DEVPOLICYBLOG

New US government website ups the ante on aid transparency

By Camilla Burkot
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ForeignAssistance.gov, the US government's central repository to consolidate official information about US foreign assistance spending, relaunched in mid-June with a glossy redesign. A portal that has been about five years in the making, this latest iteration offers an attractive example of how government aid data might be made more open and readily accessible by the public.

A virtual treasure trove for the aid nerds out there (and we know you are out there!), ForeignAssistance.gov encourages users to slice and dice the data according to year, country, sector, agency, implementing organisation, and account. (In the process of doing this, though, true aid nerds might also notice that the site's definition of relevant data is broader than ODA, appearing to use the Greenbook definition of 'foreign assistance'). Users can also distinguish planned, obligated, and spent funds – all functions that seem likely to help fulfil the site's goal of helping stakeholders and the public to better understand federal aid spending, make aid more useful for development, and (laudably) "hold ourselves more accountable".

And while ForeignAssistance.gov is certainly visually pleasing – colour-coded maps and filters abound – it has the potential to be more than just a pretty website. All of the data are available for download as CSV files and reflect International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) formatting. It's also worth noting how up-to-date the data appear to be. A glossary and pages dedicated to explaining aid transparency and the federal budget process (among other topics) are presumably intended to enhance accessibility by lay users.

Of course, such repositories are only good for serious analysis if the data is complete and reliable (or, conversely, if users are made fully aware when the data is not) – key issues raised by CGD's Sarah Rose a year ago. Admittedly, some gaps do remain in the new ForeignAssistance.gov: only 10 of 22 relevant agencies are currently represented (though, to be fair, these 10 agencies administer 98% of US foreign assistance), the data only extend as far back as 2006, and only one of the agencies (the Millennium Challenge Corporation) reports complete data across all years.

Another feature that would be great to see added to ForeignAssistance.gov is access to all significant documents prepared by the various reporting agencies in the course of their

work. Being able to easily locate and download project proposals, plans and reports is one of the most useful features of DFID's impressive Development Tracker (which my colleague Jonathan has previously written about).

Even though ForeignAssistance.gov is clearly still a work in progress, it's certainly useful to have all this information gathered in one place. Interactive sites like ForeignAssistance.gov and DFID's Development Tracker are clearly the direction in which aid transparency is headed – leaving the Australian aid program looking increasingly behind the times.

About the author/s

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Link: https://devpolicy.org/new-us-government-website-ups-the-ante-on-aid-transparency/
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