

**THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING GOVERNANCE
ASSESSMENTS NATIONALLY OWNED**

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The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness has already become a significant milestone in the evolution of development cooperation. It addresses many shortcomings in foreign aid that were not necessarily new in 2005 but had not previously been addressed comprehensively and jointly by countries in the North and the South. The underlying principle of the Declaration is partnership. It refers to the partnership among donors requiring them to harmonize and align their aid in ways that facilitate the planning and implementation of development in “partner” countries, the term used to describe those receiving aid. This second partnership relation calls for a transfer of greater responsibility for setting policy priorities to national governments – “ownership” – and a stronger results orientation in the context of mutual accountability.

A closer reading of the text in the Declaration indicates that strengthening national ownership is premised on partnership, notably the notion of mutual accountability. How far to go in extending greater national control of the use of foreign aid, therefore, is a potentially controversial issue that has yet to be fully addressed. Donor response to the Declaration to date has focused largely on the administrative issues that pave the way for harmonization and national ownership. Much attention, for instance, has been paid to the administrative implications of direct budget support to national governments. Donor officials have read the Declaration more as a manual than as a strategy with political implications.

The growing interest among some bilateral donors in the study of how power affects policy outcomes and the belief in organizations like the UNDP that governance assessments can be catalysts for nationally driven reforms is shifting attention to the political aspects of the Paris Declaration. The three questions that are of particular interest to this conference – (1) How are governance assessments being used? (2) For whom are they useful? and, (3) Why are they being carried out? – raise a number of challenges that needs to be considered.

This paper accepts the premise that it is valuable to make governance assessments more attuned to local interests and needs but it addresses a series of issues that arise in making such assessments nationally owned. These issues are conceptual, political, institutional and operational. The rest of the paper will deal with one at a time before offering a concluding opinion.

Conceptual Challenges

The concept of governance has now been around for almost two decades. Despite its popularity and resilience at both the practical and theoretical levels, it is still problematic for at least three reasons: (1) definitions vary among users; (2) it tends to become a catch-all concept subsuming too many activities; and (3) its normative content reflects one particular model of conducting public affairs.

Varying definitions

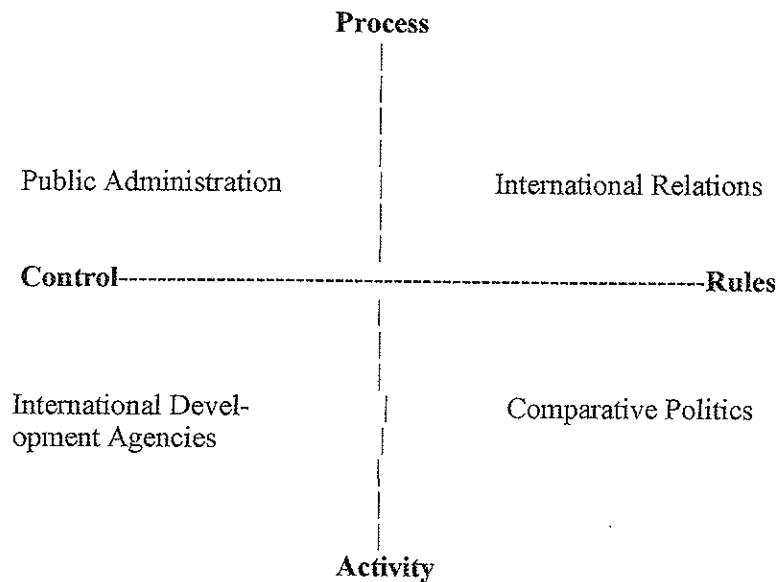
When using the governance concept academics and practitioners often talk past one another, as do scholars in different academic disciplines and fields. A review of the literature, however, suggests that these differences tend to crystallize along two separate lines, one regarding the substantive content of governance, the other regarding its character in practice. Along the first line, there is a difference between those who view governance as concerned with the rules of conducting public affairs, on the one hand, and those, on the other, who see it as steering or controlling public affairs. One might say that the ‘rules’ approach tends to emphasize the institutional determinants of choice, while the ‘steering’ approach concentrates on how choices get implemented.

Along the second line, the difference is between governance as activity or process. Some analysts treat governance as reflected in human intention and action. It is possible to see the results of governance interventions. Others, however, view governance as an ongoing phenomenon that is hard to pin down, but which bears on how results are achieved. Practitioners tend to adopt the former position; academics often end up taking the latter. As Figure 1 tries to indicate, one can identify four major positions on how governance has been defined and used. Students of public administration¹ share with analysts and practitioners in international development agencies the notion that governance is about steering and control, but differ in that the former regard it as a process while the latter see it as an activity. For example, representatives of the donor community wish to see measurable results of governance; hence, their concern with developing results-based indicators. Students of public administration, on the other hand, are quite content with recognizing that managing public affairs—and thus controlling outcomes—is no longer confined to traditional jurisdictions but influenced by processes that transcend such boundaries.

¹ See e.g. Jan Kooiman (ed.), *Modern Governance: New Government-Society Interactions*. London: Sage Publications 1993, R.A.W. Rhodes. *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, and Accountability*. Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press 1997 and Jon Pierre and Guy Peters, *Governance, Politics, and the State*. London: Macmillan 2000.

International relations scholars² share with students of comparative politics the notion that governance is about the ‘rules of the game’ while they have divergent views on its character, the former treating it as process, the latter as activity. For example, students of international relations recognize that creating new rules for global governance is a process involving multiple actors at different levels; hence, the difficulty of overcoming tendencies among national governments to stick with ‘realist’ principles. Comparativists³, by contrast, especially those studying democratization, look at governance as a voluntarist act that can make a positive difference. By focusing on the “rules of the game” they also assume, as March and Olsen point out⁴ that governance “involves affecting the framework within which citizens and [state] officials act and politics occurs.”

Figure 1. Different Uses of the Governance Concept.



Among international development agencies there tends to be agreement about governance as an activity aimed at steering societies in desired directions. They typically adopt the concept to suit their own programmatic needs. As a result, their ‘entry points’ differ. The United Nations Development Programme, for example, has for a long time worked with a definition that sees governance as “the

² See e.g. K.J. Holsti. “Governance without Government: Polyarchy in the 19th Century European International Politics” in James N. Rosenau and E-O Cziempel (eds.), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992 and P. Redfern and M. Desai, *Global Governance: Ethics and Economics of the World Order*. New York: Pinter 1997.

³ See e.g. G. Hyden, “The Study of Governance” pp 1-26 in G. Hyden and M. Bratton (eds.), *Governance and Politics in Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1992, G. Hyden, J. Court and K. Mease, *Making Sense of Governance*. Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers 2004, and James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Democratic Governance*. New York: Free Press 1998.

⁴ March and Olsen, *op.cit.* p 6.

exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels."⁵ In this perspective, governance comprises the mechanisms, processes, and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their conflicts. Governance has been defined as having three legs: economic, political, and administrative. Economic governance includes decision-making processes that affect a country's economic activities and its relationship with other economies. Political governance involves the formulation of policy, while administrative governance is the system of policy implementation.

The World Bank has its own interpretation of governance that is of special interest because its official mandate prevents it from dealing with political issues. To cope with this, the Bank makes a distinction between governance as an analytic framework and governance as an operational framework, leading it to identify three aspects of governance: (1) the form of political regime, (2) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development, and (3) the capacity of governments to design, formulate, and implement policies and discharge functions.⁶ The Bank has professed to confine itself only to the second and third aspects of governance, but it has found itself under increasing pressure from Western bilateral donors to address also the first. Its recognition, however modest, of human rights as an essential aspect of governance seems to be a manifestation of this extended operational use of the concept.

With the proliferation of governance assessments in recent years, there is a virtual conceptual jungle out there. Because each actor tends to use its own way of defining it, analysts find it very hard to make sense of it. The attempt by the World Bank Institute⁷ to aggregate findings from some two dozens of such assessments is a gallant effort, but it is inevitably a mixture of "apples and oranges". The methodology is under criticism⁸ and the reports that the World Bank analysts issue are as much about margins of error and other statistical problems as it is about governance content. It is fair to say that the variable definitions of the concept remain an untamed challenge when it comes to making governance assessments.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme, *Reconceptualizing Governance*. New York: UNDP 1997, pp 2-3.

⁶ World Bank. *Governance and Development*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank 1992.

⁷ Daniel Kaufmann and his collaborators at the Institute have been publishing this type of aggregate governance assessment every two years. See, e.g. D. Kaufmann, A. Kraay and M. Mastruzzi, *Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996-2004*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank 2005; also available on line: http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance/pdf/GovMatters_IV_main.pdf

⁸ Christiane Arndt and Oman Charles 2006. *Uses and Abuses of Governance Indicators*. Paris: OECD Development Centre. Melissa Thomas 2006. "What Do the Worldwide Governance Indicators Measure?" unpublished paper, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

Definitional stretching

In addition to the lack of agreement about what governance stands for as a concept, there is a problem stemming from definitional stretching. The way it is being defined as a “catch-all” concept, it very much resembles the notion of ‘development management’ that was employed in the 1970s to identify what governments in developing countries were doing. More specifically it fails to make a distinction between governance, policy and administration. Governance folds into the latter two without a distinct meaning to it. This means that it is difficult to know whether it is actually the quality of policy-making and implementation rather than something peculiar known as ‘governance’ that really is supposed to make a difference. For example, it is quite possible that the same kind of governance set-up in two separate countries may produce different outcomes because of variations in policy formulation or implementation capacity. Secondly, by watering down its political character, governance loses its distinction in relation to the economy. As Frischtak pointed out several years ago: “in the absence of explicit definitions, governance is often used as an ‘umbrella concept’ under which elusive and ill-defined political processes and concerns, as well as desirable goals and value preferences, can be subsumed.”⁹

The opposite to this broad definition of governance is one that is more specifically focused on an activity that can be distinguished from other aspects of what governments and societal actors may do. Those who have adopted this minimalist definition focus on governance as the “rules of the game”. Hyden, Court and Mease, for instance, define it the following way:

Governance refers to the formation and stewardship of the formal and informal rules that regulate the public realm, the arena in which state as well as economic and societal actors interact to make decisions¹⁰.

With such a definition, governance is treated as both activity and process in the sense that it is viewed as reflective of human intention and agency but is itself a process that sets the parameters for how policy is made and implemented. Analytically speaking, governance becomes a ‘meta’ activity that influences outcomes, such as reducing transaction costs and protecting human rights, depending on the nature of the rules adopted.

Governance, then, refers to behavioral dispositions rather than technical capacities. It is created to measure the quality of the political regime. In this perspective, governance deals with the constitutive side of how a political system operates rather than its distributive or allocative aspects that are more directly a

⁹ L.L. Frischtak. *Governance Capacity and Economic Reform in Developing Countries*. World Bank Technical Paper (No 254). Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

¹⁰ Hyden, Court and Mease, *op.cit*, p 16.

function of policy. As a meta concept subsuming other activities, it sits distinctly at the apex of a conceptual pyramid as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Governance and Its Relations to Other Concepts and Activities.

Level	Activity	Concept
Meta	Politics	Governance
Macro	Policy	Policy-Making
Meso	Program	Public Administration
Micro	Project	Management

With this definition, governance is confined to the political sphere. It becomes a way of measuring the legitimacy of the regime, or the formal and informal rules that determine political behavior and choice. It measures a critical aspect of how political systems change – for better or worse. A focus on the legitimacy of the rules that determine how actors behave and make choices at various points in the policy process is meaningful for investors and donors alike but also – and above all – allowing the concept to be operationalized and thus used for analytical purposes.

Normative preferences

When the concept was first introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was often defined in quite functional terms as illustrated, for example, by the World Bank definition of 1992 and the UNDP definition of 1997 quoted above. Governance was a noun in search of an adjective. It did not take too long before it was added. For ten years now, the discourse has been more about “good” governance than just a functional concept called governance. Within the UNDP, governance has crystallized into a preference for “democratic” governance focusing on new ways of speeding up the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹¹.

“Democratic” can be interpreted in two different ways. One is to imply that governance has to meet certain normative standards that are commonly associated with the notion of Western forms of democracy. Democratic governance, therefore, is much the same as liberal democracy. It is relatively easy to identify what the basic indicators are. Another way of defining democratic governance is more open-ended and may include other forms, e.g. participatory democracy. This seems to be the way it is being applied in UNDP circles where democracy is viewed in substantive and not just process terms. It is not

¹¹ UNDP, *Measuring Democratic Governance: A Framework for Selecting Pro-Poor and Gender Sensitive Indicators*. New York: United Nations Development Programme 2006.

just about the rules of the game – the mainstream definition in political science circles – but about social and economic rights, fairness and social justice as well. This definition is less “ethnocentric” and lends itself well to governance assessments that involve broad-based consultation in different countries.

It may be argued that it is impossible to talk about governance without having a normative preference. That has certainly become the general assumption today as the argument has spread that governance is a variable with a causal relation to economic growth and poverty reduction. Analysts have identified a whole battery of governance indicators that they believe will make a positive difference. Some analysts are more narrowly focused on transparency and public accountability as the key indicators of governance, while others go further and operate with a broader set of indicators.

In spite of this mainstream trend toward a normative specification of what governance stands for, there is a way of thinking about the concept that reduces rather than reinforces normative biases. For example, the World Governance Assessment (WGA)¹², one of the many projects referred to in UNDP’s own Users’ Guide to Governance Indicators¹³, takes a functionalist approach which assumes that the way political systems operate can be compared in terms of governance indicators linked to specific arenas as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The Functional Dimensions of Governance and Their Institutional Arenas in the WGA.

Functional Dimension	Institutional Arena	Purpose of Rules
Socializing	Civil Society	To shape the way citizens become aware of and raise issues in public
Aggregating	Political Society	To shape the way issues are combined into policy by political institutions
Executive	Government	To shape the way policies are made by government institutions
Managerial	Bureaucracy	To shape the way policies are administered and implemented by public servants
Regulatory	Economic Society	To shape the way state and market interact to promote development
Adjudicatory	Judicial System	To shape the setting for resolution of disputes and conflicts

¹² For further information, see www.odi.org/wga_governance/

¹³ UNDP, Governance Indicators: A Users’ Guide, second edition. Oslo: UNDP Governance Centre 2007; also www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs07/undp_users_guide_online_version.pdf

By focusing on how a given political system functions it does not specify in advance which particular model of governance is superior to others. At the same time, in order to obtain a meaningful assessment of governance, it is necessary to tie the functional indicators to a range of valid norms. Rather than taking these norms from a textbook on liberal democracy, the WGA draws on the principles included in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights: (1) participation, (2) fairness, (3) decency, (4) accountability, (5) transparency, and (6) efficiency. The complete instrument for assessing governance, therefore, looks like this:

Table 3. Matrix of Governance Arenas, Principles and Indicators used by the WGA.

Principle / Arena	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Decency</i>	<i>Accountability</i>	<i>Transparency</i>	<i>Efficiency</i>
Civil society	1. Freedom of association	2. Society free from discrimination	3. Freedom of expression	4. Respect for governing rules	5. Freedom of the media	6. Input in policy making
Political society	7. Legislature representative of society	8. Policy reflects public preferences	9. Peaceful competition for political power	10. Legislators accountable to public	11. Transparency of political parties	12. Efficiency of legislative function
Government	13. Intra-governmental consultation	14. Adequate standard of living	15. Personal security of citizens	16. Security forces subordinated to civilian government	17. Government provides accurate information	18. Efficiency of executive branch
Bureaucracy	19. Civil servants' shape policy	20. Equal opportunities to public services	21. Civil servants respectful towards citizens	22. Civil servants accountable	23. Civil service decision-making transparent	24. Merit-based system for recruitment
Economic society	25. Private sector consulted on policy	26. Regulations equally applied	27. Government's respect private property rights	28. Regulating private sector to protect workers	29. Transparency in international trade policy	30. Interventions free from corruption
Judiciary	31. Non-formal processes of conflict resolution	32. Equal access to justice for all citizens	33. Human rights incorporated in national practice	34. Judicial officers held accountable	35. Clarity in administering justice	36. Efficiency of the judicial system

This approach is not void of normative content but it is tied to a theory-based approach to the study of governance that provides a focus and acknowledges the interdependence between variables that is typically not present in other assessments where a more pronounced normative model or specific program

needs have determined which indicators to include in the assessment. It becomes particularly useful if the ambition is to seek the views of local stakeholders.

The Political Challenges

There are three main challenges of a political nature that might be considered here. The first concerns the choice of approach: is improving governance a matter of filling a void or is it building on what exists on the ground? The second challenge arises from what role external agencies play: do they interpret national ownership as being satisfactory as long as government takes a lead and commits itself to improved governance or do they strive to reach out to actors in society as well? The third comes from the attitude of the partner government: is it ready to be inclusive and open or does it prefer to treat governance issues as its own domain?

Filling a void or not

This is an issue that easily gets politicized because it raises the question of whether improved governance is a matter of introducing “foreign” ideas or it can be achieved by building on the norms, values and institutions that already exist on the ground. For a long time, it is the first position that had been allowed to dominate. Countries in the global South have been compared with more developed democracies and economies. Since good governance has been defined in advance as being how these countries – typically OECD members – conduct their public affairs, the partner countries in the South have inevitably been placed toward the lower end of the governance ladder. The conclusion in donor circles: they have to become more like us!

This idea that partner countries must do more of what the OECD member countries practice in order to develop remains mainstream and keeps being reinforced by many global governance assessments, not the least the one run by the World Bank Institute¹⁴. The authors claim that improved governance has a significant development dividend. They call it the “300 per cent dividend” because, according to their analysis, a one-standard-deviation improvement in governance raise incomes per capita in a country by about 300 per cent in the long run. Given the many questions that have been raised about the methodology used in their approach, policy practitioners and scholars alike have reason to take this claim with caution. Thus, even if filling the void is not an altogether useless approach making such claims as

¹⁴ Kaufmann, Kraay and Mostruzzi, *op.cit.*

those above only serves to reinforce the idea that good governance inevitably implies injecting norms from the outside.

This approach has been questioned in recent years not only by scholars like Grindle¹⁵ who argues that reforms or policies should focus on what is actually feasible and may pass as “good enough governance”. Some bilateral donors, notably DfID and Sida, have also begun to look anew at governance by trying to understand the role that power plays in deciding policy outcomes or finding the “drivers of change” that really matter on the ground in individual partner countries¹⁶. This approach is more cautious in terms of what external actors expect to achieve through their support. It acknowledges that history matters, that path dependency is important, and elite choices are constrained by structural conditions that cannot be overcome or changed in the short run.

UNDP’s own approach to democratic governance may fall in-between these two versions. It presupposes the possibility of really bringing about improvements in governance by insisting on a number of normative preferences, notably in support of the poor in general and women in particular. It bases itself on the premise that inclusive consultations at various levels will activate local interest in governance issues and a wider range of individuals will get civically involved. It may be too early to pass judgment as to how far this approach produces anticipated results, but it does face one challenge from within the UN itself and the global agenda to which it is committed.

The Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) which the international community through the United Nations is committed to achieve by 2015 puts pressure on those working on improving governance because it is based on the premise that without it economic growth and poverty reduction will suffer. With regard to the MDGs, the UN has bought into the World Bank view that there is an assumed causality between governance and growth¹⁷. Thus, there is a need to first of all pay attention to more efficient division of labor, more productive investments, lower transaction costs and faster implementation of proper social and economic development policies. This prioritization of a certain set of governance indicators by the international community raises the question how much scope there is for the voices of local stakeholders in partner countries. Whose voice or agenda counts in the end? The effort by UNDP’s

¹⁵ Merilee S. Grindle, “Good Enough Governance: Poverty Reduction and Reform in Developing Countries”, *Governance*, vol 17, no 4, pp 525-48.

¹⁶ OECD DAC Govnet, “Lessons Learned on the Use of Power and Drives of Change Analyses in Development Cooperation: Final Report. Review Commissioned by the OECD DAC Network on Governance”. Paris: OECD, 20 September 2005.

¹⁷ United Nations, *Governance for the Millenium Development Goals: Core Issues and Good Practices*. New York: United Nations, January 2007.

Democratic Governance Group to democratize governance assessments by making them more accessible to a broad range of local stakeholders is a step in the right direction but the challenge remains what difference it can make in these countries with regard to accelerating the implementation of pro-poor policies given competing concerns not only within the UN system itself but among donors at large.

Defining national ownership

Development cooperation is first and foremost a matter of government-to-government transfer of resources. While many donor governments remain skeptical about the extent to which partner governments can be trusted to take the steps to improve governance that they expect as part of the mutual accountability, the Paris Declaration has reinforced the importance of government in partner countries and the need to “fix” its accountability instruments. National ownership, therefore, has often been taken by these donor governments to mean government ownership.

A recent study of how the Paris Declaration is being implemented in Tanzania highlights some of the issues that this orientation raises¹⁸. One is the difference that exists among the partner governments whether Tanzania is on the right track and is making sufficient progress toward the MDGs. The multilateral agencies – UNDP, World Bank and the European Union – as well as Britain’s DFID tend to see the glass as being half full, while the majority of the bilateral donors tend to see it as half empty. A common frustration among all agencies is that they conduct their dialogue with top civil servants, especially in the Ministry of Finance, but not with cabinet ministers who are the ones that decide and also have an influence on the quality of governance. The lessons that they have learnt in Tanzania is that implementation of the Paris Declaration calls for a shift toward greater recognition of how power enters into the governance equation. After all, improving governance implies realigning power relations, an exercise that creates its own winners and losers. Dialoguing merely with top civil servants, therefore, is not as important as it was when foreign aid consisted largely of program and project support. The donor community, as several diplomats noted, need to get their house in order for franker – and perhaps tougher – dialogues with political decision-makers in partner countries.

The Tanzanian case study also drew attention to another important issue. Direct budget support, which has been extended to a number of partner country governments, does reinforce the power of government in relation to other institutions in society. It makes these governments look to the external agencies as their principal partners and reduce their interest in accountability to national parliaments and civil society

¹⁸ Goran Hyden, “The Paris Agenda in Tanzania: Partnerships and the Issue of Power”, Report Submitted to the Swedish Embassy, Dar es Salaam, July 2, 2007.

institutions. Realizing this, some bilateral agencies have embarked on developing a joint strategy for supporting civil society, not merely through particular projects but by financing a separate fund for the development of civil society organizations. This is a step in the right direction but it is too early to say how far such a measure will empower civil society actors in their interaction with government.

The politics of national ownership

The tendency in government circles not only in Africa but many other places as well is to ignore civil society and treat it as irrelevant or – if it speaks out and challenges government – as a threat. Government wants to keep an exclusive control of the national policy agenda and in many countries civil society organizations are invited to participate only as a means of co-opting them into the political mainstream or establishment.

The politics of national ownership has become especially apparent in the context of putting into practice the African Peer Review Mechanism under the auspices of NEPAD¹⁹. The Ghana experience suggests that within some relatively insignificant limitations, it is possible to conduct an independent self-assessment involving not only government but also private and voluntary sector representatives. It also shows that the president of an African country is ready to listen to his peers and consider their viewpoints and suggestions. Unfortunately, the Ghanaian case is unique rather than representative of what is happening in Africa. To begin with, while the Ghanaian president was ready to listen to his peers, the first time they met under the auspices of the African Union, his fellow presidents had not read the governance report on Ghana; hence, they had to meet again to complete the exercise. What is even more disappointing, presidents in other countries that have declared their readiness to go through the peer review have not been as open as in Ghana in their view of how the process should be conducted in their country. Thus, in Kenya, Rwanda and South Africa which were among the first to declare, the Presidents have insisted on government control and participation by cabinet ministers in the review instead of allowing for an independent assessment as the case was in Ghana. Instead of fostering a climate in which a governance assessment could be used for genuine reforms, the African Peer Review Mechanism has had the effect of blocking reform and alienating government and civil society from each other.

The APRM is a high-profile exercise that raises the political stakes in African countries. Governments there are not used to the principle of separation of power or the idea of independent reviews. They know

¹⁹ Ian Taylor, *NEPAD: Toward Africa's Development or Another False Start?* Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers 2005 and S.K.B. Asante, *Implementing the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): Challenges and the Path to Progress*. Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences 2006.

that governance reforms imply realigning power relations. As a result, they are reluctant to let go of the control of governance assessments that are likely to come up with genuine proposals for change. They will adopt a delaying tactic and tarnish the image of any one that criticizes what it is doing. It raises issues about how to go about assessing governance in countries where the political climate limits the extent to which they can be conducted freely and independently.

Institutional Challenges

Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn about governance assessments in the post-Paris Declaration period. The first is that assessments carried out by international agencies to meet their own programmatic objectives are deemed to be of little relevance to governance reform in partner countries. The second is that narrowing the concept of governance to fighting corruption not only limits the scope of what the concept is all about but it also stigmatizes it in a negative fashion. Going local, therefore, is a step in the right direction if governance as a global concern is going to have a life after Paris. The question is how far to take “local” and how to operationalize it in ways that produce a baseline for measuring progress while also serving as a platform for civic activism.

As suggested above, national ownership is often interpreted to be the same as government ownership – and definitely government leadership – in assessing governance. In the post-Paris Declaration period, there are many reasons why the partner countries do not question this. One is the principle of national ownership which tends to constrain the donor voices. Another reason is that governance is tied to development objectives and viewed as part of national development strategies that are designed and carried out by government agencies. A third reason may be a failure to distinguish between an assessment and a plan of action. A fourth may be a lack of staff familiar with what governance assessments typically entail.

If governments are allowed to direct governance assessments, chances are slim that they will have a value to others. The agenda for such assessments will be set with a focus on issues that are not embarrassing to key political actors. Governments have a vested interest in including as many activities as possible in the assessments so as to increase the chances that there are at least some fields in which progress is being made. Diplomats from partner countries tend to share the

same perspective. Their governments have provided significant foreign aid and need to report home about its uses. Being able to point to some achievements, however modest, is important. I do not want to imply that there is a sinister collusion here, but it is difficult not to conclude that diplomats from the OECD countries have become more accommodating and less outspoken in post-Paris days than they were some years ago.

The effort to broaden participation in governance assessments to include non-governmental actors is politically a step in the right direction but it tends to have the effect of also making them more cumbersome. First of all, there is the question of who should be consulted and allowed to have an input. Secondly, with more participants, there is an inevitable tendency to augment the number of indicators. Every actor, or group of actors, wants to have its own favorite concerns included. It is not difficult to see that the assessment itself is going to be time-consuming and turn participants off rather than on.

The general experience is that self-assessments that are controlled and carried out by governments generate little of value for establishing how well or how poorly a set of public institutions are doing. They will obfuscate the relations among key variables and thus render governance assessments quite useless for establishing whether or not progress is made toward implementation of the MDGs (or any other set of policy objectives, for that matter).

If governance assessments are going to have a meaning as monitoring instruments and potentially also as measures aimed at stimulating civic activism they need to be carried out by independent bodies and include indicators that speak not only to government policy but to rights concerns among citizens. Such assessments should not include just anything but concentrate on indicators that are relevant for changing the nature of the regime. For instance, how far specific policy objectives are being reached or how the economy may be better managed, are issues that should be left out.

Assessing governments in terms of how far they respect human rights and laws aimed at controlling their use of power is a more relevant but also more challenging project than those that concentrate on how well they implement the MDGs and other key policy objectives. Not only

does it make the assessment more focused on key political issues, but it also shifts ownership in the direction of the citizens. This may be the single most serious challenge in the aftermath of the Paris Declaration. Not taking it up might mean a return to the ideas of the 1970s when development management concerns were allowed to completely overshadow rights and governance issues.

Operational Challenges

So, what to do? It would be pretentious to suggest that it should be done in a single way. Governance assessments will no doubt continue to serve different objectives and constituencies but the relative value of particular types of assessment may have to be reassessed in the light of the Paris Declaration.

Governance assessments aimed at ranking countries on a universal scale, such as those carried out by the World Bank Institute and Transparency International, are likely to remain influential in certain circles, e.g. academics and business people, but their ability to influence efforts to improve governance in the global South is going to decline rather than increase. They are seen as foreign and tailored for foreign consumption. Their methodology also limits the impact that they may have in partner countries.

At the other end, governance assessments that are designed and carried out locally in individual partner countries have their own operational problems. They tend to become overwhelming both for those who are expected to carry them out and for those asked to participate. In order to respond to the interest of various stakeholders, the number of questions and indicators tends to be very high. Interviews and focus group discussions go on forever or are interrupted before the exercise is over. Those with responsibility to carry out the assessments balk at the work load confronting them. Many refuse and others go about it with little or no motivation. The most serious problem, however, arises at the time of analysis. There is simply too much data. Much of it cannot be easily coded and the chances of discerning changes in performance are very slim indeed.

Making governance assessments nationally owned, however, does not necessarily imply that government controls them or that they become unmanageable instruments trying to cater for every stakeholder group. It is important not to overload the assessments. As Grindle has noted recently, the current governance agenda is additive rather than analytical. She argues that it must be reduced and focus on “things that must be done”²⁰. Governance assessments must target fewer, more useful and more feasible indicators. They must serve a purpose that is sufficiently narrow or specific that it can be achieved. Measuring how local stakeholders perceive the performance of the regime in place will provide indications, if not answers, to a number of concerns that subsequently can be addressed by government or civil society organizations. A governance assessment, therefore, should focus on data collection and analysis while also serving as a platform for policy reform or civic activism. Depending on resources and time available, data collection can be in the form of surveys among well informed persons, as the case is in WGA, focus group discussions or a combination of both.

The following principles for how to conduct governance assessments in the post-Paris Declaration period may be of special interest to consider:

- Governance is defined in ways that concentrate the assessment on key political issues, for example, how government and other key actors in the public realm relate to key values and rules that define the political regime or system at large;
- The assessment is in the hands of a credible independent agency which has the right to design the instrument to be used bearing in mind both local concerns and experiences of similar assessments in other countries;
- Participants in the assessment should be a cross-section of local stakeholders who can be approached using a survey or focus group techniques (or a combination of both).

²⁰ Merilee Grindle, “Good Enough Governance Revisited”, *Development Policy Review*, vol 25, no 5 (2007), p 571.

- Quantitative data alone may not be enough and should as much as possible be complemented by qualitative data, preferably provided by the same people who answer the survey;
- Efforts should be made to create a baseline assessment that can be used in future assessments, preferably drawing on the same respondents;
- Each assessment should strive to include a capacity-building component, enabling local researchers and analysts to develop skills for conducting and analyzing governance;
- Those in charge of the assessment should give consideration to how their findings may be used by others for purposes of enhancing civic activism and empowerment;
- The cost of each assessment must be commensurate with its anticipated results so as not to encourage expensive projects with little or no value.