

Improving Aid Data: Recommendations to Consolidate Foreign Aid Dashboards Detailed Analysis

The United States Government hosts two dashboards to provide information on how and where it spends foreign assistance funds. These are ForeignAssistance.gov, hosted by the Department of State, and [Foreign Aid Explorer](http://ForeignAidExplorer), hosted by USAID.

This detailed analysis compares the platforms along ten dimensions, identifying key strengths and weaknesses of each. This work builds upon the [Principles for An Effective Dashboard on US Foreign Assistance](#) put forward by MFAN and PWYF, as well as Congress' request in the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 (FATAA) that State and USAID coordinate and consolidate the data collection process and presentation of the two websites by the end of Fiscal Year 2018.

- **ForeignAssistance.gov (FA.gov)** strengths are in two of the ten recommended functions: publishing budget request and appropriation data (part of recommended function #1) and data in comparable development sector codes (recommended function #4). Critically, FA.gov is the only platform to compare budget and appropriation data (post-appropriation allocations (653(a)) and actuals, which FA.gov refers to as “planned data”). FA.gov also publishes obligation and disbursement data, but the data are often incomplete and not identified as such on the map, making it unreliable. While FA.gov provides data at the transaction level, it is not linked to other transactions of the same project and therefore difficult to use.
- **Foreign Aid Explorer (FAE)** strengths are in nine of the ten recommended functions. FAE publishes verified and complete obligation and disbursement data (part of recommended function #1) in a timely manner (recommended function #2). FAE maximizes historical data (recommended function #3), includes comparable dollar amounts and development sector codes (recommended functions #4 and #5), and links transaction-level data to specific projects (recommended function #6). Finally, FAE includes project documentation (recommended function #8), publishes its methods (recommendation #9), and defines all key terms (recommendation #10). Once verified, this data is also the basis for reporting to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and the Green Book (USAID's annual report to Congress on U.S. foreign assistance flows).

Below is a more detailed discussion of the functionality of each dashboard and recommendations for how a consolidated dashboard should improve upon both.

Recommended Function 1A. Include President's Budget Request and Appropriation Data

The consolidated dashboard should provide complete and clearly delineated budget request and appropriation data from all aid agencies.

- FA.gov provides budget request and appropriation data for U.S. foreign assistance, which it refers to as “planned” data by fiscal year (FY). The two primary ways to access this data is through exploring the map or downloading data sets.

- To download the data, use the “special downloads” tab and download planned data. This displays the data in three forms: request, appropriation, and actual. The figures are disaggregated by sector, country, and account.
- If the map function is used, the user will see one “planned” figure, and the data shown intermingles between budget request, post-appropriation allocations, and actual. For example, for FY 2016, users are shown the “actual” while for FY 2019 users are shown the “request”, but this is not flagged for the user. This can also happen at the country level between agencies. The “planned” data is updated whenever more recent figures become available from a specific agency (i.e., post-appropriation or actual). *Thus, a user may be looking at the budget request for one agency and the appropriation for another – but there is no way for the user to know.* This issue is more pronounced recently, given the significant differences between the president’s budget request and the appropriation for a number of specific countries.
- FAE does not publish budget request or appropriation data.

Recommended Function 1B. Include Obligation & Disbursement Data

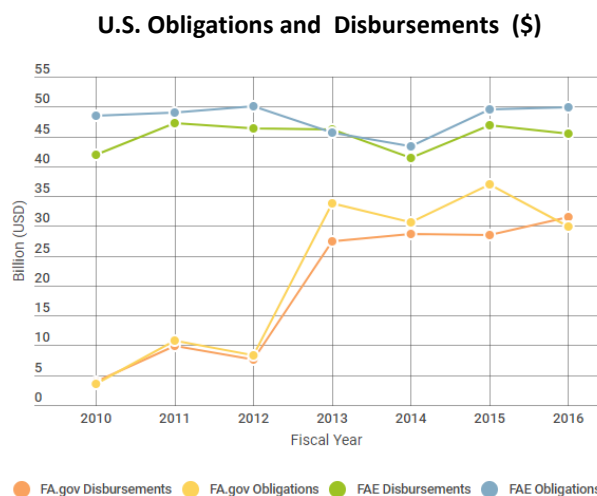
The consolidated dashboard should provide complete obligation and disbursement data linked to projects on a quarterly basis. The dashboard should clearly flag for users where data are incomplete.

- Both FA.gov and FAE provide obligation and disbursement data by U.S. fiscal year. Neither provide the data by calendar year, although that information is available from the OECD DAC with over a year’s delay. Calendar year information is particularly useful when comparing the U.S. with other donors.
- FA.gov provides obligation and disbursement data by fiscal years by total, by country, by agency, and by U.S. categories of aid. Both agency and categories can be searched at the country level. However, much of the data is incomplete and the map function does not flag incompleteness to the user. Instead, a user must leave the map function and go to a specific [agency page](#) to check which are partial and which are complete.
- FAE also provides obligation and disbursement data by fiscal year, by total, by country, by agency and by sectors. Moreover, it validates the data prior to posting it. When data is incomplete on FAE, there is a clear flag highlighting this on the map function page.

Recommended Function 1C. Ensure Data Quality

The consolidated dashboard should provide complete budget and appropriation data, verified obligation and disbursement data, and other project-level data (e.g., titles, descriptions, supporting documents and subnational location).

- There are often significant discrepancies between what is published on FA.gov and FAE. For example, when the top line figures for two dashboards for FY 2016 are compared, there is a discrepancy of roughly \$20bn for U.S. obligations and \$14bn for disbursements.



- These errors translate to the country level. For example, FA.gov reports \$75m less than FAE for FY 2016 disbursements in Liberia.¹ There are also clear gaps in FA.gov’s data. For example, it reports that the Department of State disbursed \$59,206 in Liberia during FY 2016, while FAE reports \$10.7m. Further, FA.gov reports zero disbursements for the Department for Health and Human Services while FAE reports \$19.5m.

Recommended Function 2. Maximize Historical Data
The consolidated dashboard should publish budget request, appropriation, obligation, and disbursement data as far back as feasible.

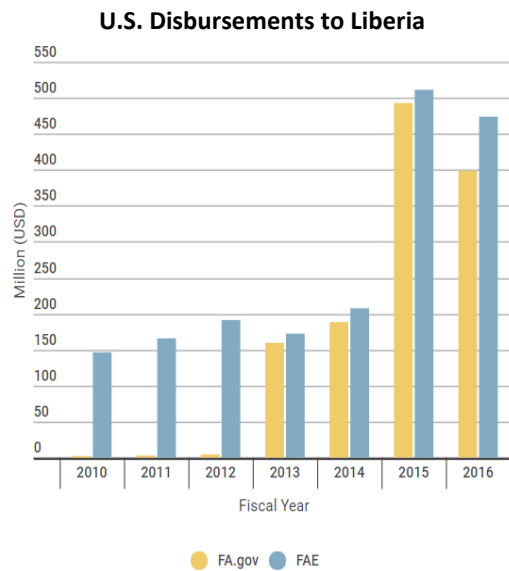
- On FA.gov, data for years prior to 2013 is severely limited. Additionally, despite the limited data on FA.gov prior to 2013, the platform still totals up the partial data to give an incorrect top-line figure on U.S. foreign assistance. For example, the FA.gov reports that the U.S. “spent” \$7.3bn in 2013, while FAE reports that total as \$46bn for the same fiscal year.
- FAE provides U.S. obligation and disbursement data since 1946.

Recommended Function 3. Include Data in Constant and Current Dollars
The consolidated dashboard should provide data in both constant and current dollars.

- FAE provides all financial data as both “constant” and “current” USD. The pre-made conversion allows individuals to conduct more complex trend analyses.
- FA.gov provides only current USD.

Recommended Function 4. Include US and OECD Development Sector Codes
The consolidated dashboard should provide data both by U.S. and OECD sector codes, ideally visualizing both.

- Sectors can be defined using the 44 U.S. specific sectors (e.g. Democracy, Human Rights and Governance) or the approximately 200 OECD DAC sectors (e.g. Government and Civil Society). The U.S. specific codes are better aligned with the U.S. budget and appropriation process, whereas the OECD DAC codes are recognized internationally and allow users to compare U.S. spending with other donors.
- FA.gov visualizes its data using the U.S.-specific codes and FAE visualizes using the OECD DAC sectors. However, both dashboards have the ability to query and receive results in both the U.S.-specific foreign assistance and OECD DAC sectors.



¹ Liberia is used as an example as Publish What You Fund has spent considerable time researching and validating U.S. and other aid data.

Recommended Function 5. Link to Transaction-Level Data

The consolidated dashboard should link all published transactions to specific projects.

- Transaction-level data is particularly useful when an individual wants to know how much has been obligated or disbursed in a specific program or to identify which implementing organization has obligated or disbursed funds for a particular program or expense.
- FA.gov allows users to download granular transactions in the “data download” section by country, agency, and account. However, these come in the form of bulk-downloads which can be challenging to use. For Liberia, for example, individuals can access a spreadsheet containing 11,543 transaction entries; when filtered to include only FY 2016 there are still 1,585 records. This creates a barrier to use, as the spreadsheet will require significant time and manipulation. FA.gov does not provide transaction level data on the explore map function.² Finally, due to gaps in FA.gov’s obligation and disbursement data, the completeness of the transaction data is also unclear.
- FAE does not share granular transaction data as FA.gov, but instead has “activities” which have an “amount” [obligated/dispursed] attached. “Activities” are “projects, programs, cash transfer, delivery of goods, training course, research project, debt relief operation, or contribution to an international organization.”³ Thus the transactions have been “rolled up”, removing some “noise” in the data, but also some of the granularity. All “activities” are ascribed to a project or program, so it is clear to the user what the money refers to. For Liberia in FY 2016, for example, there are 539 activities, some of which are administrative.
- The consolidated dashboard should group relevant transactions or activities under a single program or project so that all data pertaining to that program or project can be seen in one place.

Recommended Function 6. Ensure Timeliness & Completeness

The consolidated dashboard should provide data that is timely and complete. Budget request and appropriation data should be published as available. Obligation and disbursement data should be verified and updated quarterly, ensuring complete data sets for every fiscal year.

- FA.gov provides one-year forward looking data through the president’s budget request. This information is mostly complete.
- In terms of updating dashboard data, FA.gov’s model is to publish all *available* data on quarterly basis, which means it publishes information if and when it has been submitted by agencies involved in foreign assistance. FAE’s model is to hold the data until it has been verified, with the aim of sharing data quarterly.
- FAE is timelier than FA.gov for publishing complete data sets on obligations and disbursements. There are seventeen agencies which report data on both dashboards (see chart below). On FAE for FY 2016, for example, all seventeen agencies are complete. For the same time period, only nine agencies have completed data on FA.gov. For FY 2017, on FA.gov there are nine agencies for which data is complete, seven which have partial data, and one has none at all. Conversely, FAE reports thirteen as having complete FY 2017 data, one as having partial, and two as having no data at all.

² There is a “data search” function on FA.gov, but it wasn’t clear what the results referred to. The number of results for a country did not correlate with the number of transactions returned under the download section. For the same query on Liberia, a user will get 572 results, not 1,585.

³ See <https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-dashboard.html> for the full definition of aid “activity.”

- Both dashboards publish limited data from a subset of agencies for FY 2018 for obligation and disbursement data, with FAE publishing roughly \$2bn more for disbursements and FA.gov publishing roughly \$1bn more for obligations.

Data Completeness (Disbursements)				
	FY 2016		FY 2017	
	FA.gov	FAE	FA.gov	FAE
Department of Defense	Partial	Complete	Partial	Partial
Department of Energy	Partial	Complete	Partial	Complete
Department of Health and Human Services	Partial	Complete	Partial	No Data
Department of Homeland Security	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
Department of Justice	Partial	Complete	Partial	Complete
Department of Labour	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
Department of State	Partial	Complete	Partial	Partial
Department of Interior	Partial	Complete	Partial	Complete
Department of Treasury	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
Department of Transport	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
The Inter-American Foundation	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
Millennium Challenge Corporation	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
OPIC	No Data	Complete	No Data	No Data
Peace Corp	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
African Development Foundation	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
USAID	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete
Department of Agriculture	Partial	Complete	Partial	Complete

Accurate as of August 22, 2018

Recommended Function 7. Provide results data, where possible

The consolidated dashboard should provide quantitative and qualitative project-level results where possible.

- Results data can be provided in a number of ways and formats. They can be found in documentation (see below) as well as quantitative data. This is an area of reporting and publishing that still requires significant work. It would be useful for the agencies which publish their various results to think through the best format and platforms to provide this information.
- On FA.gov, under the special downloads tab, individuals can download a spreadsheet of quantitative results for State and USAID only. It is unclear whether the results apply to the sector level or program level and there is no link to any particular project or activity. Thus, it is not possible to understand what the results refer to or how comprehensive the spreadsheet is. Moreover, for Liberia, the latest “actual results” are from 2015.
- FAE does not provide any quantitative results, but does link to a limited number of documents that provide results.

Recommended Function 8. Provide Documentation

The consolidated dashboard should link relevant documents (e.g., contracts, evaluations, progress reports) to projects.

- FA.gov does not provide any links to program documentation.
- FAE has the capacity to provide links to supporting documentation. The types of supporting documents available range from technical papers, program quarterly reports, and final evaluations. However, documentation is not widely available, and many programs have little or nothing attached. For Liberia in FY 2016, for example, even with administrative entries excluded, only 29% of activities have documents attached. Moreover, the amount and types of documents available vary significantly by program.

Recommended Function 9. Describe Processes and Methodologies

The consolidated dashboard should publish its methodology and timeline for publication.

- FA.gov does not include its methodology of how the data is collected, nor a timeline for publication. It does, however, link to [OMB Bulletin 12-01](#). The 25-page document explains what data should be published but it is unnecessarily detailed for a user. Further, without prior knowledge, a user is not likely to know to check the Bulletin. FA.gov also includes other useful information such as an explanation of the U.S. budget process and information on “special initiatives”.
- FAE provides a [comprehensive methodology](#) of the process by which data is collected, verified, and shared. There is no timeline of when data will be updated or published, except to say that it will publish “periodically.”
- Both websites share which agency data is partially available, complete, or not available. When data is incomplete on FAE – for example FY 2017 – a disclaimer and a link to this page is flagged to anybody using the map function. On FA.gov, the map function does not contain a flag so a user must specifically know where to look to see if an agency’s data is complete or not.

Recommended Function 10. Define Key Terms

The consolidated dashboard should define all key terms. Financial terms should be those used in the USG budget and appropriation process.

- Both dashboards provide definitions of terms. FA.gov provides a [glossary of terms](#), but some prominent terms, such as “planned” and “actual” are not defined. FAE also provides a [glossary](#).