Toward more open aid: aid transparency in Australia's Open Government Partnership National Action Plan

A submission in response to the Australian government's call for public comment on a draft version of Australia's first Open Government Partnership National Action Plan

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The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is an approximate contemporary of the [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#) (IATI) and shares with it an emphasis on concrete, time-bound commitments, peer accountability and technology. IATI has received strong support from major donor countries and organisations, and has regularly figured in G7 and G20 communiqués. Unsurprisingly, some countries' OGP actions plans, including those of the [US](#), [UK](#) and [Canada](#), have included aid transparency commitments and references to IATI. Australia's first action plan, in its present draft form, does not. I argue that it should.

Aid transparency

Under the Gillard Labor government, the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) operated in accordance with a [Transparency Charter](#). This took [effect](#) in November 2011 and led to some real improvements, particularly in the amount of information on country programs which was made available via AusAID's web site—though a Development Policy Centre [transparency audit](#) conducted around that time found that much of the improvement was the result of a one-off information 'dump' following the publication of the Charter. When the government changed two years later, and AusAID was integrated into DFAT, the Charter disappeared from view. It was not explicitly rejected, just no longer mentioned.

Reassuringly, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said not long after the election of the Coalition government in November 2013 that she wanted to see even higher levels of aid transparency than had been achieved under Labor. In reality, though, aid transparency was placed on a backburner. It did not figure at all in the list of performance benchmarks for the aid program which appeared in June 2014. The aid policy framework which appeared at the same time said just the following:

> We are committed to high standards of transparency and accountability in the management of the Australian aid program. We will give effect to this commitment through publishing information on the aid program on the DFAT website, including policies, plans, results, evaluations and research. … Australia will fully participate in the International Aid Transparency Initiative.

Unlike its interest in membership of the OGP, the government's interest in 'open aid' was not noticeably altered by the change of leadership in 2015. The Transparency Charter, or more importantly the set of commitments contained in it, stayed—at best— on the backburner.

This backtracking on aid transparency has had predictable impacts. The broad commitments contained in the present aid policy framework, as quoted above, are far less demanding than those contained in the charter, despite the fact that the charter occupied only one page. In particular, there is now no commitment to comprehensiveness and timeliness in the publication of information, nor to the provision of information that is reasonably detailed with respect to each activity and in 'a format that is useful and accessible'. In addition, there is now no commitment to publish annual, quantitative transparency targets.

In short, the aid policy framework adopted in 2014 permitted the partial and slow publication of information, as well as the publication of information in obscure and unusable forms. And what was permitted to happen did happen. Stephen Howes, Director of the Development Policy Centre, has highlighted aspects of the aid transparency decline decline here, here and here. An exploration of DFAT's web site shows that for the most part it contains less information on aid activities than it used to. Much of the information to be found there is old. And the one stream of seemingly quite

comprehensive data that is published there—in line with the IATI reporting standard—is published only in an indigestible (that is, raw Extensible Markup Language) format, with no accompanying tools to make sense of it. A second Development Policy Centre transparency audit, soon to be published, confirms the above observations. It finds that while there have been some improvements in specific areas, there has been a general decline in the availability of project-level documentation since 2013.

It appears, in fact, that DFAT's claim to across-the-board aid transparency, as opposed to transparency in selected areas, now depends almost exclusively on the argument that Australia 'fully participates' in IATI.[1] However, for reasons I have set out in detail here and here, that is a poor argument. Essentially, in the absence of genuinely useful global IATI data portals, the Australian government cannot claim much credit for its IATI reporting unless it puts in place a dedicated data portal that allows people to make sense of the information that it is releasing. This could be done at almost no incremental cost, because other international development agencies—most notably the UK Department for International Development—have gone down this path and have made their portal designs freely available. Yet it has not been done. This is something of mystery. It can only be assumed that DFAT faces no incentives to act.

An important further point is that, at present, it is not possible to know what 'fully participates in IATI' means. DFAT has at no point revealed whether all aid activities are now covered by IATI reporting—there is, for example, nothing about this in its 2015-16 Annual Report. In addition, DFAT has made no commitments in connection with

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[1] Sometimes DFAT also refers to the availability of activity-level information via the OECD's Creditor Reporting System. This does provide a useful historical perspective on expenditures and commitments but data appear with a lag of some two years and comprise only financial information and brief activity descriptions.

reporting frequency.[2] As noted [here](#) and [here](#), the regular aid transparency assessments conducted by the organisation Publish What You Fund have [consistently found](#) Australia's performance to be no more than 'fair', the equivalent of a C grade, owing to the partial and sporadic nature of its reporting. They have called for monthly reporting and have also highlighted the absence of a dedicated data portal.

OGP commitments

Against the above background, it is disappointing yet unsurprising that the draft Australian OGP action plan has nothing to say about transparency in the administration of Australia's aid program. It refers to the aid program only by way of referring to Australia's role in helping developing countries in the Asia-Pacific to develop and implement open-government policies.

One could perhaps take the view that DFAT, as administrator of the aid program, should not be singled out for special mention in a document that relates to the operations of all Australian government agencies. But there is reason to single out DFAT, and there are international precedents for doing so. The aid program is run mostly offshore and well out of sight. It should therefore be held to particularly high standards of transparency in order to ensure accountability to both taxpayers and putative beneficiaries.

The latter point, about the interests of the beneficiaries of aid, is particularly important. A fundamental reason for creating IATI was to help developing country governments and their citizens understand how foreign aid is being spent in their countries. Some developing countries, such as [Myanmar](#), have been able to create their own IATI data portals in order to have better information on incoming aid. Simply holding

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[2] We do know, from [this](#) slightly informative source, that the number of past and present activities covered by some kind of IATI activity report roughly doubled to about 10,000 around the beginning of 2016. Even this positive information is nowhere highlighted by DFAT itself.

development assistance agencies to the same standards of transparency as their domestic counterparts does nothing to further this end.

Moreover, as noted at the outset, Australia would not be alone if it were to include IATI-related commitments in its first OGP National Action Plan. For example, the UK government, which has now published three biennial OGP action plans since 2011, gave much prominence to aid transparency commitments in the first two, the second of which is linked in the opening paragraph of this submission. (The UK's third action plan doesn't contain such commitments for the simple reason that the earlier, quite demanding ones have been met.)

What, then, might an appropriate set of Australian aid transparency commitments look like? In a high-level document of this nature, it is not feasible to specify detailed targets and actions. However, a small number of broad commitments might be considered, and there is no reason not to reference IATI explicitly. Specifically, the Australian government might consider the following several commitments:

1. *to report no less than bi-monthly on all aid activities according to the IATI Standard by <date>, and to include data or links as applicable in relation to all significant, non-sensitive categories of project information and documentation;*

2. *to put in place by <date> an Australian aid information portal, similar to those already created by a number of other international development agencies, enabling interested parties easily to access and manipulate IATI information on Australian aid activities; and*

3. *to report annually, via DFAT annual reports or whole-of-aid-program performance reports, on progress against the above commitments, and at the same time to publish revised targets for subsequent years where deemed necessary.*

Or, if a single commitment were deemed more appropriate for a domain so relatively niche as overseas aid, then:

To have put in place by <date> an aid information reporting regime and related access portal that ensures the timely public availability of full and clear financial information and non-sensitive project documentation relating to all Australian aid activities.

Commitments of this nature are almost costless. They would give substance to the foreign minister's stated but unfulfilled desire to see Australia's aid program exceed the levels of transparency achieved under previous administrations. Most importantly, they would help improve the quality and relevance of Australia's aid by allowing researchers, commentators and developing country governments to see, in something like real time, how Australian aid is being used. Well-informed external scrutiny is at least as important as good internal quality assurance arrangements for improving aid effectiveness.

Recommendation

I recommend at a minimum the inclusion in Australia's National Action Plan of something close to the short-form IATI-related commitment outlined immediately above.

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