie](#), reflecting on lessons from the OBS public participation results raises the following points that are helpful reminders for civil society and government reformers alike;

*“If more governments do not become more inclusive in how they design and implement taxation and public spending, we are much less likely to counter the negative trends with respect to inequality, willingness to pay taxes, and trust in government.*”

*One challenge from OBS 2017 is to work much harder on inclusive public engagement in the management of public finances... direct public engagement has the potential to transform the disclosure of fiscal information into more effective accountability and better development outcomes."*

And - here is comes a particular gem of a reminder about the value of a platform such as vulekamali;

*"... the ICT revolution has given it a major shot in the arm, by dramatically cutting the cost of direct interactions between governments and citizens, as well as by making possible entirely new forms of public participation."*

It is these new ways of thinking, engaging and doing that we must collectively embrace. As with any quest - the *unknowns*, *unknowables* and risks are abundant. Along the way there will be naysayers and detractors but ultimately the commitment to achieving something outrageously ambitious must sustain us. In this case - the team working on vulekamali have the outrageously

ambitious goal of going #beyondtransparency towards participatory budgeting and a system in which accountable governance and effective, inclusive service delivery is a reality.

Let's embark on this quest to travel #beyondtransparency - join us!

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### *Save the date:*

**2 March 2018** • Community Information Drive in Soweto

**12-15 March 2018** • Community Information Drive in Mpumalanga

**16 March 2018** • Data Quest in Nelspruit

We hope to keep you and other participants informed of the project's progress and to invite you to give us critical feedback during the portal development process.

IMALI YETHU seeks to develop a growing community of residents in South Africa who are advocates for fiscal transparency, accountable governance and the progressive realisation of the human rights enshrined in the constitution.

Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others who would be interested to subscribe and become a part of this community of active citizens who are working to maintain a transparent, open budget process in South Africa.

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