Visibility Vis-à-Vis Effectiveness of Aid: Looking for the Third Way

Summary

Official development assistance (ODA) is constantly under pressure to justify its raison d'être. Hence, calls for more visibility are frequently raised at the headquarters level. At the same time, reports that such calls for more visibility can undermine efforts towards achieving aid effectiveness continue to appear, particularly from aid practitioners at the field level. With these different views in mind, it is time to think more intensively about visibility and its implications for the aid effectiveness agenda. First, a conceptual discussion should be started. Next, it is necessary to better understand the relationship of the two calls, one for "more visibility" and one for "more effectiveness". Can ODA be more visible and remain effective at the same time? Or does achieving one demand sacrifice the other?

Starting with the claim that visibility could be a valuable asset for promoting the aid effectiveness agenda, there are three main arguments to support this point. First, the implementation of the principles and commitments of the Paris Declaration (PD) and Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) – confirmed in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation – implicitly demands greater visibility of the agenda as such in the political and public domains. In particular, the PD requires "continued high-level political support, peer pressure and coordinated actions" (par. 8). Greater visibility of the agenda is therefore necessary to ensure its continued relevance. Second, visibility in the form of information exchange is a precondition for development actors to coordinate and act jointly. Third, agents have to be visible at some stage of the aid delivery chain for legitimising actions vis-à-vis their respective principals.

But the desire for visibility can also be seen as a potential risk for the implementation of the aid effectiveness agenda. Visibility can have adverse effects if the yearning for visibility at the agency level outweighs approaching aid delivery, according to the PD. Such "declaration-style" aid is defined as being "clearly aligned to country priorities and system, coordinated by the country and/or provided through harmonised or multi-donor arrangements, untied, predictable and transparent" (Wood et al. 2011, xi). Actions should be geared towards the achievement of substantial and sustainable development outcomes. "Declaration-style" aid is undermined if the desire for visibility incentivises a "free for all" situation, a relapse into the turmoil of "competitive, uncoordinated and donor-driven activities" (ibid., xv) that the PD set out to overcome by demanding joint action.

Looking at the bigger picture, is it possible to have more visibility and more effectiveness simultaneously? A clear "definitely maybe". To begin, it is not a win-win situation, considering that development actors tend to think of "agency" visibility and "group" effectiveness. Thus, might this be a case of "impossible geometrics"? Only if agents insist on input and activities visibility, which is the kind of visibility that hinders joint efforts the most. Might there be a third way? I will argue yes – in the form of an acceptable trade-off. If agents (a) present their efforts as contributions to jointly achieved development outcomes, and if agents (b) are willing to be creative, and to enrich visibility with meaningful communication strategies that explain eventual losses of individual visibility for the sake of functioning joint efforts, then losing a certain kind of visibility – input visibility – might be an acceptable trade-off for achieving the higher goal: aid effectiveness.

Introduction

Development cooperation is known as a discipline characterised by "buzz words" that often do not have clear definitions. Yet, few words in development cooperation are used as frequently as visibility, while lacking any type of conceptualisation. In fact, the term is loosely deployed in various constellations. With regard to the aid effectiveness agenda, most commonly visibility is used to justify actions and agendas: "By continuing to apply the principles of the Paris Declaration, we can [... bring] ever-greater visibility to development that works" (Eckhard Deutscher, former chair of the Development Assistance Committee). Visibility is also used as an excuse: "The few substantive explanations offered (...) for limited progress [on harmonisation] emphasise donor headquarter insistence on their distinctive channels for reasons of visibility (...)" (Wood et al. 2011, 27)). But often visibility is hidden in the subtext, which is probably its most common usage: "The need to demonstrate attribution [caused] some bilateral [development partners to adopt] direct modalities and some remain reluctant to adopt government systems fully" (ibid., 117).

Hence, it is time for (a) a conceptual discussion: What is visibility, and how is it established? Why is it sought, and why is it useful? And (b) to address what is the relationship between visibility and effectiveness: win-win, impossible geometrics, or acceptable trade-off?

1. What is visibility, and how is it established?

Visibility has two main meanings: visibility is the "state of being able to see or be seen" (Oxford), and the "capability of being readily noticed" (Merriam-Webster). Therefore, in context of the aid effectiveness debate, the term visibility can roughly be placed between transparency – the open exchange of information among development agents and towards their respective principals – and public relations of agents who seek noticeability.

Visibility can be established through the utilisation of any combination of signs, symbols, phrases and words (signifiers) that allow for being noticed. For example, the "Communication and Visibility Manual for European Union External Actions" identified banners, photographs, display panels, leaflets, press releases, press conferences, press visits, brochures and newsletters, web sites, commemorative plaques, vehicles, supplies and equipment, promotional items, audiovisual productions, public events and visits, and information campaigns as main elements (or channels) for its communication and visibility plan.

The chosen channels for achieving visibility depend on a number of mutually influencing factors, ranging from (a) the reason / motivation to be visible, (b) the target group, including its attention span, to (c) the phase in which the desire for visibility emerges. For instance, if visibility becomes an objective of development actors in due course of an immediate humanitarian crisis (phase), then aid pledges and commitments will be announced immediately to the public (target group), even though specific projects and programmes might still be in the identification and inception phase. However, most importantly, the choice of channels to establish visibility depends on the reasons / motivations of agents who seek visibility.

2. Why is visibility sought?

Visibility is sought for three main reasons / motivations:

1. To inform: on what is done and how it is done. Transparency remains a key challenge in development cooperation. According to the 2011 Pilot Aid Transparency Index of the Global Campaign for Aid Transparency, the vast majority of aid information is currently unpublished, and therefore not visible. Transparency offers an unsparingly open and realistic account of an agency's work, as well as of the policy field as a whole. Visibility – in the sense of transparency – must increase across the entire aid delivery chain so that the necessary information is at hand to analyse reasons for good performance or a lack thereof.

2. To present: agents want to and have to present their work. Deployed for presentation purposes, visibility becomes more delicate from an analytical point of view, because information is selected in order to present the agent's work in its best light.

3. To form perceptions: development cooperation is subject to politics, e.g. from the respective ministry, or opposition parties critically scrutinising the ministry's work. As any development agent has to gain legitimacy, fighting for hearts and minds *en masse* is a political reality.

Using visibility to shape perception is justifiable, but caution is required. Instrumentalising visibility for political motivations – such as securing a continuation of financial endowments, boosting the career of the presenter, or setting an agenda – can be ambiguous, because it conflicts with the transparency element of visibility. For the sake of "managing visibility" information is tailored, at times withheld, and sometimes manipulated in order to shape a favourable perception, or to avoid being perceived negatively.

Ideally, perception is built upon evidence that an agent's work and agenda are useful, relevant, effective and efficient. Yet, judging whether this is true remains one of the biggest challenges for analysts of development cooperation. S/he must scrutinise visibility (and communication) plans for content. Assuming the role of the "watch dog" the analyst has to differentiate between quality work and bogus work (or lip-service). S/he must help to establish transparency in those cases where visibility has not been utilised by its sender in concordance with its other main task: to inform honestly on who is doing what and why. The following box exemplifies the importance of such a role.

> **Box 1:** **Instrumentalising visibility: caution for the case "function follows form"!**
>
> Actively seeking visibility is closely linked to the choice of channels for establishing visibility. But caution is required. Not every signifier has the same potential to generate attention and to shape mass perceptions. Certain channels for delivering messages are more desirable for certain actors because they are more direct, have a high outreach and target emotions. For example, a five-minute slot on the evening news with a field report about a high-ranking official visiting refugee camps supported by attributable aid transfers, such as bilateral ODA, at the peak of the hunger crisis in the Horn of Africa in 2011 might have been the most desired form of visibility. Visibility established in such a form would help to achieve the prime political target of using visibility, i.e. to establish the widespread perception that funds are given in the most useful way to those in greatest need. But is such action really the most useful way to address the problems in the region? Or does "function follow form"? In this case, one might argue that the more noticeable relief effort obscured the fact that many donors and regional actors previously had ignored warning signals that a famine in the Horn was likely to occur without an early intervention, which, of course, would have been a less noticeable / visible course of action. In other words, the international community failed to take preventive action because it reacted to the wrong signals, including visibility. It reacted to emotional pictures of malnourished children, not to rational predictions that food shortages were likely to occur. To expose this flawed incentive structure – to offer the electorate full disclosure about what is being done, what has not been done, and what should have been done – is one of the main tasks of political analysts.

3. Why is visibility useful?

Visibility is a precondition and facilitator for the aid effectiveness agenda. As the implementation of the PD requires "continued high-level political support, peer pressure and coordinated actions" (par. 8), visibility can contribute to the implementation in various ways and at various levels: (1) visibility can support the agenda's relevance – emerging signs of "aid reform fatigue" have been identified by Wood et al. (2011, xv). This can be encountered by a broadly disseminated discourse about the merit of the Declaration for all actors involved. (2) Visibility can maintain performance and motivation: by highlighting good and bad practise, visibility can maintain peer pressure to keep a "free for all" situation at bay. (3) Visibility allows for joint action and coordination: without knowing who is doing what, aid fragmentation and duplication will cease to be addressed.

At the agency level, visibility is a requirement and a facilitator that assists development actors in doing their work: (1) agents need to be visible to legitimise actions vis-à-vis the domestic principals. (2) Agents need visibility to leverage attention: a good awareness campaign can convince sceptics that the "principled" use of ODA is having an impact.

4. What are the associated risks?

Effective development cooperation cannot function without some form of visibility. However, the desire for visibility can also entail threatening elements to the principles of PD / AAA. In particular, visibility undermines PD / AAA if it creates incentives for going solo that are stronger than the incentives to work in a coordinated manner. More precisely, PD / AAA is threatened if the desire for visibility sets the incentive for individualism / egoism of agents who then predominantly (1) "cherry pick" attractive projects, sectors, modalities or countries. This can cause fragmentation and a duplication of efforts. It can also create aid orphans, because it hinders a division of labour: cherry pickers rarely focus on balancing out the actions of others. (2) Pursue "quick wins" which are neither sustainable nor substantial, but are immediately presentable and attributable. The evaluative focus remains on individual inputs and outputs, rather than joint outcomes or impacts. This almost guarantees positive publicity (we achieved an enrolment rate of X) though it creates a risk-averse culture that undermines joint collaborations on fundamental problems that require long-term action (i.e. to address political patronage influencing teacher placement). (3) Account achieved results as their own, rather than modestly attribute own efforts as a contribution to jointly achieved outcomes. This is not only uncandid, but can also create a climate where the partners feel unburdened from the responsibility to help to deliver results in the future.

Put differently, the pressure to attribute – and to remain in control of perception formations by promoting (and protecting) one's "brand" – can threaten the aid effectiveness agenda. This can happen if visibility-induced egoism has the (unintended) consequence that it incentivises PD / AAA non-compliance in the form of debatable aid practices, i.e. the creation of parallel project implementation units. At worst, visibility mixes with other reasons, such as geo-strategic interests, and sets a downward spiral in motion where assistance remains (or relapses into) a one-way, donor-supplicant route, on which donors compete with each other and refuse to delegate power and leadership to partner countries. Donors do so (a) to remain in control of the assistance provided, (b) to assure that outputs are as forthcoming as anticipated, (c) to guarantee that their work is attributable and distinctive, in order to (d) present positive work to the domestic principal. This follows the intention (e) to form the perception of a capable development actor. While managing visibility this way may suit the political intentions of the agent with the domestic electorate, it may also cause ODA to become ineffective.

5. How could such risks be minimised?

I. Present your "principled" self

Agents should align the presentation of their own efforts to jointly achieved development outcomes. Any further information (about inputs, activities and outputs) is important with regard to the other function of visibility: to establish oversight of actors and actions (published, for instance, via the International Aid Transparency Initiative standard). However, in order to judge an agent's visibility management in forming perceptions (visibility for what purpose?), they should be assessed based on the question: To what

degree does the agent present its contribution to outcomes (visibility at what phase?) that were achieved with aid given declaration-style at the country level (visibility with what information, and at what level)? The messages development actors want to send can be tailored to target different groups (visibility for whom?) and their particular needs and attention spans. Yet, in whatever way noticeability is sought, information should be linked to the PD understanding of effectiveness.

II.   Your "principled" self is not inevitably unnoticed

Alignment and harmonisation lead to reduced input and process visibility, but that does not mean that agents are not noticed: e.g. in 2010 Sweden used country Public Financial Management systems in the delivery of 71 per cent of their bilateral aid for the government sector (against an average of 48 per cent), and undertook 42 per cent of their missions to the field jointly (average: 19 per cent) (OECD, 2011). Arguably, by sacrificing individual input visibility, the government, the government offices / Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation gained noticeability for their commitment to align and to harmonise.

III.   Accept the challenge: be creative

Aid effectiveness is established at the country level with an individually chosen mix of aid modalities, team compositions, etc. Inevitably, this entails that strategic choices will contain elements whose potential for visualisation is inferior to others: the potential of budget support for visual presentation is inferior to project aid; the potential of multilateral aid is inferior to bilateral aid, and so forth. Yet, this should be perceived as a challenge rather than an existential disadvantage. With imagination and creativity, a lack of potential to achieve visibility can be turned into actual visibility, without undermining effectiveness. Put differently, if something is not visible, make it visible. How? By using information and data visualisation, graphics, comics and illustrations, and most importantly, by offering good explanations and by telling interesting stories why certain strategies were chosen. A lack of aesthetics can be compensated with some good communication. This necessitates an enlightened audience. Following a good explanation the addressee hopefully understands that a sacrifice of individual input and activities visibility, as well as aesthetics, has been worthwhile if the impact of joint action for the beneficiaries in the partner country is greater than it would have been by merely adding the individual efforts of development actors. In theory, this is the greatest "value for money", and hence, such a course of action would be in the own best interest of the principal. This requires – and here the paper comes full circle – making the rationale behind the aid effectiveness agenda more visible beyond the narrow group of aid specialists. If the receiver of the message rewards the sender for its honesty and priority setting (form follows function), this might also help to deconstruct the thought that visibility is a strong reason for objecting to useful strategic proposals in the future.

Conclusion

Looking at the bigger picture, is it possible to have more visibility and more effectiveness? Definitely maybe! After all, a conceptual understanding of visibility has to be established first, before questions of relationships between visibility and effectiveness can be discussed. Much depends on the attitude of the sender of the message, as well as the receiver's willingness to not merely "judge the book by its cover". It is certainly not a win-win situation, considering that development actors tend to think of "agency" visibility and "group" effectiveness. Is it impossible geometrics? Only if agents insist on input and process visibility, and when they are unable to understand that even under a shared spotlight they remain spotlighted. Is it an acceptable trade-off? If agents can settle for outcome visibility as somehow the least unsatisfying solution to a complex constellation, and if they are willing to be creative and to meaningfully combine visibility with communication strategies, a third way can emerge. Then the loss of input visibility might be merely a small trade-off for the sake of aid effectiveness. And choosing either/or is not necessary.

Literature

Wood, B. et al. (2011): The evaluation of the Paris Declaration phase two: final report, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies

OECD (2011): Aid effectiveness 2005–10: progress in implementing the Paris Declaration, OECD Publishing

Dr. Frank Vollmer
Department I: Bi- and Multilateral Development Policy
German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)