

International Aid Transparency Initiative-First Annual Conference-ECDDP Informal Report of the Meeting 20-21 10 09.

Introduction:

- The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) was launched at the Accra High Level Forum in September 2008 (www.accrahlhf.net) and aims to improve aid through greater transparency to accelerate the reduction of poverty. The central assumption of the initiative is that making information about aid available in a form that is easy to access will contribute to more effective aid and accelerate poverty reduction.
- 18 donors have signed up to IATI (incl. 7 EU MS and the EC), ten partner countries have endorsed it. It is governed by a Steering Committee and supported by a Technical Advisory Group.
- IATI follows two phases:
 - Donors will consult partner countries, civil society and other users of aid information to find out what is needed and in what format. On this basis they will develop and agree to standards for sharing aid information.
 - In phase two, the donors will implement these standards, committing themselves to giving extra priority and – if need be – more resources to this. The standards are expected to be agreed in four parts, namely:
 1. Agreement on **what** will be published (e.g. inputs, conditions, results, project documents);
 2. **Common definitions** for sharing information to enable better comparability;
 3. **A common electronic data format** to facilitate sharing of information;
 4. **A code of conduct** setting out what donors will commit to publishing, how this will be made available and how donors will be held accountable to this.

General impressions:

- The initiative has many very interesting (and refreshing) aspects, and on www.aidtransparency.net you can find a lot of intermediary outputs: reports from consultations, a scoping paper comparing different existing systems for collecting aid information, donor assessments, ...
- As per the above goals, the initiative however has become – as one speaker put it – a “monster of expectations”. The high political commitment at the Accra forum seems to have waned and as a result the foundation below the innovative and ambitious goals now appears fragile.
- More specifically, some of the 18 donors who have signed up have – either openly or informally – second thoughts on the level of ambition on the four areas listed in the intro. During the plenary some openly called for an ‘IATI light’ and during the working group some mentioned they were not ready to sign up to a Code of Conduct.
- This is not to say that the initiative is not relevant: the quality and availability of aid information is extremely poor and largely incompatible. Most information is missing and donors are completely behind on transparency targets agreed to in Accra: giving provisional figures for ODA for the years to come and making the conditions for their aid available to the public. Existing systems for capturing aid data are functioning (and the DAC Creditor Reporting System considered most credible) but there are big problems in attributing this aid to concrete sectors/themes and the problem that different donors use different sector labels – with the same for the developing countries.

- Given the governance structure for international development cooperation – namely “everyone is completely free to do exactly what they want” – there has been a surge of new aid transparency initiatives and systems for collecting aid information in partner countries that were present at the meeting (see for instance <http://aidinfo.org/> , <http://www.synisys.com/index.jsp?id=95&pid=73> , <http://amp.developmentgateway.org/index.do> , <http://aida.developmentgateway.org/AidaHome.do> , http://www.dev-practitioners.eu/fileadmin/Redaktion/GroupsFolders/Division_of_Labour/TR-AID_flyer.pdf). Especially the competition between Aid Management Platforms and Development Assistance Databases is interesting, and complex: each used in a number of developing countries, some open to the public and others not.
- Many participants therefore considered it quite timely and appropriate to have a multi-stakeholder initiative to make sure that the data collected by all these different initiatives can ‘talk’ to each other, and make sure that the data is sufficiently compatible and accurate. However it is equally clear that some initiatives and stakeholders benefit from the present uncoordinated situation.
- Many interesting documents are available on the IATI website (<http://www.aidtransparency.net>) , particularly the scoping paper contains much information <http://www.aidinfo.org/files/iati-scoping-paper.pdf> . This paper implicitly refers to the danger that ‘collecting aid information’ and manually entering it into websites and Excel takes up too much time, and results in a situation where Embassy and Delegation staff but even more so government officials in partner countries have less time available to focus on meeting their development objectives.

More specific points (Day 1):

- Minister Koenders’ opening speech is available here: http://www.minbuza.nl/nl/Actueel/Toespraken_en_artikelen/2009/10/First_annual_Conference_of_the_International_Aid_Transparency_Initiative
- He put upfront that transparency is about “*emancipation of people through information: empowering people by showing them what we do, when and how.*” Interesting element in the speech is the new figure that the Minister has to cut euro 601 million in this year’s aid budget, linked to a decrease in economic growth of 5%. He acknowledged that this puts predictability of aid under much stress, and called for more dialogue with donors on division of labour to make sure that they not all make budget cuts in similar sectors.
- Some unilateral actions by donors were highlighted at the conference, including the Dutch decision to publish country strategy papers on the website of the embassies (before they were internal documents) and the World Bank’s move from a reactive ‘positive’ disclosure policy to a pro-active ‘negative’ disclosure policy (by making things public themselves and stating what they will not make available). See www.worldbank.org/disclosure
- What was especially highlighted in the discussions was the lack of information on the results of aid (input data readily available), only some attention was given to the need for donors to make public conditions attached to aid.
- There was quite some attention to the role of CSOs in aid transparency, also as this appeared the most important issue for the CSOs that were present. The Jordan Minister for Planning made a statement that “NGOs were not above the law” and that they have to be as transparent as donors in explaining where their money comes from, a statement many agreed with.

- Although the objectives for IATI are quite clear (see intro), many participants – including those who had been involved in earlier stages – suggested additional objectives and ideas. Some partner country governments for instance made calls for the creation of a fund for capacity development to help stakeholders use aid information. This is something the organisers could have cleared up in the beginning, otherwise the conference was well organised.
- Some partner countries like Rwanda and Malawi have begun to publish data on which donors were readily supplying them aid info and who were being difficult. The DG for DFID mentioned in his speech that he was definitely motivated by the low score of DFID Malawi to improve.
- As co-chair of the DAC Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, Koos Richelle emphasised that they were ‘desperately looking’ for partner countries that want to lead on the whole Accra agenda. Only one country – Ghana – had volunteered so far.
- Highly interesting was the speech by the Brazilian Government’s Head of the Controller General office. Brazil has a portal with information on the spending of federal resources to a great level of detail: including welfare received per individual family, and per diems received by government officials. See <http://www.cgu.gov.br/english>
- There were general warnings that the implementation of Accra has hardly happened so far, this initiative being one of few ‘actions’ taken.

More specific points (Day 2):

- People were warned not to make a direct link between transparency and accountability, and similarly that availability of information is not the same as accessibility of information.
- More discussions took place on the role of the initiative, which people felt should stop at ‘facilitating’ accountability rather than producing it.
- There was also quite some critique: one of the consultants working on the initiative had estimated that the return on investment in transparency would be close to 2700%, something which some people did not find very realistic.
- The aforementioned head of the WP on Statistics emphasised that there too much attention on aid information goes at the expense of aid delivery, and referred to the significant reporting fatigue in donors: she mentioned that sometimes donors simply fill in ‘anything’ in a questionnaire. She felt that the initiative was going against its own objectives by appearing to want to introduce a single, overarching standard for all development cooperation. She also recommended the people behind the initiative to intensify discussions with statisticians.
- It was stimulating that such criticisms were openly voiced, what you should expect from a transparency initiative. What is a problem though (and Richelle had referred to that the previous day) was the issue of – as one participant put it – “path-dependency based resistance”. Other speakers hence stressed the ‘makeability’ of the initiative, stressing the importance of making it easier for the data to travel rather than creating new top-down structures and codes of conduct.
- One person mentioned that the initiative should also follow closely what comes out of Copenhagen, since proposal call for an information system on money for mitigating and adapting climate change.