Policy Hype Cycles in International Development

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Abstract

This paper adapts the concept of hype cycles from theories of technology innovation to explain the dynamics of policy change in the contemporary international development industry. I develop an inductive theory based on an in-depth case of the aid transparency movement, which since 2008 has entailed a shift in the fundamental principles and practices of the global aid industry towards the proactive disclosure of development finance information (e.g. aid spending) in order to improve the legitimacy, coordination, accountability, and effectiveness of the global aid industry. Hype cycles are characterized by five distinct phases: (1) an innovation trigger; (2) peak of inflated expectations, (3) the trough of disillusionment, (4) the slope of enlightenment, and (5) the plateau of productivity (Gartner Group, n.d.). I argue here that new development policies enter into hype cycles between the first two stages when there are distinct factors shaping policy windows of opportunity that create a sense of time-sensitive imperatives and incentives for irrational exuberance (Shiller 2000 and 2004). As a consequence, new policies moving through hype cycles are often perceived as "fashions," "fads," or "silver bullets": policy innovations that rapidity rise in prominence, but then quickly wither on the vine (Swidler and Watkins 2017). In this paper, I seek to understand examine why and how the aid transparency movement fell into a hype cycle, and in so doing derive an inductive theory about the causes and consequences of hype cycles in global development more generally. I draw from empirical work conducted over the past 13 years, including extensive participant and non-participant observation, process tracing, organizational- and country-level evaluations of aid transparency systems, and over 600 key informant interviews in 14 countries. In this case, I explain not only the factors that put the aid transparency movement on this particular path, but also the consequences of such hype cycle dynamics for the movement's ability to fully institutionalize transparency principles in the policies and practices of the international development aid regime complex.

* This (very rough) draft paper is based off a larger book project. A full list of interviews is available upon request (it was too long to include here). I will be doing additional revisions throughout Spring 20224; including further integration of interview and participant observation evidence and a discussion of the scope conditions of this inductive theory.

The history of foreign aid is…a history of fads and fashions.
~Swedlund 2017: 11

Most ideas designed to save the world go through a hype cycle: first, eureka!, and a phase of euphoria during which almost everyone falls in love with them; then a period of major disillusionment when it appears that they are much more difficult to implement than first thought, that they are not so powerful after all, and that they have lots of drawbacks too. But with the best of them, a slow process may start in which the seeds of the original ideas begin to germinate and develop slowly into a mature stand.
~ Skutsch and McCall 2010: 402.

Fads. Fashions. Panaceas. Silver Bullets. Call them what you may. For those who work closely within the international development, these fanciful terms immediately conjure thoughts of the big development ideas and policies that rise quickly to prominence, only to then quickly fade from the spotlight (Swidler and Watkins 2017). Such terms have been used to describe the infamous Washington Consensus (Naim 2010), shock therapy and the Millennium Villages Project (Munk 2014), deworming (Gordon and Hobbes 2022; Wiblin and Harris 2022), microfinance and cash-on-delivery (Swedlund 2017), and even the idea of evidence-based aid and the "randomista revolution" (Deaton 2009). The booms and busts of development fads generate fatigue and cynicism not only amongst frontline development practitioners, but also national governments and citizens on the ground who are the receiving end of the constant "churn of innovations in the way we do development." (Ramalingam 2015; Pomerantz 2004)

In order to explain the phenomenon of fads, fashion and silver bullets, I adapt in this paper the concept of hype cycles from theories of technology innovation (Gartner n.d.) Specifically, I seek to understand underlying causes, dynamics and consequences, as they emerge during five distinct phases of policy hype cycles: (1) the innovation trigger; (2) peak of inflated expectations, (3) the trough of disillusionment, (4) the slope of enlightenment, and (5) the plateau of productivity (Gartner Group, n.d.). I argue that new development policies enter into hype cycles between the first two stages when there are distinct factors shaping policy windows that create a sense of time-sensitive imperatives and incentives for irrational exuberance around a new policy idea. I then seek to explain why and how irrational exuberance shapes the ways in which these new policies are strategically framed and promoted, particular in the underlying policy theory of change. I link this to three key features of the international development aid regime complex that drive the irrational exuberance I observe in the case of international aid transparency: (1) resource dependencies and ensuing incentives rooted in the increasingly competitive political and funding structure of the regime complex, (2) the culture of international donor organizations that shapes policy framing, and (3) a broader regime norm or faith in technical fixes to complex development problems compounded by the very urgency of doing "something" to solve the world's poverty.

While I have not fully formulated a theory that links this concept of hype cycles to regime complexes or other theoretical approaches such as historical and sociological institutions, I do perceive synergies that merit future exploration. For example, as hinted above, I believe the changing nature of the international development aid regime complex matters in explaining drivers of hype cycles. I define a regime as a set of principles, norms, rules and procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area (Ruggie 1982: 380). Subsequently, I take an international regime *complex* to encompass "a set of overlapping and perhaps even contradictory regimes that share a common focus" (Alter and Raustiala 2018: 329). The international regime complex for global development aid consists of (and growing) constellations of different actors (e.g. multilateral and bilateral aid organizations, INGOs, epistemic communities, national governments, civil society groups and community-based organizations) that share a common interest in, but not necessarily shared ideas or solutions, on how to best govern aid in the pursuit of poverty alleviation and the promotion of sustainable socioeconomic and human development in the world.

Distinct features of this regime complex – namely the fierce competition between regime actors for funds to both advocate for and implement new development policies – has generated intense pressure to frame new policies in ways that resonate with powerful actors whose support is needed or whose behaviors are targeted by such policy. It also includes strong incentives for policy advocates to overpromise on a policy's potential to deliver on its espoused theory of change. This is especially true with respect to implicit expectations around time horizons, which too often are influenced by the irritatingly short attention span of actors in the development aid regime complex. Consequently, a specific framing adopted a time T1 for the sake of mobilizing financial and political support soon unravels as efforts to carry out the policy reveal fundamental misalignments between the theory of change's central assumptions and reality on the ground.

Policy hype cycles in turn reflect temporal dynamics that are the focus of both historical and sociological institutionalism. In contrast to policies whose life cycles are best described as slow, incremental and path dependent processes dependent on prior institutional arrangements, policy hype cycles are more closely aligned with critical junctures. I borrow from Fioretos (2017) in defining critical junctures as "periods of time during which processes are set in motion that reduce the likelihood that alternatives will take root (Capoccia 2016)… [and] during which the room for agency and contingency temporarily grows" (Fioretos 2017: 15). Critical junctures are important insofar as they may be "initial markets of path-dependent processes" (Fioretos, Falleti and Sheingate 2016: 11).

Indeed, what is most intriguing here is how policies that enter hype cycles fare *after* they emerge and reach the proverbial norm tipping or diffusion point (the "peak of inflated expectations"). This fate is strongly affected by how policy entrepreneurs take advantage of critical junctures in the first place. These do not (and often should not) disappear – after all, most policy innovations that rise and fall through hype cycles eventually enter into a "slope of enlightenment." But the policy's dramatic rise and fall is such that the policy itself follows a truncated and almost volatile life cycle that ultimately jeopardizes its adoption and sustainability. These policy innovations, in the grand durée, look like "blips" on the timeline. They are indeed, passing fads, fashions, and silver bullets that didn't quite reach their mark. To some we may say "good riddance." Others we may lament as missed opportunities: good ideas that lose steam because they were pushed too quickly, too simply in complex institutional environment where structural and cultural change does not emerge overnight.

Brief Note on Methodology

In order to construct this understanding of how hype cycles occur in the international development aid regime context, I engaged in inductive theory building using the case of the aid transparency movement. Since 2008, this movement has entailed a shift in the fundamental principles and practices of the global aid industry towards the proactive disclosure of development finance information (e.g. aid spending) in order to improve the legitimacy, coordination, accountability, and effectiveness of the global aid industry. Nearly 15 years later, where are we? Critically, I do not argue here that the movement has failed. To the contrary, we have seen tremendous progress in increasing the transparency of many donors, an unprecedented level of publicly available data on aid, and a general embrace of transparency policy norms. This progress is not likely to be abandoned at any point soon, largely thanks admirable resilience of a close-knit epistemic community of aid transparency advocates. But as one key informant argued, "transparency is the genie that we can't put back in the bottle; yet it still hasn't delivered on its three wishes." Today, the aid transparency movement has arguably stagnated or (in the parlance of hype cycles) plateaued. This is readily evident in some regression on the measures such as the international Aid Transparency Index that capture donor transparency performance and the experience of many national-level aid information management systems which have either been abandoned or relegated to zombie status (Park 2016; interviews). Transparency advocates now struggle with transparency fatigue, waning financial support for their work, and a stubborn (and growing?) cynicism regarding transparency's expected effects. Making the case for transparency is getting harder. Why?

In brief, my empirical work draws from over 600 key informant interviews conducted in 14 aid donor and aid receiving countries[1] between 2010-2023. I, along with numerous research partners (including dozens of graduate students I took with me into the field), conducted these interviews with subject matter experts and frontline practitioners from international aid donors organizations (multilateral and bilateral), international non-governmental organizations, national government actors (foremost key staff in national ministries and national statistical offices), think tanks in donor and recipient countries, academic experts, and transparency activists.[2] My research also benefited from ongoing collaborative research and multiple interactions with numerous partners, including the World Bank, US Agency for International Development, AidData, Development

[1] Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, Nepal, Honduras, Timor L'este, Senegal, Haiti, United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, Japan, and Belgium.

[2] In line with the consent procedures approved by The University of Texas IRB, all names of KIIs have been listed by institutional affiliation, anonymized as needed to prevent identification of specific individuals. In addition, about 120 individuals requested that their interview responses be treated as background information only. Their institutional affiliations are not listed in the interview appendix.

Gateway, Publish What You Fund, and Development Initiatives. As part of this larger work, I was directly engaged in the development, application and scaling up of aid geo-mapping work, and the evaluation of open aid initiatives as part of two US Department of Defense Minerva grants[3] and one USAID Higher Education Solutions grant (with AidData and Brigham Young University). This work entailed collection of data in countries, in depth scrutiny of thousands of aid documents for the purposes of mining data for mapping dashboard and other aid information management systems, and frequent interactions with donor agencies and national ministries.[4]

Overall, this in-depth qualitative work covers nearly the entire life span thus far of the aid transparency movement. My first-hand involvement with some of this work enabled close, detailed process tracing of the movement. Such participant observational techniques come with risks, of course, particularly with respect to bias. I certainly confess that in the early days of the movement, I, too, accepted and promulgated aid transparency's idealistic theory of change. Over time, however, the opportunities to engage in the implementation and evaluation of transparency initiatives opened my eyes to the fragility of my own and other advocates' beliefs. At the same time, my own personal journey on the "roller coaster" ride of the movement is what drew my attention to the concept of hype cycles.

There are certainly limits to this study. Given the inductive nature of this work and its reliance on one critical case study, I eschew any claim to generalizability in this work. Instead, my intent is to proffer a plausible set of hypotheses on the underlying causes and consequences of policy idea hype cycles in the international development aid regime complex. I hope other will take up these ideas and test them rigorously with other cases and other methods. And insofar as I see hype cycles as potentially harmful for the international development aid regime, I secretly hope that future research proves me wrong.

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[3] The Climate Change and African Political Stability Project and the The Complex Emergencies and Political Stability in South Asia, both housed under the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law at The University of Texas at Austin. See https://www.strausscenter.org/ccaps/ and https://www.strausscenter.org/cepsa/.

[4] I am indebted to my colleagues and students from the LBJ School of Public Affairs and Innovations for Peace and Development at The University of Texas for their many contributions to this broader collaborative effort. I owe special thanks to Josh Powell, Vanessa Goas and Jean-Louis Sarbib at Development Gateway, Gary Forster and Publish What You Fund, my many colleagues at AidData (Samantha Custer, Alena Sterns, and Brad Parks, David Trichler); Steve Davenport (World Bank), and Innovations for Peace and Development (Mike Findley and Dan Nielson).

In this paper, I seek to articulate my theory of hype cycles that I have derived from the aid transparency case. To this end, section 1 presents the concept of the Gartner Hype Cycle and the manner in which I adapt it to explain policy hype cycles in global development. In section 2, I briefly summarize the case of the international aid transparency policy, detailing as concisely as possible the convergence of factors that led to the critical juncture, or policy window, the particular framing and other advocacy tactics that contributed to transparency's rapid rise to a peak of inflated expectations, and then its fall into the trough of disillusionment. In in section 3, I seek to explain why international aid transparency, as a policy innovation, experienced the irrational exuberance that led it into a hype cycle. Section 4 concludes.

I. What are Policy Hype Cycles?

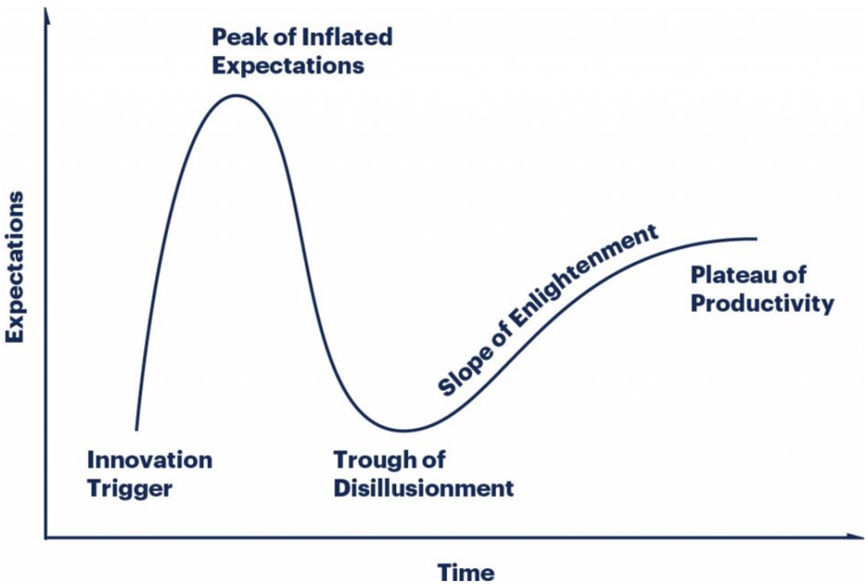
The concept of hype cycles is attributed to the Gartner Group, a technology advising firm. Gartner developed the theory of hype cycles to explain what happens in the wake of major technological innovations, as well as how to "discern hype from what is commercially viable… within the context of the industry and individual appetite for risk."[5] The concept of the hype cycle attracted attention within the international development community during the early 2000s at the same time as the rise in discussion around the Big Data revolution and the growing popularity of "ICT4D" (Information and Communications Technology for Development).

The Gartner Hype Cycle graphically depicts the emergence, maturity, adoption and application of new technologies. Its purpose is to help technology businesses and investors manage expectations about emerging technologies to inform their investment decisions. It draws attention to how technologies, after their inception or "innovation trigger," nearly always experience a phase of "hype and inflated expectations." This phase lasts for a short period of time, before falling into a "trough of disillusionment." During this phase, the various bugs, implementation challenges, and limited applications become apparent, and some technologies may fail entirely. But those that survive enter the "slope of enlightenment": a phase when lessons are learned, pragmatism sets in, and there emerges a more realistic set of expectations around the feasibility and practical applications of the technology. In the final stage, the plateau of productivity, a surviving

[5] See https://www.gartner.com/en/research/methodologies/gartner-hype-cycle.

technology fully matures and is adopted more widely. Successful technologies get picked up and integrated into mainstream business practices.

Figure 1: The Gartner Hype Cycle



(Source: Gartner Group. N.d.)

The idea of hype cycles resonates deeply with anyone who watches the rapid rise and fall of new development theories, programs and practices in international development. Take for example the aforementioned example of deworming. Deworming refers to health interventions, often funded through foreign aid, which provided medical treatments for school children with intestinal worms. If left untreated, children (and adults) face myriad health problems, including abdominal pain, fatigue, and other symptoms best left unsaid in polite company. Children suffering from intestinal worms are unable to attend school, often for long periods of time if they are not treated. The treatment itself is quite inexpensive, with few side effects.

In 2004, leading economists Michael Kremer and Edward Miguel published a major study that assessed the impact of a randomized control trial in Kenya that treated children with deworming medicine in order to improve school attendance rates (Miguel and Kremer 2004). Miguel and Kramer then followed the children for the next twenty years to see if the short-term effects of uninterrupted school attendance would yield longer-term benefits, such as better jobs and higher incomes. Their 2004 study reported that the immediate effect of the program was a 25% reduction in school absenteeism, with longer term effects of a 13% increase in income and a 14% increase in consumption for the those treated, relative to the control group. The results generated tremendous excitement in the international development community and huge financial commitments to scaling up deworming campaigns. It was heralded as one of the most promising breakthroughs in global health in the developing world, where nearly 600 million children suffer from intestinal worms (Clemens and Sandefur 2015). The policy inference was that if deworming pills could be provided *en masse*, they would be one of the most cost-effective ways to raise school attendance, with term benefits. The money poured in.

Ten years later, however, two new studies came out in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* in response to Miguel and Kremer's findings. One was a replication study (Aiken et al 2015) and the other an alternative analysis of the original data by epidemiologists from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (Davey et al 2015). The studies purportedly found key calculation errors in Miguel and Kremer's original study that challenged its positive claims, specifically with regards to examination performance, as well as the statistical techniques used to show improvements in school attendance. The key conclusion was that "the study provides some evidence, but with high risk of bias." (Davey et al 2015: 1582). What thus seems like a silver bullet for development and the "poster child for the effective altruism movement" (Clemens and Sandefur 2015) was quickly taken to task by global media (Gordon and Hobbes 2022; Wiblin and Harris 2022). And while many economists and epidemiologists continue to debate the validity of all the different studies on deworming,[6] the methodological nuances were lost on the general public. Deworming was "debunked," and the silver bullet was tarnished.

[6] In 2021, Edward Miguel, the co-author of the original report, published a new co-authored article that showed that individuals who received deworming treatments in their childhood do in fact show "meaningful gains" in adult living standards and earnings" (at least in the same population originally treated in Kenya). (Hamory et al 2021)

What is important to take from this story is not that deworming as a major policy innovation rose, fell, and the died in somewhat spectacular manner. In fact, it did not die at all. Millions of dollars are invested in deworming treatments each year, although not nearly at the scale seen a decade ago. Simply put, there is no doubt the "worm wars" produced significant disillusionment that, for a critical period of time, took the proverbial wind out of its policy sails. Today, deworming policies are well into the slope of enlightenment and perhaps even plateau of productivity, in the sense of the widespread mainstreaming of deworming treatments in global health interventions. The Achilles Heel was the inflated expectations surrounding the policy implications of the original breakthrough study and the surprisingly absence early on of other studies, pilot programs, and evaluations that would have tested the assumptions and implicit claims of the underlying theory of change. The fact that it took ten years for the central claims of the economic study to be questioned so seriously – and by epidemiologists, no less – is indicative of the kind of irrational exuberance that can emerge in response to promising policy innovations.

This irrational exuberance, ironically, comes from good intentions. There is a voracious appetite in global development for low-cost, scalable, quick technical fixes to complex problems. Everyone wants to solve world poverty, hunger, illness and violence *now*. But the danger is that this appetite leads us into moments of wishful thinking and naïveté. We fail to critically question of new policy ideas, forego iterative trial and error, and neglect the patience and tolerance needed to learn from failure. The resulting hype cycles we observe create significant risks of overinvestments in underbaked policies, the abandonment of arguably good policies once implementation (inevitably) proves more difficult than expected, and the burning of hard-won political and social capital.

II. The International Aid Transparency Movement's Hype Cycle[7]

Since the first high level forum on aid effectiveness in Paris in 2003, there has been a proliferation of declarations, initiatives, commitments, laws and startup networks and organizations dedicated

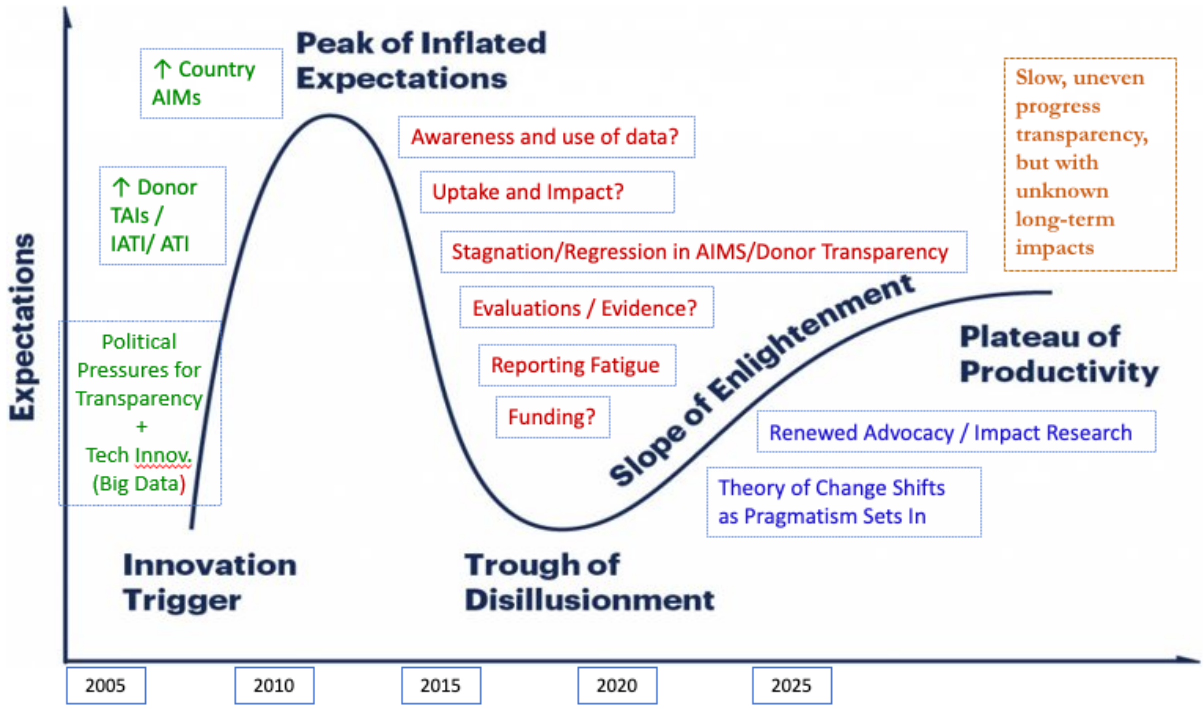
[7] A more detailed account of the emergence of the international aid transparency movement and its theory of change is provided in Ch.2 of my forthcoming book.

to prying open the spigot of information on donor agencies' own projects, programs and spending. The presumed benefits of such open aid data include the centralization of information for better donor coordination, better development planning and management, and the empowerment of aid stakeholders to push for greater voice and feedback. Transparency, its advocates argue, helps to makes aid more accountable and more effective.

I roughly place the emergence and rise of the international aid transparency movement between 2003-2011 (see Figure 2). This is a period between the first and fourth High Level Forums (HLF) for International Aid Effectiveness, during which numerous initiatives and organizations were established with a focus on transparency and accountability in international development, foremost the International Aid Transparency Initiative and the aid transparency watchdog Publish What You Fund (both established in 2008). At the fourth HLF in Busan, South Korea in November 2011, most major bilateral countries and multilateral agencies – including many from the global south – committed themselves to reporting their aid information to a common standard,[8] and become signatories to the International Aid Transparency Initiative. At the national level in developing countries, numerous countries promised to adhere to principles around open data systems and initiated efforts to improve government oversight and management of external finance, foremost aid. By 2010, more than 50 recipient countries had established Aid Information Management Systems (AIMS) to collect and analyze data on aid flows (Mulley 2010: 22). It was not uncommon for interviewees to declare "the transparency revolution is finally here."

[8] This 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).

Figure 2: The International Aid Transparency Hype Cycle



Phase 1: The Innovation Trigger

Interviews with key actors in donor agencies and transparency advocacy groups provide a clear picture of three major events or factors that led to aid transparency's "innovation trigger" (in hype cycle parlance), critical juncture (in historical institutionalist language) or policy window (in American political development language, ala Kingdon 1984). This juncture is rooted in a convergence of factors that empowered transparency advocates to propel the policy agenda onto the global stage.

Timeline of Aid Transparency

1961
- OECD Development Assistance Committee

2000
- Millennium Development Goals
- Development Initiatives

2002
- Monterrey Consensus
- EITI

2004
- Development Gateway
- AiDA
- PLAID

2005
- Paris Declaration
- International Budget Partnership

2007
- AidInfo

2008
- Accra Accords
- International Aid Transparency Initiative

2009
- Open Government Partnership
- AiDA + PLAID = AidData
- World Bank Mapping for Results
- Publish What You Fund

2011
- Busan High Level Forum
- First ATI Published
- Open Aid Partnership
- Open Contracting Partnership

2013
- G8 Open Data Charter (Lough Erne Declaration)

2014
- UK DFID DevTracker
- SDC Open Aid Platform
- US Foreign Assistance Dashboard

2015/2016
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030)
- UN Data Revolution

The first is a global norm shift after the end of the Cold War that centered development attention on the goals of good governance, anticorruption and human rights in the 1990s. This "transparency turn" (Hood 2006; Florini 2007; Peters 2015) emboldened critics of international financial institutions, who were quick to point out the hypocrisy the IFIs who consistently demanded more transparency and public accountability in borrower countries while refusing to embrace and practice these principles themselves (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Weaver 2008; Ball 2009: 298; Florini 2002 and 2007; Blanton 2007; Darch and Underwood 2010; Gaventa and Barrett 2010; McGee and Gaventa 2011). This pressure led to significant internal shift in IFIs from highly restrictive information disclosure policies to more liberal access to information policies that treated informed as disclosed by default unless it was on a prespecified list of exempted materials (Weaver and Peratsakis 2014).

This significant change in Access to Information policies was also a reaction to a wave of countries adopting freedom of information acts (Bellver and Kaufman 2005; Florini 2007; Ball 2009; Calland and Bentley 2013). As of February 2014, the Open Society Justice Initiative documented 107 countries with Access to Information or FOIA provisions in their national or federal laws and actionable decrees (Open Society Justice Initiative 2014; see also Kosack and Fung 2014, Open Society Foundation 2012). Of these countries, only 14 had enacted such legislation prior to 1990. Similar transparency legislation started to appear in many areas of global governance, including international conventions focused on promoting financial transparency and anticorruption, such as the OECD's Anti-Bribery Convention (1996) and the UN Convention Against Corruption (2003). (Bellver and Kaufman 2005, 4-5)

A second factor is the emergence of the "big data revolution" and accompanying innovations in information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) that helped to spur the UN Data Revolution (UN 2014). In brief, this was a period in which it became dramatically easier, faster, and less expensive to collect and share vast amounts of data, ranging from rural health data collected on smart phones to climate data collected from remote satellites. Within the realm of development finance, technologies innovations in open-source data dashboards and the increasing use of ArcGIS and other geospatial methods contributed to efforts to collect and use subnational data on aid in countries, promising to shift aid allocation and coordination process away from the painful slog through dense spreadsheets to interactive, visualized platforms where key decision-makers could "see where the aid was in the countries." (Weaver *et al* 2014). This technological opening coincided with 2000 Millennium Development Goal of improved donor coordination, harmonization and results-based management (and late Goal 17 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals). The net result of these forums was a strong convergence of pressure on existing reporting systems to also include more comprehensive, detailed, accessible and comparable information on aid activities and results, and to make the data publicly accessible.

A third factor contributing to aid transparency's "innovation trigger" was the increasing density of similar transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) that overlapped or were adjacent to the international development aid regime complex. This included the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (established in 2002), the Open Government Partnership (2011), Open Budget Index (2006), International Budget Partnership (2007), Global Initiative on Fiscal Transparency (2011); and Open Contracting Partnership (2012). Altogether (along with the International Aid Transparency), this regime complex of TAIs has been supported by a vast array of governmental and non-governmental organizations, with the significant participation and support of donor organizations themselves. This collectively comprised an exhaustive epistemic community of scholars, practitioners and activists. These overlapping networks supported a flurry of linked workshops, conferences (such as the annual International Open Data Conference), and research programs. Much of this work was supported by grant programs such as the "Making All

Voices Count Grand Challenge for Development," co-funded by the UK DFID, USAID, the Swedish Government, Open Society Foundation and the Omidyar Network, as well as funding from foundations such as Hewlett and Gates. Altogether, the regime complex was known as the "Open Data for Development" (OD4D) movement.

Phase 2: Climbing to the Peak of Inflated Expectations

Fundamentally, aid transparency was propelled into the policy cycle by a set of factors that framed transparency not simply as a "good policy idea" but as a moral and political imperative for the global aid industry. Transparency was not simply seen as a necessary tool for achieving better coordination, effectiveness and accountability in aid. Transparency was also seen, especially by beleaguered donor agencies, as palliative for the crises of legitimacy in IFIs in general (Buchanan and Keohane 2011: 426; Moschella and Weaver 2014; Tallberg 2014).

Central to understanding how aid transparency climbed to a "peak of inflated expectations" is the overarching theory of change pushed aggressively by transparency advocates. As Kingdon (1984) argues in his classic work on agenda and policy cycles, policy entrepreneurs act strategically to identify policy windows: moments when political, economic, social and technical factors converge to make a preferred policy resonate with important audiences. These policy entrepreneurs, much like norm entrepreneurs in transnational advocacy networks, keenly understand the political landscape in which they are working: they know which problem framings will resonate with key stakeholders and how the proffered solution – aid transparency policies – can be articulated to fit within the prevailing worldviews and organizational cultures of targeted actors (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1999).

Indeed, early transparency advocates, quite consciously constructed and promoted a set of ambitious claims about transparency's benefits; even going so far as to explicitly call it a theory of change (see e.g., AidInfo 2009; see also Collin et al 2009; Moon and Williamson 2010; Mulley 2010; PWYF 2009). In general, this theory asserted that improved transparency in aid would: (1) improve coordination between donors and increase aid predictability; (2) limit corruption and waste and strength government accountability, (3) improve service delivery by empowering citizens with information so that they provide input and feedback on aid programs, and (4) enhance borrower government's ownership of development strategies and enhance oversight over international donors in country. Ultimately, publishing aid data would lead to a virtuous cycle. It would reinforce donors' own support for timely and high-quality data production, particularly as donors began to use published data for internal purposes under the principle of "publish once, use often" (what leading advocate Owen Barder also described as "eating their own dog food"). The digitization, standardization and centralization of information in open data platforms would also reduce administrative costs and enhance results-based monitoring, evaluation and learning. Implicit in this long list of expected effects was the direct link between transparency and accountability, an assumption the rested on the expectation that governments, citizens and donors would proactively use the data to keep tabs on aid in countries and blow the whistle if aid went astray. In the words of Aleem Walji, then Director of the Innovation Lab at the World Bank, "Open Data is Yelp for Development!"

In sum, the espoused theory of change presented an exhilarating picture of what could transpire if only donors and national governments focused on improving aid transparency. Transparency was a means to many ends. That said, advocates acknowledged that "getting to open" would not be easy, mainly due to political resistance in donor agencies. But the overarching ideal of transparency had irresistible appeal at a time when such a solution was so sorely needed. And who could actually argue *against* the idea of transparency at this time? So, by 2013, it was no surprise when *The Economist* published an op-ed proclaiming that the "open data movement has finally come of age."

Phase 3: The Fall into the Trough of Disillusionment and the Slope of Enlightenment (2011-)

The fall into the trough of disillusionment and the subsequence slope of enlightenment capture the period roughly between 2013-2021. This might be summed up as time in which the core assumptions of the transparency theory of change were put to the test, as the honeymoon ended and the "real" work of transparency implementation began (interviews). In brief, this period is defined by the work around two goals the needed to be achieved relatively quickly in order to sustain the initial hype. The first goal relates to the *supply* of aid transparency itself, and the challenging process of convincing recalcitrant donor agencies that they needed to make data on their activities and spending publicly accessible in timely, standardized, and open formats. Accordingly, much of the early work focused on this supply-end: engaging in tough political pressure campaigns to extract promises from agency leaders and the frontline work of developing operational systems within agencies that could deliver on a long list of transparency requirements, as outlined in the International Aid Transparency Standard and monitoring by Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index (Honig and Weaver 2019). Agencies in general were initially skeptical: after all, greater transparency threatened to increase the kind of exposure and resulting criticism that had led to their perceived crisis of legitimacy, relevance and effectiveness (AidInfo 2009: 4). At the same time, these donors faced a Catch-22. Failing to become more transparency also threatened their legitimacy, which many now saw as a "an essential quality for every modern organization" (interviews).

The second goal related to the expected impacts of aid transparency. Here is where the "design-reality gap" quickly became apparent, particularly with respect to the top-down technical nature in which the task of building open data platforms was approached. Critically, the biggest lesson learned during this time was the expectations regarding the demand for such data – and ensuing use – were grossly overestimated. As Sarah Mulley aptly predicted in 2010, "the 'supply' side of the transparency and accountability debate in aid [was] moving ahead of the 'demand' side – more progress has been made on transparency and accountability of than transparency and accountability to." (Mulley 2010: 5). Moreover, like many development innovations, the movement originated in the global north. "… At the moment [in 2010], the political and campaigning energy behind the aid transparency and accountability movement is mostly northern" (Mulley 2010: 6). Early work focused on simply publishing whatever data was readily available, often with the intent of increasing access for principals and taxpaying citizens in donor counties. This data was often highly aggregated and backwards looking (e.g. past, rather than current, committed or disbursed funds). It was thus not very useful for purposes of management and planning. As evident in the regular Aid Transparency Index reports, donors faced myriad challenges in developing effective data reporting systems, implementing new data standards, and convincing organizational staff to collect and report data. This proved a task much greater than a technical challenge. It involved a significant shift in the organizational habits and cultures of donor headquarter agencies, and of course money and human resources that were neglected by the agencies' principals who pushed transparency largely as an unfunded mandate.

The more fundamental problem, however, was achieving the successful implementation of aid transparency programs on the ground in aid-recipient countries. This implementation not only included the construction of national aid information managements systems but also the reorientation of many donor mission offices around data transparency. In brief, the experience on the ground quickly revealed systemic weaknesses in the aid transparency's theory of change.[9] Amongst the many challenges to implementing the transparency agenda were the vast constraints with respect to technical and statistical capacities in developing countries, as well as infrastructural barriers such as low bandwidth and the need to convert analog data into digital form. Even more problematic was the lack of trust in aid data (and government data in general) and the lack of standard operating procedures, incentives and habits to *use* the data that was becoming more available. Aid data also largely siloed in national accounting systems, making it difficult for key policy makers and other stakeholders to merge the data alongside budget, debt, procurement and other information needed for development work. Data collection and reporting became compliance exercises and a burden for under-staffed and under-trained government agencies.

In all, optimistic expectations that "if we build, they will come" (Heller n.d.) clashed with the hard reality that the burgeoning supply of aid data was not met with high demand and use, much less the effects further down the causal chain such as citizen empowerment, accountability and aid effectiveness. As Custer and Sethi argue (2017: 3): "producers and funders of development data are often limited to constructing vague, and arguably naïve, archetypes of their ideal users…(1) the superbureaucrat who has the time, ability, and incentive to make evidence-informed decisions and (2) the supercitizen who uses data to hold service providers accountable for service delivery. One might also add a third generic archetype to this list, the superjournalist, who has a ready grasp of data and statistics to weave into their news articles to inform and provoke action for sustainable development." (Custer and Sethi 2017: 3)

[9] A detailed analysis of this period is provided in Ch.4-6 of my forthcoming book.

Within ten years of transparency's dramatic breakthrough and rise in the international development aid regime complex, many central players candidly confessed that they had reached a hard reflection point. While significant progress had been made in donor aid reporting, the large expectations of the aid transparency theory of change were unrealized. As a result, date reporting fatigue set in, cynicism grew, and external funders started to move on to new initiatives. In 2016, Simon Rupert (then CEO of Publish What You Fund) wrote a blog in which he explicitly invoked the language of hype cycles. He declared that the aid transparency had hit the bottom of the trough of disillusionment and was now on the "slope of enlightenment." Notably, he acknowledged the temptation of transparency's advocates to be defensive:

It is easy to respond: "We never said transparency would cure everything," That is true, but misses the point. The slow uptake of data published to IATI and other open data initiatives IS disappointing. We know of a few countries that are importing IATI data into their systems (including Bangladesh, Burkino Faso and Myanmar) but have little idea how they are using it. (Rupert 2016).

Thus, the techno-optimism that had fueled the irrational exuberance in the previous decade had by this time given way to realism. The work of transparency from here on out would be done largely out of limelight, with fewer resources and with a smaller cadre of dedicated proponents. In one positive spit, a key informant interviewee remarks: "The nice thing about hitting bottom, is that there is only one way to go: up."

III. Why Did Aid Transparency Fall Victim to a Hype Cycle?

Why and how the aid transparency movement fall into a hype cycle? I identify here three key factors that appear to drive the irrational exuberance that fueled the hype cycle: (1) policy windows that created a sense of a time-sensitive imperative for policy entrepreneurs and incentives to convey excessive optimism about uptake; (2) overstatements of expected impact and the timeline in which we would see results; and (3) the understatement of challenges or risks of new policies.

The irrational exuberance and resulting inflated expectations in the early stages of the aid transparency movement are all the more intriguing given that there were plenty of forewarnings about the hype around transparency and accountability initiatives (Heald 2006; Hood 2010;

Gaventa and McGee 2013). Many well-known development scholars had already questioned the assumed link between transparency, citizen empowerment, and accountability. They noted that "information by itself is not power" (Florini 2007) and "the volume of information will likely be too great for most citizens to deal with or too complex for anyone other than experts to interpret (Fluck 2015; see also Fung, Graham, and Well, 2008; Fung 2013). Others warned that information, as a form of power, is not always the great equalizer: "transparency mobilizes the power of shame, yet the shameless may not be vulnerable to public exposure" (Fox 2007: 663). Similarly, I found a plethora of published works in journal, think tank paper series and speeches that highlighted transparency's potential costs, including a reduction of candor (Pat 2005; O'Neill 2002 and 2006) and risks to confidentiality and data privacy (Oneill 2006; Heald 2006: 68-71). Open data, if not provided in forms that were easily accessed and consumed by non-experts, could actually backfire, in the sense of exacerbating digital divides where open aid data systems would empower elites with the know-how to navigate such systems while remaining impenetrable to the average person (Verhulst 2016, Mcgee and Edwards 2016). In sum, this substantial literature argued that "…a more realistic approach to transparency and accountability would represent an important step forward and a correct to current debates that tend to exaggerate the potential of data, information and ICTs as a magic bullet to improve accountability relationships, and, ultimately, development outcomes" (Bergh, Forest, Menocal and Wild 2012). All of these warnings proved prescient with respect to what I heard from dozens of transparency proponents in the years to follow.

So why was there so much irrational exuberance that propelled the aid transparency movement into a hype cycle? Here, I offer three key take-aways from my inductive empirical research that links irrational exuberance to resource dependencies in the large authorizing and task environment of the international development regime complex, the cultures of aid organizations, and broader norms in the international development regime.

Resource Dependencies. First, irrational exuberance – in this case the excessive optimism embedded in the aid transparency movement - stems from the nature of the "marketplace of ideas" in international development. This marketplace creates strong incentives for policy entrepreneurs to deploy advocacy tactics that will be most effective in garnering needed political and financial support. As Dan Drezner argues, ""for good and ill, the modern marketplace of ideas strongly resembles modern financial markets. Usually, the system works. On occasion, however, there can be asset bubbles"(Drezner: 197). Many of aid transparency's champions are positioned in INGOs and think thanks, and they constantly have to find funding to support their work. Much of this funding, in turn, comes from major international foundations who most often work on specific strategies, structured around five-year time horizons. As Cooley and Ron (2002:6) argue, the behavior we thus from non-governmental actors is a rational response to institutional pressure. Because foundations will often pursue a "strategy refresh" after a relatively short period of time (Aston, Guerzovich and Wadeson 2021; interviews), NGOs continuously suffer from "contract fever" - the proverbial chasing after the newest and greatest ideas to attract funding, with little incentive to be candid about the risks of such new ideas (Cooley and Ron 2002: 38).

The consequences of upfront irrational exuberance and inflated expectations are quite predictable: when policy ideas do not fully come to fruition, support wanes. This is certainly true for aid transparency movement, which relied heavily on funds from institutions such as the Open Society Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and Gates Foundation. Foundational support is also based very much on personal relationships, and subject to volatility as program officers transition in and out. If a desk officer who championed transparency leaves one foundation (as is common given norms of rotation in the philanthropy sector), grantees must cultivate relationships with new desk officers or find other sources of funding (interviews). Foundation support also easily wanes in absence of quick, positive evidence. In the case of aid transparency, there was also little money and time for careful impact evaluation work. As one foundation desk officer said to me, "The glory is in getting our brand attached to the original idea that everyone is excited about," and on the other end, avoiding association with policy failures (foundation officer, September 2016). There was little money early on to conduct rigorous impact evaluations, and the few evaluations that were conducted early on had null results. By 2015 it was clear that the relative absence of evidence of impact constituted an "existential threat to the movement" (interviews).

Overall, one key take-away from my participant and non-participation observation over 13 years is that there is little appetite in the international development regime for the hard slog of implementation, scaling up, evaluation, and iterative learning. Thus, as Swidler and Watkins (2017: 1998-99) eloquently argue:

...altruists are caught between their idealistic aspirations and the limited, uneven, and sometimes disappointing results of their work. Experienced development professionals working for globe-spanning aid organizations know these problems, but to sell their organizations' programs to ultimate funders—idealistic voters and generous individuals in the West—they have to promise not modest, uncertain progress, but transformative change. The challenges of trying to help thus result not only from the inherent difficulties of the task, but also from the need to move distant publics, whose hearts are touched by distant suffering. Thus, practical difficulties on the ground are compounded by the need to pitch unrealistic goals with soaring rhetoric.

Thus, the donor-driven nature of much of development advocacy work has a distinct effect on policy life cycles. Ben Ramalingam, a well-known development scholar, echoes this very point about funding imperatives, irrational exuberance and development hype cycles:

...innovations may well be oversold as the answer to development problem, without enough emphasis on the importance of failure. The potential payoffs of innovation are considerable, but so are the costs and the risks. In a time when development leaders are demanding more private sector know-how and approaches, it is remarkable that our approach to innovation is still so steeped in development grant giving protocols. (Ramalingem 2015).[10]

Organizational Cultures. Another key factor shaping irrational exuberance and its consequences is the implicit pressure to frame transparency policies in ways that "fit" with the organizational cultures of targeted actors, in this case donor agencies. In particular, there is one dimension of organizational culture that stands out with respect to the rajectory of the aid transparency movement: the deference to economic theories and ways of seeing the world that shape how organizations, which tend to be majority occupied by economists, accept or reject new policy ideas. In the case of aid transparency, the framing of transparency as an economic imperative was a conscious choice over alternative frames, such as transparency as a basic right to information or as a human right (Birkinshaw 2006; Klaaren 2013). In the alternative "rights" framing, transparency is an end itself. But in an economics framework, transparency is a *means* to end.

[10] Owen Barder, one of aid transparency's biggest champions, also recognized this external pressure in 2015, arguing: "we want to see faster progress, both because we want better outcomes and because we worry that, unless the movement gets some demonstrable results soon, transparency fatigue will set in and we will lose momentum." (Barder 2015: 2)

Therefore, it must have instrumental effects that are observable, measurable, and meaningful for economic development in order to justify large-scale investments.

The result of this framing is seen in the promoted theory of change around transparency, which was constructed to be less about politics and much more about reducing information asymmetries to achieve efficiencies through market-like governance. As Etzioni (2010: 390) argues, transparency policy is much more palatable to economists when it is envisioned as voluntary disclosure by actors. When approached in this way, transparency becomes "more powerful than regulation." Invoking familiar economic theories of principal-agent problems, transparency policies also become tools of citizen watchdogs and whistleblowers (Florini 2007), which are also significantly less costly that direct government oversight and enforcement (Heald 2006; Breton et al 2016). Such pro-market sentiment is strongly echoes in the World Bank's 2016 report, *Making Politics Work for Development: Harnessing Transparency and Citizen Engagement.* This report defined transparency as the means of "getting the incentives right to address government failure and corruption through transparency and citizen engagement" (executive summary).

Such framing, according to numerous interviewees, was critical in mobilizing internal support in donor aid agencies. This was especially true for agencies (such as the World Bank) that have apolitical mandates and have remained reluctant to adopt any rationale for development policies that is embedded in the language of democratization or human rights. Of course, "in the push for open data, there is [also] a risk of failing to 'think politically' – to recognize that governance institutions are shaped by power relationships, culture, interests and incentives, not just laws, processes and institutional forms." (Carolan 2016:20). But as an advocacy tactic, the economics framing was widely seen as critical for obtaining political buy-in.

Complexity Avoidance. The final factor driving irrational exuberance and hype cycles in the international aid transparency movement is one that is significantly more difficult to articulate in concrete terms, but pervasive in the hundreds of interviews I conducted for this study. In very simple terms, this factor embodies the overwhelming tendency to pursue development solutions as quick technical fixes, created by northern experts on behalf of the global south. This is often driven by a sense of urgency take advantage of new and exciting technical innovations, partially explained by the resource dependencies discussed above, as well as an enduring sense of *moral* urgency to end human suffering that is at the very heart of the development industry. And perhaps more importantly, transparency was seen as an almost foolproof idea: even if it took longer than expected to get donors to open up, to create data dashboards and train people to access and use the data, transparency's benefits would be realized.

In the case of the aid transparency movement, as discussed previously, this faith in technical solutions manifested in an over-focus on the supply end of aid transparency and the naïve belief that "if we build it, they will come." The immense challenges to generating demand and use around newly available data - the actual behavior needed to realize transparency's theory of change – were not fully anticipated or considered when designing specific transparency policies and programs. In particular, as the experience of transparency initiatives on the ground in developing countries revealed, there soon proved to be numerous obstacles to building awareness, access, trust and use of data. Data demand and uptake are not foregone conclusions. In fact, the very low level of data use was a surprise to many, especially in the context of what appeared to be so much initial excitement about aid transparency. After all, who was going to say transparency was a *bad* idea?

Growing awareness of this dilemma led many transparency policy advocates to assume the problem was technical capacity. Therefore, all that was need was to build the right infrastructures and the technical know-how to access and use the data, which often resided in dashboards and databases that were difficult for non-experts to navigate and often crashed due to lack of reliable servers or low internet bandwidth. Yet numerous efforts to build such infrastructure and provide training to increase both awareness and use failed to produce the engagement expected. The experiences here exposed deeper underlying challenges around trust in the data, habits around data use, and most critically society's appetite to use such data for accountability purpose. The overall conclusion was that political demand and data cultures needed to be cultivated first, prior to investing time and money into extensive transparency campaigns. But that certainly was not going to be a quick, technical fix.

IV. Conclusion: The Consequences of Hype Cycles

> *In today's world, new fads burst on the scene every fifteen minutes, the speed of life seems to accelerate in measure with ever greater development challenges from climate change to poverty eradication. Will these fads come to the rescue when dealing with complex problems?*
> ~ Caroline Heider, World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (2013)

A reasonable question at this point may be: why such a hype about hype cycles? In other words, what are the possible consequences of hype cycles in international development aid? Ultimately, I believe that Haley Swedlund, in her brilliant book *The Development Dance*, sums it up best: "...development aid is continuously reinventing itself, claiming to have finally found the next big idea that is going to make aid more effective. This relentless innovation—what some call aid fads or fashions—leads to rapid paradigm shifts in development cooperation that are difficult, if not impossible, for development practitioners to keep up with" (Swedlund 2017: 3).

One might easily believe that hype cycles in development are good. After all, hype cycles might quickly weed out bad, infeasible ideas. They might even save money in the long term, protecting scarce development funds for more "proven policies." The danger with this thinking is that it ignores how policy hype cycles deter pragmatism, reflection and learning. Hype cycles do not allow for enough time and attention to sort out the bad from the good ideas. In this way, they may actually stunt innovations. And in doing so, they reify perverse incentives structures and engender a kind of pathological attention deficit disorder that undermines the inherently complex work of global development.

Sadly, it is not clear what can be done about hype cycles and the constant flow of fads, fashions and silver bullets they produce. But a first step may be to simply acknowledge and try to understand the phenomenon of policy hype cycles in international development. And that is my goal here: to explain not only the factors that put the international aid transparency movement on the trajectory of a policy hype cycle, but also the consequences of such hype cycle dynamics for the movement's ability to fully institutionalize transparency principles in the policies and practices of the international development aid regime complex.[11] In doing so, I hope that I am laying important groupwork for future research to exploring the concept of policy hype cycles not only in development, but other regime spaces. If anything, perhaps we can get a bit closer to understanding the often volatile the ebb and flow of ideas in global governance policy processes. And, if we're lucky, maybe we'll learn to reign in our irrational exuberance and cultivate the patient and pragmatic approach to innovations that are sorely needed for global development today.

Note: This is obviously a very rough draft, with an extremely lame and incomplete conclusion. Sorry. I warmly welcome questions, comments and nasty remarks.

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[11] Of course, this is an inductive study built on one case. To really probe the concept of policy hype cycles and their influence on the life cycle of ideas in development would require many more case studies. Future research will need to sort out what empirically distinguished a policy hype cycle from what may be considered a more normal policy life cycle. And the underlying drivers and consequences are likely to be different across policy issue areas and regime complexes. However, the broader significance of this inquiry, I hope, will not be lost on anyone who is struggling to understand the bewildering presence of policy idea hype cycles more generally in global governance.

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