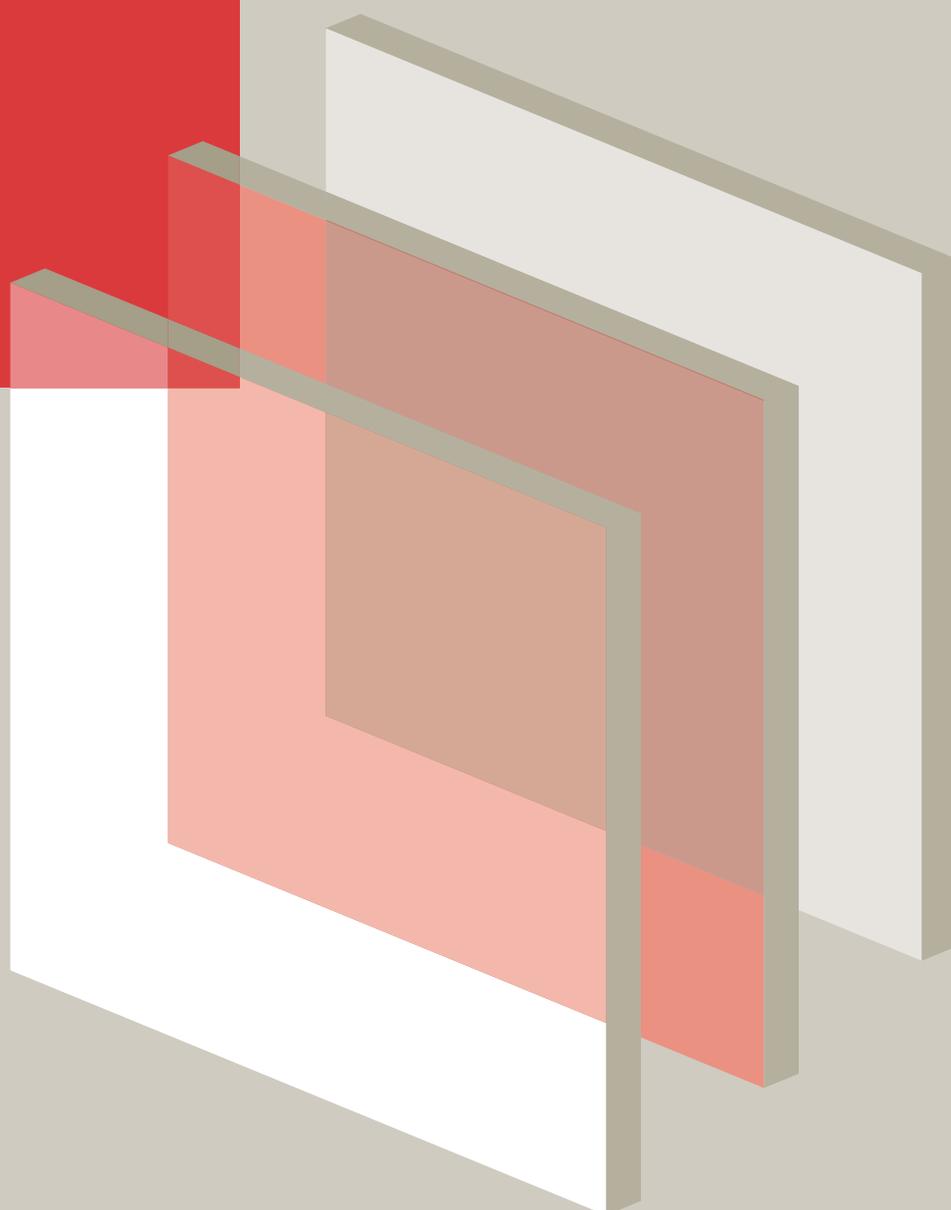


Transparency Review 2015

Cohort Report

November 2015



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About Bond

Bond is the UK membership body for over 450 organisations working in international development, ranging from large agencies with a worldwide presence to community and specialist organisations. We work to influence governments and policy-makers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and effectiveness and provide opportunities to exchange information, knowledge and expertise.

www.bond.org.uk

About NIDOS

NIDOS is the network of over 100 member organisations in Scotland that unites the international development sector to promote effectiveness and collectively influence the policy agenda. Our aim is to strengthen the contribution of Scottish organisations to reducing inequality and poverty worldwide.

www.nidos.org.uk

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Executive summary

Open, honest and active communication between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their stakeholders about the work they do, the decisions they make and the results they achieve is crucial.

This kind of communication increases transparency, can make NGOs more accountable to the people they work with and can increase the trust of partners and supporters.

The Bond and NIDOS Transparency Review helps organisations learn how transparent and open they are through the lens of the outsider looking in, and provides practical recommendations on how to increase their openness. It does this by examining a key route for sharing information: organisations' websites. NGO websites are primarily aimed at audiences in the global north and at funders or supporters rather than those who the organisations aim to support. However, websites are now increasingly used by partners and stakeholders in the global south.

This review uses indicators developed from good practice guidelines and similar NGO transparency and accountability reviews in Europe and the US. Indicators cover four areas of practice:

1. Transparency policy
2. Organisational information
3. Governance and finance
4. Activities and results

Scores for each indicator range from **0** for weak practice to **3** for best practice.

This report covers the 2015 round of the Transparency Review which involved 48 UK-based NGOs working in international development.

On average across the cohort, the indicators with the highest and lowest scores are:

Highest scoring indicators

Mission, values and affiliation **1.7**

Board/trustees **1.6**

Scope and breadth of information on activities **1.6**

Annual audited accounts **1.5**

Contact information **1.2**

Lowest scoring indicators

Scope of exclusions from open information policy **0.4**

Scope and breadth of information on results and evaluations **0.4**

Open information policy **0.7**

Quality and depth of information on activities **0.9**

Sources of funding **0.9**

The highest scoring NGOs in this cohort are Oxfam, Fairtrade International and BBC Media Action. All of these are considered large NGOs. ChildHope is the highest scoring medium-sized NGO, and Population Matters is the highest scoring small organisation.

On average large NGOs achieved higher scores than smaller organisations. However, some small NGOs scored higher than some large NGOs, suggesting that greater resources are neither necessary nor sufficient to achieve a good level of transparency.

Organisations that receive funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) score higher on average than those who do not. Within that group, those with strategic, flexible DFID funding (Programme Partnership Arrangements) score higher on average than those only receiving restricted funding. This suggests that a combination of donor pressure or encouragement and resources can help increase NGO transparency.

Recommendations to NGOs

1. NGO leaders need to reflect on why so few NGOs currently make information on results and evaluations public. A sea change in attitudes and approaches to generating and sharing good quality information is required within a context of declining public trust and an ongoing need for shared learning in the sector about what works in addressing poverty.
2. Those NGOs that are currently showing leadership in transparency should capitalise on this to enhance relationships with donors, supporters, partners and their own staff.
3. Quick wins for organisations keen to improve transparency but with limited resources are:
 - a) Develop and publish an open information policy.¹
 - b) Publish documents that already exist but are not published. Examples include strategies, accounts, project documents and basic information about trustees and senior staff.

4. Participating organisations should use the Transparency Review report and recommendations to develop an action plan for improving their transparency.

Recommendations to donors

Donor expectations and pressure for transparency can contribute to improved NGO transparency. Requiring grantees to be more transparent through contractual conditions is risky: it can prompt organisations to only do the minimum necessary to be compliant. It should only be considered within a broader approach to promoting transparency agreed with NGOs. Flexible, strategic funding appears to better enable improved NGO transparency and should be considered.

Recommendations for Bond and NIDOS

1. Promote transparency as an intrinsically valuable principle for NGOs to adopt, while also highlighting the potential benefits to organisations of being more transparent. Carry out follow-up work with the top scorers on the review to understand and communicate the effects of greater transparency.
2. Continue to support organisations to improve the quality of their monitoring and evaluation activities, as this is cited by organisations as a primary reason for not currently publishing results.
3. Actively promote the publishing of results and evaluations, including in synthesised or summarised forms, to improve sector practice on both transparency and learning.
4. Explore further the links between organisational transparency and UK public trust in NGOs, and share this information with the sector.
5. Continue to promote the development of open information policies, complementing current guidance with occasional seminars/workshops.
6. Explore the possibility of including an additional indicator in the Review regarding the publishing of constituent feedback.

1. See: www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness/open-information-and-ngos

Introduction

Since 2011, Bond and NIDOS have been working on promoting greater transparency among NGOs working in international development. When timely and relevant information about organisations, their activities and results is shared publicly and made easily accessible, this can be beneficial in four main ways:

- Stakeholders are more able to hold organisations to account for their activities and results.
- Actors can learn more from each other.
- Better coordination of activities between development actors can be achieved (particularly when information is shared in a common format).
- Greater openness can help build greater public trust in NGOs.

Bond and NIDOS are keen to support the sector in overcoming barriers to greater transparency. The Transparency Review aims to encourage this by examining organisations' openness through their websites. It helps organisations understand how open they are currently, how they compare to peers and what simple and relatively low-cost steps they can take to be more open. Through this process and follow-on activities, we hope to support more NGOs to share more information about their organisations, activities and results.

This report summarises the results of the 2015 cohort of the Transparency Review, which involved 48 UK-based NGOs working in international development.

Methodology

Why look at websites?

Websites are just one way in which organisations can be transparent. Typically, the primary audience for an international NGO's website will be stakeholders such as supporters, funders and in some cases the media. As a result websites are often seen within organisations as the domains of marketing and communications staff. Increasingly, websites are accessible to and visited by partners in the global south, by local government, civil society and academic institutions and, to a lesser extent, individual citizens. But they are not yet an effective channel for reaching those citizens who the NGOs' work is intended to benefit. However, for review purposes, organisations' websites are easy to see, assess and compare.²

Bond and NIDOS recognise that the indicators in the Transparency Review focus on the amount of information made available, and pay less attention to the form and accessibility of that information. There is ample evidence that simply publishing comprehensive information (such as lengthy evaluations or accounts in PDF form that cannot be further analysed, or which are hard to find on a website) is a weak form of transparency that does not generate high levels of usage or help users to easily hold publishers to account. Nonetheless, there can be a Catch 22 in transparency that if not enough information is published, it is not possible to make good use of it; and if it is not obvious how information will be used, prospective publishers may be discouraged from making the effort to publish. The Transparency Review is a step towards breaking that Catch 22. If transparency practices are seen to improve over time, it will be appropriate for the Transparency Review to set higher standards around accessibility.

The indicators

The indicator list for the Transparency Review was originally drawn up in an iterative process between March and May 2014 by Bond and NIDOS, with reference to transparency and accountability regulations and reporting processes, including those from the UK government and the Charity Commission. International standards and initiatives such as the INGO Charter of Accountability were reviewed; feedback on the indicators was collected from transparency advocacy organisations and our member NGOs.³

The review considers 13 indicators in four areas of practice:

1. Transparency policy

Policies linked to transparency, for example, an open information policy.

2. Organisation information

Information describing an organisation, for example, the mission and values.

3. Governance and finance

Funding and decision-making processes within the organisation.

4. Activities and results

International projects and programmes (activities) and results and evaluations.

Four levels of openness were identified and defined, and each was assigned a score.

0 = weak practice

1 = minimum acceptable practice

2 = good practice

3 = best practice

A score of **3** should be achievable on all indicators for any type or size of organisation, but only if the organisation makes transparency a high priority.

² Unlike, for example, sharing information and being transparent with those communities the NGO supports through media such as meetings, noticeboards or radio programmes. These are key aspects of transparency, but challenging and expensive for an external organisation to monitor.

³ For further information on the development of the tool, see the Transparency Review Pilot Cohort Report: www.bond.org.uk/data/files/publications/Transparency_Review_250215.pdf

The 2015 review cohort

Participation in this round of the Transparency Review was free for Bond and NIDOS members. Organisations were invited to sign up through various communication channels such as Bond Working Groups and email newsletters.

Forty-eight organisations took part in the 2015 review. Five of these organisations had also taken part in the pilot cohort, the remaining 43 were participating for the first time. Thirty-eight of the organisations were Bond members and 10 were NIDOS members, based in Scotland.

Of the 48 reviewed, 13 were small NGOs (spending less than £500,000 per annum), 16 medium-sized (spending £500,000 to £5million) and 19 large NGOs (spending over £5million).

Table 1: Size of organisations reviewed

Size	Expenditure	No of NGOs	
Small	Under £100,000	4	13
	£100,000 – £500,000	9	
Medium	£500,000 – £2,000,000	8	16
	£2,000,000 – £5,000,000	8	
Large	£5,000,000 – £20,000,000	10	19
	£20,000,000 – £40,000,000	2	
	Over £40,000,000	7	
Total number reviewed			48

The review process

Drawing on learning from the pilot round of the Transparency Review in 2014, the wording on some of the indicators was altered to make them less ambiguous. Two of the indicators that were included in the original pilot round (“active sharing of information” and “timeliness of publication of information on activities”) were dropped for this round as the pilot found that it was simply not possible to reliably assess these indicators from information on websites.

To make the open information policy indicator more inclusive for smaller organisations, the wording was amended to give more credit to organisations who didn’t have a full transparency policy but had a clear statement on their approach to transparency on their website. While these changes have helped ensure that scoring is fairer and more consistent, it means that there is not direct comparability between scores in the pilot and in the 2015 review.

Bond recruited two temporary, full-time staff to carry out the reviews of organisation’s websites, supervised by Bond’s Transparency Advisor. The reviewers were trained on making the assessments and co-created a scoring guide for determining the scoring for each indicator to maximise consistency of scoring.

Both reviewers independently reviewed every participating organisation’s website. They then compared scores and reconciled any differences to achieve consensus on scores. Bond staff assisted the reviewers where they were not able to reach a consensus on the levels allocated.

Draft reports were written for each participating organisation and sent for feedback shortly after reviews were completed. This process aimed to address two shortcomings in the pilot round related to consistency of scoring and delays in getting reports sent to participants.

The individual organisation reports showed the assessment results and cited the webpages and rationale for scoring for each indicator. It also provided tailored recommendations for each organisation to improve transparency, illustrated with examples from other NGOs’ websites. Organisations were then given the opportunity to challenge scores if they felt something had been missed or incorrectly assessed. One-third of the participating organisations challenged the level allocated on one or more indicators. Challenges typically related to information that the organisations felt had been missed by the assessors.

Individual scores were then finalised in June 2015 and individual ranking within the cohort on each indicator and section was calculated. Final individual reports were sent to organisations in July 2015.

Headline results

Indicator scores⁴

Table 2: Average indicator scores for all organisations

Practice areas	Indicators	Why it matters	Average score
1. Transparency policy	1.1 Open information policy	A policy demonstrates a systematic, consistent approach to transparency	0.7
	1.2 Scope of exclusions from open information policy	Some exclusions to publishing are necessary, but a transparent organisation seeks to limit their scope	0.4
2. Organisation information	2.1 Mission, values and affiliations	Enables visitors to understand what the organisation seeks to achieve, the values that inform their approach and any religious, political, etc affiliations	1.7
	2.2 Organisational strategy	Provides clarity on organisational direction	1.0
	2.3 Contact information	Enables those interested to engage with the organisation	1.2
	2.4 Partners	Enables visitors to see the other organisations and institutions with whom the NGO works	1.0
3. Governance and finance	3.1 Board/trustees	Enables visitors to learn about those who provide governance oversight	1.6
	3.2 Directors/senior staff	Enables visitors to learn about those who manage the organisation on a day-to-day basis	1.2
	3.3 Annual audited accounts	Enables visitors to understand levels and sources of funding, and how money is spent	1.5
	3.4 Sources of funding	Enables visitors to see where funding comes from	0.9
4. Activities and results	4.1 Scope and breadth of information on activities	Enables visitors to understand the work an organisation does: information should be complete and detail should be available	1.6
	4.2 Quality and depth of information on activities		0.9
	4.3 Scope and breadth of information on results and evaluations	Enables visitors to see what the organisation achieves	0.4

Indicators carried a score between **0** and **3**, where **3** represented best possible practice and **1** the minimum acceptable level of transparency advised.

Highest scoring indicators

- Mission, values and affiliation
- Board/trustees
- Scope and breadth of information on activities
- Annual audited accounts
- Contact information

Lowest scoring indicators

(all below the minimum standard of transparency)

- Scope of exclusions from open information policy
- Scope and breadth of information on results and evaluations
- Open information policy
- Quality and depth of information on activities
- Sources of funding

⁴ Although absolute scores are not directly comparable between the pilot round and current round due to refinements made in scoring practice, the highest and lowest scoring indicators were broadly similar in both rounds.

Top scoring organisations

The Transparency Review is primarily a learning exercise for individual organisations to aid reflection about performance relative to peers and prompt reflection on how to improve. Therefore, detailed scores and ranking for individual organisations are not made publicly available. However, the top scorers are listed below with the permission of each organisation to provide good practice examples.

All three organisations that came top overall are categorised as large organisations (annual expenditure on activities of over £5million).

Of the nine organisations below, four had also taken part in the pilot round (and thus had previously received recommendations on improving online transparency).

Table 3: Top scoring organisations

	Top overall in cohort, of which all are large NGOs	Top medium-sized NGOs, £500,000 – £5m	Top small NGOs, under £500,000
1.	Oxfam GB	ChildHope	Population Matters
2.	Fairtrade International	Penal Reform International	Women and Children First
3.	BBC Media Action	ADD International	NIDOS

Transparency and organisational size

Results for different sizes of organisations were compared to consider whether levels of organisational resources may contribute to the degree of online transparency. In this round, as in the pilot round, the average score for large organisations (expenditure over £5million per year) was better than the average for the whole cohort (see Table 3). There was only a minor difference between small and medium-sized organisations' scores. Scores for the "activities and results" section, however, were similar across all sizes of organisation.

Averages, however, undervalue the performance of specific organisations. The highest scoring small organisation – Population Matters – scored higher

than 15 of the 20 large organisations in the cohort, proving that it is not simply a question of resources. Two other small NGOs scored higher than the average for large NGOs. Meanwhile the worst scoring large NGO scored lower than any small NGO.

The average results show that this cohort scored below the minimum on transparency policy and activities and results, and scored a "good" level on organisational information and governance and finance. This almost certainly reflects the UK regulatory situation and institutional funding requirements, both of which have a strong focus on fiscal transparency. It is also consistent with the findings of the 2014 pilot review.

Table 4: Average scores by size of organisation

Indicator	Small total 13 NGOs	Medium total 16 NGOs	Large total 19 NGOs	All total 48 NGOs
1. Transparency policy Maximum score: 6	0.9 14%	0.9 15%	1.3 21%	1.0 17%
2. Organisational information Maximum score: 12	4.8 40%	4.1 34%	5.6 46%	4.9 41%
3. Governance and finance Maximum score: 12	4.5 37%	5.2 44%	5.5 46%	5.1 43%
4. Activities and results Maximum score: 9	3.0 33%	2.6 29%	3.0 33%	2.8 31%
All sections Maximum score: 39	13.1 34%	12.9 33%	15.3 39%	13.9 36%

Transparency and funding from the UK Department for International Development

Organisations who receive funding from the UK government, predominantly via DFID, were the strongest performing organisations on average out of the cohort (Table 5). Eighteen out of the top 20 organisations receive some kind of institutional funding from the government.

The type of funding received from DFID was also related to different average scores. Those organisations receiving strategic, flexible funding (PPAs or Strategic Grants) scored higher than those receiving project-

specific funding only (eg via the Global Poverty Action Fund or UK Aid Direct). This pattern was also seen in the pilot cohort. While there is a question about the direction of the effect here (ie are more transparent organisations more likely to qualify for strategic funding?), recipients of DFID strategic funding are required to report annually on their progress on transparency and can use some of their funding for this purpose, which is likely to incentivise and facilitate more openness.

Table 5: Comparison of NGOs with/without DFID funding

Indicator	No DFID Funding total 17 NGOs	Restricted DFID Funding total 15 NGOs	DFID PPA/ Strategic Grant Funding total 16 NGOs	All NGOs total 48 NGOs
1. Transparency policy Maximum score: 6	0.2 4%	1.1 18%	1.8 30%	1.0 17%
2. Organisational information Maximum score: 12	4.0 33%	4.1 34%	6.5 54%	4.9 41%
3. Governance and finance Maximum score: 12	4.3 36%	4.8 40%	6.4 53%	5.1 43%
4. Activities and results Maximum score: 9	2.6 29%	3.0 33%	3.0 33%	2.8 31%
All sections Maximum score: 39	11.1 29%	13.0 33%	17.7 45%	13.9 36%

Detailed results

1. Transparency policy

Having an open information policy is a necessary step towards being systematically transparent. It helps others hold you to account by letting them know what information you are willing to provide and what will be “excluded” from publication.

Table 6: Indicator scores

Indicator	NGOs scoring 0	NGOs scoring 1	NGOs scoring 2	NGOs scoring 3	Average score out of 3
1.1 Open information policy	37	0	1	10	0.7
1.2 Scope of exclusions from open information policy	36	8	3	1	0.4

Thirty-seven out of the 48 organisations participating in this survey (ie 77%) had no open information or transparency policy on their website. Of those that did, most had broad-ranging “exclusions” clauses in their policies which provided them with a high degree of discretion about what information they could decide not to publish. Broad exclusions can undermine transparency in practice and increase the likelihood of any policy being inconsistently applied.

BBC Media Action was the only participant to score full marks on this section, by publishing an open information policy in full, and having only a narrowly-defined basis for excluding information from publication.

If we only count the scores of those who published their open information policies, the average score for this indicator would have been 1.6. This most closely matches our definition for “good practice” (level 2), where most information is made available, but some is excluded for legal or security reasons or narrowly-defined commercial reasons.

Those who published their policies in any form scored substantially higher across the whole review (18.4 out of 39, or 47%) than those who did not (12.6 out of 39, or 32%). Although most of that difference comes from their scores for open information policies and exclusions, just over 25% of the difference also comes from higher scores on governance and finance.

There is no difference in scores for publishing activities and results, however. This may suggest either that having a published open information policy does not consistently lead to greater transparency in practice, or perhaps that some of those who have open information policies just do not currently publish them.⁵

⁵ For examples of good open information policies and guidance on developing such a policy, see: www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness/open-information-and-ngos

2. Organisation information

This section of the review examines whether organisations provide clear information on their mission, values, affiliations, strategy, partners and contact details. This information is essential for public understanding of the organisation and for framing what the organisation should be held accountable for.

Table 7: Indicator scores

Indicator	NGOs scoring 0	NGOs scoring 1	NGOs scoring 2	NGOs scoring 3	Average score out of 3
2.1 Mission, values and affiliation	3	15	25	5	1.7
2.2 Organisational strategy	27	6	5	10	1.0
2.3 Contact information	3	31	14	0	1.2
2.4 Partners	16	20	7	5	1.0

There was wide variation in scores in this section. It includes the highest-scoring indicator (mission, values and affiliation) and one of the five lowest-scoring indicators (strategy).

Scores on mission, values and affiliation are sometimes held down artificially if organisations with no external affiliations or links to other organisations (eg within a federation or confederation) omit to say that explicitly on their website.

More than half of the cohort did not share information about their organisational strategy on their website. Publishing strategies should be a quick win for

increasing transparency, as most organisations have some form of strategy.

To improve scores on contact information, more organisations would be required to commit to responding to queries within a set time period and to publish FAQs relating to queries they receive.

It is increasingly rare that UK-based organisations working in international development do not have southern partners, yet 33% of organisations in this cohort did not publish any information at all about such partners. Most that do share information are not clear about what those partners work on or whether the list of partners named is comprehensive.

3. Governance and finance

Governance and finance is the highest scoring of the four sections in the Transparency Review. It covers information shared by organisations about their trustee boards and senior staff, their finances and their sources of funding. Some of these indicators are aligned with minimum reporting standards required by England's Charity Commission and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR), which may contribute to the relatively high scores. Transparency in these areas is important in helping establish organisations' legitimacy with external actors, as they relate to who runs the organisation, the scale of its operation and who funds it.

Table 8: Indicator scores

Indicator	NGOs scoring 0	NGOs scoring 1	NGOs scoring 2	NGOs scoring 3	Average score out of 3
3.1 Board/trustees	3	13	32	0	1.6
3.2 Directors/senior staff	8	25	15	0	1.2
3.3 Annual audited accounts	13	3	29	3	1.5
3.4 Sources of funding	15	25	4	4	0.9

Less information is provided on average about senior staff in NGOs than about trustees. No organisation made public a register of interests for either trustees or senior staff,⁶ which is necessary to score 3 on indicators 3.1 and 3.2. However, two-thirds of the organisations publish biographies of their trustees and almost one-third publish biographies of their senior staff.

Although most organisations were strong in publishing their full annual audited accounts on their websites, and some even provide machine-readable versions (which facilitate further analysis of the data by users), 13 participants did not publish any accounts on their website. This is a serious omission and is also another potential quick win.

Audited accounts have to be submitted to the Charity Commission and OSCR and are published on those regulators' websites, so at a minimum those organisations could place a link to the relevant pages on the regulators' websites.

The majority of organisations only publish the minimum amount of information on their sources of funding. Some (particularly individual) donors may wish to remain anonymous and this must be respected. However, more proactive sharing of information on sources of income would allow website users to better understand from where an organisation secures its funding.

⁶ Transparency International is an example of an organisation (that was not part of our cohort) that publishes such registers of interest. See www.transparency.org.uk/who-we-are/trustees-a-advisory-council/register-of-interests

4. Activities and results

Expectations around publishing information on activities and results have been gradually increasing over recent years. Initiatives like the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) Standard (now Core Humanitarian Standard), International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) and the UK Aid Transparency Guarantee have prompted some organisations to share information on their activities more systematically. The “results agenda”⁷ together with increasing public and donor expectations that charities explain what they have been achieving also provide a strong incentive for greater openness about results.

Table 9: Indicator scores

Indicator	NGOs scoring 0	NGOs scoring 1	NGOs scoring 2	NGOs scoring 3	Average score out of 3
4.1 Scope and breadth of information on activities	4	24	8	12	1.6
4.2 Quality and depth of information on activities	8	39	0	1	0.9
4.3 Scope and breadth of information on results and evaluations	31	16	0	1	0.4

The stand-out organisation on publishing information on activities, results and evaluations in this cohort was Fairtrade International, scoring full marks on each indicator in this section. Unfortunately this was an exception.

Almost two-thirds of participating organisations provided no information on what they had achieved on their websites.⁸ This is a serious indictment of NGO practice – and possibly of attitudes. In an era of declining public trust and increasing questioning of the legitimacy and accountability of charities, it is unwise for an organisation not to share information on their achievements.

Moreover, it is a missed opportunity for those who are effective in their work, since sharing such information can build trust, legitimacy and potentially help secure funding; it can also inform the practice of others. One-third of organisations shared some information, but without being clear about what proportion of the organisation’s work these results reflected. Such selective publishing of results and evaluations can give rise to suspicions of cherry-picking success stories, and undermines true accountability.

⁷ The “results agenda” is the name informally given to the increased focus in international development – particularly from donors such as DFID – on ensuring results are achieved (as opposed to just delivering activities), with an emphasis on tracking progress against predicted outcomes and delivering value-for-money.

⁸ It may be argued that a more meaningful measure of “results” to examine in the Transparency Review would be the feedback and satisfaction levels of those the organisation’s work seeks to benefit (as Charity Navigator is attempting to do in the US, for example). This is a valid suggestion, however, it is currently unlikely that organisations reviewed would score any better (and possibly worse) if an indicator on making such feedback public via the website was included.

On average, organisations were significantly better at sharing information about their activities than about their results. A quarter of organisations published a full list of their activities with some information on all projects (thus scoring 3). However, again the majority of information is selective and summarised, preventing those interested from gaining a full understanding of the NGOs' work. It is recognised that for many NGOs, a website is seen primarily as the domain of

communications or fundraising teams, and summarised information is essential for making it accessible to their primary audience of (prospective) supporters and funders. However, that does not preclude organisations from also making available more detailed information alongside summaries for other audiences, such as partner organisations, researchers, journalists and interested individuals.

Publishing evaluations

Publishing results and evaluations has been the lowest-scoring indicator in both cohorts of the Transparency Review. To investigate the reasons for this further, and identify ways of promoting more publishing of results, Clore Social Leadership Fellow Michael Cooke carried out a short piece of research for Bond.⁹ The research involved interviews with a range of NGOs who had participated in the Transparency Review and with a mix of those who do and do not currently publish evaluations.

For those organisations that publish results, the research found that the main enabling factors were:

- an organisational culture and commitment to transparency and learning;
- a donor requirement to publish results;
- an internal champion promoting transparency;
- an organisational desire to build their reputation (particularly with donors) for being transparent.

The most commonly reported barriers to publishing results information were:

- a simple lack of thought: it had simply not occurred to some organisations to share such information on their website
- concerns about the quality and reliability of the evidence, ie whether it would stand up to external scrutiny (note that, perhaps surprisingly, organisations did not report fearing that publishing poor results would reflect badly on the organisation)
- concern that there would be a limited audience for NGO project evaluation reports, combined with limited resource to produce more accessible products for sharing
- low prioritisation of this among those responsible for the website, including a tendency to not migrate previously published results information onto new websites when updates were carried out.

Bond is already working on helping organisations improve the quality of their evaluations through training, promoting of the "Evidence Principles" standards, new initiatives on peer support and guidance on commissioning evaluations, and a practical tool on choosing appropriate evaluation methods. Further work is needed to help ensure clear value and utility for organisations in sharing more results information.

⁹. The report is forthcoming in late 2015.

Conclusions

The Bond/NIDOS Transparency Review indicates that NGOs are familiar and comfortable with addressing a number of aspects of transparency. Websites typically include good information on mission and values, for example, and accounts are commonly made available in full. Most organisations also provide a basic level of information about their activities.

However, the Transparency Review shows that international development NGOs are still on average at an early stage in responding to and addressing growing external expectations about the information that they should make public. The majority of organisations do not have the key building block of an open information policy (or equivalent) in place to frame their approach.

Perhaps most critically, given that it is the reason why NGOs exist and how central this is to accountability, the vast majority of organisations in this cohort share little or no evidence on their websites about what they achieve and what difference they make. There may be a “chicken and egg” debate to be had about whether greater investment in the quality of evaluations and in making results information accessible should come first, or whether current evaluations should just be published as they are as a way of putting pressure on organisations to get better at documenting and achieving results. Either way, current levels of published information on results make the sector very vulnerable to valid external criticism.

Those at the vanguard of transparency are to be applauded for being first movers. They provide practical examples to others about how greater online transparency can be achieved.

Increasing transparency via websites is not necessarily a high cost activity. However, our review shows that larger organisations, and those that receive DFID funding – particularly flexible, strategic PPA funding – are on average more likely than other NGOs to share more information on their websites. Resources and pressure from a major donor help. But the progress of some small or medium organisations shows that those factors are not essential. Bond and NIDOS’ engagement with our members suggests that valuing and making a commitment to transparency is essential to greater organisational openness.

As there was only a three to four month window between the publication of the report of the pilot round of the Transparency Review, and the assessment of a new cohort of organisations’ websites, it was not expected that a lot of progress would have been made on previous recommendations. Many of the recommendations from this cohort, therefore, remain unchanged or refined from the pilot cohort.

Recommendations to NGOs

1. A sea change is required in attitudes to publishing results and evaluations. NGO leaders need to reflect on why they do not currently make that information available, including, if relevant, why the quality of such information is not considered good enough for sharing, and if so, whether it is good enough for guiding their own management decision-making.
2. Those NGOs who are currently showing leadership in transparency should capitalise on this to enhance relationships with donors, supporters, partners and their own staff. Leaders of transparent NGOs should encourage their peers to follow suit.
3. There are many quick wins for organisations keen to improve transparency but with limited resources to do so, such as:
 - a) Develop an open information policy: Bond resources can help organisations do this with a relatively low level of effort.
 - b) Publish documents that already exist but which are not currently on the website, such as strategies, accounts and basic information about trustees and senior staff.
4. Participating organisations should use the Transparency Review report and recommendations to develop an action plan for improving transparency, ensuring a balance between easy, quick wins and commitments that require deeper changes in organisational culture and behaviour.

Recommendations to donors

Donors interested in promoting greater transparency and accountability in the NGOs they fund should learn from DFID's experience, as reflected in the results in this review and in the practice of DFID grantees in relation to publishing to IATI. That experience shows three things:

1. Donor expectations and pressure for transparency can contribute to improved NGO practice in this area.
2. Flexible, strategic funding appears to better enable improved NGO transparency than just requiring transparency in relation to project-specific funding.
3. Requiring grantees to be more transparent through contractual conditions risks prompting organisations who are not intrinsically motivated to further this agenda to only do the minimum to be compliant. It should only be considered within a broader approach to promoting transparency agreed with NGOs.

Recommendations for Bond and NIDOS

1. Promote transparency as an intrinsically valuable principle to adopt, while also highlighting the potential benefits to organisations of being more transparent. Carry out follow-up work with the top scorers on the review to understand and communicate the effects for them of greater transparency.
2. Continue to support organisations to improve the quality of their monitoring and evaluation activities, as this is cited by organisations as a primary reason for not currently publishing results and evaluations.
3. Actively promote the publishing of results and evaluations, including in synthesised or summarised forms, to improve sector practice on both transparency and learning.
4. Explore further the links between organisational transparency and UK public attitudes towards NGOs and share this information with the sector.
5. Continue to promote the development of open information policies, complementing current guidance with occasional seminars/ workshops.
6. Explore the possibility of including an additional indicator in the Review regarding the publishing of constituent feedback.

Sign up for the Transparency Review

If you are interested in having your organisation included in future round of the Transparency Review, the tool and details of how to participate are on the Bond website:

bond.org.uk/strengthen/transparency-review



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