

Paradigm shift or aid effectiveness adrift? Previewing the first High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership

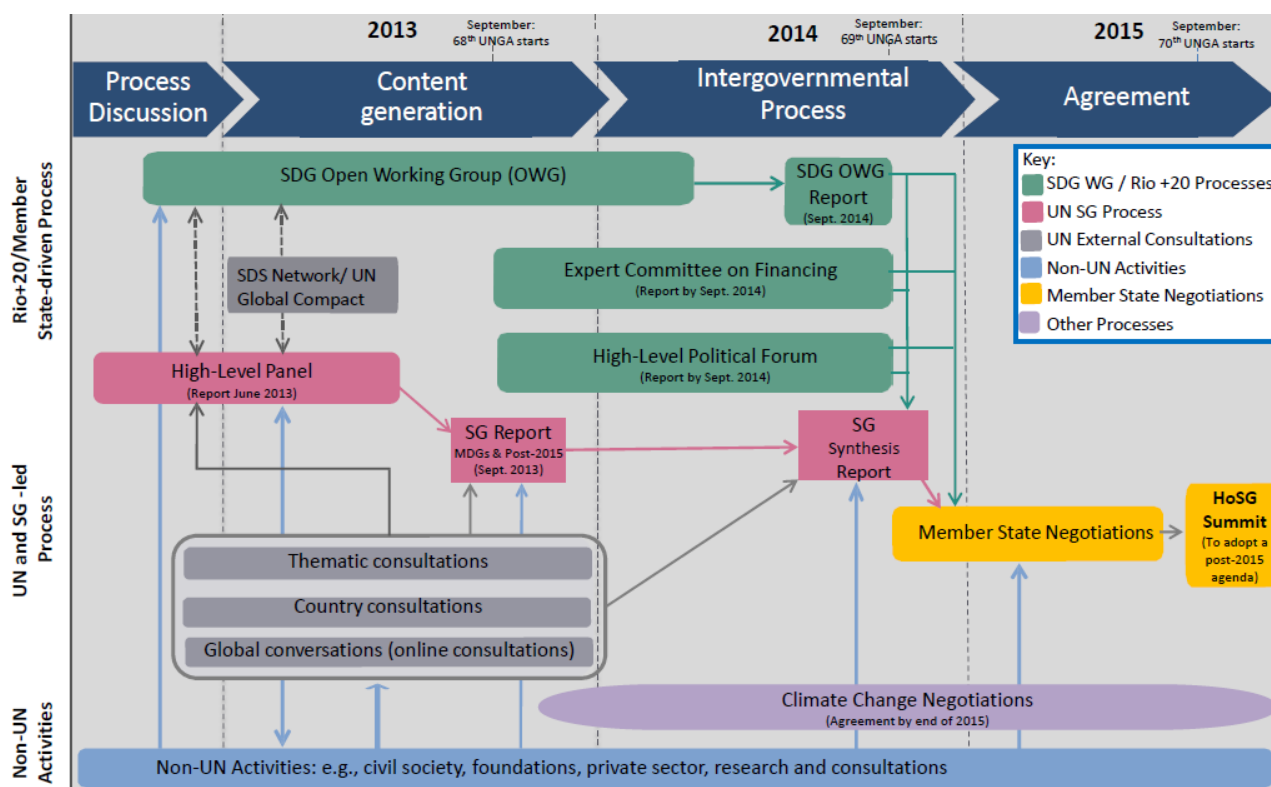
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Some 1300 'development leaders', including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and our own development leader, Julie Bishop, are in Mexico City at the [First High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation](#) (GPEDC), which started yesterday and continues today. (You can follow proceedings using the twitter handle #GPHLM). As the global community seeks to define a post-2015 development agenda, and meetings such as this become more common, the risk of 'development summitry fatigue' is real. Each summit blurs into the next, making it next to impossible even for the experts to keep track. A quick glance at the diagram below - which attempts to depict the various parallel processes underway to develop a post-2015 development agenda - shows why. What's more, for those struggling to keep up, it doesn't help that many of these meetings, or processes, have either 'high level' or 'global partnership' in their title.

Processes feeding into the post-2015 development agenda



Source: [United Nations Foundation \[pdf\]](#)

The GPEDC is not actually about the post-2015 development agenda, or at least not what goals will replace the MDGs. The easiest way to understand where the first High Level Meeting (HLM) of the GPEDC ‘fits in’ is to [see it](#) as the latest significant global forum of the aid effectiveness movement. Like earlier gatherings in Rome, Paris, Accra and Busan, the meeting in Mexico City is focused in large part on improving the quality of aid. Yet, while its continuity with these earlier meetings is undeniable, this HLM, like the partnership that it seeks to advance, also represents a self-conscious break from the past.

The GPEDC emerged from the December 2011 Busan High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, an event that, some argue, represented a turning point in the politics of global aid. In their review of the Busan Forum, [Eyben and Savage](#) argue that “Busan established a new discourse of international development cooperation in which the old donor-recipient relationship is replaced by an equator-less landscape of a multistakeholder global partnership.”

Whether or not one accepts this enthusiastic rhetoric, there is no doubt that the GPEDC was cast as the centrepiece of this new regime of development effectiveness (note: no longer just ‘aid’ effectiveness). Section 36 of the Busan Partnership Document [\[pdf\]](#), called for the establishment of a “new, inclusive and representative Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation to support and ensure accountability for the implementation of commitments at the political level.” In a symbolic move, the Busan Partnership Agreement decoupled the GPEDC from the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC) Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (WP-EFF), which had been the driving force behind the Rome-Paris-Accra HLF process.

In other words, Busan heralded two substantial shifts. First, a shift from aid effectiveness to the broader notion of development effectiveness, which encompasses both the effectiveness of aid and the effectiveness of developing countries’ own national development efforts. Second, a shift from an OECD-led discourse – shaped mostly by rich countries even though the WP-EFF became ever more inclusive of non-OECD voices over the years – toward a UN-led discourse.

The GPEDC is led by three co-chairs ([currently Indonesia, Nigeria and the UK](#)) and has a 15-member

Steering Committee. Together, the OECD and UNDP provide secretariat services (further details on the governance arrangements of the GPEDC can be found [here](#) [pdf]). [Kim and Lee](#) see the joint OECD and UNDP secretariat arrangement as significant “since it will help broaden the representation of development cooperation partners in the post-HLF process that had been led by the OECD-DAC members.”

The inclusiveness of the GPEDC is touted as its key strength. It brings together governments, business, civil society, international organisations and foundations. [161 countries and 61 organisations](#) have endorsed the Global Partnership Principles. Yet this inclusiveness is also the very thing that shapes as the key limiter of the GPEDC’s impact, potentially preventing it from charting a decisive course and moving beyond the delivery of platitudes. Mark Tran [detects](#) “a lack of high-level political interest,” evidenced in shortfalls in the provision of funding to the secretariat and indeed in the long delay in scheduling this first HLM—nearly two-and-a-half years after Busan. [For Jonathan Glennie](#), “the deliberate ambiguity employed to collect as many signatures as possible in Busan, a common device in international affairs, has led to confusion regarding mandate. And without a clear and legitimate mandate, countries will gradually melt away.”

The ambiguity Tran mentions, it should be noted, related particularly to the commitments made by emerging donors such as China and India, who were responsible for the inclusion in the final partnership document of language such as this: “The principles, commitments and actions agreed in the outcome document in Busan shall be the reference for South-South partners on a *voluntary* basis” (my emphasis). And this: “we now all form an integral part of a new and more inclusive development agenda, in which these actors [i.e. emerging donors] participate on the basis of common goals, shared principles and *differential commitments*”. To endorse a document containing such strong escape clauses is not to endorse much.

With observers [already talking](#) of [growing apathy](#) ahead of the Mexico City meeting, the key challenge is to demonstrate its relevance. Some have advocated that the GPEDC should focus on the post-2015 agenda. Glennie [argues](#) that “the whole point of the meeting in Mexico should be to discuss how the GPEDC fits in to post-2015, how it can be a part of the “how” when the “what” is signed in New York in September next year. But that discussion is not even on the agenda.” GPEDC Co-Chair Justine Greening, who is also the UK’s Secretary of State for International Development, suggested to a recent meeting of the Steering Committee that it should “map out the ongoing processes in relation to the post-2015 development agenda with a view to identifying the ambition and added value of the Global Partnership in relation to each of them.” This advice has not been followed.

Instead, the [program](#) has been organised around five ‘critical themes’ which are the subject of plenary sessions: progress on implementing key principles of effective development co-operation; tax and development; delivering development effectively in middle-income countries; knowledge sharing, South-South and triangular co-operation; and improving the role of business in development. Each of the critical themes represents an important ‘beyond aid’ discussion, but none is likely to ignite the interest of non-development specialists.

Interestingly, climate change financing has not made the cut as a priority area, despite its being headlined in the Busan Outcome Agreement, which illustrates the difficulty of achieving consensus in such a huge gathering. It is, however, the subject of a [Focus Session](#) [pdf]. Meanwhile, a forthright discussion on the role of aid in development is notable by its absence, at least from the plenary sessions of the HLM (again, this discussion has been relegated to a [Focus Session](#) [pdf]). Although the Steering Committee recently stated that “[aid remains vital](#)” [pdf], the HLF program appears to shy away from this contention. If the [summary document](#) [pdf] for the plenary session on ‘effective development co-operation’ is anything to go by, it appears this discussion will deliberately avoid directly discussing the ongoing role of aid in development. Perhaps this is a strategy to allow the best possible chance of reaching a consensus about the ongoing direction of the GPEDC. To me, it looks like an over-correction: broadening the conversation from effective aid to effective development is one thing; reluctance to squarely address the ongoing importance of aid in achieving effective development is another.

Perhaps the most positive thing one can say about the HLM, from an Australian perspective, is that we enjoy high-level representation, with Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop [leading our delegation](#). Bishop will

partake in the [second plenary session on tax and development](#), representing the G20. Bishop's [continued engagement](#) and leadership on this issue makes a lot of sense. It figures prominently among Australia's priorities for the [development component of the G20 agenda](#) and is strongly consistent with the Coalition's focus on ['economic diplomacy'](#). Australia's delegation will also contribute to a Focus Session on [strengthening development coordination in the Pacific](#) [pdf].

The [draft Communiqué](#) [pdf] for the High-Level Meeting has already been released. It contains little beyond the bland. Depressingly, this leaves the most anticipated outcome of the meeting as the election and announcement of the new co-chairs. The outcome of this decision, and the next host, may, in fact, prove vital for the ongoing viability of the GPEDC. Mexico has proven an enthusiastic host and, following in the footsteps of the Republic of Korea (ROK), has used the opportunity to trumpet its development credentials. While the ROK used Busan (like the 2010 G20 summit) to demonstrate its capacity to act as a bridge between the North and the South, Mexico has focused on highlighting the role of Middle-Income Countries (MICs) in international development. A [post](#) on the Global Partnership's [blog](#) by Juan Manuel Valle Pereña, head of the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation, highlights the dual role MICs perform as "both recipient and provider of development co-operation." It will fall to the next host, and especially the new co-chairs, to provide as much energy, and more concrete ideas, ahead of the next High Level Meeting two years from now.

Busan in 2011 was certainly the end of an era of OECD-dominated international development discourse. Was it the start of something new and useful? Or did it mark the beginning of a dismaying UN-isation of global dialogue on development effectiveness? The geopolitics of international development remains [in a state of flux](#). High-level political attention is trained elsewhere, [not least on geopolitics](#) itself. Expectations [are low](#). But paradigm shifts can take time to occur, becoming evident only in hindsight. So, while the preliminary signs are not encouraging, let's not write off the GPEDC just yet.

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