Issue Note

Reimagining Data Quality: A User centric approach

Executive Summary

This issue note outlines a strategic pathway to reorient IATI's approach to data quality from generic-based metrics to a user-centred, trust-driven framework that enables data to serve its intended purpose; supporting more effective decision-making, coordination, and accountability. It builds on a rich body of documentation accumulated across the IATI community over the years: evidence and feedback from **regional and country workshops**, the previous **Data Quality Index (DQI) consultations**, **user surveys**, and **publisher analytics**, as well as **research on automating data quality checks** to ensure that future diagnostics are both objective and repeatable. Together, these insights reveal how publishers publish and how users actually engage with IATI data, offering a strong foundation for refining what we mean by "data quality."

Improving the quality, usability, and trustworthiness of IATI data has long been a shared ambition across governments, multilaterals, civil society, and the broader development and humanitarian community. This ambition continues through 2026-2030, anchored in IATI's Strategic Directions and reflected in the FfD4 Sevilla outcome document. Yet what constitutes "good" data quality is inherently contextual: humanitarian actors value timeliness; national NGOs emphasize localisation and partner traceability; governments prioritise alignment with budget frameworks; and multilateral organisations focus on results and SDG integration. The diversity of needs highlights that no single metric - or tool - can capture the full picture.

The IATI Dashboard has historically served as a useful starting point; tracking progress across key dimensions such as timeliness, forward budgets, and comprehensiveness. However, as it applies uniform metrics across diverse publisher types, it offers limited diagnostic value and little tailored guidance. Over time, this has led to an **overreliance on static scores** that risk incentivising publishing for compliance rather than for usability. Addressing these

shortcomings requires repositioning **data quality as a continued process**, not a tool: an iterative cycle of automation, consultation, capacity-building, and feedback.

This note therefore proposes a **new approach to data quality measurement** that integrates (i) objective, automatable checks where feasible; (ii) differentiated parameters that reflect the realities of each constituency; and (iii) a transparent, consultative process to validate these parameters with IATI Members and data users. The outcome will be a **feedback-rich ecosystem** where improvements are both measurable and meaningful; turning data quality from an abstract benchmark into a shared pathway toward usability, trust, and development impact.

This work forms a core component of the IATI Secretariat's current workplan and is funded by the **European Commission**, reflecting the Commission's strong commitment to advancing data quality, trust, and usability across the IATI community.

Background

Since the early days of the initiative, IATI has relied on a set of publishing statistics - measuring timeliness, forward-looking budgets, and comprehensiveness - to track data quality and encourage improved publishing practices. These metrics, originally rooted in global commitments to aid effectiveness, helped establish a baseline and common reference point across the diverse IATI community. They were presented through a dashboard developed originally as an internal tool, intended to guide conversations between the IATI Secretariat and individual publishers on how to improve their data. Over time, this approach evolved into the IATI Dashboard, which has served as a public-facing resource to visualise publishing quality metrics across the initiative.

In parallel, external assessments such as the Aid Transparency Index (ATI) have adopted index-based scoring methodologies to evaluate transparency across organisations. While distinct in purpose and methodology, these efforts have contributed to raising the political visibility of aid transparency and sustaining momentum around openness and accountability.

As the aid landscape and data use practices have grown more complex, the limitations of the Dashboard metrics have become increasingly apparent. IATI's current measures apply uniform expectations across vastly different types of publishers; ranging from large bilateral donors and multilateral development banks to UN entities, INGOs, and local implementing partners without sufficiently accounting for differences in business models and the diverse needs of users in different contexts. They also do not help publishers understand the data quality improvements which should be prioritised to make transformative progress on data use. The

result has been a set of incentives that, while successful in helping to provide detailed metrics about organisations' publication, have not always encouraged publishers to prioritise usability - leading to fragmented understanding of data quality and a need to rebalance the focus toward practical impact and user value. Insights from the 2021-2022 Data Quality Index (DQI) consultation, subsequent community feedback, regional workshops (including Nairobi 2024 and Abidjan 2025) have consistently underscored the need to move beyond static scoring of individual organisations and towards a more strategic approach. These processes revealed that the metrics currently used to assess data quality do not always incentivise or capture improvements that enhance how easily users can find, interpret, and use IATI data. Moreover, improvements to the IATI Standard (e.g. such as new elements, guidance, and codelists) should be closely linked to how the quality of IATI data is assessed and communicated. At present, these processes operate largely in isolation, creating a disconnect between how the Standard evolves and how data quality is measured in practice.

Finally, the current approach lacks a clear **advocacy dimension**. Data quality is often presented as a technical output rather than a developmental value, with little emphasis on celebrating progress, encouraging (prioritised) improvement, or communicating its relevance for planning, coordination, and results. Without this narrative and engagement, data quality risks remaining an internal concern rather than a shared responsibility and opportunity across the community.

To support both publishers and data users more meaningfully, IATI now requires a **more nuanced, diagnostic, and user-driven approach** - one that reflects the diversity of contexts and recognises the strengths and gaps in data through the lens of *practical utility, trust, and impact*, not just formal completeness. This repositioning must embed feedback loops between the Standard, the tools that operationalise it, and the community that relies on it.

Proposed Framework for Measuring and Improving Data Quality

Building on evidence from IATI's regional workshops, previous consultations, and research on automatable tests, this proposal provides an approach towards creating a **concrete and actionable framework** for reimagining how IATI defines, measures, and improves data quality. It will establish a **cross-constituency baseline** and **differentiated parameters** that reflect real-world data needs, while identifying where automated checks are feasible to ensure consistent, objective, and replicable measurement across publisher types. Integrating these parameters into a continuous, open diagnostic system will strengthen transparency, comparability, and accountability.

Core Components of the Proposal

The proposed framework is structured around three mutually reinforcing components designed to balance comparability, differentiation, and targeted improvement. Together, they

form a coherent approach that can be operationalised through both automated and qualitative methods, ensuring that data quality measurement reflects the diversity of IATI's publishing community while remaining objective and scalable.

1. **A core, cross-constituency baseline**
   A set of foundational parameters applicable to all publishers, covering essential dimensions such as timeliness, forward budgets, valid identifiers, structural integrity, and adherence to core codelists. These provide a common foundation for assessing data completeness and reliability across the initiative. These parameters are identified through the application of a user centric approach to data.

2. **Constituency-specific parameter sets**
   Tailored indicators that reflect the distinct publishing mandates, data structures, and user needs of IATI's main organisational types - bilateral providers, multilateral development banks, UN entities, international NGOs, and implementing partners. This differentiated approach ensures that data quality expectations are relevant, fair, and aligned with each constituency's role in the data ecosystem.

3. **A "publishers-in-focus" cohort**
   A prioritised group comprising the top quartile of active publishers by activity and reported financial spending volume. This cohort will serve as the initial focus for targeted engagement, diagnostics, and technical support, enabling measurable improvements in usability and visibility of IATI data where it matters most. Active publishers are defined as those with current activities or transactions in the past year and meeting a minimum activity threshold, while also including strategically important regional actors.

Proposed Parameters for Measuring Data Quality

The following parameters translate the framework into measurable dimensions of data quality, grounded in usability and aligned with the IATI Standard. Wherever possible, parameters are defined in ways that can be **automated** through objective checks, while those requiring contextual judgment will rely on qualitative review and feedback from publishers and data users.

A. Cross-Constituency Baseline (Automated Where Feasible)

These proposed parameters form the **universal baseline** for assessing data completeness and utility across all publishers. Together, they provide a replicable foundation for automation while remaining adaptable to evolving needs and policy significance.

Parameter	Definition / Threshold	Rationale
Timeliness / Frequency	Activities or transactions updated within the last 30 or 90 days. Measured through rolling analysis of activity updates and transaction timeliness across a 12 month window to holistically capture continuous rather than one-off reporting.	Ensures that timeliness reflects meaningful, portfolio-wide publishing rather than isolated or superficial updates. Captures both the frequency and coverage of updates, emphasizing regular publishing. Monthly or near-monthly updates are essential for operational relevance and planning.
Forward Budgets	≥1-year forward organisational and activity budgets, with progression toward 3-year visibility	Check verifies presence and date range of forward budgets
Core Structure & Validity	Valid IATI identifiers; valid codelists for sector, flow-type, aid-type, finance-type, and tied-status; start and end dates; valid activity status	Ensures structural integrity and interoperability. Automatically validated against schema, codelists, and rulesets.
Minimum Descriptive Quality	Activity title ≥10 characters; description ≥80 characters	Avoids empty stubs and improves discoverability and interpretability of data. Flagged when below thresholds.
Financial Core	Commitments and disbursements/expenditures	Provides the foundation for financial traceability

	present at the activity level. Encouraging disaggregation of financial data rather than (e.g.) annual aggregates.	networks and accountability. Tested for presence and internal consistency (commitments ≥ disbursements).
Local Relevancy	Sub-national location elements with coordinates where applicable; availability in local languages	Supports localisation, contextual relevance, and integration with national systems. Checks for valid coordinates within recipient country and currency tagging.
Document Links (where applicable)	Presence of key supporting documents (budget, strategy, policy, evaluation, performance)	Enables users to access contextual information and assess activity results. Tested for presence and validity of document-link URLs.

B. Constituency-Specific Parameters (Illustrative Examples)

The application of these parameters recognises that while **all publishers are assessed against the same cross-constituency baseline**, the emphasis placed on certain aspects of data quality will vary depending on the **publisher's role, mandate, and data-use context**. The following examples illustrate key **focus areas** where specific constituencies may require deeper attention or additional guidance, without implying different or parallel metrics.

Constituency Type	Focus Areas for Differentiation

Bilateral Development Providers	Expected to demonstrate comprehensive coverage of their portfolios through detailed sector (CRS 5-digit) coding, inclusion of results data, and consistent publication of a wide array of documents, and all participating organisations in an activity appropriately (particularly funding and implementing roles).
Multilateral Development Banks / International Financial Institutions	Should ensure full disaggregation of financial flows (avoiding aggregation at the regional or project level) and completeness of sector and regional classifications. Accurate project-completion and results data enhance transparency of large-scale investments.
UN Entities	Should prioritise clear identification of implementing organisations, consistent use of organisation identifiers, and accurate designation of sources and channels of funds. Completeness of evaluation or results documentation supports accountability and alignment with UN transparency commitments.
International NGOs and Implementing Partners	Focus on traceability through complete information on the organisations and activities providing funding and precise sub-national locations. Results narratives and links to project documents strengthen the connection between financial and results information.

C. Automation and Qualitative Review

Most of the parameters above can be translated into **automated tests** (e.g., checking forward budgets, valid sector codes, results fields, title and description completeness, or sub-national location coordinates). Automated diagnostics will enable daily or near real-time feedback loops for publishers, providing objective, replicable results. However, certain aspects; such as the quality of descriptive narratives, document relevance, or contextual alignment, cannot be fully automated and will instead be addressed through **qualitative review**, **sampling**, and **targeted**

guidance to ensure consistency and fairness. The IATI Secretariat might explore the possibility of AI in the assessment areas that can not be automated.

Prioritisation and Implementation Plan (2025-2028)

To ensure a practical and measurable start, implementation during **2025-2026** will prioritise the **top quartile of active publishers** - those with current activities and the **largest reported spend and activity volume** published to IATI. Concentrating initial efforts on this group is an efficient use of scarce resources which will enable rapid progress, generate learning, and build the evidence base for broader community rollout.

This initial phase will focus on parameters directly linked to operational and policy relevance from the cross-constituency baseline - e.g. **monthly/quarterly updates, one-year forward budgets, and completion of key fields such as disbursements, locations, and results** - as consistently underscored as key user needs.

Implementation will follow an **iterative three-phase process** that integrates stakeholder consultations, automated diagnostics, and progressive institutionalisation:

- **Phase 1 - Validation of Parameters (Q4 2025 - Q1 2026):** Consultations to review and validate proposed baseline and constituency-specific parameters, confirm the feasibility of automated tests, and discuss presentation formats for a public diagnostic interface. This phase will also coincide with the *State of the Data* reviews, which will help identify additional indicators and user priorities.

- **Phase 2 - User-Needs and Contextual Testing (Q1 2026):** Building on Phase 1, online consultations and targeted dialogues with partner-country governments, publishers, and data users will assess the practicality and value of proposed diagnostics, ensuring they align with real-world use cases and country-level data needs. Proactive **constituency consultation**, through workshops, virtual sessions, and thematic meetings, will ensure broad engagement and balanced input across organisation categories.

- **Phase 3 - Integration and Baseline Roll-Out (Q1-Q2 2026):** Validated indicators and diagnostics will be integrated into IATI's technical infrastructure - across the new dashboard, validator, and publishing statistics - culminating in a **baseline data-quality report** disaggregated by publisher group to benchmark progress through the upcoming Strategic Plan period.

Throughout 2026-2028, implementation will combine **daily automated diagnostics** (where feasible)**, targeted engagement with publishers-in-focus, and structured regional exchanges** to sustain peer learning and encourage continuous improvement. Periodic progress

updates will recognise improvement and embed feedback loops between data users, publishers, and the IATI Secretariat.

Summary Timeline (2025-2028)

Timeframe	Milestones and Key Activities
Q4 2025 -Q1 2026	• **Phase 1 - Validation of Parameters:** Members review proposed indicators and automated checks; confirm feasibility; discuss presentation models for public diagnostics.
Q1 2026	• **Phase 2 - User Needs and Consultation:** Online and in-person consultations with partner-country governments, publishers, and users to test practicality and contextual relevance. Proactive constituency outreach through workshops, dialogues, and thematic sessions
Q1-Q2 2026	• **Phase 3 - Integration and Baseline Roll-Out:** Integrate validated indicators into the dashboard, validator, and statistics systems; publish the first **baseline Data-Quality Report** disaggregated by publisher group.
Q3-Q4 2026	• **Dissemination and Refinement:** Continued publisher engagement and follow-up; refinement of indicators, visualisations, and diagnostic tools based on feedback from the baseline rollout.
2027-2028	• **Institutionalisation and Continuous Advocacy:** Embed the framework into IATI operations and Strategic Plan monitoring; conduct annual reviews, and refinement of indicators.

Conclusion

This new approach marks a shift from treating data quality as a solely technical question to seeing it as a shared effort to make IATI data more useful, trustworthy, and relevant. By combining automated checks with regular consultation and practical guidance, it encourages continuous learning and collaboration across the community. Over time, this will help ensure that IATI data not only meets standards of accuracy and completeness but also serves the real needs of those who use it; for planning, coordination, and accountability. In doing so, IATI can

strengthen trust in its data and reinforce its value as a common good for more effective development and humanitarian action.