



Turning infrastructure data into compelling information: How CoST Assurance adds value to open government and open contracting

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We are delighted to launch our first CoST Assurance Week ([#CoSTAssuranceWeek](#)) – five celebratory days where we will delve into the [assurance process](#) and demonstrate its value in showing tax payers how their money is being spent on infrastructure.

For the week, CoST members, Afghanistan, Guatemala, Ethiopia, El Salvador and Uganda will publish their assurance reports. Several months in the making, the reports do not deal in small change, collectively, they highlight key issues and good practice from 72 infrastructure projects. We'll be drawing out key messages from each country's report throughout this week and a second blog will summarise statistics and trends from all the reports to provide an indication of key performance issues within the sector.

Now, however, we'd like to highlight more on the impact of [CoST Assurance](#), including how it adds value to existing audit mechanisms, why it can be a deterrent for poor performance and its catalytic effect on sector reform and project improvements.

1. What is CoST Assurance?

and for moving transparency to accountability.

When looking at the completeness of the data, CoST Assurance compares [data disclosure](#) with both applicable regulations and the [CoST Infrastructure Data Standard](#) (CoST IDS) which requires 40 data points (or items) to be disclosed over the entire project cycle. Whilst the CoST IDS was designed to provide basic facts that a non-technical expert can understand, it may require some expertise and analysis to turn the data into compelling and useful information that sheds light on key issues. The information must be factual and minimise subjectivity to lessen the susceptibility of its important findings being subject to dispute. Therefore, external experts are appointed by CoST member multi-stakeholder groups (MSG) to form an ‘assurance team’.

The assurance team initially reviews the data that has been disclosed on a sample of projects and may then ask for additional information and interview procuring entity officials or members of the supply chain to clarify issues. To do this, the team often visits the infrastructure project site where they can ask questions of the project contractor and site supervisor. At the site they can also identify what accountability systems are in place and to observe the quality of the infrastructure. Using this information, the assurance team compiles a report which provides a compelling narrative on each project, communicating key facts in an accessible way to a non-technical audience.

2. How CoST Assurance goes beyond a technical audit

It is important to clarify the difference between the assurance process and a technical audit. A technical audit is concerned with checking whether construction work has been undertaken as specified, but whilst the assurance process is interested in this, it has a bigger-picture focus.

Firstly, unlike an audit, it looks at how improved transparency and stakeholder engagement can help address shortcomings found in accountability mechanisms such as quality management, contract management or cost controls.

Secondly, the assurance process adds value by turning disclosed data into compelling information, highlighting examples of good practice and waving red flags that other competent authorities could use as a basis for further investigation. And if handled well, this can lead to a trusted audit institution adopting key aspects of the assurance process as part of its functions.

Finally, unlike a technical audit, the assurance process can occur at any stage of a project, from design through to completion, thus, it contributes to ongoing monitoring functions. This increases the potential areas of improvement to be implemented by the procuring entity so that ultimately, it enhances the project outcomes and broader sector reforms.

3. How does assurance deter poor performance?

In the early stages of a CoST programme, the focus on assurance is on a handful of specific projects. As a programme matures and the number of projects on which data is disclosed rapidly scales up, only a small percentage of these projects will be subject to an in-depth review as part of the assurance process.

In the long-term assurance gives rise to recommendations that extend beyond the specific project being studied. In addition, MSGs are encouraged to use a randomised approach to identify a sample of projects based on citizens’ needs. This approach sends a powerful message. It helps to provide a deterrent across the hundreds of projects from which the sample will be selected and provides a strong incentive for procuring entities to ensure that shortcomings do not occur in the first place. For example, the roads directorate in Guatemala reported that any project could find itself subject to Assurance, this led to substantial improvements in the integration and co-ordination of suppliers and the quality of road construction.

Our randomised approach has been particularly relevant as CoST has expanded and used innovation within its evolution. Mature CoST programmes where data from several hundred or thousands of projects can be disclosed normally involve sophisticated web-based disclosure platforms which are an asset for storing and generating performance data. In light of this development, the CoST assurance process includes data from the platforms, analyses it and communicates it through the assurance report.

4. A catalyst for government action and broader sector reforms

Over the last two years, we have seen an increase in our assurance findings and recommendations leading to government action. These actions have often been initiated on individual projects but they have had a much wider impact.

– independent supervision of construction contracts was introduced in Ukraine, changes to the Uganda Roads Act were made that will improve the health and safety of construction workers and road users and Malawi accelerated its road construction by breaking up large road into smaller and more affordable packages. These are long-term solutions allowing thousands of citizens to access more affordable and accessible infrastructure.

As part of this success story we must speak of two critical factors. Firstly, CoST members have rigorously channelled findings from assurance reports towards media and civil society to empower them to demand action. Secondly, MSGs with representatives from government, industry and civil society have used their unique position to influence decision-makers and encourage them to take action.

Therefore, as the reports are published at key launch events in CoST member countries this week, we realise this is one part of CoST Assurance and our approach more broadly. Using the reports, MSGs in Afghanistan, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uganda will continue to drum home messages from the reports to engage their communities and decision-makers and encourage action for better infrastructure for all.

We look forward to keeping you updated on the tangible results of this action. For that you can hold us to account.

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