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Putting Paris into practice

Foreign aid, national ownership, and donor alignment in Mali and Ghana

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Abstract: This paper examines the application of the first two principles of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, namely ownership and alignment, to the cases of Mali and Ghana. It argues that Western donors and recipient governments have adopted the Paris Principles mainly in form, rather than in substance, not because of a lack of capacity but rather due primarily to a lack of will, related to interests and incentives on both sides to maintain the pre-Paris status quo. As a result, the impact on Mali's and Ghana's relationships with their traditional donors has been minimal and short-lasting. To the extent that donors and recipients have not significantly changed their practices in either Mali (a poor, fragile, aid-dependent country with low state capacity) or Ghana (a wealthier and more stable country with greater capacity), it seems unlikely that they will be able to apply the Paris Principles elsewhere. Together, the cases of Mali and Ghana, placed in a broader context, suggest that the Paris Agenda is dying.

Keywords: aid effectiveness, Paris Declaration, ownership, harmonization, Mali, Ghana
JEL classification: F35, N47, O19, O20

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1 Introduction

In 2005, foreign aid donors and recipients formally endorsed a few basic but far-reaching principles that had the potential to revolutionize global development cooperation. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness—with its emphasis on putting recipients in the proverbial driver's seat and ensuring that donors align their aid with recipients' national development strategies—promised to transform the way donors worked with recipients, especially how they designed and implemented aid, in the interest of greater effectiveness. In the decade since, scholars and practitioners have tried to assess how much has actually changed in donor practices and how aid relationships play out 'on the ground'. The findings have been generally pessimistic. Collectively, donors have failed to put the new norms into practice. Case studies suggest that, if anything, donors have strengthened their capacity to impose their priorities on recipient governments.[1]

In this paper, I explore the cases of Mali and Ghana, and ask the following questions: To what extent have the Paris Principles of ownership and alignment been applied? What explains this degree of commitment? What has been the effect on the donor–recipient relationship? What do these findings suggest regarding the future of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda? I argue that Western donors and recipient governments have adopted the Paris Principles mainly in form, rather than substance, not because of a lack of capacity but rather due primarily to a lack of will, related to interests and incentives on both sides to maintain the pre-Paris status quo. As a result, the impact on Mali's and Ghana's relationships with their traditional donors has been minimal and short-lasting. To the extent that donors and recipients have not significantly changed their practices in either Mali (a poor, fragile, aid-dependent country with low state capacity) or Ghana (a wealthier and more stable country with greater capacity), it seems unlikely that they will be able to apply the Paris Principles elsewhere. Together, the cases of Mali and Ghana, placed in a broader context, suggest that the Paris Agenda is dying.

The paper draws extensively from semi-structured interviews I conducted in Bamako, Mali, in April 2015 and in Accra, Ghana, in July 2016. In each country, I interviewed 17–18 current and retired officials of Western bilateral aid agencies and embassies, multilateral organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the local government.[2] I also interviewed the Ghanaian High Commissioner to Canada and attended as an observer a meeting of donors and local and international NGOs in Bamako to discuss strategies to engage the Malian government on the issue of family planning. The fieldwork is supplemented by the

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[1] In this paper, I use the somewhat old-fashioned and blunt language of *donors* and *recipients*. I recognize that these are problematic terms, not least because several donors would be more accurately described as lenders. Still, I prefer this terminology to the more politically correct alternative of 'development partners' (or, as they are known in Mali, 'technical and financial partners') and 'partner countries' because they mask the power dynamics of one actor transferring funds to another. They are also quite imprecise: It is not only donor governments and agencies that could accurately be referred to as 'development partners', but also recipient governments, as well as local and international NGOs. Similarly, since partnership goes both ways, 'partner countries' could be used to describe both donor and recipient countries.

[2] All interviewees spoke in a personal capacity. When citing the interviews below, I provide as much identifying information as permitted by the interviewee. Most of them did not want to be cited by name in order to allow them to speak candidly. In such cases, I identify them with a generic title of their own choosing and do not specify the exact date that the interview took place. In the one case where the interviewee did not permit me to use any identifying information at all, I refer to that citation as an 'unattributable interview'. When interviews were conducted in French, I translated the quotations into English.

analysis of publicly accessible scholarly studies, as well as official aid-related documents and data that I obtained from officials I interviewed and on public websites.

I have organized the paper as follows: I begin by presenting the Paris Principles and outline competing scenarios on their potential impact. Next, I outline how the Paris Agenda has been put into practice in general and introduce the cases of Mali and Ghana. The following two sections analyse in turn the application of the first two Paris Principles: ownership and alignment. A conclusion sums up my argument and highlights its relevance for the future of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda.

2 Reading the Paris Declaration

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness was proclaimed in February 2005, as the culmination of a high-level forum held under the aegis of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/DAC), the main club of traditional Western donors.[3] A total of 138 countries—both donors and recipients—have signed the declaration, as have 28 international organizations and numerous NGOs and civil society networks.[4] It comprises five basic principles, which the OECD (n.d. c: 1) summarizes as follows:

1. Ownership: Developing countries set their own development strategies, improve their institutions and tackle corruption.
2. Alignment: Donor countries and organisations bring their support in line with these strategies and use local systems.
3. Harmonisation: Donor countries and organisations co-ordinate their actions, simplify procedures and share information to avoid duplication.
4. Managing for results: Developing countries and donors focus on producing—and measuring—results.
5. Mutual accountability: Donors and developing countries are accountable for development results.

In this paper, I focus on the first two principles, as they have the greatest potential to affect aid relationships on the ground. I will analyse a third in a separate paper. I pay much less attention to the remaining ones, as the fourth is more technocratic and the fifth very abstract.[5]

The Paris Declaration was groundbreaking in several ways, not least because donors were implicitly recognizing that the failures of past aid were not solely due to problems in recipient countries and that they themselves needed to change the way they operated. It is a utopian

[3] This description is not completely accurate, as the European Union and Japan are members and South Korea recently joined, as have some former Soviet Bloc countries, namely the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Nonetheless, the DAC remains the main body that represents the perspectives of traditional Western bilateral donors. For a list of the DAC's 29 members, see OECD (n.d. b).

[4] For a complete list of signatories, see OECD (n.d. a).

[5] It is worth noting here that the content of the Paris Declaration relates more to *efficiency* than actual *effectiveness*. Its principles concern primarily the organization of aid, rather than its content, which may be ill conceived. As a result, aid could be exemplary in its application of ownership and alignment (not to mention harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability), yet utterly ineffective.

document, outlining a scenario in which donors set aside their own priorities, self-interest, and rivalry and work together—and with recipient countries. Henceforth, recipients would set their own development priorities and plans, while donors would adopt them as their own and coordinate among themselves to help the government implement them.

A more pessimistic prediction presents a scenario that reverses the chronological chain of events. Coordination among donors would permit them to pre-select a preferred development strategy, most likely one based on dominant neoliberal perspectives, and the recipient government would then align with it. Finally, the recipient country would claim ownership, but this would not be genuine, as the government would have adopted the development strategy as the only way to access donor funds—as Emma Mawdsley (2007: 498) found when she analysed five countries and discovered that all identified 'remarkably similar' key priorities when seeking funding from the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation, which had made known its preferred areas of funding.

3 The Principles in practice

Given the above, to what extent have the Paris Principles been put into practice and to what effect? Initially, the OECD held high hopes that they would 'significantly increase […] the impact of aid' (OECD 2006: 49). Nonetheless, it recognized that, 'Put simply, the Paris Declaration is about changing behaviour'; '[f]or it to yield results, however, it will have to be matched by serious and sustained political resolve at the highest level' (OECD 2006: 54). Within a few years, it became clear that donors lacked the required will to implement the principles or perhaps some other factor was preventing them from doing so. Of the 13 targets they set for themselves for 2010, the OECD determined that they met only one—and only by a small margin.[6]

The OECD monitored the implementation of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda as measured against the quantitative targets set out in the Paris Declaration, including in the 32 recipient countries in which it conducted its survey. However, qualitative research has not been as complete. More analysis is required to *explain* the lack of implementation, i.e. beyond the lack of donor will or recipient capacity. Also, where some Paris-related measures have been put into practice, it is not clear what effects they have had, for example, on the power dynamics between donors and recipients. Some preliminary research suggests that donors are indeed reluctant to let recipient governments take charge. Bidaurratzaga-Aurrea and Colom-Jaén (2012) document the lack of ownership and alignment in the case of HIV/AIDS policies in Mozambique. Similarly, Hayman (2009) analyses donors' unwillingness to cede control to the government of Rwanda, despite the latter's high degree of ownership of its development strategy. By way of contrast, McGee and García Heredia (2012) find that the Colombian government used the Paris Principles of ownership and alignment to justify controversial policies and decrease the influence of donors

[6] The sole target met was having at least 50% of 'technical co-operation implemented through co-ordinated programmes consistent with national development strategies', which reached 57% in 2010. Targets not met include: 37% instead of 75% of '[recipient] countries having a national development strategy rated "A" or "B" on a five-point scale'; 41% instead of 85% of 'aid for the government sector reported on the government's budget'; 48% instead of 55% of 'aid for the government sector using partner countries' PFM [public financial management] systems'; 43% instead of 71% of 'aid for the government sector disbursed within the fiscal year for which it was scheduled and recorded in government accounting systems'; 45% instead of 66% of 'aid provided in the context of programme-based approaches'; and 19% instead of 40% of 'donor missions to the field undertaken jointly' (OECD 2012: 19).

and both international and local NGOs. The different result in the Colombian case could be due to the government's stronger state capacity, its lesser dependence on aid, or its pre-existing strong bargaining position vis-à-vis international actors. More comparative work is required to test the generalizability of findings, as well as explain inter-country and inter-regional differences.

This paper does not propose to make any definitive findings on global patterns. It does nonetheless seek to supplement currently limited knowledge by analysing two cases that could prove symptomatic of a broader trend. The first, Mali, was previously described as 'a laboratory for the implementation of the Paris Declaration' (Bergamaschi 2009: 217) and 'the Paris Agenda success story in francophone West Africa' (Whitfield and Fraser 2009: 361). In fact, even 'long before' the Paris Declaration, 'Mali was a pioneer – albeit more as a testing ground than as a leader – in the improvement of aid effectiveness' (Magassa and Meyer 2008: 3). A 2011 study notes that aid reform, though initially disappointing, 'saw significant improvement in the 2006–2010 period' (Wood et al. 2011: 110; see also Virchaux 2007: 221–22). Few assessments of Mali's aid programme and relationships with donors have been made since then—and none using data since the 2012 military coup d'état, which caused donors to be more critical in their assessment of the situation in Mali. The coup led to aid sanctions, but development assistance flowed again with the return to civilian rule later that year and the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2013.[7]

Mali is a relatively poor country, even for Sub-Saharan Africa, facing tremendous development challenges. In 2015, its per capita gross national income was US$790 (World Bank 2016). It is also highly dependent on foreign aid, which was equivalent to 11 per cent of gross national income and a mammoth 80 per cent of central government expenditure in 2013 (World Bank 2016). For two decades after its democratization in the early 1990s, Mali was a 'donor darling' and considered a 'good pupil', receiving significant amounts of foreign aid (Bergamaschi 2014; Magassa and Meyer 2008: 3; see also van de Walle 2013). Nonetheless, despite advances in some indicators, Mali remains stuck near the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI), ranking 179th out of 187 in 2014 (UNDP 2015: 214). In theory, Mali's weak capacity and relatively high level of aid dependence should mean that donors are more able to impose their will there than elsewhere. However, the separatist and Islamist rebellion in the north, where UN peacekeepers are now stationed, could strengthen the government's hand in bargaining with donors, who fear the spread of violence and fundamentalism across international borders.[8] Mali

[7] For more information on the coup, the French intervention, and the deeper origins of the crisis, see Bleck and Michelitch (2016), Charbonneau and Sears (2014), and Wing (2013).

[8] Mali is a very ethnically diverse country. Its northern region, the most arid and least developed, is home to the Tuareg, a Berber/Amazigh people, who span Mali's border with Algeria and Niger and are distinct from the dominant 'Bantu' groups in the south. Violent rebellions have periodically erupted in the north since Mali gained independence in 1960, fuelled by cultural and land-related grievances. The Malian government's inability to quell one such uprising, exacerbated by the influx of weapons from Libya after the fall of the Gadhafi regime and the ensuing civil war, was one of the factors that led to the 2012 coup. The short-lived military government, however, proved even less effective at combatting the rebels, who at their apogee controlled some two-thirds of the country and imposed harsh measures under *shari'a* law. French military intervention helped push the insurgents out of the main population areas in the north and a UN peacekeeping mission has since taken over and ensures a certain degree of stability. The rebels themselves belong to several different groups, some Islamist (including al-Qaeda affiliates), others ethnonationalist (including secular groups).

The Malian government seldom if ever plays the 'Islamist card'—or the 'China card', threatening to turn to 'emerging donors' if DAC donors seek to impose too many conditions (Mamadou Namory Traoré, retired government and donor official, interview, Bamako, Mali, 17 April 2015). Nonetheless, DAC donors are reluctant to abandon a so-called fragile state. Numerous interviewees stated that France and the US are particularly interested in Mali because of the national and transnational instability caused by the security situation. Some donors worry that their withdrawal would lead to an overthrow of the government and the installation of an Islamist regime. A is thus an interesting case to analyse the evolving dynamics of aid provision and donor–recipient relations.

The second case study, Ghana, has also been considered a 'donor darling' and World Bank-anointed 'success story' since the early 1990s (Opoku 2010: 155). Writing in 2005, Hughes stated that 'Ghana's contemporary success can be ascribed to an increasingly co-operative and mutually reinforcing relationship between the Ghanaian government and the international community', citing its 'strong economic and political relationships with the West, and, more importantly, with the donor community. Furthermore, for almost half a century Ghana has been a laboratory for a succession of domestic and internationally crafted developmental and macro-economic prescriptions' (Hughes 2005: 75–76). Ghana benefitted from significant general budget support from an array of bilateral and multilateral donors, which transferred up to US$525 million per year to the government of Ghana's coffers (Ghana n.d.), albeit subject to detailed negotiations regarding benchmarks and payment conditions. Although this practice began in 2003, pre-dating the Paris Declaration by two years, it epitomized in many ways the operationalization of the declaration's principles on ownership and alignment, as well as harmonization. In fact, the Ghanaian government had articulated its own principles for aid, at least in the education sector, which preceded but closely resembled those in the Paris Declaration (King 2011: 653). An early evaluation of the Paris Declaration's implementation in Ghana was quite positive, especially in the areas of ownership and alignment (Quartey et al. 2010).

Ghana's steady growth and relatively good governance shined all the brighter in comparison with other countries in the tumultuous West African region, several of which have experienced great instability, including coups and civil wars. In 2010, following a rebasing of its gross domestic product, Ghana 'graduated' to Lower Middle-Income Country (LMIC) status. The shine has worn off, however, in recent years, as Ghana's fiscal situation has worsened, despite the discovery of oil off its coast—or perhaps encouraged by it, since the government's overspending was in part fuelled by the newfound sense of wealth and access to credit. As a result, donors have virtually ceased providing general budget support and the country has had to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), obtaining a US$918 million credit facility for the period 2015–2018.

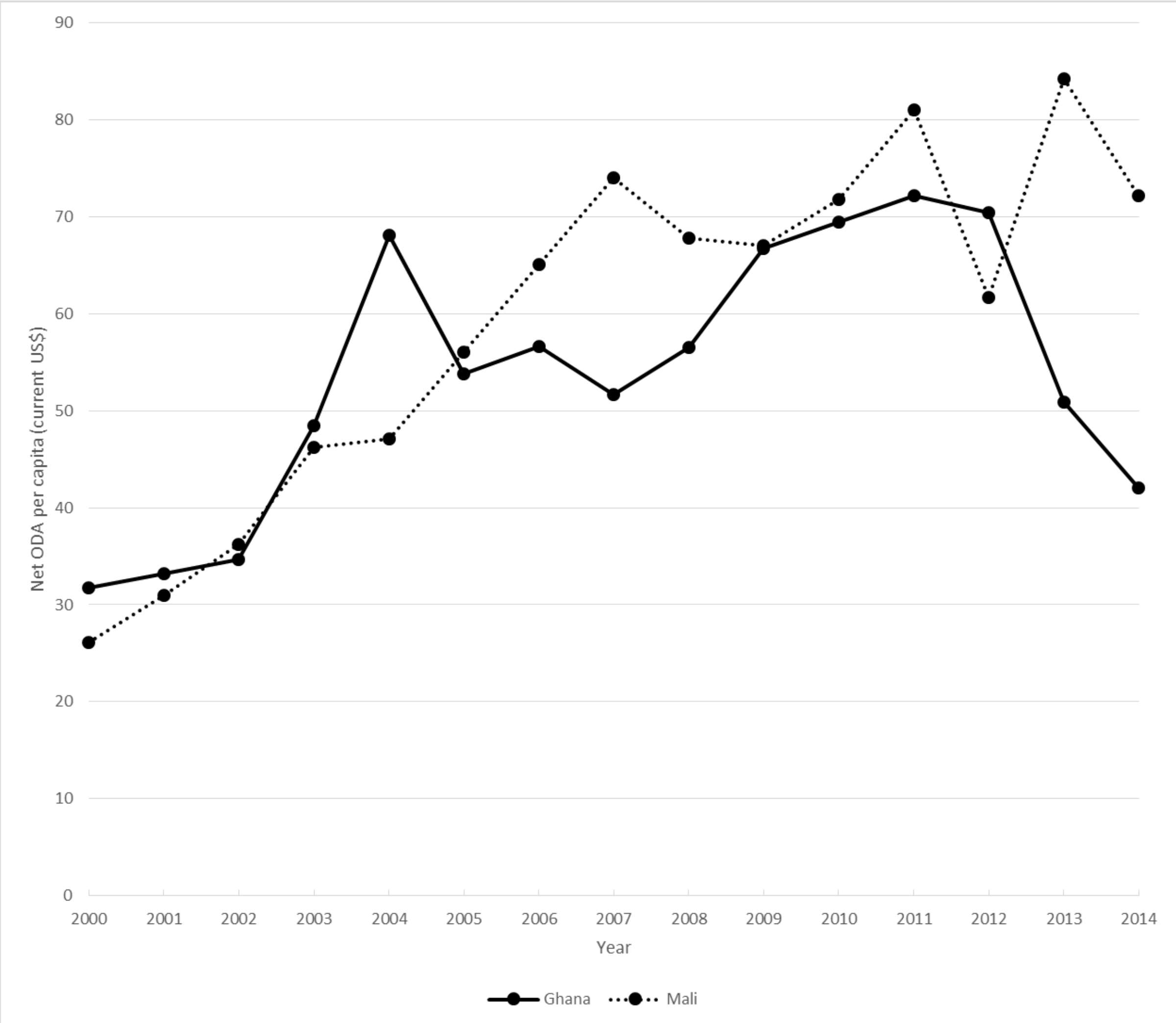
In 2015, Ghana's per capita gross national income was US$1,480, almost twice as high as Mali's (World Bank 2016). Its level of human development is considered 'medium', and it holds 140th place in the HDI (UNDP 2015: 214). Official development assistance (ODA) received was equivalent to 3 per cent of gross national income in 2014, only half of what it was in 2009, and 22 per cent of central government expenditure in 2011, both figures roughly one-quarter of Mali's (World Bank 2016). As can be seen in Figure 1, per capita ODA to Mali has more or less steadily increased since at least 2000, with a dip in 2012 after the coup d'état, more than tripling from US$26 in 2000 to a peak of US$84 in 2013. Similarly, Ghana's more than doubled from US$32 per Ghanaian in 2000 to US$72 in 2011, but then declined by over 40 per cent to US$42 between 2011 and 2014. As a result, Mali's total aid receipts have overtaken Ghana's, even though it has a significantly smaller population.[9] In all likelihood, aid to Ghana will continue to decline, mainly due to the country's attainment of LMIC status, as well as to concerns over corruption and lax fiscal policy. Despite the recent drop in aid to Ghana, its long-term

European technical cooperation official stated, in all likelihood deliberately exaggerating, that 'If donors leave, there will be a jihadist government within two weeks'.

[9] In 2015, Mali's population was 17.6 million and Ghana's 27.4 million (World Bank 2016).

importance to donors and its sophisticated development planning and aid management mechanisms make it an important case study as a complement to Mali.

Figure 1: ODA per capita to Ghana and Mali from all donors, 2000–2014



Source: OECD (2016).

4 Ownership

To what extent do Mali and Ghana 'own' their development strategies? Are the governments able to set their priorities, as well as design and implement their programmes, as foreseen in the Paris Declaration? Or do they negotiate their strategies with donors, who have already made clear what they are willing to fund, as several critical authors have described the situation in other countries or more generally (Dijkstra 2005; Eyben 2007; Hayman 2009; Raffinot 2010; Saliba-Couture 2011)?

In both countries, the level of ownership is high, in the sense that development plans—or at least the most recent ones—have been developed nationally and the government sees them as overarching frameworks. Still, ownership should not be equated with government ownership: The Accra Agenda for Action—the outcome of the 2008 high-level forum on aid effectiveness, three years after Paris—clarified that ownership requires participation in policy formulation from actors outside of government. This study does not have access to data that would show the extent to which the consultations that have taken place in both countries have been meaningful.

Mali's third World Bank-backed Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Cadre stratégique pour la croissance et la réduction de la pauvreté, CSCRP) spans the years 2012–2017 (Mali 2011). Although the strategy paper predates the coup, the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, elected in 2013, remains committed to it, according to most accounts. Even if it was drafted with some international assistance, key respondents almost unanimously agreed that there is a high degree of national ownership of the CSCRP, which was drawn up after a complex and inclusive consultation process—in contrast with previous strategy papers (Bergamaschi et al. 2007; Cissoko and Touré 2005; Dante et al. 2003; Wood et al. 2011: 111).

The situation in Ghana is quite similar. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the terms of structural adjustment programmes and Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiatives were to a large extent dictated from Washington (Whitfield 2005, 2010; Woll 2008). However, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategies (GPRS I and II, 2003–2005 and 2006–2009) marked, in the words of a government official, 'a magnificent shift towards ownership'.[10] The more recent 'medium-term' (four-year) development policy frameworks—the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA), 2010–2013, and its successor, GSGDA II, covering the period 2014–2017 (Ghana 2010b, 2014)—have been drawn up nationally, following a broad consultation process. In other words, Ghana's development planning is also characterized by a high degree of ownership.

However, three significant problems challenge these positive assessments. First, there are multiple plans, which are not necessarily coherent and muddy the waters of what is actually being owned. Second, the plans are overly inclusive. When such plans do not provide strategic prioritization—that is, if virtually everything is included in an unrealistic wish list—they hollow out the content of ownership to the point of meaninglessness. Third, even if the plans are good, follow-up can be deficient to the extent that it constitutes an abandonment of ownership. This section examines each of these problems in turn, before trying to tease out the reasons behind the deficiencies identified.

4.1 The multiplication of national plans

The first problem with the nationally owned plans named above is that they are not the only development plans in effect. In Mali, the Keïta government issued two additional strategies soon after coming to power: a short-term one labelled a 'sustainable revival plan', Plan pour la Relance Durable du Mali 2013–2014 (Mali 2013a), the other a medium-term 'government action plan', Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement 2013–2018 (Mali 2013b). With three strategy documents simultaneously in effect, without much coherence among them, it remained unclear which one constituted the government's true priority and guide for development activities. A fourth document, a joint assistance strategy (Stratégie Commune d'Assistance Pays), covered the period 2008–2011 and has not been updated. At the time of the fieldwork, efforts were under way to produce a fifth document, an interim CSCRP that would take into account the post-coup context, and integrate the Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement.[11] It remains to be seen

[10] Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

[11] Interview with a senior government official at the Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et du Budget, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

whether the new document will provide more focused guidance or take precedence over the other documents.[12]

The Ghanaian government has also issued a number of plans. They tend to be more sequential than Mali's, especially the medium-term plans, and contrary to Mali's they are explicitly meant to fit into each other. Still, a strong potential for contradiction is also present. The aid components of these plans are meant to be guided by two further documents: the Ghana Aid Policy and Strategy, 2011–2015 (Ghana 2010a) and a 'compact' between the government and donors for the period 2012–2022 (Ghana 2012). A further long-term (40-year) national development plan, covering the period 2018–2057, is in preparation, including extensive consultations.

The existence of multiple, overlapping plans in Mali and Ghana makes it difficult to identify what in fact is being owned. Incoherence among them adds further confusion. This lack of clarity—perhaps even quality—fundamentally undermines the content and therefore the concept of ownership.

4.2 Over-inclusiveness

The second problem with Mali's and Ghana's development plans is their extremely comprehensive scope. In Mali, the three plans in force as a whole and the CSCRP in particular contain provisions for cooperation in virtually all sectors imaginable. The CSCRP outlines strategies for 44 different areas, from rural development to communication for development (Mali 2011). As one donor official put it, 'Everyone and their grandmother is in it'.[13] As a result, the government is open to almost any kind of assistance and donors will find their own priorities somewhere in the CSCRP and potentially the other documents as well, meaning that nothing can really be said to be imposed.

The situation is similar in Ghana, if not quite as extreme. Rather than naming a large number of specific sectors, the plans tend to aggregate a large number of areas into more general sectors, lacking detail. Interviewees almost all agreed that the result more closely resembles an extensive wish list than a strategic plan and, consequently, almost any activity can be said to be compatible with the plan. A Canadian aid official stated that 'The plans are so broad you could drive a truck through them'.[14] This view was not, however, unanimous: Two Ghanaian government officials claimed that the plans did have some implicit prioritization and, moreover, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning requires a plan-related justification before allocating any financing for a project, implying that not everything could be found in the current plans.[15]

The sole indicator for alignment, as established by the OECD (n.d. c: 2), is in fact the extent to which 'Countries put in place national development strategies *with clear strategic priorities*' (emphasis added). For without any clear prioritization, the government-owned plans cannot be considered an actual strategy—thereby in effect rendering the issue of ownership moot.

[12] Similarly competing plans also characterized Mali before the 2012 coup, the government using one to mobilize donor financial support and another to garner local political support (Bergamaschi 2011: 144).

[13] Interview with Ini Huijts, First Secretary (Health), Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Bamako, Mali, 15 April 2015. She added: 'It does not encourage rational policy decision-making. Some things are on the lists of different ministries, and they do them separately.'

[14] Interview with a Canadian aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[15] Interviews with a senior official in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Accra, Ghana, July 2016, and Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

4.3 Ineffective follow-up

The lack of follow-up constitutes a third area that problematizes ownership. Widely shared claims of a high degree of ownership are contradicted by inaction in certain areas. A striking example is family planning in Mali. The country has the second-highest fertility rate in the world: an average of 6.2 births per woman in 2014 (World Bank 2016). This is widely recognized as a development problem, including in the CSCRP, which notes that a high population growth rate can 'erase all poverty-reduction efforts' (Mali 2011: 30). As a result, the CSCRP outlines the importance of promoting family planning, both as a stand-alone issue (one of the 44) and under the areas of education, nutrition, and health (Mali 2011: 69–70, 79, 87–88). The Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement 2013–2018 also emphasizes reproductive health and its 'key element' of family planning in the order to not only 'reduce maternal mortality rates, but also, and especially, tame population growth' (Mali 2013b: 39). In addition, the government of Mali participates in regional and international initiatives on family planning. By all accounts, however, it is extremely reluctant to actually promote family planning domestically. Despite apparent ownership of the policy, the government appears to prefer inaction. Interviewees agreed that it was not a question of capacity, but rather political will related to cultural preferences, citing the example of the government allowing donor-funded condoms to sit unused in warehouses rather than distributing them through existing clinics.[16] As a result, donors prefer to fund NGOs instead of the government to work in this area.[17] Decentralization is another example of a sector where 'movement is slow because of wavering political support', despite a claim of government ownership.[18] Rhetoric is not reflected in action in the fight against female genital mutilation, either.[19]

In Ghana, too, although donor officials reported that some sectors were working well (such as health, education, and decentralization), they also emphasized that others were not. Collectively, the donors expressed much dissatisfaction with the implementation of the development plans and strategies. For instance, one European embassy official bluntly stated: 'The government is great at writing plans and then ignoring them'.[20] Such views were echoed by Ghanaian NGO officials. One stated that 'Strategies get curtailed along the way, abandoned, as the government wants to do new things'.[21] The 'compact' between the government and the donors was abandoned soon after it was signed, while many donor officials doubt how realistic it is to draw up a 40-year plan—'dreaming of being South Korea', in one donor official's words[22]—especially in the middle of an election campaign that could lead to a change in government, in a system characterized by 'competitive clientelist electoral politics' (Oduro et al. 2014: 25).

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[16] Interview with a senior official, Western aid agency, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

[17] Interview with a foreign official of an international NGO, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

[18] Interview with Peter d'Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, 14 April 2015. According to a European technical cooperation official, donors are waiting for the government to develop a decentralization strategy, but the government prefers to go to each donor individually (interview, Bamako, Mali, April 2015).

[19] Interview with Pierre Amadou Nébié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, Bamako, Mali, 16 April 2015.

[20] Interview with a European embassy official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[21] Interview with Franklin Oduro, Head of Research and Programs/Deputy Director, Centre for Democratic Development, Accra, Ghana, 22 July 2016.

[22] Interview with a European aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

Ownership, to be meaningful, must go beyond the identification stage and lead to actual implementation.

4.4 Understanding deficiencies in planning and implementation

Why do governments not do more to 'own' the concept of ownership? In Mali, other than in the case of contraception, most interviewees emphasized its lack of capacity.[23] A common refrain was that ministers and senior ministry staff had only a handful of dedicated people around them, insufficient to draw up a strategic plan in their area or for the country as a whole.[24] Some interviewees, however, noted that donors bore some responsibility for the lack of capacity in government: Over a decade of donor-led structural adjustment programmes not only reduced the size of the state and therefore its capacity, but also contributed to the deterioration of the education sector, which reduced the capacity of the next generation of civil servants to replace retirees.[25] Some interviewees also pointed out that donor agencies and international organizations often 'poached' the best government personnel by offering them better salaries and other perks, thereby reducing the state's capacity.[26]

However, it is not solely a question of capacity. Numerous interviewees in Mali also emphasized the lack of leadership or will, a perennial problem (see Bergamaschi et al. 2007; Meyer and Schulz 2008: 10). Even if the strategy is nationally owned, this commitment does not automatically transfer to government officials, whose daily work is often disconnected from broader plans.[27] Incentives also play an important role. Why limit oneself to a smaller list of areas when a maximalist approach will attract the greatest amount of financial resources? Because it wants as much funding as it can get, the government accepts all proposals from donors, who can thus 'do whatever they like'.[28] Moreover, central government authorities can reduce rivalry among ministries by refusing to select priority sectors.[29] Overall, Bergamaschi's (2009: 241) observations remain valid today: 'the government does not seem to fully consider the Paris Agenda as an opportunity to be more assertive in taking leadership and negotiating aid'. As Rosser and Bremner (2015: 448) found in the case of Timor-Leste, 'where the interests and agendas of

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[23] One international aid official said that the Malian government's 'Planning Department is like a statistics department, but horrible. [When planning for this year], they just take last year's budget and add 1 per cent'. A Malian official at an international NGO called government leadership 'very, very weak'. The head of development cooperation in a European embassy went one adverb further, stating that 'The administration has very, very, very little capacity' (interview, Bamako, Mali, April 2015). Still, when the government was committed to a goal (such as organizing elections), it had the ability to attain it—suggesting a lack of leadership from the top, rather than capacity per se (interview with Pierre Amadou Nébié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, Bamako, Mali, 16 April 2015; interview with a Malian official at an international NGO).

[24] For instance, interview with Peter d'Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, 14 April 2015.

[25] Interviews with a European technical cooperation official, the head of development cooperation in a Western embassy, and an international development consultant, Bamako, Mali, April 2015. Delville (2013) and Saliba-Couture (2011: 191) make this point more generally.

[26] Interview with the head of development cooperation in a Western embassy, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

[27] Interview with Peter d'Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, 14 April 2015.

[28] Interview with Pierre Amadou Nébié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, Bamako, Mali, 16 April 2015.

[29] Government ministries compete for resources and their interests often mitigate against the intra-governmental coordination that a national strategy requires (see Bergamaschi 2009: 242). For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manages aid grants, but donors' loans, especially those from multilateral organizations, fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance—and the two operate independently (interview with Mamadou Namory Traoré, retired government and donor official, Bamako, Mali, 17 April 2015).

donors and powerful domestic political and social groups within recipient countries are well aligned, the political commitment required to create ownership will emerge'.

In Ghana, interviewees also raised the issue of the lack of capacity, though less frequently than in Mali. A European embassy official, for instance, stated that 'Officials are short-sighted and opportunistic, not good at adopting a medium- or long-term view', while also recognizing that the government is overwhelmed by the number of donor relationships it has to manage, as well as the rapidly changing development landscape, including the repercussions of acquiring LMIC status and the growing influence of 'emerging' donors, such as China: 'It says yes to everything […] but it is not in control of the process'.[30] A Western aid official stated that the government 'is not very responsible with money. Not out of bad intentions, but it is not very able to flow funds into the decentralized system down to the local level'.[31]

Lack of will, however, was more commonly cited. Donor officials repeatedly suggested that, as in Mali, the inclusion of a large number of sectors and priorities was part of a resource maximization effort, whereby no external financing would be refused—even if the government did not have the activities as a de facto priority, reducing the likelihood of implementation. Woll (2008: 74) found a similar pattern in the past, arguing that 'the Ghanaian government formulated development strategies with a view of pleasing the donors but with little intention to alter conventional patterns of everyday politics', including when applying for debt relief.

The recent reduction in foreign aid to Ghana and the hardening of its terms (the rise in the proportion provided as a loan rather than a grant) increase the incentive to seek as much ODA as possible by accepting all development assistance on offer, and this is exacerbated by uncertainty as to when further government funds will be released.[32] Nonetheless, it is worth keeping in mind, as several interviewees pointed out, that all sectors do actually need development. Moreover, since the Ministry of Finance requires activities to be in the plan in order to be funded, too narrow a plan would make it hard to get funding not only from donors but also from the government.[33]

In sum, it would be misleading to say that donors are squarely imposing their agendas on the Malian government. The latter, to a great extent, owns its development plans. However, ownership does not necessarily imply that plans are actually strategic in their prioritization of sectors or that action will follow—nor, if it does, that it will be effective in reducing poverty or otherwise promoting development (Raffinot 2010: 90–92). With such broad and potentially contradictory visions of development, what is owned by the Malian government may actually be of little practical advantage. The same could be said of some aspects of the Ghanaian development process. Thus the quality of the strategy, as well as the will and ability to implement it, matters as much as the degree of ownership, a factor ignored in most discussions relating to the Paris Declaration.

A further qualification should be added to claims of strong ownership. Governments can propose plans aimed at pleasing donors. Donors 'are part of the domestic policy space', as one

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[30] Interview with a European embassy official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[31] Interview with a Western aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[32] Interview with a European aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[33] Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

Ghanaian government official stated,[34] and recipient countries certainly know what donors' policy preferences are. As one former official at Ghana's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning put it, real ownership must comprise leadership, which includes the willingness to tell donors to 'get lost',[35] but the Ghanaian government tends to tell the donor what it wants to hear in order to obtain more aid. Some would go further, arguing that donors' involvement in development programmes (as opposed to stand-alone projects) has embedded their own officials in government, including all sector ministries, leading to a form of 'co-governance', whereby the donors 'clearly lay out what needs to be done'.[36] Moreover, many government officials have been trained in donor countries and have sometimes served in multilateral development agencies, which can help shape development visions or internalize donor perspectives. Ghana's and Malawi's ministers of finance, for instance, both previously held senior positions at the IMF in Washington.

5 Alignment

To what extent are donors aligning their development assistance with government priorities and strategies, as well as channelling it through government systems, as prescribed by the Paris Declaration? In both Mali and Ghana, alignment with the government's plan is not much of a challenge, inasmuch as the planning documents contain virtually any activity that donors may wish to undertake. One interviewee in Mali asserted that the government was in fact aligning its priorities with donors', because it 'needs funding'.[37] Whether that is the case or not, donors are formally able to do almost anything they want and claim it is aligned, although their efforts can be hampered by government foot-dragging (as in the case of family planning in Mali, mentioned above). As a result, donor governments are free to pursue their own priorities, which may technically comply with alignment goals, thus respecting the letter of the Paris principle, if not the actual principle itself. Donor officials based in the field can therefore programme their aid budget in ways that please their headquarters, often reflecting ministers' flavour-of-the-month priorities (which helps advance their careers), while hiding behind the fig leaf of alignment. As a Ghanaian observer noted, what remains is only negotiations on *how* to get projects done.[38]

The second component of the Paris definition of alignment—the use of government systems—is more problematic in countries where public financial management is weak (see Knack 2014). At the root of donors' reluctance to use such systems is a lack of trust. Whitfield and Fraser (2009) note that donors often do not have enough confidence in the government to release the

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[34] Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

[35] Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[36] Interview with Emmanuel O. Akwetey, Executive Director, Institute for Democratic Governance, Accra, Ghana, 29 July 2016. An almost identical point was made by Yao Graham, Coordinator, Third World Network-Africa (interview, Accra, Ghana, 27 July 2016). Writing over a decade ago, Whitfield (2005: 659) similarly argued that 'Through the proliferation of government–donor dialogue arenas, donors participate intimately in the design, implementation and monitoring of government programmes and policies. For these reasons, donors form part of the state, rather than external forces acting upon it. In addition to the embeddedness of donors within the state, the state has internalised the [World] Bank's discourse of reform'.

[37] Interview with Abdoulaye Konaté, Principal Country Economist, African Development Bank, Bamako, Mali, 21 April 2015.

[38] Interview with Kwesi Aning, Director of the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Accra, Ghana, 12 July 2016.

purse strings (see also Hyden 2008). These authors believe that, in accordance with the principle of national sovereignty and in order to encourage a domestic political process, donors must set aside their mistrust. Booth (2012), on the other hand, supports donors' qualms, worried that blind alignment risks strengthening illegitimate governments and even being 'harmful to country-owned development, because of the way it shields incumbent leaders from the consequences of irresponsible or short-termist actions' (Booth 2012: 539; see also Buiter 2007; de Renzio 2006; Eyben 2007; Molenaers and Nijs 2009: 565–66).

In the case of Mali, quite a small proportion of aid flows directly to the government or uses government procurement systems. Trust in the government declined after the 2012 coup. The United States, for instance, provides no direct assistance to the government because of concerns over corruption.[39] Other donors do, but are much more reluctant than in the past to provide budget support (direct payment to the central government or a specific ministry for its general programmes, rather than specific projects). Corruption scandals and disputed expenditures have contributed to this erosion of trust. For instance, President Keïta secretly spent US$40 million on a new presidential jet in 2014, to the dismay of donors, without explaining what was wrong with the previous one. Donors (and perhaps Malians as well) saw this as emblematic of the new government's 'poor governance practices', including 'nepotism, high-living, lack of accountability, political aloofness and what the IMF sees as "threats to the integrity of the budgetary process"' (Smith 2014). This purchase was subsequently linked to fraudulent practices, with an alleged overbilling of US$14 million, causing the IMF and the World Bank to suspend assistance; the European Union and others followed suit (Soumali 2014; see also Smith 2015). A report by Mali's Auditor General found that the equivalent of about €234 million of government funds had been embezzled in 2013 and 2014 (RFI 2015), further fuelling mistrust.

The use of government systems has been much more widespread in Ghana than in Mali. In particular, general budget support—the epitome of using national systems—was an important component of development assistance. Between 2003 and 2010, donors transferred a total of US$2.8 billion to the government through the Multi-Donor Budget Support (MDBS) mechanism (Ghana n.d.). At its peak in 2009, 35 per cent of all aid was provided through the MDBS.[40] However, since 2011/2012, general budget support has all but evaporated and the government–donor relationship has worsened significantly, characterized by an erosion of trust, related mainly to macroeconomic slippage and corruption.[41] Sectoral budget support continues with some line ministries, such as health, and donors consider this more effective than providing assistance through the central government/Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning.[42] In Ghana but not in Mali, donor and government officials alike mentioned how the mechanisms for aligning aid—in particular general budget support—served as important platforms for policy dialogue, but that this process has been eroded significantly in recent years, alongside the decline of the MDBS and the worsening interpersonal relations between government and donor officials.

[39] Interview with an international aid official, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

[40] Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

[41] For instance, one otherwise sympathetic donor official said that the government exhibited 'pretty bad partner behaviour', wanting donors to 'write the cheque […] and then go away'. Interview with a Western aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

[42] Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, 19 July 2016.

In sum, alignment with government priorities can hardly be considered a challenge in Mali or Ghana, given the comprehensiveness of their stated development priorities. However, donors are reluctant to embrace the second component of alignment as defined by the Paris Declaration, the use of country systems, with the exception of a decade or so of significant general budget support in Ghana, now over—and a reasonable case can be made that they are right not to. More debate is thus needed on the advisability of comprehensive alignment with recipient governments, especially in the case of unrepresentative or poorly governed ones.

6 Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, the Paris principles of ownership and alignment have been applied in Mali and Ghana, but in a rather cursory way. The formal principles are in place and reflected in institutional structures, discourse, and some practices. However, they—along with the rest of the Paris Agenda—have failed to have the transformational effect on aid that its promoters hoped to achieve. In both countries, despite their differences, neither the government nor the donors have a strong commitment to altering their existing practices. They have embraced the Paris Declaration at the normative level, but never really internalized it—and there is no enforcement mechanism. An evaluation of the Declaration broadly recommended in 2011 that donors in Mali 'Respect the commitments made in the Paris Declaration' (Wood et al. 2011: 112), but not much appears to have changed since then, despite the formal mechanisms in place to put the principles into practice. Strong habits and incentives, far more than a lack of capacity, vitiate the ability of the Declaration's norms to make much of substantive difference on the ground. As a result, the Paris Declaration has not significantly altered the power relations between actors. For development cooperation in Mali, it is essentially business as usual. In Ghana, development cooperation and government–donor relations are changing significantly, but not as a result of the Paris Principles—rather as a result of economic growth, the country's middle-income status, and the appearance of alternative sources of development finance. As ODA declines in importance in such countries, it is all the more unclear how relevant the Aid Effectiveness Agenda actually is.

More comparative work is needed to see the extent to which these findings hold for other developing countries—and whether different patterns may be observed in countries with states (including 'developmental' states) that take ownership more seriously and negotiate more strongly with donors. Such governments—such as Ethiopia (see Borchgrevink 2008; Feyissa 2011) or Colombia in the example cited above—are in a better position to use the Paris Principles to their advantage, prioritizing certain sectors and forcing donors to align with them. Such cases, however, are quite exceptional.

The growing pressure in traditional donor countries to orient their aid more towards visible results that are attributable to the donor, demonstrating a certain kind of accountability and 'value for money' to sceptical parliamentarians and taxpayers and branding their assistance with signature projects and themes, further erodes the Paris principles of ownership and alignment, as well as harmonization. In many instances, donors' security or commercial interests—the latter also fundamentally characterizing development cooperation from 'emerging donors'—also promote a move away from aid effectiveness by emphasizing instead self-interest. For all its flaws, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness reflected an idealism and altruism that now seem to have faded from the global agenda.

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