

# Some Thoughts on Country Platforms

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*This note was prepared for a workshop held by the G20 International Financial Architecture Working Group in February 2019 entitled “Building Country Platforms.” The current chair of the G20, Italy, and the upcoming chair of the G7, the United Kingdom, are taking stock of the progress made in the last several years on country platforms. We thought it might be useful to put this note in the public domain.*

“A partnership platform is an ongoing mechanism to catalyse collaboration for development in a systematic way. Platforms undertake activities to convene and align government, business, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), donors and other development actors around a particular issue or geography, facilitate innovative collaborative approaches and directly broker and support new partnering action.”

—[World Vision and The Partnering Initiative, Delivering on the Promise, 2016](#)

The recommendation of the Eminent Persons Group to “build effective country platforms to mobilize all development partners to unlock investments, and maximize their contributions as a group, including by convergence around core standards”<sup>1</sup> evokes a mixed reaction: enthusiasm for deepening development collaboration, especially as the number of players is increasing; and a cynicism that the development community has been down this road before, with a smaller number of more homogeneous players, with at best mixed results – will this renewed push have impact or just build more bureaucracy? Enthusiasts are convinced this time will be different; cynics wonder why this time will be different.

Here are five questions that the G20 IFA Working Group might want to answer if it is to harness the energy of the enthusiasts and quell the skepticism of the cynics:

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE COUNTRY PLATFORM?

Using the definition given at the outset as a starting point, the pilot platforms will convene, align, facilitate, broker, and support, but to what end? Is it advancement of the broad development agenda of a country? Or a sector? Or a set of projects? Or promotion of an enabling investment climate? Or

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<sup>1</sup> “Making the Global Financial System Work for All”, October 2018.

even encouraging cross-country collaboration on regional public goods? A clear definition of purpose is critical for determining the participants, time frame, needed administrative support, and, most importantly, cost both in money and time. A wider scope will require more of all these ingredients and perhaps diminish the possibility of success.

## HOW WILL WE GAUGE SUCCESS?

While measuring the counterfactual to a pilot country platform will always be difficult, some benchmarks, linked to the stated purpose, should be set for each pilot, beyond the number of meetings and the other trappings of collaboration. What is going to be different: Financing mobilized? Reduced duplication of effort? Information shared? Bottlenecks cleared, or regulatory frameworks implemented? Markets made? Innovative activity observed? Consider another recent G20 effort—the Compact with Africa, which is a country platform aimed at mobilizing private sector involvement in a handful of African countries—does the IFA Working Group know if it has been successful? By what measure?

## WHAT SHOULD THE G20 MAKE OF COUNTRY OWNERSHIP?

It is instinctual to underscore the need for country ownership for a successful country platform, but what implications does ownership have for pilot country choice and platform design? Countries likely to show success are those with strong leadership and plans in place. If the country has a well-articulated strategy, a country platform could conserve on scarce government capacity and bandwidth by consolidating negotiations with donors, mobilizing needed technical assistance, and setting a path for consensus for regulatory reform. And it could establish and monitor in-country the core standards for donor behavior, as the EPG report emphasizes.

In fragile states with relatively weak country leadership and institutions, country platforms are likely to look quite different. Donors will have a comparative advantage in helping country leadership set strategic directions and coordinating donor actions. There may be a better case for one donor to co-lead the platform with the government. And it is likely that platforms will be long in the making, not very steady, more donor-driven, and have less chance of enduring over time and across sectors. But if they succeed, they could be transformative. Ownership will be a result, not a predicate of the country platform. This is neither inherently good nor bad, but it should be acknowledged up front.

In which kind of countries does the G20 want to marshal its resources in encouraging country platforms?

## HOW CAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR BE INCLUDED?

The definition at the outset is notably anachronistic in its omission of the private sector as a player in country platforms. Including private sector actors is likely to change the nature of collaboration. While objectives may be shared (e.g., build a public transit system), incentives for adhering to stated standards of transparency and information sharing can be different. Private sector operators, both international and local, will need to see that platform-based opportunities, with the constraints on competitive behavior that they may bring, will yield more positive commercial results than working

to second-guess or circumvent the platform. That could be a tall order in countries where lack of regulation and/or corruption already incites non-transparent behavior. Or the platform could be purposed to agree on what regulatory and administrative changes need to be put in place to provide incentives for private initiatives to flourish. The Partnering Initiative emphasizes that an iterative process of evolving regulation and “rules of the game” will be needed to align public and private sector incentives.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE G20 IN THIS PROCESS?

The success of in-field cooperation between development actors can be highly dependent on the individuals involved, despite institutional mandates for such cooperation. And in an era when there is less agreement among development partners about shared in-country objectives, the perceived benefits to collaborations are less likely to outweigh the costs. It is yet even harder to imagine that shareholder insistence that MDB management encourage the use of country platforms will force a noticeable change in actual behavior on the ground, especially if bilateral interests are at odds. So, what can the G20 do? Putting the weight of the G20 behind a few pilots could be effective in demonstrating how country platforms could work, but the pilots will require willing developing country authorities, a principal external partner with enough resources to get the pilot up and running, and the cooperation of all relevant development partners on the ground, G20 members or not. And the results will be evident only after numerous years, as evidenced by the Partnership with Africa. Another fruitful contribution for the G20 might be to focus on prioritizing the discussion and monitoring of the core standards of donor cooperation espoused by the EPG—what is already in place among the MDBs, what needs to be done and in what order, what bilateral partners are participating and how.

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<sup>2</sup> See “Platforms for Partnership: Emerging Good Practice to Systematically Engage Business as a Partner in Development”, Partnering Initiatives, 2014.



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