

The surprising missing link in the aid transparency chain: Recipients

by Terence Wood

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If you've got a bit of prior knowledge, high speed internet, and a decent store of time and patience, now is a good time to have an interest in aid data. If you want a simple aid overview, either for a particular donor or recipient country you can whip over to [Aidflows](#). If it's details you need, why not have a dig amongst the OECD DAC's [CRS database](#)? Or you could try making use of the more user-friendly, but still only in beta, [Aid Data database](#). If you're one of those people who thinks that quality of aid, rather than quantity, is what really matters, you can get donor data from the Center for Global Development's [QUODA database](#). And if you think good development policy is about more than aid, you ought to take a look at the Center for Global Development's [commitment to development database](#), which integrates information on aid, trade, migration, investment, the environment, security and technology (phew!).

It's great. Or at least it's great if you've got: prior knowledge, high speed internet, time — and patience. But if you don't have all, or at least some, of these attributes in reasonable quantities, the great aid transparency revolution is likely to be of considerably less use to you.

This is a significant shortcoming and something that restricts the potential for increased transparency to actually improve the world of aid. The problem is simple: in most aid recipient countries people living in poverty don't have regular access to the internet. And, even when they do, they don't have access to the assistance that they'd need to dig through the detailed aid information in the OECD DAC's CRS database. So aid information may well be out there, but practically it's still out of reach. Subsequently, while an aid transparency revolution is taking place, there's a missing link: the people who depend on aid for their welfare.

This is something that represents a missed opportunity in resolving a long-recognised issue with aid. The issue being that, too often, citizens in aid recipient countries have little or no idea how much aid their government receives, or the specific causes that the money is supposed to be devoted to. Because of this it's

more difficult for citizens to hold elites to account. In democracies this is a potentially potent form of accountability and yet in the absence of information, it's rarely realised. Instead, aid donors for the most part continue to rely on their own conditionalities when it comes to trying to ensure that aid is spent appropriately.

It wouldn't be a difficult problem to resolve. All it would take is all the donors in a particular country to pool information on their aid spending into a central database and then use readily accessible media (newspapers, TV, the radio) to let people in that country know the total quantity of aid and its intended purposes. Tailored information could also be given to civil society organisations. In the space of a few simple actions, people living in aid recipient countries would be in a much better position to do their bit in ensuring that aid money is well spent.

This wouldn't (or at least shouldn't) be a difficult initiative for donors (particularly OECD DAC member donors). Harmonisation would be required in the form of shared information and given that donors have been talking about harmonisation for years, this shouldn't be hard. (If it is, you'd have to conclude that the Paris Declaration isn't worth the paper it's written on.) In addition to shared information, the initiative would require a small amount of funds to pay for broadcasting time, and some staff to work with civil society groups. In proportion to the total aid flowing into most developing countries, the cost would be tiny.

I'm certainly not the first person to have made this suggestion (Nicolas van de Walle called for something similar over five years ago) and yet, as far as I'm aware, despite the current enthusiasm for transparency, it is still not high on the priority list of donors.

Why this is the case, I really don't know. Maybe it's been tried before and it failed? Maybe there are practical challenges I haven't thought of? Maybe donors really aren't that keen on genuine transparency after all? Maybe. Although I think the most likely reason is that in the faddish world of aid it simply hasn't been promoted hard enough.

If that's the case, then consider this blog post as advocacy in action. Donors, what are you waiting for? You say you support transparency, you say you support democracy, and you say you support accountability. Well, if this is true, then close this missing link in the aid transparency chain and let your data flow. Provide it to the people who depend on aid the most and provide it through media they can access. Do this and you'll be doing your bit in promoting transparency, and in aiding the people who depend on aid to actually have their say.

[Update: Having double checked I'm now not so sure that Nicolas van de Walle did

actually call for the type of aid transparency mentioned here. Nevertheless, I'm certainly not the first to suggest the idea.]

Terence Wood is a PhD student at ANU. Prior to commencing study he worked for the New Zealand government aid programme.

Author/s:

Terence Wood

Terence Wood is a Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. His research focuses on political governance in Western Melanesia, and Australian and New Zealand aid.

Link:

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