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Carrying out a Joint Governance Assessment: Lessons from Rwanda

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The Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment can be downloaded here:
http://www.minaloc.gov.rw/spip.php?article193

A joint governance assessment aims to bring government and development partners together to undertake a joint assessment of governance performance based on commonly agreed indicators. The first assessment of this kind was undertaken in Rwanda during 2008. Based on first hand experience of supporting this process, this policy brief reflects on the usefulness of a joint approach to governance assessment and offers practical guidance on how it might be applied elsewhere.

During 2008 The Policy Practice provided professional support to the Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment (JGA). This was a joint initiative of the Government of Rwanda and its development partners seeking both to assess performance and to devise indicators for future monitoring. The model of a joint governance assessment has attracted interest as an alternative to conventional practice where donors have undertaken separate assessments with little or no government involvement. Ideally, such an exercise could be an important way to advance the Paris Principles for aid effectiveness.

The potential advantages include reducing donor duplication, creating a basis for a frank and constructive dialogue between government, development partners and other stakeholders, establishing a shared evidence-based framework for analysis, strengthening government ownership of aspects of the agenda, and agreeing on arrangements for joint performance monitoring. While acknowledging these potential benefits, a joint governance assessment also carries inherent risks because the issues under discussion are likely to be sensitive. Consequently, it may generate damaging disagreements between the various parties who bring different interests and agendas to the process, or may inhibit frank assessment.

There is very little experience of joint governance assessments in practice. However, the Rwanda JGA, being the first of its kind, provides an interesting test case. The process is generally regarded by the main stakeholders as having been productive, but has also faced significant challenges. This brief draws on this experience to provide some reflections on the usefulness of the joint approach and its wider applicability. Based on first-hand experience, it offers practical guidance on how the approach might be adopted elsewhere.

What is a Joint Governance Assessment?

Over the past decade development agencies have increasingly emphasised the importance of good governance as a condition for development, and have fashioned numerous tools for the analysis and monitoring of governance conditions in the countries they support. However, growing interest in good governance has not led to analytical coherence. A recent review by the OECD found that there are currently 30 separate analytical tools used by eleven different donors to assess governance in developing countries.[1] This situation has inevitably led to duplication of effort, fragmentation of knowledge, uncoordinated action and high transactions costs.

These weaknesses suggest that there would be significant benefits to: (1) greater coordination, information-sharing and joint analysis among donors carrying out governance assessment work, and (2) directly involving developing country governments in governance assessments. While there has been modest progress in the first of these two areas, government involvement has typically been limited. Enhancing the role of government in the assessment process could help to encourage government ownership of the governance reform agenda and create a framework for mutual accountability where governments and their development partners are able to agree on a joint programme to support reforms and monitor progress. This, of course, depends on willingness on all sides to enter into a frank assessment of governance weaknesses.

In undertaking the JGA, the aspiration has been that the assessment should be jointly owned and directed by the Government of Rwanda and its development partners, for donor co-ordination to be strengthened, and for the principles set out in Box 1 to be followed.

Box 1 – Objectives and Guiding Principles for the Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment

The Joint Steering Committee defined three objectives for the JGA:

1. To undertake a thorough and rigorous analysis of existing institutions, laws and practices affecting governance in Rwanda, and propose policy improvements.
2. To define and monitor indicators to measure performance, assess progress, highlight weaknesses and establish priorities for action.
3. To make recommendations on establishing an ongoing system for monitoring the agreed indicators, including training for the Rwanda Governance Advisory Council.

The committee defined ten principles for the assessment, namely that it should:

1. be jointly 'owned' by the Government of Rwanda and its development partners,
2. be conducted in an open and consultative manner,
3. be forward looking and aim to provide a basis to identify priorities for action,
4. be acceptable to development partners as a basis for their own governance reporting,
5. be credible by virtue of the thoroughness and rigour of the analysis,
6. take due account of the specific governance and historical context of Rwanda,
7. analyse underlying explanations of governance that need to be addressed to bring about improvements,
8. be of high professional quality and based on sound evidence,
9. provide a basis for well-informed on-going dialogue among stakeholders on governance issues,
10. establish a monitoring framework for continuing assessments over the coming years.

It was recognised from the outset that there would sometimes be trade-offs and compromises to be made between these objectives and principles. In resolving potential conflicts it was agreed that the guiding principle of the joint governance assessment would be to provide a basis for joint ownership and constructive discussion in order to improve the quality and usefulness of dialogue around issues of good governance.

Reflecting the joint ownership of the JGA by the Rwanda government and the development agencies, it was directed by a Steering Committee co-chaired by the Minister of Local Government (whose portfolio includes responsibility for broad programmes of governance reform) and the World Bank Country Manager, and also included other government ministers and heads of agencies. Supporting functions were provided by a Technical Committee and the Rwanda Governance Advisory Council. A team of international and local consultants managed by The Policy Practice undertook the research and analysis, organised consultations with key stakeholders and drafted the report in consultation with the Steering and Technical Committees. The primary responsibilities for each stage in the assessment process are shown in Box 2 below:

Why undertake a joint governance assessment?

In undertaking a joint governance assessment it is important to set realistic expectations that reflect the nature of the process and the requirement for joint ownership. A joint governance assessment is a specific tool whose primarily purpose is to better manage certain aspects of the aid relationship. It cannot serve all the purposes of governance analysis, for which a wide range of other tools exist.

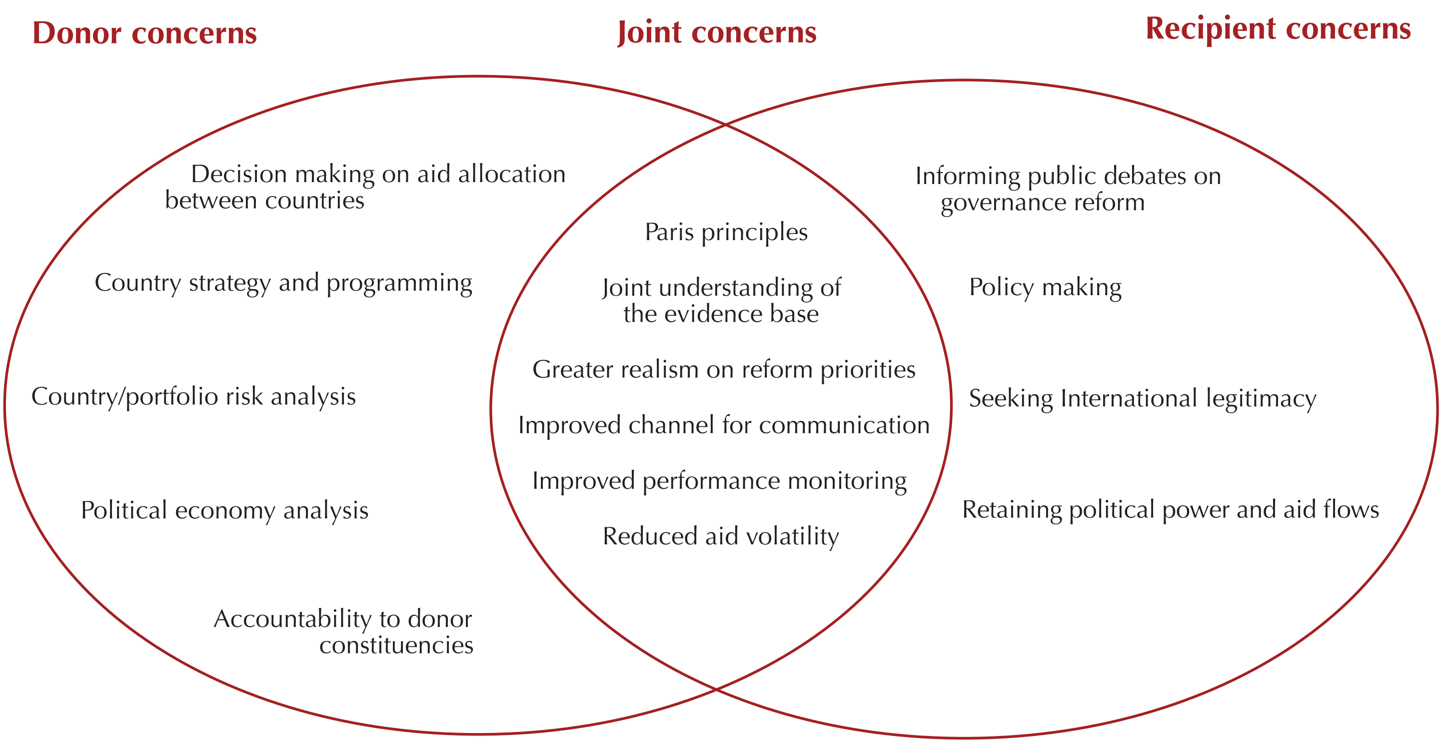
As illustrated in figure 1 below, donors and government have a number of individual and joint needs, some of which are consistent, while others may be conflicting. A joint governance assessment will work best where it focuses on those requirements that are common to both donors and recipients and centre on better managing the aid relationship. These include:

- Reducing duplication of effort, fragmentation of knowledge, uncoordinated action and high transactions costs (consistent with Paris Declaration principles).
- Testing the evidence basis for assessments, identifying and resolving misunderstandings and misinformation, and promoting better understanding of country specific considerations.
- Reducing donor-induced reform overload, and inducing greater realism about the possible scope and pace of change.
- Identifying areas of overlap between the interests of donors and government.
- Providing a formal channel for communication through which governance issues can be collectively raised by donors.
- Building mutual accountability around a joint framework for performance assessment as a means to increase aid predictability and reduce aid volatility.

Box 2 Tasks and Responsibilities

Action	
Decision to conduct assessment	Government and Development Partners at 2006 Development Partners Meeting
Terms of reference for assessment	Joint Steering Committee
Funding of assessment	Selected Development partners (DFID and EC)
Recruitment of consultant team	International competitive tender managed by UNDP. Decisions taken by Joint Steering Committee
Research, consultations, logistics, drafting	Consultant team
Comments on first draft	Channelled through Joint Steeering Committee
Preparation of final draft	Consultant Team
Adoption of report	Joint Steering Committee, Cabinet
Dissemination of results	Government and development partners
Practical follow-up	Government and development partners

Figure 1 – Purposes and users of governance assessment



What are the risks?

The risks to a joint governance assessment arise where expectations are raised beyond meeting the fairly narrow set of objectives labelled as 'joint concerns' in figure 1. A particular risk will arise where the joint governance assessment is one factor influencing future aid flows. This will almost certainly reduce the space for deep analysis of governance challenges and conducting a neutral assessment of performance. In such conditions government may well wish to avoid discussing sensitive or contentious issues, and donors may wish to avoid pushing the debate to the point where such issues jeopardise the aid relationship. There will be an incentive on all parties not to 'rock the boat', and this may limit the extent to which the assessment can address difficult issues in an incisive way. The risk is that raising the stakes of a joint governance assessment too high will push the results down to the lowest common denominator.

A joint governance assessment may be of some use in addressing the donor concerns on the left hand side of figure 1. However, pushing these agendas too far will compromise the common objectives of a joint governance assessment. For example, several donors are currently interested in political economy analysis, which seeks to examine the power relations, institutions and incentive systems that underlie the formal systems of governance. Such analysis may well prove to be too sensitive and contentious for inclusion in a joint governance assessment. However, the risk is that in avoiding a political economy perspective, the assessment will adopt an overly technocratic view of governance that focuses more on formal institutions and legal provisions, rather than the informal institutions that are often most important to explaining how a country is governed in practice.

There are a number of other risks that reflect the government's interests as shown on the right hand side of figure 1. The format of a joint governance assessment is unlikely to provide a basis for wide public debate on governance priorities. Even though a wide range of civil society stakeholders should be consulted to inform the joint governance assessment, it must be recognised that the process is driven by governments and their development partners, and cannot be a substitute for national debates on governance reform.

There is also a significant risk that governments will enter into a governance assessment mainly for reasons of public relations and may view the exercise primarily as an opportunity to strengthen their international legitimacy and deflect domestic criticism. This may be justified in cases where government believes that its record has been misrepresented or misunderstood in the past. However, attempts by the government to push its position too hard are likely to erode confidence in the process.

In view of these potentially serious problems, it is essential to make a careful judgement of the likely risks and benefits before embarking on a joint governance assessment. Where conditions are not conducive to success, a joint governance assessment should not be undertaken. However, there may be

Box 3. How did the Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment come about?

The Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment arose from a particular context and set of circumstances. Amongst all parties there was a sense of dissatisfaction with existing processes of governance assessment and dialogue, which were fragmented and had led to miscommunication and misunderstanding. The weak evidence base on Rwanda's governance performance was a key obstacle to informed discussion, partly a reflection of the fact that 'objective' assessment of governance problems is particularly challenging in Rwanda because there are still important social and political divisions in society left by sectarianism and genocide.

There are a number of existing information sources on governance in Rwanda, but their quality is mixed and coverage is incomplete. The APRM Report published in 2006 is generally well regarded, but has generated little in the way of follow-up actions and monitoring. While the increasing number of studies and indicators have brought many issues to attention, some stakeholders in Rwanda have criticised certain sources (indicators of corruption in particular) for being inaccurate or insensitive to Rwanda's specific history and institutional context. Because of Rwanda's troubled history, international comparative indicators are of only limited use in informing the design of governance reforms at the national level. There is a particular sense of frustration on the part of the Government of Rwanda that many of the indicators and commentaries on governance in Rwanda appear to repeat the same message year after year, without acknowledging the important governance reforms that have taken place.

The Joint Governance Assessment was initiated in response to the recognition by both the government and donors that processes for assessment and dialogue on governance were not working well. At the Development Partners Meeting in November 2006 President Kagame called for governance issues and concerns to be discussed much more openly between the Government of Rwanda and its development partners.[2] The President's challenge provided an important impetus for the Joint Governance Assessment, and a signal that the process would be taken seriously at the highest political levels.

intermediate conditions where it is possible to introduce the approach gradually starting with a limited agenda focussing on less contentious areas. Such judgements need to be informed by an understanding of the positions of the various stakeholders, and the interests and incentives facing them. A careful analysis of the country situation and the nature of the relationship between government and donors is required. Political economy analysis can be useful to inform such decisions.

While the risks of undertaking a joint governance assessment should be fully appreciated, these alone should not discourage parties from going ahead. In the right conditions the risks are likely to be manageable and the benefits could be significant. The risks will be lower where the various parties have strong and well-established relationships, and where governments are genuinely committed to broad-ranging governance reform. It is also important to structure the assessment process around mechanisms and approaches that help build trust and ensure effective communication.

What should a joint governance assessment be expected to deliver?

Expectations on the results of a joint governance assessment need to be limited to a modest set of goals. Most usefully, a joint governance assessment can set out a common framework for analysis, provide a forum for the discussion of the evidence base, bring about a meeting of minds on difficult issues, and establish a framework for ongoing monitoring. However, there will be limitations to the extent to which the assessment can claim to be definitive, neutral and comprehensive. While a joint governance assessment should strive to be as objective and evidence-based as possible, there will always be difficult issues where disagreements between the various parties make it impossible to arrive at a single judgement. A well-managed process can reduce the scope for disagreement by requiring the debate to be based on high standards of evidence, encouraging a degree of negotiation and compromise, and finding constructive language that balances critical comments with positive statements acknowledging progress made and identifying opportunities for change. However, attempting to seek too much consensus risks leading to a discussion that covers only the issues where everyone is in agreement, and addresses controversial issues in a superficial way. The better approach is to agree to differ on certain issues, and to acknowledge this publicly rather than forcing consensus. This requires a mature partnership, and acceptance at the outset that it may be impossible to agree on everything and that this should not derail the process.

In view of these constraints, it is clear that there will always be a need for independent analysis of governance from a plurality of sources. Donors should be willing to support other research and assessment processes, notably those undertaken by local institutions and individuals, and should continue their own analytical work on governance issues. This is part of the central responsibility of all development agencies to meet due diligence requirements and to invest in their own knowledge so that they are in a position to identify strategic opportunities to promote change.

How should a Joint Governance Assessment be undertaken?

Based on the limited experience gained so far in joint governance assessment work it is difficult to provide definitive guidelines that would be widely applicable to different country situations. However, a number of lessons can be drawn from the preceding discussion and the Rwanda experience.

Clarity of purpose. One of the most important lessons is to seek clarity at the outset on the purpose of the assessment, and to manage expectations according to a realistic assessment of what the exercise is likely to deliver. It is essential to avoid setting up unrealistic or conflicting objectives, or at least to recognise and manage potential trade-offs. Most importantly this requires recognition that the assessment will be a joint product of government and donors, and that it should not be regarded as being independent of these influences. The assessment should aim to be fair, balanced and constructive in the light of the purpose for which it was designed.

Oversight arrangements. Having clarified the purpose of the assessment, it is essential to put in place arrangements to ensure that the outcome is regarded as being credible and of high quality. Much will depend on the composition of the committees overseeing the assessment, whether they represent a balanced set of viewpoints and whether or not they enable a full and frank debate to take place on equal terms between partners. It needs to be understood that discussions will sometimes be tough, but that arriving at a positive outcome depends on maintaining an atmosphere of openness and trust. Clear rules governing the proceedings of the committee will need to be established, in particular to maintain confidentiality where appropriate, and to guard against sensitive debates becoming overly heated.

Willingness to disagree. It is not realistic to expect there to be a consensus on every topic, nor should differences in viewpoint between the donors and the government be concealed. It is better to have a frank admission where agreement is not achieved and recognise that these matters need to continue to be raised and discussed. Agreement needs to be reached at the beginning of the process on how to handle differences of view in verbal discussions and in the written report.

Role of consultants. The role and professionalism of the consultants supporting the process is also crucial. The consultant team needs to be given the resources, operational independence, time and space to prepare a thorough and well researched report that brings together evidence from a wide range of sources. While the consultants should play a role in interpreting the evidence, the final assessment should be seen as the product of the organisations commissioning and overseeing their work. To reduce the risk of the JGA being reduced to the lowest common denominator, the consultants will need to play a 'challenge function' seeking to maintain focus on the more important issues, even if they are controversial.

Box 4. What did the Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment achieve?

It is too early to judge the results of the JGA, in particular because it is intended to be an ongoing process rather than a single report. However, most significant is the strong government involvement: the initiative originated principally with government, senior political figures reviewed drafts, the final report was approved by Cabinet, and government is leading in developing a results matrix from the governance indicators. In addition, initial reactions suggest that the JGA has been quite successful so far in creating a common focus on some priority issues, even though there are areas where the government's view differs from that of some of the donors. The report provides a wide-ranging analysis of governance issues, identifies clear priorities and recommendations, and proposes 45 indicators for ongoing monitoring. An Implementation Working Group on governance under the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy is being set up, to be responsible for devising and implementing an Integrated Governance Action Plan.

Reaching this point has not been a straightforward process. At times there were difficult exchanges on the more politically sensitive issues raised by the report. Viewed positively, these difficulties are an indication that the process enabled meaningful discussion to take place. Although the final report represents a degree of compromise between the views of the various parties, it is by no means a lowest common denominator, and has succeeded in opening up the debate on sensitive issues. However, it was also evident to the consultants that it was difficult to move the discussion beyond a consideration of the working of formal institutions to examine the underlying structural political factors and informal power relationships that many governance professionals, including the Policy Practice, regard as being of fundamental importance. This reflected the limitations of the terms of reference, the preference given to easily-measurable indicators, and the sensitivity of some of the issues raised by political economy analysis. Consequently, the final report adopts a rather technocratic view of good governance, and focuses its recommendation on reform options for improving formal institutions.

In making this observation it is important to make clear that the JGA report does not ignore issues relating to informal institutions and how power is perceived and operates in practice. There is a good deal of discussion in the report on sensitive questions relating to political space, the fairness of political competition, party financing, inclusiveness, non-discrimination and the use of laws to prevent sectarianism. In addition, issues of perception relating to government legitimacy and inclusiveness are also discussed, and reflected in the framework of indicators. In the view of the consultants these are essential elements of the analysis, and the discussion needs to be taken further. It is hoped that the JGA has provided the groundwork for further analysis and dialogue.

Recognising the complexity and difficulty of the JGA, most participants have expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the process so far. It is recognised that the JGA represents a great improvement on previous processes for governance dialogue and assessment. There has been a significant opening of the debate on challenging issues. The report is generally considered to be a balanced statement, which recognises the achievements that have been made, does not make light of the remaining governance challenges, and sets out a substantial and meaningful agenda for change.

Scope and focus. In setting up a joint governance assessment, agreement needs to be reached on its scope, focus and depth. Initially a broad-ranging study is likely to be required, covering the whole variety of good governance concerns, including human rights, safety and security, political competition, accountability and voice and effective administration. Subsequent updates might focus more narrowly on priority issues. The realm of government will be the focus of enquiry, but depending on the country setting, it may also be important to consider non-state bodies, for example good corporate governance, and civil society organisations' internal governance. This would recognise that improved governance depends not only on the 'supply' side (i.e. institutional reform) but also on generating 'internal demand'. An issue is whether to widen the analysis to assess whether donors are following best practice within the country.

Broad consultation. The quality of the assessment will depend on the breadth of consultation with national stakeholders. It is essential to invest time in this process and to consult widely across the country, including representatives of government (central and local), the private sector, civil society and local communities. There may be merit in including civil society and private sector views on the steering committee. In addition, some form of information-gathering or validation workshops might be envisaged. While recognising the value of stakeholder consultation to inform the analysis, it is important to manage expectations regarding the degree of public participation in the drafting of the assessment, which is ultimately a donor-government document, and which may be made unmanageable by attempting to seek broad consensus across all sections of society.

Political economy analysis. While covering a broad range of issues, it is important that the assessment should attempt to focus on those factors that are of greatest importance to realising development and human rights goals. This will require an understanding of the principal economic and political processes shaping the governance environment. Political sensitivity may limit the extent to which a political economy analysis can be explicitly presented in the report. However, it will be important to ensure that the focus of the study and the indicators reflect an understanding of the political economy, and that there is sufficient emphasis on the workings of informal institutions and power structures and the incentives, both formal and informal, influencing decision-makers.

Country-specificity and international norms. While international best practice provides a useful benchmark, to be realistic a joint governance assessment needs to be rooted in an understanding of country-specific constraints and opportunities, rather than emphasising international comparison. For this reason the analysis needs to be grounded in an understanding of local institutions and their historical context. Looking for positive opportunities to build on existing institutions is likely to prove more fruitful for promoting better governance than seeking to assess how a country measures against its peers. Similarly, it will generally be more productive to use local norms, such as those set out within the Constitution or laws, or in government's own policy statements, as a basis for setting objectives, rather than seeking to promote an assumed model of best practice. However, it is also important to refer to international norms and experience, where these provide a relevant set of principles for strengthening governance. Achieving an assessment that is both internationally credible and sensitive to local realities will require the exercise of good judgement, and a balanced approach that avoids being overly normative and prescriptive, but provides a clear sense of direction for bringing about better governance.

Indicators. The selection of indicators is an important but difficult part of the assessment exercise. Considerable discussion will be required to reach agreement on a manageable list of indicators that captures the range of priority issues, but is neither too costly nor too burdensome on statistical capacities. From the huge number of potential indicators available, priority should be given to those that are relevant to the most important governance issues, those that measure outcome and impact, and those that minimise scope for statistical error or disagreement over interpretation. Triangulation of sources is essential, in particular in relation to contentious issues where government, civil society and foreign organisations may use different sources or apply different interpretations. It must also be recognised that some of the most important aspects of good governance, particularly those relating to informal institutions, are less amenable to quantification using fact-based indicators. Perceptions-based surveys can prove useful to assess such factors, but in some cases the assessment must rely on the best judgement of informed observers.

Research methods. A meaningful and credible joint governance assessment that seeks to extend understanding beyond existing reports will require in-depth and in-country research. A combination of research methods will be required including interviews with key stakeholders, workshops at national and local level, gathering of data from a wide range of agencies, and careful review of secondary sources. Because many issues are likely to prove contentious, the assessment must provide high standards of evidence backed by robust sources that will withstand scrutiny. Triangulation of different sources will be essential where facts are disputed. An active role for local researchers will be necessary.

Sustaining the process. The maximum benefit of undertaking a joint governance assessment is only likely to emerge if the exercise is viewed as a long-term process subject to regular update and review. The first report will serve as a baseline establishing initial values for most of the indicators. However, the full value of the indicators will only emerge from ongoing monitoring and the ability to track change. Appropriate financial and institutional arrangements will need to be put in place to sustain the process over time.

[1]A further six agencies were developing tools. OECD (2008) 'Survey of donor approaches to governance assessment,' OECD DAC Network on Governance, 2008. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/26/5/40049776.pdf

[2]Sixth Annual Government of Rwanda and Development Partners Meeting, Final Communiqué, 23 November 2006

About us

The Policy Practice analyses policy options and supports institutional reforms in developing countries. We advise governments, development agencies, civil society organisations and companies, providing practical, innovative solutions based on realistic assessments of the challenges and opportunities they face. Our multi- disciplinary approach uses 'The New Political Economy Perspective' to understand the processes of socio-economic change and their effect on the implementation of development programmes.

This paper is part of a series of policy briefs intended to share our insights on an ongoing basis, in a form that is easily digestible and readable to policymakers, experts and others in the development field. For further information please contact **Gareth Williams** (gareth.williams@thepolicypractice.com), **Alex Duncan** (alex.duncan@thepolicypractice.com), **Pierre Landell-Mills** (pierre.landell-mills@thepolicypractice.com), **Sue Unsworth** (sue.unsworth@thepolicypractice.com) or **Tim Sheehy** (tim.sheehy@thepolicypractice.com).

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