

What has the data revolution got to do with IATI? : A personal view

Bill Anderson - February 2017

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In a couple of weeks time the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) will be meeting in Tanzania. This is an annual get together where the IATI community—a varied bunch of software geeks, transparency advocates, aid experts, development workers, statisticians and policy specialists from governments, multilateral agencies and civil society—get together to discuss how IATI’s publishing standard can best be employed and leveraged to improve data production and usage, as well as remaining innovative in response to changing data demands in the fields of development cooperation and humanitarian aid.



This year the TAG will be different. The decision to hold it in an African country was deliberate—previously it has been held in the UK (three times) and Canada (twice)—and over a third of the attendees will be from Africa. The first day agenda is also new: a whole day focusing on the use of data in developing countries.

IATI was established in Accra in 2008, our history tells us, in response to the **demands** developing countries were making on the aid effectiveness agenda. This is not quite true. It was established by donors and multilateral agencies as an initiative to solve a number of problems relating to aid effectiveness—in particular the lack of timely, comprehensive and forward-looking data—that had been voiced, by, among others, developing country governments. The first thing IATI did once established was to spend 2009 organising (through the UN Development Programme) regional workshops where stakeholders from developing countries were consulted on these problems and how they could be solved. The result was the IATI standard, developed in 2010 by a TAG consisting predominantly of statisticians and policy experts from donor institutions and

multilateral agencies. Very few representatives of developing countries were present in these meetings, and I don't remember a single **demand** ever being put by them on the table.

The fact is IATI was established as a northern supply-side initiative and so, in practice, it remains. Despite IATI now being recognised by many as a good example of a multi-stakeholder initiative it is not an equitable partnership. Despite 28 developing country governments now being IATI members—quaintly and anachronistically still referred to as 'partner countries'—most fail to pay their nominal membership fee or cover their travel costs to meetings. And despite constituting a third of the 77-strong IATI Members Assembly their voice is rarely heard.

IATI is still a relatively young initiative. It takes time to get a new publishing standard established and to become part of the norm. It *is* starting to gain traction in a number of areas. Some publishers, for example, have benefited from the improved quality control regimes required by transparency and by better visibility of their funds as they flow down the aid delivery chain. Advocacy organisations in some developed countries are increasingly using IATI as a means of holding their government's to account. It is hoped that in the next few years that IATI will be able to play an important role in the cost-effectiveness of humanitarian operations through the provision of timely and relevant data, particularly in fast onset emergencies.

But the big prize still eludes us. With a few exceptions, the data that is now available through IATI is not being used as envisioned by the initiative's architects in Accra back in 2008. It is not being used to meet the needs of developing countries.

We, the suppliers of IATI data, have been having pained discussions on this topic for years:

- The quality of data from many publishers remains a big issue (although there is now a lot of very good data available).
- We have not sold IATI as well as we could: most of IATI's leading donor champions, for instance, have still not properly briefed their country offices on the benefits of the data.
- The tools available for users to access the data are not yet adequate.

We need to sort these issues out—and hopefully we will take some steps in this direction at the TAG. They are necessary steps, but they will remain insufficient.

Data plays an increasingly critical role in national development. Planners and policy makers in developing countries need a handle on all the resources available to them: domestic and international; public and private. They need to pull together all this

information into a coherent whole in order to effectively deploy resources where they are most needed. This is their problem. They need to solve it.

Many countries do still rely on development cooperation as a substantial contribution to their plans. IATI data is available and relevant. This data needs to be used:

- for revenue and budget planning;
- for public financial management systems to have integrated access to data on all finances;
- for line ministries to understand both on and off budget activities in their sector;
- for civil society to hold the government to account.

Making this happen is not a supply-side problem. Neo-colonial paternalism isn't a solution. Responsibility rests squarely with the governments and citizens of developing countries.

Most developing countries are facing big challenges to ensure they have the financial, technical and human capacities, legislative frameworks and multi-stakeholder partnerships in place to build the information infrastructures and ecosystems necessary for a twenty first century approach to data-driven national development. Whatever the challenge, it is one that only they can own, prioritise and develop. This is what the data revolution for sustainable development data is all about.

IATI data contributes a small, yet not irrelevant, part to this data landscape. The use of IATI data in developing countries need to be seen in this context. Many of those from Africa coming to the TAG are new to IATI, but they are no strangers to the broader issues emerging in the African data revolution. This is what makes Day One at the TAG such a great opportunity: to build common cause; to drop the "us and them" approach; to better understand the IATI ecosystem of supply and demand.

Disclaimer: I have been a member of the technical team within the IATI secretariat working on the development of the standard since 2010. I am currently the Technical Lead, responsible for the integrity and development of the standard. In that capacity I am responsible for solely technical, not political issues (if such a distinction is possible). The views expressed here are my own.