

Governance for development in Africa: building on what works

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Should the governance of poor developing countries mimic what works in advanced capitalist democracies? Of course not. Yet for 20 years ‘good governance’ has meant exactly that. Millions of dollars have been spent on programmes to make private enterprise work in Africa as it does in the US, elections work as they do in Sweden, audit authorities as in Germany and civil society campaigns as in the Netherlands – with results that have been mixed at best.

Challenging assumptions

In its present form, ‘good governance’ is not evidence-based. Despite growing awareness of this problem, programmes to improve governance continue to reflect what ministers and parliaments in donor countries will support, rather than a relevant body of knowledge and experience. Inspired by general notions of what is right grounded in liberal-democratic ideology, they pay insufficient attention to context, timescales and trade-offs.

The Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) is working to change all that. It is building a solid evidence base about what works in context in Africa and what doesn’t. In the process, it is challenging assumptions that influence leaders and intellectuals in Africa as well as campaigning and assistance organisations in the North. It is doing so in four areas:

- the implications of a ‘best fit’ approach to governance for development
- the relations between elections, empowerment and public policies
- development leadership and types of regimes
- what is really needed to improve the effectiveness of aid.



*Father and son at pro-government demonstration, Ethiopia, May 2008.
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From ‘best practice’ to ‘best fit’

Some of the sharpest minds in development policy agree that the ‘universal best practice’ approach to governance for development is bankrupt.² There are no institutional templates that are valid everywhere and for all stages in a country’s development.

The right approach to governance for development is ‘best fit’, not ‘best practice’. And that implies being prepared to question the ideological forces, vested interests and political pressures that promote institutional mimicry at global and country levels.

But what is really implied by ‘best fit’? According to APPP research, it implies:

- a real commitment to ‘working with the grain’, meaning building on existing institutional arrangements that have recognisable benefits
- a shift from direct support to facilitating local problem-solving.

Working with the grain

If there is a genuinely universal truth about institutions for development, it is that institutional innovations work when they build constructively on what already

exists. Pre-existing institutions need to be treated as a potential resource for reforms that improve development outcomes, not swept aside regardless of their ability to contribute. In APPP, we have expressed this as ‘working with the grain’ of the host society.

APPP research into the provision of public goods at local level is clear about what this means. The findings confirm the theory:

- good institutions solve the collective action problems actually posed in particular contexts – so approaches that are imported from a generic concept of good practice are unlikely to work unless there is a serious effort to adapt them to local circumstances³
- as a rule, arrangements that work borrow institutional understandings from local society – they are practical hybrids, marrying up modern professional standards or scientific principles (e.g. about what constitutes good health care) with the moral economy and previous practices of the area.

Enabling local problem-solving

This has a clear implication for donor-financed and NGO-delivered support to self-help at the local level. Direct funding of groups and organisations inevitably means specifying institutional templates, for control and accountability purposes if nothing else. This can have very negative effects on capacities for genuine self-help. More attention should be given to the enabling environment for initiatives that are both technically sensible and locally anchored.

For the reasons just given, ‘locally anchored’ means being driven by local problem-solving – whether at the community level or within the multi-stakeholder environments that are a feature of much public goods provision in Africa today. And that means making good use of the ‘toolbox’ of local culture, bearing in mind that when it comes to institutional innovation, it is too costly, socially, to invent everything from scratch.⁴ Obviously, the culturally recognised practices that are beneficial and have potential as foundations to be built upon have to be identified on a case-by-case basis. APPP’s research is providing examples of both problem-solving ‘local reforms’ and the construction of practical hybrids.

“ *the ‘universal best practice’ approach to governance for development is bankrupt.* ”

Trade-offs and timescales

Adopting a ‘best fit’ approach also implies relying less on the congenial assumption that all good things go together. There is a widespread assumption that the solution to chronic development problems is more political democracy and greater citizen participation so that governments are more often ‘called to account’. This is an attractive idea, but it is more ideological than evidence-based. APPP is adding to the evidence that, in poor developing countries:

- democracy is a desirable long-term goal but not a reliable route to better public policies in the short and medium term
- citizen pressure is at best a weak factor and at worst a distraction from dealing with the main drivers of bad governance.

Voting and public goods

Democracy is definitely a desirable goal and an effective way of improving public policies in all societies in the long run. However, its effectiveness depends on social and economic conditions that are not yet enjoyed in most developing countries. Competitive elections, checks and balances, and other elements of the typical liberal democratic constitution have undoubted advantages if they can be made to work. However, it is important to be realistic. The evidence is clear that the formal arrangements of liberal democracy have radically different effects in different kinds of social and economic contexts.⁵ Many young democracies are not particularly developmental, and we know from both theory and empirical case-research why this is the case.

In many settings, clientelism (vote-buying in its various forms) is cheaper and more reliable for power-hungry politicians than promises to improve policies and the delivery of public goods. Voters, for their part, have little evidence of politicians’ ability to provide public goods, so they opt for the targeted benefits they believe ‘their’ candidate will channel to them. So it is a mistake to believe that more and cleaner elections are a reliable way to get better public policies and more development. And without development, a genuine democratic deepening will stay off the agenda for years to come.

The mirage of citizen empowerment

The mobilisation of citizens as clients or users of public services is another topic on which more realism is needed. APPP has re-examined the evidence on which this theme in donor programming has been based, particularly since the 2004 *World Development Report* on service delivery. We find that the results to be obtained from client empowerment by promoting information dissemination and transparency have been seriously over-sold on the basis of a partial reading of key bits of evidence.

Theory and empirical studies show that client ‘voice’ is a weak source of results-based accountability unless accompanied by strong top-down pressures of some kind.⁶ Corporate disciplines or other mechanisms for enhancing motivation within the organisations charged with public goods provision are essential ingredients of performance improvement. Wagering on the ‘demand side’ may seem harmless. But doing so can provide an alibi for all those who prefer not to tackle the problems chiefly responsible for the poor quality of public services in Africa. These are problems of leadership.

Refocusing on development leadership

What poor developing countries really need are leaders who, as well as constructing sufficiently inclusive coalitions of support, are able to show that they can ‘get things done’.⁷ Indeed, the demonstration effects produced by leaders who show themselves to be credible providers of public goods are probably a necessary step in building an effective democracy in any developing country. It is important, therefore, that external actors such as donors are capable of:

- recognising developmental leadership when they see it, by becoming more attuned to the variety of types of regimes and how they work
- breaking away from the tendency to assess country policies using the norms applicable to advanced capitalism.

Developmental patrimonialism?

In Africa, the most relevant dimension of variation among regimes is between more and less developmental forms of neopatrimonialism. While most African states are neopatrimonial, meaning they blend modern bureaucratic and more personalistic and clientelistic forms of authority, there are important differences among them. APPP research has identified a sub-type of neopatrimonial regime in which there is centralised management of the main economic ‘rents’ in support of a long-term vision. We are calling this ‘developmental patrimonialism’.

Under such regimes, the ruling elite has the disposition and capacity to use rents productively to enlarge the national economic pie, rather than obtaining the largest slices from it in the short term. Where this happens, key elements of the state technocracy are subjected to corporate disciplines. Anti-corruption efforts are able to become more than a charade. And serious efforts can be made to address the difficult collective action problems that prevent improvements in public-sector performance.

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What works in context

An implication of best fit at the level of regime types is that external actors base their decisions and their policy dialogue on a thorough understanding of the prevailing institutional arrangements. They then lend their support to those aspects of the set-up that work well enough for development, rather than applying prefabricated norms and expectations.

That may mean taking their cues from the country’s citizens, and what *they* find acceptable. APPP research confirms, for example, that less-than-perfect standards of transparency and accountability are often considered acceptable so long as there is peace, development is visible and the distribution of benefits among the various segments of society is perceived as broadly fair.

In assessing government support to private investment, for example, the issue is not whether policies meet the criteria applied to advanced capitalism (level playing-fields, minimal rent-seeking and arm’s length regulation). Those norms are not only hard to achieve: according to APPP research, they have the more serious weakness of failing to address some of the central challenges that poor developing countries face.

More implications for aid

Ahead of the 4th High Level Forum in Busan, Republic of Korea, this year, there is an urgent need for a more realistic approach to the concepts of country ownership and aid alignment which have been central to recent debate about aid and development. APPP research findings are relevant to this too. They suggest:

- linking ‘ownership’ more explicitly to political leadership, and ‘alignment’ to this concept of ownership
- working with parliaments and the public in the North to create the conditions in which more aid can work in a ‘best fit’ way.

Ownership = leadership

Whether development efforts are country-owned or not depends on the orientation of the country’s political leadership – its willingness and ability to articulate a national development vision and

take charge, pulling donor efforts into its orbit. However desirable democratisation and civil society mobilisation may be, they are not relevant criteria of ownership.⁸ So if the idea of 'democratic ownership' is supported in Busan, it will be a step backwards, just increasing the confusion that now surrounds the issue of aid effectiveness.

Related to this, it is time to abandon the polite fiction that the politicians in charge of most poor developing countries are really committed to development. Instead, minds need to be focused on how and in what form developmental leadership might become more common, especially in Africa. That is what aid alignment should be about, not about the technical mechanics of aid delivery.

Can aid transform itself?

Working in a context-sensitive, best-fit way is a challenge for aid agency personnel. On the one hand, they are under pressure to disburse funds and demonstrate results, often with fewer staff. On the other hand, adapting programming to individual country contexts takes time, local knowledge and specialist skills, and it can imply deciding not to spend.

Well-articulated research findings can help here, by elaborating propositions about 'what works' in particular types of context, rejecting the mantra that every situation is unique.⁹ APPP is committed to building theory about relevant differences in actual practice in Africa – careful propositions about how 'best fit' is likely to be achieved.

In the final analysis, however, it is the aid business that has to change to meet the needs of development, not the other way round. Donor and NGO staff cannot effect such a change on their own, although their influence is critical. The challenge is to convince ministers, parliaments and the voting public in the North that development problems are as much about institutional blockages as about funding gaps. This has implications for where and how aid money is best spent.

Aid is needed to help institutions to change, but the diagnostic and design work this entails is intensive in skilled labour. Getting the right skills to the right places is therefore a valid use of development assistance budgets. Dispensing larger and larger amounts of cash in pursuit of 'results' in the context of unresolved institutional problems is, in contrast, wasteful, and can do actual harm.

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1. Director, Africa Power and Politics Programme. This paper draws on research in the Business & Politics, Local Governance and Local Justice research streams of APPP and has benefited considerably from suggestions by the stream coordinators Tim Kelsall, Diana Cammack and Richard Crook, and by Sue Martin. Further details can be found in Richard C. Crook and David Booth (eds.) 'Working with the Grain? Rethinking African Governance', *IDS Bulletin* 42(2), March 2011; and in the numerous Working Papers published on the programme site (www.institutions-africa.org).
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