

WORKING PAPER **305**

Power, Mutual Accountability and  
Responsibility in the Practice of  
International Aid: A Relational Approach

Rosalind Eyben  
May 2008

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## Power, Mutual Accountability and Responsibility in the Practice of International Aid: A Relational Approach

Rosalind Eyben

### Summary

Drawing on both theory and experience, this paper takes a fresh look at current efforts to strengthen mutual accountability in international aid relations. What additional possibilities become available when we conceptualise aid as a field of interdependent and dynamic relations that are played out in the absence of pre-established consensus or shared vision concerning desired changes?

The tendency is to understand mutual accountability as holding each other to account for performance against pre-established objectives. It reflects a perception of aid as a contract and exemplifies the dominant 'philosophical plumbing' of donor organisations, one that views the world as a collection of entities. From this *substantialist* perspective, mutual accountability is about strengthening mechanisms for regulating behaviour between autonomous parties. But such efforts are constrained by the global political economic structures that sustain the very inequities in aid relations that make mutual accountability so difficult. Can a complementary perspective help?

*Relationalism* understands entities as mutable, shaped by their position in relation to others. Relational notions, married to ideas of process and complexity illuminate the messy and contradictory quality of aid relations that substantialism finds difficult to cope with. Yet, arguably much of what proves with hindsight to be effective aid may well be an outcome of relational approaches, although such approaches are rarely valued or reported.

Associated with these perspectives are different concepts of power. Whereas mutual accountability requires identifying specific power holders, diffuse or relational power links to ideas of mutual responsibility and the effect we have upon each other and the wider system. In that respect the paper concludes with some practical steps that aid agencies could immediately start to take to encourage mutual responsibility. In so doing they might also make more effective the mutual accountability mechanisms that until now have been the sole focus of attention.

**Keywords:** substantialism, power, complexity, aid, accountability, results.

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## Abbreviations

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DGIS	Directorate General for International Cooperation (in Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (in OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MfDR	Managing for Development Results
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Fund for Women

# 1 Introduction

Do you know, it's really just astounding how many mechanisms they'll create if you let them.

A senior United Nations official in conversation with author, 12 June 2007

Even if we are unconscious of it, we all use theory for explaining the world to ourselves and to each other. Our usual way of thinking about the world and its problems shapes our practice. New ways of thinking offer the potential to make choices about practice. The Paris Declaration on Effective Aid offers an important opportunity for this to happen.

The Paris Declaration concerns a set of commitments by donor governments, multilateral agencies and group of aid recipient governments to make international aid more efficient and effective. According to this Declaration, effective aid requires recipient government ownership of the policies they are implementing; donors aligning their own policies and resources in relation to these; donors harmonising their procedures and strategies; a mutual focus on time-bound and measurable results; and donors and recipients being accountable to each other and to their own constituents for the use of resources and for securing results. Paragraph 50 of the Declaration states that partner countries and donors commit to jointly assessing 'through existing and increasingly objective country-level mechanisms mutual ... progress in implementing agreed commitments on aid effectiveness, including the Partnership Commitments' (OECD 2005).

The origins of this paper lie in an invitation from a working group of bilateral aid agencies tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Declaration. I was invited to bid for a piece of work to review

...The existing accountability mechanisms at international and regional level so as to get a more complete picture of what is taking place to promote mutual accountability. The study will consider strengths and weaknesses of existing mechanisms, opportunities and challenges and how mutual accountability at the regional and international level could be enhanced. It should consider intergovernmental organisations, both formal and informal, independent bodies and civil society mechanisms and the linkages between international and country levels.

DAC (2007a, paragraph 7)

Although I declined, I continued to reflect upon these Terms of Reference. Why was there so much emphasis on reviewing *mechanisms*? Of course it should not be forgotten that Terms of Reference such as these are the product of intensely painful and protracted negotiations within and between international aid agencies. The tortured language of paragraph 50 of the Paris Declaration (cited above) reflects such a process. Some donor governments are known to have strongly resisted the idea of mutual accountability, let alone monitoring it. That the existing discursive progress has been made reflects the persistence and creativity of those within international aid agencies committed to getting to grips with the problems of power that impede effective aid.

Such emphasis on mechanisms could be interpreted as a compromise that allows the work to go forward, provided it is represented as technical and not political. Yet, in these Terms of Reference exhaustive reference is made to all the available commentaries and papers (both official and non-governmental) generated by the Paris Declaration, and even in non-negotiated documents this emphasis on mechanisms persists, with a concern as to why these mechanisms are not working well:

Progress to date on mutual accountability at country and international levels is uneven ... many countries are only beginning to set up mechanisms and there is as yet relatively limited country experience to draw on to date ... There are concerns about the disconnect between policy and practice at the country and headquarter levels, the slow pace of change in donor practices and that donors face relatively weak incentives to improve the quality of aid with little regulation ... *There is broad agreement by partner countries, donors and civil society* [my emphasis] that further progress is necessary and that what happens at country level needs to be complemented by mechanisms at the international level.

DAC (2007a paragraph 2)

Thus, while the civil society network involved in monitoring the Paris Declaration not unsurprisingly emphasises the political nature of the Declaration and warns against its over-technical focus,<sup>1</sup> the network's demand is for additional or different – more inclusive or more radical – mechanisms than those that donor and recipient governments are likely to favour. It is a challenge within the paradigm.

Have all parties involved got stuck on an iterative treadmill, in which it is impossible to imagine other ways of conceptualising and therefore of tackling the issue? Is this an example of how those engaged in shaping international aid policy are involved in single-loop thinking, typified by a concern for getting the mechanisms right? Such thinking results in efforts to strengthen controls, rather than to step back and ask whether it is actually the lack of the right controls that is at issue. If this is the case, should it not be time to do some double-loop thinking? (Argyris 1978) This present paper aims to encourage such thinking by scrutinising the broad underlying assumptions that shape perspectives on aid relations: how we understand and act in the social world. Such assumptions are what Midgely (1996) calls our 'philosophical plumbing'. Like the pipes that go behind the walls and under the floors of our houses, this philosophical plumbing is so taken for granted that we have forgotten its existence.

I examine such plumbing for a two-fold interconnected purpose. I aim to make a theoretical contribution to relational sociology on the one hand and on the other, contribute to the effectiveness of international aid in reducing poverty and realising greater global social justice. While some of the discussion is theoretical, the

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1 'From Paris 2005 to Accra 2008: Will Aid Become more Accountable and Effective? A Critical Approach to the Aid Effectiveness Agenda?', draft for discussion at regional consultations – September 2007. <http://betteraid.org/> accessed 15 January 2008.

purpose is intensely practical. With that in mind, I propose some down-to-earth steps that donor agencies could take for achieving more effective aid, other than creating additional mechanisms.

### 1.1. Structure of paper

In section two, I look at the current understandings of mutual accountability as found in texts circulating in international aid circles. I conclude that while some understandings of accountability are in terms of a business contract and others contain a normative value, the philosophical plumbing is the same. It is a 'substantialist' plumbing in which we know or interpret the world as one composed of discrete units or substances. In the third, theoretical section of the paper, I discuss substantialism and contrast it with another perspective known as 'relational'. As the word indicates, this sees the world primarily in terms of relations between substances rather than in terms of the substances themselves.

How would 'aid' look from this viewpoint? It would mean us making sense of 'aid' not as just as a thing in itself – money and technical cooperation – but also as patterns of social relations that both shape and are shaped through the giving and receiving of money and people. From this perspective, it is these 'social connections and relations' to quote Karl Marx <sup>2</sup> that are what constitutes the international aid system – connections and relations that tend to get neglected through a substantialist focus on the resources and the architecture.

In section four, I look at an associated element of relational ontology known as 'processual' – an understanding of the world as emergent change. I consider the challenges of understanding continuity and change and explore the conceptual links between processualism and the intellectual network of complexity theories that are being introduced to development studies (Ramalingam *et al.* 2008). Section five moves from theory to experience and explores what a relational approach looks like in the practice of aid relations, illustrated from my work for DFID and from conversations and interviews with other aid practitioners. As a researchable proposition, aid that makes a positive difference may be more relational than is reported.

Section six introduces *power* into the argument and explores how different ways of conceptualising power are linked to how we understand and practice mutual accountability as distinct from mutual responsibility. Accountability, I suggest is more a substantialist idea and responsibility, relational. What are the prospects for the latter in systems of aid relations? The second part of this section identifies some practical steps that aid agencies could encourage their country office staff to take, steps that need not wait for the strengthening of existing mechanisms or the identification of new ones but that might in themselves help these mechanisms work better while at the same time shifting thinking towards responsibility as well as accountability.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a quote from Marx's discussion of 'capital' as a social relation (Marks and Engels 1962: 89–90).

A final introductory word. Bearing in mind the complex and assorted national and global political economy challenges that constrain productive aid relations, it could be argued that efforts to improve the situation are progressing pretty well, all things considered, and that in such circumstances it is a waste of time for busy officials and consultants to stop a moment to consider how they know, observe and therefore make judgements about the world. I disagree. If, after undertaking such a moment of reflection and analysis, some of my readers conclude that a substantialist perspective is the only one needed for achieving effective aid, still their time would not have been wasted in reading the present paper. They would have become conscious of what *is* their perspective and explicitly considered why and in which circumstances it is useful. Accordingly they will be better equipped to apply their theory in practice, with the additional benefit of being alert to the possibility that others whom they meet in international aid negotiations may be viewing the world differently.

I hope other readers may conclude that a complementary perspective can point to practical improvements in aid relationships. Richard Manning, at the time Chair of the OECD Development Assistance Committee and the principal architect of the Paris Declaration, has said that the key question is how the Paris Declaration will affect behaviour on the ground in developing countries (Manning 2005). In that respect, as a pragmatist, I believe a relational approach will prove its utility.

## 2 Meanings of accountability

To get to grips with the philosophical plumbing of *mutual accountability*, as expressed in the Paris Declaration and its associated actions, we must recognise the concept as part of a wider discursive and globally pervasive notion of accountability.

Accountability is prevalent, not only in the world of aid but more generally in the current discourses and practices of public and private sector governance, even achieving the status of a Reith Lecture series (O'Neill 2002). However, there is no agreement as to what it means – ‘a confusing term, one that readily confounds efforts at precise definition or application’ (Weisband and Ebrahim 2007: 1). In international aid practice its use by official development, as well as by non-government organisations, is widespread and varied. DFID understands ‘accountability’ as one of the three requirements of good governance and briefly defines it as ‘the process by which people are able to hold government to account’ (DFID 2006: 8). The World Bank’s Social Development Department describes it as ‘the obligation of power holders to account for or take responsibility for their action’ (World Bank 2004: 2). MANGO, a financial management advisory and training service for international development NGOs, defines accountability as ‘explaining what you have done and taking responsibility for the results of your actions’.<sup>3</sup> Accountability is a development buzz word that has a ‘capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, [with] .... normative resonance’ (Cornwall 2007: 472).

In connection with the accountability of civil society organisations, Jagadananda and Brown define it as responsibility to answer for particular performance

expectations to specific stakeholders (2006: 8). Answerability for performance is also how official aid agencies tend to see it, associating it with the 'managing for results' commitment of the Paris Declaration. Accountability is about holding organisations responsible for performance against pre-established objectives. As distinct from traditional financial accountability, the focus is on delivering outcomes rather than the correct allocation of inputs.

This kind of accountability is a response to what is known as the principal-agent problem. Because individuals are understood always to be in pursuit of their own selfish interests, the notion of principal-agent explains how policy intentions can be subverted by those designated to implement them. Thus 'Accountability denotes the mechanisms through which people entrusted with power are kept under check to make sure that they do not abuse it, and that they carry out their duties effectively' (De Renzio 2006: 1).

It is a way of framing organisational relationships that is derived from rational choice theory in Economics. Putting principal-agent theory into practice requires institutionalised positive and negative incentives to align actors' interests with the interests of those who have set the agenda but do not have the power to implement it. Changing behaviour through incentive structures has become so 'naturalised' in modern management that many people do not even appreciate it is a practice derived from just one among many conflicting theories that seek to explain social reality and human behaviour. As people have to be controlled or incentivised to make them behave, the theory's application leads to a focus on mechanisms, as for example in the context of international aid. 'The three key determinants of the functioning of accountability mechanisms are availability and use of information, mechanisms for monitoring performance, and the existence of adequate incentives for compliance' (De Renzio 2006: 1). More generally, what has been termed a new public management approach has been described by its critics as 'audit cultures' (Strathern 2000) and 'coercive accountability' (Blackman 2001).

Brown (2007) distinguishes the principal-agent notion of accountability from 'representative accountability' – the latter being the relation between the elected officials and the people who voted for them. What these two forms of accountability share is their focus on only *two* parties in the relationship. However, in many contexts – including the field of international aid – there are often more than two parties involved in a web of relationships, making unworkable a dyadic model of accountability.

However, the two-party model of accountability remains prevalent leading to multiple sets of dyads. Thus, in a concept note drafted by the DAC (2007b) on behalf of the Paris Declaration monitoring group, three kinds of accountability are defined: 'horizontal', between institutions of the state; 'vertical', between the state and citizens/societal actors; and 'external', between the state and international actors, including donors and treaty bodies.

‘Upward’ and ‘downward’ accountabilities are more commonly favoured by international NGOs and development academics than by official aid agencies. Upward is towards one’s donors and downward is towards one’s beneficiaries. While the idealised notion of horizontal partnership between donors and recipients is equally prevalent among INGOs and among donor governments, some NGOs such as ActionAid are prepared to be explicit about power and to struggle with the conflicts that can occur between upward and downward accountability demands.

Accountability is also associated with human rights. As such, an ODI paper proposes it can complement financial or results-based management approaches ‘with a concern for impacts on individuals, or ... the effectiveness of redress mechanisms’ (Piron 2005: 1). More robustly, the civil society network organising in relation to the Paris Declaration argues that ‘rights-based obligations should provide a normative and organising framework for accountability in the aid system’ (International Civil Society Steering Group 2008: 5). Piron observes that human rights *are* included in certain Memoranda of Understanding between donor and recipient governments as an integrated part of mutual accountability. However, she notes the understanding of human rights is a narrow one and does not cover economic and social rights, including the Right to Development that the civil society network demands. Rather, such agreements between governments tend to be about the protection of political and civil rights and are used as a good governance condition – if the recipient government violates these rights, donors can withdraw their aid (Piron 2005).

‘Accountability’ becomes a tougher concept when power becomes a central thread of meaning. This is particularly so when the focus shifts from legal mechanisms for holding ‘power holders’ to account, to one that is about struggles for voice and justice. As noted by the civil society network cited in the preceding paragraph, accountability shifts from a technical to a political project.<sup>4</sup> However, ‘social accountability’ is rarely understood in such sharp political terms. Instead, it is an approach ‘in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations [who] participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability’ (World Bank 2004: 2). The DAC note (2007b) cited earlier, comments that what it terms ‘societal accountability’ may be less universally acceptable to governments than ‘electoral accountability’. It observes that direct accountability relations between external donors and recipient country citizens are even more open to dispute.

That this is the case can be understood when we appreciate donors’ classical liberal perspective on the nation state and the social contract. Thus, ‘accountability is a consequence of the implicit social compact between citizens and their delegated representatives and agents in a democracy’ (World Bank 2004: 2).

This compact, which some of DFID’s Governance Advisers refer to as ‘the political settlement’<sup>5</sup> is pervasive in official international aid thinking. It is a perspective of political and social reality that understands historical change as an outcome of

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4 See also Newell and Wheeler (2006).

5 Author’s interviews in early 2006 in preparing Eyben and Ladbury (2006).

bargaining processes undertaken, as in a market place, and according to certain rules of the game. Thus accountability's popularity in international aid practice is a reflection and part of a broader philosophy in which all relationships are understood as contracts (Nussbaum 2004; Ranson 2003).

'Accountability' in this sense is also associated with the notion of civil society as the watchdog of the state (Mercer 2002). It needs watching because it can be not only corrupt but also tyrannical. Stemming from seventeenth and eighteenth century Western European political thought, what is seen as a fundamental challenge for society in sustaining its contract with the state is ensuring that those who exercise power can be held accountable and even punished.<sup>6</sup>

Once we appreciate these chains of meaning it is less surprising that, as a development buzzword, accountability can equally well serve as a watchword for human rights movements as for technocratic managers at the World Bank (Fox 2007). This apparent dissonance of meanings disappears when we recognise the concept's common root in a particular historical time and locality. As Cornwall comments, 'The apparent universality of the buzzwords that have come to frame "global" development discourses masks the locality of their origins' (2007: 473).

'Accountability' gets carried by international aid practitioners all over the developing world (Newell and Wheeler 2006). It comes to be used in other languages as a loan word, its meanings tightly associated with the international organisations that diffuse it (Cornwall 2007). When I worked for DFID in Bolivia, I was told that the literal translation of the word into Spanish, 'rendition des cuentas' ('rendering of accounts' in book-keeping) did not satisfactorily cover the broader threads of meaning of the term as used in that special branch of the English language known as 'Donorspeak'. Thus while conversations between Bolivians and international aid staff were generally conducted in Spanish, every now and then 'accountability' – along with other donor words such as 'ownership' – would pop up in its English form.

## 2.1 Mutual accountability in the world of official aid

I turn now to 'mutual' accountability as understood in official aid relations. Unlike NGOs, official aid agencies do not even attempt to use concepts of upward and downward accountability to describe their relations with recipients. According to the Paris Declaration, mutual accountability is understood as multiple sets of dyadic relations with recipient and donor governments accountable to their respective legislatures and citizens as well as to each other.

However, the DAC note (2007b) referred to earlier makes an important observation concerning the interdependence of these different sets of accountability relations; thus unless specific measures are put in place to prevent this, efforts to strengthen mutual accountability between donors and recipient governments may risk prejudicing domestic accountability relations:

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6 See for example the recent speech by the UK Conservative politician George Osborne, 'Recasting the Political Settlement for the Digital Age', 8 March 2007 (accessed 7 January 2008) [www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj\\_id=135408](http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=135408).

In a broader sense, however, it can be argued that mutual accountability should not remain an exclusive, opaque relationship between the executive branch of government and donors, but should be transparent and include a broader set of stakeholders from the partner country, as they are often directly affected or concerned from the quality and volume of donor support and the results achieved through policies, programs and services of the partner country. As strengthening domestic accountability is one particular obligation of partner countries under the core principle, transparency, public information and the involvement of a broader set of stakeholders related to mutual accountability processes would be one way of demonstrating how to honor this obligation in practice. In the absence of transparent and inclusive management of mutual accountability processes there is the risk that domestic accountability is not promoted, but rather undermined.

DAC (2007b: 4)

Governments and donors, as well as their constituent organisations, are subject to multiple accountability relationships, often with partners who have divergent or conflicting expectations that could lead to ‘multiple accountability disorder’ (Jagadananda and Brown 2006, citing Koppell 2005). For example, when donors collectively supply a significant proportion of partner country government resources, a government’s accountability to the donors may be at the expense of downward accountability to its citizens, who may have very different points of view among themselves of what they expect from their government. Furthermore, the resources-for-results bargain runs into difficulties because donor governments are rarely prepared to commit taxpayers’ resources over a timeframe longer than three years. At the same time one might argue that asking recipients to deliver quantifiable results in terms of health or education within a fixed period of time is something that donor governments are rarely able to do in their own countries.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of this discussion concerning the achievement of results, the origins of ‘mutual accountability’ in the world of aid are significant. These lie in the efforts of some donors, led by the World Bank among the multilaterals and DFID and CIDA among the bilaterals, in persuading recipient governments to adopt results-based management. Eventually this became a formal ‘Managing for Development Results’ (MfDR) initiative, set into motion by the multilateral development banks in the margins of the 2002 Monterrey Conference on Financing. In 2003 the Joint Venture on Managing for Development Results was established, as a stream of activity within the DAC Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, incorporating bilateral and multilateral donors. This was followed up in 2004 by a conference in Marrakesh, to which recipient government representatives were also invited, and where Core Principles and an Action Plan were agreed upon. These principles will be familiar to many readers from the Logical Framework Analysis:

... the change in mind set from starting with the planned inputs and actions and then analyzing their likely outcomes and impacts, to focusing on the desired outcomes and impacts (for example on poverty reduction) and then

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<sup>7</sup> See a related argument (from a principal-agent position) by Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) about developing countries being required to ‘skip straight to Denmark’.

identifying what inputs and actions are needed to get there. It also involves establishing baselines and identifying upfront performance targets and indicators for assessing progress during implementation and on program completion.

(2004: 3)<sup>8</sup>

In Section 3 of this paper, I discuss the philosophical plumbing associated with such a mindset.

The Marrakesh document also notes that ‘Although partner countries and development agencies have different roles and responsibilities in development, managing for development results means that they each have accountabilities – to their own constituencies and to each other – for achieving development results’ (2004: 2).

Mutual accountability was incorporated into the Paris Declaration as ‘a closely linked pillar’ with MfDR (DACb 2007: 17). However, it has been widely commented that mutual accountability is the pillar least well articulated. There is a dissonance between the broad statement in the Paris Declaration concerning donors and partners being mutually accountable for development results, and the concrete obligations of both parties:

Specific partner country commitments focus on the use of development resources (inputs) and the management and governance processes required to enhance transparency and accountability. Donor commitments mainly relate to the nature and level of inputs (information on aid flows; agreed upon aid effectiveness measures.

DAC (2007b: 2, fn1)

Because of such concerns, the Joint Venture has been implementing a stream of work to clarify and strengthen the notion of mutual accountability.

The Paris indicator for the implementation of the mutual accountability pillar are mechanisms within recipient countries for mutual assessments of progress in implementing agreed commitments on aid effectiveness. By late 2007 this had been achieved in just under half of the recipient countries who are signatories to Paris. Government officials in some recipient countries are simply not interested in yet a further mechanism to spend their time upon.<sup>9</sup> In Vietnam there was found to be a low level of understanding of what mutual accountability means, among both recipient and donor staff (Bagai 2007).

A civil society network report in relation to Malawi notes arrangements such as ‘the Donor-Government High Level Group, the Donor-Government Sector Level Group, the Internal Government Dialogue Group, the Joint Country Programme

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8 The document from which this has been taken was downloaded from [www.mfdr.org](http://www.mfdr.org). The homepage informs the reader there is an MfDR results secretariat, but with no further information as to what the secretariat consists of, where it is based and who is funding it.

9 Personal communication from DFID staff member based in a country office.

Review (JCPR) and the Donor-to-Donor Dialogue Group' (AFRODAD: 2007: 27). The comment is made however that all these arrangements are human-resource intensive and that 'the main obstacle to realising the norm concerning mutual accountability is capacity constraint' (28).

In Cambodia enthusiasm for such mechanisms has led to a veritable alphabet soup:

The key mechanisms for mutual accountability are the JMIs and the H-A-R Action Plans. The JMIs focus on key actions which are assessed annually. In addition, the TWGs have their own plans of action with additional indicators which are reviewed in TWG meetings. Mechanisms are being put into place to systematically monitor implementation of the NSDP and the first NSDP Annual Progress Report (APR) is currently being finalized.

Urashima (2007)

It can be justifiably argued that just getting mutual accountability onto the Paris agenda has been a success, bearing in mind the continued strong resistance to the notion from some donor governments. Nevertheless, it can be disputed as to whether the next stage of the process is to find suitable mechanisms that move accountability on from answerability to enforceability of contracts as proposed by De Renzio (2006).

Even when enforceability mechanisms exist on paper, they will do little good when the power relations are very unequal – as I learnt following the time when I had been head of the DFID office in Bolivia. There, in respect to a multi-donor basket fund arrangement, I signed a contract on behalf of DFID with the recipient government in accordance with the international civil contract convention, established at The Hague. When thereafter DFID broke its agreement and reduced the amount of financing previously committed to, the Bolivian government did not take the UK to The Hague for fear of antagonising its donors (Eyben 2006a). Mechanisms by themselves will not address the matter of how power operates in aid relations. Even those international NGOs who want to implement downward accountability have not yet found the means to move beyond answerability to enforceability. 'Power imbalances between donors and aid-dependent countries are still very real. Most partner countries are still very reluctant to criticise donors for their conduct' (Aguilhas 2006: 2).

From a principal-agent perspective, De Renzio notes that 'Donors face only weak incentives to improve the quality of aid, based on reputation and peer pressure (i.e. being seen as a 'bad' donor), but little or no regulation or competition (i.e. bad donors being penalised, or losing 'market share')' (2006: 2).

By framing international aid as a contract between nation states (including on the donor side those multilateral development organisations funded by donor governments), the principal-agent problem appears to be insoluble.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, how would this problem appear if we framed it differently?

To explore that question I next examine two alternative ways of framing aid, one within the substantialist tradition and the other within the relational. I ask whether these can throw further light on the donor-recipient relationship and thus point to

possible changes in donor behaviour not taken into consideration by incentives-and-sanctions contractual model. I start the next section with a brief introduction to what I mean by framing.

### 3 Substantialist and relational perspectives: complementary ways of framing aid relations

The frame of a picture directs the eye to what is inside the frame, momentarily rendering invisible everything outside the frame. The procedures and activities associated with processes of socialisation shape or 'frame' our view of reality. The frames define what is thinkable, visible and doable. A new frame allows us to see things differently, imagine alternative futures and open up new possibilities for action. However, this is much easier said than done! Power intervenes.

We explain our experiences through certain frames – or 'interpretive horizons' (Haugaard 1997) that are shaped by power. Because the socialisation process is one in which our frames are being confirmed or rejected by other people, over time we learn to use only those frames approved by those with whom we are in relationship. Unless we are willing to appear insane or, possibly worse, simply silly and irrelevant, we generally choose to articulate that which we believe will be confirmed by others as good sense. Drawing on Foucault, Haugaard describes 'a regime of truth production' as the structural or historically created constraint that constitutes a local context or field of action in which what we say and do is either accepted as normal or, alternatively, is perceived as nonsense (1997: 169). Debates about future strategy become choosing among alternatives within the same frame, which have become so 'naturalised' that people forget it is just one way of looking at things. Thus we lose the possibility of even imagining there could be other ways of explaining social reality, and are consequently blocked from any purposeful attempt to change the status quo. Fortunately, the power of structure is not so all-pervasive that people cannot challenge it and mobilise others to create or popularise other frames and thus effect change.

The purpose of this brief theoretical introduction is to point out that in the context of official donor-recipient relations, the framing of international aid as a contract is so normal that it become naturalised and therefore not subject to questioning *in that specific context*. Despite this quasi-naturalisation of aid relations in terms of a contract, alternative framings do exist. Can these other frames help with the problem of making aid more effective?

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10 In fact, the threat of losing 'market share' is increasing through the arrival on the scene of new donors, notably China in Africa. However, in terms of accountability, the effect does not appear to be helpful for those who want international aid to support the reduction of inequalities and promote social justice. Ironically, it is making donors more responsive to what African government leaders want and is already shifting OECD concepts of development away from the 1990's emphasis on societal change and back to the old economic growth agenda.

### 3.1 An alternative frame? Aid as entitlement

Many citizens and their governments in recipient countries – supported by those in donor countries promoting rights-based approaches – prefer to see aid as an *entitlement*, to which they understand people in developing countries have a claim within the international human rights framework. Such an understanding has been resisted by donor countries during interminable debates over the Declaration of the Right to Development (Piron 2002).

In a paper largely dedicated to discussing why contractualist approaches do not satisfactorily respond to the urgent necessity of tackling global inequalities, Nussbaum proposes an entitlement approach as likely to deliver more promising results. She argues that the solution to these great inequalities can only be solved:

... by thinking of what all human beings require to live a richly human life – a set of basic entitlements for all people – and by developing conception of the purpose of social cooperation that focuses on fellowship as well as self-interest. Contractarian ways of thinking, especially the idea that we ought to expect to profit from co-operation with others, have untold influence on public debate.

Nussbaum (2004: 4)

Taking Rawls as a modern exponent of the social contract, she identifies three problems with his initial theory in relation to global social justice. These are, first, the assumption that there is no power differential between the parties concerned; second, that self-interest is the driving force behind the bargain, even allowing for the 'veil of ignorance; and third, that the contract is between nation-states – even when such states may be failing, corrupt or tyrannical. Although Rawls and others after him have diluted and improved social contract theory by adding the concept of universal human rights, nevertheless, overall the theory remains inadequate for promoting social justice. The notion of bargaining, which is the central to social contract theory, she argues leads to a level playing field mentality with no concern for equitable outcomes.

Drawing on concept of natural law of Grotius, the seventeenth century Dutch philosopher, Nussbaum proposes a theory of social cooperation as a basis for a global governance arrangement, whereby all individuals are entitled to meet their human needs and each of us have a duty to help others secure their entitlements. The final section of her paper proposes ten laudable principles that would shape such an arrangement, but it fails to discuss the practicalities of how these could be reached. As I shall discuss later, one of the advantages of a relational approach is that its attention to process encourages us to consider what can be pragmatically achieved at present, rather than construct ideal scenarios or Utopias, as does Nussbaum.

While remaining firmly a methodological individualist (indeed it does not occur to her to consider any other possibility), Nussbaum challenges the idea that individuals live by pure self interest; she argues we are naturally moral and seek to cooperate with each other. Nevertheless, because we are first of all individuals who then proceed to make relationships, collective action to secure universal

entitlements is problematic, something she notes that we have to work at and make happen.

A more radical alternative framing of international aid would be one that privileges an analysis of the relations between social actors. To explain this, I look in more detail at the differences between substantialist and relational perspectives, a matter central to this paper's argument.

### 3.2 Substantialist and relational perspectives

'*Substantialism*' is a term coined early in the twentieth century by Cassirer, a German philosopher. 'What is unchanging and essential in known reality lies before us, while all connections, which are established subsequently between the particular contents, form a mere addition of the mind' (1953: 331). A substantialist perspective primarily sees the world in terms of discrete entities. These are pre-formed, in the sense that the relations between them are of only secondary importance. It is a way of looking at the world which allows us to observe, classify and ascribe essential properties to the concepts we employ to organise our understanding (Eyben 2007a).

Christian teaching drawing on Aristotle is substantialist when it stresses the continuity of the individual soul, and thus contributes a fundamental element of philosophical plumbing in Western European thought as manifested in liberal political thinking and the methodological individualism that derives from it (Emirbayer 1997). Rational choice theory is predicated on such individualism. When one actor engages with another, rational choice theorists resort to game theory to explain the outcome from the interaction. However, methodological individualism is the foundation of other current theoretical approaches, notably what Emirbayer refers to as 'norm-following individuals' (1997: 284). These individuals, rather than being driven by selfish interests, commit themselves to live up to the social values they have accepted as their own. Nussbaum's entitlement approach to international aid is such an approach.

Both the contract and the entitlement approaches discussed earlier are informed by an understanding of people as autonomous individuals whose motives are internally driven. This perspective can be extended to complex social institutions such as firms or the state, which are treated as persons for the sake of the argument.<sup>11</sup> For example:

Like other social actors, states pursue multiple goals with limited resources. This means that the accomplishment of some goals must come at the expense of others. The efficient, i.e., rational, pursuit of state goals therefore requires that resources be allocated to a given goal only up to the point at which marginal benefits equal marginal costs.

Baldwin (1998: 141)

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<sup>11</sup> See Jackson (2005). Arjan de Haan (in commenting on an earlier version of this paper) mentioned how macroeconomists will invent entities in cross-country regression analyses in order 'to bring order out of chaos'.

The substantialist methodological individualism that informs this theory is prevalent in International Relations literature (Jackson and Nexon 1999). Units come first – be they ethnic groups, states or individual persons – and then ‘like individual balls on a billiard table they are put into motion and their interactions are the patterns we observe in political life’ (p293). It is this substantialist perspective that has dominated approaches to mutual accountability between donor and recipient states. Throughout the interaction the essential quality of the actors themselves remains fixed and unchanging.

Cassirer contrasted substantialism with another way of looking at the world which he termed ‘functionalism’ but in more recent literature is termed ‘relationalism’. This alternative perspective is one in which the totality is more than the sum of its parts – a musical composition is something more than the notes that constitute it because it is the relation between the notes that is what makes it music. Relationalism is a perspective in which things (substances) are understood and observed as they relate to or are a function of other things. The relationalist theories of modern physics and mathematics – Planck, Einstein – were for Cassirer current expressions of a school of thought that like substantialism can be traced back to ancient Greece.

*Relationalism* in the social sciences is a tradition that starts from the premise that social actors – be they persons or states – are mutable; they not only shape their social relation but are also shaped by it. Many social anthropologists are relationalists, considering individuals as inseparable from the relational contexts in which they are embedded. Anthropologists objecting to methodological individualism explain the connection between individuals and their social world as a simultaneous process of people making society and of society making people. What Bourdieu and others have described as the *relational* mode of thinking<sup>12</sup> ‘identifies the real not with substances but with relations’ (Bourdieu 1989: 15). ‘The primacy of attributional categories and other substantives [is rejected] in favour of dynamic observable processes in relations’ (Emirbayer 1997: 298). A relational view of power is not that it is a resource or a substance, one that different individuals or states possess in varying quantities. Power is conceptualised as productive energy that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by social interactions. As I discuss later, this relational understanding of power has implications for the concept of accountability in terms of ‘power holders’.

Thus a relational understanding of international aid would not see it as a *thing*. Rather, aid would be understood as a particular pattern of social relations shaped by context-specific and historically-derived configurations within the broader fields of power and meaning in global and local politics. An illustration of the difference between a relational and a substantialist understanding of aid is found in Edgren’s discussion as to whether aid is a catalyst (2004). He takes a relational view when arguing that it is not. A catalyst, by definition, causes a process to happen without itself being changed by that process. This would imply – which he suggests is

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12 Presumably to avoid confusion with the idea of functionalism in sociology, in which every element is understood to have a ‘function’, as in my undergraduate anthropology essays in the 1960s in which I wrote about the ‘function of witchcraft’.

patently not the case – that a donor is capable of intervening without being affected and influenced by the patterns of relationships, of which its organisation and staff are a functional part.

According to Swartz, substantialism is the more self-evident way of knowing the world because it starts from observing physical entities and then by extension attributes the qualities of an entity to what we experience but cannot observe, power for example or love. Thus our efforts to understand relations are obscured by the way we organise the world based on ordinary experience (Swartz 1997). However, this opinion is open to challenge when we appreciate that substantialism is not the more self-evident way of knowing in other cultural traditions.

Currents in Buddhist thought reject the ‘individual’ as a permanent self (Macy 1991). It explains the world in terms of relations (Kalupahana 1992). Strathern contrasts Melanesian relational perspectives with ‘Euro-Americans [who] think of individual persons not as relating to other persons but to society as such and to think of relations as after the fact of the individual’s personhood rather than integral to it’ (1992: 124–5, cited in Douglas and Ney 1998: 9). In Bolivia I was very much struck when a friend told me that she was not interested in me as such but rather in the quality of the relationship between us. Quechua and Aymara languages contrast in this respect with a European language such as Spanish which ‘is increasingly a language of objects’ (Ishizawa-Oba n.d.: 6). Desmond Tutu speaks of *ubuntu* as an African concept in which a person is a person through another person.<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore worth bearing in mind that while those raised in the Western intellectual tradition may assume – if they enquire into the matter at all – that substantialism is the commonsensical and globally prevalent way of understanding the world, this may be far from the case – with challenging implications for those negotiating aid relations. At the same time, we should be careful not to essentialise ‘other cultures’ as belonging to one tradition or another.

For example, substantialism is being increasingly challenged from within the Western intellectual tradition not only by the physics and mathematics that Cassirer discussed but also by the more recent developments in biological sciences – complex adaptive systems theory – as well as in the social sciences by feminist theories that interrogates the essentialism of fundamental social categories such as gender (Butler 1999).<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 Conclusion

Cassirer is at pains to stress that if we conceptualise our experience of the world in just one of these two ways, we will constrain our capacity to explain reality. ‘We

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13 [www.tutufoundationuk.org/ubuntu.html](http://www.tutufoundationuk.org/ubuntu.html) (accessed 9 April 2008).

14 ‘The relational or contextual point of view suggests that what the person “is” or indeed what “gender” is, is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations’ (Butler 1999: 15).

can cancel neither of them in favour of the other and exclude it from this complex [our world] but we can refer each to its definite place in the whole' (1953: 454). In practical terms, this means that for international aid to be more effective, we need to give equal significance to both perspectives, to think in terms of relations as well as entities such as mechanisms.

A relational approach, just like a substantialist approach, is not necessarily normative. In other words, it is about explaining how life is, not how it should be.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in an earlier paper I have argued that a relational understanding of aid as a gift, rather than contract or entitlement illuminates facets of life that substantialism obscures (Eyben 2006a). Theorised by Mauss, the French sociologist writing at the same time as Cassirer, a gift is a material expression of social solidarity. Mauss is conceptually challenging methodological individualism – 'an impoverished concept of the person seen as an independent person rather than as a social being' (Douglas 2002: xiii). Both Mauss' gift theory and Nussbaum's entitlement theory bring to the fore notions of morality – which, as she points out, are overlooked in contractual approaches. The concept of the gift offers however a richer theorisation of power as relational, rather than – as Nussbaum would see it – a resource. The gift is at one and the same time a material expression of potentially mutually transformative solidarity *and* of oppressive adverse incorporation into an unfair world. Thus, working with a relational perspective offers the prospect of making visible and therefore practically responding to the contradictory qualities in aid relations.

To explore further how this non-substantialist framing can enrich our approach with reference to the subject of this present paper, mutual accountability, the next section considers the intellectual and practical connections between relational/process approaches and complexity theory and the implications for these theories in terms of achieving results through mutual responsibility.

## 4 Process, complexity and results

As with substantialism, relationalism within social theory is not necessarily a theory of change. Its functionality could be the dynamo of an equilibrium model of society in which all relations are mutually supportive, existing to sustain the greater whole. As a political philosophy, conservative communitarianism reflects such a meaning. That is the kind of relationalism I learnt in my days as an undergraduate anthropology student when under Mary Douglas we studied the 'ethnographic present'. I had to move to another university to get to grips with ideas of how change happens. And change is of course integral to aid practice. Thus in this section, I explore how relational ideas when linked to concepts of process and complexity can contribute to outcomes that reduce poverty.

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<sup>15</sup> This is a point that I failed to clarify in *Relationships for Aid* (Eyben 2006c). I am grateful to David Mosse in pointing this out at a seminar on the occasion of the launch of the book in October 2006.

## 4.1 Change and continuity

'Process philosophy' understands the world as a state of unceasing emergent change, one in which patterns of relations self-generate new patterns. This is the philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus that privileges events over things (Rescher 1996). Relational and processual thinking are linked in an important study by the political scientists Jackson and Nexon (1999), who draw on Emirbayer (1997) to introduce such thinking to International Relations – as I am now attempting to do with reference to aid relations. They discuss some key concepts from relational and processual schools of thought that explain state formation and international relations in terms of interdependent events. I briefly consider two of these – process and configuration – that I find particularly cogent for the subject matter of the present paper.

The first is the idea of *process as a pattern* – generated and discernible over time – of functionally interlinked events. Processes exist of course in substantialist accounts, but they are attributed to the doings of a reified entity – an actor. It is a fallacy, argue Jackson and Nexon, to suppose that all processes must be thus attributable. They cite the relational sociologist Elias who observed that, when we remark the wind is blowing, we portray the image of an entity which puffs at will – as in the old maps of men with big cheeks portrayed at each corner of the world. But in reality the wind *is* the motion; there is no separate entity doing the puffing. And, even when in other instances it might be possible to postulate observable entities shaping the process, a sole focus on these entities may mean we lose sight of the emergent effects.<sup>16</sup> For example, if mutual accountability is studied as a series of separate actions by different entities – donors on the one hand, recipients on the other – one risks ignoring a process that is generating its own effects, not attributable to any specific actor.

An easy way to understand the difference between substantialist and relational/processual approaches is to switch from thinking about the world as a *noun* to understanding it as a *verb*. We focus on the effects of the blowing rather than the blowers. When we do this, it allows us to imagine that a process – for example, mutual accountability – is mutable in relation to space and time, as are the mechanisms established to promote it. In the field of business theory and practice a conceptual shift of this kind is already taking place – from studying organisations to organising (Scott 2004).

The second useful concept is 'configuration' or 'field', understood as a temporally sustained collection of processes, nested within or overlapping with other fields. Thus we can imagine a field of mutual accountability within a wider field of international aid practice which itself overlaps with a multiple number of other unbounded fields such as national political processes or global trade negotiations. Bourdieu explains the relative durability of an objective 'field' through the processual, socially generated action of 'habitus' which is our subjective

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16 I could suggest another example in terms of complexity theory to which I return later in this section. This would be the proverbial flap of the butterfly wing in Tokyo that caused the tornado in Chicago. It is not the butterfly that interests us so much as the subsequent effect produced.

disposition to think, value, feel and act in a certain manner within any particular field. It is 'habitus' that sustains a recognisable pattern over time, explaining why events repeat themselves rather than always generate change. Habitus is a form of power. It frames what is doable and sayable when acting. It creates orthodoxy (Grenfell 2004: 28). However, what is orthodoxy in one field may be quite unacceptable in another – as in the case of business studies having adopted relational/processual approaches as the new orthodoxy while these remain unorthodox in international aid practice. We are capable of thinking and acting quite differently in the various fields of practice that constitute our social relations.<sup>17</sup> Process shapes us as much as we shape process. Change occurs in a field of practice when people succeed in introducing a different way of thinking and acting from another field.

Not only does the observation of processes help explain stasis as well as change, it can also illuminate contradictions. For example, because the owned process of the Paris Declaration appears to be generating self-sustaining, un-owned processual effects, such as far too many international conferences and documents which are becoming a collective embarrassment, observers like me cannot decide whether what we are seeing is reinforcing or changing the status quo. It is very possibly both.<sup>18</sup> By empirically researching these processes – and the trends towards continuity or change – we would be in a better position to propose purposeful interventions – for example in terms of mutual accountability – to strengthen those processes we believe will deliver beneficial changes. Thus, in taking a substantialist perspective, one that ignores non-attributable processes and focuses only on things – actors and mechanisms – we may be missing a significant opportunity. The next section outlines specifically what those opportunities could be. However, before that, we need to consider how a relational/processual perspective would inform our view on results – which, as we have seen, in the Paris Declaration are closely connected with accountability. I do this by briefly looking at a body of theory intellectually connected with what I have been discussing so far, namely 'complexity'.

## 4.2 Complexity and emergent change

One reason people have difficulties with process as distinct from substance is its intangible nature. We can only spot process through its often unintended, self-generating effects. When everyone involved in some purposeful endeavour wrings their hands and asks 'How the hell did we get in this mess?' we are observing unintended self-generating effects. These are very commonly encountered in the world of international aid practice. Complexity theory posits that change is emergent. The system, composed of innumerable elements, continuously shaped and reformed through interaction upon each other, is constantly creating new

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17 'It is partly in such challenges [between different habitus] that fields evolve over time, although there is often resistance to fundamental change' (Grenfell 2004: 28).

18 Nevertheless, we must be alert to Bourdieu's (1993) warning that what looks like a significant change may be turn out to be an adaptation that serves to preserve the overall status quo.

elements that in turn may affect (loop back) and change those already in existence. This is an understanding of change that privileges *networks, relationships* and *process* (Cilliers 1998). Because of the complexity of the processes, we cannot predict all the effects that any of our actions may have on the wider system, or indeed on ourselves as initiators of the action. Small 'butterfly' actions may have a major impact and apparently significant ones may have very little.<sup>19</sup>

Scientific models of change in the natural world have influenced our ideas about societal change. For the last three centuries mainstream western thought has understood historical change as linear progression; specific causes produce particular effects in proportion to the significance of the initial cause. This paradigm of change assumes that it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result. Ormerod (1998 and 2005) argues that looking at society or the economy as a predictable machine provides an illusion of being in control, with often unintended and unhelpful consequences. Governments would have more impact if they were to revise their understanding of how change happens and adapt their own role accordingly. This would stop governments thinking that all problems could be solved in a predictable manner and assuming there was sufficient information available to inform the decision.

At a more theoretical level, in one of the most thorough discussions of complexity theory in connection with the study of social systems and structures, Urry takes a process perspective and emphasises the significance of events which are

... not 'forgotten' within the analysis of such systems. Complex changes stem from how agents iteratively respond to local configurations. Agents may conduct what appear to be the same actions involving a constant imitation of, or response to, the local actions of others. But because of what can be tiny adaptations of other agents, iteration results in transformations in even large-scale structures. Iteration can produce through emergence, non-linear changes and the sudden branching of large structures. Change can occur without a determining 'agency'.

Urry (2005: 243)

Chapman (2002), illustrating his argument with reference to the UK National Health Service, contrasts bounded with unbounded problems. The first are 'difficulties'. With difficulties there is broad agreement on the nature of the problem; there is some mutual understanding of what a solution would look like; and there are limits to what is required in terms of the time and resources required for their resolution. Unbounded problems, on the other hand, are 'messes'. There is no agreement about the diagnosis and therefore the actions required; no possibility of an eventual permanent solution because solutions generate new problems; and therefore no way of determining the quantity and type of resources needed. Why governments fail to achieve results, suggests Chapman, is that they insist on treating messes as difficulties, ignoring the wider effects of a linear

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19 When understood as a description of how the world really works rather than as a metaphor, social theorists provide a more elaborate and detailed explanations of complexity than I have attempted here (see for example, Cilliers 1998.)

cause-effect intervention in one just part of a complex system, for example what happens when a target is set for the maximum number of weeks a patient should stay on a waiting list before seeing a specialist.

Snowden and Boone (2007, cited in Guijt 2008: 250) propose four rather than just the two kinds of problem situations proposed by Chapman. These range from simple, clear-cause effect problems through to complicated (cause-effect knowable with expert input) to complex (cause-effect coherent in retrospect but not repeated) and finally chaotic with no clear cause-effect pattern established. With its use of planning tools such as logical framework analyses and reliance on expert knowledge, international aid practice represents itself as a field of complicated processes yet even more than in a national health service, observation indicates that more often it is complexity at play because there are so many collaborators involved in non-routine interventions with absence of consensus among them (Guijt 2008).

Complexity theory has begun to enter development studies (Groves and Hinton 2004; Morgan 2005; Eyben 2006b; Fowler 2008; Ramalingam *et al.* 2008; Guijt 2008). In identifying ten key concepts in what they describe as 'complexity science', Ramalingam *et al.* make the important point that complexity is best approached not as a grand unifying narrative but rather as a collection of ideas, principles and ways of interpreting the world from a variety of bodies of knowledge. Although explicit connections with the relational/process literature have so far been absent,<sup>20</sup> I find the practical utility of complexity theory is its connection with the relational/processual principles that I have been discussing above. On that basis I suggest what is useful for enhancing mutual accountability or responsibility in international aid practice is as follows.

An alternative to the notion of bounded nation-states and societies is to understand change as occurring in a globally interconnected social system through patterns of processes or fields. A relational approach requires recognising that the boundaries of overlapping fields shift according to one's vantage point and thus affect what any one of us might include or ignore in our observations of the processes within the field. For example, in mutual accountability, the problems we discern and the solutions we identify to these problems will depend on how we define the field within international aid practice. What Medd (2001) terms 'the ecology of ignorance' is an open system in which different ignorances leads to different possibilities for change.

Thinking about it thus clarifies why there are multiple causes, multiple effects and multiple solutions to poverty reduction. Anyone's diagnosis of a problem – such as

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20 A literature search on Google Scholar reveals surprisingly that the intellectual connections between relational/processual approaches on the one hand and complexity on the other are scarce. I found only one crossover between an application of complexity theory in connection with higher education policy and a reference to Emirbayer, namely Blackman (2001). As we have seen in its current western intellectual manifestation, relationalism owes much to post-Newtonian physics, to which those using complexity theory in the social sciences also refer (cf Urry 2005). On the other hand, relationalists do not appear to draw on the biological sciences theory of complex adaptive systems which, along with chaos theory, shapes much of complexity thinking in the social sciences.

poverty reduction – and its solution(s) is necessarily *partial*, because the information they possess about the complex system will be limited due (a) to their relative subject position to others in the field and because (b) ‘habitus’ will influence the boundaries of their knowledge and constrain them from perceiving other possibilities.

The trick is to introduce people to contiguous fields in which some patterns are similar and others different as this may help them more clearly discern what to do about their own circumstances. Thus at a workshop in Bangkok designed for donor and government representatives from four countries in S-E Asia, teams, formed on the basis of the countries in which they were working, were asked to examine cases from the other countries involved as a way of placing themselves in a different context where they had to struggle with another country’s problems. They subsequently returned to their own case study with a new perspective (Eyben 2007b).

Finally, from complexity theory I find useful the possible non-proportionality of input and outcome. It helps us search for non-linear connections that may result in changes taking place in unexpected ways and through unlikely actors in quirky spaces. It not only provides a stimulating intellectual challenge to the linear planning model that remains so remarkably embedded in development policy practice, but also offers a practical mode of organisation for seeking to radically change that practice (Urry 2005).

From this introduction to complexity theory it will be seen that, if applied to tackling development problems, the approach would be very different from that adopted by the Managing for Development Results Joint Venture initiative discussed earlier. Nevertheless, the interesting employment of a verb rather than a noun in the Joint Venture’s title may provide the possibility of finding or constructing common ground. First however, I examine how a relational/ complexity perspective challenges the Marrakesh/Joint Venture’s approach to managing for results.

#### 4.3 Whose results count?

In many of our routine daily activities, a managing-for-results approach to mutual accountability makes sense when we are tackling what Chapman calls ‘bounded problems’ such as the repair of a material entity – for example a family’s broken down car. If all the voices of the limited number of stakeholders are heard and their knowledge and views taken into account, agreement can be reached with little difficulty concerning what is the matter – namely a broken down vehicle, the level of resources required and who will find them, who will actually do the repair job and the time it will take to get the car back on the road. There is little likelihood of any major unintended effects, particularly if there is careful monitoring of the repair process by someone whom the family trusts. Logical framework approaches are helpful for tackling such problems *efficiently*. In a speech to the Novartis Foundation, the then Chair of the DAC, Richard Manning, gave measles vaccination in Africa as an example of how MfDR works well in the aid relationship, while then admitting that this was indeed an example of an easy problem that could be fixed technically.<sup>21</sup>

However, there is a risk to aid *effectiveness* when all problems are assumed to be of this kind and are managed accordingly. If un-owned processes, such as the spread of HIV AIDS, are treated in this manner, key events and trends become invisible, leading to a failure to understand and therefore respond to the continuities and changes in the field.<sup>22</sup> From a complexity perspective there are likely to be many different and competing ideas from a vast multitude of stakeholders (many with muted voices) concerning the nature of the problem – or even whether there is a problem at all; and on how to solve it – who should be involved in solving the problem, the kind and quantity of resources the solution will require and the time it will take. To use Chapman’s phrase, it is a ‘mess’ continuously reinterpreted through the interplay between ever-changing reality and our own partial knowledge and experience. It is impossible for any one observer to have a full picture. Furthermore and most importantly, power comes into play so that some observations dominate and become accepted as orthodoxy or ‘group think’.

The risk of managing for results irrespective of context in the manner described in the Marrakesh statement cited above is that it handles messes as if they were difficulties and processes, such as poverty, as if they were material substances. It is thus an approach that seeks to secure a limited set of agreed, time-bound and measurable results in circumstances of self-generating, non-attributable processes of complexity in which any one of us can only have a partial view because of our relative subject position, made worse by power that privileges some viewpoints to crowd out others. For example, the insistence on baseline information as a prerequisite for judging whether the desired change has been achieved leads to decisions to opt for some results rather than others, namely those for which information is already available, that availability itself being a product of power in terms of prior choices having been made as to what is meaningful or relevant knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of aid, relational power produces perverse consequences in which the orthodox perspective confirms previously-held convictions. Evidence is sought to check that one is still on track, not to ask whether there are other tracks. Alternative ways of understanding and tackling problems are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. For example, what appears to be policy dialogue between donor and recipient may be nothing more than ‘group think’, and other parts of the recipient government may not sufficiently influence the conversation. To secure support for their point of view, donors may seek to construct some parts of recipient

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21 This admission was in response to my speaking just before him with reference to bounded and unbounded problems.

22 ‘Field’ in the sense of Bourdieu’s configuration of power relations (1993) – not in the aid workers’ sense of ‘the coal face’.

23 At a recent meeting of international aid agency staff, I was told of an incident in a sub-Saharan African country where donors were negotiating with the Ministry of Finance in terms of what results should be included in the Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) against which donors would provide budget support. One person wanted to include in the PAF an increase in female adult literacy as the PAF’s only result relating to gender equality. However, as there was no baseline data available as to the prevalence of illiteracy among adult women, this result was dropped from the PAF.

governments – such as Ministries of Finance – in their own image and it is with those parts that they may spend most of their time. Arguably many capacity development initiatives achieve such an outcome and result in senior government officials securing appointments as staff members of an international finance institution such as the IMF. At the same time, the new mechanism of Performance Assessment Frameworks and budget support groups are involving donors more in micro-management of policy decisions than in the former times when they imposed conditions from a distance. This makes it even harder than before for them to admit mistakes and learn from them (Booth *et al.* 2005). The consequence is that those who are using alternative framings become muted voices in the official meetings and consultations related to the pursuit of effective aid.

At the same time, what is muted or heterodox in that context may be orthodox in another, contiguous non-aid context. Staff and many consultants working for international agencies are full-time professionals working within only one specific self-referential context, the management of international aid. Their recipient government counterparts (other than perhaps those in the relevant aid management units of Ministries of Finance) only occasionally enter the world of aid management. While they may learn to switch orthodoxies as they move back and forth between these worlds, they may be less likely to ‘naturalise’ the framing of aid as a contract. They are more liable to treat the whole relationship in a more sceptical manner. This might explain the anecdotal reports that donor staff in recipient countries are finding it very hard to convince their counterparts of the value of ‘mutual accountability’.

While many may learn to articulate orthodoxy in the field of aid, they are also responding to and reproducing societal processes in other contiguous and connected fields, thus unintentionally producing complexity and unpredictability in aid relationships. This illustrates how the procedural and organisational changes associated with managing for results may trigger unintended effects. One learns to do what is required – through medium-term expenditure frameworks and performance matrices – to sustain the aid relationship and the benefits flowing from it. One may go through the motions of imposed procedures but not internalise their logic or the values underlying them. In such a case, the more emphasis given to controls and the measuring of performance, the greater the likelihood of deviance and secrecy, which – as we know from the many studies of centrally planned economies – may produce perverse effects and unwished-for consequences.

Many of these ideas are beginning to influencing domestic policy approaches of donor governments where accountability to their citizens is obliging them to stay in contact with a complex reality, revealing the unhelpful process effects of a managing for results approach. However, aid ministries of donor governments such as DFID are increasingly less in touch with on-the-ground reality (OECD 2006a). A partial perspective becomes a blinkered one. When we recognise that power influences whose ideas count and what is deemed a ‘result’, opportunities can be opened up for dialogue and learning based on the recognition that diverse perspectives and voices need to be taken into account for effective aid. In the next section, I consider how such an approach might look in grounded practice

through proposing some exploratory principles and then discussing the extent to which the application of such principles may be more common than are recorded and how the invisibility of relationalism is possibly attributable to dominant discourses of accountability.

## 5 A relational approach to aid

No one of us is either a substantialist or relationalist. Aid practitioners mix and match these different perspectives – referring to the aid system as well architecture, of processes as well as outcomes. Nevertheless, because substantialist thought has tended to dominate discourses about aid, we may not be recognising or sufficiently valuing those approaches that are relational and emergent, even when using them. Drawing on my own experience of what I observed while working for DFID in Latin America,<sup>24</sup> I have identified a far from exhaustive list of some ways of working that I have come since to appreciate as ‘relational’ and ‘processual’. These are:

- Decentralised decision-making
- Multiple diagnoses and solutions
- Messy partnerships
- Privileging muted voices
- Political disagreement and debate
- Planned opportunism
- Capacity development as energy

As we shall see from my examples below, these various ways of working are not magic bullet solutions to making aid more effective. Things did not always work out as planned. Recognising what does not work and why – and thinking how to do it better next time – is central to the reflective practice of a relational approach to aid.

Because the messiness of problems is more apparent the closer one is to the reality of lived experience, *decentralising decision making* to as low a level as possible seems an obvious step to embracing complexity and one that aid agencies appear to be taking on board. Ways of reporting messiness up to top management, in whose hands big decisions may still lie, still remains a conundrum. Top management is required not to insist on being told that issues are simple (Snowden and Boone 2007). When I worked for DFID in Bolivia, I found it difficult to resist the Secretary of State’s insistence that who was and was not indigenous – and therefore how we could tackle social exclusion – was a simple issue (Eyben 2007a).

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24 Between 2000–2002 I was head of the DFID office in Bolivia and also frequently visited DFID in Peru.

DFID in Bolivia supported two separate initiatives in support to people's right to identity. One was through financing a civil society consortium via the intermediary of an international NGO; the other was to finance the National Election Commission via UNDP. These initiatives each worked relatively well on their own terms. We were facilitating variously-positioned actors to tackle the problem according to their *different diagnoses* and consequent purposes, and thus supporting a variety of different kinds of actions and projects. Subsequently, in pursuit of the principles of joined-up programming and efficiency, DFID sought to bring the two initiatives together under a single financing umbrella in which the different parties concerned were obliged to negotiate with each other as to how to design and implement a single programme. This led to a loss of energy and innovation, with the negotiations dragging on for over two years.

At the same time, *'messy partnerships'* (Guijt 2008) allow differently-positioned actors to get a better grasp of systemic issues through mutual communication of their respective partial knowledge of the system. As distinct from the example given in the previous paragraph, aid agencies should not force people into partnerships but they can provide neutral spaces people can meet without any commitment other than to communicate with each other for the purpose of learning. This should be understood as a sufficient and entirely satisfactory output without any requirement for a consensual document or agreed plan of the way forward. For example, Rosario León, working as a consultant for DFID in Bolivia used different media, including paintings and poetry, to allow people from social movements and the police to exchange perspectives on their understanding of rights based approaches to development.

With UNDP, DFID funded a series of workshops in Bolivia on social exclusion to energise the government of that time's commitment to take practical steps on this matter. Each workshop aimed to discuss the situation of a specific 'excluded' group in Bolivia. With the facilitators we recognised the need to address 'power in the room' (see next section). Thus, in preparation for each event and to privilege what otherwise might have been *muted voices*, facilitators ran pre-workshops with civil society organisations representing these 'excluded groups' to help them speak with authority in the presence of Government officials, academics and international aid staff. This led to the workshop on indigenous peoples discussing the different mindsets that the participants identified as existing in Bolivia: the modern, Western mindset of donors and Harvard-trained Bolivian technocrats; the Spanish colonial mindset of the traditional ruling elite; the Andean mindset of the Aymara and Quechua peoples; and the Amazonian mindset of lowland indigenous peoples. Initially and mistakenly, we had wanted at the workshop to agree specific policy recommendations but we learnt that its main value had been in bringing groups together to explore underlying differences in the way we understand the world. However, the workshop on 'women' was less successful, in that when the women felt empowered to speak many of the men participants left the room and carried on their own separate conversations in the garden of the conference centre.

Aid agencies can facilitate *political disagreement and debate* as much as consensus for tackling messy problems. For example, DFID in Peru financed a national forum on health policy that aimed to bring together a diversity of points of

view from government and civil society. An important lesson for DFID was that selecting, supporting and thereby privileging particular groups and networks in civil society, and working across the civil society-State divide, proved more tricky and contradictory than envisaged, with DFID running the risk of being seen as partisan. 'This would have been even more risky had DFID not built up legitimacy and credibility from its earlier phases of support and was well informed on the backgrounds and political positions of the people with whom the agency worked' (Wilson and Eyben 2006: 127).

In many of its initiatives DFID in Peru responded agilely and flexibly to the rapidly changing political environment with the fall of Fujimori. Staff practised *planned opportunism*,<sup>25</sup> a way of working that requires the capacity to judge when an intervention might be critical in supporting a process of change, with active and horizontal communications between all those involved concerning what they are observing while learning from the changes occurring as an effect of the initial intervention. It is about modest, step-by-step actions with no certainty as to what will happen next. Despite formally including a logical framework in its Country Action Plan as a head office requirement, DFID took a largely relational approach to its programme in Peru, an approach later judged as a success story in a recent DAC publication (OECD 2006b). Complexity theory posits that self-organising networks rather than hierarchical structures are a key element in societal change (De Landa 2000). While the DFID staff had not consciously engaged with network or complexity theory, they were responsive to the potential that self-organising networks represented for aid practice. They invested far more energy and resources in supporting relational processes both within and outside the State administration than in formal institutions, with little interest in securing technical and measurable outcomes. Mark Lewis, the head of the office recognised that the logical framework, with its embedded linear logic, had its limitations for dealing with the complex process that many of its initiatives supported (DFID 2005: Ch. 4).

DFID was taking an approach to *capacity development as energy*, one that means paying less attention to what Morgan calls the 'conventional categories of tasks, functions and hierarchies' (2005: 14) and more to investing in relational processes and patterns. Morgan looks at this in terms of networks 'of social relations [that] form, centre around certain values or ideas and then unleash capacity in their participants. From this perspective, capacity is as much about energy as it is about skills and resources' (2005: 26–7).

The complex and contingent nature of social change and the impossibility of predicting that a particular event will lead to a given outcome suggests that a possible donor approach would be to develop long-term and consistent relations with recipient organisations and networks (including those within governments) which are pursuing a social change agenda more or less compatible with the donor's own values and mission. Rather than aiming to achieve a predetermined specific real-world change in which the recipient organisation is treated as an

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25 I am grateful to Andy Batkin for this phrase and more generally for his helpful comments regarding the development of my thinking on complexity approaches to aid.

instrument for that change, the focus of donor effort would be to support reformers' own efforts in what may be a rapidly changing policy environment. DFID in Bolivia undertook such an approach in supporting for four to five years an apex organisation – the Comité Enlacé – in its efforts to represent the views and perspectives of its member associations of self-employed workers during a turbulent political period with a frequently shifting agenda.

This way of working emphasises the understanding the local and changing context and the political relationships therein and thus requires a high value to be placed on aid agency staff. To what extent does aid contribute to progressive change as a result of flexible responsiveness by people on the spot? The former leader of the Comité Enlacé whom I interviewed in a return visit to Bolivia in early 2008, saw the flexibility of a succession of DFID staff as key to the support received and what the Comité was able to achieve.

Encouraging the tracking and reporting of unexpected events as much as of desired outcomes, and feeding this learning back into future decision-making is key to working in a changing context. Social audits and similar multi-stakeholder methods of assessing performance and impact reveal the organisational challenges in working with 'messy partnerships'. Although DFID supported the Inter American Development Bank in conducting its first ever social audit, in relation our own country programme in Bolivia, we failed to adopt a similar approach. Interestingly, it seems easier to persuade others to work with relations and complexity than to fully embrace its practical implications for one's own organisation! Having to explicitly recognise and respond to these implications requires internal changes which management will be reluctant to embark upon unless external pressure obliges it to do so. This may explain why the private sector which is concerned about its profits and 'highly reliable organisations' (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001) such as the nuclear industry, are adapting more easily to working in complex environments. International aid agencies have neither profits to lose nor power stations that might blow up.

## 5.1 A researchable proposition

Some readers may comment that what DFID or another aid agency does in Latin America is not applicable in countries such as much of sub-Saharan Africa where donors are more significant and influential actors. Why this should be the case is not clear to me other than that donors' preoccupation with managing very large amounts of money severely constrains their interest and willingness to recognise complexity at play because to do so would require a different response from the current one.

Nevertheless, as a researchable proposition, a relational/processual approach to aid may be more common than is made public. For example, projects and programmes may be reframed in terms of linear cause-effect outcomes for the purposes of official reporting. Efforts to work with complexity are either represented as results achieved within complicated circumstances or they are not reported at all. One agency staff member told me he was hiding from his line manager what he considered to be the most effective initiatives he had supported

in a certain country because it ran counter to what management had articulated what the programme was doing.

A UNIFEM official told me that she believed many of her agency's most effective country-level interventions in support of gender equality had not been reported because they concerned investing in relationships, rather than achieving the kind of outcomes that were included in logical frameworks. An interview with a consultant working on the DFID-funded project in Africa revealed that when completing an output-to-purpose review, DFID country office staff may have formally represented the project as different from how they knew it was being implemented in practice, just because the project could not easily be captured as a solution to a bounded problem. The project focuses on domains rather than outputs, exploring how formal institutional structures such as parliament interact with networks and identifying opportunities for deliberative encounters so as to strengthen the voice of marginalised communities.

In late 1997 a client oriented participatory plant breeding project was started in Nepal. It was designed to adapt and develop cost effective methods for improving rice varieties available to farmers in high potential agro climatic conditions. The project has had a wide range of positive policy and institutional impacts that were never seen as part of the original project design. However, these were not seen as goals of the original project. Furthermore, almost all of these impacts are a result of the social entrepreneurship of the local project staff, practising planned opportunism. Although, almost without exception, effective actions in the policy and institutional arenas were never planned (i.e. they were not in the annual work plan based on the logframe) once they proved to be effective, the logframe and annual plans were changed accordingly each year. Paradoxically, while the project has contributed significantly to policy, institutional and social inclusion goals, it has not documented or analysed how it played a significant role in these processes.<sup>26</sup>

A similar case was cited at a seminar in The Hague in 2005 on complexity approaches to aid effectiveness. Dutch development officials at the seminar mentioned an evaluation of their Tanzania District Development Programme that reported that while DGIS failed to achieve its specific logframe objectives it nevertheless produced very interesting and positive side effects in relation to strengthening civil society – effects that could not be captured through measurement and therefore had until then been overlooked.

Lastly, a consultant told me of the unexpected discovery of systematic sexual harassment in the DFID-funded project in India. A concentrated effort to tackle this problem led to a significant change in the way the project was managed and the consultant volunteered lessons learnt from the experience to help shape DFID's subsequent sexual harassment policy. However, none of this was ever officially recorded in project reporting.<sup>27</sup>

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26 I am grateful to Stephen Biggs for providing me with this example.

27 There is a striking parallel here to the reporting by the Soviet Union of collectivised agriculture as a effective means for sustaining agricultural productivity while in reality it was the 'invisible' activities of the farm workers who invested their energies (and pilfered resources) not in the collective but in their own small holdings. By so doing and without realising it, their subversion was maintaining the whole system (Scott 1998).

These instances were given me by people who use a relational/processual approach, wholly or partially, in their own work. Missing from these are examples from the context of new aid modalities and efforts to align and harmonise aid. Analyses of these processes tend to use a principal agent framework to clarify the point that 'partnership' in terms of commonality of vision and equality of power is an aspiration more than a reality in the majority of aid dependent countries (Booth *et al.* 2005). Thus still waiting to be done are in-depth country specific studies through the relational lens of complexity to analyse the implementation of the Paris Declaration. There are, however, studies from other contexts which can throw light on what we could look for.

In the context of discussing accountability between differently positioned civil society actors, Brown (2007) suggests that the creation of mutual accountability systems involving many actors in poorly defined relationships – Guijt's 'messy partnerships' (2008) – requires approaches other than the dyadic mechanisms associated with principal agent and representative principles of accountability. He recognises that what could be termed mutual responsibility is difficult to achieve even among like-minded civil society partners. How relevant then are Brown's mutual accountability elements for official aid practice?

His first element is negotiating shared values and visions; this is how Clare Short and others envisioned the utility of the Millennium Development Goals rather than seeing them as targets for complicated rather than complex situations. Second, creating relations of mutual influence and trust, an element that is still a challenge when DFID, for example, tends to conceive influence as a one rather than two-way process. Brown's third element, refining strategies and complementary expectations, is fully incorporated into orthodox understandings and approaches; at the country level some serious efforts are underway in this respect through mechanisms such as Joint Assistance Strategies; as is the case also with Brown's fourth element, assessing performance and rendering mutual accounts. In Mozambique for example, independent local consultants have reviewed donors' performance against the indicators in the Paris Declaration on the basis of information that donors provide, the whole undertaken in a spirit of partnership rather than one of policing.<sup>28</sup>

Brown comments that his fifth element, fostering joint learning in the face of changing circumstances, succeeds when the organisations involved are committed to substantial flexibility for innovation and experimentation. Interestingly, this appears to work best between official donors and recipients in non-aid dependent countries such as Brazil and China where donors' resources are used for piloting new and risky initiatives in places where failure can be a source of learning without causing too much damage (Zhang *et al.* n.d.). In highly aid-dependent countries, donors' managing for results approaches based on a linear-cause effect theory of change combined with the new aid modalities of budgetary support appears to discourage governments from what Parsons (2002) argues they should be doing of facilitating learning and innovation at the

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28 I am grateful to Heather Cameron, formerly country representative of CIDA in Maputo for this information.

periphery. Current approaches to managing-for-results assumes that we are in control, that change is predictable – and that knowledge and evidence is objective and neutral rather than shaped by the more powerful, who decide what is acceptable evidence.

Brown notes that practising mutual accountability in this way ‘helps to accomplish shared visions and goals for multiple parties facing complex and changing problems’ (2007: 106). Mutual accountability as a process that becomes relationally effective if people work at it through critically reflective practice. Thus readers need not wait for the proposed research to be undertaken and published before experimenting with such an approach to mutual accountability. In the context of their own work, they could start straight away to explore the relevance of the ways of working discussed in the first part of this section. To do this, however, means recognising how power operates in the everyday practice of aid.

## 6 Ways forward? Addressing power in messy partnerships

Much of the debate ignores the quality of impact discussions ... to whom, for what and what outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

This section starts with a discussion of common ways in which power is conceptualised, explicitly or otherwise, in international aid practice and the implications for substantialist and relational understandings of accountability and responsibility. We may find it easier to address the problems of how change happens – problems that underlie the comment of my informant cited at the start of this section – should aid agency staff take power into account in what they do every day in their multiple relationships. I conclude this section by propose six practical steps for how to do this.

Power may be understood within aid relations in terms of three propositions:

- i Without reference to causality, institutional actors are observed to possess varied amounts of power and thus mechanisms are required to redress the balance; this proposition shapes a response to the problem of power through a contractual approach to aid;
- ii Such variation in the distribution of power is a historical legacy and when the more powerful pursue their own interests without due regard to the relatively powerless, they reconfirm that legacy; this proposition shapes a response through a modified contractual approach, namely that of entitlement;
- iii Power is not a resource held by identifiable entities but rather a diffuse process that enables and constrains action; this is a relational proposition that

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29 E-mail sent me by concerned official from a donor government.

shapes a response to aid informed by notions of the gift as an expression of solidarity and mutual responsibility.

Although, for the purposes of argument, I shall treat each way of framing aid as distinct, in practice we tend to articulate shifting meanings of aid that are derived from all three frames; this is the fuzziness of conceptualisation discussed at the start of this paper.<sup>30</sup> However, we may also emphasise one particular frame depending on context. For example, OECD Ministers for International Co-operation, in speaking to a religious faith group in their own country, might conceptualise aid primarily as a gift; they will emphasise the morality of aid and the importance of solidarity with those in need. At the annual meetings of the World Bank and IMF, they might emphasise the results/resources bargain from the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development. And should they be from a left-wing political party, they might include the concept of aid as an entitlement when speaking about human rights at their party's annual conference.

## 6.1 Power and mutual accountability

The *contractual* approach, whether based on self-interest or entitlements, is the favoured substantialist frame for aid. It is how most of those involved would like to imagine official aid relations working. The contract is understood as between states or multilateral institutions, conceptualised as autonomous actors with causal powers who can produce intended and unintended effects. Ideally, such a contract – for example the ‘performance assessment framework’ – consists of agreeing in advance on the intended results (e.g. more girls in school, reduced numbers of women dying in childbirth), the quantity of resources required to achieve these results, and the means by which the parties to the contract will know whether these results have been achieved.

The specific-self-interest version of the contract sees mutual accountability as a response to a principal-agent problem. Power is understood as a resource that donors have more of. The purpose of a strengthened mutual accountability is to redistribute power so that aid responds more to local priorities and is thus more effective (De Renzio 2006). Institutional mechanisms are the means to do this through incentives and sanctions that create a more level playing field. At its crudest, this approach focuses on what needs to be done without taking into account the history that produced the current power imbalance.

The advantage of a substantialist approach, which the notion of contract reflects, is its capacity to identify ‘power holders’. The attribution of power to specific actors is at the same time an attribution of responsibility for the consequences that flow from their actions. Yet does anyone have complete freedom of action? Be they individuals or institutions, they are always constrained in their room for manoeuvre through the historical circumstances in which they find themselves.

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30 For those familiar with Wagner, this point can be illustrated through reference to his use of *leitmotifs* when he mingles two or more leitmotifs together to express the complexity of an actor's thoughts and emotions.

Even if we build into our notion of action, recognition of the constraints of structure, it is still possible to imagine some actors having more power to do things than others. The fewer the constraints, the greater their capacity to change things. Thus, if nation states are viewed as persons, rich OECD states have more capacity and should therefore be more accountable, for making aid work better than the poor aid recipient states. In actuality, the force of 'power over' means that the current situation is just the reverse – the relatively powerless are those who are being held more accountable for making aid work (De Renzio 2006).

Why should this be? If structure is understood as a temporal process of social relations that configure the actors that produce the structure (Jackson and Nexon 1999), then each time a state actor with relatively greater freedom exercises that freedom in whatever domain of action, whether it means to or not, it reproduces the structural constraints from which the other actor suffers. To change this situation would require the more powerful parties in the relationship to alter their behaviour, not only by becoming more accountable donors but in all the other ways through which they sustain their privileged position. This is the idealists' OECD coherence policy agenda in which all a government's different policies aim to be mutually supportive in favour of global sustainable development and poverty reduction, for example, putting international trade relations on a more equal footing, reducing carbon emissions and cutting back on the export of armaments to developing countries. From a rational self-interest perspective, donor governments are finding this agenda extraordinarily difficult to implement, however much its advocates argue that in the longer term such structural change *is* in the rich countries' own best interests. We understand why this is so if we view nation states not as persons with a single interest but rather as patterns of shifting and oppositional relationships in an unbounded system. Because international aid relations are part of this wider system, it is hard to imagine mechanisms that can work effectively for strengthening mutual accountability between donors and recipients while ignoring the wider political economy.

The self-interest version of the contract framework would thus appear to leave us at an impasse for improving mutual accountability in the everyday practice of the here and now. This is because it seeks to tackle power imbalances in aid relations without adequate reference to the wider structural problems that sustain such an imbalance. Can a value-based notion of contract, as proposed by Nussbaum, move us forward? DFID makes the case for aid to UK taxpayers on the grounds of morality as well as self interest.<sup>31</sup> This might allow some shared vision of the greater common good to be added to the self-interest notion of the bargain, thus achieving Brown's proposed first element discussed in the preceding section. The Poverty Reduction Strategy and Millennium Development Goals initiatives at the start of the present decade were brave attempts to create such an element, attempts which now appear to have lost much of their impetus. In the absence of such shared vision, the logic of managing-for-results appears unassailable. Both parties to the agreement limit their contract to achieving something which both find advantageous in their own separate interests. You do it because it makes

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31 'In a world of growing wealth, such levels of human suffering and wasted potential are not only morally wrong, they are also against our own interests' (DFID homepage accessed 14 January 2008).

your citizens feel good and we do it because it brings us some badly needed resources. In such circumstances, the details of the agreement must necessarily be pre-determined (results-based), for on what other basis could the parties hold each other accountable?

Yet a managing-for-results approach, with its emphasis on efficiency and on the reduction of fiduciary risk, while appearing to defend donors from accusations of wastefulness jeopardises donor governments' accountability to those of their own citizens who attach a solidarity and moral value to aid and find this absent from their government's discourse. One way of handling this is to avoid what might prove to be an unproductive discussion of vision with recipients, while framing aid in terms of a bargain based on normative standards and objectives against which donors and recipients could measure each others' performance. For example, rights could be built piecemeal into medium-term contracts and connected to specific actions (Uvin 2004). This step-by-step approach might provide more solid and durable grounds than the moral vision of the MDGs that without this underpinning of standards are fading away.

Even taken piecemeal however, human rights standards are something which in practice both donor and recipient governments find difficult to meet. Donors resist the implications of using rights language because of the Right to Development that frames aid as an entitlement and not a discretionary gift, while recipients are suspicious that donors are invoking human rights standards to impose conditions on aid. And normative standards by themselves would not get rid of the power issues and political pressures on both parties (Uvin 2004).

This is the crux of the matter. *Mechanisms and standards can support and sustain processes of mutually agreed and desired transformation; they cannot create those processes.* That is the drawback of substantialism as the only perspective on the problem. A unique focus on things detracts attention from practical engagement with processes.

## 6.2 Power, process and mutual responsibility

So how does mutual accountability look if we switch to a relational view of power – power as process rather than a resource? First and foremost, the notion of power-holder, so central to the idea of accountability, disappears. It is replaced by a notion of power as dispersed throughout society and operating in all relationships. Power, understood as energy or capacity, can both enable social change and sustain the status quo. Because it is not a (scarce) resource in which if I have more, you have less, power has the potential to be infinitely expanding. In an interesting discussion of 'defacing power', Hayward (2000) argues that when power is not thus attributable to specific entities, our focus shifts to mutual responsibility to help each other participate effectively in shaping and expanding the social limits of what is possible.

Hayward's defaced notion of power understands individuals as inseparable from the relational contexts which shapes them. It is underpinned by a normative preference for cooperation rather than competition. 'Mutual responsibility' is thus based on a shared recognition of interdependence, a notion formulated in classic

German sociology as *gemeinschaft* and manifested in the political tradition of communitarianism, as opposed to *gesellschaft* and the substantialist liberal tradition of rights. Communitarianism assumes the prior existence of a shared vision of a common good (Mouffe 2005). Bearing in mind however that aid relations are ‘messy partnerships’ in which such a shared vision is absent, is there any practical utility to using notions of mutual responsibility associated with defaced power?

As Mouffe notes, dissension, division and conflict will not disappear. However, this need not mean that we must abandon mutual responsibility as an aspiration or guiding principle which informs our everyday practice. Feminist strands of political thought such as Mouffe’s prove useful here.<sup>32</sup> Through deliberative dialogue and other participatory modalities a greater number of people, including those who historically had less voice, may join the debate and secure an agreement that things could be done differently, amplifying our imagination to discern new horizons. Included in our aspiration to mutual responsibility could be the recognition of diversity through democratic sharing and participation.

A relational but non-communitarian approach to mutual responsibility would recognise the ‘messiness’ and contradictory nature of aid relations while responding to the diffuse nature of power that makes us each one responsible for creating the conditions in which a fairer world can be constructed. I propose six practical steps towards mutual responsibility. For each of these there already exist methodologies and ways of working that have been tested and developed in other domains of practice beyond that of international aid.

### 6.3 Some practical steps towards mutual responsibility

I consider in turn:

- i Encouraging diversity of views for tackling unbounded problems;
- ii Tackling the spatial operations of power in donor-recipient events;
- iii Highlighting notions of solidarity that broaden the circle of mutual responsibility for making aid work better;
- iv Mutual monitoring of aid relations;
- v Mutually assessing process outcomes; and
- vi Supporting double-loop, adaptive learning.

#### 6.3.1 Diversity of views

In aid relations we will find different perspectives on how change happens. These perspectives not only shape the diagnosis of what needs to be changed but also

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32 See also Adams (2002).

determine the parameters for effecting the change, thus identifying the nature of the anticipated impact. For this reason, there are methodological problems in determining mutual responsibility for aid effectiveness. It may depend on who you are and what you are looking for, as discussed in the earlier section on 'whose results count'. If such a premise were accepted, the mutual responsibility of donors and recipients would be to encourage and welcome a diversity of views among their own staff and among those they interact with.

The Paris Declaration is a welcome attempt to shift power relations between aid-giving and aid-receiving governments, with potential for more genuine partnership. At the same time donors must take great care that local, national and regional debates on what needs to be changed to improve people's lives, and on how to bring such changes about, are not discouraged through a misapplication of harmonisation and of results-based management. While there are some obvious arguments for better coordination and more efficient use of resources, a balance has to be struck between this and encouraging diverse points of view for solving complex problems. Both consensus and contestation are drivers of pro-poor change. If the former dominates, there may be a tendency to look only for a single diagnosis and solution, thus shutting out the possibilities of creative dialogue and the collaborative challenging of implicit assumptions about how the world works that hampers innovation and constrains imagination.

When, for example, a certain way of doing things is framed as 'best practice', dissenting voices may refrain from comment and thus from providing an alternative point of view that helps expose the complexity of reality, revealing that there rarely are quick-fix and off-the-peg solutions. In pursuit of the validation of diversity, in designing a study of four country case studies concerning gender equality and the Paris Declaration in SE Asia, I requested that for each study the researchers speak with a range of stakeholders in different relative positions to the case being studied, and in their report record and reflect on differences in views rather than seek to synthesise them into a single viewpoint. At the subsequent workshop in Bangkok that brought these stakeholders together, the existence of these 'not best practice' case-studies facilitated debate and disagreement as a necessary first step to exploring the potential for partnership.

### **6.3.2 Spatial operations of power**

For those who have regularly experienced the adverse effects of power in their lives, its operations in any gathering of people is very easy to recognise through physical changes in oneself, such as increased pulse rate. As with most observational skills, practice over time improves one's ability to observe power at work on others by looking at behaviour such as body language, as well as who speaks, who stays silent and who is checking their e-mails on their Blackberry rather than listening to some speakers. Mutual responsibility for effective aid requires systematically addressing the workings of power in the facilitation of donor-recipient meetings at all levels of engagement. Despite the increasing prevalence of sophisticated methods and skilled facilitators, it is still very rare, however, that any consideration is given to this matter, even at the crudest level such as creating space for women as well as men to speak. At a recent

international event to discuss one of the Paris Declaration commitments, out of 30 speakers there was only one woman, although about 40 per cent of the attendance was female. I have observed that women in such audiences speak proportionately much less in the meeting room, but at coffee breaks talk among themselves concerning all the things they would have liked to have said if they had not felt the workings of power constraining them.

The previously-mentioned final workshop in Bangkok (4.2) related to gender equality and the Paris Declaration was explicitly designed as a process for strengthening government-donor partnerships through critical, strategic and constructive reflection; through learning from one's own and others' experience, while recognising that what works in one context might not apply to another; and through using facilitation methods, to make sure everyone had time to understand the issue and that their voice was heard.

Such a process means that those already better informed about international aid practice (donor staff who work full time on the issue, as compared with government and civil society representatives whose focus of effort is on making change happen in their own country) – or for whom the language of the workshop is their mother tongue – must be patient and deliberately seek to include others in the discussion. The rewards are well worth the time spent. One workshop participant remarked that if the government-donor consultation meetings they usually attended had been designed in the manner of this workshop, there would be much greater potential for genuine policy dialogue.

With complex problems, mutual accountability for making a positive difference only works if the changing political, social and economic environment is continually kept under review, if different points of view are engaged, and if expectations are allowed to shift accordingly.

### **6.3.3 Broadening the circle of mutual responsibility**

Substantialist thinking informs the adversarial approach associated with the watchdog notion of civil society holding the state accountable. A relational perspective, on the other hand, is able to privilege diversity of views while at the same time seeking to involve civil society actors in shaping policy decisions, not just for holding the state accountable for autonomous decisions. From this perspective has been developed the idea of 'co-governance for accountability' (Ackerman 2004). Such an idea, extended to mutual responsibility for aid, implies a conscious effort to involve in the circle of accountability relations also citizens and the organisations that claim to speak for them, not only in recipient countries but also in donor countries.

While citizens in donor countries have a direct experience of their own health or education services which their taxes pay for, they rarely have any direct experience of the effect of their tax money in aid-recipient countries. They must believe what they are told by those with an interest in the matter – government and non-government aid agencies. Donor organisations believe that a perception of aid as being of low quality discourages citizens from supporting increases in the aid budget. The proposed response to such perceptions is to demonstrate what

money can deliver in terms of tangible results: so many bed nets or other 'quick wins'. The public receives a simplified and unhelpful impression of how aid works, one that discourages a reporting of failure.

Aid agencies have thus become trapped into making complexity simple. Broadening the circle of mutual responsibility means engaging with the media to facilitate wider discussion among citizens in both donor and recipient countries about the challenges of delivering quality aid, so that citizens can understand the difficulties and do not have false expectations as to what is possible. For example, a DAC informal working group on communications and the media is seeking to respond to the challenge of engaging citizens in more informed discussions about aid. Herein lies an important opportunity that could be further developed to broaden the circle of responsibility.

### **6.3.4 Mutual assessment of process outcomes**

Mutual accountability in aid relations is widely understood in managerial terms as accountability for performance in delivering agreed results. Some of the problems with this perspective in relation to understanding and making change happen have been discussed in the previous section. The emphasis on measuring targets, such as increasing the numbers in school, makes invisible the relational processes that can sustain real and durable change.<sup>33</sup> There is a growing literature concerning how to assess wider policy as well as project interventions from a processual/complexity perspective of change being an effect of relational interactions. It requires evaluation methodologies that focus on processes and relations, for example 'outcome mapping'.

Mutual assessment of outcomes from a complexity perspective emphasises 'valuing the policy intervention in relation to the alternative normative frameworks of the various stakeholders' (Sanderson 2000: 450) and respecting otherness and differences as values in themselves (Geyer 2003).

Such a perspective potentially challenges the harmonisation agenda of the Paris Declaration, unless this agenda can be converted into a more nuanced understanding of how, when and with whom diverse rather than harmonised assessments of outcomes are likely to make all those involved in the accountability relationship better able to contribute to solving the problems that international aid is tackling.

### **6.3.5 Monitoring relations**

A process approach would complement the assessment of outcomes by also assessing mutual responsibility for the quality of relations against agreed

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33 I am grateful to Dr Sulley Gariba, President of the African Evaluation Association, for the following example from Ghana. An impact evaluation compared results in terms of numbers of children at school and failed to take into account that the programme with fewer children in school invested in the process of setting up women's groups, that over time were likely to ensure that more children would stay at school than in the programme that did not invest in community relations.

indicators that could be regularly reviewed and widely commented upon. Because an emphasis on performance measurement can lead to mutual risk-adverse behaviour (Perrin 2002), compensatory process indicators might include 'preparedness to take risks', 'embracing and learning from failure' and 'willingness to change one's mind'.

Donor and recipient government staff could also be encouraged to develop such indicators at project/programme, country and international levels. Some years ago I facilitated such a process with Chinese Government staff working with DFID-funded programmes. Their indicators for a good quality relationship included DFID staff not being too serious or official, asking more questions than giving instructions, working directly with them to analyse and solve problems, and not giving lots of recommendations that are hard to make sense of.

The process should also generate information about the relationships between different actors, perhaps using a method developed by DFID staff in Brazil – the *tensionometer* (Guimaraes and Larbi-Jones 2005). I am sure that process indicators such as these are already being used, formally or otherwise, by those committed to making aid relationships work who have learnt from observing the practice of mutually responsible relationships. However, I am unaware as to whether any comprehensive enquiry has been made as to the extent to which this is happening, and the literature on mutual accountability stays largely silent on this matter.

### 6.3.6 Double-loop or adaptive learning

Current approaches to managing-for-results assume that we are in control and that change is predictable. In my introduction to this paper, I queried whether this approach has led to aid practitioners becoming stuck in an iterative single loop that blocks them from responding effectively to a largely unpredictable and dynamic policy environment. A donor agency staff member told me recently how she gets a performance bonus against achievement of her pre-set objectives for the year. There is therefore, she felt, a disincentive to respond to feedback and learn from others and make changes to her work plan.

Adaptive learning means recognising diverse realities and the existence of political relationships in which international aid is embedded. For example, indicators of achievement are not a technical matter; they need to be chosen through deliberation and dialogue with various stakeholders, encouraging differences in perspective. Adaptive learning requires both critical self-reflection and feedback from others through relationships of mutual accountability. Once again, as in my other suggestions, methods are already available for securing such feedback. For example, social accountability is becoming increasingly adopted in other fields of practice.

Adaptive learning probably presents the greatest challenge to donor organisations, because of their disconnectedness from their own citizens. It means developing an organisational and personal self awareness and a sound understanding of the power, position and biases that one holds in relation to others. However, the mutual accountability pillar of the Paris Declaration offers a

helpful framework for adaptive learning, because it offers an opportunity to mainstream a relational approach into the giving and receiving of aid.

## 7 Conclusion

I have argued that efforts to make aid work are handicapped by an over-reliance on substantialist ways of thinking. I have sought to demonstrate the practical advantages of explicitly integrating a relational perspective into the practices of international aid. None of us are either fully relationalist or fully substantialist. Even though the substantialist mindset may be officially privileged I suspect that a successful aid policy actor is one who is able to apply both ways of understanding the world. Thus I suggest that we would expect to find these two perspectives reflected in hybrid practices of mutual accountability and responsibility relationships – possibly most commonly in transactions within and between donor and recipient government staff at the country level, because of the more frequent challenges of different perspectives that such encounters will generate.

When we recognise that power influences whose ideas count and what is deemed a 'result', opportunities can be opened up for dialogue and learning based on the recognition that effective aid means recognising diverse perspectives and voices without, on the one hand making any prior assumption of shared common values, or on the other, assuming that everyone is just pursuing their individual self-interests.

A sole focus on *mechanisms* may render invisible possible and useful changes in *processes* that are confronting issues of power – changes that, if recognised, could be nurtured and strengthened. Recognising power as central to aid relationships allows for serious critical examination of the organisational cultures and practices that shape expectations of what international aid can and should do. It is equally important to make visible and tackle unhelpful processes that reinforce existing power relations and that may be hindering the effectiveness of mechanisms established to support mutual accountability. This is something that empirical research could investigate. In other words, for a change, we could switch more of our attention to observing relational processes rather than the things which the processes have generated.

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