GEG Working Paper 2015/106
August 2015

Bilateral donors in the 'Beyond Aid' Agenda

The Importance of Institutional Autonomy for Donor Effectiveness

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Abstract

New pressures and demands on traditional bilateral donors are encouraging an examination of their reform and improvement. In this new environment, effective bilateral donors will need the capacity to protect and defend a robust global development agenda domestically within their own governments. This can only be achieved, however, if donors have the right balance of institutional autonomy that allows them to serve such a leadership role. This paper analyses the various dimensions of institutional autonomy in comparative case studies of three highly regarded bilateral donors — Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Overall, the paper concludes that greater consideration of donor institutional autonomy can improve bilateral guardianship and stewardship of the global development agenda.

I would like to thank the British Academy for its support of this research project. Sebastien Dibling, Caroline Laroche, and Anna Minayasan helped with research assistance, for which many thanks. A draft version of this paper benefited greatly from suggestions from Scott Fritzen, Emily Jones, and Alexa Zeitz.

The Global Economic Governance Programme is directed by Ngaire Woods and has been made possible through the generous support of Old Members of University College. Its research projects are principally funded by the Ford Foundation (New York), the International Development Research Centre (Ottawa), and the MacArthur Foundation (Chicago).

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1. Introduction

The bilateral donor community faces a number of shared anxieties that are eroding support for foreign aid among donor-citizens and the governments in which ministries and agencies are embedded. A new operating environment for international cooperation now demands that bilateral donors look beyond aid to other areas of policy that influence development: the capacity to support policy coherence while defending the integrity of the global development agenda among key domestic constituencies; more appropriate responses to the needs and priorities of beneficiaries; and faster delivery of sustainable development results. These forces are pushing aid agencies to reinvent themselves to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Although bilateral aid donors can more feasibly reform themselves than reform recipient countries, to date they have mainly looked outwards rather than inwards to improve development effectiveness. This is notwithstanding the fact that public sector capacity is an accepted condition for sustainable development in both developed and developing countries, shaping the possibilities and trajectories of development success and failure. One could therefore do worse than ask how to design a donor system that is both adapted to its new operating environment as well as likely to generate better outcomes for global stability, progress, and prosperity.

This paper attempts to answer this question by exploring how donor institutional autonomy can safeguard and strengthen the cause of global development. By examining existing spheres of autonomy within three respected donor countries, one can begin to distinguish each donor's comparative advantages and illustrate how well adapted each is to defend the global development agenda given the new environmental pressures they all collectively face. One can see how the value of donor autonomy lies in its ability to create spaces for protecting and championing global causes among domestic constituencies more commonly oriented to advancing national interests. One can also identify the limitations of institutional autonomy for furthering the cause of global societal welfare. Analysis of the various dimensions of institutional autonomy is illustrated through case studies of Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom — all high performing bilateral donors by most metrics but, as will be illustrated, not necessarily equally adapted to new pressures and changing roles. Overall, the paper concludes that in these testing times, consideration of institutional autonomy can improve bilateral guardianship and stewardship of the international development agenda.

2. The Changing Environment for Bilateral Donors

These are challenging times for bilateral donors. Economic pressures are diluting popular support for global development and putting downward pressure on overseas spending. The global financial crisis and turmoil in the eurozone is the backdrop for austerity measures that accentuate the domestic opportunity cost of foreign aid spending. Reforms that cut overheads, achieve efficiency gains, and streamline operations remain popular options among all donors. As the fiscal environment in donor countries deteriorates, so too does the general perception that foreign aid is provided at the expense of the poor at home (Lancaster 2007). Retrenchment in developed countries is largely blamed for aid's 6% drop in real terms between 2010 and 2012.[1] While these declines appear to have been reversed in 2013, there is a worrying fall in aid shares going to the neediest countries in sub-Saharan Africa.[2]

As aid budgets shrink, commercial organizations encroach on the mandate of donors as emissaries of international poverty reduction. These competitors include: venture philanthropists who have pledged significant sums to tackle global challenges; hybrid social enterprises encouraging pro-poor venturing; and large corporations investing in global public goods. Commercial money and mindsets put public sector involvement in development on the back foot, even if there is a risk of over confidence in the ability of corporates to solve endemic market failures and remove the impediments to real poverty reduction (Blowfield and Dolan 2014). The convergence of official development assistance (ODA) and private sector agendas has meant the latter is perceived as a plausible substitute for donors, challenging the reputation, viability, and survival of a publicly funded aid agency (Kharas and Rogerson 2012).

Policy setting, management, and delivery of government-to-government foreign aid are the defining responsibilities of a donor. In today's climate, that mandate is perceived to be a remnant of a post-war era captured by large administrations. Accusations of bureaucratic archaism are launched alongside claims of irrelevancy as non-aid policies are identified as more germane for global development. Trade, climate change, global remittances, migration policy, technological change, tax policy, emergency relief, military assistance: all these are seen to be alternative pathways to improving living standards with a more robust track record than ODA. As the salience and relevance of each of these policy arenas grows in global development discourse, the profiles of aid departments and ministries diminishes within government. Donor administrations lose power and profile within whole-of-government fora. The risk is that in searching for "policy coherence", what is in fact happening is the dilution of robust global development priorities and champions.

The problem of shrinking donor mandates is exacerbated as the pool of poor country clients contracts, leaving a new geography of global poverty in middle-income countries, failing states and humanitarian contexts (Sumner and Kanbur 2011; Bond 2015; Gavas, Gulrajani et al. 2015). Remarkable economic growth and poverty reduction in emerging markets are

[1] http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/aidtopoorcountriesslipsfurtherasgovernmentstightenbudgets.htm
[2] http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/aid-to-developing-countries-rebounds-in-2013-to-reach-an-all-time-high.htm

attributed to trade openness, foreign investment, and technological development — but, strikingly, not foreign aid (UNDP 2013). With such growth, there are now fewer aid-dependent countries, while those that remain poor countries suffer from the intractable difficulties of failed and fragile states and humanitarian catastrophe (World Bank 2014). Meanwhile, emerging markets are creating their own foreign aid programmes and engaging in South–South international cooperation efforts that rival those of the DAC or G7. Between 2001 and 2011, non-DAC donors more than doubled their aid from just under US$5 billion to US$16.8 billion.[3] The discontent expressed by the US over the establishment of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank underlines this changing nature of global hegemonic power. As Southern aid flows rise and geopolitical axes shift, the future configurations of bilateral foreign aid provided by traditional DAC donors grows even more uncertain.

There is now acceptance that the Millennium Development Goals, a key set of objectives for the aid community, will not be reached. Donors only achieved one of the targets in the Paris Declaration benchmarking their own performance, and this one was achieved virtually at the time it was set (Mawdsley, Savage et al. 2013). Against such failure, aid agencies are also perceived to be less responsive to both their financial backers (voters) and their beneficiaries (Kharas and Rogerson 2012). There is a palpable and growing insecurity in the donor community, with every bestselling critique of development policy lamenting the way aid fosters corruption, inflation, dependency, and lucrative tax-free employment with perks, among other horrors. Greater transparency exposes problems and unmet expectations in such a way that contributes to a crisis of legitimacy for the foreign aid sector, even among some of its most ardent supporters (MacGee 2015).

This is not to say that foreign aid has completely lost all its supporters (Sachs 2005; Kenny 2011). Rather, it is to suggest that bilateral donor survival increasingly depends on adapting to this new environment. Operationally, this means a new geographic focus for bilateral aid on middle-income states, failed and fragile situations, and humanitarian contexts (Gavas, Gulrajani et al. 2015). Organizationally however, one needs to consider how to strengthen donor capacity so it remains an empowered guardian of a robust development agenda that includes — but also goes beyond — foreign aid. This has much to do with strengthening donors domestically within the central government apparatus, where perhaps virulent criticism stings the most. Improving donor capacity so that it can be a better steward for development interests across government can involve many things. For example, it may include ensuring bilateral donors are capable of: convening cross-governmental policy agendas; arbitrating disputes and achieving compromises; coordinating inter-agency activities; brokering deals and partnerships; underlining the global development impact of national policy decisions; and making sure domestic processes support the achievement of timely and appropriate development results. In other words, in these new contexts, effective bilateral donors will have the capacity to act as both guardian and steward of a robust global development agenda domestically. This can only be achieved, however, if donors have the autonomy that allows them to serve such roles.

[3] http://devinit.org/development-cooperation-emerging-providers-rising/

3. Institutional Autonomy: How Can It Help?

Bilateral aid is often an instrument of domestic foreign policy in which objectives predominantly involve political gain. Studies of aid allocation patterns do not show sincere donor interest in policy reduction but demonstrate the privileging of self-interest (Verdier 2008; Dietrich 2011: 44). For example, Steele (2011) demonstrates how health aid spending is a reflection of bilateral donor priorities, particularly a desire to protect citizens from infectious disease, rather than address the disease burdens prevalent in afflicted countries (Steele 2011). This reworks bilateral aid into a mechanism for political interference in the affairs of recipient states (Wang 1999; Phull 2007; Nielsen 2013). Donor geostrategic and commercial motives also have a past record of misdirecting funds into the hands of corrupt and poorly governed countries (Nunnenkamp and Thiele 2006; Girod 2008; Steele 2011). With such obvious misallocation, country ownership can become little more than a ruse, where enhancement to political, rather than societal, welfare is the main achievement.

Consideration of bilateral donor organizational design is one practical way to limit such pernicious political influences and protect the humanitarian impulse of bilateral aid. Protecting the global interest is not to say that everywhere and always it must take precedence over national development priorities (Gavas, Gulrajani et al. 2015). Rather, it is to empower the bilateral donor to arbitrate across competing domestic preferences and defend the corner of those seeking to deploy domestic resources to generate growth, human rights, and fairness in the world. The donor must at least be credibly represented and stand a fair change of holding its ground against other domestic stakeholders, even though policy trade-offs and compromises will have to be made. The value of donor autonomy lies in its ability to create spaces and opportunities for the bilateral donor to be both guardian and steward of global development wherever it is practically possible, even in the face of domestic political opposition.

Autonomy is a “key lever for organizations, public and private” that is “highly prized” in the uncertain environments of foreign aid and global development (Honig 2014: 1). While current definitions recognize it has something to do with the freedom to influence decisions and exercise behaviour, granular distinctions can be made between the various spheres of autonomy and the mechanisms by which such autonomy might liberate and encourage donors to assume the roles required to advance the cause of global development domestically. One can identify at least six dimensions of organizational autonomy relevant for enhancing the ability of bilateral donors to protect and champion global development (Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of donor autonomy

Dimension of autonomy	Definition
Structural	Freedom from lines of hierarchy and accountability to other government actors
Financial	Freedom to negotiate and manage the financial allocation for development
Legal	The donor has a legal personality associated with global development interests enshrined in a parliamentary act
Interventional	Freedom from reporting requirements, evaluation, and audit provisions
Policy	Freedom to define and adapt development policy
Managerial	Freedom to choose and use inputs

Source: Adapted from Verhoest, Peters, et al. (2004)

Structural autonomy is about the freedom that a donor has with respect to formal hierarchies and accountability structures in government. There is reason to believe that such autonomy can make development concerns a central priority at the heart of government systems. *Financial autonomy* refers to the freedom to negotiate and manage fiscal allocations. This can provide the donor with the freedom to spend funds productively so that they can be used to support global development priorities. *Legal autonomy* is when a donor has formal status associated with global development interests as enshrined in a parliamentary act. This can formally empower donors to protect and champion international concerns domestically. *Interventional autonomy* is about freedom from excessive reporting requirements, evaluation, and audit processes. By being subject to strategic as opposed to prolific reporting requirements, government confidence in donors is signalled and credibility grows in intra-governmental processes. *Policy autonomy* is the freedom to define, defend, and convene the priorities for global development activities within intergovernmental fora. Such independence can protect against the dilution of development policy to service domestic political priorities. *Managerial autonomy* is a foundation for actions that require the exercise of judgement and “soft information” (Honig 2014). In a bilateral donor, this can include managing partnerships, brokering deals, acting with political sensitivity, and adapting and responding flexibly to changing circumstances.

These multiple layers of institutional autonomy within donor systems can facilitate transition to the new roles and responsibilities demanded of bilateral donors. While autonomy has the potential to contribute to malfeasance or unproductive behaviours, it is thought that this risk is dwarfed by the potential benefits that institutional autonomy can bring. This includes facilitating a sense of empowerment, emancipation, and well-intentioned motivated actions on the part of bilateral donors that support their continued robust engagement in international development.

4. Comparing Institutional Autonomy across Donors

This section proceeds with a nuanced analysis of institutional autonomy along the six dimensions identified in Table 1 with reference to Norway, the UK, and Sweden. All three bilateral donors are relatively high performing, ranking within the top ten countries on the Center for Global Development's Commitment to Development Index. In the UK, the "agent" with responsibility for development policy and administration is the Department for International Development. In the case of Norway, the primary agent is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), where policy and operational responsibility for international aid and development is fully consolidated. In Sweden, the development agent role is split. Policy setting functions recently shifted to the MFA. Meanwhile, the technical directorate — Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) — continues to have responsibilities for implementing development policy overseas.

Although all three donors are considered relatively good performers, as the narratives below demonstrate, the spheres of each bilateral donor's institutional autonomy vary quite significantly. Each narrative is drafted with a view to understanding if there is evidence for varying levels of competency in guarding and championing the global development agenda domestically. Evidence supporting the construction of these comparative narratives of institutional autonomy was gathered between 2011 and 2013. Data included in-person and telephone interviews with donor staff over this period. A snowball sampling technique was adopted to identify appropriate interviewees. Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately one hour, and focused on obtaining information on each dimension of autonomy. These were supplemented by a review of published, official, and grey literatures — historical and contemporary — that dealt with the management and administration of all three donor agencies.

4.1 Structural Autonomy

Donor governance provides the bureaucratic structures of accountability to national principals, including other government departments, the executive branch, and legislative assemblies (Gulrajani 2014; Gulrajani 2015). Governance structures serve national constituencies' desire for control and oversight over development policy, with greater autonomy dispensing greater freedom from formal rules and responsibilities.

Structural autonomy of the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) protects against domestic interests overwhelming global altruism objectives. Created in 1997 with dual responsibility for development policy and implementation, DfID has had senior cabinet-level representation throughout in the person of a Secretary of State for International Development. Through its Secretary of State, DfID possesses a seat on various Cabinet committees, including the National Security Council, which allows it to defend development from a position of strength (Lockwood, Mulley, et al. 2010: 10). The creation of the International Development Select Committee (IDC) accompanied separate departmental status. Although it is a cross-party parliamentary committee scrutinizing DfID's policies and expenditures, in practice, the IDC has been a strong champion of DfID and a vigorous development agenda.

In Sweden, a dualist system of government rests on constitutional separation between policy setting and administrative/implementation functions. Government ministries communicate policy priorities to their implementing agencies in annual ordinances and appropriation letters. This means that Swedish politicians are not strictly political executives in the same sense as politicians in parliamentary democracies because they lack full control over implementation. This difference has traditionally empowered their implementing agencies and been a source of their structural autonomy. Until recently, such structural autonomy was characteristic of Sida. Since 2009, however, the structural autonomy of Sida has shrunk and correspondingly grown for the MFA (Hudson and Jonsson 2009; OECD 2011). The MFA is now the unquestioned leader on development policy matters in government, while Sida's role is more narrowly defined in terms of implementation of the bilateral programme.[4] A minister for international development serves alongside ministers of trade and foreign policy, with each reporting to a politically appointed Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs.

Prior to 2004, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) functioned as a specialized autonomous agency, independent and at arm's length of government. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs possessed authorities for international development activities. Following a public sector modernization reform in Norway over 2001–2005 (Lægreid, Dyrnes Nordø et al. 2013: 10), the MFA reasserted its formal leadership role over NORAD. NORAD became a directorate with a limited mandate over technical advisory work, quality assurance, and grant administration (Gulrajani 2010, 2014; OECD 2013). The MFA sought to strengthen both its development policy-setting capacity and administrative competencies within its network of embassies. This gave the Minister of International Development and Environment (IDE)[5] located within the MFA the power to exercise some oversight over development policy issues that had previously been under NORAD's purview.

Although it may still be too soon to tell whether the robustness of Norway and Sweden's development agenda has suffered with the reassertion of authority by their foreign affairs ministries, it is clear that over the last decade or so these actors have gained structural autonomy while their development agencies have lost influence. Admittedly, to the extent that development is now a central priority at the heart of government under MFAs, this may be of benefit to the policy coherence agenda. On the other hand, MFAs are clearly mandated to represent the national interest overseas, and as such it remains unclear how well they will manage tensions between their altruistic ambitions and their commercial and geostrategic interests. While in the UK such conflicts also remain, structural autonomy provide DfID with a seat at the table of important whole-of-government fora that allows for the exercise of a leadership role over the direction of global development policy.

4.2 Financial Autonomy

Every four years the UK government sets out ministerial budget allocations in Comprehensive Spending Reviews (CSR). The CSR provides a three-year medium-term framework for national budgetary spending. In order to draw down and consume these funds, departments must additionally be authorized by Parliament through the Mains Estimate. This supply procedure is presented by the Treasury in Parliament at the start of the financial year. Revised or Supplementary Estimates can ask Parliament for approval for additional resources, capital and/or cash, or for authority to incur additional expenditures.

The Treasury and Parliament are important gatekeepers for DfID's financial allocation and spending authority. And yet, once funds are allocated, DfID has autonomy to spend funds over the length of the CSR. For example, it can adopt longer-term time horizons, which can provide aid predictability for recipients. Financial rules also provide DfID with greater end-of-

[4] The only exception is in the area of multilateral development spending, which the MFA will administer.
[5] In 2012, this ministerial position was split into two roles — a Minister of International Development and a Minister of Environment. Both still preside over the MFA.

year flexibility, as unspent funds can be re-profiled without being deducted from the following year's budget allocation. This can disincentivize "spending splurges and poor resources use" (van der Noorde 2002: 16). Nevertheless, pressures to meet the 0.7% ODA/GNI target have resulted in DfID being asked to disburse larger sums at faster rates.[6] In this way, the adoption of this input target has reduced some of DfID's space to manage its financial allocation, as it biases allocations to initiatives that can be booked quickly, such as contributions to multilateral institutions.[7]

As in the UK, Sweden's development expenditures must be approved through an annual parliamentary appropriations process. Unlike the UK, however, appropriations are not embedded in a medium-term spending framework. Annual appropriations are presented to Parliament in the Spring Fiscal Policy Bill that contains broad guidelines for spending. The autumn Budget Bill provides detailed proposals on the allocation of government expenditures.[8] In 2014, the MFA was responsible for three expenditure areas: international cooperation, international development cooperation, and international trade and promotion of trade and investment. In turn, the MFA provides annual instructions to Sida through an Ordinance with Instructions. These are annual appropriations directions as well as decisions on policies, strategies, and guidelines, including the allocation of funds to different sectors and geographies. Although both Sida and the MFA are constrained by Parliament in their financial allocation, the government's draft development budget is informed by inputs from both. And yet, Sida's financial autonomy is limited by the MFA, which stipulates the size of its allocation, where it should be spent, and what constitutes appropriate mechanisms for spending. Moreover, with limited strategic longer-term vision for expenditures, there is less opportunity for predictable financing of aid recipients.

Within Norway, the budget is negotiated annually between the MFA and the Ministry of Finance. The latter presents parliament with a draft budget in early October, which is considered by the Parliamentary Finance Committee. From early December, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense debates fund allocations within the MFA. Parliament will approve the overall budget by mid-December and present separate proposals for each ministry in an appropriations letter. Within the budget envelope of the MFA, development cooperation is treated as a separate programme area, with an appropriations letter to embassies outlining the overall strategy and budget items for (1) bilateral cooperation with regions or countries, (2) allocation to different sectors and (3) multilateral organizations and debt related activities.[9] Embassies then have financial autonomy to respond flexibly to circumstances and needs, including the ability to re-profile (Gulrajani 2010; OECD 2013). In the past, allocation letters were based on three-year strategic plans, although this practice was discontinued in 2012, making longer-term commitments more difficult. In 2012, the MFA (including embassies) administered the bulk of Norwegian ODA (63%).

Overall, all three cases demonstrate the role that central government actors play in fiscal oversight. Nevertheless, there is some variance in the financial autonomy that is possible once the appropriations process ends and management of the allocation begins. Only the UK provides its development agent with a stable planning framework that permits some degree of aid predictability. Its growing budget also provided the backdrop for an expansive

[6] http://www.owen.org/blog/7496
[7] In 2013–14, the Department chose to give multilateral organizations 43% more in core funding than it did in 2012–13, compared to a 33% increase in bilateral aid (Comptroller and Auditor General 2015).
[8] In 2002, there were 13 ministries in Sweden and 27 expenditure areas, so one minister could be responsible for multiple expenditure areas, but, at the same time, more than one minister could be responsible for a given area.
[9] http://donortracker.org/donor-profiles/norway/budget-process

portfolio of activities, although ironically this may be reducing its autonomy to re-profile funds as well as to allocate across bilateral and multilateral channels. Sida is by far the most constrained implementer of development policy, with limited scope for adaptation and divergence from its ordinances, notwithstanding its strong implementation role. By contrast, the MFA in Norway has financial autonomy within its appropriations letters that can facilitate responsiveness to evolving needs in-country.

4.3 Legal Autonomy

Legal autonomy exists in the UK, where the International Development Act is a legislated mandate that aid spending must contribute to poverty reduction and have the explicit purpose of furthering sustainable development or promoting human welfare (2002). Furthermore, the Act designates DfID as the lead ministry for carrying out this legislative mandate (OECD 2008: 5). While the Act does not explicitly forbid the tying of aid or aid that furthers foreign policy, trade, or national security concerns, this legal framework prevents these priorities from overwhelming the development agenda (Burall, White et al. 2009: 16–17, 21, 25; Lockwood, Mulley et al. 2010: 69). This is also supported by the legislation of the 0.7% ODA/GNI target in 2015.

Similarly, Sweden has strong legal foundation for international development cooperation (Oden and Wohlgemuth 2007). In 1962, a government bill defined the primary driver of Swedish development cooperation as the improved standard of living of poor people. This objective has remained relatively consistent over the years. An update in 2004 restated this principle alongside the importance of policy coherence and coordination, making Sweden one of the first donors to legally commit to a whole-of-government framework for development. The fight against poverty is at the core of Sweden’s legal mandate and formulated to be applicable to all areas of foreign policy, including trade, defence, and migration (Hudson and Jonsson 2009). Unlike Sweden and the UK, Norway places no direct restrictions on its foreign aid through legislation and gives the MFA no formal status as the champion of the global development agenda.[10] Restrictions and conditions on aid are made on an ad hoc basis, through individual appropriations letters, government policy addresses, and White Papers. This has posed some challenges for policy coherence in Norway (OECD 2013: 28; Vormedal and Lunde 2015).

To the extent that a legislated mandate enshrines the integrity of global development aims across government, the ability to stray away from these objectives becomes more difficult in Sweden and the UK. Legal autonomy for development agents is also a source of their empowerment, for it formally underwrites their roles in whole-of-government negotiations and debates. Legal autonomy can be helpful when inevitable domestic policy conflicts arise, by authorizing agents to safeguard the integrity of the development agenda and minimize the degree to which this agenda can be co-opted and diluted.

4.4 Interventional Autonomy

The desire to manage performance is at the heart of all audit and evaluation processes and is motivated by the desire for political accountability to domestic stakeholders. And yet, an excess of reporting mechanisms for donors can undermine their credibility, as it is suggestive of performance problems and/or a lack of confidence in the development agent, whether or not these concerns are warranted. Moreover, excessive reporting can actually

[10] http://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-aid/norway.php

detract from the results agenda, to the extent that they can sap staff motivation, increase duplication and inefficiency, skew priorities, and incentivize gaming.

A number of interventional mechanisms exist in the UK. Intra-governmental reporting to the International Development Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee are two of the most important interventions for DfID. The National Audit Office, an independent agency reporting to Parliament on the use of public funds by government bodies, also monitors DfID on a semi-regular basis. In 2011, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) was set up to assess effectiveness and value for money of DfID programmes. This is in addition to an active evaluation unit that regularly assesses or contracts out assessments of DfID's performance as well as internal audit functions. The Cabinet Office assesses DfID's overall administrative quality through Capability Reviews.[11] Meanwhile, a new "Results Framework" has been set up to "monitor and manage progress and report publicly on delivery".[12] Although interviewees could empathize with the need for multiple reporting requirements given DfID's growing budget at a time when other ministries were having their allocations slashed, there was limited clarity in the ways that interventional mechanisms reinforced each other to generate real gains in performance, efficiency, and accountability. Indeed, if anything, most accepted that it was the lack of confidence and suspicions about DfID that motivated such prolific interventional mechanisms.

Sweden also has a breadth of interventional mechanisms that impinge upon its development agents. Results measurement and management mechanisms include National Audit reports, annual performance reports to Parliament, external development evaluations, and internal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within both Sida and the MFA (OECD 2013: 87–8). Sweden's new aid policy framework also has results measurement and management at its heart (Government of Sweden 2014). While the aims of learning, feeding back experiences, improving transparency, and communicating results are all laudable benefits from interventional mechanisms, it remains to be seen how this system will be organized to further these aims and avoid the pitfalls associated with performance measurement and management. The level of uncertainty in Sweden about how recent donor reforms will play out is a plausible driver for the introduction of the performance measurement and management systems now being introduced.

In the Norwegian case, there has been a push for greater interventional mechanisms and yet these do not seem to be as onerous as either the UK or Sweden (OECD 2013). Scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee, the Auditor General, NORAD's evaluation unit, and internal quality control mechanisms all undoubtedly constrain interventional autonomy. And yet, a strong culture of managing for results has been slow to emerge. This may be because Norway's administrative traditions and the power and prestige of the MFA have inured it from the worst excesses of an audit culture (Christensen 2003).

All bilateral donors are, at least in a formal sense, deeply embedded in reporting requirements that necessitate the prolific production of targets, reports, and accounting mechanisms. Such interventional "accountability solutions" are situated within rationalistic ideals of public policy design and implementation. In the UK and to a lesser degree Sweden, interventional obligations weaken public and government confidence in donors and plausibly undermine their stewardship role in development. In Norway, it would appear that informal practices challenge formal reporting requirements in such a way that the MFA preserves its autonomy from interventional mechanisms.

[11] For a number of years, DfID has topped this survey.
[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360906/DFID-external-results-Sep_2014.pdf

4.5 Policy Autonomy

DfID's structural and legal foundations provide it with the autonomy to define and defend development policy across government. In practice, however, this policy autonomy has come under increasing pressure in recent years. With the development budget not only protected from fiscal cuts but also growing to meet the 0.7% ODA/GNI target, there have been efforts to challenge its independence in order to direct political and financial resources to other ministries. For example, the last Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government sought to widen the definition of ODA spending to include expenditures for security-related initiatives in failed and fragile states, a plausible substitute source of funds given the reduction to defence budgets.[13] Meanwhile, witnesses to the International Development Select Committee inquiry into UK approaches to foreign aid suggested that development is often "bolted on" to pre-existing military operations (Committee 2015: 37). Changing political winds have put DfID in an awkward position, unable to criticize outright the growing linkage between development and security agendas in fragile states, and at the same time, wary that as the lines blur between the military and development, so too are some of the values of a vigorous development agenda compromised. Recent evaluations suggest DfID's capacity as arbitrator of serious intergovernmental policy conflicts is quite weak, as is its policy vision for development (OECD 2014; Committee 2015: 16).[14]

In Sweden, the balance of policy autonomy has dramatically shifted from Sida to the MFA in recent years (OECD 2013: 37). According to interviewees, this shift was marked by conflict and hostility towards Sida. Rather than transitioning staff to the Development Policy Unit within the MFA, budget cuts purged Sida staff with long-standing expertise and knowledge.[15] This contributes to a perception that the MFA has relatively weak capacity for development policy formulation and analysis, notwithstanding its oversight and control over both functions. Its recent aid policy framework released in 2014 is supposed to clarify policy directions across government (Government of Sweden 2014), and set a better foundation for its implementation by Sida. This is some improvement from the past, when policy setting involved making sense of a maze of perspectives, thematic priorities, and bilateral strategies (OECD 2009; OECD 2013).

In Norway, the MFA exercises ultimately authority over the direction that development policy will take (OECD 2013). Norway's current White Paper, *Climate, Conflict and Capital* (2009) represents its main development policy statement and places development within the context of wider foreign policy and security issues.[16] Norway's foreign policy and development policy are so closely intertwined that they are considered a joint policy area (OECD 2013: 57). The MFA steers whole-of-government negotiations across ministries and leads on the policy coherence agenda.[17] Nonetheless, its capacity to manage and generate policy coherence has come under increased criticism, with unsettling contradictions coming to light (Curtis 2010; Vormedal and Lunde 2015). For example, Norway's US$500 million aid commitment to conserve rainforests is dwarfed by the Norwegian pension fund's $US13.7

[13] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21528464
[14] Opportunities for policy coherence tend to be exploited only when the UK national interest is reasonably aligned to its development aims. For example, policies on global health or climate change are easier for DfID to advance in domestic circles than policies restricting arms sales or regulating global finance.
[15] http://www.scidev.net/global/cooperation/news/swedish-government-sida--research.html
[16] This White Paper is complemented by a statement on the importance of inequality in another policy paper *Sharing the Prosperity* (2013). Nevertheless, it is explicitly stated that the 2013 White Paper is subordinate to the 2009 White Paper.
[17] Since 2011, a single public official has been assigned to draft an annual report on policy coherence as part of the MFA's budget proposal to Parliament.

billion investment in companies constituting significant threats to sustainable development. Or Norway's lack of commitment to robust global CSR standards out of fear of the damage it may do to its overseas business interests (Curtis 2014). These examples suggest that policy autonomy by the MFA does not yet adequately champion a robust development agenda in the face of countervailing domestic priorities.

In all three cases, there has been a noticeable shift in policy autonomy away from traditional development actors in favour of foreign policy units and/or domestic priorities. Emerging evidence suggests reasons to be cautious about the implications this change has for the ability to defend global development concerns against narrower political interests.

4.6 Managerial Autonomy

It has long been accepted that managerial autonomy is a valuable asset to public sector organizations (Lipsky 1980). Particularly in the context of international development, where there is greater environmental volatility, less potential for task routinization, and high uncertainty, such autonomy will be highly prized (Honig 2014).

In the UK, interviewees suggest professional discretion in DfID exists, particularly among its decentralized network of offices. As the recent OECD-DAC Peer Review of the UK highlighted, DfID staff in country offices are able to deliver development programmes in a "flexible and autonomous way", with decision-making powers "in the hands of those closest to the programme" (OECD 2014: 56). And yet, this autonomy is being challenged in other respects, for example with the decision to increase oversight over staff spending (i.e., ministers must now approve programmes above GBP 5 million whereas previously this ceiling was GBP 20 million). Increased ministerial oversight, onerous corporate procedures, and heavy scrutiny and control from headquarters reduce scope for managerial autonomy in country offices (OECD 2014: 56).

Sweden has traditionally been a flexible and innovative donor that has given leeway to programme officers to develop activities according to local need. However, negative audits and evaluations have contributed to greater risk aversion in the organization and acted as a barrier to managerial autonomy. New government legislation on risk and internal controls in all Swedish departments and agencies has increased the number of comptrollers at both headquarters and the field. In the field, Heads of Development Cooperation who are Sida appointees are increasingly restricted by MFA rules and reporting requirements. Meanwhile in Norway, MFA officials, particularly in embassies, exercise a high degree of managerial autonomy. This autonomy encompasses decision-making authority around staffing, aid channels, and management instruments. Officials appear to possess the flexibility to respond to evolving needs as and when they occur, and adapt to local country contexts and needs (OECD 2013: 57).

Apart from Norway, managerial autonomy appears to be in decline in the UK and Sweden (at least among Sida administrators of development policy). This is unfortunate, as a growing body of evidence suggests that such autonomy can result in better judgements about programme design, management, and revision; incentivize higher quality staff; result in adaptations that encourage country ownership; and facilitate greater innovation and learning (Gulrajani 2010; Honig 2014).

5. Donor Institutional Autonomy in a 'Beyond Aid' World

Consideration of institutional autonomy within bilateral donors is often reduced to a decision about the nature of structural autonomy, that is, the formal independence/integration of a development ministry from a ministry of foreign affairs. The preceding discussion should make abundantly clear that autonomy is a much larger concept, involving multiple decisions that go well beyond and cut across formal structure. Institutional autonomy is a critical design variable whose multiple dimensions need to be given due consideration in the context of bilateral donor reform proposals. Only the integrated and combined study of its various spheres can shed light on the relationship between institutional autonomy and performance (Verhoest, Peters et al. 2004: 114).

As the case study narratives demonstrate, the value of institutional autonomy given a new operating environment for bilateral donors lies in its ability to create spaces for protecting and championing global causes among unreceptive domestic constituencies. Many of the examples above — legal autonomy in the UK, structural autonomy in Sweden, managerial autonomy in Norway — allude to the benefits that institutional autonomy provide in empowering, validating, and defending the integrity of the global development agenda. Similarly, a lack of autonomy — interventional autonomy in the UK, financial autonomy in Sweden, legal autonomy in Norway — limits robust guardianship and stewardship by development agents.

Nonetheless, it is also apparent that institutional autonomy is not always and everywhere an advantage. In fact, the intersection of institutional autonomies can affect the effectiveness of any singular dimension. For example, one detects that the weaknesses emerging from DfID's financial autonomy (i.e., disbursement pressures) derive from existing limitations on its policy autonomy to present a vision for its development programme that goes beyond a simple input target (OECD 2014: 36). In Norway, the successful exercise of policy autonomy to support global development causes looks like it is restricted by the limited legal autonomy that safeguards development and makes it a primary responsibility for the MFA. Greater understanding of the linkages across various dimensions of institutional autonomies can ensure that design is fit for purpose and that institutional autonomies reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Nowhere is the intersecting nature of institutional autonomy more obvious than in the Swedish example. Structural autonomy in Sweden splits the functions of development policymaking and development policy implementation across the MFA and Sida respectively. This represents the middle ground between an independent development ministry (UK) and an independent ministry of foreign affairs (Norway) and creates two development agents. The result is that policy autonomy is consolidated within the MFA in such a way that limits the managerial autonomy of Sida. This suggests there may be integral weaknesses in dividing policy and implementation roles across more than one actor. A recent study supports the finding that dividing policy and administration functions among donor administrations is not associated with higher performance (Faure, Long et al. 2015).

Given the fact that the UK, Norway, and Sweden are all highly regarded donors on most international benchmarks, it is interesting how a comparative examination of institutional autonomy begins to distinguish their capacity to respond to emerging demands and pressures in the new operating environment of global development. For example, in the UK a plethora of reporting systems that reduce interventional autonomy suggest there is limited governmental confidence in DfID, notwithstanding strong executive commitment to a growing aid budget. Policy autonomy also appears to be on the wane, notwithstanding high levels of structural and legal autonomy. Given these restrictions, it is uncertain whether DfID inspires the confidence that would allow it to convene and lead cross-governmental policy agendas or arbitrate serious conflicts. By contrast, in Sweden, Sida's low levels of financial and managerial autonomy (and to some degree interventional autonomy) restrict capacity to administer policy flexibly to take into account changing circumstances. This suggests Sida is not well placed to support the achievement of timely and appropriate interventions, engage in entrepreneurial learning by doing, and broker relevant partnerships. Meanwhile, in Norway, there is limited legal autonomy that enshrines global development and safeguards its integrity. Combined with high levels of structural and policy autonomy for the MFA, this suggests some weaknesses on its part in protecting the development agenda from co-optation and dilution by competing political objectives. These findings point to the opportunities that exist for improving the design of bilateral donors so they can be better guardians and stewards of an ambitious global development agenda. They can also assist emerging donors as they look for successful organizational templates upon which to build their donor programmes. Bilateral and emerging donors alike could do much worse than consider what kinds of actions their current or desired institutional autonomy will permit, as well as deny, them.

The bilateral donor is an unusual beast. It is charged with delivering assistance to people outside its borders but must do so within government structures whose purpose it is to uphold the national interest. In other words, it must simultaneously be doting mother hen to the wider animal kingdom and defensive lioness to her own pride. This conundrum is at the heart of the challenge of strengthening bilateral donor capacity in the new contexts of development. And yet, as this paper has demonstrated, there are design features that can be conducive to the bilateral beast taming her selfish ambitions and nurturing her global compassion and empathy. The bilateral donor may necessarily have to service both functions, but the hope is that through greater consideration of the nature of institutional autonomy, the hen outsmarts the lion more often than not.

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