Eight lessons from three years working on transparency

Description

Tweet

Blog posting by Owen Barder
February 22nd, 2011

â??Iâ??ve spent the last three years working on aid transparency. As Iâ??m moving on to a very exciting new role (watch this space for more details) this seems a good time to reflect on what Iâ??ve learned in the last three years.

This is a self-indulgently long essay about the importance of aid transparency, and the priorities for how it should be achieved. Busy readers can just read the 8-point summary below. For a very clear and concise introduction to the importance of aid transparency, this video by my (former) colleagues at aidinfo is very good.

Iâ??m going to talk in a separate post about the exciting progress that has been made towards a new system of aid transparency, which I believe builds on many of these lessons, and on the next steps for the transparency movement more generally.

The 8-point summary

There is apparently a law that every document in development must have an â??Executive Summaryâ?•. (Not just a â??summaryâ?•, mind. It has to be for executives.) So here are what I think are the eight most important things Iâ??ve learned in the last three years about transparency in general, and aid transparency in particular:

1. *To make a difference, transparency has to be citizen-centred not donor-centred*. A citizen-centred transparency mechanism would allow citizens of developing countries to combine and use information from many different donor agencies; and provide aid information compatible with the classifications of their own country budget.

2. *Todayâ??s ways of publishing information serve the needs of the powerful, not citizens*. Existing mechanisms for publishing aid information were designed by the powerful for the powerful. Until the aidinfo team started 3 years ago, nobody had ever done a systematic study of the information needs of all stakeholders, including citizens, parliamentarians and civil society, let alone thought about how those needs could be met. Thatâ??s why current systems meet only the needs of donors, and powerful parts of governments.

3. *People in developing countries want transparency of execution not just allocation*. There are important differences between the information requirements of people in donor countries and people in developing countries. Current systems for aid transparency focus mainly on transparency of aid allocation, because that is what donor country stakeholders are largely interested in, and not enough on transparency of spending execution, which is of primary interest to people in developing countries.

4. *Show, donâ??t tell*. The citizens of donor nations are increasingly sceptical of annual reports and press releases. In aid as in other public services they want to be able to see for themselves the detail of how their money is being used and what difference it is making. They increasingly expect to be actively involved in decisions, and they are less willing to delegate the decisions entirely to experts. Donor agencies â?? whether government agencies, international organisations or NGOs â?? will have to adapt rapidly to become platforms for citizen engagement.

5. *Transparency of aid execution will drive out waste, bureaucracy and corruption*. There is, unfortunately, quite a bit of waste, bureaucracy and corruption in the aid system. There is good evidence that this kind of waste is rapidly reduced when the flow of money is made transparent. Corruption and waste prosper in dark places. Transparency of planned future aid spending will also help to increase spending efficiency and value for money.

6. *Social accountability could be Development 3.0*. The results agenda in aid agencies is currently too top down and pays too little attention to the power of bottom up information from the intended beneficiaries of aid. Increased accountability to citizens may be the key to unlocking better service delivery, improved governance and faster development.

7. *The burden of proof should be on those who advocate secrecy*. We have published a compelling business case for greater transparency, with all the uncertainties this kind of analysis entails. So where is the business case for secrecy, which would be far harder to quantify or defend? Why is the (inevitable) uncertainty in this kind of analysis allowed to count against the case for transparency, when the same uncertainty would deal a much greater blow against the case for secrecy?

8. *Give citizens of developing countries the benefit of the doubt*. Transparency is necessary but not sufficient for more effective aid. But the fact that transparency alone will not solve every problem should not be an excuse for aid agencies to shirk their responsibilities to be transparent. Nor should we be too attentive to vested interests in the aid industry telling us that transparency is not enough. Citizens of developing countries will be more innovative and effective than some people give them credit for when we give the information they need to hold the powerful to account.

Thatâ??s the summary. If any of that whets your appetite and you want the long version, read on.â?•

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

1. aid effectiveness
2. corruption
3. transparency

Date
25/11/2026
Date Created
22/02/2011
Author
admin