

Global aid transparency: taking the data out of the darkness

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Heated debates about the volume and allocation of international aid have long been conducted under conditions of poor lighting — it's not an easy matter for interested people, in both donor and recipient countries, to know exactly what is done with aid at the level of individual countries and activities.

The OECD's [Creditor Reporting System](#) (CRS) helps somewhat. It's an authoritative source of activity-level data (hint for the uninitiated: click on the expenditure totals to view the underlying activities). However, CRS data enters the system with a very long lag and the system is quite narrow in scope, having been designed long before contemporary transparency desiderata took shape. The CRS is a rich repository of quality-assured data on past commitments and expenditure, but contains nothing very current and nothing qualitative beyond short activity summaries.

In some respects, lighting conditions have improved dramatically over about the past decade. Aid transparency has received much attention and now figures in [indexes](#), [rankings](#), [individual donors' policy frameworks](#) and the collective doctrine on development effectiveness embodied in the [Busan outcome document](#). Certainly the news is [not all that it could be](#), but it's pretty good.

The vast bulk of the attention directed to aid transparency, however, has been directed to the reporting of information, most notably the reporting of it in line with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) [Standard](#). In general, far too little attention has been directed to ensuring that the information reported is accessible and meaningful, and that it can be combined — in practice, not just in principle — with information from other sources in order to allow useful international comparisons.

While my subject here is not Australian aid transparency, Australia's case illustrates one half of the point just made. While Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) seems to be improving its IATI reporting performance, at least with respect to quantitative information, it has constructed no portal that would allow anyone easily to access the data, assess its quality and make use of it. Other donor countries are in a similar situation, though their IATI reporting performance might in some cases be below DFAT's (and fixing that should probably be their first priority).

A few donor countries have built IATI portals, among which the [Development Tracker](#) of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) is the most impressive. Some recipient countries have done likewise, in order to gain an almost real-time overview of donor activity in their countries, and assist with aid management (Myanmar's portal is [here](#)). If this practice were to spread, and donors were to continue to

improve their IATI reporting performance (including with respect to document transparency), that would eventually deal with the "accessible and meaningful" point.

But what about the "useful international comparisons" point? While individual donor portals are important, they don't help with international comparisons. For that, a global IATI portal is required. In [this recent blog post](#), I noted that various such portals appear to have started up and either failed or not advanced very far, and that at present there are three main options, none very satisfactory.

One is the "[query builder](#)" provided by the IATI Registry itself, a very basic data extraction tool that requires the user to undertake laborious manipulation of the extracted data. A second is [AidData 3.0](#), an ambitious database that pulls in data from the IATI Registry, the CRS and other sources. In principle, the data can be filtered and presented in many ways but, in practice, this database is difficult to use and seems not to deliver comprehensive coverage of data from the IATI registry. A third global portal, currently the best option for accessing IATI data from multiple donor sources, is [d-portal.org](#). Useful as it might be, it's not very flexible and has limited options for customising the presentation of data. It seems also to be running on a shoestring (see the "Funding" section of [this](#) page), so it is hard to be sure that it will be well maintained, let alone upgraded.

In that same recent blog post, I noted the impending launch of IATI Studio, a [suite of tools](#) to facilitate the publishing, extraction and presentation of data published by international development organisations in line with the IATI Standard. This has been on the horizon for quite some time, and looked from a distance like it might constitute a fuller-featured global IATI portal. IATI Studio has now been [officially launched](#), at the end of May in The Hague. The launch was a few months delayed but still looks to have been premature. Unfortunately, the capabilities on offer at this point are slender and in beta — just a quite basic [chart builder](#) and a "community feed" for sharing the charts.

I used IATI Studio to generate and publish a simple test chart showing Australian aid expenditure in Indonesia from 2010 to 2015, in the top 20 sectors. You can see the chart [here](#) and a screen shot (which illustrates rather dramatically the rise and fall of support for basic health care — the green blocks — as a share of the program) is pasted below. The total level of expenditure each year, it should be noted, doesn't much resemble reality, but presumably it does reflect what information is and is not contained in the relevant IATI records.

IATI Studio: Australian aid expenditure in Indonesia by selected sectors, 2010-2015

In making the chart above and generally poking around, I found the IATI Studio chart builder to be less than friendly. It can in principle do some reasonably complex things — see [this example](#) — but using it is laborious and confusing. Among other things, if you select a parameter that it doesn't like, it just goes blank on you. For example, if you select "native currency" rather than US dollars for Australian expenditure, you get "no

data available". It's unclear why that would be: national currency expenditure information is in the IATI registry. Moreover, since the IATI Studio chart builder is no more than its name suggests, you can't click through to look at the underlying activity information. You can hover over a bar and find out how many activities contributed to the expenditure total; that's all.

As noted, IATI Studio's principal competitor right now is d-portal.org. While d-portal doesn't have much chart-building capacity, it is otherwise a much more useful window into the IATI data registry. For example, you can ask for a chart showing Australian expenditure in Indonesia, in Australian dollars, by top sectors (it knows what these are, whereas in the IATI Studio chart builder you have to identify them by trial and error), and get the following:

D-portal: Australian aid expenditure in Indonesia by top sectors, 2015

You can then click through to view all sectors, and then click through any individual sector to get detailed activity information for 2015 as well as previous years. Among other things, this allows you to see if there are publisher errors in the data, such as the inclusion of Myanmar projects among Australia's aid activities in Indonesia (which I did find).

It's hard to avoid the impression that IATI Studio is struggling to get going, though the Amsterdam-based data visualisation company behind it, [Zimmerman & Zimmerman](#), has previously built several good donor-specific IATI portals, including for the [Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and [UNESCO](#). It was also contracted by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to build the "dynamic data engine" that funnels data into its Development Tracker portal.

The next products in the IATI Studio suite, currently scheduled for launch later in 2016, might be more useful — and, not unrelated to that, they will cost money (specific [pricing information](#) is not yet available). These products are an "IATI Publisher" and a "Microsite Builder". The former is intended to reduce the headaches involved in publishing valid data; the latter aims to allow organisations to make their own IATI portals even if they lack the internal technical capacity to build them from the ground up. No doubt the Microsite Builder will also be handy for watchdog organisations wanting to make sense of publishers' data.

If the IATI Studio team can in fact deliver a portal-builder that does not require fiddly and expensive customisation to meet the needs of individual publishers, developing country governments and aid watchdogs, they will have provided a much-needed service. It's a service that some bilateral donors, including Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which pour [raw data](#) into the IATI registry but have nothing resembling the UK or Dutch portals, might consider consuming. This would be akin to buying a Mini Cooper though. Most OECD donors are big enough organisations to aspire to the DFID Rolls-Royce—and [the source code is free](#).

Whatever emerges next from the IATI Studio project, there is still a problem about international comparisons and still a need for a decent global IATI portal. At this point, d-portal.org looks the best candidate to become one, but only with a very substantial investment of resources. I would think that no such investment is likely to be made unless a major multilateral organisation, such as the World Bank or the OECD, were to be given custody of it. There is in fact something to be said for the idea of progressively developing the OECD's existing CRS database in the direction of the IATI Registry, so that it might contain a quality-assured

collection of older data and a more fluid collection of current data, and so that it might allow additional information to be attached to records, including links to project documents. A look at [this argument from 2009](#) for regarding the CRS and IATI as "complementary" mechanisms serves only to illustrate that there is no very good argument.

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