

Janus, Heiner; Röthel, Tim

## Research Report

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IDOS Policy Brief, No. 37/2025

### Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

*Suggested Citation:* Janus, Heiner; Röthel, Tim (2025) : Transparency portals in development cooperation: More effectiveness and better communication?, IDOS Policy Brief, No. 37/2025, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb37.2025>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/335913>

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## Transparency Portals in Development Cooperation: More Effectiveness and Better Communication?

Heiner Janus & Tim Röthel

### Summary

Transparency portals in development cooperation serve two main functions: accountability to a specialist audience and communication with the wider public. In this policy brief, we conduct an international comparison to demonstrate how transparency portals could better fulfil these requirements.

As part of a broader effectiveness agenda, donors are pursuing the goal of greater transparency. In line with this international agenda, transparency is intended to promote learning and improve predictability for partner countries, as well as combatting corruption and fulfilling accountability requirements. Taken together, these factors can contribute to greater development effectiveness.

Donors also hope that their work will receive greater public support. By providing detailed information, experts will be better able to assess the quality of development projects. The aim is to initiate a process of learning and improvement, and to convince the general public that taxpayers' money is being used effectively. Citizens can use the portals to understand project content and develop their own views.

However, current debates suggest a more complex dynamic. The "Bike Lanes in Peru" project caused a scandal in Germany. Against the backdrop of the closure of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), individual projects became politicised. Accordingly, transparency portals can also have unintended consequences. For example, information can be taken out of context, leading to misunderstandings and legitimate criticism of individual projects going unanswered.

Donors can mitigate these negative effects by redesigning transparency portals. In times of declining approval ratings and cuts to development budgets, they should use the portals to communicate in a targeted manner and demonstrate a greater willingness to engage in honest debate. The following recommendations could help with this:

- **Even greater transparency of impact data:** Although progress is being made in transparent reporting on project content and financial data, detailed project data on impact measurement and results, as set out in logical frameworks (logframes), is lacking. Increasing transparency in this area could improve development effectiveness.
- **Additional investment in communication:** Information that is provided in accordance with internationally comparable standards must be translated for a lay audience. In many donor countries, a large proportion of the population has no fixed positive or negative attitude towards development cooperation. Targeted, group-oriented communication should appeal to these people more directly.
- **Openness to criticism and discourse:** Development policy actors often resist critical examination of their work in public debate. They tend to respond defensively to criticism, whether general or specific. However, informed discussions based on project data from the portals offer an opportunity to openly discuss ineffective projects and, if necessary, replace them with effective ones.

## Introduction: transparency in development cooperation

Recent controversial debates in the media and politics on development cooperation have been sparked by German development assistance for bike lanes in Peru (Huser, 2024), a British grant for an Ethiopian girl band (BBC, 2017) and the alleged financing of abortions in Africa with US tax money (van Dyk, 2023).

Detailed project information from the respective donor organisations – German, British and American – was published on online transparency portals for the three cases. This transparent presentation of the information enabled the public to learn about development projects, but it also gave biased critics more information for their one-sided reporting. In this way, transparency in development cooperation is often a component, but not necessarily a trigger, of broader socio-political politicisation (Hackenesch, Bergmann & Orbi, 2021).

Over the past 15 years, all major donor countries in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have introduced digital transparency portals. These are intended to ensure compliance with international standards. For example, in 2011, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation agreed to make information on publicly funded development measures and their contribution to development outcomes publicly available (OECD, 2011). According to our definition, transparency in development policy renders processes, decisions and achievements comprehensible to the public.

Many donor organisations hope that publicly accessible information about development projects will increase both their effectiveness and their public acceptance. Transparency portals are intended to make actions traceable and present organisations' results. This is carried out in accordance with national laws and legal requirements for electronic administration (e-government). Additionally, Germany aims to

implement transparency and accountability as internationally recognised principles of effective cooperation, demonstrating the efficient use of public funds and preventing abuse and corruption (BMZ, 2024). In practice, the portals provide an overview of the project portfolios of individual donor organisations and highlight specific projects.

## Insights from transparency research

From a normative perspective, transparency is considered a core element of a functioning democracy. In recent decades, its importance in political processes has increased. Adequate access to information enables citizens to make fact-based electoral decisions and participate in political processes. Advancing digitalisation has led to higher expectations from citizens regarding transparent participation in political decision-making (Von Lucke & Gollasch, 2022). The mere existence of transparency portals can increase social support for the actions of public organisations (Heinzel et al., 2024).

Research investigating the relationship between transparency and public trust have produced conflicting results. A meta-analysis by Wang and Guan (2023) found positive effects, such as improved governance, increased accountability, reduced corruption, more efficient financial management, better service delivery and higher overall trust. However, greater transparency can also lead to an excessive focus on minor mistakes, information overload for citizens and uncertainty and deterioration in public administration. Digital transparency enables the cost-effective and easily accessible provision of information, but it also promotes the dissemination of unsorted information and misinformation. Overall, however, studies show that the positive effects of transparency slightly outweigh the negative ones.

Efforts to increase transparency can also be viewed from a communication theory perspective. A classic example of this is the sender-mediator-

receiver model (Fenster, 2015) (see Figure 1). According to this model, the transparency portal of a donor organisation acts as the sender of information. However, the correct transmission of information does not occur automatically, but largely depends on the mediators and recipients. In this interaction, both traditional and social media act as mediators. Ideally, both would present information to the public in an understandable way. However, this is often not the case, as the media – especially social media – can present a distorted picture. Often, the public, acting as receivers, are not sufficiently informed about development cooperation to recognise distorted reporting. Therefore, transparent provision of information alone cannot ultimately contribute to informed discourse.

Transparency is also discussed as a prerequisite for greater development effectiveness. Recent empirical studies show that digital access to information increases the effectiveness of development organisations. With access to information, the professional public can compare different organisations and generate pressure for reform (Honig & Weaver, 2019). Internal dynamics within development organisations also play a role. Employees improve their performance when they can anticipate requests for information (Honig, Lall & Parks, 2023). Thus, greater transparency can be the starting point for a feedback mechanism that leads to greater effectiveness of development organisations by informing the public.

## **Current overview of transparency portals**

The transparency portals of the ten largest OECD-DAC donor countries were introduced over the past 15 years (see Table 1). This period was marked by ongoing fundamental discussions about development cooperation. All portals have a dual objective: to meet international effectiveness standards and to inform and convince the public.

In terms of meeting the international effectiveness agenda, a comparison of transparency portals reveals an encouraging upward trend. The strongest evidence for this comes from the Aid Transparency Index (ATI), which compares all donor organisations in terms of their compliance with transparency standards. In recent years, the ATI has revealed gradual and continuous improvement in transparency (PWYF, 2024). However, all bilateral donor organisations have room to improve in the “performance” category. In particular, donors still publish insufficient information on evaluations and impact data (e.g., evidence for impact hypotheses, indicators, target formulations and interim results). This is partly due to technical difficulties in reporting results. Evaluation reports, for example, are often only available years after a project has been completed and, for cost reasons, usually only cover a small proportion of projects.

Conversely, political considerations can also influence the reporting of impact data. Donors are often reluctant to publicise the failures of their own projects. In a sector where experts estimate that 80 per cent of development projects fail to achieve their objectives (White, 2019), self-evaluations and public reports by donor organisations often show the exact opposite: an 80 per cent success rate. This disproportionately positive reporting creates constant political pressure to succeed. It makes it difficult to have an open and honest discussion about the effectiveness of individual development projects. This, in turn, negatively impacts the professional community, as it is hard to evaluate projects without access to impact and funding data. If detailed impact data were disclosed transparently, project quality could be improved. However, this type of disclosure is primarily aimed at the wider professional community, that is, politicians, parliament, donor organisations and researchers. Due to its complexity, it is less suitable for communication with the general public.

**Table 1: Overview of the ten largest bilateral donor countries**

	USA	GER	JPN	GB	FRA	CAN	NED	ITA	SWE	NOR
<b>Organisation</b>	USAID	BMZ	JICA	FCDO	AFD	GAC	MFA	AICS	SIDA	Norad
<b>ODA volume ranking (2023)</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Portal since</b>	2010	2023	2020	2013	2017	2022	2023	2014	2010	2020
<b>Languages</b>	EN	DE, EN	EN, JP	EN	FR	FR, EN	NL, EN	IT, EN	SW, EN	NO, EN
<b>ATI ranking (2024)</b>	4	3	9	1	8	7	5	6	2	10
<b>ATI category “performance” 2024</b>	6.1 Poor	7.5 Poor	9.4 Fair	12.5 Good	7.9 Poor	4.2 Poor	8.0 Poor	2.2 Very poor	9.1 Fair	0.0 Very poor

Source: Own representation based on OECD (2024) and PWYF (2024).

Note: In the ATI rankings, the organisation listed in the second column is used in each case, except for Germany. For Germany, we use the “BMZ-GIZ” value.

In addition to complying with international effectiveness standards, donor organisations also aim to use their transparency portals to inform and persuade the public. This can be inferred from the portals’ own objectives and a number of other factors. The languages used on the portals suggest that they are primarily aimed at the domestic public. They are almost exclusively available in the national language of the donors and, in addition, only in English. In traditional and social media, the transparency portals are predominantly used in the context of the donors’ own countries. For example, German media outlets primarily focus on the German transparency portal and emphasise accountability. At the same time, donor organisations primarily use their respective portals to communicate with the public in their own country.

### Transparency portals in the transparency loop

In recent years, donors have increasingly published information on transparency portals. At the same time, surveys of public opinion in

Western donor countries indicate that support for development cooperation has declined sharply in many of these countries (Oh, 2025). A decisive factor here is that public support correlates strongly with a country’s general socio-economic situation; in particular, how the population perceives the current economic situation plays a central role. Donors can influence public opinion by, for example, making greater efforts to ensure transparency in order to build trust. The current phenomenon of declining support, therefore, has many causes. Greater transparency alone cannot change this. Nevertheless, transparency portals can become relevant in public discourse when projects suddenly receive media attention.

In November 2023, a project involving the construction of bike lanes in Peru sparked a controversial debate within the German public sphere. Some politicians claimed that German development cooperation had spent €315 million on building bike lanes in Peru. These unverified claims were then disseminated through traditional and social media (Reitz, 2023). However, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and

Development (BMZ) later clarified that only €44 million in grants had actually been approved for bike lanes in Peru (BMZ, 2024). This information was already publicly available via the transparency portal. Why did the transparency portal not help to quickly and comprehensively clarify the controversy in this case?

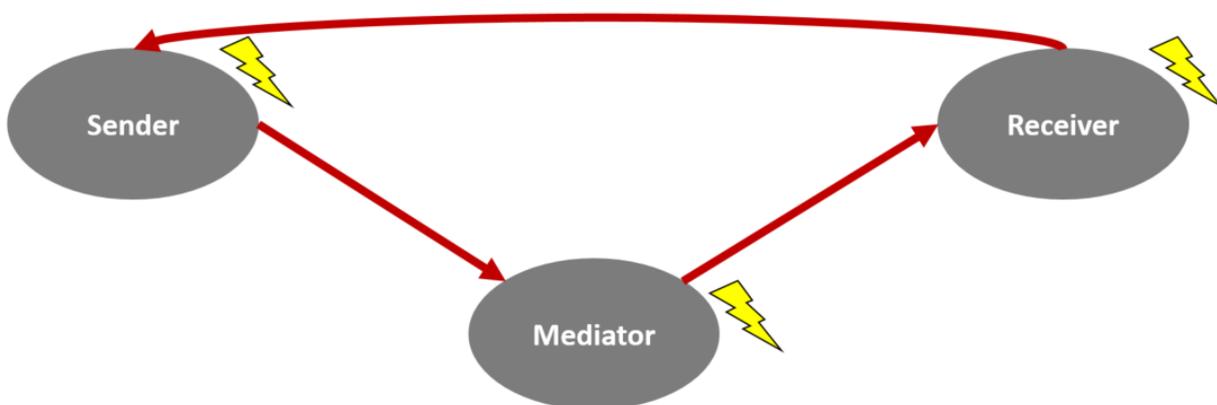
In this context, the sender-mediator-receiver model (see Figure 1) can provide explanatory insights into why transparency loops might break down (Janus & Röthel, 2025). According to this model, general information on the bike lanes project is initially provided by the sender, that is, the BMZ, on its transparency portal. The reporting format is based on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) standard. In condensed form, it presents basic information such as the project title, duration and funding volume. This format enables international comparisons. However, it is only of limited use when it comes to assessing the quality of individual projects. For example, project progress reports and evaluations are only available for a few projects globally. The available information is also written in technical language, which makes it difficult for those without prior knowledge on the subject to understand. In the context of the bike lanes in Peru, for example, many observers were unsure of the difference

between a grant, which does not have to be repaid, and a loan, which does.

In the German context, the group of mediators consists primarily of traditional and social media, with the latter becoming increasingly important. With regard to the bike lanes in Peru, most traditional media outlets played an educational role, though a few tabloid newspapers were exceptions. They often presented information neutrally and explained it for the public. However, on social media – particularly X (formerly Twitter) – several users deliberately took information from the transparency portal out of context to spread misinformation about the bike lanes in Peru.

The recipients of information from the transparency portal are citizens. Researchers describe the population’s general level of knowledge about development cooperation as rather low and argue that these attitudes are relatively easy to influence (Schneider et al., 2024, p. 27). Furthermore, public opinion on development cooperation can be divided into three categories: stable opponents, ambivalent-moderate supporters and stable supporters of development cooperation (Schneider et al., 2024). The majority of the population typically falls somewhere between the two extremes.

**Figure 1: Sender-mediator-receiver model**



Source: Authors

In line with this, our sender-mediator-receiver model provides three explanations for how communication between politicians and the public can be disrupted. Firstly, the public often finds it difficult to obtain information directly from the transparency portal because they lack the prior knowledge required to understand the content. Secondly, intermediaries are tasked with processing information neutrally. However, as with social media, they can disseminate misinformation that the public may not easily recognise as such. Thirdly, the general public already has preconceived opinions. Depending on how strongly held these opinions are, new information may have no effect. These three breakdowns in the transparency loop demonstrate that providing information via transparency portals requires careful management of the relationships between senders, intermediaries and recipients. This is another reason why transparency does not automatically lead to greater public understanding of, or support for, development cooperation.

## Policy recommendations

All major donor countries involved in development cooperation use transparency portals to achieve two objectives. Firstly, they want to comply with effectiveness standards, and secondly, they want to inform the public in their own countries. However, given declining public support and substantial reductions in development budgets, donor organisations must enhance their current use of transparency portals. The following recommendations can contribute to this:

- **Even greater transparency of impact data:** Although transparent reporting is improving, there are still gaps in the provision of detailed project data. This is particularly evident in relation to the underlying evidence for impact hypotheses and monitoring data, such as indicator and target formulations and results. This information can be found in project applications, interim and final reports and, particularly, in logframes. Currently, most donors do not share these documents, with a few excep-

tions such as the World Bank. Greater transparency in this regard can contribute to greater development effectiveness. The specialist audience would be better informed and able to critically monitor development projects. In addition, compliance with quality standards and the ambition level of a project would be easier to track.

- **Additional investment in communication:** Technical processing of impact data alone is not sufficient to communicate effectively with the general public. The information provided in accordance with internationally comparable standards is often complex and difficult for citizens to understand. In many donor countries, much of the population has no clear position on development cooperation. This section of the population should be addressed through targeted communication. In addition, donor organisations should collect and publish usage data for their respective transparency portals. This would make it easier to understand when and how often various project information is accessed. Based on this information, donors could continuously improve their communication. Finally, donors should consider setting up a separate unit for strategic communication. This would allow competences and resources for strategic communication to be pooled within donor organisations. The European External Action Service, for example, has such special units. These units are responsible for fact-based communication and combatting disinformation, among other things.
- **Openness to criticism and discourse:** In public debates, development actors often defend themselves against fundamental criticism of development cooperation. In doing so, they often respond to both blanket and differentiated criticism with blanket rejection. Despite the bias of critics, many development cooperation projects can be rightly criticised. Informed discussions based on project data from transparency portals offer the opportunity

to discuss ineffective projects more openly and, if necessary, discontinue them in order to promote more effective projects. These discussions require protected spaces in which development actors can express criticism

honestly and without fear of sanctions, both within and across organisations. On this basis, development cooperation can become more effective in the long term, thereby increasing public trust.

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**Dr Heiner Janus** is a senior researcher and project lead in the department “Inter- and Transnational Cooperation” at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) in Bonn.

Email: [heiner.janus@idos-research.de](mailto:heiner.janus@idos-research.de)

**Dr Tim Röthel** is a researcher in the department Inter- and Transnational Cooperation Department at IDOS.

Email: [tim.roethel@idos-research.de](mailto:tim.roethel@idos-research.de)

*The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).*

Suggested citation:

Janus, H., & Röthel, T. (2025). *Transparency portals in development cooperation: More effectiveness and better communication?* (IDOS Policy Brief 37/2025). IDOS. <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb37.2025>

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IDOS Policy Brief / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN (Print) 2751-4455

ISSN (Online) 2751-4463

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb37.2025>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn

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