

**A Race to the Top?:
The Aid Transparency Index and the Social Power of Global Performance Indicators**

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies on global performance indicators (GPIs) reveal the distinct power that non-state actors can accrue and exercise in world politics. How and when does this happen? Using a mixed-methods approach, we examine the impact of the Aid Transparency Index (ATI), an annual rating and rankings index produced by the small UK-based NGO Publish What You Fund. The ATI seeks to shape development aid donors' behavior with respect to their transparency – the quality and kind of information they publicly disclose. To investigate the ATI's effect, we construct an original panel dataset of donor transparency performance before and after ATI inclusion (2006-2013) to test whether, and which, donors alter their behavior in response to inclusion in the ATI. To further probe the causal mechanisms that explain variations in donor behavior we use qualitative research, including over 150 key informant interviews conducted between 2010-2017. Our analysis uncovers the conditions under which the ATI influences powerful aid donors. Moreover, our mixed methods evidence reveals *how* this happens. Consistent with Kelley & Simmons' central argument that GPIs exercise influence via social pressure, we find that the ATI shapes donor behavior primarily via direct effects on elites: the diffusion of professional norms, organizational learning, and peer pressure.

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One of the more striking examples of the power exercised by global performance indicators in world politics is the case of the Aid Transparency Index (ATI) – an annual rating and ranking of international development assistance donor agencies by Publish What You Fund (PWYF).² PWYF was established as a non-governmental organization in 2008 to monitor the progress of international donors by disclosing where they spend their aid funds, on whom and for what. PWYF is small. It has nine staff members and a 2017 budget of less than £600,000.³ Housed in a modest one-room office above an Italian restaurant on London’s South Bank, PWYF has no direct material power with which to coerce change in the behavior of these large multilateral and bilateral donors.

Nonetheless, the ATI has contributed greatly to global aid transparency. How so? As described by Kelley and Simmons in this symposium’s framework chapter, we find that the ATI has attained and exercised significant symbolic and normative power by defining clear indicators and benchmarks for donor transparency. Its authority derives from its independence and its process of working with donors and external reviewer to construct and validate the annual ratings and rankings. The ATI catalyzes behavior change by publicly comparing and categorizing donors as “very good”, “good”, “fair” and “poor”, and “very poor” performers, thereby invoking peer reputation and status concerns and mobilizing pressure for donor reforms.

This is important. Since the first high level forum on aid effectiveness in Rome in 2003, a cascade of initiatives and organizations have sought to pry open the spigot of information on

² UK Charity Registration #1158362. In the interests of full disclosure, both authors have a prior relationship with the organization. [Author 2] has worked as an external reviewer for the ATI’s 2016 and 2018 indices. [Author 1] has a longstanding friendship with PWYF’s CEO at the time this study was conducted, Rupert Simmons. Neither Simmons nor PWYF have had any influence over the research questions asked or results discussed here, though PWYF has commented on drafts of the paper for errors of fact regarding PWYF’s activities.

³ Publish What You Fund Annual Report 2017.

donor agencies' projects and programs.⁴ The principles of transparency and open data are now centrally embedded in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the UN's "Data Revolution,"⁵ in hopes of centralizing information and improving donor coordination, country-level development planning and management.⁶ Advocates also claim that transparency empowers the poor by providing means for citizen voice and feedback. For example, in January 2018 two Sierra Leonean Ebola survivors sued their government, alleging that their government misdirected millions of dollars of foreign aid marked for the Ebola crisis.⁷ Transparency, simply put, promises to make aid more inclusive, accountable and effective.

However, for an aid industry long subject to public scrutiny, the push for transparency presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the transparency agenda promises to assuage NGOs, CSOs and national parliaments who have long demanded enhanced access to donor information and accountability. On the other, as our interviews with donor staff and management suggest, transparency also threatens to lift the veil on internal processes which may disrupt donors' relationships with borrowers, introduce onerous reporting burdens, and invite further interrogation and grievances from parties disaffected by aid programs. Moreover, not all donor agency staff agree that the ATI's 39 indicators represent the "right path" towards transparency. PWYF's efforts to promote convergence on the ATI's particular standards are not simply a matter of pushing on an open door. The ATI constitutes a critical case study that can address key questions regarding under what conditions and through what mechanisms an NGO-produced GPI can influence powerful actors to do what they otherwise might not do on their own volition.

⁴ For reviews of transparency and accountability initiatives in global development, including campaigns and initiatives focused on aid transparency, see Darby 2010; Martin 2010; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; and McGee and Gaventa 2013.

⁵ See https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/iaeg-sdgs-meeting-06/2017-10-04_CCSA%20Guiding%20Principles%20data%20flows.pdf.

⁶ Interview with Owen Barder, Center for Global Development [date]; interview with Tony German, Development Initiatives, 11 January 2017. See also Florini 2002 and 2007; Collin, Zubairi, Nielson and Barder 2009; Publish What You Fund 2009; Mulley 2010; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Herrling 2015; Barder 2016.

⁷ Inveen 2018.

We find that the ATI does impact donors' transparency practices, but not evenly. Agencies that have aid distribution as their primary operational mandate (e.g. USAID) are much more likely to be respond to the ATI than donors for whom the provision of official development assistance is secondary to their core mandate (e.g. the U.S. Department of Defense). When agencies respond to the ATI, they do so because of the ATI's influence on policy *elites*. As Morse and Bisbee et al (this symposium) also argue in their cases of the Financial Action Task Force and the Millennium Development Goal on education respectively, we find that elites are not concerned with their performance on the ATI purely on the basis of material payoffs.⁸ Rather, elites worry about their peer status and are susceptible to socialization around new norms. Moreover, the very process of being closely monitored and regularly interacting with the PWYF team produces inter- and intra-organizational learning and norm diffusion, and professionalizes aid staff and management around ATI's standards. Secondly, the ATI enhances domestic *political pressure* by equipping transparency reform proponents (particularly those with some material power over aid agencies) with critical information and clear standards to guide policy change.

In the following section 2, we provide a brief overview of the international aid transparency movement to provide context for our study of the ATI. In section 3 we present our central hypotheses and mixed methods of inquiry, In section 4, we use quantitative analysis to understand variation in donor performance on, and donor response to, the ATI. In section five we further examine mechanisms using qualitative interview evidence.⁹ This qualitative research enables us to dig deeper into how the channels of influence work. Together, our quantitative and

⁸ Bisbee et al; Morse. This symposium.

⁹ Specifically, as part of a broader project on aid transparency between 2010-2017, [Author 2] personally interviewed or sent trained graduate research assistants to conduct 465 interviews in eight countries, with a concentrated focus on members of the development community based in the US (DC and New York), the United Kingdom, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, and Nepal. These interviews are listed in the online appendix 1 and discussed further in section 5.

qualitative evidence informs our conclusion in section six: the ATI does in fact influence donors, and does so primarily through elite channels of influence and secondarily through its indirect influence via the political pressure of donors' principals.

2. The International Aid Transparency Movement and the ATI

The transparency movement represents a sea change for international aid. Ten years ago, if you wanted to find out how much development assistance was going to Kenya, to whom and for what, you would have needed high bandwidth access to the OECD's creditor reporting system and the ability to decipher the complex accounting jargon of elaborate spreadsheets. Even then, only highly aggregated data was available. Attaining actual project documents, which might or might not have contained information on the subnational locations of aid activities, implementing partners and details on project objectives, could only be attained as hard-copy documents for a fee through a few select donors' public information centers. Borrower governments themselves had scant knowledge of where the aid was in their country. As one Malawian Ministry of Finance deputy told us in 2010, "we don't really know where the aid is in our country, what [it] is doing, and who is doing it. How can we plan to properly spend government money to build schools, hire doctors, or provide services when we don't know if our donor partners are already doing this?"¹⁰

By 2017 the aid information landscape had dramatically changed. It is easy now to go directly to the World Bank's website to find full project documents. Most major donors have created public dashboards, with infographics and interactive maps. The International Aid

¹⁰ Interview with Deputy Minister of Finance, Government of Malawi, Nairobi, Kenya, December 2010.

Transparency Initiative, established in 2008, is rapidly moving towards a common, publicly accessible database with standardized information on the precise geographical locations of aid, budget data, and activity-level project details. While significant challenges remain, the past decade has been nothing short of a revolution in aid data.¹¹ Achieving this transparency in the multibillion dollar global aid industry has not been an easy task. Donor agencies have enjoyed relative opacity for most of their existence. Past efforts to enact fundamental changes in national freedom of information acts and organizations information disclosure policies have been met with agencies' resistance and persistent delays.¹² Numerous published analyses and interviews point out pervasive problems of organizational inertia, staff's cultural fears surrounding transparency, and a myriad of technological and economic barriers to change.¹³

PWYF was established in 2008 by International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) advocates, including founding CEO Karin Christiansen, with funding from the Hewlett Foundation and Open Society Foundation. Three short years later, at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea in November 2011, most major donor countries and agencies – including many from the global south – committed themselves to reporting their aid information to a common standard.¹⁴ A rich set of supranational initiatives (such as the EU Aid Transparency Guarantee and the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation), national level policies and open data systems,¹⁵ and international

¹¹ Lee 2016.

¹² Nelson 2001; Florini 2007; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; and Ingraham 2015.

¹³ Bent 2015; and Weaver and Peratsakis 2014.

¹⁴ The standard combined three complementary systems: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System (CRS++), the OECD DAC Forward Spending Survey (FSS) and the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). See <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=FSS>, and <http://www.aidtransparency.net> for more on each of the three systems.

¹⁵ For example, many countries – especially lead countries such as Sweden, Britain, Denmark, and the US - adopted National Transparency Guarantees with specific references to aid (Sweden, Britain), integrated aid transparency commitments within their Open Government Partnership National Action Plans, and similar open aid data strategies and policy papers. In the U.S. case, see Obama's executive order on open government (Obama 2009) and the Office of Management and Budget's open government director (Orzag 2009). For examples of aid transparency systems, see the UK Department for International Development's

non-governmental organizations and networks have since been created to advocate for open aid data.¹⁶ PWYF’s ATI plays a specific role in this advocacy movement by translating the broad goals of transparency into measurable standards of performance and using ratings and rankings to monitor and enforce donor agencies’ compliance with these international commitments.

The ATI works explicitly through engagement with donors and independent experts to collate annual data. Publish What You Fund publishes the evaluation criteria for a given year’s index and engages in a three-month dialogue with every aid agency prior to the finalization of annual ATI scores. There were annual releases of the ATI from 2011-2016.¹⁷ While the methodology of the ATI has been modified slightly over time, the ATI has always focused on publishing specific data regarding aid flows at the activity level – meaning the details regarding particular interventions and projects. While the ATI is primarily disseminated to the public via hierarchical rankings of agencies into categories (“good”, “fair”, “poor”, etc.), these rankings draw from a continuous scale drawn from a series of indicators. There are currently 39 indicators in the ATI, which cover information such as project title, description, budget, and objectives of interventions. Table 1 provides greater detail.

TABLE 1: 2016 ATI Indicators and Weights

ATI Total Score out of 100%

- 1. Commitment to Aid Transparency (10%)**
 - Quality of FOIA Legislation (3.33%)
 - Implementation Schedule (for IATI Common Standard) (3.33%)

DevTracker, Sweden’s openaid.se, Denmark’s Danida Open Aid USAID’s Global Aid Explorer, and the US Government’s Foreign Assistance Dashboard. See also Clare, Verhust and Young 2016; Greening 2012.

¹⁶ See, e.g., AidData, Aidwatch, aidinfo, Development Gateway, DevInfo, Development Initiatives, Data2X, Interaction, Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, Open Aid Partnership, Oxfam International, and many others.

¹⁷ In that time there were five full waves of the ATI – 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2016. In 2015, PWYF conducted a ‘mid-term review’ covering only EU and US agencies. The 2011 data was called a “pilot index”; there was also a 2010 assessment, but at a country level and based on perceptions surveys. While annual through 2016 (the last data included in this paper), the ATI has now transitioned to an 18- month cycle. The 2018 index is expected in late spring 2018. Email from Elise Dufief, PWYF Research Manager, November 21, 2017.

- Accessibility of Aid Information through donor portals, databases, etc. (3.33%)
2. **Organizational Level Publications (25%)**
- Planning: Strategy Documents (2.5%)
 - Planning: Annual Report (2.5%)
 - Planning: Allocation Policy by Themes or Countries (2.5%)
 - Planning: Procurement Policy (2.5%)
 - Planning: Strategy Documents – Country Level (2.5%)
 - Financial: Total Organization Budget (three year forward spending) (4.17%)
 - Financial: Disaggregated Budget (4.17%)
 - Financial: Audits (4.17%)
3. **Activity Level Publications (65%)**
- Basic Activity Information: Implementer (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Unique ID (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Title (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Description of Activity (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Planned Dates (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Actual Dates (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Current Status (1.63%)
 - Basic Activity Information: Contact Details (1.63%)
 - Classifications: Collaboration Types (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Flow Type (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Aid Type (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Finance Type (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Sectors (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Sub-National Location (1.86%)
 - Classifications: Tied Aid Status (1.86%)
 - Related Documents: Memorandum of Understanding (2.17%)
 - Related Documents: Evaluations (2.17%)
 - Related Documents: Objectives (2.17%)
 - Related Documents: Budget Documents – Activity Level (2.17%)
 - Related Documents: Contracts (2.17%)
 - Related Documents: Tenders (2.17%)
 - Financial: Budget – annual/quarterly; total activity commitments (3.25%)
 - Financial: Commitments (3.25%)
 - Financial: Disbursements & Expenditures (3.25%)
 - Financial: Budget ID (3.25%)
 - Performance: Results (4.33%)
 - Performance: Impact Appraisals (4.33%)
 - Performance: Conditions (4.33%)

Source: Publish What You Fund. 2016a. 2016 Aid Transparency Index.

The comprehensive index largely evaluates national government agencies and international organizations, as well as a few foundations (e.g., Hewlett and Gates). The primary focus is bilateral aid agencies (e.g. the US Agency for International Development or the UK Department for International Development) and major multilateral aid-focused organizations (e.g.

the UN Development Program or the World Bank), who together account for the vast majority of ODA. Notably, the index also includes agencies that disburse significant amounts of foreign aid, even though development assistance is not their primary mandate. For example, the 2016 index includes six such US Government agencies, only three of whom have ODA as a primary mandate.¹⁸ Appendix 2 provides a complete listing of all covered agencies and their inclusion in the various waves of the ATI.

3. When and How Does the ATI Influence Aid Donors?

A recent survey of staff within U.S. development agencies revealed that over 75% of respondents thought the ATI had a “very positive impact” on their own agency’s transparency efforts.¹⁹ To what extent does empirical evidence support this claim? If indeed the ATI influences organizational practices, under what conditions should we expect to observe this impact? How exactly does the ATI influence targeted donors?

Key informants and our examination of agency level documents suggest that not all donors are equally concerned about, or responsive to, the ATI’s assessment of their agencies’ performance.²⁰ Instead, one key mediating factor appears to shape agencies’ reaction to the ATI: whether their primary mandate is to provide ODA.

¹⁸ The three agencies with aid as a primary mandate are the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The other three US agencies are the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. While the US has the greatest number of evaluated agencies in 2016 (and 2014, the year with the broadest coverage), it is not alone in having multiple units evaluated. E.g. in 2014, 5 UK, 3 German, and 3 French agencies were evaluated. Amongst multilaterals, 4 EC and 3 UN agencies were evaluated.

¹⁹ Friends of Publish What You Fund 2016, 10.

²⁰ Interview with Sally Paxton (Publish What You Fund, October 2015), George Ingram (Brookings Institution, October 2015), Nilmini Gunaratne Rubin (U.S Foreign Affairs Committee, September 2014), and two senior staff at USAID (September 2014).

As Kelley and Simmons suggest in this symposium, there are several possible channels of influence for GPIs. In the case of the ATI, our interviews²¹ indicate that two channels are at play. First, the ATI influences donors by inciting external political pressure, particularly through the provision of critical information to key domestic stakeholders who may then use the ATI's scores to monitor, sanction and reward aid agencies. Second, the ATI plays a direct role in shaping the interests and behavior of elites within aid organizations by translating political broad mandates and commitments regarding transparency into distinct operational policies that can be enacted through internal reforms.

Donors act as the agents of principals, notably national legislatures (in the case of bilateral agencies, such as USAID or the US Department of Defense) or multinational executive boards (in the case of multilateral agencies, e.g. the World Bank, or foundations such as the Hewlett Foundation). In this relationship, principals (member states or national parliaments) can exercise oversight and control over agents (donor agencies) through mechanisms such as mandated audits or threats of changes to financial appropriations. Here, as hypothesized by principal-agent theory,²² the ATI reduces critical informational asymmetries and provides clear assessments of agents' relative performance. With such information, principals can more easily detect and sanction agents' deviant behavior. This is consistent with previous scholarship, which has shown that aid agencies are sensitive to demonstrating success to principals, with some agencies much more concerned with appearing successful to principals than others.²³ As a result, the mere presence of the ATI incites these agencies to be more proactive in transparency reforms,

²¹ These observations were offered by several senior staff at USAID, U.S. Congress House Foreign Affairs Committee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee, think tanks and NGOs. See appendix 1.

²² On PA models, see Hawkins et al 2006.

²³ Buntaine 2016; Honig 2018.

often in *anticipation* of increased principal oversight and control even when principals do not actually make overt gestures to this end.²⁴

Our interviews also suggest that the ATI shapes what transparency means to the elite professionals who staff aid agencies. This channel focuses on aid professionals' logic of appropriateness rather than the more traditional payoffs that might accrue to organizational reputational changes, such as greater funding, access to markets, or private investment. Donor organizations are often framed by scholars, in our view correctly, as part of an "aid industry."²⁵ Professionals in that industry see themselves as part of a broader community of peers. By influencing the meaning of what it is to be a "good" aid agency and thus "good" aid professional, the ATI influences the actions of aid professionals.

Both the political pressure and direct elite response channels imply a scope condition for the ATI's influence. We hypothesize that when aid is the primary mandate (versus a secondary mandate or goal) of an agency, the agency will be more sensitive to the (de)legitimizing effect of poor ATI scores. Agencies that do not primarily provide aid (e.g the US Department of Defense) are likely not to be staffed by elite professionals who see themselves as part of a broader aid community, nor are these agencies' political principals likely to be concerned by the agencies' aid transparency practices.

We hypothesize that both channels — political pressure and direct elite response — are operative, yet we remain agnostic as to which of the two channels is more influential. We construct a quantitative test for which of these is the more influential mechanism. We believe leveraging variation in agency insulation from the pressure to respond to principals, or (as we

²⁴ This observation was offered by a senior staff member of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee (interview, September 2014) and confirmed by several senior officials working on transparency reforms at USAID, MCC and the World Bank (interviews in Washington, D.C., September 2014, February 2015 and October 2015).

²⁵ See e.g. Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010; Gulrajani 2011; Engel 2014.

term it) an agency's relative independence, is a way of getting purchase on which of these channels is the dominant means via which the ATI influences agencies. We hypothesize that the political pressure and direct elite response channels have conflicting implications as to whether more or less independent agency will be more responsive.

If political pressure is stronger, then less independent agencies – those which are more susceptible to that pressure - should be more responsive to the ATI, as measured via their yearly net change on the ATI ratings and rankings. The ATI may, for example, enable the materially weak PWYF and its key allies in the aid transparency movement to capture principals' "power of the purse" and executive or legislative authority over donor agencies. Consequently, if principals are indeed paying attention to and taking action on the ATI's information, then aid agencies with higher degrees of dependence on principals' financial contributions should to be especially sensitive to the ATI's effects.

However, if elites primarily respond to the ATI's social power, agencies that have more relative independence to engage in needed reforms may be more responsive to the index. This is because more independent agencies can react faster to emerging standards around transparency policies and practices and to the ATI's professional norm diffusion and socialization effects. Less independent agencies may hold more limited capacity to enact wide-sweeping operational reforms around transparency and data reporting without the consent and resources of their principals.

To restate our argument: We hypothesize that the ATI does influence donor agencies, prompting them to alter their information disclosure practices. The ATI achieves this both via reducing information asymmetries for political principals (*political pressure*) and by constructing meaning and inducing competition not tied to direct payoffs for the professionals who staff donor

agencies (*direct elite effects*). In section 4 we employ regression analysis using a panel dataset of ATI scores with the unit of observation the agency-year. In addition to each agency's overall and indicator-by-indicator score from 2011-2016, our dataset includes independent data on aid agency disclosure and transparency practices from 2006-2013 compiled by AidData at our request.²⁶ The AidData data allow us to model the presence of the ATI as a treatment, examining whether (and which) agencies are responding to the ATI.

In section 5 we utilize 465 semi-structured key informant interviews between 2010-2017, primarily in the US, UK, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Nepal, Honduras. These interviews were conducted with the staff and management of donor organizations' headquarters and mission offices, national parliamentary and U.S. Congressional staff, relevant think tanks, civil society groups and international non-governmental organizations. In addition, we analyzed a wide array of primary and secondary materials, including donor organization press releases, policy documents, parliamentary and congressional hearings and legislation, and the research and advocacy materials of NGOs, CSOs and think tanks.

4. Quantitative Results: Does the ATI Alter Donor Behavior?

In this section, we present evidence as to whether the ATI has systematically affected donor practices, and for whom. We include agency independence in regression models, providing suggestive evidence that it is the elite channel of influence that is more dominant in explaining the ATI's effects.

²⁶ AidData is a "stand-alone development research and innovation lab at the College of William and Mary" (<http://aiddata.org/our-story>). For a given country-year AidData uses the best, most complete data source available. Over the period in question (2006-2013) the primary source is agencies' official reporting to the OECD Development Assistance Committee's Creditor Reporting System, but the source is sometimes agencies' annual reports and public websites. AidData source choice represents a determination by arguably the organization most concerned with finding high quality historic aid data of what source provides the best available data for a given country-year. The source of data is never the IATI data on which the ATI most directly contracts. This does not mean that e.g. the data reported to OECD and that reported to IATI in a given year are independent, of course. This is not a concern, inasmuch as the focus here (and what the alternative scale drawn from AidData's data measures) is changes in the quality of the best data disclosed irrespective of the forum where that disclosure occurs, whether it is via the IATI or not.

To explore differing organizational response to “treatment” by the ATI, we build a panel at the agency-year of ATI scores (and thus ATI coverage), complementing this with historic data on agency transparency practices drawn from AidData’s database. We also include a calculation of agency independence and an indicator for whether the aid agency’s primary purpose is the giving of foreign aid (e.g. USAID) or not (e.g. the US Department of Defense). These agencies are hereafter referred to as “aid” and “non-aid” agencies to signal their primary mandate. Forty-five of the eighty-four agencies that appear in the ATI at some time between 2011 and 2016 are coded as aid agencies.²⁷ The online appendix Table A1 lists every covered agency, their country, their years of ATI coverage, and our assignment of the indicator as to whether the giving of foreign aid is the agency’s primary mandate.

Table 2 provides summary statistics of key variables.

Table 2: Summary Statistics of Selected Variables

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
ATI Score	333	40.448	24.009	0	93.3
Net Change in ATI Score Over Coverage Period	77	10.15	18.772	-39.3	75.7
Agency Independence (using Gilardi scheme)	84	.435	.154	0	1
Aidagency Status Dummy	84	.536	.502	0	1
AidData Activity Scale	367	90.784	14.941	25	100

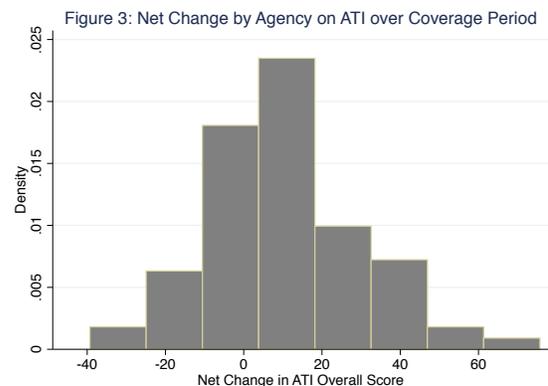
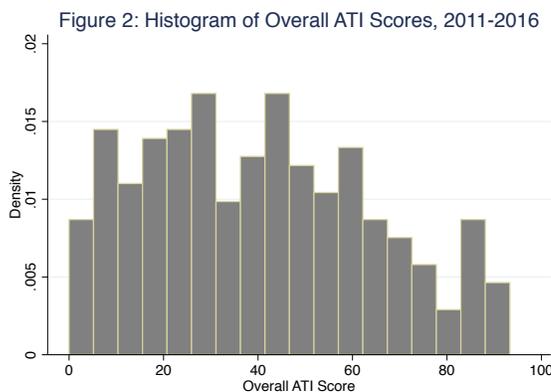
To calculate agency independence, we build on Gilardi’s work on Western European regulatory agencies.²⁸ The Gilardi Index is explicitly focused on agencies’ relative independence from political authorizers’ control and influence. Gilardi developed the index to allow cross-national calculation of formal agency independence from politicians for a variety of agencies.

²⁷ At the time of writing the 2018 ATI had not yet been released, and thus is excluded from our study.

²⁸ Gilardi 2002. Gilardi develops a scale of 21 indicators, unique in its attempt to compare the independence of a variety of agencies focusing on different issue areas from a range of countries. In collaboration with research assistants, we applied Gilardi’s scheme to all agencies covered by the ATI using those indicators we were able to consistently code.

Independence is coded as a time-invariant measure based on the best available data. We were able to find consistent information for just four of Gilardi’s 21 indicators of agency independence: term of office of agency head, source of budget, whether independence is formally stated, and whether the head of the agency is of cabinet rank.²⁹ Each of these four measures is scored between 0 and 1 using Gilardi’s coding scheme. For example, agencies whose head has a fixed term of office receive 1 point, agencies whose term of office is 6 to 8 years receive .8 points, and so on. While this opens up possible measurement error regarding changes in independence within organization over time, we expect this measurement error should be orthogonal to the primary analysis and thus add noise (reducing power) rather than lead to spurious inferences. The measure constructed using the Gilardi method is broad, incorporating both aid and non-aid agencies. The full coding scheme is provided in the online appendix.

A visual examination of ATI scores and changes over time underscores the heterogeneity of agency response to the ATI. The wide differences in donors’ behavior are demonstrated in Figure 2, which shows the variation in realized scores, and Figure 3, which compares each agency’s score in its last year of ATI coverage to its score in its first year.



²⁹ While the results presented here apply this scale to multilaterals and foundations – i.e. organizations without cabinet rank by definition, and for whom the scale was not intended by Gilardi – the results are robust to restricting the sample to bilateral agencies.

Table 3 below uses the ATI overall score data to examine differential performance on the ATI with and without country, year, and country*year fixed effects, allowing us to examine intra-country differences in ATI performance. The results are quite stable with and without these fixed effects. Agencies whose primary purpose is to give foreign aid perform better in the ATI ratings than those for whom foreign aid is a secondary task. This is true looking both across all agencies and within a given country's set of covered agencies.

Table 3 suggests that for non-aid agencies, greater independence has no association with higher ATI scores. For aid organizations, however, the picture is quite different. More independent aid organizations score better on the ATI than less independent aid organizations from the same country.

Table 3: Performance on the ATI: Dedicated Aid Agencies & Independence

DV: Overall ATI Score, 2011-2016	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Aid Agency Dummy	19.00*** (0.954)	16.16*** (1.934)	-17.11*** (2.596)	-28.89* (12.02)
Independence (Gilardi)			-29.57*** (6.119)	-5.376 (19.92)
Ind*Aid Agency			85.64*** (4.560)	129.9*** (24.66)
Constant	21.79*** (0.592)	27.82*** (4.493)	36.53*** (3.040)	34.28** (11.35)
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country FEs	N	Y	N	Y
R^2	0.262	0.724	0.332	0.756
Observations	333	333	333	333

OLS; Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by year

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Of course, differential performance on the ATI itself does not mean that it is the ATI that has affected the disclosure and transparency practices of aid agencies. Aid agencies, particularly those with more independence, may simply be more apt to disclose information, irrespective of the ATI's influence.

Our primary econometric test exploits inter-temporal variation in ATI coverage across agencies. The ATI covers the vast majority of consequential aid agencies; that is, those that provide between 84 and 94% of global official development assistance between 2011 and 2016.³⁰ Of the 84 agencies in our sample to *ever* be included in the ATI, 58 are included in the first full year of the ATI (2011). In 2012, 72 are covered. In 2013, 67 agencies receive ATI scores. The empirical strategy in Table 4 exploits this within-organization and across time variation, including both agency and year fixed effects in examining agency responsiveness to the ATI.

Table 4 shifts to modeling inclusion in the ATI in a given year as a binary treatment variable. If an agency exists in the ATI in a given year this variable takes the value of 1. Alternatively, if an agency is not covered by the ATI in a given year it takes the value of 0.³¹ Intra-agency variation in coverage years, when combined with agency fixed effects, allows Table 4 to better identify whether inclusion changes within-agency transparency practices.

³⁰ Authors' calculations. This is the proportion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) reported to the OECD Development Assistance Committee's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) at www.stats.oecd.org represented by those agencies included in both the ATI and the CRS. This necessarily underestimates the actual aid provided by agencies included in the ATI, inasmuch as some agencies (e.g. Chinese development aid, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Hewlett Foundation, the European Investment Bank) are covered by the ATI but do not report to CRS. This calculation uses the year of reporting and net disbursements when possible. For example, the 2011 statistic is the proportion of 2011 net disbursements accounted for by agencies covered by the 2011 ATI. The broad coverage also unfortunately precludes matching strategies of included agencies to agencies never included in the ATI, as there are few, if any, plausible untreated agencies with which to match those covered by the ATI.

³¹ This treatment variable is not lagged, as agencies do respond to the ATI in the same year as they are covered. Indeed, PWYF's process is explicitly designed to induce agencies to do so. PWYF staff engage in a three-month dialogue with covered agencies prior to the generation of an ATI rating for a given agency in a given year. As such, agencies are clearly aware of whether and when they will be covered and thus have the ability to alter their practices accordingly. PWYF frames this dialogue and the ability of agencies to improve scores in response to knowledge of ATI coverage as a critical part of the ATI's method.

Since ATI scores only exist in years where an agency is covered by the ATI, we draw on disclosure quality measures from AidData’s historic aid flow reporting data described above to separately measure transparency practices.³² This data commences in 2006, five years prior to the ATI’s first year of coverage and two years prior to the launch of PWYF. It runs through 2013, thus overlapping with the first three waves of the ATI (in 2011, 2012, and 2013).³³

To construct the dependent variable in Table 4, we use a subset of the AidData historic data. This is quite similar in thrust to the ATI’s “Activity Level” component (see Table 1), which focus on the completeness of individual aid activity reporting. We also employ AidData’s measures of the percent of projects for a given donor in a given year that provide a project title, a project description, report the source of the project’s funding, and describe the type of flow (e.g. a grant as opposed to a loan). We take the simple average of these four measures, and call this the *AidData Activity Scale*.³⁴

The AidData Activity Scale is a distinct measure of items on which the ATI focuses. It begins before the ATI and is available even when agencies are not covered by the ATI (and thus the binary ATI treatment variable takes a value of 0). We can thus examine whether inclusion on the ATI is in fact associated with a change in a covered agency’s disclosure behavior, leveraging the variation in agency years of coverage discussed above. In models with both year and agency fixed effects, Table 4’s analysis indicates whether within-agency performance rose in years where the agency was covered by the ATI (over and above secular time trends).

³² AidData generously provided these data to us on request.

³³ Table 4 thus cannot speak to how the ATI has come to influence donors in the past few years if the pattern of influence has changed.

³⁴ Table 2’s summary statistics and a histogram in the online appendix (figure A2) provide fuller information on the measure’s distribution. The AidData Activity Scale is calculable in at least one year for 56 of the 84 agencies to ever be included in the ATI. Appendix Table A1 provides information on which agencies have AidData Activity Scale scores.

Table 4: ATI as Treatment³⁵

DV: AidData Activity Scale (2006-2013)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Covered by ATI in Year (Treatment)	5.960** (1.942)	0.229 (2.566)	-1.830 (3.337)	-7.785** (3.071)	-5.467 (4.528)	-9.038** (3.639)
Treatment*Aid Agency	4.697** (1.573)	4.852*** (1.253)				
Treatment*Independence			16.85 (10.18)	17.15 (11.15)	39.16*** (9.933)	37.97*** (10.46)
Constant	90.14*** (1.420)	97.77*** (1.775)	87.81*** (5.874)	91.41*** (7.217)	91.39*** (1.484)	97.51*** (1.650)
Organization FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FEs	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
R ²	0.597	0.627	0.594	0.623	0.607	0.640
Observations	367	367	152	152	215	215

OLS; Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by year

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 strongly suggests that inclusion in the ATI changes aid agencies' behavior.

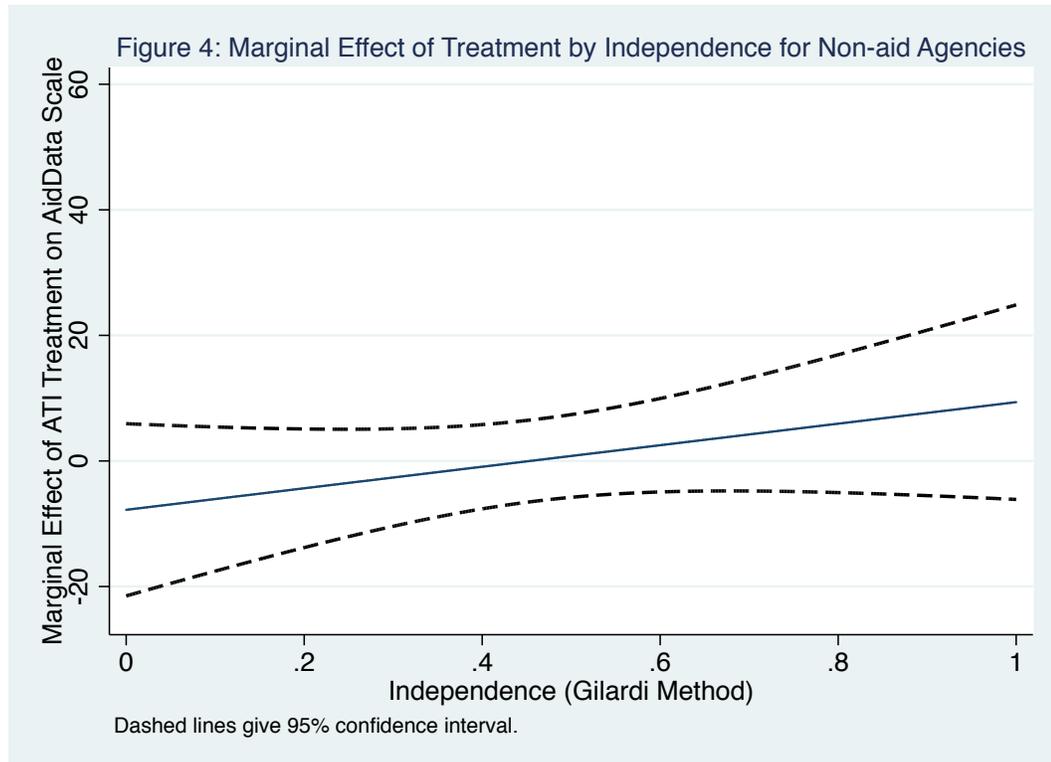
Models 1 and 2 indicate that the quality of covered agencies' reporting at the "activity level" – the level of individual projects and interventions – improves when agencies are covered by the ATI. This finding is only robust in the case of dedicated aid agencies, however. When year fixed effects are included, *the disclosure practices of aid agencies correlate with inclusion in ATI assessments, but there is no evidence that this holds for non-aid agencies.*

This relationship is further conditional on agency independence. Models 3 through 6 of Table 4 examine the role of agency independence for aid and non-aid agencies. While there is no evidence of a relationship between independence and response for non-aid agencies, for aid agencies greater independence is associated with greater improvement on the AidData scale, *ceteris paribus*. Indeed, for the median aid agency on the independence scale (independence=.375), there is no statistically significant effect of ATI inclusion. For a firm at the 75th percentile, however (independence=.5), there is a ten-point treatment effect statistically

³⁵ Specifications 3-6 have interaction terms but no 'base' term for independence (calculated using the Gilardi scale) as independence does not vary within organization and is thus absorbed in the organization fixed effect. This is also why specifications 1-2 do not have a 'base' term for aid agency dummy.

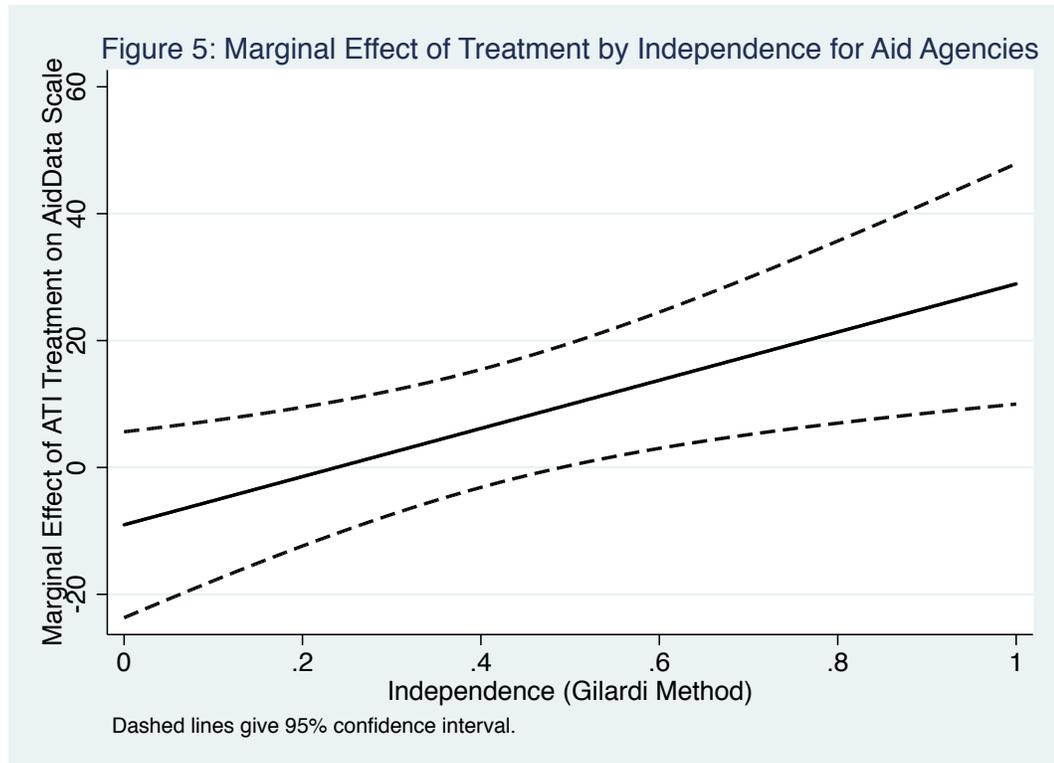
distinguishable from zero.³⁶ This ten point effect would raise the median aid agency (score=89.1) to a near-perfect 99.1.³⁷

Figures 4 and 5 graphically represent the role of independence for aid and non-aid agencies respectively (Table 4, Models 4 and 6), demonstrating the importance of agency independence for aid but not non-aid agencies.



³⁶ Drawn from Model 6, Table 4. Net treatment effect is the sum of the beta on the interaction term (37.97) and the beta on the effect of ATI coverage (-9.038).

³⁷ The maximum possible score on the AidData Activity Scale is 100 (full disclosure of all information fields for all projects, in percentage point terms). This ceiling effect means the test in Table 4 may in fact understate the effect of ATI inclusion on covered agencies.



The AidData Activity Scale captures the completeness of the information donors are disclosing about projects (titles, descriptions, financing agency names, and flow types) in percentage point terms. A one scale point is the equivalent of a one percentage-point shift in performance on the underlying measures. The ten-point treatment effect for an aid agency at the 75th percentile of independence is equivalent to a shift from non-disclosure to full disclosure of ten percentage points of a given agency’s projects. For example, in 2012 USAID had \$17 billion US dollars of total disbursements and over 8500 activities.³⁸ This means an increase of ten percentage points of transparency for USAID would cover about 1.7 billion US dollars of aid flows and 850 activities. For these 850 activities, observers could now know what USAID’s programs were doing, where, and who was financing them. Individuals and civil society

³⁸ Data drawn from USAID’s “Foreign Aid Explorer”, explorer.usaid.gov. The explorer covers all US Government assistance; these are the USAID-only 2012 disbursement statistics reported as of December 30, 2017.

organizations in recipient countries could access information that would help them hold foreign donors and their own governments accountable. Individuals and politicians in the US could better understand where their tax dollars are going. Other donors could better understand what 1.7 billion dollars of USAID funding was doing, allowing for better coordination and planning.

Turning briefly to robustness, there are multiple reasons for caution in interpreting these findings as regards mechanisms. Appendix Table A2 runs a robustness check using a categorical variable interpretation of the data AidData disclosed and an ordered logit model, and finds robust support for the overall treatment effect. However evidence on the treatment effect's heterogeneity by level of agency independence is far less clear cut.³⁹ In addition, as noted earlier in this section, the independence scale itself is a patchy measure. It is a mere echo of the original Gilardi measure on agency independence. As such, these econometrics provide strong evidence that ATI coverage is associated with changes in the disclosure practices of (some) covered agencies. This analysis can, however, only be suggestive as regards the mechanisms underlying any ATI coverage effect.

In sum, donors included in the ATI are more transparent, especially if they are more independent and designated aid agencies. This finding on aid agency independence, as hypothesized, suggests the ATI primarily works through aid agency elites: if agencies primarily responded to pressure from their principal(s), then more dependent agencies should perform better on the ATI. This does not mean that direct elite influence is the only channel of influence, however. To further explore how the ATI drives donors to change we turn in section 6 to a closer examination of the nature of the ATI's power and its key mechanisms of influence over donor agencies.

³⁹ See Appendix Table A2 for more details. The ordered logit specification precludes fixed effects, instead using random effects models.

5. How Does the ATI Affect Donors? Qualitative Evidence on Mechanisms and Channels of Influence

In this section, we return to our qualitative evidence to further probe the results and explore the mechanisms through which the ATI influences donors. Overall, between 2010-2016, we conducted 465 open-ended and semi-structured interviews⁴⁰ with aid donors, governments, NGOs and CSOs, academics and other subject matter experts. We conducted these interviews primarily in seven countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Nepal, and Honduras (see Table 2 below and online Appendix 1). Many of these interviews broadly focused on aid transparency in donor agencies, with some focused on specific sectors (such as climate change, agriculture and education).

In most cases, in order to avoid leading questions, we did not ask directly about the ATI or its effects. Instead, we asked about the general pressures for donor-level transparency, general data needs and uses in resource allocation decisions, as well as awareness and use of open aid data at the agency or country level. Some interviewees referenced the ATI explicitly. In other cases, interviewees referenced the “index” associated with the International Aid Transparency Initiative or Publish What You Fund. We subsequently coded all the interviews to assess both awareness of the ATI and, where awareness existed, the overall perceptions regarding the ATI’s influence over donors’ transparency behavior (see Table 5 below).

**Table 5: Perceptions of ATI Influence on Donor Transparency Behavior
(see online Appendix 1 for interview list)**

⁴⁰ All interviews conducted on the record are listed in online Appendix 1. Interviews who requested partial anonymity are listed according to institutional affiliation. Interview subjects who requested full anonymity, or were exempt from attribution in our IRB protocols, are not listed.

Country	Interview Dates	Interviewee Role	Total # of Interviews*	Awareness of ATI***			
				Yes - Positive Influence	Yes – Negative Influence	Yes – No Influence / No Opinion	Not Aware of ATI / Did Not Mention ATI
United States	2/2011; 6/2013; 9/2014; 2/2015; 10/2015; 1-2/2016; 9/2016; 2/2017	Government	12	10	0	0	2
		Donor Agency	21	15	3	1	5
		Other**	34	31	2	1	2
United Kingdom	7/2013; 5/2014; 12/2015	Government	2	2	0	0	0
		Donor Agency	6	6	0	0	0
		Other**	17	17	0	0	0
Malawi	12/2010 1/2013; 12/2014	Government	22	0	0	2	20
		Donor Agency	35	0	0	2	33
		Other**	9	0	0	0	9
Uganda	6/2014; 3/2015	Government	6	0	0	2	4
		Donor Agency	30	1	3	5	24
		Other**	28	4	0	1	23
Kenya	12/2010; 6/2017	Government	9	1	0	1	7
		Donor Agency	23	2	0	2	19
		Other**	13	2	0	2	9
Nepal	12/2014; 3/2015	Government	8	1	0	3	4
		Donor Agency	34	3	1	16	15
		Other**	11	2	0	7	2
Honduras	3/2016; 6-8/2016	Government	36	2	0	1	33
		Donor Agency	20	1		6	13
		Other**	28	0	0	0	28
AMP Workshop Delegates	Nairobi 2010 and Nepal 2014	Government	38	10	0	5	23
		Donors	0	0	0	0	0
		Other**	11	3	0	4	4
Remote Correspondence	2013-2017	Government	0	0	0	0	0
		Donor Agency	7	7	0	0	0
		Other**	5	5	0	0	0
TOTAL			465	125 (26.9%)	9 (1.9%)	61 (13.1%)	279 (60%)

*= Includes interviews that were conducted under agreement of non-attribution or deep background (off the record only), per IRB protocol. In these instances, the names are not listed in the online appendix.

** Other includes international and national non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, think tank and academic subject matter experts.

***ATI awareness includes explicit reference or implicit reference (for example, the “index used by” the International Aid Transparency Initiative or Publish What You Fund).

In sum, 40% of interviews made explicit or implicit mention of the ATI. General awareness of the ATI was largely confined to interviewees who worked in donor headquarters (e.g., Washington, DC, London, Stockholm, Brussels) or who worked with NGOs, think tanks and academic research programs that pay explicit attention to aid transparency issues. ATI awareness was significantly lower among government and donor staff in borrowing countries. In these instances, respondents were more aware of domestic donor aid transparency initiatives, such as their respective Aid Management Platforms. In a few cases, respondents conflated aid transparency with general government transparency.⁴¹ The handful of respondents in aid receiving countries that signaled awareness of the ATI were individuals in government or donor agencies that were explicitly involved in reporting to domestic Aid Information Management Platforms or those who worked with domestic aid transparency advocacy groups that had connections to transnational aid transparency advocacy groups (such as Development Initiatives).

As indicated in Table 5, 186 (40%) of all interviewees indicated they were familiar with the ATI. 125 of these reported that they thought the ATI had a positive influence in shaping donor agencies’ transparency behavior, whereas 61 reported that they did not think the ATI had any influence or simply expressed that they had no opinion. As shown in Table 5, 93 out of these 125 that reported a positive influence for the ATI were based in Washington, DC, London, or other major donor country where donor aid agencies are headquartered.

Direct Elite Response to the ATI’s Social Power

⁴¹ This became evident when interviewees discussed the ATI in the context of Transparency International’s transparency ratings or other international transparency indices such as the Open Budget Index or the Open Government Partnership.

Donor agencies clearly care about their reputation and perceived legitimacy even when such status is not explicitly linked to material rewards or sanctions. In both interviews at donor headquarters and in official organizational documents, management and staff nearly universally report that their agencies use ATI ratings and rankings to draw positive attention to themselves (self-promote), direct negative attention to others (distract), or signal their own good intentions and commitments. Landing in the “very good” category grants bragging rights with large legitimacy gains. This is something that organizations value independently from any direct link to financial sanctions or rewards.⁴² Moreover, as Kelley and Simmons note, the very act of the ATI’s regularized monitoring triggers reactivity, meaning that target actors change their behavior (if not their underlying interests) in reaction to being evaluated, observed and measured.⁴³

The ATI’s ability to incite status and reputational concerns has two effects on organizations. The ATI’s peer rankings serve to motivate poorly performing donor organizations to communicate their renewed commitments and refocus organizational resources on transparency reforms.⁴⁴ At the same time, the ATI peer rankings and release of annual reports provide opportunities for well-performing organizations to send signals to their external constituents that they have made good on their transparency promises and, in some instances, achieved compliance with international commitments and open data standards. According to 15 interviews with donor agencies and NGOs in the US and UK, there is a fair amount of institutional rivalry that reifies organizations’ desire for status and positive reputations. This appears to especially resonate in countries with multiple aid agencies that jostle for favorable

⁴² Interviews with World Bank, USAID, MCC, SIDA, DFID and DANIDA staff. See Clare, Verhust and Young 2016, 4 (Sweden’s SIDA); George 2012 (World Bank IDA); Greening 2-12 (UK DFID).

⁴³ Espeland and Saunder 2007.

⁴⁴ Interviews with PWYF staff (London 2014 and 2015), CRS and GAO staff (DC, October 2015), and senior officials at USAID (DC and Uganda), UNDP (Nepal, Uganda and New York), World Bank (Uganda), SIDA (Nepal), GIZ (London), and DFID (Nepal and London). Various dates; see Appendix 1.

positions in the eyes of the same political authorizers.⁴⁵ This is clearest in the case of the US. Our observations and interviews with donor staff and external aid experts in the DC, there is a palpable rivalry between the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), both of whom have mandates that solely focus on official development assistance and who “vie for the top spot in the ATI”.⁴⁶

The peer pressure invoked by the ATI motivates key reforms in US agencies that have performed poorly in past ATI rankings, particularly at USAID and the US Department of State. In the first months after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US would become a signatory to IATI in November 2011, these agencies (especially State) argued “vigorously through back channels”⁴⁷ against an aggressive timeline and benchmarks for implementation. They argued this was because of the anticipated high costs of required changes in underlying data technology systems. They also needed time to build capacity and buy-in from staff to report to new standards and dashboards, including the newly established US Foreign Assistance Dashboard. Interviews with approximately one dozen actors within US aid agencies, the US General Accounting Office, and US Congress reveal that much of the rationale behind this argument fell by the wayside when the Millennium Challenge Corporation quickly enacted an ambitious transparency agenda and vaulted to number one on the ATI in 2013.

Policy and behavior change in response to the ATI need not emerge solely from the gain or loss of professional status. As Kelley & Simmons note, GPI processes can alter identity and professional norms through knowledge production and socialization. The ATI shapes how the

⁴⁵ Interviews with George Ingram, Brookings Institute and senior officials, USAID. This sentiment was reiterated by other senior staff and management at MCC, USAID, U.S. State Department, DFID, UNDP, and UNICEF (various dates). In addition to the US, three other countries have at least two agencies assessed by the ATI, including France (MINEFI and MAEDI), Japan (JICA and MOFA), and Germany (BMZ-GIZ and BMZ-KfW). Four multilateral groups also have multiple agencies in the ATI: United Nations (UN DP, UNICEF, UN OCHA), the World Bank (IFC and IDA) and the European Communities (EBRD, EIB, DG-NEAR, DG-DEVCO, DG ECHO and DG Enlargement).

⁴⁶ This rivalry became evidence in interviews with senior staff at USAID and MCC (various dates). Such rivalry was also noted by senior staff in the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

⁴⁷ Interview with senior USAID official.

concept of aid transparency is collectively understood and acted upon.⁴⁸ Our interview with Publish What You Fund’s Sally Paxton, and public comments made by donor representatives at annual ATI launches suggest that circulation of elite staff between organizations and the sharing of “best practices” spurred by the ATI’s annual rankings, publications and public discussions foster inter-organizational learning and diffusion of new policies.⁴⁹ For example, Sheila Herrling, Vice President for the MCC declared that the MCC learned directly from the transparency initiatives of other donors, including PLAN USA.⁵⁰

Annual ATI releases also diffuse learning by providing critical information on the experiences of peer institutions in building organizational cultures around transparency reforms, overcoming technological barriers, and building staff capacity in needed areas. This is done through donor-level narrative reviews, press releases, and open discussion forums. For example, interviews with DFID staff in London and USAID staff in DC affirm that the ATI has helped to “prove” that organizational change is possible, and PWYF’s donor-level reports⁵¹ have provided key insights into how to approach difficult organizational reform. This is an effect quite synergistic, but distinct, from that of peer naming and shaming. In the words of Brookings scholar George Ingram, such inter-organizational learning helps organizations learn to “stop hugging data” and to release more of the information they gather.⁵² The success of the IDA (World Bank), MCC, DFID (United Kingdom) and the UNDP in scoring very highly on the ATI led other agencies such as USAID, IFC (World Bank), SIDA (Sweden) and GIZ (Germany), to adopt disclosure policies on sensitive areas such as procurements and finances that they

⁴⁸ Interview with Sally Paxton from Friends of Publish What You Fund, February 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview with Sally Paxton from Friends of Publish What You Fund, February 2015. We observed several general comments to this effect at the ATI launches in both Washington, D.C. and London. These comments were often offered by panelists in direct response to questions posed by panel moderators or audience members regarding how organizations do – or can – learn from the successes of other donor agencies that have performed well on the ATI.

⁵⁰ Herrling 2015.

⁵¹ PWYF 2015a and 2015b.

⁵² Interview with George Ingram, Brookings Institution, January 2016.

previously had been reluctant to pursue. Consistent with section 4, these first movers tend to be more independent agencies on the Gilardi independence scale. This is also true within-country. For example, in the US, the MCC scores higher on the independence scale than does USAID and was the “first mover” on improved transparency practices. In sum, some agencies performing well on the ATI are able to demonstrate to other organizations that implementing seeming “costly” or “risky” transparency reforms are, contrary to expectations, neither costly nor risky.⁵³

Similarly, the process of constructing the annual ATI itself is critical to understanding the ATI’s social power and influence over elites within donor agencies. The inclusive nature of the ATI review process, which provides opportunities for target organizations to participate in the collection of data and validation of results, lends considerable authority to Publish What You Fund and the ATI. Because donors are directly involved in reporting to the index, and have opportunities to review the data before the index is finalized, the results are rarely openly contested.⁵⁴

Nearly two dozen interviews with the staff of PWYF and donor staff based in their agency’s headquarters reveal that the process of collating the ATI results every year provides further opportunities for organizational learning and diffusion of transparency policy norms. During the review process, which takes several months and involves repeated interaction with PWYF, donors provide their own assessment of their performance on the ATI’s indicators. When these donor-generated assessments conflict with the scores generated by PWYF staff and independent reviewers, PWYF and the donor discuss what exactly is expected to achieve a full score on each of the ATI’s indicators and how the donor may achieve such scores by achieving

⁵³ Interviews with staff from SIDA, GIZ, World Bank Group and USAID (various dates). See also Clare, Verhust and Young 2016, 10; see also Hansen and Marchner 2015.

⁵⁴ Interview with Sally Paxton, February 2015, This is similar to the repeated social interaction learning affect, discussed in Kelley 2017, chs.3 and 6.

full compliance with reporting standards.⁵⁵ Thus, according to PWYF staff in both London and DC, during the busiest months of the review process, donors are compelled to reflect on their progress towards transparency. Moreover, because the ATI grants some points in donors' overall score for organizational commitments and implementation plans even in the absence of actual policy changes in reporting, the period of review becomes an opportune time to double down on public statements in support of transparency reforms.⁵⁶ According to George Ingram, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow and Co-Lead of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, the cost of inattention to this process is a stagnant or bad score for the agency, leaving agencies' stakeholders and peers within the aid community with a lingering sense of "what have you done lately?"⁵⁷

The period of review also enhances the reactivity effects of the ATI's monitoring.⁵⁸ A donor agency may report that they are fully compliant with the ATI's expectations regarding information disclosure policies (i.e., they will argue they deserve a score of 100 on that measure). However, two sets of independent reviews plus the PWYF's assessment can catch where such policies are weak – e.g. if the disclosure policy provides few mechanisms for appeals or puts limitations on the acceptance of third party information and internal deliberations. Amongst the USAID and PWYF staff we interviewed, the process reifies the sense that the annual review is deep and rigorous, with layers of independent analysis from subject matter experts to serve as a check against agencies' self-assessments.⁵⁹ In the case of USAID, staff reported that this prompted the organization to steer away from loose coupling or rhetorical commitments that

⁵⁵ [Author 2] made this observation several times while participating as an external reviewer for the 2016 and 2018 ATI. This observation is also based upon conversations with the PWYF staff who compile the ATI scores.

⁵⁶ This is based upon impressions provided by three senior staff officials at USAID, one senior staff official at DFID, one senior staff official at DANIDA, and two staff members of Publish What You Found. See also Clare, Verhust and Young 2016, 9; Hansen and Marschner 2015; UK DFID 2015.

⁵⁷ Interview with George Ingram, Brookings Institution, January 2016.

⁵⁸ As observed through [Author 2's] participant role as an external reviewer in the 2016 and 2018 ATI review.

⁵⁹ Interview with two senior USAID officials and Sally Paxton, September 2016.

might otherwise be used to “game” the assessment process (a form of shallow behavioral change) to tight coupling around meaningful policy and operational change on transparency.

The ATI also empowers elites to mobilize support for reforms by clearly defining what transparency looks like and setting specific benchmarks for success. According to John Adams, staff member at DFID and chair of the IATI Technical Secretariat, references to the ATI help champions of transparency reform within agencies to persuade reticent staff of the merits of policy change.⁶⁰ Specifically, according to staff in charge of transparency reforms at USAID, the MCC and GIZ, the ATI’s detailed set of indicators reduces uncertainty on the part of agency leaders in terms of identifying precisely what policies and practices need to change to meet basic expectations set in international commitments and national law. Some donors’ transparency strategies are in fact directly oriented around the standards embedded in the ATI.⁶¹ For example, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (ranked first in the 2014 ATI), attributes its success to this: “...through the Aid Transparency Index process, Publish What You Fund and other advocacy groups have made specific recommendations to MCC in the interest of moving the field of aid transparency forward, particularly regarding how to prioritize improvements to IATI data.”⁶² The ATI, in essence, became the MCC’s the “blueprint for reform.” This shows up in other interviews and in internal and published organizational strategy papers and operational policies at USAID and SIDA. Notably, this happens even when there continues to be some disagreement within organizations on the importance or fit of those ideals and standards within the overall transparency agenda and core values of the organization.⁶³

⁶⁰ Interviews with senior staff, DFID, USAID and World Bank (September 2014, January 2016, February 2017)

⁶¹ Interview with John Adams, DFID, September 2014. See also Clare, Verhust and Young 2016 on Sweden’s aid transparency strategy.

⁶² Hansen and Marschner 2015. For similar statements by the Canadian International Aid Agency, see Bhusan and Bond 2013.

⁶³ Interviews with staff and management at USAID and World Bank. See also Koeberle 2016.

USAID's response to the ATI provides an illustration of the central role played by elite channels. In July 2015, after struggling in prior years in the ATI rankings, USAID published a strategy paper on open data depicted as the agency's "roadmap" to transparency.⁶⁴ The strategy paper, also known as the IATI Implementation Cost Management Plan (CMP – Phase 2), explicitly stated that one of the four central goals of the strategy was to increase USAID's ATI score.⁶⁵ A month later, Alex Their, then Assistant to the USAID Administrator for the Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning, stated ".....after we implemented Phase One of the CMP, our Publish What You Fund Aid Transparency Index....increased more than 20 points and moved USAID from 'Fair' to 'Good'. This was an exciting, tangible way to demonstrate our progress, and this success raised awareness around the Agency on these important efforts."⁶⁶ This internally driven, elite-led reform effort is consistent with the quantitative evidence presented in section 5 regarding agency independence.

The ATI's Power via Political Pressure

While our interviews were on average about twice as likely to expound upon the direct elite responses to the ATI (in terms of the length and content of their responses), those who perceive a positive influence for the ATI were also likely to note (in approximately 65% of the interviews) that the ATI does indeed reduce information asymmetries and induce greater principal attention to the disclosure practices of donor organizations. The ATI creates awareness and support among political principals for aid transparency via the lobbying and advocacy campaigns of PWYF and like-minded members of the epistemic community. As such, the ATI is a useful tool for resolving the information asymmetries that hinder principal oversight and

⁶⁴ Hamilton 2015; see also Thier and Crumbly 2015.

⁶⁵ USAID 2015a.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Hamilton 2015.

control. In providing detailed, regularized data on agencies' transparency performance, the ATI essentially acts as an information intermediary for politicians who may have neither the capacity nor inclination to closely monitor their agent's behavior.⁶⁷ According to one senior staff member in the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, the ATI is "great for letting us know when there's a problem [with US aid agencies].... We don't have time to follow that stuff that closely."⁶⁸ In addition, we found that the ATI's detailed information on where donors are lagging in transparency performance is used by principals to inform specific policies within national legislation on open data standards. Several national "aid transparency guarantees", such as in the UK and Sweden, and even the 2016 US Foreign Aid Transparency Act makes specific recommendations that align with the indicators and goals of the ATI.

In other instances, it is quite apparent that the ATI is empowering third party actors (watchdogs and police patrols, in the parlance of principal-agent theory). In the U.S. for example, there is a thriving group of think tanks, academic and NGOs around aid reform that pays close attention to the ATI.⁶⁹ The rankings and ratings inform their analytical reports, lobbying and activism.⁷⁰ Interviews with senior congressional staff in the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee and the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee reveal that a great deal of their information on the transparency performance of US aid agencies comes from this epistemic community, with frequent reference to the ATI as a primary source of evidence.

Some of the competitive pressure between agencies described above has links to political pressure. According to three off-the-record interviews with Congressional staff, the US Senate

⁶⁷ Interviews with staff in the US House Foreign Affairs Committee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee, senior staff at the UK Department for International Development, and think tanks scholars both in the U.S. and U.K. (various dates; see appendix 1).

⁶⁸ Interview with senior staff member, USHFAC, February 2015.

⁶⁹ See online Appendix 1 for the list of 34 interviewees that fall into this category, including the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, Center for Global Development, and Oxfam International.

⁷⁰ USAID 2015a.

has also brought attention and importance to the ATI. The MCC's success on the ATI, and the need for other US agencies to 'catch up' to the MCC, has been prominently discussed in congressional hearings. For example, this was noted in the very first question asked to Dana Hyde in her 2013 confirmation hearing as MCC CEO, by Senator Markey (D-MA). As Markey put it, MCC's success on the ATI was "a very impressive record" and asked "how do we keep it going, and how do we transfer that transparency to all of these other venerable institutions [e.g. USAID]?"⁷¹ While only two interviewees admitted (off the record) that the MCC's success was an official reason for the significant shift in USAID's approach to a more aggressive IATI implementation plan shortly thereafter, nearly all (20 out of 25) of the USAID, US State Department and other US government interviews remarked that this competition had a lot to do with getting the attention of top USAID management and putting data transparency reforms "on the front burner."⁷²

Consistent with our hypotheses, political pressure appears to play a stronger role with respect to less independent aid agencies. For example, close observers of the US system note that staff from USAID, which has a relatively little financial autonomy vis-à-vis Congress, fear that the ATI's score may influence the way their agencies' political masters decide to appropriate funds.⁷³ By contrast, interviews on the evolution of the transparency initiative at the World Bank, whose funds comes from a more diverse set of sources (including trust funds and profits from non-concessional lending and bonds) make no mention of the shadow of appropriations, even when asked directly.⁷⁴ The World Bank has consistently placed in the top ten of all donors and in the "very good" category of the ATI. Interestingly, our interviews also reveal that staff in less

⁷¹ Senate Foreign Relations Committee 2013.

⁷² Interviews with senior USAID staff, October 2015 and January 2016.

⁷³ Interviews with staff in the U.S. Congressional Research Service, U.S. General Accounting Office, and USAID (2014-2017).

⁷⁴ Interviews with World Bank staff, February 2011, June 2013, February 2017.

independent agencies do not always wait for clear threats or actual principal exercise of oversight and control. Instead, they can act *in anticipation* of possible greater oversight and control by principals, exhibiting a desire to “get ahead of the game” by taking proactive steps to implement data reporting standards that would be fully compliant with IATI and aligned to the metrics in the ATI.⁷⁵

6. Conclusion: The ATI’s Social Power and Influence

The qualitative and quantitative empirics jointly suggest that both political pressure and direct elite channels play a role in the influence of the ATI. The elite channel appears to be the more influential, however. The ATI provides information to political principals; it also provides information to elite bureaucrats inside donor agencies. These elites are the primary drivers of agency changes as the ATI has created a clear standard of what it means to be “transparent”, invoking normative and reputational power for these policy elites.

GPIs can enable weak actors to influence powerful actors in world politics. The ATI is a remarkable case in point. Created nearly ten years ago by a small NGO with no direct material power, the ATI now sets best practices in aid transparency. The ATI exercises influence via political pressure and elite channels to invoke important socialization, learning, and peer pressure effects that discernibly shape many donors’ transparency. Agencies with aid as their primary mandate are more responsive to the ATI’s assessments, particularly when those agencies are relatively independent and thus more able to act in response to a change in aid professionals’ priorities and understandings. The ATI case thus demonstrates that a GPI creator (in this case,

⁷⁵ Interviews with staff at the U.S. General Accounting Office, Congressional Research Service, and USAID. See also Marks 2012.

Publish What You Fund) can substantially alter behavior within a relatively tightly knit professional community.

The case of the ATI suggests that there may be advantages to focusing on elite channels and construction of meaning in professional communities. At the same time, this case also suggests that a GPI that operates via social pressure will be unlikely to influence those who overtly reject the importance of the goal (such as China or the United Arab Emirates) or are not part of the community in which social pressure operates, including organizations that are primarily focused on other matters and only incidentally disburse aid. The ATI's efforts to affect change in these agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) or Department of the Treasury whose ODA activities are a small fraction of their responsibilities, may be of limited usefulness.

In sum, the ATI has drawn critical attention to the aid transparency commitments and performance of donors. It is now an industry leader in assessing aid transparency and setting accountability standards for donors. The ATI alters what transparency means in practice even as it encourages greater disclosure. It does more than merely assess transparency practices, it defines norms of transparency.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the ATI's influence is not always viewed in a positive light, even when the ATI is seen to play a significant role in pushing donor agencies towards transparency. For example, when asked if the ATI presented any concerns or risks, five interviewees in the US (in donor agencies and NGO) pointed out that the systems put in place in response to the ATI did not always represent the quickest or most efficient route to full transparency for their organization.⁷⁶ It is interesting that conformity around the ATI's norms of transparency has taken hold, despite emerging reservations about the appropriateness of the

⁷⁶ Interviews with senior staff at USAID, World Bank, GIZ, UNICEF, JICA, NORAD (various dates; see appendix 1)

ATI's assessment criteria and specific indicators. This qualitative observation may portend a varying level of normative power over time as the ATI ages. Contestation over the operationalization of 'transparency' may lead to some discrediting or distancing from the ATI. It might also create pressure to alter the index to be more inclusive of other indicators and weights, or perhaps even the rise of new GPI competitors that reflect changing norms regarding the structure and goals of aid transparency.⁷⁷

What is clear today is that the ATI has been a key part of the transparency revolution in international development aid. PWYF's indicators have helped to set a clear standard for the over 600 governmental and non-governmental signatories of the International Aid Transparency. For an NGO that still occupies just one room, it shows that GPI creators do not necessarily need material power to influence the behavior of the powerful. David may move Goliath with a well-aimed slingshot fired in conflict. But David can also induce Goliath to change by orienting Goliath's attention towards the behavior David wishes to alter.

⁷⁷ At the fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea in November 2011, the Global Partnership on Effective Development Cooperation⁷⁷ was created and mandated to monitor donor progress towards the Busan agreement, including commitments to transparency. The first Global Monitoring Report 2014 was released just prior to the 2015 Fifth High Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Mexico. The monitoring framework thus far appears to depend upon voluntary reporting by participating countries and organizations and a vague methodology and set of indicators; as such, it does not appear to be emerging yet as a viable competitor to the ATI. However, the clear overlap in the indices' purposive goals may indicate some movement in the competitive landscape, with yet unknown consequences for its power and influence of the ATI.

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