

How Can Data Revolutionize Development?

Putting Data at the Center of U.S.
Global Development - An Assessment
of U.S. Foreign Aid Transparency

Friends of

Publish What You Fund

Friends of Publish What You Fund, a U.S.-based non-profit organization, was established in May 2015 with the objective of promoting transparency among donors, users, and implementers of international assistance in order to ensure effective spending, evaluation, and accountability. Our particular focus is on U.S. transparency and accountability, and we work in partnership with a number of stakeholders with similar objectives.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In this report Friends of Publish What You Fund aims to gather lessons learned about U.S. efforts to make aid data more transparent over the past decade, including the efforts of both the U.S. Government (USG) and civil society. The scope of the report also covers feedback on Publish What You Fund's efforts, including the Aid Transparency Index. To inform this exercise, a consultant — Andria Hayes-Birchler — conducted a survey with a wide range of stakeholders and undertook in-depth interviews with 30 of the respondents. Both the surveys and interview responses were not for attribution. In addition, we conducted consultations on the draft report with both USG and civil society representatives and received written comments from a number of stakeholders. The Board of Friends of Publish What You Fund is very grateful for the time, constructive input, and thoughtful responses by all of those involved.

The progress made in the past decade is due to the hard work by both external advocates and internal champions whom have devoted considerable time, energy, and political capital despite the considerable challenges. The assessments in this report should in no way undercut the full appreciation of those efforts.

This report was produced with financial support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary _____ 1

Introduction _____ 4

Background: U.S. Aid Transparency Commitments and Policy _____ 6

Key Decisions, Constraints, and Milestones _____ 8

Lessons Learned _____ 20

Recommendations _____ 27

Conclusion _____ 34

Endnotes _____ 36

Executive Summary



Data-driven decision-making can help inform smarter allocation of limited funds

Over the past decade, significant commitments were made by the U.S. government (USG) to make foreign assistance more transparent. The President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), both created during the Bush Administration, emphasized transparency and data driven decision making as hallmarks of their missions. The Obama Administration strengthened this trend through numerous policy announcements, the creation of a one stop website for all USG aid data, making specific foreign assistance commitments to the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and agreeing to publish U.S. aid data according to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). These efforts have been strongly encouraged and monitored by civil society through a variety of efforts. For example, the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN) made transparency and accountability of U.S. foreign assistance one of its central pillars, and Publish What You Fund has produced an annual Aid Transparency Index, ranking donors' progress on transparency commitments.

Meeting these various commitments has entailed significant effort, has proven to be more difficult than many originally thought, and has been slower to realize than transparency advocates had hoped. Despite that, the work continues and the commitment remains.

The purpose of this report is to reflect on the last decade of the U.S. aid transparency movement. It analyses the key decisions and milestones, draws up the critical lessons learned, and offers recommendations to both the USG and to civil society so that, working together, everyone can make more progress on U.S. foreign aid transparency, accountability, and effectiveness.

As set forth in more detail in the report, the key findings, lessons, and recommendations include:

- **ACCOUNTABILITY**

The initial commitments, including the IATI commitment, were strong and promising, but there was insufficient central leadership or coordination to implement these pledges. The USG took a "whole of government" approach to publishing foreign aid data, but did not provide central leadership to oversee and coordinate agencies progress on implementation strategies, releasing targets for publication, or improving the quality and comprehensiveness of their data. Conversely, agencies were constrained by the whole of government policy, undermining individual agency progress. In this vacuum, the Aid

Transparency Index became the *de facto* accountability mechanism for assessing USG commitments and individual agencies' progress.

- **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES AND PLANNING**

Following the decision to sign up to IATI, and the U.S. transparency commitments in the Open Government Partnership, too little was done to assess and plan for the resources needed to meet these commitments. This included the need for cost-management plans, timelines for implementation, proper staffing plans, adequate budgets, upgraded data management systems, and staff training on data input and management. In many agencies it took years to even identify these constraints.

- **CONSTRAINTS TO DATA USE**

Concerns have been repeatedly expressed that U.S. data is not being used, which jeopardizes the internal USG momentum to keep publishing and improving its data. The lack of use is an issue, but there are real concerns that U.S. data – as well as data from other donors – is of insufficient accuracy and completeness to be used. Adding to the concern are the two U.S. foreign assistance dashboards run by USAID and the State Department, both of which purport to aggregate U.S. aid data, but which produce conflicting data. Until the quality concerns are addressed, data use will remain limited. At the same time, additional efforts are needed to ensure data is both useful and accessible through data portals, apps, and visualizations.

- **CIVIL SOCIETY**

There are a number of non-government organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and other networks that have played a critical role in promoting and monitoring U.S. aid transparency. Some of these civil society organizations, like Plan International USA, have also undertaken publication of their own IATI data. If IATI is to be robust, however, more civil society and implementing contractors need to publish to IATI.

Even if progress has been slower than desired, the last decade has seen significant improvements in the transparency of U.S. aid information. As agencies and organizations continue their progress on making aid data more transparent, they unlock data that can potentially improve their own internal coordination, communication, and learning agenda. Data-driven decision making can help inform smarter



If IATI is to be robust, more civil society and implementing contractors need to publish to it



Through smart, targeted U.S. policies, the data revolution can strengthen global development

allocations of limited funds, better monitoring and evaluation, and improved project and program design.

With the work done to date, the U.S. is set on the right course. Going forward, through a combination of smart, targeted policies that deepen existing commitments, the U.S. can utilize the full potential of the data revolution, putting timely, quality, and accessible information at the core of its development policies. Specifically, the U.S. should:

- **DELIVER MORE EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE**

Although global humanitarian assistance has reached record levels, the need and the financing gap are growing. The poor state of the data severely impacts the ability to plan and provide effective, collaborative, and responsive assistance. As the world's largest humanitarian donor, the U.S. must fully implement its commitment made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit: improve the responsiveness, accountability, and collaboration of humanitarian action by publishing data in a transparent and harmonized way using the IATI format.

- **CHAMPION GENDER EQUALITY**

There is a strong consensus to invest in women and girls for both their own equity and better outcomes for children and families, and to invest in economic growth and peace and security. U.S. policies support this principle, but the U.S. needs to fix its own gender-data deficit through the publication of more robust and comparable gender-based funding and gender-disaggregated data.

- **FINISH THE INVESTMENT IN U.S. DATA QUALITY, COMPREHENSIVENESS AND USE**

Significant investments have laid the groundwork to put data at the core of U.S. global development. Attention needs to be paid to the right policies that will: increase data quality, demand and use; promote a data-driven culture within U.S. agencies; and join up IATI data with other data flows and standards to provide the most complete picture of resources.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the USG and civil society have put a great deal of effort into making aid information more transparent. This has included the development of USG aid websites – such as www.foreignassistance.gov and USAID’s Foreign Aid Explorer (<https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-dashboard.html>), efforts to publish aid data as part of broader commitments to transparency in the Open Government Partnership (www.opengovpartnership.org), and U.S. publication of aid information to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (www.aidtransparency.net).

This report will explore why the USG made these aid transparency commitments, what worked and what didn’t during implementation, and the role civil society played in advocating for aid transparency. The report sets forth lessons learned from the past decade and suggests recommendations for future improvements in aid transparency.

Due to the crucial nature IATI plays in aid transparency, this report will focus largely on the efforts to implement the USG commitments to publish to the IATI standard. However, it will also examine other related efforts toward aid data transparency, including the development of ForeignAssistance.gov, the expansion of USAID’s Foreign Aid Explorer, and the foreign aid commitments the U.S. made in its OGP action plans.¹ The scope of this report is focused on U.S. efforts, including both the experiences of USG agencies and U.S. NGOs to make their aid data more transparent, as well as the experiences of civil society organizations and the U.S. Congress in promoting transparent aid data.

This report is organized as follows:

- **BACKGROUND**

The U.S. initial commitments to aid transparency were a mixture of domestic and international commitments, and this section provides a brief history of the important steps.

- **KEY DECISIONS, CONSTRAINTS AND MILESTONES**

Over the past decade, the USG and civil society made decisions about how to implement their commitments to aid data transparency. This section will explore those decisions and their impact on progress.

- **LESSONS LEARNED**

This section draws up the main lessons learned, identifying what worked well and what didn't in the efforts to make aid data more transparent.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A great deal of progress has been made but there is still a long way to go. This section will make specific recommendations on how to improve the comprehensiveness, quality and usefulness of aid transparency efforts.

This report uses data from a survey of 52 key stakeholders in the USG and civil society who have years of experience implementing and advocating for aid transparency. Respondents include current and former staff from the State Department, USAID, MCC, PEPFAR, Treasury, OMB, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as current and former staff from the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN), Brookings, the Center for Global Development, InterAction, AidData, Development Gateway, Oxfam, Plan International USA, the ONE Campaign, Save the Children, Publish What You Fund, and Friends of Publish What You Fund.

It also relies on information from interviews with 30 stakeholders within many of the same organizations. For the sake of candidness, both survey and interview data remains anonymous. The list of interview respondents, interview questions, and survey questionnaire can be found at www.friendsofpublishwhatyoufund.org/resources.

Background: U.S. Aid Transparency Commitments and Policy

In the early 2000s, the OECD hosted a series of high levels forums focused on aid effectiveness. In the first two meetings in Rome and in Paris, there was a focus on improving aid-decision making and coordination.² At the Third High Level Forum in Accra, Ghana, in 2008, aid transparency became a central theme. Comparable and transparent aid data was deemed necessary for effective donor coordination and partner country planning, as well as enabling citizens to hold their governments accountable. Donors agreed to “publicly disclose regular, detailed and timely information on volume, allocation and – when available – results of development expenditure.”³ This marked the launch of the IATI, with fourteen international donors pledging to develop and implement common definitions and a format to facilitate sharing of aid information.

The momentum behind aid transparency continued to grow. In February 2011, the IATI standard was agreed and, in November 2011, at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, Korea, numerous additional donors – including the USG – committed to publishing certain data in the IATI standard by the end of 2015.⁴

This commitment to transparency was complemented by a series of steps in the United States:

- Two significant transparency initiatives were made during the Administration of George W. Bush. The Bush Administration created PEPFAR and the MCC, both of which put a premium on gathering, publishing, and utilizing rigorous development data.
- On his first day in office, President Obama signed a Memorandum committing to an open and transparent government, focusing on the role of new technologies to make information, including foreign assistance information, readily available to the public.⁵
- At the Group of 20 Summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, the Leaders’ Statement committed members to enhancing aid transparency efforts. On that basis, an interagency task force was formed, resulting in a USG policy on foreign assistance transparency, including a commitment to create ForeignAssistance.gov with OMB government-wide guidance.



In November 2011 in Busan, Korea, the U.S. committed to publishing to the IATI Standard

- ForeignAssistance.gov was launched in 2010 in order to make foreign assistance budget data more accessible to the public.⁶ It originally included limited budget data from the State Department and USAID. By the end of 2011, data from the MCC was also published.
- In September 2011, the USG co-launched the OGP, a voluntary, multilateral initiative aimed to “secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.”⁷ The first U.S. National Action Plan (NAP)⁸ included a commitment to release and implement government-wide reporting requirements for foreign aid, including timely and detailed information on budgets, disbursements, and project implementation. These commitments have subsequently been repeated and expanded in the second and third NAPs.
- In September 2012, the government published the OMB Bulletin on Guidance on Collection of U.S. Foreign Assistance Data (12-01).⁹ The 25-page bulletin set forth the information and processes by which foreign assistance information must be published by all U.S. agencies.
- As required by its IATI commitment, in December 2012, the U.S. released its first IATI implementation schedule,¹⁰ outlining its plan for fulfilling the commitments made in Busan.
- In May 2013, the White House released an executive order on open data¹¹ and an Open Data Policy.¹² The executive order, titled “Making Open and Machine Readable the New Default for Government Information,” applied to all U.S. agencies (not just those involved with foreign assistance), and provided that data should be released in open and machine readable formats.

Key Decisions, Constraints, and Milestones

1. With the launch of ForeignAssistance.gov, the publication of the OMB Bulletin, and the subsequent commitment to IATI, the U.S. adopted a “whole of government” approach to publishing aid data.

When ForeignAssistance.gov was launched in December 2010, the goal was to create a website that provided information on what the U.S. government as a whole spent on foreign assistance. It developed a U.S. standard specifying what data would be published, how that data would be defined, and from where the data would come. In doing so, it aimed to standardize and aggregate foreign assistance data from over 20 U.S. agencies, all of which published foreign assistance data on disparate websites – or not at all.

This “whole of government” approach was subsequently applied to the U.S. commitment to IATI. Agencies were encouraged to submit their data to the ForeignAssistance.gov team – housed in the Foreign Assistance Bureau (F) at the State Department – which would then aggregate the data into one USG submission to the IATI registry. In addition to the USG speaking with one voice, this approach intended to minimize the work burden on individual agencies, many of which were not prepared to publish data using the IATI standard. Agencies were encouraged to submit their data using the U.S. standard to ForeignAssistance.gov, and the ForeignAssistance.gov team would then aggregate and convert the data to the IATI standard. The “whole of government” approach had been applied to many of President Obama’s foreign assistance initiatives – including Feed the Future, Partnership for Growth, and Power Africa – in order to ensure coordination across USG foreign assistance agencies.

This approach was not universally supported when it came to data transparency, however. There was a wide variance in agencies’ readiness and capacity to publish their data. By insisting on a whole of government approach, those agencies that were ready to publish quickly – such as the MCC – were actively discouraged from doing so. “They didn’t want [the MCC] to get out ahead of the whole government,” said one interview respondent from the USG. Publish What You Fund argued, “Governments that have several aid agencies should not wait until the slowest mover is ready to publish. Instead, start publishing to IATI what is already at hand. Other agencies will learn a great deal from the



There was a wide variance in agencies’ readiness and capacity to publish their data



The Index created pressure and accountability on individual agencies that was otherwise lacking

experience. ... Where countries have multiple aid-spending components, let leaders lead.”

The whole of government approach also reduced individual agencies’ accountability. The U.S. IATI implementation plan, released in November 2012, set targets for the entire USG, without specifying which agencies would release which data by which date. Individual agencies thus had no metric by which they – or others – could hold themselves accountable. Similarly, the fact that agencies were discouraged from publishing their own data on their websites made it harder for the public to track the comprehensiveness or quality of data released by any given agency.

Finally, until 2014, ForeignAssistance.gov published in a schema different than IATI. The multiple conversion process from the U.S. standard to the IATI standard duplicated efforts, disempowered agencies that had the capacity and interest to publish to the IATI standard themselves, and had a negative effect on data quality. Every time data has to be reorganized to fit a new set of definitions, categories, or standards (often referred to as “crosswalking” data), it potentially loses meaning, tracability, and even accuracy. The more agency-specific data is manipulated from its original form – in this case first to fit the U.S. standard and then again to fit the IATI standard – the greater the risk to data quality.

2. Publish What You Fund’s Aid Transparency Index held individual USG agencies to account.

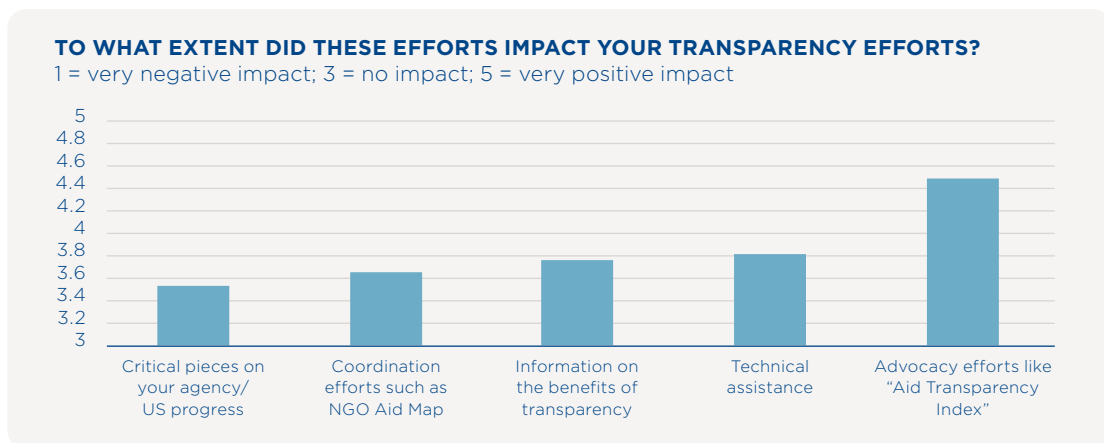
When asked what civil society advocacy techniques were most effective, nearly all government and civil society respondents mentioned the Aid Transparency Index: “The Aid Transparency Index is the most effective civil society effort to get the U.S. government agencies to take action to make aid data more transparent,” said one civil society respondent. A government respondent agreed, “The Index is great in raising awareness and pulling in leadership’s attention and resources.”

Part of the power of the Aid Transparency Index (“Index”) is that it assesses individual agencies, rather than the USG as a whole. This created pressure and accountability on individual agencies that was otherwise lacking. Indeed, the Index seems to create a major incentive for many implementers: over two-thirds of survey respondents rated the Index as a significant or major incentive for aid transparency efforts.

Respondent also praised the Index for creating a deadline every year; one noted that the Board of his NGO only checked in on IATI implementation efforts in the weeks before the Index release. “It’s a constant reminder every year that these governments have made commitments;” noted one civil society advocate.

The Index is more than just an accountability tool, however. One government respondent noted that the Index helped prioritize among IATI’s many fields, based on stakeholder consultation with partner country end users, which was information agencies didn’t necessarily have. In addition, Publish What You Fund staff engaged with agency staff and offered technical support, including through an on-line “tracker” tool. This allowed agencies an opportunity to correct and improve their data each year prior to the release of rankings.

For all these reasons, over three-fourths of survey respondents stated their score on the Index made it easier to strengthen aid data transparency internally. Similarly, respondents rated five different types of civil society efforts and, while all of them were rated as having some positive impact, the Index was rated as having the most:



However, concerns were voiced by multiple respondents about the Index’s methodology and focus. Specifically, several stakeholders noted that the Index is too limited and the indicators used don’t cover the wide array of transparency efforts underway in a number of agencies and organizations. As such, it risks incentivizing very specific transparency efforts (*i.e.* agencies “play to the test”) and discourages others (“[Unscored] efforts are questioned internally and then halted or limited.”) Some felt the comparisons across donors were not fair because they compare very large agencies with a great deal of data to very small agencies with comparatively less data.

There were concerns that Publish What You Fund's evolving methodology has resulted in "the goal posts moving" as agencies worked to improve their score on the Index. Some feared this was actively discouraging agencies in their implementation efforts. There were related concerns that the Index encouraged a single-minded focus on improving scores or ranking, rather than pursuing aid transparency because it is actually useful to internal or external stakeholders.

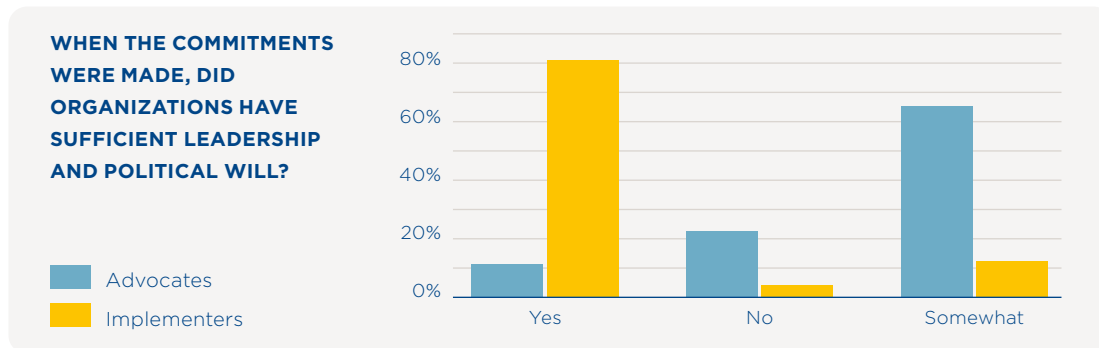
Others noted that even progress on the Index was not necessarily that meaningful in the larger scheme of transparency efforts. One civil society advocate noted that improvement in scores does not necessarily link to real world impact. "If USAID gets a 20% higher score, does that translate into their aid being 20% better in some way?"

3. The 2011 commitment to publish to IATI was not accompanied by IATI management plans, strategies or system upgrades.

Following the USG commitment to publish to IATI, progress was slow largely due to the following constraints to publishing aid data:

- **STRUCTURES WERE NOT IN PLACE TO ENSURE LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Prior to the publication of the OMB bulletin, the White House's Office of Science and Technology – which doesn't otherwise have a role in foreign assistance but does work with data transparency and related technology – and the NSC co-chaired an Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) on Foreign Aid Transparency. The IPC provided high-level guidance and oversaw the OMB Bulletin negotiations, but did not continue meeting after the Bulletin was published. As a consequence, most respondents felt there was little oversight or guidance provided from the White House or any other coordinating body on agencies' implementation of USG commitments, leaving agencies to fend for themselves. "When the USG makes a big commitment like [the one made at Busan] and no one knows how to pull it off, they really need a technical lead who knows how to pull it off. Otherwise it just turns to politics," said one USG respondent, recalling the lack of central coordination and leadership and the knock on effects of agencies trying to manage among themselves.



This issue was exacerbated by the fact that most agencies' management did not prioritize implementation of the commitments. While many felt there was political support at the highest levels and dedicated staff level champions, most advocates, and some implementers, noted that there was a “missing middle” in terms of management to push implementation efforts. In addition, data transparency efforts were usually an extra duty for both management and staff – an extra set of tasks on top of their day jobs. As a result, efforts to meet IATI and OGP commitments were often delayed as other more urgent priorities arose.

“Look, everyone basically agreed that aid transparency is good,” summed up one civil society advocate, “it just was never as pressing as everything else.” And without an interagency leader or coordinator, engaged management, or full time staff dedicate to implementation efforts, it remained non-pressing.

- **IT TOOK MANY YEARS FOR MOST AGENCIES TO DEVELOP DETAILED STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

The USG decision to sign up to IATI was not followed by a strategy to implement. The first U.S. IATI implementation schedule, released in December 2012, set implementation targets for the USG but did not specify individual agency goals. Publish What You Fund called the schedule “unambitious” and noted that, despite its lack of ambition, the targets were still unlikely to be met without a significant increase in data publication from the State Department, which, at that point, had only published minimal budget data.

Individual agencies generally did not release strategies and/or costed management plans for many years – and some still have not. In 2015, USAID finally released a detailed cost-management plan, which paved the way for requesting additional resources, laid out a phased approach to releasing data, and detailed

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Transparency, while good, was never as pressing as everything else.



The largest impediment to publishing IATI data were the data management systems

TOP THREE ISSUES WITH DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

1. Data management systems don't store the right data for IATI standard.

- “Our internal management information systems are weak and this makes data collection more manual and therefore expensive and time consuming and prone to errors.”
- “The requested data is not housed in corporate systems.”

2. Data management systems were not designed for IATI reporting.

- “Our antiquated systems, which focus on accounting, limit the data that can be collected or managed. System improvements are sought by some but resisted by others because accounting systems should not be re-purposed or overburdened as project management systems. There is currently no committed budget for small accounting or procurement system improvements, and no broader discussion on development of a new system. Even if leadership chose the upgrade approach, there is very limited budgetary support from the Congress for IT systems.”
- “[One key issue was the] inability to link financial data to the entire cycle of a project and its results, because of fragmented systems, different protocols and standards, and incomplete data. We're still working on this. [We are] opening up data from systems that were designed to be internal managerial systems.”
- “[We struggled with the] lack of technical tools to create IATI. We had to increase technical resources to build an IATI-compliant ‘generator’.”

3. There are multiple systems that must be bridged to meet IATI standards.

- “The ... big issue is that the data systems that do exist don't talk to each other.”
- “[One key issue was the] technical challenge of fragmented and incomplete data across multiple source systems. This has still not been resolved.”

specific steps and targets for each phase. State has undertaken a study of their systems, but key decisions about system upgrades or processes remain. Too many agencies still do not have a plan that outlines in detail the resources, steps, and targets needed to fulfil the IATI commitments.

- **MOST DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS WERE NOT DESIGNED TO PUBLISH DATA EXTERNALLY**

The largest impediment to publishing IATI data were the data management systems. Many of the systems that are being used to collect, process, or publish aid data were not initially designed for such purposes. In some cases, the process involved multiple data systems, which were not compatible or which each housed only fragmented data. In some instances, the needed system didn't exist at all or didn't house the required data. Many agencies and organizations expressed the need to overhaul or upgrade systems in order to meet the requirements. Some upgrades have been successfully completed but many have not.

- **OVER TIME, USAID AND THE STATE DEPARTMENT CREATED DUELING WEBSITES**

Prior to 2010, USAID was the primary publisher of aggregated U.S. aid data. For several decades it had been responsible for compiling annual U.S. data on foreign assistance obligations in the Green Book and to the OECD DAC. U.S. foreign-assistance agencies would manually gather the requested data and submit it to USAID, which would then carefully vet it. The data was also published on two different USAID websites with only limited visualization tools.

When ForeignAssistance.gov was launched in 2010, it originally served a very different role. It began as a tool to help stakeholders visualize the annual Congressional Budget Justification for State and USAID, which had previously only been available in a PDF format.

Over time, however, the scope of ForeignAssistance.gov broadened to include data from additional foreign assistance agencies, as well as both backwards looking data on obligations and disbursements, as well as forward looking data on planned budgets. In 2011, ForeignAssistance.gov also took on the responsibility for publishing IATI data for the whole USG. This meant collecting a lot more data fields on a quarterly rather than an annual basis. It was quickly determined that this could not be done manually. Instead, agencies began to pull data from their



There are large discrepancies between the data on USAID's Foreign Aid Explorer and ForeignAssistance.gov

own financial management systems, which – as discussed above – were never designed for this purpose, and report it to ForeignAssistance.gov.

In 2015, USAID's old websites, which presented Green Book and OECD/DAC data for the U.S., were combined into the "Foreign Aid Explorer" with enhanced data visualization tools. The new website looked remarkably similar to ForeignAssistance.gov: both displayed similar looking maps, both allowed users to look at obligations for a number of fiscal years, both claimed to be covering all of USG assistance, and both let users break aid information down by country or by sector. However, they gathered their data in different ways. USAID continued to gather data through an annual data call to all executive agencies that either fund or implement foreign assistance and then carefully vet the data. ForeignAssistance.gov relies on agencies to report on a quarterly basis and do not vet the data before publication.

These different methods lead to inconsistent data. As shown in one example below, there are large discrepancies between the vetted, manual data on US-AID's Foreign Aid Explorer and the data on ForeignAssistance.gov. This raises serious questions about data accuracy and completeness. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently released a detailed report on these websites, focusing primarily on the data quality of ForeignAssistance.gov. One of its primary findings is "ForeignAssistance.gov is not transparent about data limitations, and data are not updated annually to ensure quality."¹³

DATA AS OF SEPTEMBER 22, 2016	FOREIGNASSISTANCE.GOV (STATE DEPARTMENT)	FOREIGN AID EXPLORER (USAID)
FY14 Obligations	\$36 billion	\$43 billion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tanzania • Kazakhstan • Colombia 	\$694 million \$87 million \$284 million	\$589 million \$192 million \$560 million
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace and Security (State category) • Conflict Prevention and Resolution, Peace and Security (USAID category) 	\$2.5 billion	\$6.36 billion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (S) • Government and Civil Society, General (U) 	\$1.1 billion	\$7.7 billion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian Assistance (S) • Emergency Response (U) 	\$7 billion	\$6.15 billion

4. There were insufficient attempts to ensure that published data were useful and useable to potential data users.

The vast majority of interview respondents stated they were not aware of people using the public data available on ForeignAssistance.gov or IATI. This was primarily due to concerns about the following:

- **THE DATA PUBLISHED WAS NOT MEASURING THE RIGHT THINGS OR GOING INTO ENOUGH DETAIL**

Prior to the creation of the IATI standard, there were consultations on data needs, particularly with partner countries. These needs tended to be described together. Advocates of aid transparency often discussed the benefits to all potential end users: donors would use it for planning and coordination; recipient governments would use it for budget planning and prioritization; and advocates would use it to hold governments accountable. Similarly, implementers published data and designed websites without sufficient thought about the intended audiences. Recently, however, both advocates and donors have realized that different end users need different types of data, as well as different data tools. There is now an increased emphasis on determining the specific audiences for data, their unique needs, and their capacity to absorb the data once it is published.

In 2014-2015, USAID conducted three country pilot assessments¹⁴ that aimed to determine what types of data partner governments currently use, what data civil society uses in those countries, what additional data the government and civil society would like, what data management tools are currently utilized, and the capacity to use data by local stakeholders. They then determined whether these needs are – or could be – met by ForeignAssistance.gov or IATI, as well as soliciting stakeholder feedback on those tools. They generally found that if IATI data were complete, accurate, and timely, it would meet the needs of recipient governments. However, right now it is none of those things, so governments rely on gathering data manually from individual donors.

- **THE DATA WERE NOT COMPLETE, ACCURATE, OR TIMELY ENOUGH**

While ForeignAssistance.gov publishes agency data when it is received and ready to be posted, the completeness of the agency data sets are not clearly marked. Thus data users may unknowingly be using inaccurate and incomplete data – or



If IATI data were complete, accurate, and timely, it would meet the needs of recipient governments

avoiding the data altogether due to concerns about its incompleteness. The ForeignAssistance.gov vs. Foreign Aid Explorer example provided above suggests the concerns about incompleteness or inaccuracy are valid.¹⁵ Users also expressed concerns that the data was too old or that it was not possible to tell when the data were published.

WHY SHOULD PUBLISHING AID TRANSPARENCY BE AN ITERATIVE PROCESS?

Numerous implementers noted that there is a strong element of “learning through doing” when it comes to publishing aid data. Problems are uncovered – and subsequently fixed – during implementation. Data errors and discrepancies are discovered once they are posted. One NGO implementer noted that once they posted their first tranche of data, their colleagues began reaching out to point out errors and missing data. It was challenging to vet the data thoroughly when it was simply on internal spreadsheets but once it was online, the interest in accuracy and accountability increased dramatically.

- **THE DATA WERE TOO TECHNICAL TO USE (PARTICULARLY IATI XML DATA)**
Not many people – even among statisticians and economists – are familiar with utilizing raw xml data. “It’s machine-readable, not human readable,” noted more than one respondent in regards to the IATI XML data. This serves as another substantive hurdle to data use. Many called for better tools and apps to visualize data.

“The release of GPS data is commonly cited as a major success story of the publication of USG data,” noted one USG respondent, “but if the U.S. released all the satellite data that now drives the GPS systems in our cars, and there was no app, people would ask ‘Why did you release all this data? There is no demand for this data. What are people going to do with this data?’ Without an app, there is no demand.”

To date, there have been some efforts to make aid data – and IATI data specifically – more user-friendly through data portals and visualization tools. Along with the beta version of ForeignAssistance.gov, a number of NGOs have made progress in displaying data-driven maps to allow people to visualize their projects. Oxfam Novib has Atlas (<https://atlas.oxfamnovib.nl>), Cordaid has the CORDAID dashboard (www.cordaid.org/en/open-data-dashboard), and InterAction has the NGO Aid Map (www.ngoaidmap.org). In addition, initial efforts have been made to make the IATI data itself more accessible with the “D-portal” (www.d-portal.org),

a website that allows users to search by country or donor to see where aid comes from and where it goes. However, these tools are still limited, in part due to the incomplete data underpinning them.

- **THE DATA DOES NOT JOIN UP OR TRACK OTHER IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT FUNDS**

In order to make IATI data more useful to stakeholders in recipient countries – both from a coordination and an allocation perspective – foreign aid flows need to be aligned with their own country budgets. After years of work, and the approval of additional DAC sector codes, this alignment is now possible. The challenge now is to implement.

Another gap is the lack of IATI data related to humanitarian assistance. Anecdotes abound on poorly coordinated aid that potentially cost lives and could have been avoided with better data. “In December 2015, 60 out of 80 beds at a newly-constructed Ebola clinic in Sierra Leone were not being used because of a lack of staff,” reported the Center for Global Analysis. Traction to fill this hole in the data got a boost from the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, where a variety of key actors – including the USG – agreed to a “Grand Bargain”, including commitments to publish their humanitarian aid to IATI within two years. IATI recently modified its standard to allow organizations to mark their activities as humanitarian and tag them to specific crises and sectors. These modifications combined with donor commitments have set the stage for significant improvements in tracking humanitarian assistance.

“
IATI modifications combined with donor commitments allow for significant improvements in tracking humanitarian assistance

5. Pressure from civil society helped ensure efforts progressed.

Both the interviews and the survey data suggests civil society played an important role in promoting aid transparency initiatives. The majority of agency staff responsible for implementing IATI said that encouragement from civil society or the public was one of the primary motivations for making aid data public. Similarly, when asked to rate the extent to which efforts from civil society influenced their agencies’ efforts to make aid data more transparent, 60% of respondents rated it a 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being “not an influence” and 5 being “a major influence.”)

However, many implementers expressed frustration that advocates often underestimate the scope and costs of transparency efforts. “[It is] less helpful to have too



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many opinion pieces not understanding the details of how hard it is for agencies to change given limited resources,” said one USG implementer. Another agreed, “[It’s] least helpful [when civil society shows a] lack of understanding or desire to understand the challenges.” Conversely, MFAN was recognized as helpful by one respondent due to their “deep understanding of the budget process, USAID systems and processes, and the political landscape under which the Agency is operating.”

One way advocates can address these issues is by making their own data public using the IATI standard. Respondents from NGOs that publish their own data say they are stronger advocates because they understand the challenges but also know how to work towards solutions. Implementers agree that advocates that publish their own data are often seen as more credible and more helpful. In addition to credibility, publishing their own data has the potential to assist in internal coordination among NGO confederations, where the decentralized nature makes it difficult to track what other members of the confederation are doing.

Implementers want civil society to encourage data use. “I do wish civil society groups would show us how it is useful for development effectiveness – actually using the data,” said one implementer. Another agreed, “Make sure the open data initiative is not just for transparency’s sake, but that the data be treated as an asset.” In this vein, the work of Development Gateway, including its work with recipient governments on importing and using IATI data, including through aid management systems, came up several times as an example of helpful steps towards increased data use.

The OGP also serves as a venue for government and civil society to work together to improve aid transparency. Through the U.S. national action plans – developed in partnership between the USG and civil society – specific commitments have been made to increasing U.S. openness and transparency. The most recent U.S. national action plan, released in October 2015, made further commitments to improve the quality of foreign assistance data and build increased demand for the data. These national action plans and progress are routinely assessed through OGP’s Independent Reporting Mechanism reports.¹⁶ The most recent IRM report¹⁷ deems U.S. progress towards foreign assistance transparency as “limited” and describes the data on ForeignAssistance.gov as low quality and incomplete. The gap between the increasingly strong commitments made in the U.S. national action plans and the relatively critical assessments in the IRM report point to a need for increased accountability to ensure OGP commitments are fulfilled.

Lessons Learned

Lesson Learned #1: The decision for a “whole of government” approach to publishing to IATI slowed progress.

While there is logic and value to aggregating all foreign assistance data into one USG website – providing stakeholders with a one-stop shop to understand what the *entire* government is doing in foreign assistance in a consistent manner – the reality is that it slowed progress and negatively affected data quality. It prevented agencies that were ready to push ahead from innovating, experimenting, learning, and then sharing their experiences with other agencies. It also reduced accountability of individual agencies to come up with strategies for implementation, release targets they could be held against, and publish agency-specific data in a way that would allow data users to assess both the comprehensiveness and quality of that agencies’ data. The decision to have ForeignAssistance.gov be the only entity that could publish to the IATI Registry also slows publication, lessens agency ownership of the quality of their data, and reduces the usefulness of the IATI data, as end users don’t know to which agency the data belongs.

Lesson Learned #2: The Aid Transparency Index played a vital role in incentivizing and assisting progress made by individual agencies, yet agencies also need to decide independently what efforts best meet their business model and goals.

The Index created the accountability structure that was missing in the whole of government approach to publishing aid data. It created pressure on individual agencies to publish more comprehensive and better quality IATI data in a timely manner, while also providing some technical assistance. However, the Index is just one measurement of transparency and agencies should decide what efforts and outcomes are most important for their aid transparency and effectiveness goals. In moving forward with its current methodology review, Publish What You Fund should also review whether its Index is measuring actions and outputs that are the most relevant to both data producers and data consumers.



Agencies should decide what efforts and outcomes are most important for their aid transparency and effectiveness goals



Without senior White House leadership holding agencies accountable, “we had very few carrots... and even fewer sticks.”

Lesson Learned #3: Senior, central leadership and accountable staff are needed to ensure progress.

After an initial push to make commitments to aid transparency through the Open Government Partnership and IATI, the White House significantly stepped back from any role of either coordinating agencies' efforts or holding them accountable for progress. Although there were interagency groups at both the working level and the senior level, the latter met infrequently after Busan and rarely pushed agencies to honor their commitments. As one respondent from the staff-level working group noted, without senior White House leadership holding agencies accountable, “we had very few carrots . . . and even fewer sticks. Nagging agencies [to submit data] only gets you so far.” The lack of an effective, centralized interagency coordinator was exacerbated by the fact there were few full-time managers or staff dedicated to publishing aid data in the agencies. It was usually an additional task on top of their existing portfolios. As such, other competing priorities often took precedence.

Lesson Learned #4: In the immediate aftermath of the transparency commitments, constraints were not identified and strategies to overcome them were not developed.

In the months - and sometimes years - that followed the IATI commitments in Busan, many agencies did not put cost-management plans in place to outline the needed resources, skills, targets or timelines to fulfill the commitments. This meant that when constraints were uncovered, they often seemed insurmountable, further postponing progress.

Lesson Learned #5: Data management systems in most agencies do not have the capacity to report accurate, complete, or timely data to the IATI standard.

Inadequate data management systems were the number one constraint that served as a long-term hurdle to progress for many agencies. Without cost-management plans in place to address technological constraints, many agencies attempted to pull, organize, and publish data manually. The limited capacity of data management systems also had profoundly negative impacts on data quality, as is evident by the Index assessment over many years.

Additionally, insufficient attention was paid to data input. Often times the staff entering the data into the systems were not given specific instructions or training on data definitions, data quality control, or intended data use and publication. In many cases, data inputters were unaware that the data would even be made public, much less aggregated across systems or agencies, which meant little effort was put into ensuring the data was accessible and comprehensible to a wider audience.

Lesson Learned #6: Dueling USAID and State dashboards reveal data quality issues.

As explored in great detail in the GAO report on ForeignAssistance.gov, the fact that USAID and State dashboards contain significant data discrepancies highlights data quality issues that need to be either reconciled or publically explained. While each dashboard was initially created to serve its own purpose, they have evolved into very similar dashboards and now – at least to the user community – appear to be duplicative efforts. Although they serve marginally different purposes and prioritize different trade-offs (primarily accuracy versus speed), the apparent duplication of effort strains already thin resources and confuses end users who assume the data discrepancies mean neither dashboards' data can be trusted. In going forward, the USG should prioritize its data needs, reconcile the dashboards to meet those needs, and better explain to the public the choices it made and the knock-on effects to data quality and completeness.



*The U.S. should
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Work is needed to ensure data publishers are considering their likely data users and data needs

Reconciling the dashboards will likely force some difficult choices about how to ensure data is both timely (as currently prioritized by State's quarterly updates) and accurate (as currently prioritized by USAID's careful vetting of annual data). In order to achieve both objectives, the reconciled website will likely need to rely on improved data management systems that can automatically pull key data, as well as increased quality control from staff entering the data into the management systems. In the short-term, this will likely require prioritizing a subset of the most important data, ensuring staff are trained on how to vet the data prior to input, and designing systems that can publish the data quarterly without additional manual interventions.

Lesson Learned #7: Specific data users need to be identified and their needs assessed.

While the USAID country pilot studies were a good step, additional follow-up work is needed to ensure data publishers are considering their likely data users and data needs. The USG and civil society advocates both have a role in understanding data demands and in building capacity for data use. The financial data needed for internal accounting purposes within an agency, for example, is very likely different than the project data needed by stakeholders in recipient countries who want to plan and allocate their own resources and for citizens to hold their own governments accountable.

Lesson Learned #8: Data quality and accessibility drives data use.

Although improvements to data quality and data use will continue to be both intertwined and iterative, the clear message from stakeholders is that until data sets are believed to be relatively complete and accurate, their use will be minimal; a critical mass of quality data is needed before an uptake in use can be expected. Additionally, complete and accurate data also needs to be accessible. Websites, data visualization tools, and data apps are needed to help users explore the

data, ask specific questions, and get visuals that help them make sense of large, technical datasets. The importance of promoting data use is recognized globally, including by the Board of IATI and Member's Assembly, which recently approved a strategic direction¹⁸ for IATI. Promoting data use was the first recommendation and was described as “critical to the suitability of the initiative.”

Lesson Learned #9: Civil society advocates are most effective when they strike the right balance between putting pressure on implementers and understanding of the challenges they face.

Civil society advocates are largely perceived as a driving force in making aid data more transparent. They ensured the issue became mainstream, put constant pressure on agencies for progress, and offered some technical assistance to help implementers, all of which helped to drive progress. Constructive engagement in helping to solve the real constraints implementers face – such as working to improve the standard as well as ensuring that necessary resources are available – is also critical. Civil society actors that publish their own data often strike this balance best and are seen as more credible and helpful advocates as a result.



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Meeting these various commitments has entailed significant effort, has proven to be more difficult than many originally thought, and has been slower to realize than transparency advocates had hoped.

To increase the speed and likelihood that the U.S. will meet its aid data commitments, there needs to be a better balance between the central leadership's responsibility for coordination and accountability and agencies' autonomy to implement and publish data.

The U.S. is a leader in global development. It now needs to become a leader in data driven decision-making so that the U.S. is stronger, more accountable, and more effective in supporting global development.

Recommendations



There is near universal consensus that progress has been made over the past decade

A great deal of progress has been made over the past decade. The commitments by the Bush and Obama Administrations to aid transparency, including the critical step to publish to IATI, were important and commendable. The 2016 Index showed how far U.S. agencies have come since 2011, but also demonstrated the work remaining. Aid transparency has now become both a norm and a necessary tool for more effective development.

“We have more momentum now than ever before,” stated one NGO advocate, noting that the Sustainable Development Goals and data revolution have created a demand for data and pushed the conversation past transparency as a normative value into data as a crucial tool to get work done. “There has been tremendous progress over the past 8 years.”

“Aid transparency has come a long way in the last 6-7 years. It went from being almost an unknown term within policy circles to a well discussed agenda item and included in important policy documents within USG. This effort should be recognized and praised.” – NGO Implementer

Others agreed: “The amount of information collected, the amount made public, the ease of accessing it, has been a revolution since 2010,” said one advocate and another agreed, “At this point [finishing the job] is low hanging-fruit.”

Respondents overwhelmingly singled out MCC as a leader in transparency efforts, with many also noting that USAID has improved dramatically over the years and now is also doing relatively well. Plan International USA, Oxfam America, InterAction, MFAN, and Publish What You Fund were mentioned by multiple respondents as strong players on the civil society side. The Department of Defense was repeatedly mentioned as performing poorly on the aid transparency commitments, whereas Treasury and the State Department were given mixed reviews.

There were several factors that seemed to drive the success of leading publishers. The first was a management team and organizational culture that valued and prioritized transparency as a critical component of their work. Transparency was viewed as mission critical. Some publishers, such as MCC and Plan International USA, also understood the value that this data brings to their

internal management. A second important factor was connecting policy staff with technical and management staff and giving them the time and resources to make a plan, including identifying constraints and determining how to overcome them. In some cases, this might also include bringing in additional technical assistance with comparative expertise. Finally, it is worth noting that smaller agencies or organizations with less data and fewer data systems may also have an easier task.

Although some agencies have successfully overcome some hurdles, significant challenges remain. The lack of high quality and comprehensive data sets, inadequate data management systems, insufficient funds and staff time, and lack of prioritization were mentioned repeatedly in both the survey responses and interviews. The remainder of this report will focus on tangible recommendations to continue building on the success to date and overcome the ongoing hurdles many implementers face.



*However,
there is still
much to be
done*

1. Ensure data comprehensiveness and quality

As mentioned above, a great deal of progress has been made the past decade and many U.S. agencies have some aid data posted online. However, in order for the data to be useful to most stakeholders, it needs to be comprehensive, comparable, open, and timely. This means the first focus must be doubling down on efforts to date to get the data published.

- **REQUIRE AGENCIES TO PUBLISH**

The recent passage of the Foreign Assistance Transparency and Accountability Act¹⁹ – after five years of negotiations – codifies some efforts underway in regards to aid transparency. Advocates both inside and outside the government should use this law as another tool to achieve complete, accurate, and timely data, starting with active participation in the writing of the guidance that will come from OMB.

- **INCENTIVIZE TRANSPARENCY ACROSS IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS – BOTH NGOS AND CONTRACTORS**

Building on USAID's Open Data Policy²⁰ of 2014 that requires implementing partners to publish datasets generated with USAID funding, the USG



Civil society advocates should lead by example and publish their own data to the IATI Standard

should encourage its aid grantees and contractors to publish to IATI, which will substantially increase the available IATI information. Short of following DFID's directive of requiring recipients to publish to IATI as a condition, the USG could incentivize publication. When scoring proposals among potential implementing partners, for example, the USG could assign additional points to implementers who commit to publishing their data using the IATI format. This would reward NGOs and contractors for the difficult - but important - effort of making their aid data public and incentivize other implementers to do the same. Civil society, contractors, and the USG should also build upon the technical work underway to ensure the traceability of aid as it moves from donors to various implementing partners.

- **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Regardless of donor scoring, however, civil society advocates should lead by example and publish their own data to the IATI standard. Doing so makes them more credible advocates, increases their own transparency, and opens the door to using their own data for planning and coordinating purposes.

2. Create management and incentive structures for success

In order to increase the speed and likelihood of fulfilling the OGP and IATI commitments - as well as meeting the many domestic reporting requirements - there needs to be a better balance between central leadership's responsibility for coordination and accountability and agencies' autonomy to implement and publish data.

- **ENSURE CENTRAL LEADERSHIP FROM NSC OR OMB**

No single agency can hold other agencies accountable for publishing their foreign assistance data in a comprehensive and timely manner. Accountability needs to come from a central leadership body such as the NSC or OMB. In addition, agencies currently face multiple, non-aligned data reporting requirements, many of which have different definitions of foreign assistance. Leadership is needed to help agencies prioritize among these, as well as to assist in streamlining and aligning reporting requirements when possible.

WHAT IS “FOREIGN ASSISTANCE?”

It depends who you ask. The definition and categorization of foreign assistance varies across the USG’s own internal reporting requirements and guidance, including varying definitions in the OMB Bulletin (12-01), the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA act), the Government Performance and Results Act – Modernization Act of 2010, the Foreign Assistance Transparency Act, and the Standardized Program Structure and Definitions. These differences further complicate the existing hurdles to the publication of aid data.

- **ENCOURAGE AGENCY-SPECIFIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROGRESS**

While central leadership is needed to help coordinate and hold agencies accountable, increased agency autonomy is also needed to ensure agencies build and capitalize on their own momentum. Individual agencies should be encouraged by the NSC or OMB to publish both their own implementation strategies and their own data on their websites. Importantly, agencies that have the capacity to do so should publish their own data directly to the IATI Registry, which will positively affect data quality, data alignment, and agency ownership of their data.

- **ENGAGE CONGRESS**

Congress also has a role to play in aligning the various data reporting requirements, funding data management systems, and prioritizing and following-up on aid transparency commitments.

3. Ensure strong management of data processes, systems, and human resources

- **IMPROVE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS**

Inadequate data management systems are routinely identified as the number one hurdle to making aid data public. Current systems do not store the right type of data, were not designed to publish externally, and often do not link up in a way that allows users to follow money along a complete project chain. While some smaller agencies or organizations have been able to pull and publish data manually using Excel files, this is neither realistic nor sustainable for most



The different definitions of foreign assistance further complicate the existing hurdles to publishing aid data



Creating a culture of data management includes training, encouraging, and assessing staff

U.S. agencies. USAID is currently pursuing a Development Information Solution (DIS) as part of its plan to become fully IATI compliant. The database will automate data consolidation, redaction of personal or sensitive information, and conversion to XML for reporting. The transition from manual, Excel based solutions to automated database systems will likely be required for most - if not all - agencies and many organizations pursuing complete, timely, and accurate data publication.

IT UPGRADES COST MONEY

“It is important to recognize that for the key development agencies to make any (more) meaningful progress a fairly major overhaul of information systems will be needed. This may be a lengthy and perhaps costly process but unless information systems speak to each other, link to each other and can reconcile project information with financial transactions then much of the results will be limited and probably of not high enough quality.”

- **CREATE A CULTURE OF DATA MANAGEMENT**

Data needs to be entered completely and consistently in real time in order to populate websites or data portals. This means staff need to be trained, encouraged, and assessed on their data management skills.

- **FUND UPGRADES TO DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND TRAININGS**

Systems like DIS need to be adequately funded and resources must be provided to ensure staff are trained on data input and management - with a recognition of not just the costs incurred but also the savings (both tangible and more intangible). Instead of manually pulling and scrubbing data for multiple reporting requirements, staff can “publish once, use often” and then direct their time and talents back to delivering development results.

4. Promote data use and usability

- **DETERMINE THE INTENDED AUDIENCES, THEIR DATA NEEDS, AND THE DATA TOOLS THEY NEED**

Additional steps are needed to determine exactly who will use aid data, how they will use it, and what specific data (and data tools) they need to maximize their use. Focus groups, surveys, and pilot studies could all be used to get a better sense of who is using the data, as well as who might use the data if it better suited their needs. The USG needs to play a role in this effort, including involving U.S. missions to a much greater degree.

- **BUILD TOOLS TO MAKE THE DATA MORE USEFUL, INCLUDING DATA PORTALS AND APPS**

The USG could encourage the development of apps through project funding, competitions, or a Grand Challenge. Even just crowd-sourcing the ideas for apps would be a positive first step towards the development of tools that allow people to use aid data in a way that meets their needs. In addition to portals and apps, it is important to think about data use beyond the internet for potential data users in developing countries. In these countries, intermediaries like journalists or civil society advocates should be encouraged to share data-backed stories and findings through other forms of media, such as radio, television, newspaper, or community meetings. One way to promote this would be to include the use of IATI data within various civil society strengthening programs and media-focused programs already in place through USAID.

- **BUILD DEMAND AND CAPACITY TO USE DATA BOTH INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY**

As data becomes increasingly more complete and data visualizations and tools become increasingly more useful, both the USG and civil society have a role to play in outreach to build both the demand and the capacity to use data. These outreach/trainings efforts should raise awareness about the existence of the data, an understanding of what the data does (and does not) capture, and build capacity to use the data. USAID missions should be particularly well placed for this role. At the same time, it is important to recognize that building capacity for data use is a necessary but insufficient step towards data use. Within governments and civil society organizations, there also needs to be a policy space that encourages – and rewards – data-driven decision making.



Building data demand includes understanding user's needs



The more IATI data can be joined up with other data the more useful it will become

5. Ensure IATI data fits into the broader picture of resource flows

- **ENCOURAGE INTEROPERABILITY THROUGH THE BUDGET IDENTIFIER AND JOINED UP DATA**

One of the benefits of the IATI standard is it is broad and flexible enough to be tailored to the needs of different stakeholder communities. With new elements and tracking codes added, it can become a better tool for budgeting for recipient governments. This effort is currently being pursued through Canada and Publish What You Fund's-led budget identifier efforts (www.aidonbudget.org). IATI data could be better used to track gender-based data and programming, as is being pursued through Data2X.²¹ It can be joined up with data on other financial flows, as was discussed in the Financing for Development conference²² in Addis Ababa in 2015. The more IATI data can be joined up with other data or utilized to track specific development needs and financial flows, the more useful it will become.

- **IMPROVE HUMANITARIAN AID DATA**

Donors spent approximately \$28 billion on humanitarian assistance in 2015 but tracking where it went is incredibly difficult. By focusing on humanitarian aid,²³ the aid transparency community can meet a vital need and also demonstrate the crucial nature of aid transparency more broadly. The "Grand Bargain" commitments - which the U.S. joined - provide an important start. The U.S. now needs to provide the planning, resources, training, and systems to meet its existing commitment to publish its humanitarian aid consistent with the Grand Bargain by May 2018.

Conclusion

The U.S. has made significant progress on aid transparency over the past decade, even if it has not always been as quick as some advocates or implementers would have preferred. Both external advocates and internal champions have poured considerable time, energy, and political capital into ensuring progress despite political, technical, and technological hurdles. These efforts should be fully appreciated.

As the world's largest bilateral donor, it is important that the U.S. be a leader in aid transparency. U.S. agencies, like MCC, have shown that it is possible to publish high quality IATI data. It takes leadership that prioritizes transparency efforts, including proper data management, and a culture that encourages data use both internally and with U.S. partners, with the full participation of civil society.

By learning from the experiences of the past decade, transparency advocates – both within and outside the USG – can work to fully meet the U.S. commitments to OGP and Busan and to realize the benefits that transparency can bring to better aid outcomes.

The need for quality aid information becomes even more critical given the significant changes underway in development approaches and available resources. The rise in private sector finance, philanthropy, and blended financial flows, as well as the efforts to provide smarter assistance to emerging economies, are all part of the movement to produce better and more sustainable development outcomes. The efforts to support Domestic Resource Mobilization, for example, hinge in part on the ability to transparently see what a country raises and what it spends. And Official Development Assistance, while now a smaller part of the overall picture, is still an important development resource, particularly for the lowest income countries. The emerging political consensus both to improve humanitarian assistance as well as to invest in gender equality require better and more comparable data.

Transparency has now become a development norm, and with the work done to date, the U.S. is set on the right course. Going forward, through a combination of smart, targeted policies that deepen existing commitments, the U.S. can utilize the full potential of the data revolution by putting high-quality, accessible information at the core of its development policies. The U.S. is a leader in global development. It now needs to become a leader in data driven decision-making so that the U.S. is stronger, more accountable, and more effective in supporting global development.



U.S. agencies, like MCC, have shown that it is possible to publish high quality IATI data.

The U.S. has made important gains in foreign aid transparency. In order to build upon that progress and to make the data revolution a central pillar of U.S. global development, the U.S. should:

- Implement the U.S. commitment to publish humanitarian aid data
- Invest in gender equality through publication of robust gender data
- Improve U.S. aid transparency for stronger U.S. global development

Endnotes

- 1 www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/final_us_open_government_national_action_plan_3_0.pdf
- 2 The High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness: A history. <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/thehighlevelforaonaideffectivenessahistory.htm>
- 3 International Aid Transparency Initiative – Accra Statement. September 2008. <http://www.aidtransparency.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/iati-accra-statement-p1.pdf>
- 4 Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation. Fourth high level forum on aid effectiveness, Busan, Republic of Korea. November 29 – Dec 1 2011. <http://www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/49650173.pdf>
- 5 www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment
- 6 At the time of the launch, the website was referred to as the Foreign Assistance Dashboard. It is currently referred to as ForeignAssistance.gov. For consistency’s sake, it will be referred to as ForeignAssistance.gov throughout the report.
- 7 Open Government Partnership brochure. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/168257.pdf>
- 8 www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/us_national_action_plan_final_2.pdf
- 9 www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/bulletins/fy2012/b12-01.pdf
- 10 <http://beta.foreignassistance.gov/learn/about-fa>
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- 13 www.gao.gov/assets/680/679204.pdf
- 14 www.usaid.gov/transparency/country-pilot-assessment
- 15 The GAO report on ForeignAssistance.gov released on Sep 7, 2016 states that the “GAO found that the data on ForeignAssistance.gov were incomplete and that State was not fully transparent about such limitations on the website.”
- 16 The IRM reports are a key means by which all stakeholders can track OGP progress in participating countries. The IRM produces annual independent progress reports for each country participating in OGP. For more information, see <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/irm/irm-reports>.
- 17 www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/US%202nd%20IRM%20Report_final_0.pdf
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