

Aid Transparency External Review Group

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Aid Program website project

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A major component of the Transparency Charter is publishing the details of Australia's Aid Program on AusAID's website.

My role, as project manager, is to facilitate the process of taking the information about each program and the individual initiatives that fall within each program – and creating a comprehensive picture of these, that informs the public - both domestic and international.

I took on this project in January and developed a schedule to transform the existing program content on AusAID's website into the new 'transparent' format. That content covered web pages for 30 countries, 5 regional and 15 thematic areas.

As it turns out – and I am sure it will come as no surprise to you – there has been some scope creep. In fact the size of the project has doubled.

By the end of 2012 there will be content published for 35 countries, 5 regional, and 31 thematic programs including multilateral programs and 33 translated websites— a total of 104 program websites.

12 of our major country programs will be multi-lingual websites, except for the documents which will link to the English websites. In addition 5 minor country program websites will have the overview and see our results pages, which includes how and why we give aid, translated into local languages.

A total of 33 local languages will be used across these 17 countries as some countries have two or more languages.

In addition, the information from other government departments and agencies who deliver aid programs is now part of the schedule. We are currently working on pilot pages for the Attorney General's Department and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research to be published by the end of the year.

The pilot will enable us to refine tools we use at AusAID to collect the information to be published – to meet the needs of other government departments and agencies. The Whole of Government picture of Australia's Aid Program is scheduled for completed mid-2013.

Scope creep isn't the only major challenge of the transparency website project – but I suspect you already knew that.

The other operational challenges fall broadly into four categories:

consistency and accuracy of data to be published

sensitivities related to the content of documents being released into the public domain

stakeholders - a greatly expanded stakeholder list – both internally and externally, and
the human factor.

I'll talk about each of these and what the consequences have been for implementing the charter.

For AusAID, as well as the analysts of Australia's Aid Program, consistency and accuracy of data is paramount.

As you've already heard, what we have encountered is an information management system that does not provide a single source of truth.

In implementing the Transparency Charter, we found that data varied depending on its source. Whether it was related to funding, numbers of volunteers, scholarships or specific details related to program initiatives – the inconsistency was problematic.

Simply put, we currently do not have the Technology for a Transparency Network to help projects collect data. We are unable to find projects based not only on the country in which they're located but also on the particular sector or issue on which they focus.

And just to make things even more complex – the agency decided that we would use our five strategic goals for primary reporting purposes.

The statistics section had its work cut out for them and there were many spirited conversations about how this affected the transparency work.

Karen MacLennan will go into detail about the changes underway in the way the statistics system developed to improve what we are working with.

In the meantime, much work has been done to ensure that what we publish is accurate and therefore contestable.

The second challenge transparency face is that of 'perceived' sensitivities contained with documents slated for publishing.

I used the word 'perceived' because – coming from a traditional government agency steeped in risk adverse behaviour – there were a lot of nervous people, who understandably, were initially overzealous in their application of rating documents as 'sensitive'.

It is fair to say that when the majority of documents related to the aid management cycle of an initiative were developed, they were not intended to be read by the public – they were for internal use only.

Shifting the culture of the agency to one where transparency is viewed as an opportunity to showcase our work to a wider audience continues to be an issue.

Cultural change takes time. It is a process of education and gradual acceptance.

Defining 'sensitive' within the new operational environment of transparency was something that was discussed at great length, multiple times, as the content of documents was being evaluated for publication.

The reality is that the risk of a major political crisis as a result of putting aid related documents into the public domain is much lower than initially perceived by the many staff.

Critical analysis of contractors, partners, and ourselves is an important part of the process of improving aid effectiveness. There is usually no reason to withhold this analysis from the public.

As we progress the implementation of transparent web pages, precedents are established that give confidence to those facing decisions about what to publish, that a warts and all approach is proving, for the most part, successful.

There are exceptions to the rule, like any situation, where countries in violent conflict are sensitive to the security issues associated with some of the projects being implemented and as such due care is given to such circumstances when publishing material to avoid commercial in confidence, privacy issues and issues related to national security.

The next issue I have faced relates to stakeholders. Put simply, there are a lot of them.

The extent of scope creep has meant an increase in the number of stakeholders – both internal and external – that have to be consulted.

From the transparency team's perspective, a lot of time is invested in working with the program areas to publish their information.

From the program areas perspective, staff need to be dedicated to collating, reviewing, summarising, and obtaining clearances from third parties to publish documents. Large programs, such as Indonesia and PNG, established taskforces to do the work – and even so, a phased approach to implementing the transparency pages for these programs was the only way we could deal with the volume of work and meet scheduled commitments.

For small program areas, adding the transparency work to an already priority contested space, has led to some internal tensions from time to time and some deadlines fall by the way-side.

The last issue I raise is what I'll call the human factor.

This broad term covers the multitude of challenges that are faced and often caused by, the people involved in the project.

For transparency, the ability for the agency to meet its commitments at the most complete levels by the end of the year is being compromised by the number of people available to do the work.

People leave their positions, fall ill, need to be trained, take holidays (occasionally approved), and suffer from change fatigue.

Combined with the multitude of changes across the agency over the past year, transparency has faced its fair share of ‘human factor’ challenges.

However, it is important to remember that transparency is a long-term change in AusAID’s way of operating and that over time, the amount of information available to the public will increase in volume and improve in quality.

We are all working to ensure that it does.

So now that I’ve shared the biggest challenges we have faced – and for the most part dealt with – let’s look at what we have learned from our work to date and the direct impacts

1. Reporting formats: while there needs to be an ability to manipulate data to meet various specific reporting requirements, the public need a consistent picture across all aid programs.

We needed to determine how the data would be reported on the website to reflect an accurate picture – whether you were viewing a country, regional or thematic program.

As it happened, we were able to tie this to our reporting to Senate Estimates. What we present to Parliament is the same as what we present to the public.

This has streamlined our approach to reporting and created internal efficiencies.

We may need to build further flexibility into our reporting abilities to ensure we link and can respond to agreements within the global aid development work on transparency.

2. Sensitivities. In the case of contracts, privacy and commercial in confidence information is easily redacted while the essence of the agreement is retained. This does seem a very simple statement, but the agency did not have a history of document redaction. This has meant building awareness about our preference to redact documents rather than not publish them at all, and also building awareness about our ability to use Adobe Acrobat Professional to redact document before publishing. We have also introduced legal changes within future contracts that encourage participants to engage with AusAid in an open and transparent manner.
3. Attitudinal change. It’s no secret that government agencies have a tendency to operate in silos. Reaching out from a silo to another part of the agency can be a rarity. But the process of being transparent requires the agency to take a holistic approach to the way in which it engages with the public. It requires a common language that creates understanding of our work.
4. Sustaining transparency. The transparency project has focussed on publishing current and mid-term results - not on historical information.

The agency’s transparency is measured on the timely publishing of information about each aid initiative. Program managers have the responsibility to ensure that they publish program information as it relates to our national priorities as initiatives reach major milestones, evolve or confront issues.

While we have developed solutions for many of the challenges we have faced in implementing the website part of the Charter, this is very much a work in progress.

[SLIDE 16]As the agency develops its information management systems and streamlines its aid management protocols, the process of keeping the web content up to date should improve.

The risk is that without those systems in place, the demand for web content will become a burden and the ability for the agency, with its resources limited, to keep the momentum alive.

Thank you.