

AusAID and transparency: good progress and a way to go

Author : Jonathan Pryke

Date : December 17, 2012

On October 30 AusAID hosted the second annual 'Aid Transparency External Review Group meeting'. The half day forum updated stakeholders about the major improvements in AusAID's transparency over the past year (communiqué and presentations available [here](#)). Just over a year on since AusAID formalised its commitment to transparency, it's worth taking a look at how well it has done to date, and how far it has to go, [to be](#) "one of the most transparent aid donors in the world."

What has AusAID been up to?

AusAID certainly has a lot to be happy about since launching the [Transparency Charter](#) in November last year.

Its [website](#) has undergone dramatic improvements, with an ongoing rollout of new country, thematic and regional 'transparency pages'. To see the difference take a look at Vanuatu's [page](#) compared to Kiribati's [page](#). By the end of 2012 AusAID has committed to launching 35 country, 15 regional and 31 thematic transparency pages and 33 translated websites. It was noted in the latest [Senate Estimates](#) [pdf] (p. 99) that AusAID has 36 communications and media officers (with a budget of roughly \$7 million), a lot of whom focus on the website. It is good to see such a large amount of time and resources being translated into positive transparency outcomes.

AusAID has also begun publishing data to the [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#), which aims collect and aggregate a standardised version of bilateral and multilateral aid data. According to the IATI [registry](#) AusAID has so far submitted 23 datasets (data on country programs), ranking 11th in overall submissions to the registry of a total of 99 organisations.

The forum also highlighted AusAID's commitment to the [Information Publication Scheme](#) (IPS). The IPS sets a government wide requirement of what information agencies must publish on their website. By a minimum standard an agencies IPS registry must list all of the documents the agency has made available to the public. AusAID has gone a step further by creating a (searchable) registry with almost 2,000 hyperlinked documents (available [here](#) [pdf] and [here](#) [excel]).

These are all impressive achievements, with AusAID's improvement in transparency being reflected in its score nearly doubling in the annual '[Aid Transparency Index](#)'.

That said AusAID can, and no doubt will, certainly do a lot more.

How AusAID can further improve transparency

Publications

AusAID has thousands of publications, reports, evaluations, strategies and other documentation on their website but they are often hard to access. Here are some ways that AusAID could make access easier:

1. Implement a basic search function that includes filters for country, region, theme and year. If the IPS is expected to serve this role then AusAID should publicise its existence a lot more on other parts of the website.
2. Provide access to a full list of publications by release date. There are 15 categories on the AusAID [publications](#) page, but no comprehensive list (simply showing them in order of release). Also, the categories aren't comprehensive. For example I couldn't find the [2012-16 Research Strategy](#) in any of them.
3. Create a new category for all AusAID strategies (discussed in this [blog](#)), similar to the [performance reports](#) category, split into current and expired strategies.
4. Reduce publication delays. Gaps of 6 to 12 months and sometimes longer between completion and publication still seem common.

Project level information

We recommend AusAID remove (or at least separate) the documents that aren't directly related to the project from the project pages. Here I will again use Vanuatu as an example, this time looking at the '[Governance for Growth Program](#)'. The documents section of this page looks very promising with 13 documents being listed. Of these 13, however, only one actually focuses on that project (the [Design Document](#)), even though the [mid-term review](#) for the project, which can't be found on the project page, can be found through a google search.

Access to raw data

As can be seen on the Vanuatu page there are very good graphs summarising the funding breakdowns at the program level. However, if an interested party wants to do any in depth analysis these graphs simply aren't enough. Our recommendations are:

1. For all graphs, charts and tables provide links to download the data in an excel format to allow for external cross-country/theme/donor analysis
2. Provide access to project level funding data. How exactly is the \$19.25 million being spent for the Governance for Growth program? We simply don't know. While I understand that AusAID would need to devote considerable resources to making this information not only available (censoring sensitive information and creating a consistent format) but understandable, this would be an invaluable addition to AusAID's commitment to transparency.
3. Make Aid Works publicly accessible. The benefits of opening up AusAID's internal database (Aid Works) far outweigh the potential risks. DFID has, to an extent, committed to doing something similar by releasing [monthly releases](#) of all of their expenditure, though they could certainly make their data a lot more user friendly.
4. Provide a timetable of when we can expect more data of this nature and detail to be published.

Jonathan Pryke is a Researcher at the [Development Policy Centre](#).