

Executive summary

Development requires effective governance and institutions that can deliver. When institutions are held to account – whether by citizens or other state institutions – they deliver services better. Groundbreaking events like the 2011 Arab Spring attest to the importance of accountability in institutions for state-building and socio-political development. The development community will need to deepen its understanding of how it can best facilitate reform in line with societal demands and government capacity in the developing world.

Development assistance for accountability in developing countries has grown over the past decade in both diversity and volume. In this time various challenges have arisen:

- Developing countries' capacity has been strengthened – but unevenly.
- Information about government policy and actions is more readily available – but many people are still not sufficiently empowered or capable of acting on it.
- Citizens' voices have been amplified and, at times, have brought about change – but they are still too often ignored, dispersed, or lost.
- Reforms have been agreed – but not always substantively implemented; transformational change remains the exception.

A new approach is needed. Donors have tended to replicate accountability models that have worked in their home country; but these may not work in developing countries. A tendency to focus on strengthening specific institutions has caused capacity imbalances, ignoring the potential for reform offered by broad-based local alliances. Donors also appear to have struggled to link support programmes to the realities of the wider political context or to the informal “rules of the game”. And accountability may be undermined by too much aid: this can short-circuit the development of more legitimate, tax-based social and fiscal contracts between citizens and the state, encouraging stronger accountability to donors than to citizens.

There is growing recognition of the need for new approaches, but no broad agreement on what changed practice actually looks like. This orientation note therefore distils the findings of “work in progress” by the development co-operation and research

communities to assess donor policy and practice in promoting accountability in developing countries.

Strategic orientations

Understand the context

The accountability picture is fundamentally shaped by local politics, power and incentives in both formal and informal spheres. Development co-operation activities should be based on an accurate reading of the political context of accountability institutions and processes. This means understanding the context before developing the most suitable programming options, rather than applying standardised “best practice”. It also means building on institutions and processes that are already up and running effectively.

Look at accountability systems as a whole

Domestic accountability works as a system, involving a wide range of actors and institutions, information flows and patterns of influence and incentives. Balanced, targeted support depends on a fuller understanding of, and respect for, this accountability system. A “systems approach” can avoid supply-driven, top-down, blueprint assistance targeted only at formal accountability institutions. Instead, it can help donors to understand the specific country context and do much more to work “with the grain” of local institutions and reformers.

Decide where to focus support

Start with the core accountability problem to be addressed, then work back from it to the wider network of relevant actors and institutions. This reveals the stakeholders with whom to work, and means working with what is already in place, rather than supporting formal institutions which may not have adequate standing or influence. Develop creative approaches for supporting appropriate, “local” solutions.

Ensure balanced support that works with the links in the system

Working with wider accountability networks represents a significant shift for the development assistance community. Support broad-based alliances, where appropriate, which bring together a range of actors with common interests in reform. Provide support in ways that foster co-ordination and collaboration within specific communities. Carefully assess the causal factors and essential linkages that support reform. Clearly identify intra-dependencies and feedback loops among accountability actors that could be supported in the design phase.

Manage risk and achieve results

Strengthen the enabling environment to allow national ownership for domestic accountability to take root and flourish. Development assistance can facilitate information exchange and learning by bringing like-minded actors together. Realise the limits to the effectiveness of assistance on its own and accept that progress is likely to be

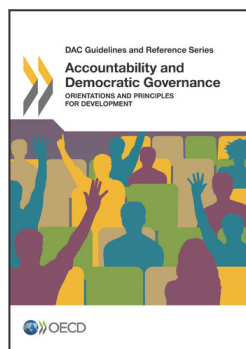
non-linear and erratic. Develop more effective results frameworks to 1) identify realistic programme objectives at the outset; 2) correctly gauge and manage risks; and 3) understand better what works and why.

Ensure development assistance does not undermine domestic accountability

Be aware of the overall magnitude of development co-operation in a given country, and be attentive to dynamics that may subvert or undermine accountability relationships between governments and their citizens. Adhere to the Paris Principles on Aid Effectiveness. Be transparent about how much development co-operation is being given and what for; ensure that development assistance is fully integrated into public budget systems; and take a “portfolio” approach to development co-operation programming in specific countries, combining a range of different development co-operation approaches. Finally, use development co-operation instruments that improve donor co-ordination and collaboration, to divide labour across the local development assistance community.

Conclusion

These strategic actions will require some changes in donor approaches, including different roles, new forms of assistance, adjustments to funding modalities and new approaches to risk and results management. There will need to be wholesale shifts in behaviour by parts of the development assistance community, moving outside conventional comfort zones and changing reflexes towards new approaches to risk taking and political engagement. While this poses challenges which need to be understood, managed and implemented cautiously, the risks of not changing may be greater.



From:

Accountability and Democratic Governance Orientations and Principles for Development

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264183636-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2014), "Executive summary", in *Accountability and Democratic Governance: Orientations and Principles for Development*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264183636-3-en>

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