



Making transparency work¹

October 2012

The debate on the post-2015 agenda is becoming more focused on specifics, with the first substantive meeting of the [High Level Panel](#) taking place this week. Early political negotiations between member states are likely to go hand in hand with reflections on policy and practice.

Strong arguments are being made by some actors that there is a need to increase the focus on governance in a post-2015 agreement. This could happen through a dedicated stand-alone goal, quantifiable governance indicators or unequivocal language and references to governance principles, such as human rights, political freedoms or democracy.

While this responds both to people's aspirations for more participation and more political freedoms, and to evidence about the importance of institutions for development outcomes, it remains controversial. It is unlikely that a stand-alone governance goal could be agreed in the current climate.

Another less political but more practical way to approach this would be to examine how domestic politics and local institutions can improve the lives of those living in poverty. This would involve a focus on the outcomes of politics and governance, rather than on the principles.

From this perspective, current thinking on transparency and accountability is an interesting starting point. The dual promise embedded in transparency and accountability – of more enlightened and engaged citizens demanding greater accountability around issues they care about, and the impact this can have on development – has generated tremendous optimism about its transformational potential. This in turn has led to a large number of initiatives, both globally and at country level. It is a movement that has real momentum, which could be built upon for a post-2015 agreement. There remain two central questions: Under what conditions do these initiatives have something to offer in improving service delivery and other development outcomes? How can this be harnessed and built upon in a post-2015 agreement?

The evidence so far offers two key insights:

Firstly, improving accountability does not always involve adversarial relationships. Overcoming accountability problems often requires collaboration between different stakeholders. Social accountability initiatives for service delivery, for example, often focus on empowering citizens to make demands of others or hold to account those who are meant to be responsible for delivering services. But in many settings, what is really needed – and crucially what works – is for different stakeholders to work effectively together. The role of political parties and governments as enablers is critical here, as well as the role of service providers and regulators. Increasingly, findings from [cutting edge research](#) and feedback from practitioners support the view that, in the real world, governance challenges are not necessarily about one set of people getting another set to behave better, but rather about multiple groups finding ways to act collectively in their own best interests.

¹ This brief was written by Gina Bergh, Marta Foresti, Alina Rocha Menocal and Leni Wild, all researchers at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). It summarises the findings of the full report by the same authors: *Building governance into a post-2015 framework: Exploring transparency and accountability as an entry point*.

Secondly, whether information is acted upon will depend on the wider enabling environment. The success of initiatives like the Rapid SMS pilot in Rwanda, and other similar initiatives, is based on harnessing widespread access to mobile phone technology, in Rwanda's case in the health sector. But in addition, the existence of a coherent policy framework, incentives to monitor performance of health workers, and the existence of effective delivery systems are key to success, in allowing the information generated by the new technologies to be acted upon by the relevant institutions. Understanding when these enabling factors are in place is therefore crucial for determining the impact of information flows and the use of ICTs, and for incorporating transparency initiatives into broader plans for improving service delivery.

What are the implications of current initiatives for future development goals?

The call for greater focus on governance in a post-2015 agreement is important in responding to the aspirations of people living in poverty, and in ensuring the achievement of other goals. But the political and practical difficulties should not be underestimated. There may be scope and potential to draw from some new initiatives on transparency and accountability to inform a future post-2015 agreement. In particular, this will require:

- Casting the net wider than what is currently offered, going further than calls for [Open Government](#), more and better data and greater use of ICTs, to learn from the evidence about how and where to apply particular approaches to maximise their impacts on specific outcomes.
- Including transparency and accountability principles and practice within the parameters or ground rules for performance monitoring of whatever goals and targets are agreed upon. This would help give concrete meaning to the demand for greater citizen voice in processes to set and monitor any post-2015 agreement. To maximise both effectiveness and political legitimacy, new processes should seek to build on existing domestic or regional mechanisms, especially those emerging from the South. These may include forms of local budget monitoring, citizens' scorecards, human rights reporting, regional accountability initiatives like the [African Peer Review Mechanism](#), and other transnational processes, including those being developed by the [g7+](#).
- Using performance monitoring to address key gaps that MDG reviews have pointed to, such as the tendency to focus on access over quality in relation to different services, or to downplay the effects of inequality on different objectives.

This more realistic approach to transparency and accountability would represent an important step forward and a corrective to current debates that tend to exaggerate the potential of data, information and ICTs as a magic bullet to improve accountability relationships, and, ultimately, development outcomes. It would embed a governance focus in a post-2015 agreement that might be able to offer real benefits to people, without creating unrealistic expectations or being held hostage to the global politics of governance and sovereignty issues.



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