

**Title:** Aid Transparency and Accountability: 'Build it and they'll come'?

**Citation:** McGee, R. (2013), Aid Transparency and Accountability: 'Build It and They'll Come'?. *Development Policy Review*, 31: s107–s124. doi: 10.1111/dpr.12022

**Official URL:** <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dpr.12022/abstract>

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**Version:** Submitted version

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## **Aid Transparency and Accountability: ‘Build it and they’ll come’?<sup>1</sup>**

*Concerns about the transparency of aid have become more prominent against a recent backdrop of donor commitments to increase aid effectiveness. Innovative approaches to providing more and better information about aid have been developed. This article explores the contemporary focus on aid transparency in the context of longer-standing concerns over accountable aid. It finds that the links between inputs, outputs and impacts in aid transparency and accountability initiatives are often not articulated or well-understood, and that the link between aid transparency and accountable aid is barely addressed. Future attempts to develop effective aid TAIs need to take full account of the diverse motivations, approaches and actors implicated in their – often implicit – theories of change, in particular the citizens of aid-recipient countries..*

### **Key Words:**

#### **1 Introduction**

Aid transparency has zoomed into focus in recent years in Northern governments, development academia, aid policy and advocacy circles, digital communities committed to open government and Northern tax-paying publics. The rapid rise to prominence of aid transparency concerns and initiatives, happening against a backdrop of growing interest in open government more broadly<sup>2</sup>, dates mainly from official aid donors’ attempts to honour the aid effectiveness commitments they made in Paris in 2005. By 2008 it was clear that these efforts were hampered by the lack of transparent and accessible data about official aid. As a result, aid transparency featured prominently at the Third High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra in 2008 and the Fourth High-Level Forum held in Busan in 2011. The multi-stakeholder International Aid Transparency Initiative was launched at Accra, and a host of innovative approaches were set in motion around that time by official and non-

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<sup>1</sup> A paraphrase of Kevin Costner’s line in the 1989 American fantasy-drama film ‘Field of Dreams’, this phrase has become current in business innovation and marketing, to capture the notion – scorned by marketing firms – that a great product needs no marketing.

<sup>2</sup> This is reflected, among other ways, in the September 2011 launch of Open Government Partnership, a new multilateral initiative that aims to promote more open and accountable government, with the ultimate goals of empowering citizens, countering corruption, promoting economic efficiencies, harnessing innovation, and improving the delivery of services. See <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/news/ogp-launch-july2011>

governmental aid actors and analysts to assess the costs of non-transparent aid, make the case for transparency and provide more and better information about aid (Martin, 2009)<sup>3</sup>.

A quick scan reveals a dazzling range of aid transparency and accountability initiatives (henceforth TAIs). All have been born in the last few years and most are going from strength to strength. Some fall under the fairly recently designated heading of citizen-led or social accountability initiatives (see Gaventa & McGee, this volume; Malena et al 2004). Others are strongly donor-inspired and –led and, as I shall argue, perhaps insufficiently attuned to the realities of citizens and social actors and over-reliant on assumptions about them.

I am a development studies researcher and lecturer who watches UK development aid and global aid trends at some distance, and works closely on citizen-led transparency and accountability. In 2010-11 I co-led a Review on the Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives, commissioned by DFID under the auspices of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, focusing on social and citizen-led accountability and transparency activities rather than those inscribed within formal political and electoral accountability mechanisms. I also conducted the segment of the review that focused on aid transparency, not because I am an aid transparency expert but by reason of my current research and applied work on social accountability and my past experience and contacts in the development NGO aid policy and research world. The aid transparency review attempted to assess the effectiveness and impact of this rapidly evolving field.

In this article I do not attempt to summarise that review's findings in respect of impact, which can be found elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. Rather, I describe the aid transparency field and its origins (sections 2 and 3); interrogate the range of aims, claims and assumptions that arose when I explored effectiveness and impact questions (section 4); and, on the basis of these, set out a range of factors that seem important in the workings of aid transparency and accountability initiatives (section 5). The argument that I advance is that insofar as can be determined from current knowledge on the impact of aid transparency and accountability initiatives, they are not adequately resolving the accountability challenges posed by the facts that (i) transparency has an uncertain relationship with accountability (Fox 2007); and (ii) aid

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<sup>3</sup> For the history of the Paris Declaration, prior and subsequent High-Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness and the Declarations emerging from each, see [http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_46310975\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3746,en_2649_3236398_46310975_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/workstream/impact-learning>

accountability 'seekers' and 'givers' include some very dissimilar, distant and disconnected groups of actors. This means that aid TAIs will only fulfil their objectives when they pay greater attention to the purported beneficiaries and their actual and potential involvement with TAIs. For now, most TAIs seem to work on the basis of 'build it and they'll come' – the 'they' referring to an unspecified and nebulously conceived set of supposed aid accountability claimants. Who are "they"? If "we" build the aid transparency initiative, will they, can they, really come and use it as "we" envisage?

## **2 Background to the Field**

'Aid transparency''s contemporary forms are but the latest mutations of a longer-standing and broader concern with aid accountability. For explanatory purposes, aid TAIs can be divided into three sub-fields. In the order in which they have emerged:

- (i) **Aid accountability thinking and practice in the development NGO sector.** Big international development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly those which work through partnerships with local organisations, have been concerned about their own and other aid agencies' accountability since the mid-nineties. Their concerns focus on their accountability to public and private donors for funds received and spent; and their accountability to partners in the global South, grassroots supporters in the North, and the marginalised people they purport to benefit, for behaving with integrity and operating effectively. These two have been referred to as upwards and downwards accountability respectively. Accountability relationships with funders are usually ascribed formal enforceability, via contracts; accountability to the marginalized tends to be based on answerability rather than enforceability<sup>5</sup>. Two new departures stand out in NGO aid accountability. First, NGOs are experiencing growing tensions between their multiple accountabilities, recognizing these as more of a complex web than an upwards/downwards dyad. Second, while NGOs have been individually developing ways of implementing and monitoring accountability to marginalized people since the 1990s (a pioneer being Action Aid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) – see David et al., 2006), increasingly they are aligning their work on accountability as a sector or sub-sector, collectively applying a range of self-

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<sup>5</sup> While I use 'upward' and 'downward' here for explanatory clarity, the terms can be seen as reinforcing a hierarchy that, while inherent to the aid relationship, is not desirable, and some more recent commentators prefer the more diffuse and less directional term 'multiple accountabilities'.

regulatory or peer-regulated frameworks such as the Human Accountability Partnership (HAP) certification, the International NGO Accountability Charter and One World Trust's Global Accountability Report<sup>6</sup>. NGO-promoted aid accountability initiatives are social rather than political in nature and are led by citizens and civil society actors, in the global North or South, in contrast to the second sub-field below.

- (ii) **Official aid accountability measures** of the past decade. These revolve around the Rome-Monterrey-Paris process and are enshrined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. This commits official donor signatories, among other things, to enhancing 'mutual<sup>7</sup> accountability and transparency in the use of development resources [which] helps to strengthen public support for national politics and development assistance' (OECD, 2005/8: 8). Donor signatories are answerable to their peers for these commitments which are monitored on a two-yearly basis. The official aid accountability sub-field, like the newer aid transparency movement, is mainly concerned with improving the effectiveness of official aid so as to reduce waste, heighten aid effectiveness and justify aid spending to Northern tax payers. It is populated mainly by donor governments and their partner governments – including, increasingly since Busan, non-OECD countries as donors. These official aid accountability initiatives lie more within the political and international relations arenas than the social and citizenship arena but, as with many forms of political accountability, the social and citizen-led accountability initiatives that grow up around them are often essential to their effectiveness.
  
- (iii) **The new aid transparency movement**, emerging since 2005. To give a flavour, some key players and sources in this are aidinfo, a programme within the UK-based organisation Development Initiatives Poverty Research, which seeks to improve access to high-quality, timely information on aid flows; AidData, a US University-based collaborative initiative consisting of an online portal which connects users with information about aid and other development finance; the International Aid

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.hapinternational.org/>, <http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org> and <http://www.oneworldtrust.org/> respectively. A good account of the evolution of NGO accountability and effectiveness activities is given by Lingán et al., 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the word 'mutual', how mutual the answerability is between aid donor signatories and their 'aid partners' (recipient governments) is a contested point, not irrelevant to the aid transparency debate.

Transparency Initiative (IATI), a voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiative including donors, partner country governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) that exists to help implement the Accra commitments regarding aid transparency; Publish What You Fund (PWYF), a global campaign for aid transparency that conducts advocacy, research and capacity support to this end; MyAid, a UK Department for International Development (DFID) fund and website which enables the public to vote on how a small proportion of UK aid gets spent; the UK government's Aid Transparency Guarantee, which aims to make aid fully transparent to citizens in the UK and recipient countries, and OpenAid, a Swedish government initiative to make Swedish aid more transparent and open to public control.<sup>8</sup>

The relatively recent genesis of many aid transparency initiatives means that not much study or analysis of their impact has occurred yet (Martin, 2009; Martin, 2010; Christensen et al., 2010)<sup>9</sup>. Often based on fairly sophisticated applications of information and communication technologies, they take forms quite distinct from the traditional development interventions on which most research, analysis and evaluation of impact and effectiveness tends to be carried out.

My initial literature review in 2010 uncovered barely enough impact-focused literature to afford a purposive sample for in-depth review that represented all three of the aid TAI sub-

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<sup>8</sup> Aidinfo is a programme within the UK-based organisation Development Initiatives Poverty Research, which seeks to improve access to high-quality, timely information on aid flows, <http://www.aidinfo.org>. AidData is a US University-based collaborative initiative consisting of an online portal which connects users with information about aid and other development finance, <http://www.aiddata.org/home/index>. The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) is a voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiative including donors, partner country governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) that exists to help implement the Accra commitments regarding aid transparency, <http://www.aidtransparency.net/>. Publish What You Fund (PWYF) is a global campaign for aid transparency that conducts advocacy, research and capacity support to this end, <http://www.publishwhatyoufund.org/issue/>. MyAid is a UK Department for International Development (DFID) fund and website which enables the public to vote on how a small proportion of UK aid gets spent, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/jul/13/cameron-myaid-development>. The UK government's Aid Transparency Guarantee aims to make aid fully transparent to citizens in the UK and recipient countries (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/ukaid-guarantee>), and OpenAid is a Swedish government initiative to make Swedish aid more transparent and open to public control (<http://www.openaid.se/en>). For further information, see, in order of mention, <http://www.aidinfo.org>/<http://www.aiddata.org/home/index>; <http://www.aidtransparency.net/>; <http://www.publishwhatyoufund.org/issue/>; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/jul/13/cameron-myaid-development>; <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/ukaid-guarantee>; <http://www.openaid.se/en>.

<sup>9</sup> An 'Aid Transparency Assessment' was produced in 2010 by Publish What You Fund (PWYF, 2010). While this is an important and pioneering contribution to the aid transparency and accountability field, it does not attempt to assess the *impact* of aid transparency, but the *extent* of it.

fields set out above. Given the paucity of literature, my research strategy also included identifying key initiatives and organisations in this field and seeking interviews with key respondents from as representative a cross-section of these as time and availability allowed<sup>10</sup>.

### **3. The uncertain relationship between aid transparency and accountable aid<sup>11</sup>**

How does aid transparency relate to aid accountability? Let us take transparency to be a "characteristic of governments, companies, organisations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information rules, plans, processes and actions" (Transparency International 2009: 44), and accountability to be the process of holding actors accountable for their actions. The broad consensus about the relationship between transparency and accountability as they relate to aid is that transparency is a necessary but insufficient condition for aid accountability. Aid transparency initiatives constitute a sub-set within the broader, longer-standing aid accountability field. Many aid transparency initiatives stop short of claiming to deliver accountability, stressing the intrinsic importance of aid transparency in its own right, in this respect resonating with freedom of information advocacy. Others purport to contribute directly to aid which is more accountable, be it to donors, tax-payers or marginalized people. Many of the initiatives that make up the contemporary aid transparency movement, if they consider at all the relationship between transparency and accountability, seem to assume that more aid transparency will lead straightforwardly to more accountable aid.

Aid presents unusual accountability conundrums compared to other fields of transparency and accountability work, such as those reviewed in other articles in this volume. Christensen et al. articulate this:

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<sup>10</sup> These were Romilly Greenhill (IATI), Owen Barder (aidinfo), Richard Manning (aid effectiveness expert, formerly of DFID and DAC), Karin Christiansen (then at Publish What You Fund), Robert Lloyd (then at One World Trust), Sarah Mulley (Institute for Public Policy Research, formerly Debt Relief International and the UK Advocacy Network) and Chad Dobson (Bank Information Center). In addition, early scoping and definitional discussions were held with Publish What You Fund, Matthew Martin (Debt Relief International/Development Finance International), Martin Tisné and the Donor Aid Reference Group of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative. I am grateful to all for their time, insights and information shared.

<sup>11</sup> To borrow from the title of Jonathan Fox's (2007) article 'The uncertain relationship between transparency and accountability'.

[v]oters in donor countries do not receive the benefits of foreign aid directly and thus cannot monitor government policy in the same way, for example, they might notice the quality of their nearby roads, schools, or hospitals. Instead, monitoring foreign aid can only happen at great distances, and the primary beneficiaries cannot directly influence the incentives of their benefactors. And this likely reduces the interest and effectiveness of voters in monitoring foreign aid outcomes (2010: 7).

Thus, the Northern tax-paying accountability seekers cannot observe the effects of aid; and the intended beneficiaries of aid have no voice in the donor countries' formal political accountability mechanisms such as elections. Transparency in democratic political systems is supposed to help solve the 'principal-agent' problem, meaning the problem that arises when policy-makers entrusted with power to take decisions and perform duties on behalf of people abuse that power by acting in their own selfish interests to subvert policy intentions (Eyben, 2008; de Renzio, 2006). Transparency reduces the power of the 'agents' (the policy-makers) by making more information available to the 'principal' (the public, voters) so that they can ensure that processes deliver outcomes closer to their preferences (Christensen et al., 2010). The fact that aid providers and putative beneficiaries are distinct actors separated by large distances is seen to leave 'feedback loops'. These get in the way of the straightforward resolution of the 'principal-agent' problem and need to be closed via transparency initiatives tailored to these circumstances (see for example aidinfo, 2008).

#### **4 Expectations, assumptions and what the evidence suggests about impact**

While many cases and claims are made for what aid TAIs will achieve, available evidence tends to focus on the hypothetical or actual negative consequences of a lack of it, rather than on outcomes resulting from it. The assumptions about how positive outcomes would come about are little discussed and rarely explicit.

It is claimed that aid TAIs "matter for many reasons - from improving governance and accountability and increasing the effectiveness of aid to lifting as many people out of poverty as possible" (PWYF, 2010: 7). In terms of the various "cases" for social accountability set out in McGee and Gaventa (2010; 2011), the span runs from the "empowerment case" through the "democratic outcomes" case to the "developmental outcomes" case. The point



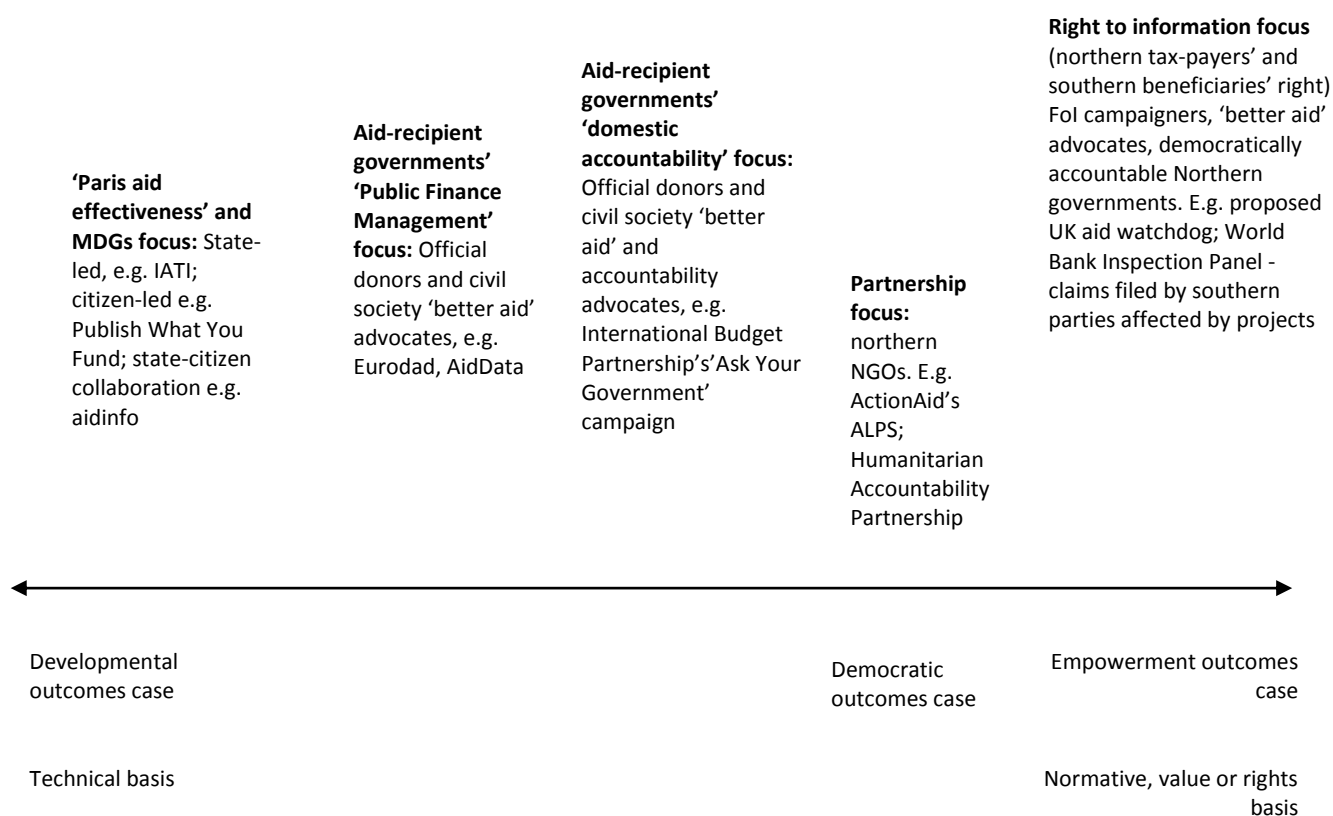
I would stress here is not that any of these 'cases' applied to aid transparency is worth more effort than any other; in given circumstances, any or several of them may be worthy ends to pursue. The point is, rather, that in keeping with the point made by McGee and Gaventa (2010; 2011) referring to TAIs more generally, that aid T&A would certainly benefit from more clarity and realism about the ultimate ends of initiatives, and more explicit exploration of how the various cases can be effectively combined within one initiative.

The new aid transparency movement and the official aid accountability school reflect a predominant concern with aid effectiveness, an important developmental outcome both in itself but also in its scope to justify aid expenditure to tax-payers in donor countries. The NGO accountability sub-field in the past has been more associated with empowerment and democratic objectives – for instance focusing strongly on promoting programme participants' active citizenship and making international NGOs' 'partnerships' with local Southern organisations more horizontal and genuine. Lately NGOs too have shifted attention to aid effectiveness concerns.

As aid is managed by both aid-givers and aid-receivers, a transparency and accountability lens can be applied to both the giving and the receiving (Mulley, 2010). Most aid TAIs so far come from the perspective of aid givers – official donor agencies, or INGOs in their capacity as donors or conduits of funding to their partners. In contrast, much budget transparency and accountability work (eg that reviewed by Carlitz 2012, this volume) relates to the overall transparency and accountability of aid-recipient governments, but rather than focusing specifically on their management of aid itself it focuses on their management of public budgets, into which aid flows, fast becoming indistinguishable from other sources of revenue. In new aid transparency movement and official aid accountability activities, and to some extent NGO aid accountability activities, accounting to those who fund aid - tax-payers, grassroots members and supporters – seems to dominate over accounting to those who receive it or in whose name it is managed and spent – marginalized people in the global South, whether users of aid-funded public services or participants in NGO programmes. While NGO accountability's beginnings lie in a strong imperative to account to partners and programme participants as well as to the NGOs' private donors and supporters, NGOs' accountability to institutional and corporate donors has gained ground more recently.

The diagram below presents in simplified form the range of focuses, cases and bases behind aid TAIs implemented at different levels by different agents, arranging them along a spectrum. The spectrum should not be taken to imply absolute separation between state actors and social actors: for instance many Northern NGOs try to enhance their development impact by strengthening their partnerships with Southern NGOs, and Northern governments' publication of aid data advances the democratic right to information as well as improving aid effectiveness via improved predictability.

**Figure 1: Focuses, cases, basis and actors in aid TAIs<sup>12</sup>**



The aid TAIs that seek to contribute to more effective aid and greater poverty reduction are based on a causal pathway that leads from increased transparency and more accountable aid to this ultimate aim. What many initiatives directly seek to produce is increased aid transparency. How that will lead on to accountability and the ultimate aim of more effective aid and poverty reduction tends to be assumed rather than explicit. These links are hypothesised, but are complex to prove and only weakly or partially substantiated in the aid literature.

Aid transparency initiatives aiming to improve recipients' public finance management are expected to directly improve budget management in recipient countries and thereby indirectly improve the coverage and effectiveness of public services to the poor.

<sup>12</sup> On the International Budget Partnership's Six questions campaign see <http://internationalbudget.org/publications/ask-your-government-initiative-slide-show/>; on Eurodad see <http://www.eurodad.org/>; on ActionAid see <http://www.actionaid.org/?intl=> ; on HAP see <http://www.hapinternational.org/>; on World Bank Inspection Panel see <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTINSPECTIONPANEL/0,,menuPK:64132057~pagePK:64130364~piPK:64132056~theSitePK:380794,00.html>. URLs where further information can be found on all the rest of the initiatives in Figure 1 are already given in footnote 10 above.

The same transparency initiatives are expected to reduce corruption and make recipient governments more accountable to their citizens, by feeding information either to social accountability initiatives or to horizontal accountability actors like Parliamentarians, audit institutions and the media.

‘Partnership’-focused initiatives relate to a value-based concern with unequal power relations in the aid system and more broadly. Moving further right along the spectrum, normative arguments rooted in a ‘right to information’ perspective come from some unexpected quarters including new technology users who advocate for open-access information of all kinds as public goods. Such positions are seen as self-evident and needing no justification by reference to expected impacts.

I have teased out here the direct and indirect impacts and assumptions that are expected to arise from the various initiatives reviewed: in short, their underlying programme logics, causal pathways or ‘theories of change’. In general, these are not made explicit in programme documents. The various positive impacts expected are seen as self-evident ‘goods’ that do not require articulation. In the absence of articulated expected outcomes and impacts it is hard to demonstrate impact, as it is not clear against what to track progress<sup>13</sup>.

In the 2010 review, detailed analysis was conducted of the sample of sources shown in Table 1 below.. The sample consists of two sources on recent aid transparency initiatives; two on official aid accountability measures; and three from the NGO aid accountability literature. Taken together they deploy a wide range of methodologies and methods for exploring the effect and impact of the TAIs on which they focus.

**Table 1: Sample of literature addressing impact and effectiveness of aid TAIs**

<b>New aid transparency movement</b>	
Collin et al. (2009)	Cost-benefit analysis of implementation of IATI standards/advocacy paper, produced by civil society research and advocacy programme, a ‘critical partner’ to IATI. Rare example of systematic attempt to quantify impact of continued non-

<sup>13</sup> Attempts to calculate costs of non-transparent aid (eg. Collins et al., 2009; Moon, 2010; Moon and Williamson, 2010) do offer some proxy for clearly-articulated expected benefits.

	transparency.
Christensen et al. (2010)	Research paper by academic ‘info-mediaries’ connected to Aid-Data, studying relationship between aid transparency and recipient government corruption levels.
<b>Accountability in official aid spheres</b>	
Martin (2010)	Background study for United Nations Development Cooperation Forum commissioned by UN Economic and Social Council. Explores how to enhance Paris principle of mutual accountability in official aid and make aid more transparent. Includes the first assessment of the effectiveness and emerging impacts of new wave of aid transparency initiatives.
African Development Bank (2009)	Institutional publication reporting on policy-focused research by staffers and high-level African government officials, into use of debt relief in relation to social spending. Covers aid transparency and accountability as factors influencing effectiveness of official aid and debt relief.
<b>NGO accountability literature</b>	
Clark et al. (2003)	Review of effectiveness of World Bank Inspection Panel (WBIP), an aid accountability mechanism introduced in international financial institutions thanks to civil society campaigners, and monitored by them. Assesses WBIP’s performance and impacts over its ten-year history.
David et al. (2006)	Situated, critically reflective account of one international NGO’s approach to improving own accountability and transparency to partners and beneficiaries (ALPS), authored by some of its architects.
Jacobs and Wilford (2010)	Presents ‘Listen First’ framework for systematic management of downwards accountability in NGOs, informed by review of existing NGO approaches.

Elsewhere I have reviewed in detail the methodological approaches and the quality and nature of the evidence of impact and effectiveness, presented in these sources (McGee & Gaventa 2010; 2011). Here a brief overview of these aspects will suffice.

Looking across the seven, few and diverse as they are, some broad ‘overview’ methodological statements can be made about the state and nature of the evidence and the methodological approaches used to gather and construct it. Evidence on the impact and effectiveness of aid accountability and transparency initiatives is scant<sup>14</sup>. There are few sources that attempt to assess impact and not many explore effectiveness of aid

<sup>14</sup> This finding applies also to the humanitarian accountability sub-field, from which NGO accountability work largely originates. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership’s 2009 report (HAP, 2009) closes by lamenting the lack of ‘proof’ of impact and committing the sector to remedying this.

transparency and accountability. The evidence is also highly diverse. This diversity does not necessarily constitute a weakness. It reflects the diversity of the field, the agents involved and the initiatives themselves. For instance, what amounts to valid impact information for a profound and slow process of organisational change such as Action Aid's ALPS makes no sense in relation to multi-country statistical analysis of the relationships between internationally recognized governance and transparency indices, and *vice versa*.

The scant quantity of evidence could reflect the newness of some aid transparency initiatives, but this is hardly the case for the NGOs that have long been pioneering aid accountability initiatives. The impact of their work is quite uncharted territory. Many of the NGOs involved even in relatively high-profile NGO aid accountability mechanisms and processes have not attempted to assess for external consumption what their own accountability and transparency efforts have achieved, in terms of better partnerships and more effective programmes. This may be because they prioritise 'downward' accountability to partners over convincing external aid skeptics or 'NGO-bashers'. Alternatively it may be because they frame themselves and their accountability efforts as somehow beyond doubt because of the value-based foundations of their organisations. But they are under increasing pressure to do the latter to assure their funding and safeguard their sector and their individual 'brand'. It no doubt poses conceptual and methodological challenges, but if these are met with epistemological and methodological clarity and care, they are not insuperable.

One basic but vital step towards improving the state of knowledge on the impact of aid accountability and transparency initiatives is therefore the recognition of the breadth of initiatives and approaches that this loosely-defined field comprises. This in turn calls for adoption of the principle of methodological pluralism and eclecticism as a starting point in evaluating, enhancing and expanding the evidence available, and the more general methodological principle that research design should flow conceptually and logically from the questions being asked. Cross-country statistical analysis of large data sets has proven useful for determining correlations and testing causal relationships between pre-specified theorised or hypothesised impacts associated with new-wave aid transparency initiatives. In-depth and often 'insider' qualitative case studies have been used for identifying in more empirical, inductive and open-ended ways the effects of 'deep-downward' accountability and transparency initiatives applied by individual NGOs, and exploring how these were attained, including via sensitivity to power dynamics and individual contexts. One case very

successfully combines methods, by including in the latter approach some quantitative aid (debt relief) data analysis, but strongly emphasises the explanatory powers of the qualitative policy and institutional analysis from the point of view of the research's policy relevance and utility (AfDB, 2009). Attempts to assess or predict impacts of contemporary aid transparency initiatives of necessity involve some methodological innovation, generally carried out in an explicit spirit of openness to criticism and inputs that could improve their quality, rigour and utility. A final observation is that the methods at work in each of the three aid TAI sub-fields are quite distinct, evincing little if any cross-fertilisation. What goes on within them is so different that this may be no surprise, but it is still likely that learning potential is being missed, through failure to analyse more deeply their connections and differences and extracting insights that might help in assessing impact within each sub-field.

## **5 Which Factors Shape the Impact and Effectiveness of Aid TAIs?**

The various sources reviewed place very different degrees of emphasis on *explaining* impacts as opposed to *detecting* or *predicting* them. Guided by a reading of relevant analysis and experience in the broader accountability and transparency field, and by the sources reviewed, I discuss the question of what contributes to impact, in terms of three sets of factors.

### **5.1 Interfaces Between State and Citizen Actors**

Both the literature and my key informant interviews, in keeping with emerging lessons from the broader literature on citizen-led social accountability and transparency, reveal the importance of the interfaces between citizens and state actors that social accountability initiatives create, and at which they are played out. That power relationships between aid accountability seekers and agents start off and remain unequal throughout, can be read off from the low degree and weak nature of enforceability and answerability in most cases. Yet the fact that a relationship is constructed and maintained at all appears key to effectiveness and impact.

Take the case of IATI, launched by DFID and its DAC peer group of official aid agencies, but called into being in large part by civil society campaigning. It is donor-led and, many civil society aid experts would argue, heavily driven by donor interests. But its steering committee includes civil society advocates the Better Aid network, PWYF, Transparency International and Civicus; civil society aid 'info-mediary' and research actors AidData and

Development Initiatives for Poverty Research; and the private philanthropic Hewlett Foundation, as well as a sub-set of its bilateral and multilateral official donor members (IATI n.d: 4). From its inception it has drawn extensively on the research and analytical capabilities of civil society allies, in particular aidinfo. According to one assessment(, the existence of a strong international civil society-led campaign in PWYF, "designed to ensure application of [the IATI] principles as well as a universal right to request and receive information about aid" is crucial to IATI's relevance and potential impact (Martin 2010: 20),. It is clear from other evidence reviewed (Christensen et al., 2010; Collin et al., 2009) that some of the potential powers of aid transparency initiatives such as IATI or AidData are only unlocked by non-governmental, academic and campaigning 'info-mediaries'. As compared to simple demand-side or simple supply-side initiatives and one-off encounters, the state-citizen collaboration that goes on over the interfaces of a multi-stakeholder process adds to the capacity, outreach, utilisation, legitimacy and authority of the initiative, and must be critical to its impact, whether or however this is measured.

Seen thus, what might at first appear 'self-regulatory' aid transparency activities by Northern governments with some degree of democratic accountability are rarely so *self*-initiated or *self*-regulating. The state, as the accountability 'agent', is behaving in a way that reflects actual or anticipated accountability demands of the social actors or citizens, as the 'principals'. Frequently, the 'principals' are taking a stance summed up by one interviewee by paraphrasing ex-US President Harry Truman: "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit".

Moreover, it appears that when aid TAIs establish accountability interfaces between citizen and state actors that have a global as well as a national or local dimension, this further enhances the prospects of impact. This proposition is hard to prove, but every aid transparency and accountability actor interviewed for the review counted their membership of a global or transnational aid transparency movement as a factor in actual and likely effectiveness. The WBIP experience (Clark et al., 2003) demonstrates how the transnational quality of aid accountability and transparency demands the engagement of differently positioned social actors in North and South in transnational strategies, adding a transnational dimension to the state-citizen interfaces. The WBIP case studies show on the one hand that the criterion that WBIP claims must come from directly affected Southern parties has ensured authenticity and focus and made the Panel a very citizen-led initiative.



Yet they also demonstrate multiple ways in which the work of transnational coalitions behind and around the Southern claimants has been vital: from raising initial awareness of the Panel as a recourse, to providing the necessary technical knowhow to claimants, to tracking the process through the machinery, to providing critique to the World Bank on the mechanism itself.

These observations about accountability interfaces show them to be different from the accountability interactions between CSOs and governments envisaged in classic political science theory and aid theory, of civil society or citizens' organisations acting as 'checks and balances' on their government. Moreover, for the case of donor-initiated TAIs which 'expect' information-hungry aid-watching members of Northern publics to engage with them, it is not clear that this has happened. IATI is rarely in the UK news and the UK government's 2010 announcements about MyAid and the UK Aid Transparency Guarantee have not been followed by extensive media coverage or prominent public interest. In the aid-recipient context, according to the aid donor ideal, citizens grouped together as civil society associations make good the imperfections or inequitable access inherent in political accountability mechanisms with social accountability mechanisms, thereby contributing to more effective and socially equitable outcomes to aid and public policy, spending and governance in general. While there is some evidence from other sources that 'civil society' does operate in this way and to this effect in aid-recipient countries (see for instance Barber, 2009), the evidence is piecemeal, and many assumptions remain unproven. On the other hand, PWYF as a civil society actor closely networked with governments, has become the centre of a lively and well-networked civil society/state aid transparency alliance.. What we can say from the available evidence is that what goes on at the interfaces between state and citizen actors is not, or not only, 'checking and balancing', but, often, quite complex and sustained forms of collaboration, in pursuit of a mutual interest or distinct but complementary interests.

## **5.2 Framings of aid transparency**

A second set of factors that appear to determine the outcomes of aid TAIs are to do with framing and, closely associated with it, incentives to engagement - what hooks the relevant actors in and keeps them there? Framing, in the context of collective action, refers to "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the

world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam et al., 1996: 6).

A powerful factor in the recent surge of aid transparency initiatives has been acceptance of the 'public good' framing of transparency overall, and aid transparency in particular. Aidinfo's cost and benefit work does not point unequivocally to huge cost savings, suggesting that public goods arguments around IATI may have proved more persuasive than cost concerns. Rights-based framings invoking tax-paying citizens' right to information clearly appeal broadly in Northern liberal democracies. The headway made by the contemporary aid transparency movement also owes a lot to peer pressure factors: the movement's framing of transparency as a desirable, assessable and rankable quality of aid donors seems to prove as persuasive to DAC members as the risk that they will undermine their own Paris commitments if they fail to respond comprehensively to advocates' calls for better and more accessible aid information (interview notes <sup>15</sup>).

International NGOs' downward aid accountability and transparency approaches are played out between the NGO (which occupies the role of 'donor' as well as aspiring to be a 'partner'), Southern social actors (e.g. local or national NGO partners, faith-based groups or producers' associations), and Southern marginalised communities. They are often framed as an explicit attempt to change the power dynamics between the NGO and these others, bringing the organisation's practice nearer to its stated principles of participation, integral accountability, empowerment and others<sup>16</sup>. This point speaks to the link between accountability and participation in aid relationships and dynamics. Where aid TAIs unfold within an aid relationship framed as a partnership based on empowered participation in all aspects, as the relationship between INGOs and their southern partners often is, beneficiary and user involvement will probably ensue naturally. That sort of empowered engagement cannot be expected in aid TAIs that frame partner organisations or primary stakeholders as hapless beneficiaries, or leave them out of the picture altogether.

Moving past the local partner organisations and looking further down the accountability chain, it seems evident that efforts to engage poor, marginalized people in

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Karin Christiansen, PWYF.

<sup>16</sup> The international NGO's invitation to these others to take up opportunities to voice opinions and criticisms and shape policy and practice is not always easily understood or taken up, as described by David et al. (2006).

Southern countries in realising the developmental or democratic potentials of aid transparency and accountability, need to start from awareness of these citizens' circumstances, *their* framings of the need for aid accountability and transparency, and the incentives and disincentives they face to engage with TAIs. This awareness is not readily detectable in the design of most aid TAIs reviewed. As an illustration of why this matters, consider the narrow conception of transparency that informs most new-wave aid transparency initiatives. Transparency all too often seems to be framed as the availability and accessibility of statistics, albeit timely, comprehensive and comparable statistics. In fact many activists and observers concerned about the uses and effectiveness of aid are interested less in the numbers than in the policies and guidelines, or even the politics and relationships, which shape aid allocation and orientation or establish aid conditionality. Arguably, until aid transparency initiatives shake off this association with quantified data and respond to a broader range of information demands and a broader set of accountability issues, aid transparency will risk remaining an area of "opaque transparency" rather than "clear transparency", to use Fox's distinctions (2007: 667). As such it may offer limited appeal to potential 'participants'.

### **5.3 Legal Frameworks and Institutions**

A third and final set of factors affecting aid TAIs' impact and effectiveness are structural and institutional, relating to political institutions, legal frameworks and organisational and societal characteristics. We know that one key way in which social accountability mechanisms and actors can have effect is by activating the formal political accountability mechanisms that exist and function, to greater or lesser extents, in variously democratic polities (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). Much aid within the purview of prominent aid TAIs today is government-to-government, so for aid TAIs to be effective and functional, formal political accountability mechanisms in donor and recipient countries need to work, domestic budget processes need to be fairly transparent and governments need to be responsive to the demands of their electorates. For all the potential of citizen-led and social accountability initiatives in North or South, it seems they can hardly enhance the transparency and accountability of government-to-government aid in the absence of functional formal accountability principles and mechanisms and transparent budget processes in recipient countries. By extension, they need to be deliberately designed to build and strengthen these formal political mechanisms and transparency impulses rather than supplanting them, . The fact that the field of budget transparency and accountability work (see Carlitz, this volume)

has expanded so rapidly attests to how often formal political accountability mechanisms do not function well enough alone and require social accountability efforts to activate them in order to achieve more accountable budgeting in aid-recipient countries.

It is clear from the foregoing that because of the role aid plays in the budgets of many recipient countries, aid transparency is needed if recipient countries' budgets are to become more transparent. It is also clear how the prospects of impacts from aid TAIs depend in great measure on the state of budget transparency and the right to information in aid-recipient countries, and on the right to information in donor countries. As discussed by Calland and Bentley (this volume), Access to Information legislation is a conducive if insufficient condition for Access to Information initiatives – related to aid, domestic budgets or anything else – to work well. The existence of such legislation and/or other related policy frameworks help to ensure impact from aid TAIs, especially aid transparency initiatives that directly and vociferously invoke citizens' right to information. The insufficiency lies in the fact that to make the right to information effective, citizen activism is often needed as a complement to the law itself, to actually trigger the sanctions and enforceability mechanisms it provides. , .

## **6 Conclusion: Beyond aid transparency to more accountable aid**

Most sources on aid transparency are very vague in relation to the theories of change, programme logics or causal pathways that underpin them<sup>17</sup>. The vagueness constitutes a weakness, and not only for academics or impact assessors whose analysis is obstructed by it. In the field of aid accountability and transparency, the links between inputs, intermediate outputs and final impacts are often articulated normatively or technocratically rather than descriptively or analytically, or not well understood or articulated at all, and far from proven. These attributes constitute a strong case for the proponents of aid TAIs to better develop, articulate or explicate the initiatives' underlying theories of change or causal logics.

If the current vagueness around aid TAIs' theories of change constitutes a weakness, it also constitutes an opportunity. Now that factors contributing to impact or failure have begun to be identified for TAIs in general and aid TAIs in particular, there is scope for future

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<sup>17</sup> Aidinfo, and the Open Budget Initiative of the International Budget Partnership which looks into aid transparency issues via its 'Six Questions Campaign', constitute known exceptions, in having clearly defined theories of change – there may be others. Both receive support from the Hewlett Foundation, which currently seems to lead the donor field in the sense of requiring partners to articulate theories of change (other donors require some aspects of these articulated in other forms, such as log-frames).

aid TAIs to purposefully incorporate these into their design and implementation. At the most obvious level, this would help address the problem of an "uncertain relationship" between aid transparency and more accountable aid. At another vitally important level, it would lead to the exposure and revision of untested and shaky assumptions about the appeal and 'friendliness' of aid TAIs to their putative users, especially marginalised people in aid-recipient countries.

Limited but probably significant evidence<sup>18</sup> suggests that for aid TAIs to succeed in effectively engaging Southern citizens or social actors – as users, beneficiaries or stakeholders who make representations to their governments, publicly-funded international NGOs or official donors - better understandings of these potential accountability claimants are needed. Approaches need to be grounded much more firmly in empirical experience about them and less in suppositions, from the very conception of the initiative onwards. Simply contemplating the width of the experiential abyss that lies between information-age cyberspace 'info-mediaries' based at US universities, and illiterate rural Mozambicans who could turn aid data into citizen-led accountability demands leveled at their local government, reinforces this point. On the one hand aid transparency 'digital natives', and on the other accountability-hungry development practitioners and the marginalized citizens with whom they work, might well be described as 'a solution in search of a problem' and 'a problem in search of a solution' respectively<sup>19</sup>.

Besides this need to underpin initiatives with more explicit, grounded theories of change and to treat critically the nature of the transparency that many aid-related transparency initiatives currently offer, there are other major gaps to be addressed. One lies in the design process: at the stage of designing the initiative, the question of how impact will actually be attained as well as assessed, needs to be thought through. Despite the recent vintage of many TAIs analysed here, this still did not seem to be happening at the time of this research, even for the relatively high-profile IATI. Another gap relates to the paucity of evidence in general about whether aid TAIs are having an impact and how. The evidence base needs building further. Given the abundance of untested assumptions pointed to and

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<sup>18</sup> In Martin (2010) and Martin (pers. comm.) Also in the aidinfo Nicaragua case study (Beech, 2010) which revealed low user awareness or interest about where funds spent locally come from and suggested that recent approaches to enhancing aid transparency needed much better grounding in such local realities in aid-dependent countries.

<sup>19</sup> Credit for this aphorism is due not to me, but to Janet Haven of the Information Programme at the Open Society Foundations, speaking at a meeting convened by the Accountability and transparency Initiative in San Francisco in October 2010.

the complexities and subtleties of accountability in the context of international aid relationships, the explanatory power of in-depth case study methodologies seems to afford great explanatory power for advancing understanding of impact dynamics in this field.

A final gap relates to the 'aid chain' (Wallace et al 2006) in which aid transparency and accountability are sought and constructed. One consequence of the nature of the 'aid chain' is that no matter how transparent northern aid-donor governments might be about the aid they give, they too are accountability seekers. Their transparency-giving efforts cannot but remain superficial until their 'partner' or aid-recipient governments increase their own transparency and accountability. That process cannot be activated and sustained by concerned donor agencies but, to be far-reaching and sustainable, must come about through the active engagement of partner country citizens. While this is recognised in the motivation or the rhetoric behind many aid TAIs, it does not seem to permeate their design and operational mechanisms.

This, then, is my argument: insofar as can be determined from current knowledge on the impact of aid TAIs, they are not adequately resolving the accountability challenges posed by the fact that aid accountability seekers are largely made up of very dissimilar, distant and disconnected groups of actors - Northern tax-payers and Southern intended beneficiaries of aid, plus aid-donor governments that espouse aid transparency. This Achilles heel, affecting most aid TAIs to date, will only be resolved and aid TAIs' objectives fulfilled when greater attention is paid to the purported beneficiaries of transparent, accountable aid and to their actual and potential involvement with TAIs.

Summing up, future attempts to remedy gaps in understanding of impact and effectiveness in the field of aid transparency and accountability need to take full account of diversity of the field in terms of actors, motivations and approaches; to work on the principle of methodological pluralism and eclecticism; and to keep in sight the complex and political nature of the aid relationship. More specifically, underlying assumptions about the full range of users and stakeholders in the South, whose interests most TAIs purport to serve, must be unpacked. Where are the accountability-seeking citizens on whom the aid transparency edifice rests? They seem conspicuous by their absence in the conception and execution of most aid TAIs. For aid TAIs to bear out their potential in terms of democratic, developmental or empowerment outcomes, there is a need to attend more closely to these people's demands, circumstances and everyday realities, and to do so 'upstream' of the

delivery of additional aid information or invitations to comment on aid projects already approved or completed<sup>20</sup>. Searching questions need to be asked. 'We' may have built it, but have 'they' actually come? Should 'we' have built it? Why would 'they' come, why should 'they' come? If 'they' built it, would 'we' come? These questions go to the heart of what participation, accountability, transparency, empowerment and responsiveness mean within aid relationships, and it is to be hoped that forthcoming aid TAIs embody more satisfactory responses to them. ..

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<sup>20</sup> This resembles the conclusion drawn by Fung et al 2007 for transparency measures overall.

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