DEVPOLICYBLOG

Aid transparency: how to track Australian aid to activity level

By Robin Davies
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The Development Policy Centre has noted at various times an overall reduction in the level of information available on Australian aid since the integration of the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in late 2013.

A fair-sounding response is that Australia, as stated on DFAT's website, is a member in good standing of the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), which means that it publishes detailed and up-to-date information at the level of individual activities according to the IATI Standard. There are, however, several large problems with this response.

One is that the organisation Publish What You Fund has, whether fairly or not, rated Australia's IATI implementation plan as 'unambitious' (see discussion here). It also found Australia's overall performance on aid transparency to be only 'fair' in both its 2014 and 2016 comparative assessment exercises (the 2016 Aid Transparency Index has just been launched), scoring Australia under 50% in both years, but at least noting a modest improvement from 2014 to 2016. In the 2016 assessment, 10 governments and organisations with 'very good' ratings scored above 80%, and another nine with 'good' ratings scored above 60%. These assessments have commented particularly on the absence of information on implementing organisations, sub-national locations, forward-looking activity budgets and project documents, and on inconsistent publication of performance information.

One point not made in the Publish What You Fund assessments is that DFAT is not very transparent about transparency. It says neither on its website nor in its latest Annual Report how often it reports data in line with the IATI standard. It's clearly less than monthly, as Publish What You Fund has just, in its 2016 assessment, called for Australia to

report monthly. DFAT also gives no indication of how complete the coverage of the data it publishes is. Judging from this IATI publisher profile, DFAT does seem to have been reporting progressively more to IATI, with a notable spike in March 2016, but it's not telling anybody about this, or saying what exactly it is reporting.

Another problem is that DFAT, to date, has not rendered its published IATI data easily accessible through its own website. It has provided no tools at all, no matter how crude, for mining the data that it publishes. If you click optimistically on the one link provided to Australia's published data, you just get a long list of obscurely labelled links to data files in Extensible Markup Language (XML) format, thus:

XML is a *lingua franca* for machines, not people. DFAT's approach stands in stark contrast with that of the UK Department for International Development (DFID). DFID's Development Tracker website is a full-blown portal for accessing the IATI data that DFID publishes every month. After only three clicks you are able to view clearly presented, project-level information on UK aid to any country. With two more clicks, you are able to read project-related documents such as these 25 documents on a 'forest governance, markets and climate' project in Indonesia.

But the biggest problem with Australia's 'we publish to the IATI Standard' defence is arguably not one of Australia's own making. It is that, despite the relative prominence of the IATI initiative, which was created back in 2008, the IATI Registry is just that: a registry, not a database, let alone a database that can easily be queried and drawn upon to produce digestible information. The IATI secretariat, it should be acknowledged, has created a so-called 'Datastore' that sucks in information nightly from the many and varied places where it has been put by reporting organisations. In addition, it provides a crude Query Builder tool that can be used to query the datastore and produce raw collections of data in comma-separated values (CSV) format, though this must be laboriously cleaned up using Excel before it can be drawn upon to produce tables and charts.

Despite the efforts of the IATI secretariat to make publishers' data somewhat accessible, IATI is really premised on the assumption that third parties or reporting organisations themselves will build decent data portals. However, few have obliged. Several third-party attempts are now defunct. In fact, the link that promises to take you to such portals from the IATI website is currently broken, as are most of the links on this Aidtransparency.ca web page. One flashy-sounding portal is currently in development—the IATI Studio. Promised for a while now, this is scheduled [pdf] to appear at some point quite soon.

A current and functioning third-party portal, not confined to IATI data, is provided by AidData, but is not easy to use. Another, which has a level of IATI endorsement, is d-portal.org (this also draws on data from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System). It's a little clunky, but quite useful. You have to decide whether you are primarily interested in a certain recipient or a certain donor, then you narrow your queries from there. For example, this query gives you a list of the major recipients of Australian aid and allows you to click on each recipient in order to drill down to specific activities. Here's a screen shot of what you get:

CRS	COUNTRY	<	IATI SPEND (AUD)			IATI BUDGET (AUD)	>
2013	NAME		2013	2014	2015	2015 allocated	2015 total
	998		1,445,777,547	1,355,659,937	988,911,206	1,020,701,734	0
808,447,420	Indonesia		521,224,245	598,794,339	173,137,798	521,162,571	375,038,249
664,601,763	Papua New Guinea		483,811,432	553,389,870	328,839,312	491,362,523	566,651,678
322,809,964	Solomon Islands		209,785,782	215,434,868	49,358,517	198,031,878	180,865,880
211,145,412	Viet Nam		156,544,846	186,433,808	61,828,171	162,483,188	92,019,483
154,698,377	Afghanistan		173,682,503	164,544,276	23,770,349	144,957,113	83,626,159
206,480,560	Philippines		197,340,019	159,169,361	51,870,400	140,943,522	86,185,099
74,096,239	Vanuatu		66,397,656	133,332,650	33,463,742	114,616,350	62,335,778
98,237,824	Myanmar		107,354,391	119,829,985	36,382,325	104,767,754	61,926,348
152,037,726	Timor-Leste		119,257,603	119,344,267	46,605,709	92,548,917	96,113,787

The results are sometimes messy, owing both to limitations of the portal and coding errors on the part of DFAT. For example, the largest recipient of Australian aid is '998' which, when you follow the link, turns out to be a code referring to all activities that do not fall under country programs. And, when browsing the list of Australian aid activities in Indonesia, you trip over various activities that clearly belong elsewhere, including some programs of support for Myanmar.

Nevertheless, the results are often interesting. To give just one example, there is an activity under the 998 heading titled with commendable candidness, 'Community Detention of Irregular Maritime Arrivals'. This is shown to have consumed a total of $277 million in 2013-14. While we knew that an amount of $375 million had been allocated in each of the 2012–13 and 2013–14 financial years for costs associated with asylum seekers in the Australian community (not those in institutions), no information has been made public on how or to what extent these funds were spent. It is quite unclear what the $277 million figure buried in the relevant XML file represents, but $277 million is not $375 million, and there has been no indication that the Department of Immigration and Border Protection refunded any unspent monies to DFAT, despite an acknowledged risk of under-expenditure. This is just one example, which happens to be of interest to the author, but many other questions might equally be asked of the data available via d-portal.org, even if not always satisfactorily answered.

So, ask away. [Here](), again, is the general d-portal link and [here](), again, is the useful generic query on Australian aid which is linked above. Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that DFAT will not continue to leave the grunt-work of aid transparency to third parties, and will get around to putting in place a portal that allows people to access and make sense of the information that it is reporting in line with the IATI Standard. Publish What You Fund has insistently [recommended]() this course of action, which would no doubt help improve Australia's performance in the Aid Transparency Index. DFID has helpfully made the source code for its own portal freely available [here](). It shouldn't be so devilishly hard for DFAT to adapt this free good.

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