



STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

By *Nandini Tripathy*

From *Symbiosis Law School, Hyderabad*

Introduction

If you are an unfamiliar visitor to an organization engaged in international development assistance and unsure of the reception you will receive, there is a way to win over your hosts: tell them you believe that four key principles are crucial for development—accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion. Your hosts will almost certainly nod enthusiastically and declare that their organization in fact prioritizes these very concepts as key tools in the larger battle to eradicate extreme poverty and achieve sustained development. This holds true no matter whether you are visiting a major bilateral or multilateral aid agency, a foreign ministry engaged in development work, a transnational nongovernmental organization, a private foundation, or any other of the many groups that now make up the tremendously heterogeneous world of international development aid.

These four concepts have become a ubiquitous feature of the policy statements of countless aid organizations over the past few years. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)'s recent strategy on democracy, human rights, and governance frames “greater citizen participation and inclusion, and more accountable institutions and leaders” as its primary high-level objectives, arguing that this framework will help “empower reformers and citizens from the bottom up.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee affirms that “there is growing consensus on the value of human rights principles—such as participation, non-discrimination and accountability—for good and sustainable development practice,” and defines effective states as “those that . . . have open, transparent, accountable and inclusive political institutions.”² Similarly, in its 2007 Governance and Anti-Corruption Strategy, the World Bank asserts that “engaged local communities, a vibrant civil society, and a transparent flow of information . . . support poverty reduction by helping to hold governments accountable for delivering better services, creating jobs, and improving living standards. Besides serving as both means and ends of development programs, the four principles also represent mainstays in the international discourse over relations between donors and aid recipients as well as other stakeholders. In the course of the past decade, the aid community has increasingly emphasized the importance of expanding recipient country ownership over development processes through greater donor accountability, transparency, and multi-stakeholder engagement. In the course of the past decade, the aid community has increasingly emphasized the importance of expanding recipient country ownership over development processes through greater donor accountability, transparency, and multi-stakeholder engagement. Contributing to this sense of intrinsic goodness is the post-ideological nature of these concepts. They rise above the burgeoning arguments around the world about the value of liberal democracy and whether it is the most effective and desirable political system for



every country. Chinese officials sparring ideologically with their Western counterparts do not hesitate to question democratic processes and institutions. But they are unlikely to argue that Chinese citizens and businesses are better served by a government that is fundamentally unaccountable to their interests and needs. Transparency and public participation have in fact become popular themes in Chinese political discourse, with former general secretary Hu Jintao himself stressing “the growing enthusiasm of the people for participation in political affairs” and affirming the intent to “improve the open administrative system in various areas and increase transparency in government work.

The four concepts also transcend ongoing debates within the development community between conservative and left-of-centre philosophies. Accountability, for example, easily aligns with the emphasis that conservatives place on anticorruption and the rule of law. Yet at the same time, it attracts developmentalists on the left who underline the need to make government more responsive to disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Similarly, conservatives may see greater participation as an integral component of small-government approaches in which citizens take up roles that pared-down states no longer play. Those on the left, on the other hand, often use participation as a synonym for the grassroots mobilization of ordinary citizens against entrenched power holders. Proponents find in these four concepts not just intrinsic value but, just as importantly, a natural instrumental logic. State institutions that are accountable to their people will use their resources constructively rather than

mispend or steal them. Greater governmental transparency will allow citizens to determine where their political leaders are going astray and exert well-targeted pressure to put them back on track. Increased public participation in governance processes on the local and national levels will provide those institutions with direct input on how to best respond to citizen needs and bring additional information about blockages and inefficiencies into decision-making processes.

Of course, these are not the only enthusiasms to have blossomed in the international aid world during the past several decades. But the agreement around them appears to be unusually broad and its implications far reaching. Rather than simply adding new elements to the international development agenda, the consensus calls on donors to revise their approach to all areas of assistance. The four principles together in effect form a new conventional wisdom about development, one with interlinked normative and instrumental rationales and one that promises to bridge long-standing divides both within aid organizations as well as between donors and recipients.

Yet behind the ringing policy declarations and the ubiquitous presence of these concepts in programming lie a number of significant fissures. They concern fundamental aspects of the agenda defined by these four concepts: whether they really bridge longstanding ideological and operational divides within the aid community, whether or not they represent a unified and coherent agenda, and how deep



the donor commitment to these concepts truly is in practice.

Bridging the Three Rivers of Politics in Development

Accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion have emerged as crucial aid priorities and principles as part of the broader opening of the door to politics in development work over the past twenty-five years. This opening was driven by a change in thinking about development that occurred at major aid institutions in the late 1980s—the realization that bad governance is often a key driver of chronic underdevelopment, and that the donor emphasis on market reform would only succeed if developing countries built capable, effective state institutions. Developmentalists at the time framed this insight in politically neutral-sounding terms as “good governance.” Yet by incorporating this concept into mainstream development work, they inevitably recognized the pressing need for greater donor attention to political institutions and processes. The dramatically changed international political landscape opened the door to politics in aid work in several additional ways. The end of the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union weakened some of the political constraints that had characterized much development work in the second half of the twentieth century—chiefly the need for major Western donors to maintain friendships with strategically useful partners in the developing world in spite of their records of domestic repression. The U.S. and European governments of course retained close military and trade relations with various authoritarian governments for the sake of security and

economic interests—including, for example, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Yet in a number of places no longer ensnared in a global ideological contest, such as sub-Saharan Africa, they proved increasingly willing to raise problematic domestic political issues with aid-receiving governments. In addition, the onset of a startling global wave of democratization, which Western governments generally perceived to be in their political and economic interest, prompted Western aid actors to find new ways to support this trend. Providing politically related assistance quickly emerged as a crucial tool

The end of the global ideological schism as well as rapidly growing civil society activism in many countries attempting democratic transitions also brought about a greater international consensus on human rights frameworks and their role as tools for social and political change. Some Western donor governments that had previously emphasized only the political and civil sides of human rights began giving greater attention to socioeconomic rights. This emerging agreement in turn triggered heightened attention to human rights issues and approaches as an integral part of development work. Human rights advocates argued for disempowerment and exclusion to be understood both as root causes and consequences of chronic poverty and stressed that economic growth should serve as a means rather than the end goal of human development. Reflecting this emerging perspective, the Vienna Declaration issued at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights emphasized



that “democracy, development, and human rights are interdependent” and affirmed that development efforts themselves should respect and enhance human rights, rather than pursue economic prosperity at the expense of the latter.

As a result of these varied drivers of change, the development community started to shed the apolitical mindset and technocratic habits that had characterized it since the 1950s. Three new streams of assistance took hold, reflecting the impetus toward a greater integration of politics into development: aid to strengthen governance, to support democracy, and to advance human rights. Governance quickly became a focus at many mainstream development organizations. Democracy was taken on as a priority area by a smaller number, initially USAID and several more specialized political aid organizations that were funded by governments but at arm’s length from them, such as the National Endowment for Democracy and various European political foundations. Rights-based development became a growing preoccupation of several northern European donors as well as a number of multilateral institutions, especially within the United Nations family.

Although these three different streams all grew out of a greater attention to political methods and goals in development work, they took shape as somewhat separate areas of aid. Governance assistance aimed at strengthening core institutions of public administration and financial management, and gradually expanded to also cover service delivery. Democracy aid concentrated primarily on assisting the formal processes and institutions regulating and shaping

political competition, such as elections, political parties, and parliaments. And rights-based programming tried to define core socioeconomic areas—like food, shelter, and education—in terms of rights-holders and duty-bearers and to translate this conception into more forceful policy attention to the power inequalities underlying core development problems. These three new rivers of international aid were separated not only by different programming foci, but also by different philosophies of development and some degree of mutual distrust among their respective communities. Governance practitioners were often wary of emphasizing rapid democratization in developing countries with weak state institutions, afraid that premature political liberalization might pave the way for fragmentation and populist pressures that would undermine efforts to foster governance efficiency and effectiveness. Democracy promoters in turn worried that governance programs emphasizing the strengthening of central state institutions might reinforce anti-democratic governments resistant to the distribution or alternation of power. The human rights community, for its part, viewed the new democracy promotion cause with considerable suspicion, worried that it might be the handmaiden of ideologically driven political interventionism serving interests far removed from development.

Governance work initially concentrated on public sector efficiency and competence, with a programmatic focus on public expenditure management, civil service reform, and privatization. Yet this narrow conception steadily broadened to take on board the principles of accountability,



transparency, participation, and inclusion. This change occurred for multiple reasons. Starting in the mid-1990s, the World Bank and other major donors began concentrating on corruption—which many aid providers had traditionally avoided confronting head on, viewing it as too politically sensitive—as a key obstacle to poverty reduction. Public sector accountability and transparency emerged as crucial concepts in the effort to reduce opportunities for corruption and strengthen internal and external monitoring mechanisms.

The emergence in those years of transnational advocacy movements that were focused on government transparency and accountability further pushed the aid community to begin tackling these issues in their work. Transparency International and other groups helped push anticorruption onto the agenda. Nongovernmental groups in developed as well as developing countries led a widening campaign for freedom of information that in many places produced new laws and regulation guaranteeing citizens' right of access to government information. More recently, the global civil society push for open government has further solidified attention to public sector transparency in domestic and international policy circles.

The rising emphasis on the citizen side of the equation therefore naturally prompted greater attention to accountability and participation. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was a leader in this area in the early 2000s, pushing for the concept of democratic governance—by which it meant the infusion of elements of accountability, transparency,

participation, and inclusion—as a fruitful formulation of a broadened governance agenda. The 2004 World Development Report, *Making Services Work for Poor People*, further specifically highlighted the importance of accountability in addressing the catastrophic failure of service delivery to the world's poorest people, and pointed to citizen engagement and direct interaction with service providers as a crucial part of the solution. It recommended, for example, that donors should not only focus on channeling resources and technical assistance to underperforming public education systems, but also support citizens in addressing local challenges such as teacher absenteeism and bribery by monitoring performance and directly engaging with responsible providers and officials.

An Incomplete Bridge

The apparent convergence among the governance, democracy, and human rights communities is striking. Yet general agreement on the importance of accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion has not fully bridged the underlying divisions between these camps.

Ask governance specialists at one of the multilateral development banks or major bilateral aid agencies whether they are engaged in aiding democracy and they will likely insist that they are not. They will emphasize that they are pursuing greater participation, transparency, accountability, and inclusion for developmental rather than politically normative purposes and are not in the business of trying to shape the political life of other countries. Democracy promotion, in their view, remains a separate terrain, more ideological than governance work, more about changing overall political



systems than improving the performance of state institutions and delivering economic growth. They may note that they often carry out governance programs for decades in undemocratic contexts such as Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, or Vietnam, without any intention of changing the larger political direction of the country.

Democracy practitioners, meanwhile, highlight the political dimension of each of the four concepts. Rather than focusing on social accountability mechanisms that target the relationship between citizens and service providers, they attempt to strengthen broader institutions and processes of *political* accountability, such as regular and competitive elections and effective, independent parliaments. When they work on participation, their focus is on citizen involvement in local and national political processes rather than development planning and programming. Similarly, they frame issues of inclusion mostly in terms of *political* empowerment and representation rather than social or economic marginalization. In other words, for this group, democratic institutions such as well-functioning political parties, responsive parliaments, and a legal framework that guarantees basic political and civil rights are the central pistons of accountability, participation, and inclusion.

As a result, democracy practitioners are skeptical of governance programming that skirts the political dimensions of these concepts. They worry that their governance counterparts are inescapably inclined toward narrow and technocratic interpretations of these principles that fail to take into account

the broader distribution of power in a society (although some aid programs billed as pro-democratic fall into the same rut of technocratic efforts to improve the functioning of state institutions, without challenging underlying power inequalities).

One Agenda or Several?

There is also disagreement over the extent to which the four principles actually constitute a unified agenda. Aid providers typically present them as such, grouping them together in policy documents as an apparently mutually reinforcing set. And these principles do share a certain common ground—all of them pertain to the interaction of states and their people, pointing toward a greater role for citizens in the functioning of the state. Moreover, some natural links do exist among them in practice. Accountability programs for example often incorporate transparency as a constituent element while also relying on citizen participation, such as support for local groups that seek to press a particular government institution to be more responsive to public concerns. Similarly, efforts to foster greater inclusion naturally connect to increased participation by the targeted group.

In short, what is presented to the outside world as a unified agenda instead appears from within the development community to be a set of goals that compete with each other for attention and resources. Different aid organizations or groups within them pursue very different relative emphases on the four principles. For example, enthusiastic proponents of the growing transnational movement for accountability and transparency view these issues as a potentially transformative advance of the



governance agenda and one that naturally connects to burgeoning efforts to harness new Internet and communication technologies for development ends. Other practitioners have a long-standing commitment to participatory development and/or socioeconomic inclusion—two domains of assistance that predate the more recent rush of attention to accountability and transparency and that have undergone various permutations over the past decades.

The four principles are not only frequently pursued at least somewhat independently of each other: they can also at times be in tension. For example, an effort to push a government emerging out of civil war to pursue accountability for past rights violations may limit the inclusion of some groups in the post-conflict political system. Accountability programs that seek to reduce state capture may actually try to limit participation in the workings of certain institutions, such as central banks, in order to isolate them from political pressure or improve efficiency. Certain attempts to strengthen public sector accountability by increasing provider competition in service delivery may perpetuate patterns of marginalization, and poorly conceived participatory projects can exacerbate rather than alleviate the exclusion of disadvantaged groups. These tensions are rarely acknowledged, and remain buried beneath the continual references to the four principles as a shared agenda.

The Problem of Superficial Application

Another fissure arising in the application of the four principles centers on the actual depth of donor commitment to transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion

in programming and implementation. Despite their stated devotion to these principles, aid organizations sometimes treat them as boxes to be ticked rather than genuinely significant or even transformative elements to be pursued in substantial, sustained ways.

This problem partly stems from the fact that despite their suggestive and appealing nature, the four concepts are sufficiently broad that agreeing on them in theory does not necessarily translate into agreement about them in practice. References to principles such as participation and accountability in aid programming have become so frequent and widespread that pinning down with any precision what is meant by those terms often proves difficult. At times the terms appear to have the quality of an elixir that aid providers sprinkle—at least rhetorically—on everything they do, in the hopes of giving their activities an appealing extra shine. Participation, for example, is generally used to refer to input by citizens into governmental processes, including, for example, in the planning, design, implementation, or review of policies that affect them. Yet such input varies widely in type, duration, and intensity—it can be formal or informal, sporadic or continuous, limited or far-reaching, local or national, and so forth. Participatory measures can be part of broader vertical accountability efforts relating to public financial management and service delivery, forming an integral element of citizen attempts to exert a disciplinary role vis-à-vis the state. Yet the term is also used to describe broader consultations and public input into decisionmaking processes that remain firmly in the hands of



governments or other stakeholders. A similar degree of variation holds for the other three concepts as well.

For example, the move to make the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) more participatory through the implementation of Participatory Poverty Assessments was, in the eyes of some critics, a long and corrosive study in the superficiality of donor commitment to participation. Although there is evidence that in some countries, civil society involvement in these processes helped shape a more multidimensional understanding of poverty and its causes, it generally fell short of achieving genuine inclusion. Instead, such efforts too often remained "poorly-conceived, rushed, exclusive and badly-organised" exercises in information extraction.¹¹ Crucial macroeconomic policy decisions were still made before soliciting citizen input, and developing country governments often saw the PRSP process as nothing but a requirement imposed by international financial institutions that they had limited capacity to meet.¹² Critics have therefore emphasized the need to tie participation within specific development programs to broader methods of citizen empowerment.¹³ Of course there were other attempts that proved more meaningful and successful: for example, the participation of civil society representatives in the writing of shadow reports to the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council as well as in official discussions of the review has helped strengthen civil society capacity and facilitated networking between different citizen organizations and movements.

Efforts to bolster the inclusion of

marginalized groups also often suffer from the problem of superficial application. For many mainstream donor organizations, inclusion emerged as a priority issue on the international aid agenda due to the efforts of women's activists who argued that the economic, social, and political marginalization of women—for example through their exclusion from education and political decisionmaking—perpetuated chronic poverty. However, the domain of gender inclusion is nevertheless littered with examples of aid providers who have professed their commitment to gender awareness in their program design without in fact attempting to address the systemic and structural exclusion of women from development processes.¹⁴

Similarly, a first wave of efforts to foster transparency in different arenas of state action is quickly giving way to the realization that achieving meaningful developmental impact this way is a considerably more complex and uncertain process than many aid providers had initially realized. Scholars have warned of the frequent conflation of open data technologies and the politics of open government, emphasizing that a government can "provide 'open data' on politically neutral topics even as it remains deeply opaque and unaccountable." In a recent review of transparency's impact on governance and public services in particular, Stephen Kosack and Archon Fung further draw attention to the ways in which different governance contexts account for variations in the effectiveness of transparency initiatives. They argue that reforms can face obstacles of collective action, political resistance, and long implementation chains,



and are most likely to succeed in situations marked by competitive service delivery that poses fewer of these hurdles.

The Unsettled Intrinsic Case

Beyond divisions among various practitioner communities and difficulties in implementation persists a broader debate about the appropriate role of the four principles in development work. The intrinsic case for making accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion major pillars of development aid seems straightforward to enthusiasts of these principles: the four concepts describe a relationship between governments and their citizens that honors and reinforces basic human dignity. As such, they are good things in and of themselves that should be understood as intrinsic elements of development. In other words, a society is more developed when its people are treated in accordance with these values and less developed when they are not. It is impossible to assess with any precision the degree to which the intrinsic case is accepted within the many aid organizations putting forward these four concepts as important priorities. Official policy statements affirming donor commitment to inclusive, participatory, accountable, and transparent governance often do not explicitly state whether this commitment is primarily normative or based on an assumed instrumental case, and only provide vague or incomplete theories of change relating to these issues. The World Bank, for example, argues that social accountability initiatives, besides facilitating better governance and improved public policies and services, can also serve to “empower those social groups that are systematically under-represented in

formal political institutions” and to “ensure that less powerful societal groups also have the ability to express and act upon their choices. . . . Yet the World Bank does not specify whether empowerment—another ubiquitous, yet conceptually ambiguous term—is advanced as a normative end goal or as a means to achieve better socioeconomic outcomes.

However, it is clear that many mainstream developmentalists remain strongly attached to a traditional socioeconomic conception of development and are reluctant to embrace normative principles for their own sake. Few donors clearly state the normative argument in their policy statements. The Swedish government is a notable exception in this regard: its core aid strategy seeks to operationalize Amartya Sen’s argument that a lack of freedom is a form of poverty, thereby merging normative political principles with a traditionally socioeconomic definition of development. Rights-based approaches to development take participation, accountability, and inclusion as inalienable rights that should be integral to both development processes and outcomes and thus represent an embodiment of the normative case. But they have gained only partial ground over the past twenty years, and even the minority of major aid organizations that embrace a human-rights-based approach are still struggling to incorporate it substantially into development practice and make a difference in programming beyond appealing statements of intent. One at least partial exception is the UNDP, which since the early 2000s has advanced a rights-based conception of development in its Human Development Reports and pushed for a convergence



between human rights and development agencies in the UN system. UNDP has invested in efforts to develop clear indicators for this approach to aid programming and assist donors in assessing human rights standards and principles in project design, implementation, and monitoring.

Divisions Over the Instrumental Case

Not only is the intrinsic case for the four concepts unsettled, so too is the instrumental one—the argument that building the four principles into development assistance will help produce better socioeconomic outcomes in aid-receiving countries. Limited and generally inconclusive evidence base to date exacerbates this problem. Despite the rapid increase of aid programming relating to accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion in the course of the past fifteen years, relatively little time and funding have been invested in examining the long-term socioeconomic and political impact of these initiatives. Only in the past several years have a substantial number of researchers and aid organizations attempted to address this shortcoming by systematically investing in evidence collection. This emerging body of work—which is still in its incipient phase—consists both of evaluations of specific programs or projects and larger reviews that attempt to extract, code, and synthesize the findings from existing studies and cases. The Overseas Development Institute for example in 2008 carried out a major review of “citizens’ voice and accountability” interventions based on an analysis of 90 such projects in ten countries and seven detailed country case studies.¹⁹ A comprehensive 2013 report by World Bank

researchers Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao similarly attempted to systematically assess the socioeconomic impact of decentralization and local-level participatory development in aid recipient countries.²⁰

Despite the rapid increase of aid programming relating to accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion in the course of the past fifteen years, relatively little time and funding have been invested in examining the long-term socioeconomic and political impact of these initiatives. However, one overarching message does emerge from the existing evidence: the need for a strong dose of realism and caution regarding donor expectations of developmental impact. Many studies show that programs targeting accountability, participation, transparency, or inclusion are at least somewhat successful at achieving their intermediate goals—such as establishing a social audit process, strengthening the transparency of a particular ministry, or improving citizen input into a national planning process. However, translating such achievements into longer-term socioeconomic progress is much less common, or, at the very least, much harder to detect.

Of course, few studies suggest that incorporating these concepts into programs has no developmental effect at all. Success stories do exist: In Uganda, community monitoring has contributed to improvements in public service delivery, such as increased student and teacher attendance in schools and better education outcomes.²¹ Similarly, community monitoring of health services using citizen report cards to facilitate regular dialogue with health workers about problems and expectations led to an increase



in the use of outpatient services as well as overall improvements in medical treatments and a significant reduction in infant mortality.²² Participatory governance councils in Brazil have improved the access to and quality of healthcare services, and participatory budgeting in cities such as Porto Alegre has stimulated citizen participation in local politics and increased public funding for housing, health, and education. However, these initiatives have also been criticized for failing to ensure inclusion of the poorest or perpetuating clientelistic politics in certain contexts.

A central challenge for the aid community is how to move from these scattered, often small-scale successes to greater socioeconomic impact. Aid providers eager to make progress on this question are increasingly trying to move beyond isolated bottom-up or top-down approaches, instead working to tackle both sides of the state-society relationship at once. Various analysts have highlighted the importance of such integrative approaches. For example, in an insightful analysis of the empirical basis for social accountability work, Jonathan Fox criticizes what he calls tactical approaches that rely on bounded interventions, neglect the role of the state, and rest on flawed assumptions about the power of information. Instead, he praises strategic approaches that attempt to coordinate citizen action with governmental reforms to bolster public sector responsiveness. While the impact of tactical approaches has been minimal, Fox suggests that the evidence base for strategic approaches “driven by coalitions of pro-accountability forces across the state-society divide” is considerably more promising.

The Larger Developmental Debate

The debate over the evidence base for the four principles is rooted in the larger, often fierce debate about the overall relationship between governance regimes and economic development. In recent years this debate has focused extensively on whether a clear empirical case exists for the proposition that Western-style governance (which is seen as including the four principles as well as other elements such as the rule of law) is good for development, whether as a contributing factor in achieving socioeconomic success or in sustaining it. Three main (and overlapping) camps contend with each other in this debate.

The optimists believe that mounting evidence from both historical analysis and more specific empirical studies indicates that inclusive or democratic governance is the key to generating and sustaining high levels of socioeconomic development. Driven by the hopefulness of the immediate post-Cold War years, policymakers in the 1990s initially embraced this argument primarily axiomatically rather than on a firm empirical basis. Scholars have since assembled a significant body of research pointing to a positive correlation between various aspects of a country’s governance—including transparent, accountable, and participative institutions—and its economic progress. Daniel Kaufmann and other World Bank economists built an influential set of aggregate Worldwide Governance Indicators to measure changes in governance quality over time, and found a positive correlation between a country’s performance on these measures and its economic development.²⁵ Their work generated numerous efforts that



relied on those indicators as well as comparable measures to tease out the relationship between particular aspects of governance—such as property rights, transparency, and the rule of law—and global variations in income levels.²⁶ This research points to the overarching conclusion that open and inclusive polities and economies ultimately tend to be more successful at sustaining economic growth.

Another influential line of work attempts to trace the historical relationship between institutions and economic growth. In their widely discussed book, *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson find that countries that develop inclusive rather than extractive political and economic institutions produce better socioeconomic outcomes in the long run.²⁷ Similarly, Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast juxtapose “open access orders,” characterized by political and economic competition, impersonal governance, and a shared commitment to equality and inclusion, and “limited access orders” in which elites engage in rent-seeking and pursue their personal interests. They argue that historically, the former has been more successful at sustaining economic growth than the latter.

A perhaps more prominent line of research on the sceptical side acknowledges the centrality of governance but disagrees that democratic or inclusive institutions are key to prosperity. Scholars embracing this view argue instead for a capable and effective developmental state, a model that gained prominence following the remarkable economic rise of the Asian Tigers in the early 1990s. Countries such as South Korea,

Taiwan, and Singapore did not institutionalize Western-style democratic governance, yet rapidly grew their economies by centralizing state power, developing autonomous and effective bureaucracies, and actively intervening in the market process. In fact, scholars have argued that the success of these efforts specifically depended on limiting citizen participation in the political process and isolating state institutions from popular pressure and accountability mechanisms.

Focusing on governance challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, David Booth and the Africa Power and Politics Programme argue that fragmented, clientelist governance systems often pose bigger obstacles to economic growth than various forms of “developmental patrimonialism” that effectively centralize economic decision-making. They therefore stress the importance of state capacity and cohesion, while rejecting a normative insistence on bottom-up pressure and accountability as a means to better government performance. Following a similar line, Mushtaq Khan criticizes the good governance agenda for prioritizing market-enhancing measures such as transparency, rule of law, and anticorruption in contexts with limited governance capabilities. Instead, he argues for a greater focus on growth-enhancing aspects of governance, such as the capacity to strategically attract new investment. Linking these scholars is an overarching concern that a premature opening of political institutions and decision-making processes can exacerbate existing collective action problems, and a wariness of good governance approaches that assume state capacity and political will for reform where



both are lacking. The ongoing, fiercely contested research debate over the relationship between governance and development exacerbates the continued fissures within the aid community over the value of incorporating accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion into development work. The arguments for their developmental impact are strong enough to give at least some comfort to their devoted proponents. Yet the strengths of the arguments on the other side give those aid practitioners skeptical of the concepts' instrumental value a foundation for their doubts. Given the fact that this decades-old research debate does not appear to be headed soon toward any definite resolution, these deep-seated splits over the instrumental case are likely to continue for some time.

Uncertain Commitment to International Initiatives

The apparent consensus around the four concepts extends to governments on all sides of the aid equation—donors and recipients alike. Part of the strong appeal of recent transnational initiatives that have taken up the four concepts—such as the Open Government Partnership, which now counts 65 member governments committed to improving government transparency—lies precisely in the fact that they put developed and developing countries on the same plane and acknowledge that they face many of the same core problems.

Yet here too, fissures persist. The problem of superficial application identified with regard to aid programming around the four concepts to some extent also affects international initiatives centered on issues

such as government accountability and transparency, which struggle with the question of how to best translate international commitments by participating governments into meaningful domestic reforms.

This challenge arises with regard to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a voluntary international regime that aims to expose revenue streams to citizen scrutiny in order to expose resource theft and increase public and private sector responsiveness to citizen demands. EITI-compliant governments regularly publish their revenues from the extractive sector and require private industry actors to do the same.³⁷ Developing countries have strong incentives to join EITI, as membership is tied to not only reputation but also improved performance on various international ratings, such as the World Bank “Doing Business” Index, which in turn influence aid flows and investment.³⁸ However, critics argue that corrupt regimes can reap these benefits while at the same time maintaining kleptocratic governance structures.

EITI's compliance standards remain relatively weak and narrow in scope, despite t

The Open Government Partnership, founded in 2011, represents another interesting case study of an international initiative attempting to trigger domestic reforms on transparency and accountability issues. The OGP is open to all countries that meet a set of eligibility criteria, and it compels participating governments to implement regularly monitored open government action plans developed in consultation with civil society. Some observers have criticized the



initiative for allowing governments to present themselves via their OGP membership as reform minded and transparent while committing to few specific, measurable, or genuinely transformative reform proposals.⁴³ The OGP's Independent Reporting Mechanism for example found that up to two-thirds of the existing partnership commitments "do not pass the three hurdles of being relevant, having the potential to have a major impact, and being implemented."⁴⁴ Yet the initiative has also been praised for achieving considerable success in a very short period of time, with 194 ambitious reform commitments in 35 countries mostly or fully implemented and completed within three years.⁴⁵ Moreover, the OGP is still a relatively new initiative and deserves time to gain traction and fine-tune its approach.

For international initiatives such as EITI or the OGP, there may of course also be value in including governments with bad track records on accountability, transparency, and citizen participation in order to encourage a "race to the top," as Western proponents of these sorts of endeavors like to argue. The inclusion of governments with chronically poor governance records may indeed serve to gradually socialize them into a different outlook. Yet research on the European Union and other multilateral initiatives shows that governments are often most likely to reform before joining an initiative, suggesting that both entry and compliance criteria should be carefully designed and reviewed to maximize leverage.

The Continuing Donor-Recipient Divide

The four concepts also appear as a potential bridge across the donor-recipient divide in a

second sense—they are not only widely embraced by aid organizations as programmatic principles and objectives but have also been agreed on by both donor and recipient governments as a means to achieve greater aid effectiveness. Yet here too the consensus is less solid than the rhetoric may indicate. A number of developing country governments remain fiercely opposed to incorporating these principles into the international development agenda as universal characteristics of good governance. While they advocate for their application to international partnerships, they reject donor attempts to promote them in aid recipient societies as illegitimate political meddling. In other words, donors embrace the four concepts as things that they hope recipient governments will do, while recipient governments embrace them as things that they hope donor governments will do.

Scepticism on the side of recipient country governments about the four concepts first emerged when the World Bank and other major aid organizations began pushing the accountability and anticorruption agenda in the 1990s. Developing country power holders were unconvinced by the instrumental case for anticorruption work, fully aware that many developed countries had in fact experienced substantial corruption throughout their own histories, yet still managed to reach prosperity. They also doubted the intentions of Western donors, seeing the new agenda as a cover for political interventionism, an excuse to embarrass or even delegitimize governments that the West happened not to favor.

These initial suspicions have continued to



fester throughout the expansion of the governance agenda over the past two decades. The argument that concepts such as accountability, participation, inclusion, and transparency are post-ideological is not persuasive to some developing country officials and observers, especially as they are often presented as core elements of “*democratic governance*.” With sensitivities over Western political interventionism having risen dramatically across the international political landscape over the last ten years, movements by the aid community toward more normative approaches to governance inevitably encounter rough terrain on the recipient side. Moreover, power holders in nondemocratic societies such as China, Vietnam, Rwanda, and Ethiopia often present their own developmental success as counterarguments to the instrumental case.

The difficulties of reaching a global agreement in the ongoing negotiations over the post-2015 development agenda sharply highlight this continuing fissure. Major Western donors have persistently argued for the inclusion of a goal that would incorporate governance principles in a substantial way—particularly since the Millennium Development Goals fell short of addressing the developmental role of governance, democracy, and the rule of law. Considerable momentum has gathered for commitments on accountability and transparency as well as citizen participation and political freedoms to be incorporated into a future framework. The High-Level Panel appointed by the UN secretary general to assist the formulation of a post-2015 development agenda recommended in its final report that “good governance and

effective institutions” be included as a stand-alone goal, and put governance among the “transformative” factors affecting development beyond 2015.⁴⁷ But disagreements persist over whether such governance components should be incorporated as cross-cutting principles, measurable targets, or overarching objectives, and whether their inclusion should follow an intrinsic (for example, human-rights-based) or instrumental rationale.

Governance principles have been a contentious topic not just across the donor-recipient divide but among developing country governments as well: the consultations leading up to the Common African Position on the post-2015 development agenda were marked by disagreements over the inclusion of the rule of law as well as peace and security, issues that were prioritized by conflict-affected countries in particular but dismissed by others as a Western agenda. South Africa, for example, has stressed a holistic approach to peace and security that centers on human rights and the rule of law, while Uganda and Rwanda have emphasized conflict-prevention and resolution.⁵⁰ Egypt, on the other hand, opposed any references to governance and the rule of law whatsoever, arguing that it would be “premature” to mainstream “an abstract notion . . . without having an agreed definition and commonly shared vision” and emphasizing that “diverse cultures and traditions have to be respected at all times.”⁵¹

Other developing country governments have welcomed a greater focus on governance, human rights, and even democracy in the



post-2015 framework. But the very difficult road that proponents of these concepts have had to travel to get close to even a partial inclusion of governance principles in the post-2015 agenda—partiality that some have rejected as potentially counterproductive—is testament to the still very shaky and incomplete consensus around the four concepts within the broader aid community.

Conclusions

The recent embrace of accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion as crucial aid priorities and overarching principles should not be seen as one more minor enthusiasm of a donor community prone to grasping for magic bullets. It is a concrete embodiment of the fundamental movement by international aid providers away from their decades-long preference for technocratic approaches that bypassed or neglected the political dynamics of recipient countries and treated states as *deus ex machinas* operating without any organic connection to the citizens they are supposed to serve.

In simple terms it represents the third stage of the evolution of development thinking across the last fifty years. In stage one, from the 1960s through the 1980s, aid providers focused on state-led development without giving serious, sustained attention to how governance processes operate and evolve. In stage two, the 1990s, donors took governance on board as a crucial factor in development, yet hewed to a primarily narrow, top-down view of the concept. In stage three, from the early 2000s on, the aid community expanded its approach to governance, emphasizing the relationship between states and citizens, ideally informed

by principles that embody the importance of citizens' roles.

Yet powerfully important though these principles are, the consensus around them is not as strong as it might appear based on formal policy statements by major aid organizations and the extraordinary proliferation of references to them in aid programs and projects. Indeed, the consensus is fissured by a host of doubts and disagreements:

- Although these principles serve as a bridge among the three communities that emerged in the overall aid world in direct response to the opening of the door to politics in the 1990s—practitioners focusing on governance, democracy, or human rights—the bridge is only partial. These communities still have very different understandings of and approaches to the four principles in practice. Governance specialists view them primarily as tools to tackle specific service delivery failures and increase government efficiency and responsiveness; they remain wary of appearing too political. Democracy and human rights practitioners, for their part, reject technical applications that they believe risk stripping the concepts of their transformative political value and reducing them to mere formalities in program design and implementation.
- Aid providers' application of these principles is often superficial and based on simplistic or incomplete theories of change. Concepts such as participation and transparency evoke powerful notions of citizen empowerment, yet in practice they are often reduced to consultation



mechanisms or exercises in information dissemination that fail to seriously challenge structural inequities in the distribution of power.

- Divisions also surround the empirical case for the instrumental value of the four principles. The impact of donor interventions related to accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion is often long-term, indirect, and difficult to isolate from other factors, and the evidence base to date is still too thin to arrive at firm conclusions.
- This uncertainty about the instrumental value of the four principles is compounded by the continuing debate over the relationship between governance and economic development. While some researchers argue that open, participatory, and inclusive institutions are closely correlated with socioeconomic success, another important school of thought de-emphasizes the importance of Western-style governance. Instead, scholars in this latter camp stress the crucial role of state capacity to intervene in the economy as well as the potentially beneficial role of neopatrimonialism structures or informal settlements in accelerating economic growth. Several recent approaches have attempted to carve out an eclectic middle ground that focuses on context specificity, attention to the different stages of growth, and working with rather than against the grain of existing governance processes. Yet the ongoing debate is enough to fuel the scepticism of developmentalists reluctant to take on board politically charged principles of uncertain

instrumental

value.

In sum, the apparent consensus around transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion should be understood as very much a work in progress, not a transformation that has largely already been achieved. Enthusiasts of these principles should avoid the temptation to act as though the agreement around them is stronger than it really is—and they should be willing to face head on the many lasting fissures and look for ways to reduce them. Some, like the debates over the legitimacy of the intrinsic case, reflect differences in the very core idea of what development is and are thus unlikely to be overcome anytime soon. But others, like the continuing divisions between governance, human rights, and democracy practitioners or the problem of superficial application of the four principles, are much more amenable to practical solutions. In other words, whether the consensus genuinely solidifies will depend greatly on how effectively its proponents deepen their understanding of how to put the four concepts into practice, share that understanding clearly across all parts of the assistance community, and bridge the divide between donors and recipients on these issues. The degree of their success will be a major factor determining the shape of international development work over the next generation.
