



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Watchdogs or critical friends? -

I was in Nairobi recently to help Aidspan facilitate a meeting with the representatives of about 30 organizations from East and Southern Africa involved in the monitoring of global health programs. The group brought together health advocates, human rights activists, data experts, journalists, as well as representatives of donor and government agencies: each of

whom will be instrumental in using the open data movement to promote positive outcomes in developing countries.

The meeting was the culmination, in many ways, of three years of work laying the foundation for a confluence of people who are not typical allies: members of the Global Fund establishment, including country coordination mechanisms (CCMs), and independent transparency activists. It was also the genesis of a new partnership seeking to send the message that improving accountability in development aid is in everyone's interest.

An animated exchange among these professionals was central to the three-day workshop as to whether 'watchdog' was the right way to describe their common responsibilities. Some felt uncomfortable with the association with a culturally sensitive animal. Others considered it too confrontational; after all, a watchdog doesn't sound like a man's best friend. Dogs bite.

Who watches the dog?

The transparency sector is packed with vocabulary that suggests opposition or conflict: people are 'factivists' — according to Bono's ONE campaign — or 'anti-corruption professionals' or 'transparency revolutionaries'. All of these labels imply, somehow, that the watchers are above the watched, like white knights fighting the dark forces of development aid, corruption and incompetence.

'So who watches the dog', one among us dared to ask, triggering a few chuckles in the room. 'How will watchdogs be held accountable themselves?' Those chuckles turned thoughtful, when we considered how to answer the question, which came from a representative of 'power': a member of a CCM.

Sometimes holding people and organizations to account requires teeth, especially in young democracies and fragile states with no mutual checks and balances. Whistleblowing and 'naming and shaming' may be the only option when dealing with corruption. But what Aidsplan's experience suggests is that a core advantage of open data is how it can help to address inefficiencies and mismanagement. In this regard, confrontation may not be the shortest route to achieving results.

Open data's best chance: people with open minds

Later that evening, my co-facilitator Jeff, a public health governance expert from South Africa, shared some of his experiences with government officials in the region. He managed to encourage change by trying to understand the realities, fears and needs of those people he was trying to influence.

'I would say to them, you managed to achieve a 67% success rate: impressive, given the conditions in which you work. Now how can I help you to do even better,' he told me.

Indeed, advocates and campaigners for transparency and accountability are starting to learn that while there is no one true way to achieve results, collaboration generally offers the best chance to generate positive change. This can include understanding the political context governing the activities you are monitoring, proper targeting of thought- and influence-leaders, and, most importantly, offering solutions as well as identifying problems.

In other words, being a successful aid 'watchdog' is all about knowing how to approach different people in different circumstances to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

'Africa Health Watch'

One of the new group's first trials, beyond accessing, understanding and processing data, will be to learn to use data strategically, taking into consideration local political dynamics, the reality and psychology of the people whose performance it aims to monitor and improve.

Without such skills in building trust-based relationships, holding aid recipients accountable will be a challenge, even when equipped with the best open data tools and resources in the world. And that means that words matter.

Meeting participants in Nairobi got that and decided to drop the watchdog label. Their new partnership will be called Africa Health Watch. They will surely be tested but together they hope to be able to promote accountability so that every dollar spent on AIDS, TB and malaria in East and Southern Africa contributes to a life saved.

Robert Bourgoing is a strategic communications specialist. The views contained in this commentary are his own.

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