



Australian aid transparency: Coalition yet to deliver

By Stephen Howes
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Not long after the last election, on 7 November 2013, Julie Bishop [said](#): “As transparent as AusAID has been, we can be more transparent; as open, we can be more open; as effective, we can be more effective.” She said she wanted “as much openness ... as possible.”

Two and a half years on, what has happened? Has the aid program become more transparent under the Coalition? There has been some progress over the last couple of years after an [initial sharp reversal](#). The [Blue Book](#) [pdf] has come back (recoloured as orange), and this provides some useful consolidated data. But I’ve always thought that what really matters for transparency is concrete, unvarnished information about specific activities and relationships. And while the new integrated aid website has been populated with some documents, overall transparency does not seem to have improved.

Here is an illustration, which I have selected because it concerns our biggest aid project to our biggest aid recipient, the PNG Transport Sector Support Program, worth about \$400 million between 2014 to 2019. Go to the DFAT website and look up transport aid to PNG and you will find [this](#):

Transport Sector Support Program

Phase 2: Up to \$400 million, 2014-2019

The PNG-Australia Transport Sector Support Program (TSSP) has been the primary Australian Government investment in transport infrastructure in PNG since 2007. The shared long term development goal of PNG and Australia for TSSP is a safe, reliable transport system that enables economic and social development in PNG. The majority of TSSP funding is spent on roads through the National Department of Works, directly assisting it to maintain sections of the core network of 16 National Priority Roads.

In 2014, the program entered its second phase, under which the focus is shifting to supporting larger, more complex highway rehabilitation projects for economically important roads, while handing more responsibility for routine road maintenance to the PNG Government. TSSP funding is also directed to assist aviation and maritime transport services to consistently move towards compliance with international safety and security standards. To deliver more integrated Australian assistance and to improve oversight and coordination, the Program also includes inputs delivered through the Strongim Gavman Program, and the Australia-PNG Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Transport Sector.

Related documents*

Name of document	Year published	Type
Australia-PNG Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Transport Sector	2010	Memorandum of understanding
Design and Implementation Framework	2013	Design

Related links

- [PNG-Australia Transport Sector Support Program](#) ↗

Note the links to two documents. One is a 2010 MOU, of unclear current relevance, between the two countries' transport departments. The other document is from January 2013, and provides the design (though not the budget) for the above-mentioned \$400 million project. And then there is a link to the [website](#) for the same project, which is glossy, but light on documents. As far as I can tell, it has no project reports either.

So, a \$400 million project, with one design document, three and a half years old, and a few announcements.

We can compare this to the situation prior to the Coalition coming to office for the same project by using the very useful [web.archive.org](#) tool. I went back to its 15 August 2013 snapshot of the web as a record of what things were like just before the Coalition came to power. [Here](#) it is for PNG transport:

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Transport Sector Support Program

Overview

The Transport Sector Support Program is the main initiative for the sector, with annual expenditure of \$25 million. The Program aims to assist the PNG Government to improve governance, capacity and service delivery in transport infrastructure agencies and helps to fund the maintenance of infrastructure. At the same time, Australia is encouraging the PNG Government to take on more responsibility and funding for infrastructure maintenance. The program currently works with the land, maritime and aviation transport sub-sectors.

The current phase of the program is scheduled to end in 2012, and it is expected to move straight into another five-year phase. Support to the sector is required over the long-term.

Related links (external websites)

Roads
[Department of Works](#)
Aviation
[PNG Air Services Ltd](#)
[Civil Aviation Safety Authority](#)
Maritime
[PNG Ports Corporation Ltd](#)
[National Maritime Safety Authority](#)
Planning
[Department of National Planning & Monitoring](#)

Results to date

- In 2011, 16 separate achieved safety certification.
- In 2011 maintenance was carried out on 2000km of national roads.
- 2011 and 2012 budget submissions were recognised by central agencies as being of a high quality and were well-coordinated.
- In 2010 maintenance activities were conducted on a total of 2,153 km of roads resulting in a higher number of roads in good condition.
 - The percentage of national priority roads in good condition stood at 48 per cent in 2010 compared with 39 per cent in 2009.
 - The percentage of roads in poor condition has decreased from 21 per cent in 2009 to 11 per cent in 2010.
- The budget appropriations reflect greater alignment with Government and Partnership priorities.

Progress

Current Stage

Documents

The following documents describe in more detail the Transport Sector Support Program initiative*. Documents are uploaded as the initiative progresses. Find out [more about the aid management cycle](#) and the documents you can expect to find.

1. Policy & Direction Setting	2. Plan & Design	3. Implementation & Performance Management	4. Review & Evaluation
PNG-Australia Partnership for Development	Transport Sector Support Program Concept Design Document (PDP 84/06) (external website)	Transport Program Annual Plan 2011 (PDP 85/06) (external website)	
Schedule to the Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership for Development, Priority outcome 3: Transport Infrastructure		Transport Program Monitoring Report (PDP 85/06) (external website)	
Joint final statement between Australia and PNG		Annual Program Performance Report 2010, Papua New Guinea	
Papua New Guinea Annual Program Performance Report 2011			

*AusAID is committed to publishing documents and data concerning Australia's official development assistance in a way that is comprehensive, accessible and current. Information published on the Papua New Guinea Program is currently not complete and further initiatives will be added over the course of the next few months. The AusAID practice will be to publish documents once finalised and where appropriate after the partner government and any other partners directly involved in the delivery of the initiative have been consulted. Not all material published on this site is created by AusAID and therefore not all documents reflect the views of the Australian Government. In limited circumstances some information may be withheld for reasons including privacy and commercial sensitivity. An important objective of the Transparency Initiative is to promote broad-based understanding, analysis and discussion of aid issues and to inform the future delivery of Australia's aid program.

Last reviewed: 5 April, 2012

One could find then, apart from some general documents, the design (though from 2005), but also an annual plan (though only for 2011) and a monitoring report (though only for January-June 2011).

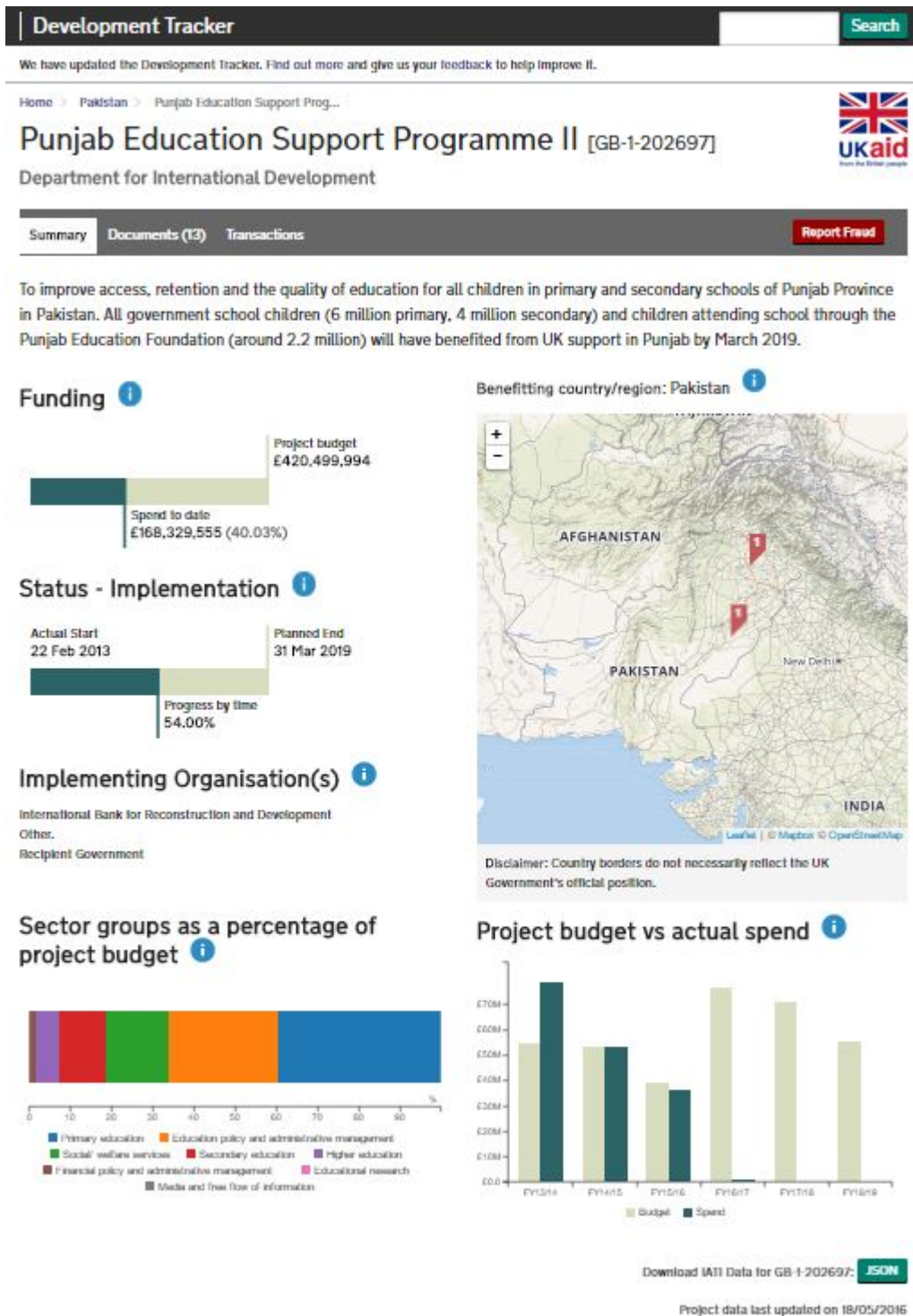
So, document availability was not crash hot under Labor, but better in this case than under the Coalition. For completeness — at least for this case — I should mention that useful remarks about many projects can be found in the annual country portfolio reviews.

According to the latest [PNG annual review](#), the PNG transport project is going very well. Such synthetic, summary information is important, but no substitute for project-level data.

Admittedly, this is only one example, though it is an important one: the biggest project for our biggest aid recipient. We did a [transparency audit](#) in 2013, and found pretty mediocre performance by Labor relative to its own Transparency Charter. We found that while two-thirds of projects had a design document on the web, only just over one-third had a project report. And on average, project reports and reviews were two years old. We haven't yet done a transparency audit for the Coalition. Some other PNG projects are better documented, especially in the area of governance, though there is no mention there of the new mega Governance Facility, which is about to take over from transport as the biggest PNG project, even though the tender has already been awarded. The most recent PNG health monitoring or evaluation report is from 2013, and there are no education reports, only three plans from 2010 and 2011. Perhaps other countries provide better documentation, but I noticed, for example, that the Indonesia website has only one monitoring or evaluation report dated 2015 and none from this year.

If there have been improvements, they have been patchy, leaving major holes of missing or out-of-date information still to be filled in. One positive is that perhaps more evaluation documents are now published, including through [this](#) useful list (though strangely I couldn't find an evaluation of the first PNG transport project, despite the fact that the second is now well underway).

In the meantime, other countries have moved streets ahead in terms of transparency. If we want to be “as open as possible” we need to look not only at the historical record but at other countries, as it is international performance that sets the benchmark. Take DFID, and their largest aid recipient, Pakistan. DFID's biggest project to Pakistan is in Punjab for education. The [Punjab education project page](#) is shown below:



It has 13 documents attached to it, the most recent a February 2016 review. Moreover, and unlike their Australian counterparts, the DFID project pages provide clear information on how much has been spent on the project, both in the current year and in earlier years. The DFID Development Tracker is an IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative) portal, and draws both the annual information expenditure and the various documents from the project

information that DFID publishes to IATI. Australia reports the same budgetary information to IATI (not documents apparently), but has not developed a user-friendly portal. In theory, as Robin Davies [explained](#), you can use a generic portal to search for this Australian spending data, but it's far from easy, and, since the government is not making the data easily available to the public, hard to know how reliable it is. (Robin points to some major problems with the Australian IATI data he unearthed: Myanmar programs classified under Indonesia, for example.)

So, here we are, three years on, with still a poor performance on aid transparency, in a context in which other donors are moving ahead rapidly.

Let's hope that if the Coalition is returned, Julie Bishop makes transparency a second-term priority, for example, by making performance in this area one of the aid program's performance benchmarks. And that, if Labor win office, Tanya Plibersek follows through on the emphasis she has given in her recent remarks to effectiveness and accountability. Australia might have become a below-average donor in terms of generosity, but we should still aspire to be not only above average, but best practice when it comes to effectiveness. Transparency is an important part of that, it's an area in which it is not hard to do well, and we have lost time to make up for.

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre.

About the author/s

Stephen Howes

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australian-aid-transparency-coalition-yet-deliver-20160610/>

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