

The ‘Right’ Results

Making sure the results agenda remains committed to poverty reduction

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Gebru Kahsay, with his grandson Aregawi Mulugeta, looking after his teff field in Adi Ha, Tigray, Ethiopia. Kahsay is a farmer and a participant in the teff crop micro-insurance pilot in his community. © Eva-Lotta Jansson /Oxfam America.

A focus on ensuring results can improve the effectiveness of aid. But this is contingent on measuring the results that matter most to women, men, girls and boys living in poverty. Donors must ensure that their focus is on the right results that will bring a lasting change and a long-term impact in the fight against poverty.

Summary

Donor governments are prioritizing aid 'results' in advance of the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HFLA) in Busan, Korea, due to take place at the end of 2011. But there is a real risk that their efforts will lead to a poorly designed results policy that could undo years of work to make aid more useful for fighting poverty.

In Busan, donors must focus on ensuring results that matter most to people living in poverty. It is crucial that they stand by the commitments they made in the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action, and go further to ensure that aid is more effective in bringing lasting change. But evidence shows that donor efforts to measure results could in fact pose a threat to achieving this goal, as a number of donors implement results policies because proving results and value for money to domestic voters is necessary in a time of economic constraints.

Donors must resist the temptation to prioritize results that they can count in the short-term but which will count less to poor women and men in the long-term. The risks and unintended but very real consequences of their focus on results must be taken seriously, or we will see history repeat itself. Over the past few decades, for instance, USAID was called on to comply to new Congressional requirements to report on development activities, which led to what Andrew Natsios called 'The Clash of the Counter Bureaucracy', meaning:

... compromising good development practices such as local ownership, a focus on institution building, decentralized decision making and long-term program planning horizons...¹

A misguided results agenda could mean:

- aid for more classrooms but less progress on literacy levels;
- more aid through projects and less through budget support and country systems;
- more projects that deliver in the short term rather than lead to long-term, lasting changes;
- more direct interventions and less time working with partners to build their capacity and take over programs;
- more time providing donor-determined direct services and less time focusing on empowering men and women to advocate for their rights and ensure their government provides them with the basic services they most require.

Ensuring that aid has maximum impact is a crucial step towards reducing poverty and inequality, and mutual accountability for development results is a key Paris Principle. But in order for Busan to advance a meaningful results agenda, national and international donor policy on results must prioritize the 'right' results.

Poverty is a symptom of power imbalances. The 'right' results are those that mean the most for people who live in poverty, including those who are often the hardest to reach such as women, indigenous peoples, and people living with disability.

To ensure a results agenda that really counts:

Donors should measure outcomes and impact; they must be more innovative about how they design and measure results.

To do this, donors should:

- focus on measuring outcomes and impact as results, not as outputs and inputs;
- ensure that indicators are sensitive to issues of equality and inclusion with special emphasis on gender;
- explore new monitoring and evaluation methods of measuring change;
- link outcomes and impacts within broader results frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals.

Donors should maintain or increase aid where it's needed, even if results are harder to measure in the immediate term.

This will require donors to prioritize the long-term impact of their aid, over showing short-term results to their own constituency. They should:

- increase aid to instruments that can be effective at delivering harder to measure results, such as budget support or empowerment programs;
- maintain aid in countries where the results of aid might be harder to measure, such as fragile states;
- proceed with caution on results-based aid as some mechanisms, such as Program-for-Results and Cash on Delivery, have not had a proper piloting phase and thus risk unintended results.

People in poverty should determine the results donors focus on.

To help ensure that they are focusing on results that matter most to people living in poverty, donors should provide aid in ways that shift the locus of accountability to recipients by:

- ensuring that results policy and frameworks are defined in collaboration with partner governments, parliaments, and civil society, not only by donors;
- building capacity to support for local results management frameworks. This includes strengthening the gender machinery of governments, to allow them to manage policies, priorities, and programs on women and men, and strengthen the capacity of civil society to hold government to account for their gender equality commitments.

Donors should give aid in a manner that helps rebalance unequal power dynamics.

Donors must remain mindful of the political context in which aid is given and work to ensure that it does not undermine the citizen-government compact, but rather helps rebalance unequal power dynamics. This is what will allow citizens to engage with government and donors to better define the results that matter for citizens. To do this, donors should:

- explicitly support commitments towards protecting an enabling environment for civil society at HLF4 and beyond, and measuring results in these areas;
- support and work towards the creation of an active independent civil society in recipient countries with special attention to women's groups and movements, and other organizations that represent the interests and amplify the voice of under-represented and marginalized communities;
- strengthen the capacity of governance institutions that would allow more citizen oversight of country systems.

A focus on results has the potential to improve the quality of aid and help achieve development outcomes. But there is a risk that donors will drive a set of policies that actually undermine this aim and their own commitments to aid effectiveness. The most important results are those that matter to people living in poverty, and there is still time for donors and the international community to ensure that they focus on what really counts.

Notes

- 1 A. Natsios (2010) 'Clash of the Counter-Bureacracy' Center for Global Development: Washington DC, www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424271 (accessed 26 September 2011)

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