Developing the IATI accessibility ecosystem
TAG discussion note
May 2012

This is a living discussion note, and will continue to be updated on Google Docs in the run up to, and during, the IATI TAG meeting in Cookham on MAy 14th and 15th. Snapshots will be saved and linked below.

Introduction

A growing range of platforms, tools and services are emerging that make IATI data more accessible. However, for IATI to have maximum impact on development effectiveness, many more platforms, tools and services are likely to be needed to serve diverse users: from officials and politicians involved in aid management, to staff and volunteers working on the ground, and citizens in donor and recipient countries. IATI data will need to be connected up with many different systems: transformed, converted and made accessible in many different ways.

It is right (and a validation of the open data model) that many of the platforms, tools and services for working with IATI data are emerging autonomously - taking advantage of the openness of IATI data to innovate and serve different niches. However, as the ecosystem develops, we also need to pay attention to the sustainability of platforms, tools and services, and to find ways to coordinate and connect up different uses of IATI data to make sure our collective efforts have the largest possible impact on development effectiveness.

The usability track at the IATI Technical Advisory Group will be the first opportunity to bring together creators of tools working with IATI data, and to develop shared plans for future development.
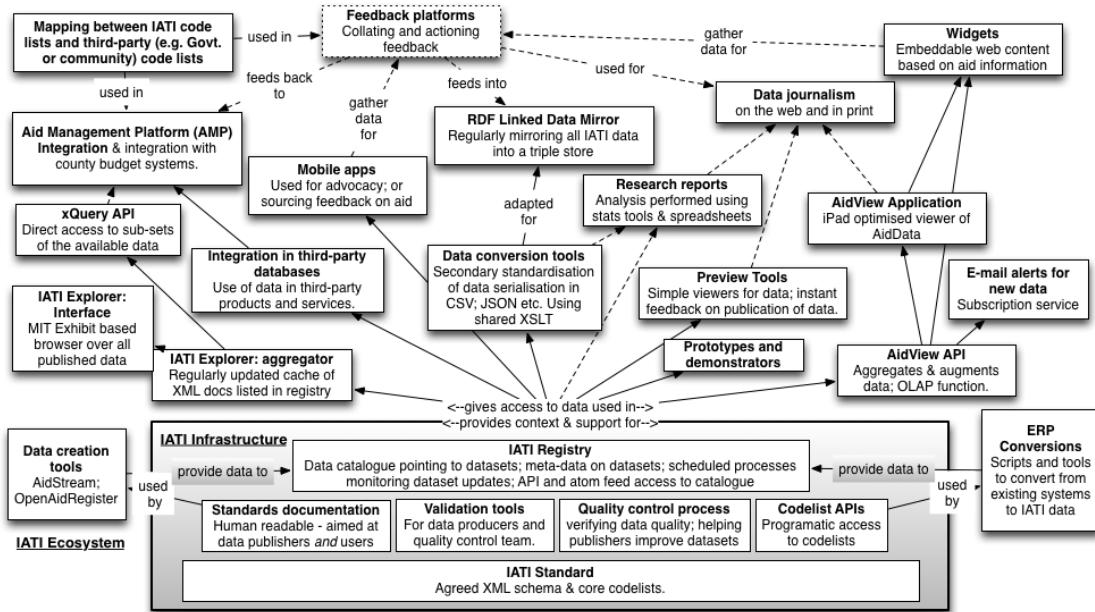
Mapping the existing ecosystem

From May to November 2012 AidInfo supported the development of AidInfoLabs to curate details of plans, prototypes and products working with IATI data. The 'Inspiration' section lists a range of different elements of an IATI ecosystem, and elements of this are mapped in the diagram below. From November 2012 limited time has been available to maintain the AidInfoLabs site whilst effort has been focussed on fully documenting the IATI Standard, and so our starting point at the TAG meeting will be to visually map out all the different tools and services available to make IATI data available and accessible.

Emerging Open Data infrastructure and ecosystem around the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)
Partial mapping of artefacts: January 2012

Solid lines indicate as case where a live example is available; dotted lines indicate components and relationships under development.

Based on preliminary survey of uses of IATI data.

- **Tools for creating IATI data:** Open Aid Register; AidStream; CSV Conversion Tool; Development Gateway Input APIs (in development);
- **Conversion tools:** OKFNs IATI->SQLite->CSV; CSV Converter (using IATI XSLT); Linked Data Conversion;
- **APIs:** IATI Explorer (xpath and RESTful); OpenAid.NL API; AidView API; Open Spending;
- **Accessibility interfaces:** AidView; IATI Explorer; OpenAid.nl; Open Spending

As we map out different tools that already exist we will also need to identify:
- The tools they rely upon, and tools that rely upon them;
- What criteria they apply for including data; how often they update data; and any conversions they apply to the data;
- Where they are documented;

We will also want to map out upcoming development plans, and tools, platforms and services that may be emerging in coming months.

Important considerations
There are a number of common challenges that tools working with IATI data may need to address.

- **Synchronising data:** any tool working with a cache of IATI data needs to make decisions about the data that it includes, how to identify updated data, and how to address errors in incoming data files. The IATI Registry provides a number of features to support tools that synchronize data, but these could be developed further. A data quality process is being developed, and there is a need to identify how third parties might link into this.

- **Normalising data, maintaining data integrity, tracking provenance**. Many tools will

want normalised data to work with. However, most normalisation approaches will throw away additional elements which the IATI Schema allows publishers to provide, so any document stores/databases will need to decide whether to handle additional elements, or to only accept elements included in the core IATI schema. For some applications of IATI data, provenance (knowing which file an IATI Activity came from and when) will be important, and so tools and platforms will need to consider how they manage provenance.

- **Data conversion and augmentation:** a number of tools will want to perform currency conversions and other calculations on incoming data. Finding common approaches to this will help ensure users of IATI data from different sources have a consistent user experience.

- **Merging data**: the IATI standard allows that multiple files could contain complementary (or even conflicting) data on a given activity (for example, when geocoded information relating to an IATI ID is published separately from the basic project details). Tools will need to decide whether and how to handle such situations. Tools may need to identify metadata that the IATI Registry will need to include to support their decisions.

- **Quality assurance**: the core IATI secretariat is not currently responsible for providing accessibility tools. However, it might have a role in ensuring the quality and sustainability of key tools, and ensuring that tools do not misrepresent IATI, or undermine the initiative by providing poor quality data. The desirability of, criterial for, and methods for quality control need to be discussed.

- **Licensing and attribution**: the IATI Licensing standard allows publishers to specify the licence of their dataset, and tools should respect these licenses. The standard license requires attribution of the source, yet few tools provide this attribution at present.

Areas for discussion at TAG

There are a number of areas that might be explored within the IATI usability track according to interest from participants.

- **Updating the IATIRegistry to include API access and a directory of tools**.
  It has been suggested IATIRegistry.org should be updated to provide a basic data store and API onto consolidated data files, and to provide better access to the tools for working with IATI data. This suggestion is based on feedback from users wanting to gain access to cross sections of the data. If desirable, a proposal for this needs to be developed and put to the IATI Steering Committee.

  Under this proposal, from a user perspective, the registry would provide access to three functions:
  1. **Access IATI data files** - access to individual IATI data files, based on the current CKAN APIs.
  2. **Get an extract of the data** - tools to support grabbing an extract of data for a given country, funder or sector. This will require a tool to cache the data and to give access to it in a range of formats, including CSV. No decision on the backend for this is yet made.
  3. **Work with the data** - providing a portal onto available tools, and potentially

some mechanism for selecting the right tool for the job.

Access IATI Data Files

25 publishers are publishing **2500 files**.

The registry provides direct access to these files.

Get an extract of the data

Fetch data for a specific country, area or sector in a range of formats

(Based on our data store, last updated dd/mm/yyyy)

Work with the data

Find tools, interfaces and APIs for working with the data.

NN tools are available providing specialist features for working with the data.

- **Developing an IATI Core Platform**.
  There are various proposals to build a common core API / data storage layer for IATI. We should discuss the pros and cons of this, and identify opportunities collaboration on shared components of a plug-in ready core IATI data storage and API platform.

- **Secondary standardisation** - **JSON, CSV, APIs and Linked Data**. It would be helpful to identify ways to coordinate on the creation and maintenance of any secondary standards to support interoperability of tools. For example, we may need to agree common API layers, or a common set of CSV serialisations.

- **Developing IATI user guidance**. It would be useful to develop a resource that provides technical and non-technical guidance to users of IATI, pointing to existing tools, source code, code snippets and How To guidance for different tasks.

  We need to identify how this could be developed and who might be involved in developing it.

- **Funding, commissioning and sustaining new tools, and developing the market.**
  AidInfo have developed a concept note for a 'sustainability fund' to support the delivery of key elements of an IATI ecosystem, and to help those seeking to develop new IATI tools to pool resources.

- *Are there other issues you would like us to discuss in the usability track? Please add suggestions here, or e-mail tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk*