2011 FRANC ZONE
ANNUAL REPORT

BANQUE DE FRANCE

EUROSYSTÈME

4

TAX REVENUE MOBILISATION IN THE FRANC ZONE: PRINCIPAL LESSONS LEARNED OVER THE LONG TERM

1| Developments in tax revenue mobilisation

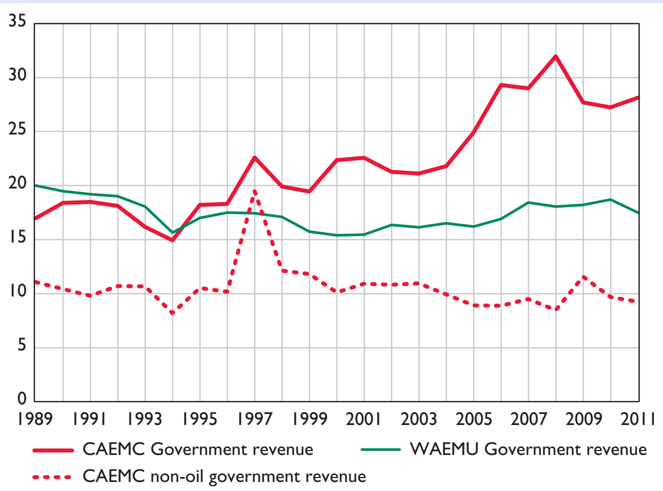
The conclusions of the Doha Conference in 2008 emphasised the need to strengthen the mobilisation of African countries' domestic financial resources in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Mobilising tax resources is indeed the first, both sustainable and predictable, source of financing for development and helps to create adequate fiscal space to finance priority spending.

The analysis of changes in government revenue, excluding grants, in WAEMU and CAEMC since 1989 (see chart below) points to the following salient features:

• government revenue in WAEMU countries has not risen significantly over the last 20 years but rather fluctuated around 17% of GDP. In 2011, government revenue in WAEMU accounted for 17.5% of GDP, i.e. a level below the average for Sub-Saharan Africa, which stood at 27.5% of GDP.

• the significant increase in total government revenue in CAEMC countries, which accounted for almost 30% of GDP at the end of the 2000s, compared with 17% at the start of the 1990s, can largely be attributed to the rise in oil resources. The non-oil government revenue of CAEMC remained almost constant throughout the 1989–2010 period, at around 10% of GDP, except for a peak between 1996 and 1998. In 2011, the CAEMC recorded a mobilisation rate of 28.2% of GDP.

Total government revenue excl. grants
(% of GDP)



Sources: BEAC, BCEAO, National Financial Administrations.

Beyond the concept of government revenue excluding grants, it is useful to analyse changes in the tax burden, defined as the tax revenue-to-GDP ratio. This tax ratio is a second-level convergence indicator for Franc Zone countries, based on a directive adopted in 2001 by CAEMC Member States and on the Convergence, Stability, Growth and Solidarity Pact between WAEMU Member States introduced in 1999. Franc Zone countries are expected to converge towards a ratio of tax revenues to nominal GDP of 17%.

The Franc Zone as a whole showed an average tax revenues to GDP ratio of around 15% in 2011, below the convergence criterion target, but with large disparities between countries (see table).

Significant disparities thus exist between certain Franc Zone countries with a tax revenue to GDP ratio below 10% of GDP (Central African Republic, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Guinea Bissau) and those with a ratio close to or above the threshold of 17% required by the convergence criterion. This is notably the case for Chad in CAEMC and Niger and Senegal in WAEMU. Nevertheless, several CAEMC countries show relatively low tax revenues to GDP ratios even though their government revenues are high. In these countries, incentives to raise tax revenues may seem small given that they record significant oil revenues.

For oil-producing countries, the tax burden also includes taxes on oil companies, which are highly dependent on world oil prices and relatively unstable. This explains the strong volatility of tax revenues in these countries. This instability of tax revenues relative to GDP is generally considered in the literature as harmful for African economies because it leads to instability of government capital expenditure. This in turn would be detrimental to the growth of these economies as it would result in a lower level of investment compared to a situation where tax revenue and expenditure are more stable (Ebeke and Ehrhart, 2012).

In addition, there are still in Africa, in particular in the Franc Zone, structural barriers to the mobilisation of domestic resources. These difficulties stem from the low contributory capacity of the population, the existence

Tax revenues in the Franc Zone

(% of GDP)

	2009	2010	2011
CAEMC			
Cameroon	15.4	13.2	12.5
Central African Republic	8.1	8.7	7.8
Congo	8.8	7.4	8.4
Gabon	20.9	14.3	14.6
Equatorial Guinea	16.0	8.0	7.8
Chad	13.0	18.9	22.8
WAEMU			
Benin	18.5	18.6	15.5
Burkina Faso	17.7	20.7	14.6
Côte d'Ivoire	19.7	19.7	13.4
Guinea Bissau	9.1	10.9	8.6
Mali	17.1	17.4	14.7
Niger	14.5	14.3	21.2
Senegal	18.8	19.5	18.9
Togo	16.9	18.7	15.8

Sources: BEAC, BCEAO, National Financial Administrations.

of a dominant agricultural sector focused on self-sufficiency, the presence of a large informal sector, and tax evasion. Furthermore, tax administrations often lack resources, which forces them to delegate the tax collection to private intermediaries. Finally, tax revenue mobilisation in Africa is lowered significantly by investment incentives, based on tax exemptions and relief, granted to various economic agents.

However, as regards improving and strengthening tax administrations, a series of major structural reforms has been carried out in Franc Zone countries in recent years. Several countries have introduced a single tax identification number for taxpayers in order to facilitate the transfer of information, which is now automated between the Customs Department and the Tax Department (Chambas, 2005).

Moreover, a management by taxpayer category (large and medium-sized enterprises and other taxpayers) has replaced a management by tax, thus giving tax administrations an overview of taxpayers.

All in all, the small rises in government revenue, excluding grants and oil resources, observed over the 1989-2011 period, conceal a disruption that occurred in the composition of the tax revenues of Franc Zone countries. In particular, the fall in tariff revenues, due to trade liberalisation measures, has been offset by an increase in domestic taxes, most notably in consumption taxes.

2| A change in the composition of government revenue: the tax transition in Franc Zone countries

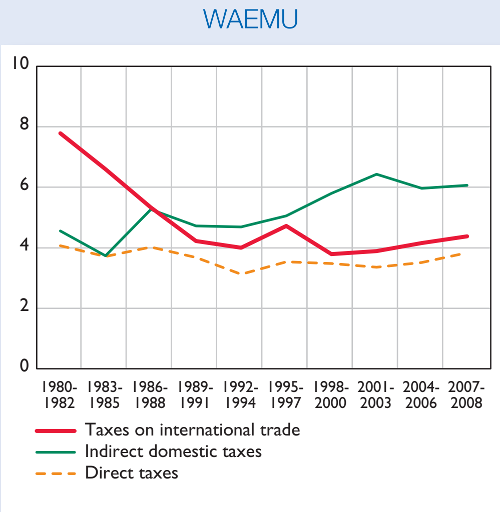
The composition of tax revenues in Franc Zone countries has changed dramatically over the last three decades. Indeed, following the trade liberalisation process initiated in the 1980s, tax revenues derived from taxes on international trade have declined in WAEMU and CAEMC (see charts below). After accounting for almost 8% of GDP in the early 1980s in WAEMU, taxes on international trade shrank to about 4% of the area's GDP in 2008. These taxes also declined in CAEMC, but to a lesser extent than in WAEMU, since they slipped from 4% of GDP in the early 1990s to 3% of GDP in 2010.

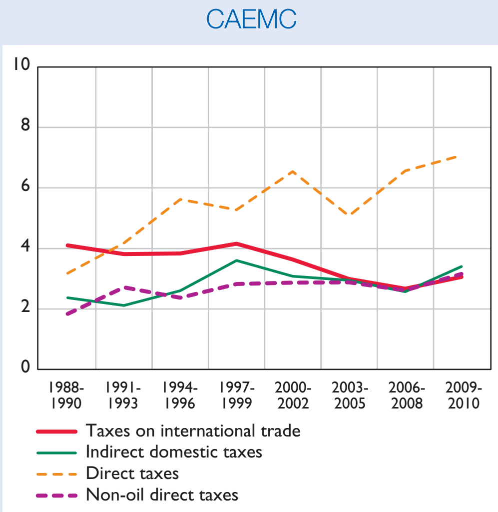
This decrease was offset by a parallel increase in indirect domestic taxes, mainly in WAEMU, which rose from approximately 4.5% of GDP in 1980 to 6% in 2008. The rise was less pronounced in CAEMC, where indirect taxes climbed by one percentage point of GDP between 1990 and 2010, from 2.5% to 3.5% of GDP.

In CAEMC, revenue from direct taxation posted a much higher increase: in 2010 it accounted for 7% of regional GDP. This high level of revenue from direct taxation is mainly due to the abundance of natural resources and the large revenues derived from corporate income tax on oil companies. If one excludes the latter from direct taxation revenue, the level of direct taxes collected in CAEMC represented only 3% of the area's GDP in 2010, a level comparable to that observed in WAEMU (4% of GDP in the late 2000s).

This tax transition is the result of a series of tax reforms conducted in Franc Zone countries, which impacted both the mobilisation of revenue from taxes on international trade and domestic taxes.

Tax components in WAEMU and CAEMC
(% of GDP)





Sources: IMF, Keen and Mansour (2010), BEAC.

2|1 Reforms of international trade taxation

Trade liberalisation, with the lowering of trade barriers, is the main factor that contributed to reducing the weight of taxes on international trade in Franc Zone countries and in developing countries in general.

The analysis of the impact of trade liberalisation on customs revenue is, nonetheless, subject to caution as rate changes may have non-linear effects on the revenue collected. The early stages of trade liberalisation, which mainly consisted in replacing the existing quotas by tariffs and harmonising these tariffs, increasing or lowering some of the rates, may have had in the short term a limited negative impact on government revenue, or may even have raised it in some cases (Ebrill *et al.*, 1999). A second factor that mitigates the negative impact of trade liberalisation on tax revenues lies in the relation between the level of tariffs and the degree of tax evasion. Fisman and Wei (2004) show that lower tariffs may result in an increase in tax revenues due to lower tax evasion. Nevertheless, the following trade liberalisation reforms, which took the form of a gradual lowering of tariffs, subsequently led to significant falls in revenue in most developing countries (Devarajan *et al.*, 1999 , Khattry and Rao, 2002).

As regards Franc Zone countries, tax revenues derived from international trade have decreased but in a differentiated manner in each sub-region. In WAEMU, the share of this category of tax revenues relative to GDP first declined significantly until the early 1990s, then generally stabilised until the late 2000s, around 4% of GDP, due to the increase in the value of imports which offset the decline in rates. In CAEMC, the fall in revenues derived from international trade was more gradual, with the introduction of a series of trade liberalisation measures.

The trade liberalisation reforms in the Franc Zone are based on international agreements concluded at three different levels: at the global level, with Franc Zone countries' membership of the WTO; at the area level, with the establishment of customs unions; at area and bilateral levels, with the conclusion of free trade agreements with third countries.

2|1|1 Membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO)

Almost all Franc Zone countries joined the World Trade Organization between 1995 and 1997. This led to a customs disarmament process vis-à-vis third countries, in accordance with the requirements of the WTO. More specifically, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Mali, the Central African Republic and Senegal joined the WTO in 1995; Benin, Niger and Chad in 1996 and the Congo in 1997. The Comoros and Equatorial Guinea still have observer status – despite having applied for membership in October 1997 and February 1998 respectively – as they have not yet submitted their Memorandum on the Foreign Trade Regime.

Franc Zone countries' membership of the WTO should in principle lead to a rise in international trade. While Rose (2004) states that membership of the WTO is not associated with an increase in trade, Subramanian and Wei (2007) conclude that the creation of the WTO has had a strong positive impact on international trade, yet with uneven effects across economies. Industrialised countries have thus benefited from their accession to the WTO since imports have considerably increased, while developing countries, which are WTO members, have not recorded any increases in imports, but only a slight rise in their exports.

2|1|2 Establishment of customs unions in the Franc Zone

Be it in WAEMU or in CAEMC, the trade integration process was largely underpinned by the creation of customs unions through the total liberalisation of trade flows between the different economies of each area and the adoption of a simplified and unified tax system, the Common External Tariff (CET). This tariff is applied to goods imported from non-member countries. The CET was adopted in 2000 by WAEMU and in 2001 by CAEMC.

The establishment of free trade areas, through the removal of tariff barriers between member economies, aimed at increasing economies of scale in order to improve overall productivity, and at building up broader export markets. Customs unions are therefore intended to encourage regional demand to be channeled towards local production and to allow goods to move freely within the area. These initiatives thus aim at supporting the development of intra-community trade.

The common principle governing the application of the CET in the Franc Zone is the progressive nature of tariffs, i.e. tariffs that rise with the degree of processing of the product (see table below). The highest rate applies to finished products, and the lowest to commodities. The tariff is the most important component of the CET. In WAEMU, the other two components are the 1% Community Solidarity Tax on the value of imports and the 1% statistical tax on all products. In CAEMC, the tariff is supplemented by a community integration tax of 1%.

The WAEMU CET includes 4 tariff bands, while the CAEMC CET counts 5 (certain goods are exempt from customs duties). A comparison of the CETs in the two regions shows that tax rates are relatively higher in CAEMC, all product categories taken together. Thus, the application of customs duties to capital goods varies according to the CET: in WAEMU, for example, customs duties on these goods amount to 5%, compared with 10% in CAEMC.

In WAEMU countries, the average tariff has declined significantly over the last two decades mainly on account of the establishment of the CET. For example, the average tariff in Burkina Faso shrank from 25% in 1993 to 11.9% in 2010. In Central Africa, the fall in the average tariff over the long term was less pronounced, as in the case of Cameroon, where it slipped from 18.8% in 1994 to 17.6% in 2009.

2|1|3 Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA)

The Lomé Convention (1975), signed between the 77 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and the European Union (EU), provided for the removal of tariffs on exports from ACP countries to the EU but maintained tariffs on imports from the EU. However, this regime of non-reciprocal trade preferences posed a compatibility problem with Article 24 of the WTO agreements governing the trade in goods. The Cotonou Agreement (2000) provided for the conclusion of a series of EPAs by 2008, in order to set up a reciprocal free-trade area between the EU and ACP countries.

6

Characteristics of Common External Tariffs

(%)

WAEMU		CAEMC	
Type of goods	**Customs duty**	**Type of goods**	**Customs duty**
Essential social goods	0	Goods of primary necessity	5
Goods of primary necessity, basic commodities, capital goods, specific inputs	5	Commodities and capital goods	10
Intermediate goods and inputs	10	Intermediate goods and miscellaneous	20
Final consumer goods	20	Non-durable consumer goods	30

Sources: WAEMU and CAEMC Commissions.

In practice, the EPAs provide for the removal of all remaining tariffs on goods imported from ACP countries as from 2008. On a reciprocal but asymmetrical basis, ACP countries are required to gradually open up to European goods. ACP countries may maintain their tariffs on a subset of sensitive products, accounting for approximately 20% of their imports from Europe, and benefit from a longer period (up to 20 years) for implementing the entire agreement. In the framework of these EPAs, the EU has also committed itself to phasing out export subsidies on all products that are exempt from customs duties by ACP countries.

These agreements should have entered into force on 1 January 2008, but this deadline could not be met due to various divergences between stakeholders. Some countries have thus signed interim EPAs, in order not to suffer the negative trade effects caused by the expiry of the previous agreements. This is notably the case for certain Zone Franc countries (Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon in 2009) and other African countries (Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana, Uganda, among others).

The issues at stake in this new trade liberalisation process differ between the EU and the Franc Zone, since trade does not have the same weight in both areas. The EU is the largest import market and the second largest export market for ACP countries, whereas these flows remain marginal for the EU (representing approximately 3% of the external trade of EU countries). Furthermore, tariffs are much higher for ACP countries, with customs duties averaging around 20% (i.e. 25% of government revenue), against 4% for the EU.

In addition, EPAs not only introduce economic and trade cooperation, but also financial and technical cooperation. This second pillar refers to external aid by the EU, mainly in the form of subsidies, and used to finance development programmes in ACP countries.

These EPAs are expected to have a number of positive effects. Economies of scale and access to cheaper inputs should enable companies in the signatory countries to grow. Consumers should also benefit from lower prices. Furthermore, sharper competition and larger investment flows should result in welfare gains. However, certain risks, associated with tax revenue losses and adverse effects on the industrialisation process of ACP countries (due to the competition from EU imports), should not be underestimated.

Lipchitz (2007), who proposes an impact study of the introduction of EPAs, concludes that the gains from the EPAs are heterogeneous across ACP countries since middle-income ACP countries (not listed among the Least Developed Countries-LDCs), which previously did not have free access to EU markets, are able to take better advantage of these agreements than LDCs. Another impact study by Fontagné *et al.* (2010) finds that EPAs should enable ACP countries to reach a volume of exports to the EU 10% higher than that prevailing in the framework of the «Everything but Arms» agreements. However, the removal of tariff barriers on imported European goods would also imply an estimated average loss of tax revenues on imports of 25% by 2022 for ACP countries.

2|2 Reforms of domestic taxation

In order to offset the decline in government resources due to trade liberalisation, Franc Zone countries have set in motion a tax transition based primarily on the substitution of declining tariff revenue by domestic tax revenue.

2|2|1 Indirect taxation

Developing countries have been strongly recommended to lower tariffs and, in parallel, to raise consumption taxes (tax on turnover, value added tax – VAT – and excise duties). Indeed, the combination of tax and tariff reforms, which consist in offsetting point by point the fall in tariffs by an increase in consumption taxes, can be a win-win solution, raising welfare without reducing government revenue (Hatzipanayotou *et al.*, 1994; Abe, 1995; Keen and Ligthart, 2002).

Tax on turnover is an indirect tax on expenditure that applies to all operations related to consumption or the use of goods and services. This tax is a cumulative tax as it is transposed each time the good is used to produce another good. Instead, the VAT collected at various stages of the value added chain, is a deductible tax. Indeed, the VAT collected on inputs is recovered from the VAT collected on the sale of the product, before being repaid to the Treasury. However, the "credit-invoice" mechanism on which the VAT is based is somewhat limited in developing countries, because VAT credits are often repaid with considerable delay, resulting in an accumulation of arrears. Lastly, excise duties are ad valorem taxes on consumption expenditure of certain specific products (tobacco, alcohol, weapons).

Value added tax in Franc Zone countries

(%)

	Year of adoption	VAT rate
CAEMC		
Cameroon	1999	19.25
Central African Republic	2001	19
Congo	1997	18
Gabon	1995	18
Equatorial Guinea	2005	15
Chad	2000	18
WAEMU		
Bénin	1991	18
Burkina Faso	1993	18
Côte d'Ivoire	1960	18
Guinea Bissau	N/A	15
Mali	1991	18
Niger	1986	19
Senegal	1980	18
Togo	1995	18

NB: the VAT rate is that applied in 2012.
Sources: National Financial Administrations.

In WAEMU, excise duties are set according to conditions laid down at the national level, yet with due regard to the principles set out in a community Directive. The Niger, for example, imposes heavy excise duties on tobacco and alcohol, of 40% and 45% respectively. In Cameroon, excise duties on tobacco and alcohol amount to 25%.

The adoption of the VAT, often in lieu of the tax on turnover, has been a central element of the tax reforms implemented in developing countries, contributing to the change in their tax structure. While in the early 1980s, only fifteen developing countries, mainly in Latin America, had adopted the VAT, these were more than a hundred in 2011. VAT has spread geographically, within each region, mainly in countries participating in IMF programmes with initially a low tax mobilisation.

Within the Franc Zone, the adoption of the VAT has also been progressive. In 1980, only two countries, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, had introduced the VAT, while in 2000, 11 countries had adopted this system. The Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea are the two countries that have adopted the VAT most recently, in 2001 and 2005 respectively.

In most developing countries, the VAT system is based on a single rate with a high liability threshold. The adoption of a single VAT rate is underpinned by the need to simplify the accounting records and the ensuing tax controls. A high liability threshold also enables tax authorities to focus their controls on a limited number of taxpayers. It also spares the smallest companies from having to establish complex reporting requirements and only results in a marginal loss of VAT revenue due to the high concentration of the tax potential on larger companies.

In order to foster regional integration in the Franc Zone, VAT rates within CAEMC and WAEMU have converged towards a single rate. In all WAEMU countries, the VAT rate is 18%, except in Niger and Guinea Bissau. In CAEMC, the VAT rate is also 18% in the Congo, Gabon and Chad.

Keen and Lockwood (2010) find that countries having adopted the VAT have recorded an increase in their revenues, even though this effect is relatively small. The beneficial effects are heterogeneous, the largest and most open economies being those that have gained the most from adopting the VAT.

Within the Franc Zone, all of the indirect domestic tax reforms have contributed to raising government revenue derived from this form of taxation. This increase has been more pronounced in WAEMU, where the share of indirect taxes in GDP rose from 4% in the early 1980s to 6% in 2008. This trend is less obvious in CAEMC since the share of indirect domestic taxes in GDP grew by about 1.5 percentage point to 3.5% of GDP in the late 2000s. In CAEMC countries, the smaller increase in indirect domestic revenue can be attributed to the already large public revenues (of around 28.0% of GDP in 2011), mostly derived from the oil industry, which have not been an incentive for diversification.

2|2|2 Direct taxation

Contrary to indirect taxation, revenue from direct taxation has remained stable since the 1980s, mainly in WAEMU. It has ranged between 3% and 4% of regional GDP over the period. Government revenue from direct taxation in CAEMC is much higher but also more volatile notably because of the inherent instability of global oil prices. It rose from 3% of GDP in the early 1990s to close to 7% of GDP in the late 2000s. However, if one excludes the tax on oil companies, it has followed a similar pattern to that of WAEMU countries, representing approximately 3% of GDP over the period.

Direct taxes mainly include personal income taxes and the corporate income taxes. Personal income taxes apply, in particular, to wage income and different types of capital income. However, this tax has a relatively limited role in developing countries because of the very low number of persons liable to taxation, since wage income only represents a marginal share of national income.

Corporate income taxes generally represent a larger share of direct taxes in developing and Franc Zone countries, as large companies are the principal source of direct revenue from corporate taxes, mainly in CAEMC, where mining activities are predominant. In this region, the relative shares of personal income tax and corporate tax in total direct tax revenues were, for example, 18% and 82% respectively in 2005. In WAEMU, these shares were more balanced, since personal income tax and corporate tax accounted for respectively 47% and 53% of direct taxes. In some oil-producing countries, such as Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, the share of corporate tax in direct income exceeds 90%.

3| CHALLENGES AHEAD: WAYS OF STRENGTHENING TAX MOBILISATION

In the Franc Zone, the mobilisation of non-oil government revenue has hardly changed over the past 30 years. However, this relative stability masks a significant change in the composition of tax revenues: although revenues from international trade have decreased, they have been offset, in WAEMU, by a greater contribution of indirect domestic taxes and, in CAEMC, by both direct and indirect domestic taxes.

In addition, a large number of reforms have been implemented to improve the tax system and revenue mobilisation with a view to achieving the MDGs. However, there is still significant room for manoeuvre, as some Franc Zone countries do not fulfill the convergence criterion whereby tax revenues should represent at least 17% of GDP.

These axes for improvement are twofold:

- first, it seems important to continue strengthening tax administrations by computerising and improving operating procedures. A core element of these reforms is to make headway with the segmentation of taxpayer categories, initiated in several Franc Zone countries. In this framework, the segmentation into four distinct categories: micro, small, medium-sized and large enterprises, put forward by Bodin and Koukpaizan (2009), has the advantage of facilitating the taxation of companies and ensuring a better collection of both corporate tax and VAT.

- second, in order to remain fair and not base taxes on too small a number of taxpayers, it seems particularly important to broaden and balance the tax base.

The tax base could be broadened by promoting private sector development and the emergence of small and medium-sized enterprises as new taxpayers and by getting all economic sectors involved. For CAEMC countries in particular, it seems crucial to raise the tax contributions of non-oil sector companies in order to diversify the tax base, which at present depends too heavily on the oil sector alone.

In addition, rationalising existing tax exemption and relief mechanisms would enable countries to broaden their tax base and improve tax yields. Many of these exemptions, which consist of tax cuts or reductions in food and oil consumption taxes, were put in place to limit price increases but generate considerable resource losses for government budgets.

However, all of these recommendations should go hand in hand with a greater strengthening of public finance management, in particular to improve channels for executing public expenditure and to reduce waste. Indeed, it will be possible to limit tax evasion and promote tax compliance only by strengthening public finance management and financial governance.

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