

aidinfo use case synthesis paper - October 2009

Introduction

aidinfo is producing a series of “use cases” in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the information needs of different types of users. As far as we know, this is the first systematic effort to identify the various needs of users of aid information.

The analysis in this paper is based on seven in-depth case studies covering three partner country governments – Rwanda, Malawi and Cambodia, a think-tank – the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an international NGO – WaterAid, and a research institute – the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME). One further case study is slightly different in that it focuses on bottom-up tracking of aid resources based on interviews with four communities in Nicaragua. Two-page summaries of each of these individual case studies and the full analyses are published on our website at <http://www.aidinfo.org/case-studies>.

Common underlying themes

While each case study focused on the specific needs of different users, there were striking similarities in the improvements these stakeholders wanted to see in the availability of aid information. These are reflected in the list on page 3. In addition, a number of common underlying themes emerged:

1) Multiple requests and duplication of effort

Multiple requests and duplication of effort create significant costs for donor and partner country officials alike. In Rwanda, donors respond to three formal processes as well as responding to many *ad hoc* requests for information from government users, who frequently ignore the main data repositories in favour of contacting their own trusted sources directly to secure the information they need. In Malawi and Cambodia, line ministries usually seek detailed information directly from donors, as well as using centrally-available data.

2) Inconsistency between different sources

Users commonly have to approach many different sources for aid information. We found five main repositories of aid information in Rwanda and six in Cambodia. Significant discrepancies and inconsistencies between these data sources (eg between the OECD DAC CRS database and data held at country level in AMPs and DADs) cause uncertainty, and leave users confused as to which data set they should use. This was identified as an issue in both Malawi and Rwanda. Meanwhile WaterAid noted that using multiple sources for their research was time-consuming and costly, and led to discrepancies that could not be reconciled.

3) Access to existing aid information is often difficult for non-governmental actors

Accessing the aid information that *does* exist at the moment is often difficult for non-expert users, such as CSOs and community groups. This was noted in our studies on Rwanda, Malawi and Cambodia. Low levels of awareness are one issue – at an aidinfo statistics workshop in Kampala, around half of the participants had not heard of the OECD DAC databases. Other barriers include language, poor connectivity and lack of technical know-how. In addition to overcoming these obvious barriers to access, our case studies highlight the need for simplified data, made more accessible through a range of information intermediaries who would be better placed to meet the specific needs of these users.

4) Beneficiaries have little knowledge about aid projects in their area

One case study was an attempt at bottom-up tracking of aid resources, interviewing people in four communities that had received funds from aid projects in Nicaragua. The main conclusion from this study was that these communities had very little knowledge of the origin of this aid (only 10% identified this correctly) and no knowledge of the sums involved (2% of respondents claimed to know this but were consistently wrong). We should not generalise on the basis on a single study: but our findings are consistent with those of one of our African partner organisations, African Monitor, who carried out similar studies on grassroots monitoring of aid in Rwanda, Mozambique, Ghana and Chad. They too found low levels of awareness about aid projects on the part of beneficiary communities, pointing to the critical lack of feedback loops within the aid business.

The analysis set out in this synthesis paper suggests two emerging conclusions from our work so far:

Firstly, there is a real cost of *inaction*

Our research reveals that **lack of adequate aid data carries with it real costs to real people**: in Rwanda, we were told that when planned aid disbursements did not arrive when they were expected, this had led to an unplanned drawing down of reserves, leading to liquidity problems in the Central Bank and unplanned government borrowing; in Malawi, we were given examples of planned education and health programmes being cut when the projected figures originally given to line ministries by donors did not match those given by the Ministry of Finance; less immediate but nonetheless important, research by ODI, WaterAid and IHME aimed at increasing the long-term impact of aid spending on poverty reduction was consistently hampered by lack of adequate data. While improving the quality of aid information will require further investment, this must be balanced by the real costs of inaction on this critical issue

Secondly, a one-size-fits-all approach is not the solution

The main reason behind the multiple requests noted in our studies on Rwanda, Malawi and Cambodia is that different users within government seek different types of information at different times, in different formats and in different levels of detail. While in-country aid databases such as the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) database in Cambodia have significantly improved the flow of aid information, they cannot meet all of the needs, all of the time. For example the CDC is an aid management tool, and is not updated regularly enough to provide the data essential for macro-economic monitoring, and may not be best placed to do so. Rather than trying to construct a mega-database that tries to meet everyone's needs, our research supports the IATI standards-based approach, seeking to develop common definitions and a common format for the publication of detailed aid information that would then allow individual users to customise this information for their own purposes.

Summary of improvements that users of aid information would most like to see

On the basis of the use cases we have completed so far, the main improvements in aid data that users have identified and prioritised are listed below. Our findings are largely consistent with our earlier research, set out in the IATI scoping paper, and also with the outcome of the regional partner country consultations on IATI co-ordinated by UNDP.

1) More timely data was regarded as a high priority by all users. Officials working for the governments of Rwanda, Malawi and Cambodia needed more timely data to plan and manage budgets effectively. The time-lag in publishing OECD DAC CRS data reduced its value to many users, including the Government of Rwanda. The Cambodia case study emphasised the need for **real-time data** for macro-economic monitoring. Lack of timely data also hampered ODI's research, while IHME required more up-to-date information in order to produce an annual report on aid spending on health.

2) Better information on future aid flows was also identified as a key issue by all three partner countries, with Cambodia saying that even qualified estimates would be better than no data at all. Better in-year predictability was also an issue in this case.

3) Comparable information covering all donors, including non-DAC donors, foundations and NGOs emerged as another key priority in all of our use cases. For example, while Cambodia does receive aid data from its largest donor – China – this is delivered in its own format, and is hard to validate. IHME noted the lack of central repositories for global data from foundations and NGOs, and found that even when data was available from them, it was not comparable. In Cambodia, the CDC has begun to collect data from NGOs but this is in its early stages, and the data are less complete and less reliable than that collected from donors. Meanwhile, ODI emphasised the need for aid data beyond the DAC in order to present a complete picture.

4) Complete and accurate data was another top ask, mentioned by all three partner countries and both research institutions. In-country databases typically lacked data from donors who did not have country offices, and the CDC database in Cambodia was lacking data from donors who had multiple agencies, and on projects that were regionally-managed. The ODI study pointed to the need for more complete reporting to the CRS, and greater effort by donors to comply with reporting directives. IHME also found examples of incomplete and poor quality data supplied by donors to the DAC and CRS databases.

5) Consistent data and definitions also emerged as key issues. For example, ODI noted the lack of consistency between data held by donor in-country missions and their own headquarters. The ODI and IHME studies both mentioned the need for consistent definitions and terminology, while the Cambodia study sought definitions that were compatible with recently agreed national budget definitions.

6) Tracking disbursements against initial commitments was identified as another priority, especially by partner country governments. This was mentioned by both the Rwandan and Malawian Governments, the latter emphasising the need for disbursement dates. WaterAid also pressed the case for reporting exact dates for both commitments and disbursements.

7) Clarity on what form aid would take, and how it would be delivered was another common theme. For example in Rwanda, officials wanted to know if the promised aid would arrive as money, goods or people, and whether it would be delivered via government or by implementing partners, with full details of the latter. IHME also wanted better information on implementing agencies, while the Nicaragua

study confirmed that communities knew less about the origins of aid money where projects were delivered via third parties.

8) Data that is disaggregated by country, by sub-national level, and by sector was a priority for WaterAid and IHME, and the Malawi case study pointed to the need for sub-national data, including information on the location of specific projects as a means of aligning aid with government priorities.

9) More detailed information was commonly required. For example, both IHME and WaterAid wanted better long descriptions of projects, WaterAid needed start and end dates for individual projects, and both the Malawi and Cambodia studies confirmed the need for detailed aid information that was better tailored to the needs of line ministries.

10) Finally, data available in more user-friendly formats was suggested by several case studies, with a clear sense that existing databases are not accessible for non-expert users.

About aidinfo

aidinfo seeks to improve the transparency and timeliness of data on aid and other resource flows in order to increase their impact on poverty reduction. The programme is led by the not-for-profit wing of Development Initiatives, an independent UK-based organization with an established track record of research and analysis on aid flows and poverty reduction. aidinfo is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

We began our research eighteen months ago and our emerging findings were highlighted in our paper “Better Information, Better Aid” published prior to the High Level Forum in Accra in September 2008. Since the launch of the International Aid Transparency Initiative at that meeting, aidinfo has provided technical support for IATI, serving on the Secretariat and the Steering Committee, acting as the Secretariat of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and drafting the original scoping paper for IATI.