

Two cheers for New Zealand aid transparency

by Terence Wood

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Publish What You Fund have released their [2012 aid agency transparency index](#) and it contains good news for the New Zealand aid programme.

The index is an attempt to quantify how transparently major aid donors spend their money, ranking donors based on an overall transparency score. The overall score is a composite of individual scores on various transparency related criteria. These criteria range from overarching attributes such as the presence of a Freedom of Information act that applies to a donor's work, to whether the donor makes documents such as country strategies available, to whether the donor publishes International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) compliant information on the individual aid activities that it funds.

An incredible amount of work has gone into compiling the 2012 index and the information it contains is excellent — you can digest the data in full via [this](#) (large) PDF or you can skim across overall aid agency rankings on [this](#) web page. If you want to know more about a particular country's score, click on its name.

In the recent Development Buzz Jonathan and Sophie [discussed over-all findings and trends in the index](#). For us Kiwis the good news emerging from the data is that New Zealand not only scores reasonably well but has improved its score since last year. New Zealand comes 16th out of 72 aid programmes (with only five bilaterals scoring better than it does.) Australia is ranked 18th by comparison.

As the [background information associated with New Zealand's score](#) on the Publish What You Fund Website shows, we still have considerable room for improvement, but it's nice to see the New Zealand aid programme becoming more transparent.

Speaking as an active consumer of aid data, New Zealand has done a good job of making it's data available in a manner conducive to analysis. The NZ Aid Programme's website contains a single file that details aid activities that were funded in 2010 and 2011 (you can access the file [here](#)). The 2011 data is still only provisional and unfortunately for both years the information is only for most activities, not all.

While the New Zealand data are incomplete, and only provisional for 2011, they already have the makings of a very useful information source. It cost me a morning but I was able to turn the data into a series of Excel Pivot tables that allow you to survey New Zealand aid by country, recipient type, sector and quite a lot more (download them [here](#); note that the file will only work in Excel 2007 and 2010). From the Pivot Tables it is easy to drill down to individual activities (double click in any row within a pivot table and you will be taken to the disaggregated data that comprise the table row) which means that the data can be used both for an overview of aid trends and patterns, and — up to a point — for detailed scrutiny of aid work.

This is all good news, although one could ask why the New Zealand government is only now releasing this sort of data. After all, government aid money comes from taxpayers, and it is very hard to see why information on how it is spent should be hidden from us.

Indeed, the answer to the ‘why now?’ question is an interesting one. In the New Zealand case the impetus towards aid transparency does not seem to have been born of the domestic political sphere. Judging by the way he responds to requests for information filed under the Official Information Act (New Zealand’s equivalent to Australia’s Freedom of Information Law) the Minister currently in charge of the New Zealand Aid Programme, Murray McCully, is not in favour of transparency. To give an example, on 24 August 2011 Jo Spratt (Coordinator of New Zealand aid think tank [NZADDs](#), and also my wife) placed an Official Information Act request to find out the dates on which Minister McCully had signed off high level aid programme funding allocations. She did this because it was rumoured that delays in Ministerial sign off were impeding aid programme planning. My wife’s request reached the Minister’s Office on 1 September 2011. The legal deadline for Official Information Act requests in New Zealand is 20 working days. In May 2012, when a response to the request was 150 days overdue, my wife complained to the New Zealand Government Ombudsman, which finally prompted a reply from the Minister. Part of the reason for the delayed response may have been MFAT misinterpreting New Zealand rules on the time allowed for replies to OIAs and advising the Minister’s office accordingly. However, even this charitable interpretation of events can’t explain the entire duration of the wait nor the fact that it took a complaint to the Ombudsman to elicit the data. What is more, when the reply from the Minister’s Office finally came, it did not contain the information requested. Jo has complained to the Ombudsman again and is awaiting a further response, more than a year after making her request. Stalling of this sort is not out of character for Minister McCully. Therefore I think it is fair to assume that he is not the source of increased New Zealand aid transparency.

Instead, as best I can tell, the impetus to increased aid transparency in New Zealand has come from international developments. Aid transparency campaigners have influenced beliefs in the international arena of aid which have filtered down to the staff of national aid agencies. Aid agency staff want to do a good job, and the idea that transparent aid is good aid has been made convincingly in the international fora that aid agency staff frequent. And this, I think, is why there is a trend towards increased aid transparency. It is an interesting example of international collective action shaping domestic policy. The PhD student in me would love to have time to study the phenomenon more. In the meantime though, the aid-concerned taxpayer in me is just happy that our aid is becoming more transparent, regardless of the cause.

Let us hope this continues.

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