



Governance for development in Africa: Building on what works

6th April ODI/IDS APPP Seminar Report

In their opening presentation, David Booth, APPP Director, and Richard Crook, Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, began by emphasising the fact that today's discussion, the associated issue of the [IDS Bulletin](#) and the first publication in the new [APPP Policy Brief Series](#) are based upon mid-term findings of Africa Power and Politics Programme research. However, while there is more to come, the goal is to move ahead with the task of pulling out emerging policy messages that go beyond just saying what does not work in development.

The APPP is centred on thinking about and building an evidence base regarding what doesn't work and what might work in improving development outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. The point of departure is that hype among business journalists and others regarding improved private sector dynamism and growth is only part of the story. Growth, which is often confined to particular enclaves, is slower and more inequitable than it could be, and has not necessarily produced the poverty reduction that might have been hoped for. There is a growing consensus around the world that this is due to failures in governance, to which the APPP adds the hypothesis that the immediate problem is in part due to the application of a 'good governance agenda' that is ideological rather than evidence-based.

However, we can do better, because there is an evidence base for more realistic and effective ways to approach institutional change in Africa. It is time to make this count, even in the face of strong ideological currents within both the global community and in Africa specifically that maintain the good governance agenda in its original form. The presentation focused on four topics (roughly corresponding to the sections of [APPP Policy Brief 01, Governance for development in Africa: Building on what works](#)) that delve into how we might do better:

1. **Moving from 'best practice' to 'best fit' in thinking about institutional development is necessary.** The idea of 'working with the grain' that is at the heart of APPP thinking is the contention that to develop effective institutions, it is best to build on what already works. This approach is a corrective to the way in which discussions of institutions in Africa frequently make comparisons to East Asia that just emphasise what Africa doesn't have. In fact, there are plenty of African institutions that do work, though not always in the ways we expect. Rather than applying a generic set of institutions, good institutions are those that solve collective action problems in ways that are trusted and effective at producing what people want. These institutions are generally anchored in local social norms. Thus, in most cases, what work are '**practical hybrids**' that combine modern professional standards with elements of the host society.

2. **A more realistic take on elections and citizen empowerment as means of addressing problems of public goods insufficiency requires us to rely less on the congenial assumption that all good things go together.** Findings to date in the APPP (as well as previous work by the IDS Centre for the Future State) challenge the conventional view on elections, empowerment and provision of public goods. Donor models are generally (and possibly increasingly) premised on belief that serious development problems need more citizen empowerment to hold governments to account. However, this proposition has been adopted not because it is evidence based, but rather because it is a position that is congenial to normative assumptions. Research suggests democracy is a desirable goal in long run, but formally democratic institutions have different effects in different settings and are not a reliable route to improved provision of public goods. Better elections in poorer developing countries get better clientelism and not necessarily better provision of public goods, while citizen pressure (on service providers) is at best a weak factor and at worst a distraction in improving provision.

3. **The leadership factor and the politics thereof are perhaps the biggest influence on the extent to which particular regimes are developmental or not.** Whilst the emphasis of many donors on bottom-up pressure and accountability may appear to address 'governance', such a focus provides an alibi to all those who prefer not to think about the key problem: a lack of developmental leadership. In practice, donors have been far too concerned with stopping African leaders doing bad things and not concerned enough with helping those who want to get things done to get them done. Working with the grain requires us to stop judging regimes by the standards of advanced capitalist countries and instead focus on variation in developmental performance among the different forms of neopatrimonial political regimes that often prevail in the African context. Examples of better performance include contemporary experiences (e.g. Rwanda and Botswana) as well as historical periods in some African countries now thought of as governance failures (e.g. Côte d'Ivoire). Important determinants of this include treatment of economic rents and related differences in bureaucratic cultures.

4. **These findings have important implications for aid effectiveness ahead of the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, Korea later this year.** Specifically, the concept of country ownership is due to be revamped, and it should be tied explicitly to this leadership question rather than to democracy, parliamentary oversight, or civil society participation. The concept of alignment needs to be about helping developmental leadership to emerge, not about technicalities of aid management. This agenda is likely to be challenging for aid organisations, politicians and voting publics in the West, suggesting the need for these actors to be re-educated about development assistance to understand that:
 - a) Development is about intuitional change
 - b) External assistance can help when it helps to get the right skills in place, and
 - c) Chasing results by disbursing larger and larger amounts of aid with less and less human skill/capacity is a bad idea and does real harm

As discussant, **Sam Hickey** suggested that we need to ask two questions of this work:

- 1) Is this interpretation convincing?
- 2) If so, how do we change how we think about and do development?

The answer to the first question must be yes, that the interpretation presented by APPP to date holds in terms of what's going on and why. Even the more controversial assertions that lead us to question beliefs about the importance of citizenship or to accept that some forms of patrimonialism are useful. They are both standing on solid theoretical foundations and adding good advances, such as the conceptual clarity around practical hybrids and the methodological rigour of the programme.

There are nevertheless a few areas in which the research programme could go further, including:

- More differentiation across sectors (e.g. institutions necessary for growth as opposed to those necessary for public services)
- Greater attention to the question of ‘good for whom?’ (e.g. who benefits from particular sets of institutional arrangements)
- Scope for reversing the ordering of political and economic issues (e.g. not only asking what forms of political institutions result in desirable economic outcomes, but also asking what forms of capital accumulation shape politics)

Hickey also suggested a number of areas in which the approach may limit the programme:

- Politics here are interpreted as the organisation of the delivery of public goods and not as struggle. Where are the politics of struggle? Understanding how and why leaders emerge from political struggle can be important in moving beyond technocracy.
- There is room to advance conceptualisations as it is not clear that a focus on institutions takes us far enough. Recent work on the public realm and social contracts may be helpful here.
- Emphasising going with the grain may suggest that Africa should merely settle for second best. There is a need to address the questions of ‘at what point does “good enough” sell Africa short?’ and ‘what about discourses are being used by institutions to gain legitimacy (and states to evolve)?’

With respect to the second question, the answer is undoubtedly complex. Implications for development policy and practice are complicated by the fact that much of this type of work (including APPP, work at IDS, and endless political economy analyses) has been commissioned by donor agencies and yet those agencies are still making many of the same mistakes. What is the gap between research evidence and uptake?

- We can agree on the need to look beyond win-wins and look at trade-offs, for example between poverty reduction tomorrow and inclusive growth and development in the medium term (e.g. moving away from implementation of policies like that of universal primary education in Uganda, which looked good on the MDG tables, but was in practice horrible for accountable state-citizen relations over time)
- There is still some confusion about the role of the aid industry in this account. The assertion was made that aid is needed to help institutions to change, but where can we see this working?
- At the same time, there is a need to look beyond aid to other forms of norms and institutions at the global level and to address what African leaders themselves can do (e.g. how do you centralise rents if you have lost control to regional barons?)

Comments and discussion

In an extended period of comment and discussion, attendees around the room contributed a wide range of comments. Here we provide an overview of some of the main themes emerging from the meeting:

First, the search for practical implications must continue. Specific comments questioned whether we know enough about how to identify developmental leaders and practical hybrids or how donors might contribute to an enabling environment for local solutions to collective action problems. However, in addition to raising questions about what can be done, participants highlighted the implications of research findings on the long-term cumulative impact of donor assistance (and potential harm therein), suggesting this reinforces the need to take ‘do no harm’ messages seriously and to be more rigorous about assessments and expectations of what, as an external actor, one can contribute. This is clearly challenging to donors, but combining this with other messages about global drivers may prove more fruitful than traditional emphases.

Second, a range of comments were made on the implications of the research for associative models, including donor support to civil society and other elements of the top-down, bottom-up debate. Whilst a number of participants noted the welcome critique of assumptions contained in the 'classic' short-route bottom-up accountability, others qualified this with the need to avoid setting up straw-men with regard to and the current state of donor thinking on support to democratisation and civil society. In response, it was recognised that there is now a very sophisticated understanding of these issues by some donor staff and other practitioners, but that the external narrative and associated funding practices remain highly problematic. As noted by both the presenters, the respondent and a number of attendees, the work of the APPP builds on a range of recent research initiatives, including the Crisis States Research Centre's emphasis on stability, work on patrimonial practices in East Asian developmental states, Mushtaq Khan's work on the different forms of corruption, a range of work on political economy analysis and the work of the Centre for the Future State at IDS on 'upside-down governance'. Yet in many cases the evidence assembled in these initiatives has failed to translate into changes in practice. Comments suggested a range of challenges the research findings were likely to face with regard to uptake, including the conflict with normative positions in the West and incentives within donor agencies.

Third, there is a need to confront questions about the sustainability of developmental neo-patrimonialism in the African context. In the context of current events, citing examples such as Côte d'Ivoire's experiences under Houphouët-Boigny and the initial period of Museveni's rule in Uganda forces us to ask what differentiates sub-Saharan episodes of developmental neo-patrimonialism of limited duration (whether ended by the death of leader or slow deterioration) from those in East and Southeast Asia that resulted in 'take-off' and sustained improvements in developmental outcomes. Will Rwanda, or other contemporary developmental neo-patrimonial states, go the same way? What enables countries to move from intermittent periods of 'good enough' to transformative governance? Some participants noted that expectations (for example, regarding voters' perceptions of effective state administration), the institutionalisation (rather than personalisation) of developmental bureaucracies and forms of political organisation may play important roles.

Fourth, whilst noting that the findings can be read as highly critical of democracy, stating that not only does democracy not necessarily lead to development, it can in fact undermine development in the African context, a number of participants contributed thoughts on the need to provide greater nuance in discussions of democracy. Important here is the need to differentiate between intrinsic and instrumental features of democracy (and/or, substantive and formal democracy). One participant suggested that a model of benign patrimonialism may reflect a base in social and economic institutions defined by a 'small-d' democratic landscape based on principles of inclusivity, not the 'big-D' democracy of multi-party electoral politics. This may require recognising democracy in unfamiliar forms. In closing, the presenters' response to this last point noted that APPP research findings are not incompatible with arguments in favour of democracy as an intrinsic good and as an important component of development, but rather stand as a counterpoint to the promotion of the 'standard package' of institutions that works against achieving *all* developmental goals, even democratic ones.