

US TRANSPARENCY:

An Assessment of US International Aid
Transparency Initiative Data

Executive Summary

This paper, *US Transparency: An Assessment of US International Aid Transparency Initiative Data*, is one part of a larger project to assess US foreign aid data. In the first instance, Publish What You Fund examined the impact of the US Administration's proposed foreign assistance budget cuts in four countries: [Cambodia](#), [Liberia](#), [Senegal](#), and [Nicaragua](#). We have since used our experience of accessing and using US aid data to reflect on the state of US aid information and have identified a number of issues that US aid agencies should address.

The United States joined the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) in 2011. Progress to turn this aid transparency commitment into usable IATI data has been a struggle for most US agencies. This paper assesses IATI data for three US agencies – the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State (State), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The top line findings include:

- USAID has made progress since its first publication in 2012. It has good higher-level information – overall budgets and strategy documents – but its project level information is hampered by problems with its basic data such as project titles, descriptions, and dates. Along with MCC, it now publishes directly to IATI, which has positively affected data quality. Any further progress, however, will be slow until USAID implements its long-awaited project management system. This requires leadership at the top levels to fully support and ensure organization-wide implementation of the proposed Development Information Solution (DIS) or an alternative.
- The Department of State has made less progress. Like USAID, its higher-level information is good, but at the project level data is unusable. It also has some significant gaps in its financial reporting on IATI. State has been attempting to address system problems for several years through its Foreign Assistance Data Review (FADR) and other systems reviews, but more political leadership is critical to accelerate progress, especially basic information at the project level.
- The Millennium Challenge Corporation remains one of the global leaders in aid transparency and its IATI data is of high quality. The next challenge will be for its Millennium Challenge Accounts (MCAs) (its partner country implementing agencies) to publish more of their data.

Introduction

Since the release of the US fiscal year (FY) 2019 budget request, Publish What You Fund has been working to assess the impact of the proposed budget cuts in four countries: [Cambodia](#), [Liberia](#), [Senegal](#) and [Nicaragua](#). The objectives are twofold. One, to provide a robust analysis of the potential impacts and then share those findings with key stakeholders, during both the FY 2019 budget debate and budget preparations for FY 2020. Two, from a user perspective, to document specific challenges faced by users of US aid information and then make recommendations on how US agencies can improve the quality and availability of its data.

This report is part of the second objective. Although supplemented with additional research, this report is primarily based on our user-experience of exploring the data for the four chosen countries. When information was not available for one of those countries, we did additional research using other countries.

There are a multitude of sources for US aid data. These include, but are not limited to, data and documents published using the [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#) (IATI) data standard, State's [ForeignAssistance.gov](#) and [Foreign Assistance Resource Library](#) (FARL), State's [website](#), USAID's [Foreign Aid Explorer](#) (FAE), [USAID's IDEA](#), USAID's [Development Experience Clearinghouse](#) (DEC), and MCC's [Evaluations Catalogue](#).

This report will focus exclusively on data published to IATI by USAID, State, and MCC.¹ Along with the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, Publish What You Fund has also produced a summary paper and separate [detailed analysis](#) documenting the data quality issues of having two separate dashboards – ForeignAssistance.gov and FAE – both of which report the same type of information but publish vastly different figures. We will also be producing a separate analysis on the available documentation on USAID's DEC, MCC's Evaluations Catalogue, and State's websites.

Background

IATI was launched in 2008 at the third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra. Behind IATI is the idea that if development and humanitarian donors and practitioners share their financial and project level information in a common open data standard ([IATI Standard](#)) it will be more accessible, useful, and usable. With this information at their fingertips, development actors – including recipient governments, civil society, and other donors and implementers – would be empowered to ensure better coordination and greater accountability, and ultimately be able to improve aid effectiveness.

The IATI Standard is divided into two major sections: the “organization file” and the “activity file”. The organization file relates to the strategic information pertaining to the whole organization, such as its total budget, bilateral country budgets, and country strategies. The activity file relates to project level information, such as a specific education or health project. The project level data includes information such as a project title, description, budgets and expenditures, subnational locations (shared as either coordinates or location name), relevant documents, and results. If donors publish timely, comprehensive, and forward-looking data, then IATI can provide an overall picture of assistance going to a selected recipient country, as well as more granular information on individual donors’ portfolios.

The United States first joined IATI in 2011. As of October 2018, USAID, State (including PEPFAR), and MCC combined publish over 125,000 individual activities. Between 2011 and 2016 all agency data was published to IATI by the ForeignAssistance.gov team housed at State. In 2017 and 2018, respectively, USAID and MCC began publishing their own IATI data. State, the Department of Defense and a number of other US agencies still publish their data as one publisher under the name “United States”.²

Country level data

IATI is a source for past, present, and future donor budgets as well as a number of linked strategic documents, which can help put the budget data into context. This information is found in the IATI organization file. State, USAID, and MCC provide well-structured and populated organization files in IATI which contain:

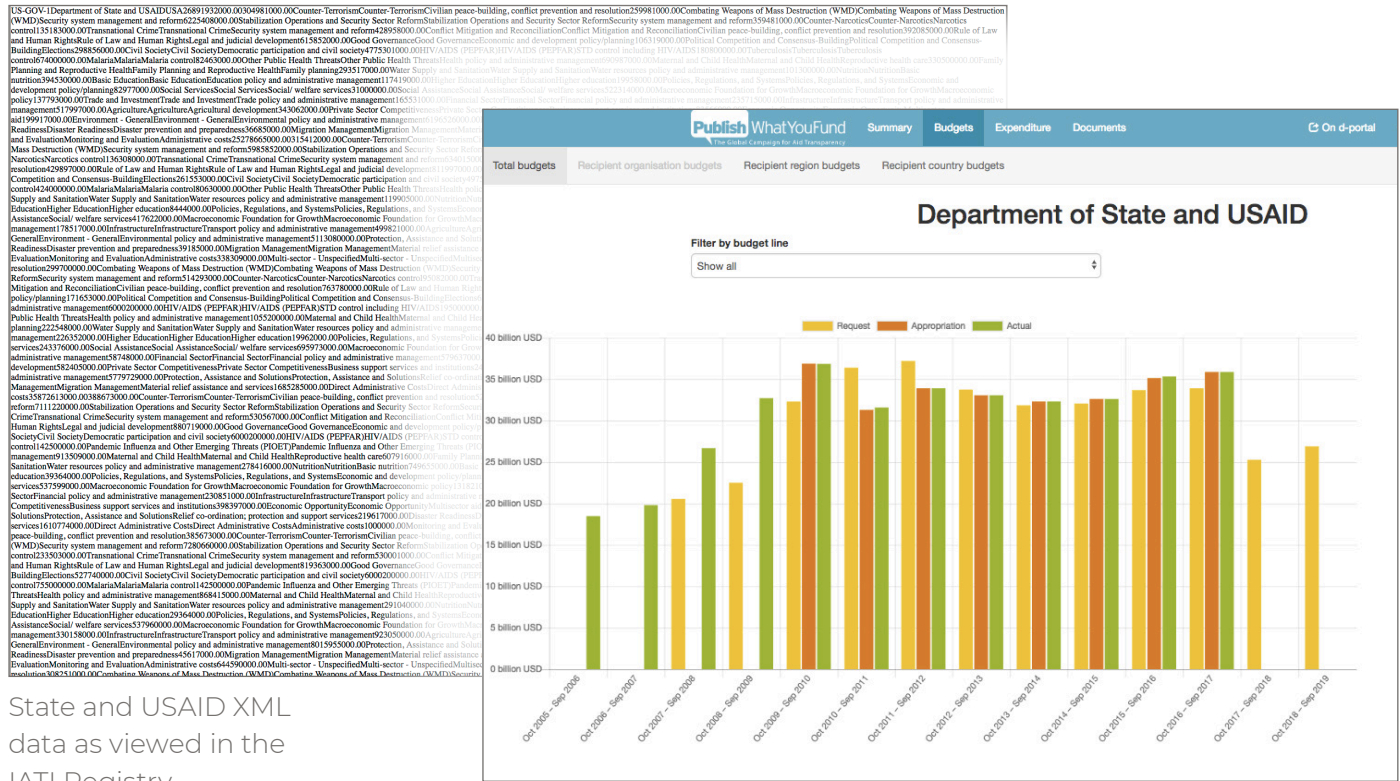
- Total agency budget
- Total agency budget by sector
- Agency budget to recipient country
- Agency budget to recipient country by sector
- Agency budget to recipient region
- Agency budget to recipient region by sector
- Historical budget data
- Strategic level documents

No US agency shares forward-looking budgets, with the exception of the Administration's top-line Congressional Budget Justification for the next fiscal year. MCC, however, shares its country compact budgets, which outline the planned disbursements to a country for its dedicated five-year compact. Consequently, these compact budgets provide some information about forward-looking country budgets.

In addition to budget data, donors are able to publish overarching country or sectoral strategies, such as USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS) which are five-year strategies for USAID assistance, including how it will work with the partner country government, citizens, civil society, multilateral organizations, and the private sector. USAID currently shares 149 such strategies.³ State has similar documents – Integrated Country Strategies – which it has recently released on its [Foreign Assistance Resource Library](#) (FARL) website. However, these State documents are not yet linked to the IATI organization file. MCC links to their compact agreements and the “program description” section briefly outlines how MCC's plans to operate in that country.

In the course of this research, Publish What You Fund identified the wealth of strategic and budget information contained in donors' IATI organization files. Despite its usefulness, however, there was no tool for users to access this data. Publish What You Fund has now built a [browser extension](#) which can give users easy access.

Figure 1. State and USAID's budget visualized in XML and in new browser extension



Project level data

In addition to the higher-level financial data contained within the organization file, IATI publishers can share granular, project level information in the activity file. This project level information links project financial information, such as disbursements or specific transactions, with other programmatic information, including project descriptions, relevant documentation, and results data. This data is particularly useful for informing users about how and where donors are operating. It also can help donors and partner countries to plan, implementers to see who else is operating in a similar space, and civil society to hold donors to account.

GENERAL USABILITY & DATA STRUCTURE

A significant challenge with using US IATI data was the level of extraneous information or “noise” contained within the data. A relatively straightforward query using [d-portal](#)⁴ – “what projects was an agency working on in Liberia in 2017?” – returned many more responses than there were projects in 2017. It was not immediately obvious whether these responses referred to a project, a transaction, or some other expense. The same was true when querying projects undertaken in Cambodia in 2017. The query responded with 219 USAID activities.

This is partly explained by how USAID structures its data. Low-cost activities, such as “Program Design & Learning” – a single project activity amounting to only \$358 – sits alongside HARVEST II, an over-arching five-year \$17m agricultural program. This means the user must scan through and manually pick out which IATI activities refer to projects and which are extraneous information. It would, therefore, be significantly more useful for USAID to restructure its data so that all single, smaller entries are linked to the larger “activity”, such as a project. If similar, but apparently generic activities, such as “Program Design & Learning”, refer to one stream of work then it would be better for these costs to be rolled up into one activity and the individual costs provided as transaction level data. Restructuring data in this way would significantly reduce the amount of extraneous data provided and improve the usability of USAID’s data.

An interim solution would be for the IATI visualization tools, such as d-portal, to be amended so it automatically hides activities below a certain expenditure threshold. This may be a short-term pragmatic solution which would help reduce the “noise” in the data for users while donor publishers, such as USAID, worked on addressing their internal systems.

State’s IATI data has similar problems to USAID’s, but they are more acute. At the project level, State’s data is essentially unusable because of gaps in the data provided (see financial data section) or because the available data is largely vague or unintelligible to anyone trying to read it (see Figure 2). For example, the majority of titles provided are generic, such as “Volunteer Medical Support” while others are internal codes, which are unintelligible for those not directly involved in the program (e.g., “INV1145/1283/1284,NET LOGISTICS,CUSTOMS AND HANDL”). Additionally, State has pervasive issues with its project descriptions. For example, every activity published for Senegal has the same description and the text does not refer to any particular project. According to State, there are efforts underway to improve the quality of the data captured in State’s financial system, which will in turn improve the quality of titles and descriptions published to IATI, but the timeframe for these fixes is two or three years off.

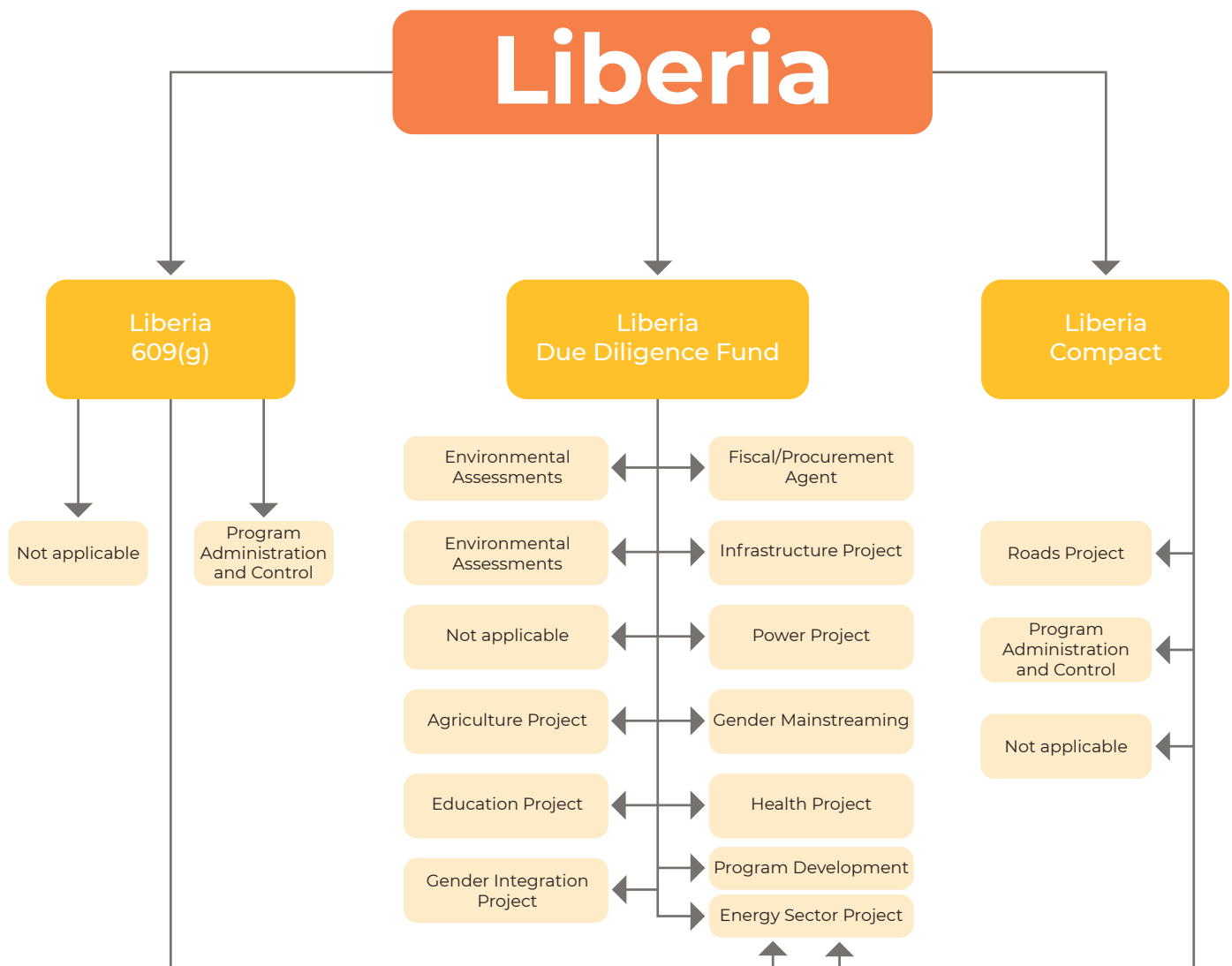
Figure 2. Example of State’s IATI data on d-portal (Senegal)

Project title	End Date	Outgoing Commitments
2143. SSG20017GR0030 Reported by United States	2017-09-30	20,115 USD
2144. CGE DOUBANGUE GRANT PAYMENT Reported by United States	2016-09-30	5,950 USD
2145. GRANT#SSG20016GR021 ImagiNation Afrika-2nd install Reported by United States	2016-09-30	54,786 USD
2146. INV1145/1283/1284,NET LOGISTICS,CUSTOMS AND HANDL Reported by United States	2017-09-30	174 USD
2147. WAL#06-5806 09-28-2016 Reported by United States	2015-09-30	50 USD
2148. ACCT#06-5806 10/28/2016 Reported by United States	2015-09-30	0 USD
2149. C,PR5515086,INV#003/16,8/12/16,DOJ/OPDAT-Interpret Reported by United States	2015-09-30	2,593 USD
2150. ACCT#06-5806 10/28/2016 Reported by United States	2015-09-30	0 USD

Lastly, much like USAID, State structures its data so it places multi-million dollar projects, such as “Preventing Radicalization by Reintegration” alongside very small transaction data, such as “ATA Cell Phone” costing \$170.

MCC’s data was the most user-friendly due to the quality and structure of their data.⁵ The agency links its activities in a hierarchical way so that a user can follow a compact down to more granular levels. Below is an example of the way that MCC structures its data:

Figure 3. MCC data structure



ACTIVITY DATES

Every activity on IATI should include a planned start and end date, as well as an actual start and end date. The planned data elements should be entered as soon as known, whereas the actual start and end dates should not be entered until the project has actually begun or closed.

State and USAID data frequently appear to have incorrect dates. For example, in Cambodia, the HARVEST program – which closed in 2015 – is listed as having closed in 2017. Meanwhile, the Rice Field Fisheries II program is listed as due to close in September 2018 but the actual close date is 2021. Data errors mostly come from dates being incorrectly entered in the first instance, errors with how the data is pulled in the USAID financial system due to an incorrect award ID, or because a project is extended without the corresponding activity dates being updated. An agency-wide project management system is a clear solution which would provide either a single source of management data or would better integrate existing systems. USAID, for example, is currently collecting project data in multiple places, including at a mission level, by bureau, and from a finance perspective. Consequently, there is no single source of project data, and those responsible for publishing data externally often do not have access to either accurate or needed data. A USAID project management system has been under development for several years, but the implementation date is unclear. In the interim, and at a minimum, training on data entry should help.

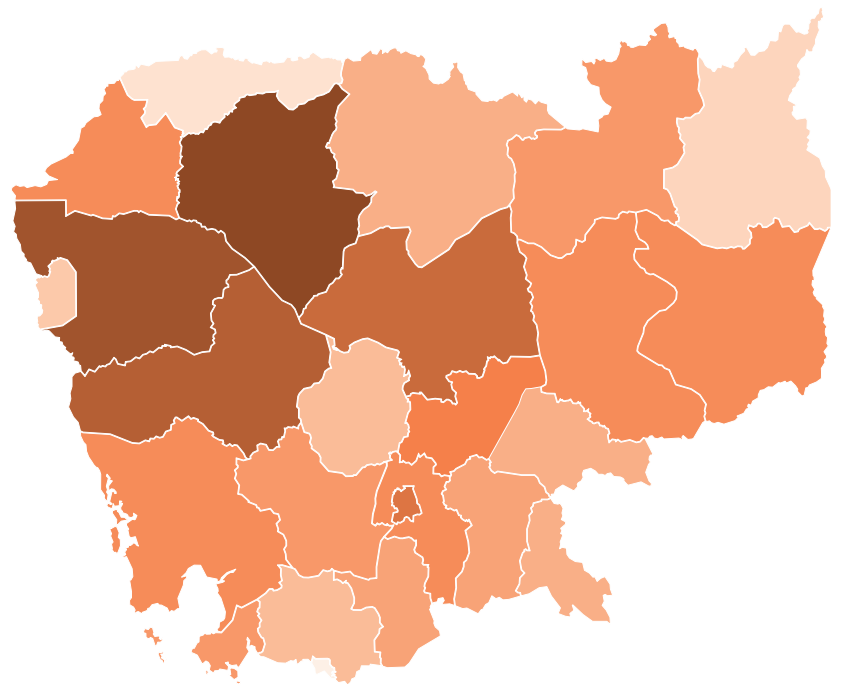
State activity date data suffers from similar, albeit more pervasive, issues. Few activities contain credible start and end dates and there are also numerous activities which list “not applicable” for these dates, with no explanation as to why.

MCC dates appear much more accurate with only occasional errors. MCC is now working to simplify how dates are coded and intends to address these minor errors in the near future.

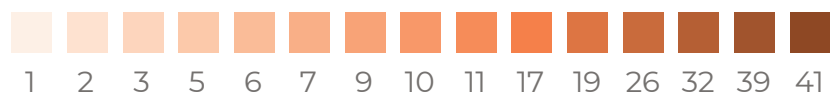
SUB-NATIONAL LOCATIONS

An activity can also include the sub-national location to indicate either where it is taking place or where the beneficiaries are based. The sub-national location is an important piece of data to help identify clusters of development activities which project design teams can leverage when recommending new activities or identifying potential gaps in existing development efforts. As part of the study to assess the impact of the proposed budget cuts, for example, sub-national location data was critical to understanding what areas of a country would most likely be impacted and what other donors were operating in the same location.

Figure 4. Map of regional sub-national locations for 2017 US programs in Cambodian AIMS



Number of projects:



Unfortunately, US agencies do not utilize this field sufficiently on IATI. State provides no sub-national locations for current data and USAID data contains sub-national locations for only 1.24% of its projects. However, this data is being captured in-country by the US missions. In the Cambodia case study, for example, US data reported to the Cambodian Government's Aid Information Management System (AIMS)⁶ had sub-national locations for 155 of the 167 US activities (see Figure 4). Conversely, State and USAID report no subnational locations for their activities in Cambodia to IATI.

SECTOR CODES

Publish What You Fund's four in-country studies analyzed one sector per country. The research first identified the sector, for example agriculture, and then the sub-sector, for example agricultural finance services. This feature is provided on IATI and publishers typically attach one or more of the internationally recognized sector codes to an activity.⁷ If coded correctly, this enables an individual to search for USAID agricultural programs based on one of these codes, such as food crop production. However, State and USAID rarely make use of these specific sub-codes and instead attach the broadest available sub-sector codes which prevents users from swiftly narrowing their searches to only the most relevant activities. For example, we found that 95% of all agricultural activities (global, past, and present) use the same two sub-sectors: "Agricultural policy and administrative management" and "Agricultural development".

Much like subnational locations discussed above, these sub-sectors were captured in more detail at the US mission level. Below is a comparison of how US agricultural projects are defined on IATI versus how they are defined within the Cambodian Government's AIMS in US fiscal year 2017.

Figure 5. US agricultural projects: Cambodian Government AIMS vs. IATI



Documents

In addition to the strategic level information shared within the organization file, publishers can also link relevant documentation to their individual activities on IATI. These can include contracts, pre-project impact appraisals, annual or quarterly reports, and evaluations. This information is critical for providing detailed information for those looking to understand what a project is about, what approach it has taken, and/or what it has achieved.

The availability of US agencies' documents on IATI is sporadic. When analyzing USAID's most significant activities, a reasonable amount of them have some sort of documentation attached. However, the amount and usefulness of documentation varied. See Table 1 which indicates the percentage of documentation for the relevant sector for each of the four case-studies.

Table 1. 2017 USAID activities with project level documents

Country	Sector	Activities with documents
Cambodia	Agriculture	22%
Liberia	Government & Civil Society	52%
Senegal	Agriculture	64%
Nicaragua	Government & Civil Society	63%

For three of the four case-studies, over 50% of USAID activities included some form of documentation. However, the vast majority of projects had only between one and three documents attached. Best practice suggests that significantly more documents should be available per project. The most commonly listed USAID documents were pre-impact appraisals – which typically outline the project and assess potential risks. The exception was Liberia which commonly had review and performance documents, such as progress reports or mid-term or final evaluations.

MCC consistently shared documents for the countries in which they operate. However, these documents tended to be at a much higher level than project level information. Documents such as the compact, evaluation plans, and constraint analyses all provided useful information. They did not, however, provide much detail on how MCC activities would be operating at the subcompact level – activities that would be implemented by the relevant MCAs.

State does not share any project level documents on IATI.

Financial Data

We are unable to verify whether each individual financial transaction on IATI is correct. Our best measure for the comprehensiveness of US IATI financial data is to compare an agency's total disbursements for a chosen year on IATI with the total disbursements for the same year on the OECD-DAC. While it is unlikely that these two figures would align exactly, it is fair to suggest they should correlate.⁹

Table 2 below compares the 2016 total agency disbursements in US dollars by the 2016 calendar year as it appears on the IATI Registry in raw XML, the IATI data on d-portal, and the data provided separately on OECD DAC.⁹

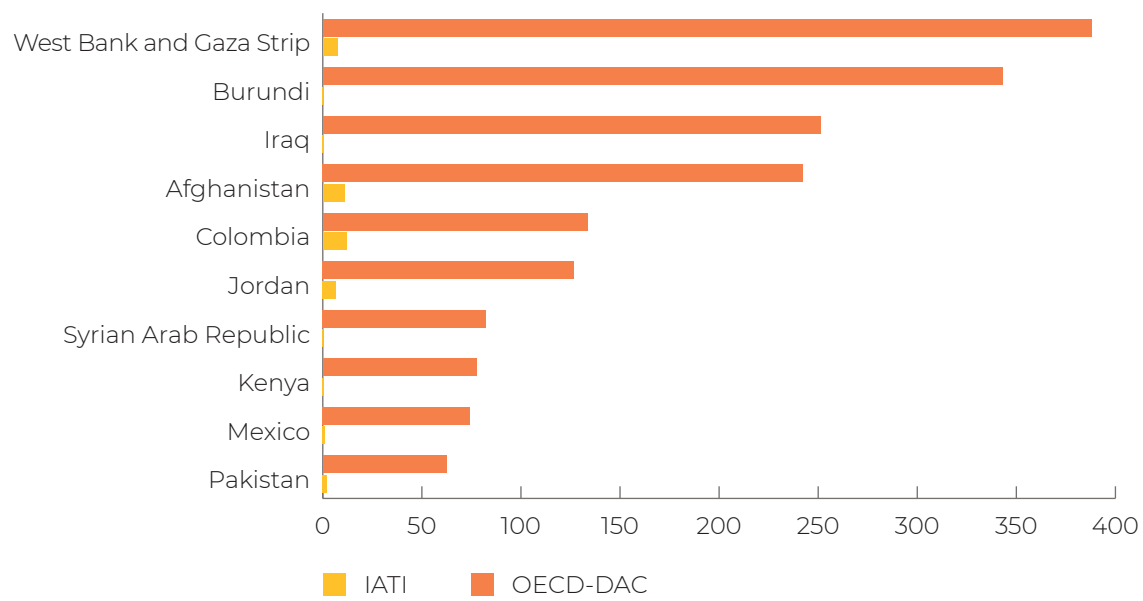
Table 2. 2016 US agency disbursements comparison

US Agency	2016 OECD-DAC Disbursements	2016 IATI Disbursements (IATI Registry)	2016 IATI Disbursements (d-portal)
USAID	19.6bn	19.4bn	10.5bn
MCC	0.69bn	0.68bn	0.65bn
State	4.9bn	2.8bn	0.4bn

USAID and MCC appear to be publishing their full historical financial portfolio to IATI. However, not all of this data is visualized on d-portal, the most accessible tool for users seeking to use IATI project data. This issue was most pronounced for USAID, where \$9 billion – or 54% of their portfolio – for 2016 was missing on d-portal. The reason for this discrepancy is currently unclear, although USAID is investigating.

The comparison also highlights significant inconsistencies between what State is publishing to IATI and what it should report. As can be seen from the chart (see Figure 6), which compares State's bilateral disbursements according to the OECD-DAC and IATI, State underreported its financial portfolio on IATI. It should be publishing at least \$4.9bn for 2016, but is currently only sharing \$2.8bn. Of this, just \$0.4bn is allocated at a country level while the remaining \$2.4bn related to "bilateral unspecified", which d-portal does not display. Therefore, for 2016 (the most recent date for which such a comparison is possible) State is underreporting roughly \$2.1bn of its bilateral funds on IATI.

This discrepancy can be explained by inadequate internal systems which do not sufficiently capture the financial flows for their IATI publication. According to State, this problem is set to be addressed in the coming years. State should thus explore a pragmatic and interim solution to filling the data gaps, perhaps by using State's data that has already been verified and reported to the OECD-DAC.

Figure 6. Top 10 recipients of State's 2016 disbursements, IATI vs. OECD-DAC

Recommendations

Publish What You Fund recommends the following actions to be taken:

USAID

- **Project management system.** By far the most important step for USAID will be for USAID leadership to accelerate the introduction of a suitable project management system, such as the Development Information Solution. Without such a system, any further progress on data improvements will be incremental.
- **Restructure USAID data.** Investigate how to reduce the amount of “noise” contained within the data and restructure it to be as user friendly as possible. A first step would be to ensure that all single, smaller entries are linked to the larger “activity”, such as a project.
- **Training and guidance.** Especially until such time as a project management system is implemented, provide training and guidance to staff to ensure that accurate data – such as activity dates, titles and descriptions – are correctly entered in the data system.
- **Integrate mission level data.** To evaluate how and where mission-level data is being captured at a headquarter level and, as an interim solution, use this data to supplement its IATI data deficiencies.
- **Financial data.** Work with the IATI Secretariat to investigate and fix the financial discrepancies between the IATI Registry and d-portal visualization.

STATE

- **System Improvements.** Many of State’s data quality issues relate to a myriad of systems that either do not capture needed information and/or do not work together. State’s leadership needs to accelerate the FADR process and other reviews and swiftly implement recommendations on system upgrades and data collection processes to improve overall data quality. Until this is done, most of State’s project level data will be unusable.
- **Strategic documentation.** Ensure that the strategic documents available on FARL are also published to the IATI organization file.
- **Restructure State data.** Investigate how to reduce the amount of “noise” contained within the data and restructure it to be as user friendly as possible. A first step would be to ensure that all single, smaller entries are linked to the larger “activity”, such as a project.
- **Training and guidance.** Assess current data entry and publication processes to remedy persistent problems, especially with basic data. Training and guidance should be provided to staff to ensure that accurate data is correctly entered.
- **Project documentation.** Link project level documents to IATI, particularly documents which are important to understanding a project and what it has achieved. This includes pre-impact appraisals, descriptions of the project and the project objectives, periodic reports, and evaluations.
- **Financial data.** Explore more immediate solutions for addressing State’s gaps in financial data, including using OECD-DAC data.

MCC

- **MCA data.** MCC already publishes high quality data, but the more granular information on projects implemented by the partner country MCAs is not generally published to IATI. MCC should continue to investigate how either to publish information generated by the MCAs on their behalf or encourage and/or incentivize MCAs to begin sharing their project level data directly.

Notes

- 1 In the course of writing this report, a draft was shared with USAID, State, and MCC. Some of the issues identified in the earlier draft were quickly resolved (such as missing IATI country codes with MCC). These consultations also provided for a constructive discussion about how best to resolve some of the IATI issues, even if they remain to be fixed.
- 2 It is possible to distinguish State, Defense, and the other agencies contained within the “United States” file but it requires more sophisticated users to readily make this distinction.
- 3 For some countries, there is more than one CDCS, as USAID still publishes some historical documents on IATI.
- 4 d-portal is a platform which visualizes IATI data by recipient country or publisher and is maintained by the IATI Secretariat.
- 5 We originally found some challenges with using MCC’s data. Primarily, MCC did not use IATI country-codes. Without the inclusion of this minor piece of data, we were unable to search MCC’s activities by a specific country. However, once we brought this issue to their attention, it was fixed quickly.
- 6 An Aid Information Management System (AIMS) is an information and communication platform which is generally owned by partner governments and populated with donors’ aid data for that country.
- 7 The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has produced a list of over 200 internationally recognized sector codes.
- 8 The most significant reason for any difference is that the OECD-DAC figure doesn’t change after it has been reported as final. Meanwhile, IATI can be continually updated with minor corrections. For most agencies the differences should be minor.
- 9 IATI data and the OECD-DAC figures relate to calendar year.

About Publish What You Fund: Publish What You Fund is the global campaign for aid transparency. We envisage a world where aid and development information is transparent, available, and used for effective decision-making, public accountability, and lasting change for all citizens.

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