

The urgent need for an Australian aid transparency reset

by Huiyuan Liu and Terence Wood

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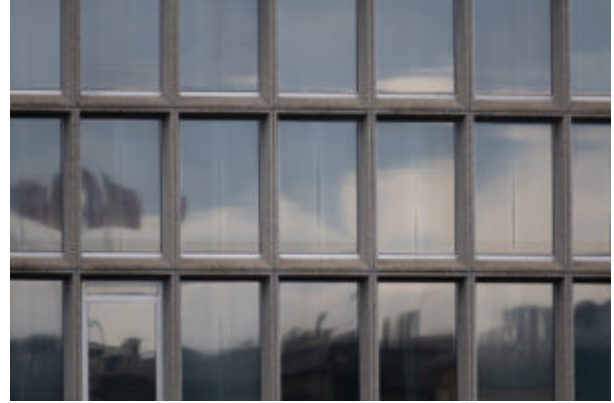


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Aid transparency matters. Transparency makes it easier to hold donor and recipient governments to account. It can help steer aid efforts. And it can contribute to more effective aid.

Since 2013, the [Development Policy Centre](#) has audited the transparency of the Australian government aid program every three years. We have just released our [2022 transparency audit](#).

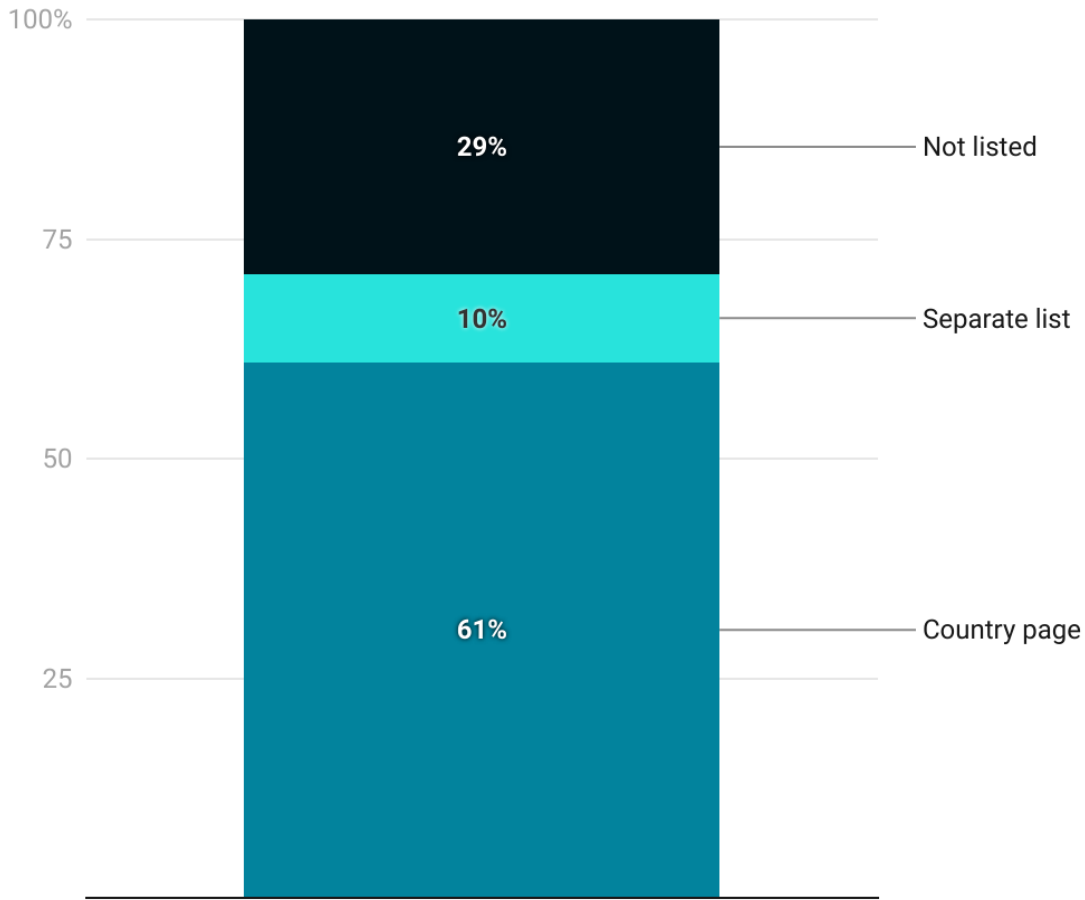
The 2022 audit's findings are worrying. Although the aid program performs quite well in some areas, most aspects of aid transparency have deteriorated since 2019, and overall transparency is now very low.

The 2022 audit uses the same methodology as our previous audits (in [2019](#), [2016](#), and [2013](#)), and is focused on how much useful information the aid program makes available on [its website](#). Much of the audit focuses on a sample of mostly large country and regional programs (the countries and regions are the same as in previous years).

The audit's central findings cover several key aspects of aid transparency.

First, for each of the country and regional programs that we covered, we looked at how many of their projects (over \$1 million) are listed on the [country pages of the aid program website](#). We found that the aid program currently lists about 61% of its projects on the country pages. It lists more projects on a [separate project list](#) (a new initiative, which we discuss below). However, even when projects on the additional list were included, project coverage only rose to about 71%. Nearly 30% of projects over \$1 million, for the countries we covered, aren't detailed in any way on the aid program's website.

Figure 1: Percentage of projects covered on aid program web pages, 2022

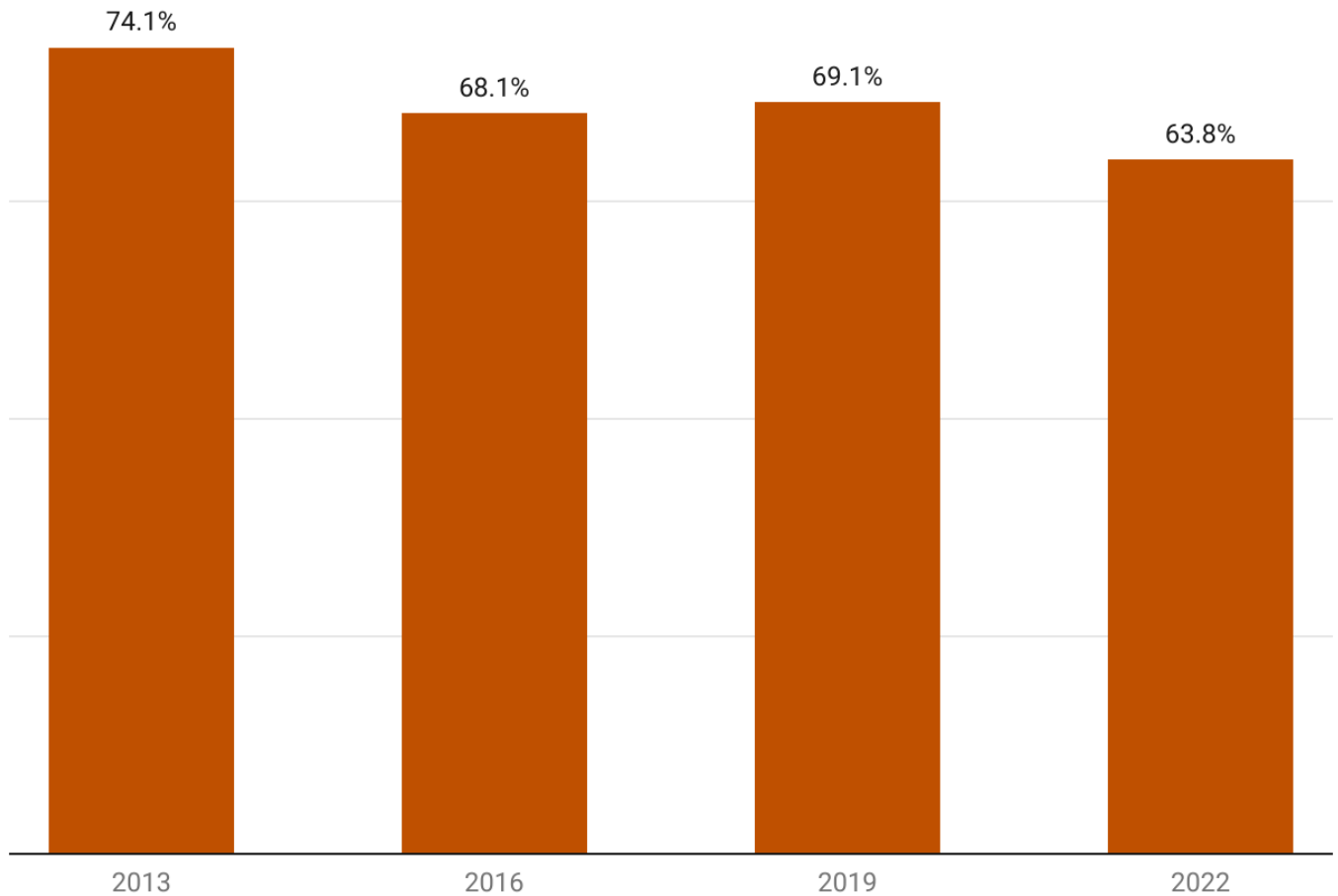


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Second, we assessed the availability of basic information (description, dates, budget, and previous expenditure) for those aid projects that were listed on the country and regional pages of the aid program website. This type of transparency was still quite high in 2022; however, it is falling, including between 2019 and 2022.

Figure 2: Availability of basic project information

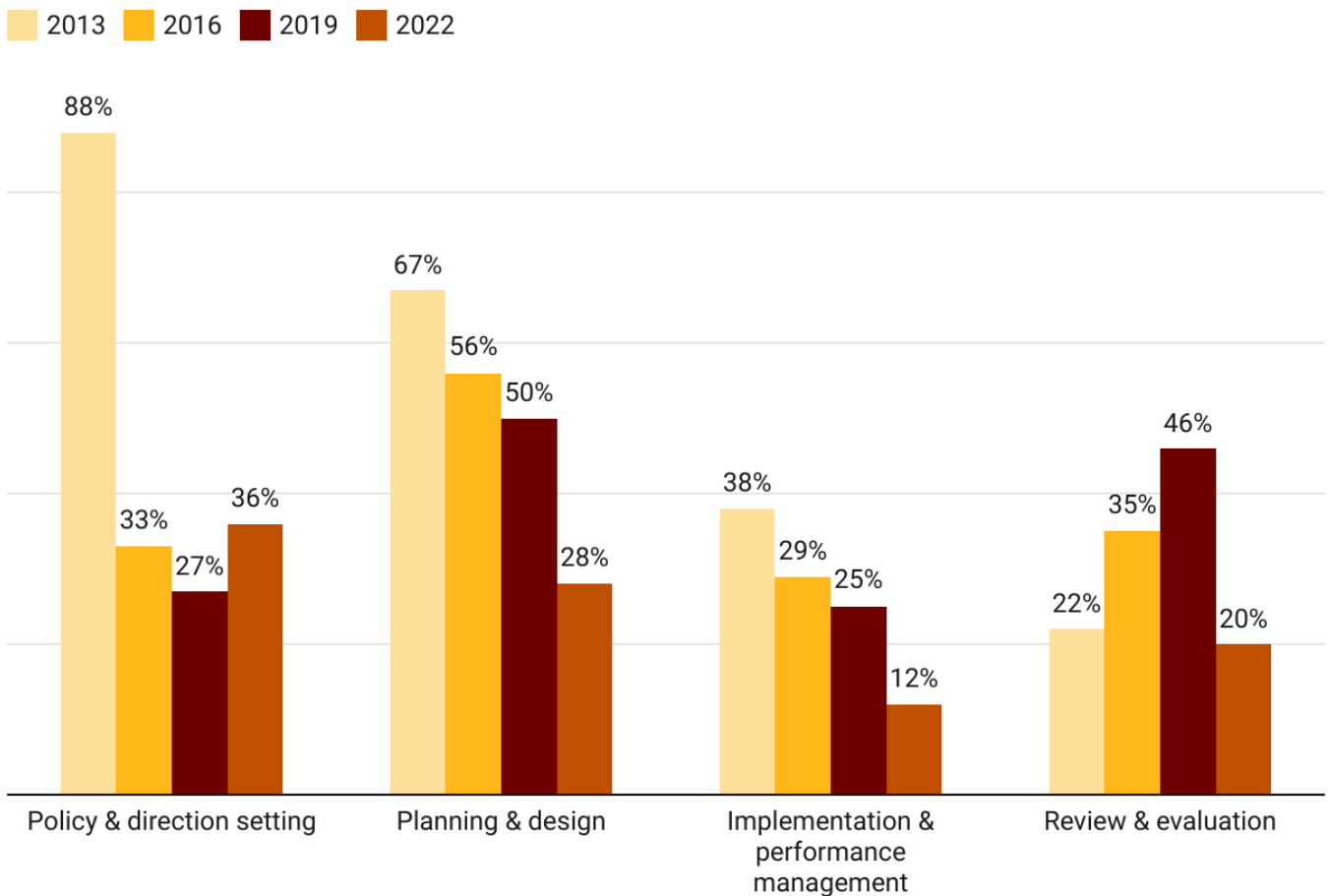
Average availability across information types



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Third, we assessed the availability of detailed documentation about aid projects. In particular, we looked for information providing a full picture across the aid project cycle – ranging from project planning documents to reviews and evaluations. As can be seen in Figure 3, between 2019 and 2022 transparency became worse in three of the four document types we covered. Over the last decade, transparency has become worse in all areas, and is now very low throughout all aspects of the aid cycle. From a transparency perspective this is not in any way adequate.

Figure 3: Availability of detailed project information throughout the project cycle



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Finally, we assessed the extent to which the aid program has made high-level aid budget data available on its website, either on budget night or shortly thereafter. We reported on this for the first time in the 2022 audit, but were able to track this aspect of transparency back to 2012-13. Here, the news is more positive. Despite missing some key information in recent years, the aid program has done a reasonable job of making at least some key data available around budget night every year from 2012-13 to 2022-23. The aid program also continues to make spreadsheets of historical aid data available, which is very useful.

In addition to the positive findings on the release of budget data, it was also encouraging to see that the aid program has partially followed one of the recommendations of our 2019 audit, and now makes a single list of almost all aid projects costing between \$3 million and \$10 million available on its website. (This is the list mentioned above.) This list would be better if it covered all projects regardless of size, and at present it is unclear how often it is being updated. But it's a potentially useful start.

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Despite these positive aspects, the overall findings of the 2022 audit are worrying. In its 2020 (and most recent) [performance framework](#), DFAT committed to, “[Improved transparency aligned with the ANU Development Policy Centre aid transparency audit methodology](#).” Yet, application of that methodology shows that transparency was worse in almost all areas in 2022 than in any other year we have audited.

COVID-19 almost certainly explains some of the poor performance in 2022, but it doesn’t explain all of it. And it cannot explain the broader trends of deterioration that predated the pandemic.

In his speech to the 2022 election policy forum, [Pat Conroy said](#) that a Labor government would work to improve transparency and accountability in the aid program. Our 2022 audit highlights an urgent need to do exactly this.

Moving forward, we believe that the transparency of the Australian aid program can improve with the following changes.

At a political level, the new government should demonstrate a commitment to aid transparency through a clear statement of what it expects from the aid program – something similar to the previous Labor government’s Aid Transparency Charter.

A transparency unit within DFAT should also be established, to monitor and promote aid transparency. Its responsibilities should include: advocating for higher transparency internally; educating staff about transparency requirements; investigating impediments to transparency in the current aid management approach; and working on transparency solutions.

In addition, the government should increase the number of staff working on aid management, to reduce time pressure and enable staff to undertake the necessary tasks that are needed to ensure transparency – including the small ones such as putting existing documents online.

Australian aid transparency is inadequate. In most areas it has been getting worse. Yet with political will, and changes to the process of managing Australian aid, it can be made much better. Now is the time to act.

Read the full report [‘2022 Australian aid transparency audit’](#).

Disclosures:

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Author/s:

Huiyuan Liu

Huiyuan (Sharon) Liu is a research officer at the Development Policy Centre, working in the area of labour mobility.

Terence Wood

Terence Wood is a Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. His research focuses on political governance in Western Melanesia, and Australian and New Zealand aid.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/aid-transparency-audit-20221004/>