Is Australia already the world leader in aid transparency?

by Jonathan Pryke

12 October 2011

Perhaps the recommendation of the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness that has been most eagerly embraced by the Government is that transparency around the aid program should be improved. In his speech at the Government's response to the Review, Minister Rudd signalled his intention to develop a new 'transparency charter' to:

> *… provide more accessible information on how Australian aid funds are deployed and results we achieve*

According to a report put out last year by two US think tanks, Brookings and the Centre for Global Development, Australia is already a world leader in transparency.

In its Quality of ODA Assessment, Australia is ranked 1st out of 31 DAC members for transparency and learning, with learning referring to a donors commitment to adapting to new and alternative delivery methods, monitoring and evaluation practices.

This raises a number of questions: Why does Australia rank so well? And if we are already so transparent, why do we need a charter?

Why does Australia rank so well?

The 'Quality of ODA Assessment' uses seven indicators to score countries on the transparency of their aid program. These indicators, however, can be boiled down into three categories: the extent and quality of information that it passes on to the DAC through the Creditor Reporting System (CRS); its current and future commitments to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI); and the proportion of aid that goes to recipients with solid monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Australia scores highly on all indicators.

The commitment to IATI is essentially a promise to be more transparent in the future. Although Australia has started publishing data to the IATI Registry, it is, as is the IATI way, in a format that will require third party platforms and designers to translate it into something accessible for the everyday user. None of these platforms have yet to be completed. In any case, what AusAID has published to IATI is so far just the reports it has on its website.

What about the CRS? Donors have reported to the DAC on aid flows on individual projects and programs by type of activity to the CRS for decades. The DAC provides two interfaces of access to this enormous data-dump, *OECD.STAT* and *QWIDS*. A much more accessible database is the third party platform *AidData*, where I was able to access and download all of the information AusAID had contributed to the CRS. This amounted to 25,168 project results and 2,069 aggregate flow results dating back to 1973 but only showing information up to 2008. This includes project data as detailed as:

- Iraqi womens' empowerment program: US$1,300,128.72 (Iraq, 2008)
- BEP Trust Sub-Accounts (AIPRD): US$40,883,659.19 (Indonesia for secondary education, 2008)
- 32nd International Conference on Art History: Crossing Cultures: US$6106.71 to Argentina in 2008
- PM's XIII rugby league match: US$937.48 (PNG, 2008)
- Deployee Support and Security: US$26,342,010.36 (PNG, 2008)

While it is certainly useful having this information available, there is just such a massive volume of it that it is difficult to know what to do with it. Also, the figures are outdated, with 2008 the last year for which data is available.

Finally, what about the indicator concerning support to partners which are themselves transparent? It is no doubt a good thing, everything else being equal, to support recipients which are transparent, but it is hardly an indicator of the transparency of the donating aid agency. Say that aid agency A gave all its funds in secrecy to recipient B. The fact that recipient B is fully transparent hardly indicates that A is as well.

So how transparent is AusAID?

It is clear from this analysis that none of the three indicators which the Quality of ODA Assessment uses in fact tells us anything much at all about transparency. The CRS reporting is the most promising, but even that is a very partial one.

How much work then does AusAID have to do on the transparency front?

Some recent research I was engaged in required me to find out how much AusAID is spending on health in PNG (until 2011, Australia's largest bilateral aid partner). Getting this basic information in fact proved incredibly hard. The budget provides no such information. The website is quick to claim results and a summary of basic information on activities within health, but to find information on aid flows and spending on activities I was forced to resort to two PDF files: an ODE report and the Papua New Guinea – Australia Development Cooperation Report. Neither of these reports are listed in the publications section of the PNG country profile. And they still only provide data up to 2009.

In an interesting comparison, USAID provides a great country dashboard interface, which, though itself is unfortunately hard to find, is easy to navigate, presents the data in intuitive graphs and visualisations, as well as numbers, and provides sectoral information on commitments and disbursements to all recipient countries. All of the data is updated to 2012 commitments. Contrasting to Australia's performance, the United States ranked 24th on the 'Quality of ODA Assessment'.

In summary, it wouldn't be difficult for Australia to do a lot better on the transparency front. So kudos to the Minister and AusAID for not taking the CGD-Brookings ranking too seriously and promising to be more transparent in the future. Progress will clearly require not only making data available online but making it easily accessible and useful. A country dashboard, à la USAID, would be a good place to start.

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Link: https://devpolicy.org/is-australia-already-the-world-leader-in-aid-transparency20111012/