

## “Be the data you want to see in the world”

*Rolf Kleef and Martine Koopman*

The data revolution is not just about Big Data. Publishing open data about the activities of actors in international development is expected to increase aid effectiveness, and improve efficiency and accountability. The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) provides a technical standard for the exchange of data. That standard is gaining momentum, largely due to donors starting to require their grantees to publish data. As a result, hundreds of organizations are now learning how to represent themselves “as data”. We want to present experiences and insights from Dutch NGOs: the sometimes unexpected uses and benefits of such data, and the profound impacts it can have on all levels of an organization.

**Keywords:** open data, aid transparency, IATI, information management, The Netherlands

### Introduction

The UN data revolution (UN, 2014) mostly talks about Big Data: data mining, statistical models, and machine learning. However, a “small data” revolution is also taking place: stakeholders in development organizations are publishing open data to increase aid effectiveness.

A recurring question regarding aid activities and international development cooperation is whether it works. In this case study we explore aid transparency as a tool for aid effectiveness for NGOs in The Netherlands. We will especially focus on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)<sup>i</sup>, an open standard for organizations to publish data about their work in a transparent way.

We start with a brief review of aid effectiveness initiatives and the founding of IATI. The core of our article focuses on the impacts (benefits and challenges) for NGOs based on examples from our practical experience with NGOs and IATI trajectories that have been supported in The Netherlands. The information presented draws upon insights shared by staff members of 57 organizations during a 2.5-year training programme (2013-2015), in workshops conducted (2016), as well as through various personal communications (2013-2016). Part of these experiences are documented in the evaluation of the training programme, with 19 participating organizations (Podt, 2016) and in the report-back of a learning workshop with participants from 30 organizations (Kleef, 2016b). We synthesize these self-reported lessons learned and our own observations to show how NGOs have to make choices

on strategic, organizational, operational, technical, and legal aspects. More research is needed to generalize our findings and to draw conclusions.

### **Aid effectiveness and transparency**

Since the end of the 1990s, there have been discussions about making aid more effective:

- How to make sure organizations are not duplicating each other's work;
- How to align donor strategies;
- How to identify marginalized groups and areas that are under-served by existing programmes.

This resulted in the Aid Effectiveness Agenda (2005 Paris Declaration), and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action (OECD, 2008). It also led to the development of a Managing for Results approach (Publish What You Fund, 2010). The Paris Declaration was formulated around five central pillars: Ownership, Alignment, Harmonisation, Managing for Results, and Mutual Accountability. The Accra Agenda for Action called for a greater partnership between different stakeholders working on aid and development.

### **IATI, the International Aid Transparency Initiative**

Around 2008, the concept of *open data* was gaining momentum as part of making Western governments more transparent and accountable (Gray, 2014). Citizens, NGOs, and journalists would be better equipped to inspect and review government's activities with publicly available information about spending and activities of government bodies in a *machine-readable* format<sup>ii</sup>.

The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) was launched<sup>iii</sup> in Accra with 18 initial signatories. It set out to develop an open standard format to facilitate sharing information about the activities, budgets and spending of actors in development cooperation. This resulted in the IATI Standard, with version 1 published in February 2011<sup>iv</sup>. Since then, many other organizations have joined IATI. By end of 2016, IATI had 78 members, and over 500 organizations published data using the IATI Standard, covering around US\$146 billion in budgets over 2016 (IATI, 2016). As can be seen in Figure 1, the vast majority of these publishers are NGOs, although few of them joined IATI as a member.

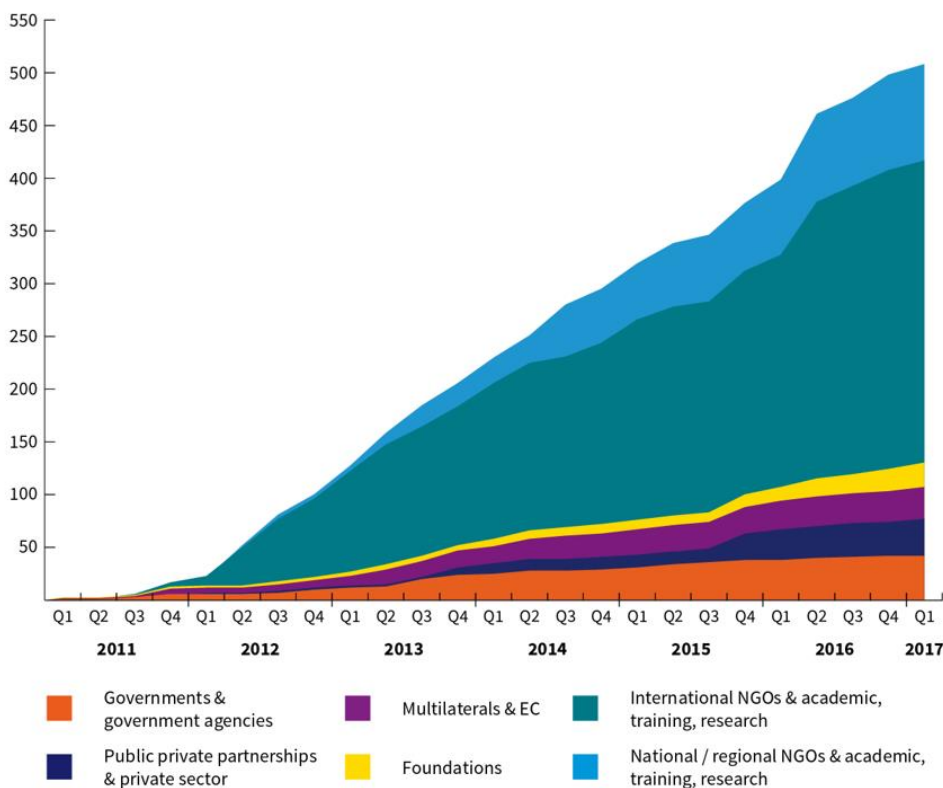
At an early stage, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) started requiring their grantees to publish information about their activities using the IATI Standard. In 2016, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) went a step further, *replacing* written quarterly progress reports with published data, including data about results (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2015)<sup>v</sup>. More donors are expected to follow this practice.

### What does the IATI Standard cover?

The IATI Standard lets you publish information about your “activities” (Kleef, 2016c): your units of work, such as programmes and projects, for which you can answer who, where, when, what, why questions:

- What is it? The title and description, and sector classifications.
- Who is involved? Who funds it, who implements, who is accountable?
- When does it start, when does it end?
- Where does it take place? At a country-level and optionally with more specific locations.
- Why? What are your target results, and what are you achieving?
- How much money is involved, who gets it, and when?

There is a shift towards publishing more about what you achieve (outputs, outcomes, impacts) and not just about financial flows (inputs) (IATI, 2016). This still has its limitations. Many NGOs that do report on results only include their inputs, activities and outputs. For example, they report as an output the number of people trained in ICT skills. Results at an outcome or impact level are not yet widely reported<sup>vi</sup>.



**Figure 1: Growth in organizations publishing IATI data (IATI 2016)**

## Impacts for NGOs

Organizations start working on their IATI publishing process with ambitions set in roughly one of four different areas:

- A few organizations see opportunities to make information management more efficient, and to offer up-to-date and easier-to-find information in “a single source of truth”. The data standard becomes a backbone in information management. Their primary users are their own staff and close partners.
- Several organizations want to communicate in more detail about their work: they focus on making information easier to read, so that it can be fed into a website or dashboard for their constituency, or can be used in fund-raising portfolios. The primary users are the general public, journalists, and individual and organizational donors.
- Some organizations “want to be transparent” as part of their mission, and emphasize publishing data. They hope that journalists and activists will start using their data, so their primary target group are expected to be data-literate users. Being transparent in this way allows them to ask the same from other organizations and companies.
- Most organizations initially “just want to comply” with donor requirements: the IATI Standard is seen mostly as an extra burden, with mostly technical challenges. The primary, and at first basically the only user of the data, is the donor.

“Typically, IATI is introduced into the organization through either finance, IT or Monitoring and Evaluation. The rest of the organization initially sits back, thinking “Well, that’s settled then”. But eventually everyone gets involved.” (Kleef, 2016b)

In 2013, DGIS funded a 2.5-year training and support programme run by Partos, the Dutch platform of organizations working in development cooperation<sup>vii</sup>. The programme helped organizations understand the core principle of open data, and work towards publishing their own IATI data. In workshops, the experiences and lessons learned by NGOs that started early were developed into a roadmap towards a first data publication.

“Most of the ‘early adopters’ of IATI in The Netherlands were small, tech-savvy start-up-like NGOs with a keen eye for innovation and new developments. But when Partos also came on board, this allowed for reaching organizations beyond the small early-adopter group: Partos functioned as a bridge to getting more ‘mainstream’ organizations to start implementing IATI as well.” (Podt, 2016)

We identified five main aspects of introducing IATI publication in an organization: strategic, organizational, operational, technical, and legal. For all five aspects we will give an example how NGOs have dealt with them. “Typically, IATI is introduced into the organization through either finance, IT or Monitoring and Evaluation. The rest of the organization initially sits back, thinking “Well, that’s settled then”. But eventually everyone gets involved.” (Kleef, 2016b)

## **Strategic aspects**

During the Partos training much attention was paid to the strategic aspects of implementing IATI: “how do you make sure IATI is embedded in the organization, and how will it influence your organization?” For most organizations such a strategic approach was a step too far. But some of the early adopters had organizational leadership that focused on an integrated approach to positioning and communication. An example is Cordaid (The Netherlands).

In 2011, Cordaid started working towards open data and IATI publishing. In 2013, it embedded IATI publishing into its organizational project management system and adopted an approach of single source, single entry, and multiple use (Kroon, 2013). It also saw opportunities to streamline internal information exchange based on its IATI data. Their ambition to publish nearly all their projects on their website brought many challenges:

- Staff and partners had to be made aware of this change, and buy-in at all levels and in all departments of the organization was needed.
- The information needed to be understandable for outsiders: titles and descriptions of projects needed to be rewritten, to avoid too much jargon. The communications department starting training staff in writing better texts, instead of selecting and rewriting a few projects themselves.
- The information for each project needed to be as complete as possible: data about both financial details and results needed to be combined. This required staff members of finance, monitoring and evaluation, and ICT to work together.
- Information needed to flow from their internal systems to their website, in a standardized intermediary format. This would become the backbone of exchange and use of the data: a single source rather than separate databases for different purposes.

Cordaid launched their open data-driven website in January 2013, and has since found various other applications for their data, such as creating internal overviews, and making it easier to pull together portfolios on specific topics or countries for funding proposals. They appointed a special “open data manager” to coordinate and promote their publishing efforts. Since each application of the data brings in users looking at it from a different perspective, and all data comes from a single source, any improvement made is automatically available to all users.

## **Organizational aspects**

By adopting an “open, unless” policy, organizations and staff are becoming more aware of what can be published (and what not). They start to focus on their own key processes and information management practices, and gain more consistent and comprehensive insight in their own work and achievements. Just as for every change in an organization, having “change agents” or “front runners” is crucial. It is also important to discuss who should be involved in the IATI team (multi-disciplinary, or just from the financial or the Monitoring & Evaluation team). A good illustration is the Oxfam Novib case (Kleef, 2016b):

Oxfam Novib embedded open data and IATI publishing into their internal processes. Oxfam Novib’s innovation lab wanted to empower their partner organizations to be more effective in holding authorities accountable, and initially looked at ways to apply open data, and to “be open”. In workshops with staff and partner organizations, they started to learn about the challenges and opportunities about “working openly”. As they decentralized and moved responsibilities from their headquarters in The Hague towards country and regional offices, and towards their partners, the information in The Hague had to become more easily accessible world-wide. With this purpose, they created an online Atlas platform<sup>viii</sup> that is fed with up-to-date information every day: information provided by field staff is imported in the central management information system, then published as open data in the IATI Standard and made available online the next day. Oxfam Novib sees benefits in providing access to their work, and enabling others to combine their data with data from other sources to improve coordination and knowledge sharing.

### **Operational aspects**

The process requires data of sufficient quality. It leads to tough discussions about how much can be standardized, but also offers incentives to move away from the prevailing practice of introducing new indicators and theories of change specifically for each donor or project. It also raises questions about how often an organization wants to publish, how accurate the data is, and how understandable and complete. Being able to bring data together across organizations is even harder. These operational aspects within an alliance are illustrated by the case of AMREF (Kleef, 2016b):

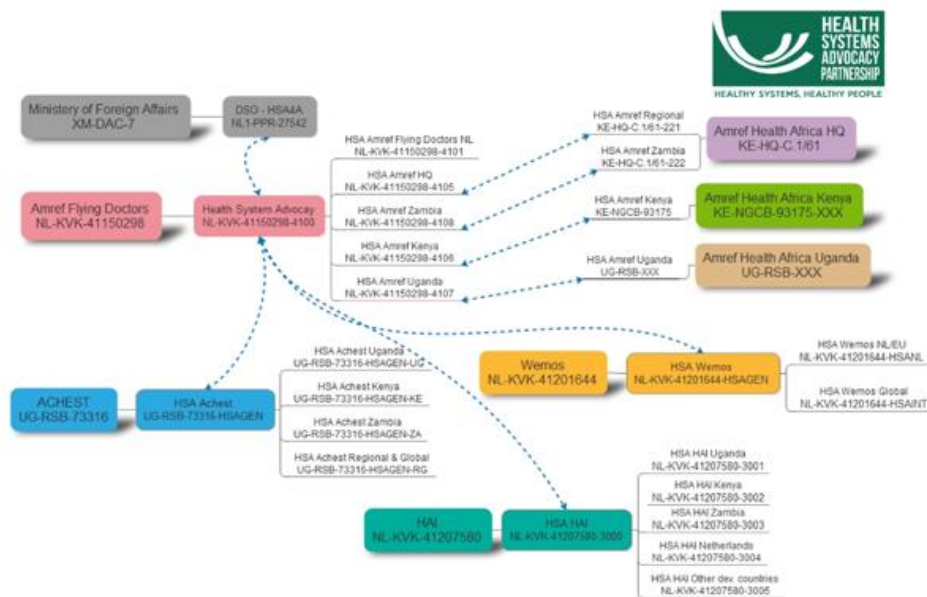
AMREF Flying Doctors is the lead party in the Health Systems Advocacy (HSA) Partnership with four other organizations, focused on increased access to health systems for poor people in Africa. Making sure that all data and results in the five target countries are collected in such a way that the HSA Partnership is able to report on the progress in IATI is quite a challenge. The Partnership set up a new reporting structure (Figure 2), and decided to use a step-by-step approach improving IATI publishing along the way (Kleef, 2016a). This included detailed reporting guidelines for each organization in the Partnership. The Partnership works with a quarterly plan of what to focus on in the next data update: first, get the structure and identifiers right, then the finance information, next the results. Every step dives a little deeper into aligning information to make sure it can be combined into an overall picture<sup>ix</sup>. (Kleef, 2016b)

### **Technical aspects**

IATI data usually has to come from different source systems. These can be full-fledged project management systems or bookkeeping software, but typically also includes spreadsheets and often plain documents. IATI asks you to structure the information as data. Organizations may have to introduce new ways to organise projects into programmes, and extract information from documents and spreadsheets. They may have to rethink how information is gathered and documented in their organization, and invest in new or upgraded



IT systems to make this process more efficient.



**Figure 2: Design of the structure of activities**

“Silos” or “islands” of data need to be connected, for instance between finance and monitoring and evaluation, or towards the website. IATI can set the basis for an in-house data policy or repository. Depending on how much data is available, an organization can use online data entry tools, or choose to integrate everything into project management software. For some organizations it will fit in their existing project management system, for others it leads to considering a switch to a completely new system, as is the case for Relief organization ZOA (Kleef, 2016b).

ZOA is exploring how their information systems should evolve. “Behind the nice looking diagrams and arrows, there is a whole struggle of how to get the data in the IATI standard and the reality on the ground of how to get the resources to the people in need. Consider the possibilities of using open data, and look at IATI as one part of that picture. It’s a useful stepping stone on the way to inform your organization on the progress of activities and make informed decisions.”

### Legal and ethical aspects

The discussions about who owns the data, especially in case of partnerships<sup>x</sup>, and questions around rights and liabilities are also present. Are there activities that cannot be published because of international relations, security and safety issues, privacy or personal information reasons, commercial reasons or contract agreements<sup>xi</sup>? These topics require a *responsible use of data*, where both risks and representations of organizations and people an organization works with are important factors (the engine room, 2016). This often leads to new discussions

with both donors and implementing partners of NGOs, and to modifications of agreements and contracts. It can lead to the discovery that an organization is publishing a lot more information about itself than their partner would. Work processes may need to be adapted, to add safeguards or to have procedures to deal with unintended data publishing. In our experience, these discussions are still in an early phase, often with a focus on who publishes which part of a joint project. An example is the case of the Dutch Red Cross (Kleef, 2016b):

The Dutch Red Cross International Federation had the challenge of how the IATI standard fits for a more complex policy dialogue program in which several actors work on common goals. As mentioned in a 2016 report, IATI “seems to be designed for more ‘classic aid’, with clear distinctions between donors and implementers and a clear ‘chain of activities’. It’s harder to reflect complex structures of organizations, various funding streams, joint results across organizations, and so on.” Instead of a linear process where input A leads to result B, the reality is more fuzzy and involves political negotiations to lessen the impact of natural and man-made disasters in disaster prone countries. (Kleef 2016b)

### **Lessons learned and emerging practices**

Emerging practices have to deal with practical hurdles. Both in the evaluation of the Partos training programme (Podt, 2016), as well as in the learning workshop in July 2016 (Kleef, 2016b), a lot of practical problems were mentioned. To highlight some:

- Build and maintain knowledge or practical experience to implement IATI. Organizations are in a continuous learning process, building up expertise. Sometimes “IATI” started with only one focal person, but once more people get involved, more people need expertise, and that expertise should be safeguarded within the organization.
- Lack of clarity from donors. The Dutch Government is clear about their ambitions for, and use of IATI, and also makes the dashboards for their staff openly available<sup>xii</sup>. But it is unclear if all donors will use the same guidelines, so additional reporting may still be needed.
- Organizations don’t see the added value of IATI. Sometimes only Finance or M&E is involved, and Management and Project staff may not be aware of how valuable data could be in their work. Therefore they also don’t feel ownership and see IATI only as an extra administrative burden. It is often difficult to get it on the management agenda, to embed IATI in all processes of the organization and benefit more from the upfront investment.
- Lack of staff time or financial capacity to implement IATI. A transformation always takes extra time, and it is not clear how much to budget for it.
- Too complex for their local partners. The data itself is rather complex. NGOs sometimes publish data of their local partners, because they see it is too complex for them. Expertise on the ground should be built, but is not yet there. Investing in reporting and data gathering tools for local partners could be the first step.
- Other developments are more important. There are big changes going on in the development sector, budgets are under pressure and staff is laid off. IATI is not a top priority



when the whole organization is being restructured.

- Attitude of an organization towards innovation and experimentation. Organizations and staff may resist change. They would like to keep everything the way it was. This is not only a hurdle for IATI implementation but for other changes as well, obviously.
- Working in an alliance makes IATI implementation more complex. Organizations have to align their information structures not only internally, but also with strategic partners.

In 2015, DGIS chose their Strategic Partnerships on Dialogue and Dissent (running from 2016 to 2020) as starting point to require public IATI data as a replacement for written progress reports<sup>xiii</sup> (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2015). As a result, dozens of organizations are now required to publish and coordinate with their partners in the Strategic Partnerships: the data of all the organizations need to be linked together. Organizations already working with IATI appear to develop a more data-oriented way of working in other areas too. For instance, a working group of several organizations, facilitated by Partos, is exploring how different data sets can be combined to inform and validate each other's activities:

- IATI data can help to find actors involved in activities in a country or region, and make visible the networks they work with or the topics they focus on.
- Organizations create lists of other data sets they collect or use in executing their programmes, such as impact assessments, baseline studies, and household surveys. This data is often not published (due to various reasons, such as privacy), but could be shared privately or used to answer questions from other organizations.
- Several other open data sets are available, such as subnational level statistics or indicators. Organizations are starting to look more into these to help validate assumptions and monitor potential impacts.

## Conclusions

The open data revolution is taking shape. At the UN, large-scale data sets are being used to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals. There is an important role to play for up-to-date, comprehensive, and forward-looking data on operations and on how actors work together to deliver aid in development cooperation. Data standards, such as IATI, help make that possible and provide the tools for it. It offers new ways to learn from others. NGOs will therefore have to present themselves with data, and become more data-literate. Adapting to this changing environment has impacts on their strategies and operations: we see examples of how organizations take on challenges in these areas. Technical changes seem to take more time, and discussions about legal and ethical issues are still in early phases.

It is too early to draw conclusions about improved aid effectiveness, or even about fundamental changes in how organizations operate. It is our hope that sharing the observations of these changes, new types of discussions, and emerging practices help to inform or even stimulate further research in this area.

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- i For the International Aid Transparency Initiative, see [www.aidtransparency.net](http://www.aidtransparency.net)
  - ii For instance via the ‘Where does my money go?’ campaign launched in 2007 in the UK: <http://app.wheredoesmymoneygo.org/about.html>
  - iii History of IATI: <http://www.aidtransparency.net/about/history-of-iat>
  - iv All versions of the standard are available via [www.iatistandard.org](http://www.iatistandard.org)
  - v The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also made a publicly available dashboard to track progress on programmes: <http://bit.ly/IATIVizBZ3>
  - vi As of April 24, 2017, 81 publishers include (one or more) output results, 69 include (one or more) outcome results, and 17 include (one or more) impact results; [http://dashboard.iatistandard.org/codelist/1/result\\_@type.html](http://dashboard.iatistandard.org/codelist/1/result_@type.html) and [http://dashboard.iatistandard.org/codelist/2/result\\_@type.html](http://dashboard.iatistandard.org/codelist/2/result_@type.html)
  - vii <https://partos.nl/actueel/nieuws/artikel/news/iat-update-na-einde-programma/>
  - viii <http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/english/about-oxfam/atlas-project-browser>
  - ix This “building a bigger picture” can include aggregation of data, but it doesn’t have to.
  - x See the previous note on data aggregation and attribution of results.
  - xi See for instance Cordaid’s *exclusion policy*, available via <https://www.cordaid.org/en/vision-open-data/>
  - xii See footnote v.
  - xiii All recipients of grants of DGIS over €250,000 are required to publish progress information in the form of IATI open data, including private sector and multilateral organisations (not just NGOs).