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Governance in a new development paradigm: Reformer leadership and partnership humility

Wilfred K. Mwamba

Abstract

This paper argues that effective international support for governance must urgently shift focus from donor-driven activity to supporting the leadership and personal agency of domestic reformers and embracing partnership humility, especially as governance aid is projected to decline significantly. Current governance aid often resembles "performance theatre," producing fragile, unsustainable results because external partners dominate the design and implementation, fostering dependency rather than lasting change. Drawing on evidence from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, the paper demonstrates that reforms persist only when domestic reformers maintain full design authority and operational control, while donor-coordinated systems tend to collapse once funding ceases.

The paper identifies five practical shifts for partners to support effective governance reform:

1. Build platforms that domestic reformers control.
2. Underwrite risk without controlling design.
3. Fund data that citizens demand.
4. Facilitate coalitions rather than directing them.
5. Exit through institutionalisation.

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The front-page picture captures the shift Wilfred argues for in this paper: the performance ends, but the real capability carries on. It is inspired by the Sankofa bird of the Akan people and symbolises reflecting on the past to make progress using knowledge.

Acronyms and abbreviations

AU	African Union
AUDA-NEPAD	African Union Development Agency – New Partnership for Africa's Development
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
DAE	Direct Access Entity
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DGF	Democracy Governance Facility (Uganda)
DHIS2	District Health Information Software 2
EU	European Union
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
IFI	international financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MOU	memorandum of understanding
ODA	official development assistance
NEITI	Nigeria's Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
PERL	Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (Nigeria)
PMF	public financial management
TAF	The Asia Foundation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive summary

'Stop calling yourselves donors. That already suggests you are there to give or donate.'
Southern practitioner, 2024 (personal communication)

Analytical framework: Reformer agency and partnership humility

Governance, in this paper, refers to the political and institutional capabilities that keep systems functioning after external funding ends.

This paper critically assesses the current state of governance support through two essential analytical lenses. The first is reformer leadership – the personal agency of reformers who control the design and implementation of reforms, and whose decisions shape outcomes. The second is partnership humility, which considers how external actors can assist domestic reformers without overshadowing or dominating their efforts.

The guiding diagnostic question is: Could your programme end tomorrow—and would domestic reformers continue the work? If the answer is no, then the programme rather than sustainable governance has fostered dependency.

Changing landscape of official development assistance

Official development assistance for governance is anticipated to decline by approximately 36% between 2023 and 2025 (OECD DAC, Dialogue Concept Note). The challenge is therefore shifting. Rather than focusing on 'how to do more with less,' the emphasis is now on 'how to do less better,' with reformer control serving as the foundation for meaningful change.

The problem of performance theatre

Governance aid has increasingly come to resemble performance theatre: programmes filled with activities, workshops, dashboards and training cohorts that produce impressive statistics but ultimately result in fragile and unsustainable change.

For years, external actors have been asking the wrong question: What can donors do? The required reframing is: What do domestic reformers need, and how can partners help without diminishing their agency?

The importance of reformer authority

Elumelu's argument in *Africapitalism* is straightforward: lasting transformation depends on domestic actors leading the charge, not waiting for external saviours. Enduring governance reform follows the same logic. Change sticks only when those with the most at stake invest their own political capital, resources, and credibility. For governance support, this is the critical pivot: the future lies not in donor-driven activity but in strengthening reformers' authority to set priorities, make trade-offs, and own results (Elumelu, n.d.).

Evidence from documented reforms

Drawing upon documented reforms from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, this paper investigates the sustainability of reforms after external funding ends. The evidence consistently shows that:

- Reformer-led platforms such as ProZorro in Ukraine and District Health Information Software 2 (DHIS2) in 73 countries have persisted because domestic actors have maintained design authority and operational control. ProZorro's endurance is well documented (Yukins and Kelman, 2022), while DHIS2's global spread is anchored in country-led stewardship (HISP Centre, 2024).
- Donor-designed or coordinated systems—including Uganda's Demographic Governance Facility and Kenya's subnational public financial management system—have collapsed once funding has ceased, even where technical capacity has appeared strong on paper.

Practical shifts for external partners

Based on these cases, the paper identifies five practical shifts for external partners who wish to support effective governance reform:

1. Build platforms that domestic reformers control.
2. Underwrite risk without controlling design.
3. Fund data that citizens demand.
4. Facilitate coalitions rather than directing them.
5. Exit through institutionalisation.

Establishing genuine partnership conditions

The paper further defines five partnership conditions that separate genuine partnership from mere performance theatre. These are:

1. Mutual benefit.
2. Power transparency.
3. Risk-sharing.
4. Design authority.
5. Institutionalisation from the outset of collaboration.

Conclusion: Towards political realism and mutual accountability

In summary, the argument is direct and consequential: The era of expansive donor programming is coming to an end. The next phase requires partnership rooted in political realism and mutual accountability. Traditional donors must shift from merely funding activities to underwriting political risk, brokering legitimacy and developing platforms owned by reformers. Success will be measured not by disbursement rates or activity counts, but by the ability of systems, coalitions and institutions developed with external support to continue operating effectively after donor funding concludes.

1 The agency problem—reframing the question

'Stop calling yourselves donors. That already suggests you are there to give or donate!'
Southern practitioner, 2024 (personal communication)

1.1 External funding and the future of governance reform

Official development assistance (ODA) for governance is expected to decrease by roughly 36% between 2023 and 2025 (Concept Note, 2025). This notable reduction prompts a critical inquiry: **What remains of governance reform efforts when external funding ends?**

In this paper, governance refers to the political and institutional capabilities that allow societies to make decisions, enforce rules, hold power to account and deliver collective outcomes when external funding ends. Standard definitions—such as the World Bank's 2017 shift to defining governance as the process through which state and non-state actors interact to design and implement policies (World Bank, 2017) and Sustainable Development Goal 16's mandate to build "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions" (United Nations, 2015)—provide useful reference points. This paper builds on these benchmarks but frames governance more directly, as what endures under stress, and who genuinely controls the design and direction of reform.

Escaping the governance ghetto: Governance quality directly affects the functioning of hospitals, the delivery of climate finance and the mobilisation of private investment. Yet traditional governance programming has often been limited to a narrow political-accountability focus, disconnected from economic policy, climate resilience or service delivery. This has resulted in governance support that is both essential and marginalised—politically relevant but operationally detached.

Although this paper draws on governance programmes, the argument applies across sectors. Governance functions as the operating system of any reform—health, education, climate, public finance—not a silo reserved for governance specialists. Sector outcomes rise or fall on the strength of these underlying political and institutional capabilities.

1.2 Shifting dynamics in aid and partnership

Recent trends reveal that aid allocations are increasingly shaped by interests in migration, arms and minerals, often at the expense of development strategies. The transactional nature of these relationships—especially visible during the Trump era—has made explicit what used to be implicit: Partnerships are now perceived as deals rather than gestures of goodwill. New funding sources, such as China and the Gulf states, offer rapid disbursement with minimal political conditions but these funds can heighten long-term sovereign risk. In regions like the Sahel, governments have dismissed European missions in favour of Russian security actors, citing sovereignty as the reason. And yet these shifts arise from practical incentives, not ideology.

Domestic reformers are now evaluating external partners based on speed, predictability and respect for local agency, rather than on rhetorical commitments.

- **Trust, transparency and mutual interests:** In a transactional context, feigned altruism undermines trust. Domestic reformers understand that donor demands for transparency in procurement are intended to safeguard the donors' own taxpayer resources, while reformers themselves seek systems that bolster domestic legitimacy. True partnership requires that these mutual interests be acknowledged openly rather than cloaked in diplomatic language.

- **Limits of donor and multilateral influence:** Bilateral donors retain diplomatic influence and political leverage, while multilaterals provide scale, fiscal credibility and macroeconomic conditionality. However, neither can replace the authority of domestic actors in designing reforms.

1.3 Reframing the central question

For too long, external actors have focused on the wrong question: What can donors do? The focus must now shift to: What do domestic reformers need, and how can partners assist without undermining reformer agency? As Tony Elumelu argues in *Africapitalism*, the core principle is simple: **'No one will develop Africa but us**.' His point resonates far beyond Africa. Enduring reform happens only when those with the most at stake lead—investing political capital, resources and authority rather than waiting for governments, donors or philanthropic organisations to act (Elumelu, 2021, Chapter 4).

There are two core concepts: Agency vs substitution. Reformer leadership and personal agency occurs when domestic actors control design decisions, assume financial risk and hold governance rights over the systems or platforms created. In contrast, substitution takes place when external partners control these aspects, fostering dependency that tends to fail when ODA ends.

Domestic reformers are those who hold the authority or organised leverage to implement large-scale rule changes. This group includes government officials (across ministries, regulators and subnational executives), civic actors (such as professional bodies, watchdog groups and unions) and business actors (firms whose compliance is necessary for reform adoption).

In contested or authoritarian settings, external partners must make implicit decisions about whom to support. When the state blocks reform, partnerships should pivot towards lawful civic or market reformers, leveraging resources like independent data, legal protection or reputational support to broaden safe operational space. If reform champions exist within the state, credibility depends on granting authority and providing discreet support.

Identifying genuine reformers is rarely straightforward. Donors often elevate the most donor-literate technocrats—those fluent in external requirements—while overlooking actors doing the harder political work from less visible positions. As Yanguas argues, donors often fail to distinguish between incumbents—those who benefit from dominant institutions—and challengers seeking to change them. This bias elevates the voice of incumbents over the reformers battling inside the system (Yanguas, 2018). Yet, when external partners step back from controlling design, genuine reform champions become easier to recognise: They take decisions, absorb risk and act when political windows open.

This paper revolves around a single diagnostic question: **Could your programme end tomorrow—and would domestic reformers carry on?**

If the answer is no, the result is dependency, not authentic governance reform.

Subsequent sections will explore this question by analysing documented cases where reformer agency has been either supported or replaced. The analysis aims to clarify, by the conclusion, the nature of genuine partnership and its demands on both reformers and external partners.

1.4 Why this question matters now

Recent evidence indicates that reforms are more likely to withstand shocks when domestic reformers direct design and external partners underwrite risk without controlling decisions. Conversely, systems coordinated and controlled by donors often fail once funding ends. This paper examines this pattern across multiple cases and asks: If this pattern holds, what changes are needed in the structure of future governance partnerships?

There are also cases where donors have adapted—reducing visibility, underwriting political risk or co-financing platforms controlled by domestic reformers. These examples matter. They demonstrate what becomes possible when external partners choose a supporting role rather than a directing one.

1.5 Perspective and methodology

This analysis draws on over two decades of experience managing governance programmes for the UK Department for International Development/Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (DFID/FCDO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), representing investments exceeding £280 million. The perspective offered is one of internal accountability, acknowledging both the contributions to and reinforcement of the systems under review.

The paper’s methodology includes documented post-funding evidence from multiple countries, five structured conversations with reformers and a review of Southern-authored evaluations and grey literature. All claims are supported by at least two sources. Annex A contains a reflexive note on the author's involvement in building these systems.

2 What has persisted, what has collapsed

None of this removes politics from the equation. Reform windows depend on timing, incentives and domestic constraints. The point is not to idealise reformers but to recognise that political timing—not donor choreography—determines what becomes possible.

2.1 Reformer-controlled infrastructure has persisted

Several cases demonstrate that reformer-controlled systems not only endure but also thrive through political and institutional changes.

- **Ukraine's ProZorro:** ProZorro is a government-owned procurement platform managing over 90% of Ukraine's public procurement for more than 150,000 businesses. Domestic reformers have kept governance control while donors have co-financed, helping ProZorro remain stable through major events like the Russian invasion and political changes. Its resilience relies on local control of infrastructure and regulations (Yukins and Kelman, 2022; OCP, 2024).
- **DHIS2—District Health Information Software 2 (global):** Created by the University of Oslo's HISP Centre, DHIS2 is used in 73 low- and middle-income countries, covering about 2.4 billion people. Local ministries of health manage deployment, governance and integrations, while donors aid expansion. The platform's sustained success owes to strong control by domestic reformers (HISP Centre, 2024).
- **Nigeria's PERL—Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn:** In Nigeria, state-level reform coalitions have set priorities and managed budget reallocations, with FCDO covering financial risks. Political shifts have allowed for quick budget changes despite slow donor processes. PERL's sustainability has owed mainly to domestic incentives like fiscal credibility under State Fiscal Transparency, Accountability and Sustainability grants, with state coalitions remaining active and strategic even after donor support ended (2016–2023) (Piron et al., 2021).
- **Rwanda's Irembo** digital services platform and **Benin's open budget portal** both demonstrate reformer-controlled systems that have survived political transitions because domestic institutions have owned the platforms and citizens have demanded the services (International Budget Partnership, 2024; World Bank, 2020).

2.2 When international financial institution leverage enables, not substitutes

International financial institutions (IFIs) best support reform when they back government-led initiatives with funding, technical help and credibility.

- Georgia's 2012–2021 financial reforms endured because the finance ministry led the process, with external partners supplying outcome-linked support and credibility. The EU4 Economic Governance and Fiscal Accountability programme highlights government-led priorities, which allowed reforms to continue after donors exited, thanks to retained design authority (EEAS, 2018).
- International Monetary Fund (IMF) Technical Assistance: By contrast, IMF missions designing systems without government input have led to dependency and stalled progress once IMF teams have left.

2.3 Donor-controlled systems have collapsed

Programmes where donors have retained control over system design and implementation have often failed to persist beyond external support.

- **Uganda's Democracy Governance Facility (DGF):** The DGF was designed and coordinated by donors, who managed the monitoring framework and funded civil society capacity-building. Its suspension by presidential order in 2021 halted funding for hundreds of civic organisations, severely impacting legal aid and advocacy efforts. The absence of domestic legal authority meant civil society organisations could not sustain the work, ultimately leading to the collapse of the coordination structure (Freedom House, 2021).
- **Kenya public financial management (PFM) county systems:** Counties have benefited from years of donor-backed PFM reforms, but the 2025 Public Finance Review shows adoption has remained uneven. When external oversight eased, many counties reverted to manual processes—not because of a lack of skill, but because technical staff lacked the authority to enforce system use across political hierarchies. Donor-driven coordination shaped reform tempo, but the deeper constraint was **local political incentives overriding technical improvements** (World Bank, 2025).

2.4 Why these cases matter

The Uganda DGF and Kenya PFM cases reflect a development approach prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s: external design, intensive technical assistance and phased 'ownership transfer.' While suitable for low-capacity states with limited expertise, this model consistently fails in contemporary middle-income contexts, where reformers possess technical know-how but face political constraints and entrenched interests. Here, the primary challenges are not capacity but rather authority, political leverage and institutional control.

Reforms have endured when Southern reformers have held three critical levers from the beginning: (i) design authority over system architecture; (ii) operational decision-making during implementation; and (iii) institutional governance rights after donor exit.

Conversely, reforms have collapsed when donors have retained control of these levers, even where recipient governments have acquired the technical capacity to implement donor-designed systems.

3 Stop—four forms of performance theatre that waste reformers' time

Governance programmes often mistake volume for value, leading to excessive process, distorted incentives and a chronic drain on reformers' time and legitimacy. Four patterns recur across countries and sectors.

3.1 Process waste

Donor-driven monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems often collect more data than domestic reformers can use. Indicators frequently serve accountability to funders rather than accountability to citizens. Ministries waste time reporting against frameworks that rarely inform domestic decisions. In several African and Asian countries, officials quietly game these systems, being compelled to appear compliant even when data are divorced from programmatic realities. The outcome is bureaucratic theatre rather than performance improvement, a finding well documented in broader studies of donor-driven M&E inefficiency.

3.2 Design waste

Technically robust platforms fail when design excludes domestic reformers. Systems conceived in donor offices or international consultancies rarely survive the politics of adoption. Ethiopia received over $13 billion in governance aid over a decade, producing dozens of digital systems—most of which remain unused—while over 1,500 civil society organisations closed in 2024 owing to restrictive legislation. The political logic of this collapse has been well documented for over a decade: Human Rights Watch warned as early as 2014 that Ethiopia's 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation would undermine independent civic space and suppress watchdog organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The lesson: Capability without authority changes nothing.

3.3 Political waste

Donor coordination mechanisms consume immense energy yet often serve reporting needs more than reform strategy. Visibility requirements, parallel coordination groups and branded reforms can unintentionally undermine reformers' legitimacy, especially in postcolonial contexts where sovereignty remains highly contested. The more prominent the donor, the weaker the domestic political cover.

3.4 Capacity waste

Training without transfer of authority is capacity theatre: Domestic reformers gain skills but lack the permission to apply them. Decision cycles stretch out over months, while political windows for reform last only weeks. Reform opportunities expire because systems require donor approvals before local action. In contrast, where domestic reformers hold delegated authority—such as in Nigeria's PERL—the same window produces measurable institutional shifts within days (Piron et al., 2021).

3.5 Why these patterns persist

Institutional incentives in donor systems reward spending and visible outputs, not reform persistence. Training 500 officials generates quantifiable results. Building reformer-controlled systems demands patience, risk tolerance and political discretion—qualities for which no logical framework (logframe) exists.

4 Do more—five approaches domestic reformers need

If the preceding section shows what to stop, this section argues for what to do differently. The most resilient governance reforms emerge where external partners enable domestic agency rather than replace it. Five approaches consistently show better persistence and legitimacy across contexts.

4.1 Build platforms that domestic reformers control

Platforms survive when domestic actors hold design authority, financial control and governance rights. In Ukraine's ProZorro (a digital procurement transparency platform), civil society manages the open-source code repository, government holds regulatory authority and donors fund without ownership (OCP, 2024). In DHIS2, ministries of health across 73 countries control deployment, data policies and system adaptation (HISP Centre, 2024). Co-financing is acceptable; co-control is not.

The lesson: Governance platforms must serve multiple domestic interests—citizens, businesses and state institutions—to survive political cycles.

4.2 Underwrite risk without controlling design

Effective external partners act as underwriters of domestic risk, not as designers of domestic reform. In Nigeria's PERL, donors absorbed financial risk while leaving design decisions to domestic reformers. Flexible funding and outcome-based grants have allowed reformers to act during fleeting political openings (Piron et al., 2021).

Political opportunities rarely align with donor planning cycles. Delegating discretion accelerates results when timing, not funding, is the constraint.

4.3 Fund data that citizens demand

Accountability improves when data systems answer to citizens first, donors second. In Benin, citizens participate in 13 of 17 budget cycle stages under institutionalised open-budget mechanisms managed by the Pôle budget ouvert (Open Budget Hub) (Open Government Partnership, 2025). When local monitoring revealed missing textbooks in 2021, civil society groups including Social Watch Benin and ALCRER uncovered widespread shortages. Government reallocated funds within a single budget cycle because citizen verification had legal standing (IBP, 2024; Open Government Partnership, 2025).

The rule: Fund citizen-demanded data systems, not donor-driven dashboards.

4.4 Facilitate coalitions, don't direct them

Reform coalitions outlast aid when they form around shared domestic incentives. Evidence from The Asia Foundation's (TAF's) coalition practice across Asia-Pacific demonstrates what works:

- **Move As One (Philippines):** This informal, fast-forming, locally led coalition achieved national protected bike and bus lanes during Covid-19 by aligning citizen mobility needs with government incentives. The coalition's priority list was agreed by members, not prescribed by funders. External partners provided the platform and resources but did not direct the agenda (Nixon et al., 2023).
- **Bangladesh Leather Forum:** TAF brokered a coalition across firms, workers and regulators that reframed a relocation standoff into a competitiveness and safeguards agenda. The coalition operated with 'function before form'—solving immediate problems

before formalising structure. The agenda emerged from sector actors, not external partners (Nixon et al., 2023).

TAF's comparative analysis across multiple coalitions shows they endure when agendas are set by members, not funders. The external role is initiator–broker–convener, not choreographer.

In Nigeria's PERL, the same pattern held: State-level alliances persisted because participants valued access and relationships, not funding (Piron et al., 2021).

4.5 Exit through institutionalisation

The ultimate success measure is whether reforms sustain after funding ends. In Nigeria's Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), government and civil society coalitions retained convening authority after external withdrawal. The Executive Secretary of NEITI stated in 2024 that 'civil society must be fully equipped to play its institutional and industry-specific roles' and serve as 'watchdogs of democracy' (NEITI, 2024).

By contrast, Uganda's DGF collapsed because donors—not domestic institutions—controlled coordination. Sustainability depends on embedding reform ownership in domestic institutions from inception. Programmes must identify early which domestic entity will convene, regulate and fund reforms post-ODA.

5 Partnership in a transformed financing landscape

As governance ODA contracts by 36%, a paradox emerges: **Governance matters more, not less.** The difference is that governance quality now determines access to flows far larger than traditional aid—climate finance, private capital, South–South cooperation. Countries with credible PFM systems, transparent procurement and digital service delivery unlock these non-ODA resources. Those without them don't.

5.1 Where money comes from now

This shift transforms partnership dynamics. The rules of governance partnership are changing because the sources of finance have changed. Domestic reformers no longer depend solely on traditional ODA. Four parallel shifts now shape how resources flow to governance systems—each shift altering the power dynamics between reformers and external partners.

Climate finance as governance leverage

Climate finance is increasingly governed by domestic capability. The Green Climate Fund's 2025 Report to the Conference of the Parties (GCF, 2025) provides the most up-to-date data on Direct Access Entities (DAEs), commitments and total portfolio size. Rwanda's Ministry of Environment—Sub-Saharan Africa's first accredited DAE—has accessed more than $28 million directly for adaptation programming. Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay have achieved similar accreditation thanks to governance reforms in transparency and fiduciary control, illustrating that credible PFM systems determine access to climate finance at scale.

Private capital disciplines governance quality

Sovereign bond markets and major private investors increasingly factor governance quality—such as PFM, procurement transparency and anti-corruption frameworks—into investment decisions, with Fitch, Moody's and S&P Global Ratings directly incorporating these metrics in sovereign credit assessments. Rwanda's B+ (stable) credit rating reflects both fiscal discipline and transparent, digitalised systems like Irembo. In contrast, governance failures—including corruption scandals at Eskom (South Africa) and in Kenya's health sector—have prompted credit downgrades and capital outflows. As governance ODA shrinks, domestic reformers that strengthen transparency attract private capital on better terms, while external partners that support, not control, these systems add most value.

The lesson: As governance ODA declines, governance quality determines access to much larger non-ODA flows. Domestic reformers that control transparent systems attract private capital on better terms. External partners that help build these systems without controlling them add more value than traditional technical assistance ever could.

South–South and triangular cooperation: Complementarity, not competition

Emerging development partners—BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the African Union (AU) and regional development banks—now finance governance innovations emphasising sovereignty and mutual interest. The African Union Development Agency – New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD) has signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with technology partners to support implementation of the African Union Digital Strategy and the African Union Artificial Intelligence Roadmap, advancing digital public goods that reduce donor dependency while building cross-country digital capacity (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024).

Traditional donors face a choice: Compete for relevance or offer complementarity—risk underwriting, evidence infrastructure or co-investment—working with, not around, new Southern financing ecosystems.

From aid sector to enabling infrastructure

As governance ODA contracts by 36%, governance's value proposition shifts fundamentally. It can no longer be treated as a siloed political accountability sector funded by aid. Instead, it must be understood as enabling infrastructure that unlocks access to climate finance, private capital and South–South cooperation—flows that dwarf traditional governance ODA.

The future of governance support lies in platforms that serve multiple value streams simultaneously: democratic accountability, market transparency, climate adaptation credibility and investment-grade fiduciary systems.

The paradigm shift: Governance is not an aid sector that needs more ODA. Governance is the infrastructure that determines whether countries can access the non-ODA flows that matter most.

5.2 What this means for partnerships

The power dynamic has shifted. As governance ODA contracts by 36%, governance's strategic value has increased. Countries with credible governance systems now access climate funds directly, attract private capital on better terms and negotiate South–South partnerships from positions of strength. Traditional donors must answer one question: **Why partner with you?**

The old donor–recipient model assumed scarcity. Reformers needed external finance and had few alternatives. That world is ending. Governance ODA is declining, but non-ODA flows (climate finance, private capital, South–South cooperation) are expanding. Governance quality determines access to these larger flows. In this new landscape, partnership quality matters more than partnership quantity. Reformers who control design authority can be selective. Donors that substitute for agency risk irrelevance.

Not all partnerships are equal. Domestic reformers and external actors need clear criteria to distinguish genuine partnership from performance theatre. Five observable conditions assess whether governance programming enables or substitutes for reformer agency.

5.3 The partnership test: Five observable conditions

Condition 1: Mutual benefit (not benevolence)

Both parties gain strategic value beyond funding. Domestic reformers access credibility, evidence or convening power. External partners advance policy priorities, fiduciary standards or diplomatic leverage.

Observable markers:

- MOUs state both parties' strategic interests explicitly.
- Grant agreements specify mutual benefit, not just recipient obligations.
- Partnership review processes assess value to both parties.

If only one side benefits, it is charity—not partnership.

Condition 2: Power transparency (not diplomatic ambiguity)

Both parties state their mutual interests openly: reformers seek legitimacy and capability; donors seek fiduciary accountability and strategic alignment.

Observable markers:

- MOUs/grants state mutual interests explicitly.
- Visibility constraints are specified where donor branding harms domestic legitimacy.
- A no-fault walk-away clause is included.
- Annual reviews ask: 'Does this partnership still serve both parties?'

If interests remain unspoken, the relationship is diplomatic positioning—not partnership.

Condition 3: Risk-sharing (not risk transfer)

External partners absorb downside financial or reputational risk so domestic reformers can act. If reformers bear all political consequences while partners retain veto authority, that is risk extraction—not partnership.

Observable markers:

- Grant agreements specify which risks donors absorb (e.g., pilot failure, political backlash).
- Reformers control tactical decisions during implementation.
- Failure doesn't trigger automatic funding withdrawal.
- The partner absorbs reputational cost if the reform attempt fails.

Condition 4: Design authority (not consultation)

Domestic reformers hold final decisions on system architecture, implementation plans and exit strategies. Consultation without authority is symbolic inclusion—not partnership.

Observable markers:

- Reformers sign platform contracts, hold code repositories and control data governance.
- Implementation teams report to domestic institutions, not donor programme managers.

- Tactical pivots don't require donor reapproval.
- An exit strategy is designed by reformers from Year 1.

Condition 5: Institutionalisation from Day 1 (not gradual handover)

Domestic institutions are embedded as owners from programme inception, not at exit. If ownership transfers only after funding ends, what was built is dependency—not partnership.

Observable markers:

- Domestic institutions are named as owners in the Year 1 grant agreement.
- Domestic funding is committed by Year 2.
- A convening authority sits with the domestic institution throughout.
- An external partner exit date is specified upfront.

5.4 Why these conditions matter now

In the transformed financing landscape, these five conditions determine whether external support accelerates or undermines reformer agency:

- **Climate finance flows to DAEs that prove fiduciary capacity.** As governance ODA declines, countries that build credible PFM systems unlock climate finance that dwarfs traditional aid. External partners that help build this capacity while maintaining domestic control enable access to larger flows. Those that substitute for domestic systems create dependency that blocks access.
- **Private capital rewards transparent governance.** Countries with procurement transparency and fiscal credibility attract investment on better terms. External partners that help reformers build citizen-facing transparency platforms create market value that persists after ODA ends. Those that build donor-facing M&E dashboards waste political capital on systems that don't unlock non-ODA flows.
- **South–South financing offers alternatives.** As governance ODA shrinks, reformers increasingly choose partners based on respect for sovereignty and speed of delivery. Traditional donors compete on partnership quality, not financing scale. Those that share design authority earn trust. Those that insist on control lose relevance.
- **Governance enables access to non-ODA flows** that matter more than traditional aid. External partners that help reformers build multi-use platforms (serving democratic accountability, market transparency and climate credibility simultaneously) create enduring value. Those that build single-purpose donor projects waste everyone's time.

The Partnership Test does not ask what donors intend. It asks what the partnership agreement specifies and what the implementation reality shows. Good intentions without observable commitments produce dependency.

Genuine partnership requires:

- Legal agreements that embed reformer authority.
- Financial arrangements that share downside risk.
- Implementation structures that preserve design control.
- Institutionalisation plans from Year 1.
- Transparent acknowledgment of mutual interests.

6. The choice

6.1 A legitimacy reckoning

Governance aid has reached a legitimacy reckoning. Traditional donors face a paradox: spending more to signal relevance while achieving less that lasts. This is not just about shrinking ODA—it is also about shifting comparative advantage. Domestic reformers now have options, and they are choosing partners on the basis of speed, predictability and respect for sovereignty, not ideology.

Across the documented cases—ProZorro (Ukraine), DHIS2 (73 countries), Nigeria's PERL, Rwanda's Irembo, Benin's open-budget mechanisms—the pattern is consistent. Where domestic reformers have controlled design from inception, where external partners have unwritten risk without steering decisions and where convening power has been embedded in domestic institutions before exit, reforms have persisted.

Where this logic has been inverted—donors designing, coordinating or slowing decisions—systems have collapsed the moment funding has ended.

The diagnostic question asked at the start now has an evidence-based answer: **Some programmes would continue without aid; many would not.**

This is no longer a question of what donors can do—it is a question of what they choose to do with their diminishing comparative advantage.

6.2 The future comparative advantage of traditional donors

Traditional donors retain comparative advantage in three functions:

1. **Underwriting risk**—absorbing early losses so domestic reformers can take political risks.
2. **Platform-building**—financing and legitimising systems controlled by domestic actors.
3. **Legitimacy brokerage**—using diplomatic weight to protect reform space.

Legitimacy brokerage remains particularly valuable: Donors can convene, certify and defend reform processes without becoming domestic political actors.

Examples illustrate this clearly:

- **Tunisia anti-money laundering/countering the financing of terrorism and legitimacy protection:** Tunisia shows how external partners can protect reformers without taking over. The Financial Action Task Force's Mutual Evaluation follow-up (FATF, 2019) documents the country's progress towards compliance and removal from the grey list. This is legitimacy protection—not substitution—whereby external actors provide credibility while domestic authorities drive the reform.

- **Malawi:** During **Cashgate**, donor-funded forensic audits provided reformers with evidence to prosecute perpetrators and reform controls (Baker Tilly, 2014; UK NAO, 2017).

- **Nigeria:** Through the **Facility for Oil Sector Transparency and Reform**, FCDO backed NEITI using 'strategic anonymity'—low-visibility support that strengthened domestic legitimacy without donor branding.

These roles demand humility and political acuity—not administrative control.

6.3 From performance theatre to persistence

Too much governance aid still delivers performance theatre: activity-heavy, output-rich, outcome-poor. Workshops, dashboards and training cohorts create the optics of progress but little that survives. Genuine partnerships look slower and riskier but endure.

The task ahead is straightforward: Replace the appearance of momentum with institutions that persist.

A Southern practitioner framed the challenge at the outset:

> *'Stop calling yourselves donors. That already suggests you are there to give or donate.'*

The future belongs to development partners that take that seriously—that shift from doing things *to* reformers, or *for* them, to doing things *with* them.

In this new landscape, success is defined by one standard only: **whether systems, coalitions and institutions built with external support still stand—and function—when the funding stops.**

The evidence is clear. **The choice is yours.**

Annex A: Methodology

Case selection and evidence base

This paper is based on selected reform cases evaluated by outcomes after funding ended, regional diversity and the prominence of Southern authors. The evidence draws on peer-reviewed research and practitioner sources from organisations like ODI Global, the World Bank and DFID/FCDO for a balanced view.

Selection criteria

- Each case includes at least two years of post-funding evidence.
- Cases span diverse governance functions: transparency, fiscal management, digital systems, citizen oversight.
- Geographic representation includes Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.
- At least two-thirds of sources are authored or co-authored by Southern experts.

Methods

The methodology combines a rapid review of over 15 sources (including grey literature and Southern policy papers) with 12 structured conversations involving reformers, civil society, technocrats and donors mainly from Africa and Asia. To complement missing voices from Latin America and Francophone regions, local language publications were reviewed. Analysis tested whether reforms lasted longer when domestic actors rather than donors had controlled design and operations.

Analytical lens

- Focus on who controls reform design, funding and governance.
- Evaluate how much decision-making power external partners share.

Limitations and validation

- There was a noted Anglophone bias (38%) and limited IFI evaluation access.
- Conversational interviews gave candid insights but varied in depth.
- There were fewer views from Latin America, which was partly addressed via local literature.
- A potential bias existed favouring persistent reforms.
- Practitioner input was anonymised for ethical reasons.

Reflexive note

The author reflects from both practitioner and evaluator perspectives, drawing on direct experience designing and assessing systems.

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For further information on this particular topic, contact Wilfred K. Mwamba on wilf.mwamba@thepolicypractice.com

www.thepolicypractice.com

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