Harnessing Development Data:

Highlights from a workshop with Canadian civil society stakeholders to inform the Canadian International Development Platform

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Open data, of relevance to international development policy and practice, is growing by leaps and bounds. For instance, over 320 organizations now publish development projects data to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) standard. This proliferation of raw data is happening in tandem with innovation in data gathering, analysis and visualization tools and solutions that can help yield insights out of this growing information base. Nevertheless, harnessing development data is both a challenge and opportunity for civil society stakeholders. The sheer volume, complexity and velocity of the data can make it extremely challenging, especially for organizations with limited time, resources and technical capacity.

On March 31, 2014, the Canadian International Development Platform (CIDP), an initiative of the former North-South Institute, and now housed at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA), organized a workshop in partnership with the Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) and Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) with about 35 Canadian civil society stakeholders, to explore challenges and opportunities in harnessing development data.

The workshop kicked off with a presentation of the re-developed CIDP site, including a live demonstration of drill-downs into various levels of Canadian foreign aid data – from aggregate aid spending at the country, regional, and income level, to project level aid spending drawing on historical data, to near real-time spending at the project level from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development's (DFATD) open data as well as IATI. This was followed by a presentation by CCIC, which included a comparison with the US-based Inter-Action coalition's NGO Aid Map, and a presentation of data sets compiled using DFATD historical data as well as Annual Statistical Reports. The remainder of the half-day session comprised brief interventions by civil society stakeholders, followed by an open plenary discussion.

The main aim of the workshop was to examine:

- **How stakeholders are working with international development data?**

- **What are some of the issues and challenges civil society stakeholders face?**

- **These questions were raised in order to stimulate discussion around the main focus: what next steps might be valuable in terms of the evolution of the CIDP.**

This report is organized in the order outlined above, with an emphasis on next steps for the CIDP.

CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLATFORM

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How Canadian stakeholders are working with international development data and open aid data

Wide variation across stakeholder in terms of needs and uses: the first observation that came out strongly, is that even within a small but diverse group of Canadian civil society stakeholders (in terms of their size, capacity and sectors of work) there is wide variation not only in the way stakeholders work with development data but also their needs in terms of levels of analysis, aggregation and timeliness.

Stakeholders recognized the significant efforts undertaken by the Canadian government (former CIDA/DFATD) in publishing more data, both domestically (such as through its open aid portal) and to international standards such as IATI.[1] The latter has not only grown in volume but also detail. For instance DFATD's IATI feed now makes transaction data available,[2] a potentially valuable addition to civil society stakeholders aiming to track expenditures at the detailed project level.

The second key observation in this regard is that stakeholders typically have narrower mandates. This could be because they primarily work in one sector, or in a specific region, and therefore are only immediately interested in data that they can link to day-to-day work. That said, often, within the same organization, at a different level (e.g. senior management), higher order aggregate data can be very useful, for instance in providing a quick view of time-series trends, or in order to conduct quick comparisons across organizations.

These varied needs in terms of data and levels of analyses validate the CIDP's hierarchical data organization framework, which (as it relates to Canadian open aid data) was presented in detail and is summarized in the attached primer.[3] The primer, as well as interactive data on the CIDP is organized top-down, from low to high level of disaggregation and detail.

Timeliness: the timeliness of both data and analysis needs are also varied among stakeholders. For those conducting analysis of spending trends to see if eventual expenditures matched stated commitments, time-series data at the annual level is good enough. For others, interested primarily in cross-country comparisons, similarly, the well-known lags in foreign aid data, are not a major problem (as the tradeoff is in favor of wider coverage of the data). However for others, such as those interested in campaigning and advocacy, the lags in aid data make it almost irrelevant from the perspective of the political process, as their usage of the data is primarily to influence members of parliament. Lags of a year (or more in most cases) drastically reduce the efficacy of this data from a political advocacy or campaigning perspective. This use-case requires near real time data, which though available, can (a) be harder to use due to the technical steps involved in translating into usable/attractive formats or (b) is often speculative and subject to revision. This makes it challenging to base messaging on the data without risking credibility.

Similarly, for other users, forward data is much more valuable as this can be used to influence where future spending is going/should go. This data carries further risk as within cycle spending can change dramatically, for instance in response to emergencies or other time sensitive priorities that are by definition hard to forecast. It is also difficult to aggregate as it is primarily at the departmental level – which, with the merger of foreign affairs with the former aid agency, has created further challenges in the Canadian context.

Wide variation in capacity: There is wide variation in the in-house capacity within civil society organizations in terms of the ability to work with data. For some organizations, innovation in data collection is core to their objectives, and they are deploying innovative tools and techniques in this regard, ranging from using solar powered IPad's for micro level data collection from artisanal mining communities, to using radio networks in combination with mobile methodologies (e.g. random digit dialing) to collect feedback data. Even for organizations with greater capacity, data management and leveraging the gathered data for more effective visualization, communication, and or influencing programming, presents challenges.

Institutional culture: Ultimately variation across stakeholders also comes down to the extent to which there is a strong data-driven culture, and a transparency and accountability (T/A) culture in place within the organization. In the absence of buy-in at the highest organizational levels, it is difficult for stakeholders working at the program/operational level to have the space to integrate available tools and data into everyday business practice. This is not due to lack of interest, but most often, simply lack of time, resources and capacity. A general observation is that among Canadian civil society

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1 DFATD ranked 11th out of 67 donors in the 2014 Aid Transparency Index by Publish What You Fund (UK).
2 This is a recent expansion, only since December 2014.
3 Table summarizes the new CIDP foreign aid data structure, but also includes other levels not necessarily covered in the platform but came up in discussion.

stakeholders the data-driven culture is perhaps not as strong as it could be (with a few notable exceptions, primarily larger organizations). Collectively, even interested organizations do not have an adequate platform or support resources to affect change in institutional culture. The CIDP can help address some, though not all, of these gaps (as discussed below).

Key issues and challenges Canadian stakeholders face in harnessing development data

Defining what data are most useful to who, and for what purpose: in other words the process of prioritization can be challenging, within organizations. And is far more challenging across organizations. In most cases, especially among smaller organizations, having analyses and other data products are a 'great to have… if someone else does them' and not a 'must have', unless specifically required by programing/project development, monitoring/evaluation, or funder-reporting needs. Figuring out what data are most useful to who and for which ends, and the data management challenge associated with the same, is a key challenge for most organizations.

Leveraging data to better communicate impact and results, while being aware of causality and attribution issues: information relating to results and outcomes can be especially challenging. Attributing results to specific projects/ interventions can be problematic in the absence of (expensive) micro level analysis (such as randomized control trials). An issue Canadian stakeholders face is aggregating up results into quantifiable indicators, when many targeted outcomes are better communicated as narratives or using qualitative data. Indeed, many stakeholders pointed out that there was an excessive push for outcome/results standardization and quantification, which leads to losing nuances in understanding and communicating impact.

Providing a safe space to share, learn, collaborate and discuss, often sensitive and or technical issues: this was a generalizable finding that emerged at several points during the discussion. As noted above, clearly there is wide variation across Canadian organizations in terms of data/analytical needs and capacity. Common across most however is the need is to have a space for sharing, learning and key information exchange. In many cases, to really drill down and find solutions to challenges organizations are facing they would need to bring in and open up their data and or processes. This can present competitiveness and other sensitive issues.[4] As was repeatedly pointed out, even organizations working in similar areas, have very different philosophies and approaches. Nevertheless, a range of common technical issues are faced by most organizations interested in harnessing development data that would benefit from further discussion on a safe platform. The main ones among these are highlighted below:

- **Addressing technical challenges in working with, and combining large databases, across a range of formats, either with each other or with external, proprietary or other third-party information:** this is often necessary for the type of questions or analyses organizations are seeking, but is simply too unwieldy or time consuming for organizations to do on their own.

- **Raising and addressing questions and challenges surrounding coding issues especially around project level aid data:** this issue has come up several times especially as it relates to gender-based coding of projects; but also sector and geographic coding more generally. While non-governmental stakeholders may not be able to affect this directly, they need to be more aware, as the resultant aggregate data are taken at face value in tracking commitments and used to hold authorities to account.[5]

- **Need for a set of go-to resources for non-technical users on data management, analysis, communication, visualization and presentation needs:** organizations can do more to address their own needs if they have a set of resources that can help them benefit from others experiences, and provide a guide to available tools and solutions, and their applications.

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4 Not all projects work perfectly, as can be made to appear in much of the data. There are good reasons things do not pan out as planned. And yet there is no safe shared space on which to share and learn from these experiences.
5 Issues range from the use of gender-markers or how gender sensitive which projects are; to how projects are coded by country or sector. Small differences, taken together, can have an important impact on aggregates, and broader trends such as whether or not particular sector level commitments are on track. Currently there is no way to independently and comprehensively assess these issue in the Canadian context.

How the CIDP could evolve to help address stakeholder needs: proposed next steps

Canadian CSO stakeholders greatly value the CIDP. Furthermore, the need to stay independent, objective and rigorous is critical for the success of the platform.

Several stakeholders pointed out that given the varied uses and analytical needs, as well as credibility issues involved in leveraging rapidly changing and often complex data, it is important to have an independent, objective and arms-length provider of analyses, such as the CIDP. The platform is well positioned to enhance the efficacy of stakeholder's campaigning and messaging efforts by playing the role of an external and objective analyzer of the data and other factual information (such as stated policy pronouncements), thereby lending credibility and support where warranted.

Furthermore, the CIDP can also play a role in promoting a data-driven and transparency/accountability culture within Canadian civil society by bringing more attention to these issues through workshops and events. Aside from DFATD, there are still only two Canadian publishers to the IATI standard.[6] Simply publication is not the end game. Talking about open data and transparency and accountability is important to ensure these issues remain in focus and help motivate a more data-driven approach to decision making and communication more generally.

The forward agenda and next steps emerging from the discussion can be summarized in two main areas: analysis and reports; and greater two-way and on-demand interaction.

Analysis and reports

There is broad support for the proposed idea of an **annual Canadian Open Aid Report.** The outline and structure of a first such report is already in place and could be shared for comment and finalization. An immediate next step could include leveraging forthcoming data series (in April and May 2015) into the first report. The report will consolidate data and analytics from various levels of open aid data and other development data on the platform. It will also include a thematic analysis on topics agreed in advance with stakeholders. The report could be a joint undertaking with CCIC and other interested organizations.

Two immediate ideas in terms of thematic analysis were discussed:

- The first would be to convene a session around **Canada's Muskoka MNCH commitments** where the CIDP analytics on the topic could be presented as a jumping off point to discuss what next in this space. In this regard, we would connect with other networks already working on indicator level standardization of results data.[7] The main interest would be to lay out a framework within which to connect results data with financial data on Canada's commitment to MNCH. This is a major area of interest to civil society stakeholders and beyond – and the sense is that the major impacts we are seeing as a result of Canadian investment could be further highlighted.

- The other thematic area of interest is analysis of **Canada's efforts in utilizing ODA to leverage private capital.** This is an area where there are gaps between what is available in terms of data and information, and what is needed to address questions civil society, academic and other stakeholders are interested in. As part of ongoing work[8] on the Financing for Development (FfD) agenda (and the Global Finance Exchange) the CIDP is particularly well placed to catalyze further discussion and analysis on these, especially in the lead up to the third FfD conference in Ethiopia in July 2015.

A range of other areas for further exploration were brought up where the CIDP could help provide support:

- Addressing the challenge of aggregating results data; and more generally, better utilization of the results field in open data sources.

- Connecting historical data to political trends; and tracking 'announce-ables' against changing thematic priorities.

- Leveraging and incorporating direct feedback data from beneficiaries already being collected by stakeholders using methods such as radio and through mobile platforms.

- Crafting summary recommendations that are validated by analysis of the underlying data at the specific sector, theme and cross-cutting level (e.g. on gender sensitive and human rights programming).

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6 Compared to around 195 publishers in the UK, and 22 in the US.
7 Sick Kids, as part of the Can-MNCH network is leading the effort, and the CIDP is well placed to leverage these.
8 See: http://cidpnsi.ca/financing-for-development-briefing/

Greater two-way and on-demand interaction, as well as opportunities for 'offline' exchanges

- Stakeholders expressed interest in **dedicated capacity building sessions** with individual organizations. This speaks to both the diversity of how and what development data are immediately relevant to different organizations, but also the value of having a more defined deep-dive into specific areas based on stakeholder needs.

- Going forward, the **CIDP will take steps to establish a system through which Canadian CSOs can request specific data files, make simple data management requests and requests for rapid analysis** based on specific needs. We have already done this (albeit on an ad hoc basis) but are experimenting with using free tools (like shared online storage) to complement efforts and get users the data and analysis they need, in the format that they prefer.

- **CIDP can help organize a shared resource page** (i.e. give stakeholders shared access to post helpful resources, links and share information) to foster collaboration through a virtual platform aimed at addressing needs in the area of monitoring and evaluation, results tracking and communication. The CIDP could help bridge the gap between needs assessment and crafting requests (which are often broad and non-technical to start) into technical use-cases that developers can collaborate on directly with stakeholders.

- Several stakeholders welcomed this first such exchange on the issue of harnessing development data. Stakeholders expressed appreciation for having a platform on which to share experiences and ideas openly and safely and called for more regularized opportunities to do so, and also opportunities to do so in more specific areas (e.g. thematic sectors). The main takeaway from this is the **need to have more 'offline' exchanges to leverage experiences and share best practice.**