Publishing High Quality Data: Guidance for Donors

Publish WhatYouFund
The Global Campaign for Aid Transparency

Publishing High Quality Data: Guidance for Donors

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This briefing note provides examples of donors' publishing practices and highlights some of the learning from our research for the 2018 Aid Transparency Index. Our data collection processes are rigorous. They enable us to take on the role of data users, searching for relevant and up-to-date information. Although publishing practices are improving, and many donors scored well on the Index, there are still many instances of missing, irrelevant or unusable data.

Even though we have extensive experience of working with the data, finding the right information can still be a confusing, time-consuming and frustrating process. The danger is that other data users will be put off by this process, unable to find what they need, impacting their work.

At Publish What You Fund, we want to ensure that data is transparent, available and used.

This paper focuses on two of the key recommendations from the 2018 Index report that are necessary to improve aid transparency and the usability of data.

1. Getting the basics right
2. Improving performance-related information

The insights we gained on publishing practices are, we hope, relevant and valuable for all donors. Even highly-ranked donors have room for improvement, so examples we've picked out below should be useful. Please note that all the examples below were found using d-portal up to August 2018.

Part 1: Getting the basics right: avoiding noisy data

In order for aid and development finance information to remain truly transparent and accessible, data has to be structured and comparable. Avoiding noisy data as well as having understandable titles and descriptions are key for this and are essential to allow non-experts to access and use the data. Small changes to the way information is published to the IATI Registry can improve both the user-friendliness and the usefulness of one's data, removing barriers to data use.

1.1 The organisation file

The organisation file in the IATI Standard includes data and documents on the broader operating and strategic procedures of a donor. It covers forward-looking total budgets and disaggregated budgets as well as documents related to organisational planning, for example organisation strategy, annual reports or allocation policy. We capture all of these in our Index.

However, we found that some organisation files include unrelated documents for specific IATI document categories. [Document category codes]() are used to identify what kind of information a linked document includes.

For example, one indicator assessed in the Index is whether an organisation publishes an annual report. In IATI, the document category reference is B01. This is the reference everyone can use if searching for annual reports. The following example is an actual search result of a donor's organisation file, giving us 206 results.

It is unlikely that all of these documents are annual reports. The latest annual report might be among these 206 documents but we would have to click through them all in order to find out. This is both confusing and time-consuming for data users.

1.2 Using document dates and labelling documents

Development activities usually span several years and generate many documents. For example, tenders, contracts or progress reports can be published every year or multiple times in the same year. This is not problematic and often adds to the comprehensiveness of the data. However, when several unlabelled documents are tagged for one category without indicating which is the most recent or relevant one, a user has to open and inspect all tagged documents, in order to find the information they need.

During our data collection and sampling work for the 2018 Index we experienced ourselves how confusing and time-consuming this can be.

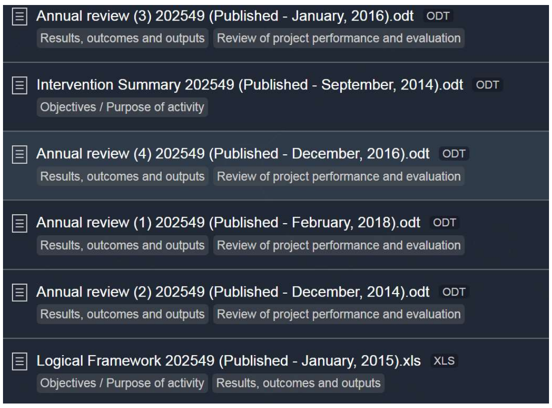
Since version 2.02, document dates can be published as part of the IATI standard to indicate the publication date of the relevant document. We would recommend using the document date reference as compared to only naming the documents with the given date. But, since document dates are currently not displayed on d-portal (we are pushing for that to change), naming documents with the publication year is still a big help for any data user.

What it shouldn't look like:

Example 1

Example2

What it should look like:



1.3 Publishing titles and descriptions

Through our research we have discovered that many donors failed to provide very basic information such as titles and descriptions. These are important pieces of information that provide an essential entry point for the data user. If missing or not usable due to the inclusion of jargon or internal language, a user will have a hard time understanding what a development activity is about. This is particularly the case if the publisher has not provided more detailed documentation.

Titles

The title provides a one-line summary of the activity, with any abbreviations or acronyms explained.

For further details on how our Aid Transparency Tracker runs automated tests on titles, please see the Technical Paper.

What it shouldn't look like:

What it should look like:

Descriptions

The description is a longer explanation of what the activity is. Descriptions must be specific to the individual activity and longer than the title.

IATI offers four different description types. It is optional to include multiple description types, for example to include more information on objectives or target groups.

For further details on how our Aid Transparency Tracker runs automated tests on descriptions, please see the Technical Paper.

What it shouldn't look like:

DESCRIPTION

Liberia

What it should look like:

GENERAL

This project aims to increase public participation in the electoral process and in democratic life in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The first component of the project supports capacity-building for civil society organisations and a vast civic education campaign that focuses on engaging women and youth. The second component of the project is directed at civic education and education for peace in the school system, but also outside the school system in order to reach out of school youth. The main activities include: (1) producing training modules and training trainers in the field; (2) implementing three civic and electoral education campaigns across the country before the local, provincial and national elections, with an expected reach of approximately 4 million people per campaign; (3) training and deploying 10,000 national election observers across the country; (4) producing training modules and training facilitators on strengthening the leadership of elected women; designing, producing and disseminating academic and educational tools (manuals, posters, etc.) on democracy, equality between women and men, peace and non-violence in order to reinforce the civic education program throughout 2000 classrooms in primary and secondary schools.

Part 2: Improving the publication of performance-related information

As well as being complete, relevant and understandable, data needs to be of high quality. This means it can be used to support decision-making processes and to hold governments to account.

One area where this is particularly important is project performance-related information. Performance data and documents are essential for monitoring the progress of projects as well as for assessing whether a project is on track or has achieved its development objectives.

However, our 2018 Index revealed that performance-related information shows the most severe gaps across the board.

2.1 Objectives

The objectives or purposes are those that the activity intends to achieve.

The objectives should include a detailed description of the activity, the target sector/group and the expected outcomes.

IATI provides two ways to publish objectives – either inline using a description of type 2, or a document-link with code A02 (“Objectives / Purpose of activity”).

What it should look like:

> **1. Objective**
>
> 5.12 The general objective of the program is to help restore connectivity and basic services to the population living in the south of Haiti affected by Hurricane Matthew. The specific objectives are (i) to restore road connectivity through the rehabilitation, stabilization, and repair of road sections, road drainage systems, and bridges; and (ii) to restore electric connectivity through the rehabilitation of electric lines and electric installations.
>
> 5.13 The program will provide resources to facilitate an immediate response to the damages caused by the hurricane by restoring basic infrastructure and basic services for the affected population. Included among these activities are the following: (i) clearing of road blockages and clearing blocked drains; (ii) structural works and repairs related to drainage systems along the roadway; (iii) repairs on bridges; (iv) road stabilization and road repairs (v) repair works on electric lines and electric facilities; and (vi) institutional strengthening to implement emergency such works. The program is structured in two main activities: (i) Engineering and Institutional Strengthening; and (ii) Infrastructure Repairs and Stabilization Works.

The objectives in this example meet the definition, describing the activity, naming the target groups as well as the expected outcomes. The objectives are detailed, differentiating between general and specific objectives.

2.2 Pre-project impact appraisals

Pre-project impact appraisals explain the totality of positive and negative, primary and secondary effects expected to be produced by a development intervention.

This can also be captured by environmental impact assessments as well as impact assessments that explain what objectives the project itself intends to achieve.

In IATI, pre- and post-project impact appraisals are reported using a document-link with code A01.*What it should look like:*

II – PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 5
2.1 Project Objective 5
2.2 Technical solution retained and other alternatives explored 7
2.3 Project Type 8
2.4 Program Cost and Financing Arrangements 8
2.5 Program's target area and population 9
2.6 Participatory process for program identification, design and implementation 10
2.7 Bank Group experience and lessons reflected in program design 10
2.8 Program's performance indicators 11
III – PROGRAM FEASIBILITY 11
3.1 Economic and financial performance 11
3.2 Environmental and Social Impacts 12
IV – IMPLEMENTATION 15

The document in this example was drafted before the project started. It provides details on the feasibility of the project, also outlining potential environmental and social impacts. Social and environmental impact assessments can also be published as a separate document and do not have to be embedded in an overarching appraisal document.

2.3 Results data

The results show whether activities achieved their intended outputs in accordance with the stated goals or plans. This information often refers to log frames and results chains.

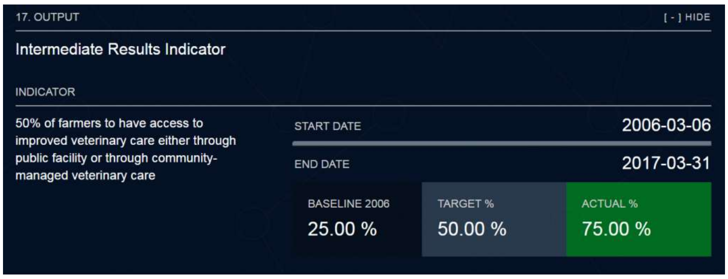
The IATI Standard offers the option to report different result types. For details on how to use the IATI results framework, refer to the reference documentation.

Despite the importance of results data to track progress, there is significant room for improvement on the publication of results by all donors.

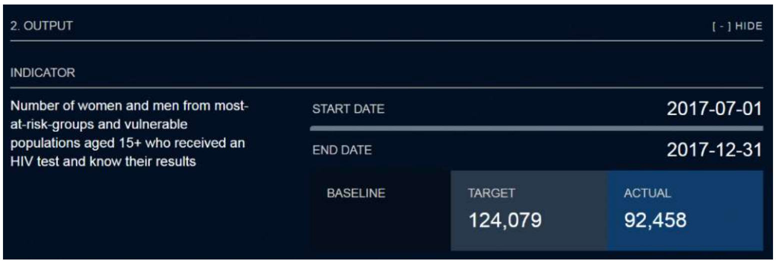
What it shouldn't look like:

Examples of better practice:

Example 1



Example 2



Both examples specify indicators. Available data includes quantifiable targets and actual outcomes, allowing a data user to see whether intended outputs have been achieved.

<u>BUT…</u>

Unfortunately, the publishing practices for results data come with a big but.

The first example aggregates the results over an eleven-year period, making it impossible for a data user to understand when progress happened and when the target was met. The [IATI results framework] makes it easy to publish interim results by giving the option to report results for self-defined timeframes (‘result period’).

The second example displays the results for a specific year but misses a baseline. This means that a data user cannot judge how ambitious the target was and what it means in the context of this activity.

Results information may be gleaned from linked results documents or other contextual information provided by the publisher on the activity, which we also capture in the Index. However, to the extent quantifiable information can be published as results data, this would improve its usability.

Conclusion

Simple steps to improve basic information – such as titles, descriptions and dates – and publishing quality information on performance will have a great impact on the ease with which people can find and use the data. It will be a big step forward for aid transparency and effectiveness.

This paper is based on a blog series by Ines Schultes.

For further details on the Aid Transparency Index, methodology and scoring system visit our website.

About Publish What You Fund

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.

We are the global campaign for aid transparency – for more and better information about aid that is accessible and usable by all.

We work to make sure that information on aid is transparent, usable and used. Whilst good progress has been made by donors to make their aid and development data available, there is still much work to do. Above all, the quality of that information must improve if governments and civil society in recipient countries are going to be able to use it, as well as the donor organisations themselves.