Publishing results to IATI
Will it improve learning and accountability?
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About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. bond.org.uk

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This report was written by Michael O'Donnell.
Introduction: the importance of results and transparency

Robust evidence of results and learning is essential to the continuous improvement of development work and the achievement of improvements to the lives of people in developing countries.

Good quality evidence of results and learning that is made public in accessible and useful ways can both promote wider learning and facilitate greater accountability and legitimacy. Wider learning could include, for example, looking at results across a range of similar interventions to understand what tends to work and what doesn’t under various circumstances. Accountability uses could include making results data available to citizens to verify whether results claimed by aid providers are visible on the ground, or to help determine which aid providers make the best use of funds received.

Bond is firmly committed to promoting greater attention to and learning from results by CSOs and others. For over five years we have been providing training, tools and other services to enhance the capacity of and incentives for CSOs to improve their monitoring, evaluation and learning practice. Since 2013, over 400 organisations have made use of these services.

In parallel, Bond has a strong track record in promoting greater transparency among international CSOs, particularly through the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). Over 220 organisations – more than 55% of all publishers to IATI globally – have published with technical support from Bond.

This discussion paper draws on Bond’s experience and knowledge to consider whether and how the publication of results information to the IATI common data standard could further promote learning, accountability and, ultimately, improved performance by those spending aid money.

The results agenda: a summary for the data transparency sector

Those working in the field of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) have been actively grappling with and debating what has become known as “the results agenda” since at least 2009.

This agenda is focused on encouraging aid actors to move from talking about their inputs and activities, to focusing on what results – in terms of changes in the lives of people in developing countries – they achieve. A focus on results is intuitively hugely appealing and hard to argue with, but the devil is in the detail. Some key critiques of the way the results agenda has been implemented include:

- The focus has often been on uses of results data for aid providers (eg to hold implementing agencies accountable for delivering planned work; aggregating results to communicate to funders and supporters; focusing on short-term results, not long-term change), and not enough for use in improving learning and results for clients;
There has been an over-emphasis on quantifying change at the expense of understanding how and why change happened;

- The “results” that are valued should not solely be determined by funders and aid actors, they should be relevant to and validated by those clients/citizens/beneficiaries who the activities are intended to benefit;

- Many valuable results are hard to measure and not quantifiable – this does not make these results less important. However, pressure to demonstrate measurable results can skew incentives such that doing important but hard-to-measure work becomes less appealing;

- There can be a desire to use common measures and aggregate results: this is feasible and very useful in some areas, but in others it may be impractical or produce data that is not meaningful or useful for learning.

It is vital that if the use of IATI expands into the area of results, that it takes into account these debates and critiques and ensures that it aids learning and meaningful accountability, and does not reinforce existing concerns with the results agenda. The importance of ensuring the utility of published data is a theme that continues to be raised in relation to other aspects of IATI.

Publishing results to IATI

IATI is a common standard that enables organisations to publish information about their activity in consistent, comparable ways.

In addition to information on things like sector of work, budget and description of activities – which are the most common fields used by those publishing information – IATI also includes a “results” module (see box 1).

From 2016, the Dutch government will require those it funds to publish information to IATI. The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) has required this since 2010. However the Dutch government’s requirements will go further, requiring publication to IATI’s results fields. Bond’s understanding is that a number of other donors are also considering making publication of results to IATI a requirement.

Bond is concerned that, without changes to the IATI results module, a requirement to publish results will not produce the desired outcome of making available useful information that can increase learning and accountability.

Some donors may intend to reduce the reporting burden on grantees by allowing publication to IATI as a substitute. This could have efficiency benefits, particularly when multiple donors fund a single intervention. However this note focuses on the potential for publishing results to IATI to enhance learning and accountability.

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1 Non-standardised indicators determined to be relevant through mechanisms such as beneficiary or client feedback, and participatory evaluation, are suggested as alternatives.
Box 1: What are the IATI results fields?
The IATI Standard allows single or multiple “results” to be recorded against activities (which are typically projects). Each result can have:

- A title (in free text, not based on a standard indicator list)
- A description (also in free text)
- An indicator, which:
  a) must be quantitative, either defined as a “unit” or “percentage”;
  b) must be designated as referring to either an “output”, “outcome”, “impact” or “other”;
  c) must indicate “baseline”, “milestone”, “target” and/ or “actual” value;
  d) must specify a time period (year) for the value;
  e) must indicate if success is measured by the indicator value ascending (eg number of children in school) or descending (eg disease incidence);
  f) can include comments.

The results module is therefore currently focused on quantitative results that can potentially be aggregated.

Current use of the results module

As of January 2016, 43 out of 321 organisations publishing to IATI (ie 13%) included some information in the results fields. Only 14 of those used the results field in every activity file they published.

Those publishing the greatest volume of results information are mainly multilateral organisations (eg Unicef, GAVI, UNDP, UNFPA, Global Fund), development banks (eg AfDB, IADB) and some bilateral donors (SIDA, USAID – though inconsistently). Neither DFID nor the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs currently publish data to the results module themselves.

A comprehensive review of current use of the results module is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a review of a small selection of activity files with results data suggests it is most common for publishers only to provide basic quantitative information along with indicator names in the results fields. There are some exceptions, where the description field is used to bring greater richness to the numbers, in a style similar to a narrative project report.

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2 See: http://dashboard.iatistandard.org/element/iati-activity_result.html (accessed 15.01.16)
Seven tests for the results module

We propose seven tests that would determine whether making the publishing of results to IATI compulsory would achieve the objectives of enhancing learning and accountability. And where it would not at present, we suggest changes that could lead to the desired outcomes.

1. Will requirements to publish results lead to greater publishing and availability of learning about how and why results were or were not achieved?

2. Can the sorts of results generated by the full range of aid-related interventions be captured by the IATI Standard’s results fields?

3. Can results disaggregated by issues of interest be reported?

4. Can the reporting of targets and results in IATI accommodate changes and adaptation over the lifetime of activities?

5. Have donors made the case and won the hearts and minds of those they fund before imposing requirements to publish results?

6. Are there financial costs involved in meeting donor requirements to publish results, and are additional resources available to cover those?

7. Will the quality of evidence behind results data be transparent?

Should these tests be failed, there is a risk that results information will at best be of very limited value for accountability and learning purposes. At worst, the information published could either be used inappropriately and in a potentially misleading way for learning and informing decision-making, and/or it could damage the credibility of IATI and of any donors requiring publishers to use the results module.

Test 1: Will requirements to publish results have the potential to lead to greater publishing and availability of learning about how and why results were or were not achieved?

Why does this matter?

Data on results cannot be used for learning or accountability without context. Just because an intervention achieved its targeted results, does not mean it will work elsewhere. There may be factors relating to the geographical area (fragile or conflict-affected, stable, undergoing a natural disaster), or the population (targeting particularly marginalised groups or more mainstream populations) and intervention modalities (direct service delivery by CSOs or government, citizen empowerment, advocacy to local government) that have a massive bearing on why particular results were achieved. Similarly, there may be valuable learning about unintended outcomes or learning from failure about why something didn’t work which is of value for learning purposes and not captured in traditional results metrics.
Will the status quo pass the test?

Only if narrative descriptions are required alongside quantitative data. Simply requiring grantees to publish quantitative data to the results module will not pass this test. Like a logframe, the figures provide some signals and can prompt further questions, but on their own, they do not aid learning. For accountability, they provide a crude measure only as they give no explanation for why or why not a target may have been met or exceeded and probably won’t capture unintended outcomes.

What could be done to enable the test to be passed?

There is the scope to use the description field to provide commentary and explanation, as would be done in a narrative project report. However, given the practical challenges involved, it would require a strong commitment to sharing learning on the part of the publisher and/or well thought out requirements from donors to creatively use this field to provide meaningful, good quality information of this sort.

If accompanied by a requirement to publish evaluations or final reports from activities, and to link to these via existing IATI reporting fields (document link), there would at least be an opportunity for interested parties to delve into the context and explanation behind results data. Such information would be essential for syntheses and meta-analysis. This would still by no means guarantee that more learning takes place, as there are many determinants of usage and uptake of evidence unrelated to transparency, but it would at least have potential to aid learning.

Adding a free-text description section to results fields may also aid the potential for learning, and could also make IATI more fit for purpose as a substitute for narrative reporting to donors.

Test 2: Can the sorts of results generated by the full range of aid-related interventions be captured by the IATI Standard’s results fields?

Why does this matter?

The types of results that are most easily captured in logframes and traditional project-based reporting tend to be quantifiable and short-term. Such results may be perfectly appropriate in some types of interventions, eg many health and nutrition interventions. However, the focus on these types of results can be reductive, and has been criticised from a number of quarters ranging from the UK’s Independent Commission for Aid Impact to the “Big Push Forward” initiative

There are many interventions in international development where quantitative measures are not relevant or meaningful, for example in relation to much policy-influencing work, and in some forms of capacity-development and empowerment interventions. These are common areas of work for civil society organisations. If there is not scope to report such results, at best CSOs will try to play the game and produce “sausage numbers” (taste nice, but you’d be horrified if you looked into what went into making them), and at worst it incentivises organisations to do more of the measurable work and less of the hard-to-measure work, even if the latter is vital.

3 See, for example, SIDA’s activity file for Bangladesh: http://iati.openaid.se/xml/BD.xml
Will the status quo pass the test?

No. IATI results indicators are currently limited to quantitative values: units or percentages. This is a required field, and thus publishers can neither enter qualitative indicators nor leave this field blank.

What could be done to enable the test to be passed?

The results module allows for a free text title and description for results, which would allow any indicator to be entered. If the indicator type codelist added “qualitative” as an option, this would avoid the current problem. This would also limit the ability to aggregate results data. However although the desire to aggregate all results data is understandable, in practice it is unrealistic and inappropriate.

A separate point is that the IATI results indicator field should include a marker clarifying whether interim and final results and targets are cumulative or new for each period of time.

Test 3: Can results disaggregated by issues of interest be reported?

Why does this matter?

It is recognised widely that results presented as averages for entire populations will usually mask differences within that population group, for example, by gender, wealth, disability, ethnicity, etc. The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular have put this issue higher on the agenda, under the heading of “Leave no one behind”. In order to ensure equity and the inclusion of marginalised groups, it is vital that disaggregated data is collected (and many aid providers are increasingly requiring disaggregation by a number of dimensions). For IATI data to be useful, it in turn must enable the publication of disaggregated results data.

Will the status quo pass the test?

Not explicitly – only by use of workarounds. The results module does not appear to have been designed to easily enable reporting of disaggregated results. It has been suggested that the narrative description field in the results module could be used for this purpose. Similarly, results for different population groups could potentially be recorded as separate indicators. But neither of those are likely to be conducive to consistent good practice by publishers.

What could be done to enable the test to be passed?

This would require further discussion and exploration. New fields might enable equity/disaggregation issues to be addressed in a more explicit manner, but could be complicated to design and use.

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6 See: http://iatistandard.org/201/codelists/IndicatorMeasure/
7 For example, DFID requires results to be disaggregated by gender and is rolling out requirements to disaggregate by disability status.
Test 4: Can the reporting of targets and results in IATI accommodate changes and adaptation over the lifetime of activities?

Why does this matter?
Flexibility in international development programming is a virtue. The situation can change, organisations can learn from feedback and monitoring about what is working and what is not, and they should adapt their activities and targets in response to that within the project lifetime. Adaptive management approaches are increasingly recognised as important for dealing with complexity. Anything that creates friction in the process of making changes to activities and targets (such as demanding sign-off processes to change budgets or targets) can inhibit the ability of an organisation to responsibly improve their activities. It would need to be easy for publishers to the IATI results module to alter their targets as necessary during the project lifetime to reflect changes made.

Will the status quo pass the test?
Yes, it is possible to change results data as necessary. For accountability and accuracy purposes, funders would need to ensure that results data published publically to IATI matches data in any other reporting formats that they require. It would also be advisable for changes in indicators and targets to be logged as such, rather than overwritten, so as not to lose historical data; it is not currently clear to the authors whether this is already the case.

Test 5: Have donors made the case and won the hearts and minds of those they fund before imposing requirements to publish results?

Why does this matter?
Donors have the power to require many things from their grantees. However, if those grantees are not bought into the idea of what they are required to do, the outcome may not be what the donor intended. Bond currently sees a lot of poor quality data being published to IATI by DFID’s grantees. Most grantees publish the bare minimum required by DFID and no more; this may satisfy DFID’s needs but does not provide the breadth and comprehensiveness of data needed to be of value to other potential users, thus limiting the overall usefulness of IATI. Fulfilling donor requirements in a meaningful way typically requires that grantees understand and support the purpose and reasoning of the donor if they are to invest the time and resources necessary to make it happen.

Will the status quo pass the test?
Probably not. Current CSO practice in publishing information on results is poor. The reasons for that include:

- not having considered the idea of publishing (which a requirement to publish would overcome);
- concern that the quality of their results data is too poor to stand up to external scrutiny (see test 6);

\[\text{See: https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/making-evaluations-work-harder}\]
• a sense that results information needs to be provided in more useful forms (eg summaries and syntheses) if anyone is going to use them – the IATI results module does not currently provide results in a very useful format for learning;

• cost of publishing beyond the minimum, without sufficient feeling of value gained from so doing.

In addition to above, informally, we hear fears that results data will be used in too simplistic a way, eg by aid critics to single out “failure”, or by donors to develop crude, context-free metrics for judging performance (eg percentage of targets reached, or cost per unit of outcome). On the positive side, those who do systematically publish results do so because of an organisational commitment to and valuing of transparency and learning.

Overall, we predict that the baseline attitude to publishing results by CSOs will be quite negative, and without a strong case being made for it, reassurance being offered to mitigate fears, and support to enable publishing of robust, meaningful results, the outcome will be slow publishing of poor quality results information which is not useful for anyone.

**What could be done to enable the test to be passed?**

Donors need to ensure that other tests listed here are met as part of winning over hearts and minds, particularly tests 1 (meaningful results information for learning), 2 (relevant results information) and 6 (financial support). In addition, donors should engage in consultations and discussions with grantees to make their case and to understand fears and challenges on the part of grantees before grantees are required to publish results information.

**Test 6: Are there financial costs involved in meeting donor requirements to publish results, and are additional resources available to cover those?**

**Why does this matter?**

There are two dimensions to the cost of publishing results. First, as with other aspects of publishing to IATI, there may be implications for staff time and for the financial costs of adapting IT systems to collate and publish the necessary information from existing sources. Organisations often require external support to learn how to do this.

Second, it is often the case that organisations under-invest in monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, and some donors do not demonstrate good practice in funding such work. Thus there may be costs both in publishing existing data and generating new and/or better quality results data to usefully publish to IATI. If additional funding is not available to support this, the result will be limited or poor quality publishing of results data, which is not useful for learning or accountability.

**Will the status quo pass the test?**

Not clear. This needs to be determined by examining each donor’s requirements and practices on a case-by-case basis.

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9 See, for example: https://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/publications/Investing_in_MEL.pdf
What could be done to enable the test to be passed?

There should be consultations with CSOs to understand the costs they would need to incur to publish good quality results data, and consideration given to the fair distribution of such costs between CSOs and donors.

Donors should ensure that there is sufficient capacity in the IATI Secretariat and elsewhere (eg Bond and other national CSO platforms to whom CSO support functions are outsourced) to support NGOs to publish to the results module before NGOs are required to publish.

There would also need to be an upgrade to the IATI Standard itself to make the changes recommended elsewhere in this paper, and technology for publishing (eg AidStream) would need adaptation, involving further costs. With the IATI Secretariat currently underfunded, such financial resources would undoubtedly need to be additional.

Separately, donors should make effort to offset other costs for CSOs if they add more IATI publishing requirements, for example by seeking to make IATI an alternative to other forms of donor reporting.

Test 7: Will the quality of evidence behind results data be transparent?

Why does this matter?

As indicated earlier, one of the main reasons given to Bond for NGOs not currently publishing results information is that they are concerned that the quality of their evidence – particularly about outcomes and impacts – is not good enough.

At the level of outcomes and impacts, evidence generation is technically – and sometimes financially – demanding, with very active debates in academic circles about the best ways to generate reliable information about the contribution of interventions to observed results. Output-level results information is typically more reliable.

Using evidence that’s quality is unknown is risky and potentially harmful. If the quality of results information published to IATI is perceived as poor or just uncertain, it will not enhance learning or accountability.

Will the status quo pass the test?

No. IATI currently has no fields for recording the provenance or quality of results information.

What could be done to enable the test to be passed?

This is a particularly challenging test, and the issue of evidence quality will not be quickly addressed. We suggest that an additional field is added to the results module to record: (a) the data source; and (b) the quality of evidence, whether self-assessed or externally assessed, and whether assessed against formal evidence standards (such as the Bond Evidence Principles, OECD DAC Quality Standards for Development Evaluation or DFID’s How to Note: Assessing the Strength of Evidence). Transparency about current evidence quality can at least act as another prompt to help wider efforts to build capacity to generate robust evidence and demand to use it.
Conclusion: should donors require use of the IATI results module?

Donors can compel those they fund to publish to the IATI results module at any time. The more important question is whether doing so will result in the publishing of good quality information that can be used to aid learning and accountability, or lead to the publishing of poor quality data which gives a superficial but misleading impression of greater transparency.

Currently, Bond believes that making the publishing of results a compulsory requirement is more likely to result in the latter outcome, as at least two – and as many as six of our seven suggested tests – would currently be failed by such requirements.

However, we believe that the intent behind the idea of requiring publication of results is a good one, and that efforts should be made to make all the necessary changes for all of our seven tests to be passed. Quick wins in this regard would be to add some fields and broaden the range of results that can be reported in the IATI results module.

We also strongly recommend that a facility to record the quality of published information is included in the results module. In parallel, we strongly recommend that donors who are considering making the publication of results compulsory should consult with those they fund, make the case for such publishing, and ensure that the necessary support and funding to facilitate such publishing are in place before requiring anyone to publish.