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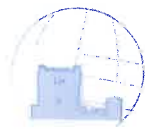
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Do politicians at central level use accounting information? Some evidence from the Portuguese case

INTRODUCTION

IPSASB's conceptual framework assumes politicians as primary users of accounting information, inasmuch as apart from citizens, i.e., «...service recipients and resource providers who do not possess the authority to require a public sector entity to disclose the information they need for accountability and decision-making purposes», «the legislature (or similar body) and members of parliament (or a similar representative body) are also primary users of GPFs, and make extensive and ongoing use of GPFs when acting in their capacity as representatives of the interests of service recipients and resource providers» (IPSASB, 2014, §2.4).

Despite acceptable, this assumption might be questioned, specifically considering whether politicians, namely parliamentarians and members of government, are real users of financial (and even of budgetary) information in their daily activities.

Subsequently, this article aims at analysing the type of information, as well as its use and usefulness, by politicians, either members of parliament or members of central government in Portugal, addressing particularly the following question:

What type of accounting (budgetary and financial) information politicians (parliamentarians and members of government) use, what is its usefulness and for what purposes?

The empirical study is based on interviews with head politicians, namely the head of the Parliamentary Commission of Budget, Finance and Public Administration (COFAP) and the Budget Secretary of State. On the other hand, interviews were also conducted with head officials of units that prepare information for politicians—the Technical Unit of Budgetary Support (UTAO) working for the Parliament, and the Budget General Department (DGO), working for the Government.

Politicians' perceptions of financial information

As representatives of citizens, and often major decision-makers, politicians are assumed as main users of financial information regarding public sector. It comes therefore important to realise which are their information needs—what type of information they use and/or ascribe more importance—and for what purposes, and above all, which is their understanding concerning that financial (including budgetary) information, regardless whether cash of accrual-based.

Several authors have analysed how the accounting practice and financial information are perceived by its users. Among those studies focusing internal users, some do not distinguish between managers and politicians, and only a very limited number tends to concentrate on distinguishing financial and non-financial information.

For example, Olson & Shalin-Andersson (1998), Guthrie et al. (1999) and Ezzamel et al. (2007) highlight the very low degree of understanding and use of financial information by the majority of politicians. They often pay more attention to non-financial information due to specific knowledge required in order to understand and use financial statements (Liguori et al., 2012); politicians are frequently referred to as

not having the capability of reading financial information (Olson & Shalin-Andersson, 1998; Ezzamel et al., 2007).

Furthermore, only a very short number of studies specifically consider politicians' perspectives, alone or comparatively to public sector managers, regarding the use and usefulness of financial information.

Brusca (1997), in a study concerning Spanish municipalities with the purpose of assessing the usefulness of financial statements (including budget accomplishment statements) for internal and external users, verified that politicians were among those users assigning lower importance to financial information, comparatively to managers. In addition, the author found that financial information was more useful to financial managers, municipal departments, Court of Accounts and creditors, even though the information reported was acknowledged as not, in fact, extensively used.

Paulsson (2006), analysing the introduction of accrual accounting in central government in Sweden, notices that accrual-based information is more used to management purposes than for public policy-making. Such findings are corroborated by Liguori et al. (2012) who showed that, apart from preferring non-financial to financial information, politicians also consider cash-based information more useful. Accordingly, accrual-based accounting is preferred by politicians because of the power it symbolises and not as a function of its real usefulness for public sector entities.

The conclusions of Buylen & Christiaens (2013) also support other previous studies indicating that accrual-based accounting is less useful for policy-making. In fact, politicians seek for financial information for controlling and monitoring governmental activities (Lapsley, 1999; Grossi & Reichard, 2009; Carvalho et al., 2012). Financial information must support the budgetary decision-making process, although often the consideration of this type of information fails or is rather disappointing (Ho, 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), due to in the political decision-making process. Therefore, many academics and practitioners are sceptical about the use for financial information for political purposes (Demaj & Summermatter, 2012; Buylen & Christiaens, 2013).

The Portuguese case

Table 1 illustrates the main users of public sector financial (including budgetary) reporting in Portugal. For the purposes of this research, the relevant users are internal. In the Central Government setting, politicians (either Government or Parliament members) are considered non-expert users, while financial officials within the Budget General Department of the Ministry of Finance (DGO), as in other financial departments of the other ministries, are considered technical experts users.

Table 1
Financial (including budgetary) information users and their needs in the Portuguese public sector context

		Experts	Non-experts
Users Groups	Internal	Financial officials (Budget and Financial-Accounting Departments within Ministries)	Politicians (members of Executive and members of Parliament)
	External	Court of Accounts (supreme audit institution) Taxation oversight authorities (IGF)	Investors Suppliers Other creditors (namely banks) Citizens (taxpayers, electors, service recipients, etc.)
Users' Needs	Information on financial position and economic performance as well as on budgetary accomplishment, of entities and of the public sector as a whole, with the general purposes of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • control • accountability • decision-making 		

The issue at the core of this research concerns the real use of financial (including budgetary) information, particularly by politicians. Twenty years after a major reform of public sector accounting in Portugal, started in the middle 1990s, introducing accrual-based financial accounting and reporting along with modified cash-based budgetary accounting and reporting, it is time to question whether this reform has made difference, namely providing more information for politicians and policy-making.

Especially due to the believed non-expertise of many politicians to deal with the complexity of financial (including budgetary) information, they often resort to technical support. In the case of the Portuguese Central Government, two technical units assume particular relevance as intermediaries with adequate expertise, so as to make budgetary and financial information more understandable by politicians, possibly contributing for its use and usefulness for debates and decision-making: the Technical Unit of Budgetary Support (UTAO - *Unidade Técnica de Apoio Orçamental*) working particularly for the Parliament, and the Budget General Department, within the Ministry of Finance (*DGO - Direção Geral do Orçamento*) working especially for the Government.

Methodology

For this study data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were based on two guiding scripts —one for the politicians and another for the technical units. Questions were prepared taking into consideration literature and public debate. The core questions related to: types of information used, resorted and prepared (e.g. sources of information politicians and technical units resort; whether the information for decision-making by politicians is within public sector entities' budgetary and financial reporting...), and uses and usefulness of information (cash/accrual, financial/budgetary, which items of information are particularly useful, why and for what purposes...).

Five interviews were conducted between March and April 2015, in Portuguese, lasting on average one hour each. Regarding technical and advisory units, three interviews were conducted to: two members of UTAO (including the respective heads of the bodies/units), and one to the Budget General Director. In respect to politicians, one was to the Budget Secretary of State and the other was to the Head of COFAP.

Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was then applied to the interviews transcripts. It was not a conventional but a directed content analysis, inasmuch as it followed the groups of topics as in the guiding script.

Main Findings

In order to reply to the main question put at the Introduction, the answers were analysed and organised considered two sub questions, as follows.

What type of budgetary and financial information is used by politicians (either parliamentarians or members of Government), for what purposes and which ones they find more useful?

Both technical intermediaries' and politicians' opinions were gathered as:

- UTAO's interviewees underlined that the users of the information they prepare (namely politicians in COFAP) are able to clearly distinguish between those reports on the budget accomplishment (cash-based micro figures) and those about National Accounts (accrual-based macro figures), and use them in two perspectives, irrespectively: the legislative process and the scrutiny of the Government's action. Users of UTAO's reports require information clearly and simply presented (short reports), using graphs, tables, etc., with comparisons to previous periods.

- DGO prepares essentially cash-based information, to be used by the Ministry of Finance to monitor macro policies, and by technical units as UTAO, for example to prepare the budget and to examine budgetary accomplishment. They otherwise acknowledge that fiscal policy objectives are settled in terms of National Accounts (accrual-based information).
- According to the Budget Secretary of State, Government uses essentially information concerning the budget accomplishment (cash-based), given that financial information from each of the public sector entities cannot be gathered and aggregated yet. In this way, neither the quality nor the comparability of such accrual-based information is assured, so cash-based information continues to be used preferentially. The information is used essentially for the purposes of monitoring the accomplishment of the Maastricht criteria, namely the public deficit. In this case, there is interaction with the National Statistics Office. As to the public debt, they also use information from the Bank of Portugal and from the governmental agency in charge of managing the public credit. Main decisions made on the basis of this information concern the scope of monitoring the budget accomplishment and taking corrective measures concerning expenditure deviations.
- As a Member of Parliament, the Head of COFAP uses only information prepared by UTAO, either from the budgetary perspective or from the National Accounts perspective. However, he thinks this information is more decisive for the political debate and the legislative process and not so much for the political decisions (policy-making). It is also important to sustain the role of the Parliament as monitoring the Executive's action.

What type of budgetary and financial information is used and prepared by technical advisory bodies, either voluntarily or at the request of politicians?

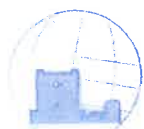
The analysis of the interviews with the technical units revealed that:

- UTAO does not use information directly from public sector entities, but information already gathered and prepared by other bodies (such as DGO and the National Statistics Office). It follows an annual activities plan, for each legislative session, which identifies a set of areas of analysis necessary to perform throughout the year. This plan is approved by COFAP and comprises at least monthly reports on the budget accomplishment, monthly notes about the public debt and analyses regarding the two annual reports in National Accounts. Users are exclusively COFAP members, although the media might also have access to these reports —they are available in COFAP's website. Sometimes, particular analyses to specific subsectors of the public sector might be performed, at the request of COFAP (e.g. Social Security, Health or Local Government), but always on the basis of aggregated data provided by the respective Ministries.

It acknowledges accrual accounting as very important for the National Accounts, but not so important for the public sector budgetary accounts, at least considering the analyses they make, at the service of COFAP, for politicians.

- DGO uses a main source of information for the budget preparation and for monitoring budgetary accomplishment – a central system fed automatically by each entity's information system. This central system is also fed in a declarative basis, inasmuch as entities with financial accounting can upload information directly. There is, however, a problem of certifying this financial information. The interviewee explained: «Our sources of information are the central system of budgetary accounting; the central system of financial accounting is used not for aggregat-





ed information, but for particular situations, and for entities individually considered».

Information prepared is essentially of cash-based nature (gathered from each entity's budgetary information). Generally, there are no specific solicitations by politicians and never directly. The National Statistics Office, who does the adjustments to pass information into the National Accounts, is also an important user of DGO's information.

From the politicians' standpoint, the type of information they use is different considering the Government and the Parliament:

- According to the Budget Secretary of State, the sources of information used by the Government are syntheses of the budgetary information, with the support of DGO's information system, added by more aggregated and simplified data prepared also by DGO, according to information needs for decision-making.
- To the Head of COFAP, Members of Parliament use almost exclusively information prepared by UTAO. Sometimes information from the National Statistics Office or from DGO might also be used, but generally, and within the scope of COFAP, after prepared and analysed by UTAO.

One interesting observation worthy to mention concerns the fact that in the technical units there are no accountants, neither people with strong training in accounting – they are economists in UTAO and some have training in budgeting, public administration and law and economics in DGO.

Conclusion

This paper discussed about the type of information, as well as its use and usefulness, by politicians. It relied on some evidence from politicians at central level, either members of Parliament or members of Central Government, in Portugal.

The discussion is particularly relevant given the fact that politicians, as citizens representatives, are, in theory, considered primary users of general purpose financial reporting, i.e., accounting information. But in practice, questions may raise concerning the real use and usefulness they do, as main users of the public sector budgetary and financial information.

Main findings allow concluding that, although there seems to be a general acknowledgement of the split cash-based/accrual-based budgetary and financial information, politicians in Central Government in Portugal give privilege to cash-based budgetary information for their use to support political debates and policy-making. Accrual-based (financial) accounting is misunderstood with ESA and the National Statistics and therefore useful essentially for supranational reporting. Finally, politicians relate financial information needs to National Accounts purposes, mainly to assess deficit and debt accomplishment under Maastricht criteria.

If such findings might be understood, given that the priority targets concerning public policies, and especially regarding fiscal policy, are assessed on the basis of National Accounts aggregates, questions may then rise concerning the need of accrual-based financial micro accounting at central level. This, yet again, seems to be understood as important to get better information for the National Accounts. It is likely that, at the organizational level (e.g. Central Government agencies) as well as at the Local Government level, findings would be different. Further research is required in order to provide additional enlightenment on this matter.

One can also conclude that the work of the technical advisory or supporting units has great contribution for the use of public sector budgetary and financial information by politicians, but it

seems also clear that these units probably need members with accounting expertise, so as accrual-based financial information might be gathered and analysed in order to be understood and used by politicians. There is a need for financial information and its potential for (public policy) decision-making to be explained to politicians, so they can become real users of accounting and financial reporting.

Moreover, it should be considered in the political debate, as an important public sector reform at central level, the relevance of the financial (accrual-based) information to management purposes at the micro level decision-making, e.g. in order to control public expenditure as well as entities' debt, as it is already done in the Local Government setting. It is also important to involve accountants in the technical process of preparing and reporting information, namely for entities' management objectives, assessing by this kind of information whether the targets each unit is supposed to achieve are being accomplished or not.

One interesting implication that seems to come from this research concerns the question that, contrarily to what is stated by IPSASB (2014), politicians as citizens' representatives might not be, after all, primary users of financial information.

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Evolução contabilística no setor público em Portugal nos últimos 20 anos

Introdução

A regulamentação contabilística em Portugal deu os seus primeiros passos com o Plano Oficial de Contabilidade (POC), cuja aplicação se prolongou por mais de 30 anos nas entidades do setor privado. Foi, ao longo desse período, objetivo de alterações várias, seja na qualidade de Estado-membro da União Europeia (U.E.) e da necessidade daí decorrente de o compatibilizar com as normas comunitárias, seja para acompanhar a evolução registada no plano internacional, fundamentalmente a protagonizada pelo *International Accounting Standard Board* (IASB). Foram também estas as razões que ditaram a sua substituição pelo Sistema de Normalização Contabilística (SNC), em 2010, um sistema que, ainda que suficientemente amplo, não é de aplicação universal. Um número significativo de serviços e entidades da esfera da Administração Pública (AP) ficaram de fora do seu âmbito de aplicação.

Recordamos que no plano contabilístico a AP deu o seu primeiro grande salto com a Reforma Administrativa e Financeira do Estado (RAFE), no início dos anos 90 do século XX, e com ela a aprovação do Plano Oficial de Contabilidade Pública (POCP), em 1997. Até então, a informação financeira preparada e disponibilizada pelos serviços e demais entidades da AP apresentava um caráter eminentemente orçamental. Porém, a evolução registada aos mais variados níveis não passou ao lado do setor público, onde fomentou o aparecimento de novas necessidades e a necessidade de modernização do seu processo de gestão. O POCP, não obstante ter representado um avanço significativo, rapidamente deixou de funcionar e se revelou incapaz para responder às necessidades do setor e das alterações sentidas ao nível da envolvente, em particular no que respeita aos acontecimentos vividos a nível internacional, no seio do *International Public Sector Accounting Standard Board* (IPSASB), com a aprovação das *International Public Sector Accounting Standard* (IPSAS), que fomentaram a necessidade de implementar sistemas e mecanismos capazes de introduzir melhorias significativas ao nível da qualidade da informação financeira. De tal maneira estas necessidades foram sentidas que a Comissão de Normalização Contabilística (CNC) deu início à elaboração de um sistema contabilístico para a AP e cujos trabalhos culminariam, em setembro de 2015, com a publicação do Sistema de Normalização Contabilística para a Administração Pública (SNC-AP).

É neste âmbito que se desenvolve este trabalho, com o objetivo de apresentar os principais resultados da revisão de literatura sobre a evolução contabilística no setor público em Portugal, permitir perceber o que aconteceu ao longo dos últimos anos e caracterizar o seu atual estágio de desenvolvimento.

1. *Over view* do normativo e papel da contabilidade em Portugal

A contabilidade surge vulgarmente classificada no campo das ciências sociais e tem no património e respetivas variações o seu objeto de estudo. Admitindo que estas ciências têm o homem por objeto, em si e relativamente aos seus atos, poder-se-á depreender que estuda a ação do homem e os seus efeitos sobre o património de uma entidade. É, por isso, uma ciência aplicada que procura utilizar o conhecimento para a solução de problemas concretos (Schwes, 1991). Porém, a sua qualidade de ciência social coloca-a perante a necessidade de assumir a existência de condicionalismos decorrentes da sua natureza e que são suficientemente capazes de poderem comprometer uma interpretação e aplicação isenta do conhecimento disponível porque a procura de soluções para problemas concretos exige uma interpretação que é pessoal e, por isso, condicionada e influenciada pelos valores de quem a interpreta e pelas características dos agentes envolvidos. Digamos que o processo de interpretação do conhecimento contabilístico é conjecturado porque as soluções contabilísticas respondem às necessidades sociais e são por estas simultaneamente influenciadas. Neste sentido, a ideia de que a informação financeira deve ser igualmente útil para um conjunto alargado de utilizadores com interesses diversos não parece dispor de grande sustentação, não obstante ser sistematicamente enjeitada pela teoria (Pires e Rodrigues, 2012). No dizer de Kerlinger (1980), a interpretação da ciência contabilística permite também depreender que diferentes teorias conduzem a diferentes interpretações e, conseqüentemente, a resultados não inteiramente coincidentes.

Por sua vez, na sequência de um longo percurso levado a cabo pela União Europeia (U.E.) e fundamentado na necessidade de eliminar a diversidade de práticas contabilísticas existentes assistiu-se, por parte dos diferentes Estados-membros, à reforma dos seus sistemas contabilísticos na sequência da necessidade de fazer cumprir o preceituado no Regulamento 1606/2002, do Parlamento Europeu e do Conselho. Genericamente, este Regulamento veio introduzir a obrigatoriedade de aplicação do referencial do *International Accounting Standard* (IASB), as *International Accounting Standards/International Financial Reporting Standards* (IAS/IFRS) por parte das empresas cotadas e, nessa circunstância, a necessidade de buscar uma solução convergente para as demais entidades de forma a assegurar a existência de um sistema contabilístico de aplicação vertical, suficientemente capaz de garantir a comparabilidade e assegurar a redução do custo de preparação da informação financeira suportado pelas empresas. Surge assim o SNC, em sintonia com o normativo internacional e em coerência com os principais instrumentos de harmonização contabilística comunitários. Esta reforma, ainda que fortemente inspirada pelas normas que a sustentam, as IAS/IFRS, surge no quadro dos fatores que caracterizam a envolvente em Portugal, nomeadamente no que respeita às características do tecido empresarial, maioritariamente formado por pequenas e muito pequenas empresas. É que, não obstante o facto de se assistir à defesa crescente da ideia de que a contabilidade está perante a oportunidade de se tornar numa ciência informativa e de apoio ao processo de tomada de decisão (Cunha e Silva, 2013), a verdade é que o tecido empresarial português é maioritariamente formado por empresas de pequena dimensão que tendem a olhar para a contabilidade como um meio de utilização simples e privilegiado para o cálculo e pagamento dos impostos e demais obrigações fiscais, e não tanto como um importante instrumento de apoio ao processo de tomada de decisão (Pires e Rodrigues, 2011).

