

Aid transparency hits a new low

by Stephen Howes
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It used to be very hard to get information about the Australian aid program. When I was researching the Kalimantan Forests and Climate Partnership a couple of years ago I noticed that the design document for this project was nowhere to be seen on any Australian government web site. If it had been, it would have been clear to all that the line taken in the PR materials that were up on the web about this project were fundamentally misleading: the project had in fact been downsized to a tiny fraction of its originally intended size.

Since then the Australian aid program has come a long way. In 2012, under the newly adopted Transparency Charter, the government started routinely placing aid project documentation on the web. The system didn't work perfectly. We did an [audit](#) last year, and gave a critical review. Still, much more data was made available than before, and it would have been easy to build on a decent start, and make the availability of project data both comprehensive and up-to-date.

We were very surprised on budget night this year to find out not only that the Blue Book (the aid budget statement) had been done away with, but that all the project information had been removed from the DFAT aid website. Oddly, you could still search for and find particular projects if you knew their name using an external search engine, but all the pathways within the aid program's website had been removed.

We reckoned it was a temporary measure, and thought little of it. But that was in May. And now we are in June, more than a month later, and the project data is still missing. We asked DFAT, and have been told that the links to the project pages were regarded as being out of date following the release of the 2014-15 budget and that individual project pages would be progressively re-linked following the release of the new development policy by the Foreign Minister tomorrow.

Frankly, this is ridiculous. The strategy might be under revision, but the projects are still being implemented. Why hide the design documents and progress reports of these projects? Why not release the new links when they are ready to be made public, rather than taking the old ones down and leaving a vacuum?

What benefit has been gained by removing the project information for a month? And how long will it take it put the project data back?

This weekend, Julie Novak at the IPA [called](#) for the government "to establish fiscal transparency online portals outlining spending activities in real time." I could not

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agree more. Aid transparency, and the timely release of aid documentation, should by now be routinised. It should not be interrupted every time there is a change of government and the need for a new strategy.

Shortly after becoming Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop **said**: “As transparent as AusAID has been, we can be more transparent.” I hope that the new aid strategy to be released tomorrow (June 18) contains a strong commitment to transparency. There is by now considerable ground to be made up.

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