

## Why accountability matters

### Key points

- Improved accountability is essential for development effectiveness
- The accountability agenda is a broad one, and DFID needs to work with actors beyond its comfort zone
- Interventions to strengthen accountability must be driven by context, realism and caution
- Support for greater transparency by governments, the private sector and NGOs should be higher on the accountability agenda

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Strengthening accountability is a political activity’

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**W**e all know that accountability is critical for genuine and durable development results. The accountability of public institutions and, increasingly, of the non-governmental and private sectors, has been on the agenda for some time. But we now know that to achieve genuine changes in accountability, the donor community needs to be a great deal more savvy, not just about the politics of development, but also of aid itself.

Donor interventions to build more accountable and better governed states have foundered in part because of too little emphasis on country-specific political processes and structures, a failure to recognise that seeking to impose reforms without domestic support won’t work, and a lack of realism about what is achievable. This is seen most sharply

in contexts of high insecurity including Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also across a range of low-income countries and beyond.

ODI research shows that the universal application of an ‘accountability blueprint’ will not work. Strengthening accountability is fundamentally a political activity, requiring a robust understanding of local politics (and not just party politics) combined with smarter and more flexible ways of delivering aid and technical support. To achieve this, DFID and other donors need to adapt their support.

### Policy recommendations

Donor support has focused on demand-side accountability through traditional civil society organisations, or on building state capacity on the supply-side,

This policy brief draws on the work of ODI on governance and politics:

<http://www.odi.org.uk/themes/governance>



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### Engaging with political parties

Donors have conventionally focused accountability programmes on civil society organisations and political parties have, in general, been sidelined. Concerns about political sensitivities and perceived interference should be addressed, but there is increasing recognition that political parties need to be part of the solution in building better governance and more accountable states, not least because no other actor can replace their roles in aggregating and representing citizens' interests (Wild and Hudson 2009).

In Uganda, for example, the fusion between the state and Museveni's ruling party means that no other actor can hold the President or ruling party to account. This undermines accountability, aid programmes and overall development outcomes. ODI research has identified models used by donors and others that aim to build more effective political parties in Uganda. Our research suggests that donors should undertake smart engagement with political parties to become better informed of the realities on the ground; and should develop better strategies for contexts where the ruling party is fused with the state. This will require more rigorous processes to identify and manage political risk (Wild and Golooba-Mutebi 2010).

often to the exclusion of other actors. But ODI research finds that it is more helpful to examine the overall system for accountability and the range of actors within that system in each country (Hudson and GOVNET, 2009). This may include those beyond the current comfort zone for donors, such as political parties, trade unions, informal civil society groups and the private sector. Working with these actors will require:

- different tactics including the greater use of diplomatic approaches and better negotiation skills;
- greater coordination across Whitehall, particularly with the Foreign Office, which has a longer history of engagement with political actors and a wealth of country-specific knowledge.

Effective accountability interventions require better political analysis (including political economy analysis) and more realistic objectives. This means understanding political risks and how to better manage them as part of a more rigorous design and planning process.

Finally, supporting efforts for greater transparency by governments and non-state actors should be much higher on the agenda. A lack of transparency and access to information, particularly in terms of the use of government resources and donor aid, can severely undermine citizens' ability to hold decision-makers to account.

Civil society initiatives to address this

issue include the work of organisations in Malawi that have tracked budget allocations, and in Uganda, where they have monitored government spending of the resources generated by debt cancellation (Domingo et al., 2009).

Donors like DFID can also lead by example, strengthening their own transparency in terms of aid commitments and disbursements.

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