

Open aid: Australian aid transparency and the Open Government Partnership

Author : Robin Davies

Date : November 29, 2016

Driven initially by eight governments including those of the US, the UK and Indonesia, the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP) was established in 2011 to encourage improvements in the transparency and inclusiveness of public administration. It's an approximate contemporary of the [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#) (IATI) and shares with it an emphasis on concrete, time-bound commitments, peer accountability and technology. Unsurprisingly, some countries' OGP actions plans, including those of the [US](#), [UK](#) and [Canada](#), have included aid transparency commitments and references to IATI. Australia's first action plan, it seems, might not.

Ambivalence overcome

Australia [announced](#) its intention to join the OGP's then 50-odd members under the Gillard Labor government, a little belatedly, in May 2013. Following the federal election in September of that year, the incoming Abbott Coalition government was [unenthused](#) about this inherited commitment and placed it firmly on the backburner. When Malcolm Turnbull, an [advocate](#) for open and consultative government, replaced Abbott two years later, this raised [hopes](#) that Australia's membership bid would be reactivated. It soon was. In November 2015, Turnbull [advised](#) the OGP by letter that Australia would at last move ahead to finalise its membership.

The main [prerequisite](#) for gaining and maintaining OGP membership is the submission of an initial two-year National Action Plan and further such plans every two years thereafter. These are to contain 'concrete and measurable commitments' and must be 'co-created' with civil society through a 'multistakeholder, open and participatory process'. Drawing on inputs from government agencies and civil society, an [Interim Working Group](#) developed a [draft National Action Plan](#) for Australia in August and September of this year, with the intention of finalising the plan by the end of the year. This was made available for [public comment](#) until 18 November, and comment I did; my submission is [here](#).

Goodbye to the Transparency Charter

As with OGP membership, so with aid transparency—at least up to a point. Under the Gillard government, with Kevin Rudd as foreign minister, the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) operated in accordance with a [Transparency Charter](#). This took [effect](#) in November 2011. It led to some real improvements, particularly in the amount of information on country programs which was made available via AusAID's web site—though a Development Policy Centre [transparency audit](#) conducted around that time found that much of the improvement was the result of a one-off information 'dump' following the publication of the charter. When the government changed two years later, and AusAID was abruptly integrated into DFAT, the charter disappeared from view. It was not explicitly rejected, just no longer mentioned.

Reassuringly, foreign minister Julie Bishop [said](#) not long after the election, in November 2013, that she wanted to see even higher levels of aid transparency than had been achieved under Labor. In reality, though, aid transparency was placed on another backburner. It didn't figure at all in the list of [performance benchmarks](#) for the aid program which appeared in June 2014. The [aid policy framework](#) which appeared at the same time said just the following:

We are committed to high standards of transparency and accountability in the management of the Australian aid program. We will give effect to this commitment through publishing information on the aid program on the DFAT website, including policies, plans, results, evaluations and research. ... Australia will fully participate in the International Aid Transparency Initiative.

This is where the OGP and aid transparency storylines diverge. The government's level of interest in 'open aid' was not noticeably altered by the change of leadership in 2015. The Transparency Charter, or more importantly the set of commitments contained in it, stayed—at best—on the backburner while OGP membership did not.

The transparency backslide

This backtracking on aid transparency has had predictable impacts. The broad commitments contained in the present aid policy framework, as quoted above, are far less demanding than those contained in the defunct charter, despite the fact that the latter occupied only one page. In particular, there is now no commitment to comprehensiveness and timeliness in the publication of information, nor to the provision of information that is reasonably detailed with respect to each activity and in 'a format that is useful and accessible'. In addition, there is now no commitment to publish annual, quantitative transparency targets.

In short, the aid policy framework adopted in 2014 permitted the partial and slow publication of information, as well as the publication of information in obscure and unusable forms. And what was permitted to happen did happen. Stephen Howes has highlighted aspects of the aid transparency decline [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). An exploration of DFAT's web site shows that for the most part it contains less information on aid activities than it used to. Much of the information to be found there is old. And the one stream of seemingly quite comprehensive data that is published there—in line with the IATI reporting [standard](#)—is published only in an indigestible (that is, raw [Extensible Markup Language](#)) format, with no accompanying tools to make sense of it. A second Development Policy Centre transparency audit, soon to be published, confirms the above observations. It finds that while there have been some improvements in specific areas, there has been a general decline in the availability of project-level documentation since 2013.

The IATI defence

It appears, in fact, that DFAT's claim to across-the-board aid transparency, as opposed to transparency in selected areas, now depends almost exclusively on the argument that Australia 'fully participates' in IATI.^[1] However, for reasons I have previously given in detail [here](#) and [here](#), that is a poor argument. Essentially, in the absence of genuinely useful global IATI data portals, the Australian government cannot claim much credit for its IATI reporting unless it puts in place a dedicated data portal that allows people to make sense of the information it is releasing. This could be done at almost no incremental cost, because other international development agencies—most notably the [UK Department for International Development](#)—have gone down this path and have made their portal designs freely available. Yet it has not been done. This is something of a mystery. It can only be assumed that DFAT faces no incentives to act.

An important further point is that, at present, we can't actually know what 'fully participates in IATI' means. DFAT has at no point revealed whether all aid activities are now covered by IATI reporting—there is, for example, nothing about this in its [2015-16 Annual Report](#). In addition, DFAT has made no commitments in connection with reporting frequency.^[2] As noted [here](#) and [here](#), the regular aid transparency assessments conducted by the organisation Publish What You Fund have [consistently found](#) Australia's performance to be no more than 'fair', the equivalent of a C grade, owing to the partial and sporadic nature of its reporting. (The same organisation once [expressed](#) the hope on this blog, over five years ago, that Australia might soon boast 'one of the most transparent aid agencies in the world'.) Publish What You Fund has called for monthly reporting and has also highlighted the absence of a dedicated data portal.

One simple commitment

Against this background, what commitments does the draft OGP action plan contain in relation to transparency in the administration of Australia's aid program? None. It refers to the aid program only by way of referring to Australia's role in helping developing countries in the Asia-Pacific to develop and implement open-government policies. What should it have said? My submission, linked above, gives two alternative answers, one long and one short. The short answer is that it should at a minimum contain the following

commitment:

To have put in place by an aid information reporting regime and related access portal that ensures the timely public availability of full and clear financial information and non-sensitive project documentation relating to all Australian aid activities.

A commitment of this nature is almost costless. It would give substance to the foreign minister's stated but unfulfilled desire to see Australia's aid program exceed the levels of transparency achieved under previous administrations. Most importantly, it would help improve the quality and relevance of Australia's aid by allowing researchers, commentators and developing country governments to see, in something like real time, how Australian aid is being used.

Well-informed external scrutiny is at least as important as good internal quality assurance arrangements for improving aid effectiveness. It's hard to see the downside.

Robin Davies is the Associate Director of the Development Policy Centre.

[1] Sometimes DFAT also refers to the availability of activity-level information via the OECD's [Creditor Reporting System](#). This does provide a useful historical perspective on expenditures and commitments but data appear with a lag of some two years and comprise only financial information and brief activity descriptions.

[2] We do know, from [this](#) slightly informative source, that the number of past and present activities covered by some kind of IATI report roughly doubled to about 10,000 around the beginning of 2016. Even this positive information is nowhere highlighted by DFAT itself.