"Good Governance": The Metamorphosis of a Policy Metaphor

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"Governance" quickly became a household word, but as is often true of buzzwords, there has hardly been a consensus as to what it means, and even less of an idea as how it could be applied more concretely.

For well over a decade, the notion of good governance has served as a general guiding principle for donor agencies to demand that recipient governments adhere to proper administrative processes in the handling of development assistance and put in place effective policy instruments towards that end. Currently, however, the use of the concept as a means to induce reforms within the institutional environment of recipient countries appears to have had its longest day. Instead, new patterns of interaction between donors and selected recipient countries are giving rise to new contents for the good governance metaphor, notably as a pre-condition to qualify for aid. This paper explores the conditions under which the criterion of good governance first became adopted as a donor policy metaphor and now appears to be transformed in favor of "selectivity." Particular attention will need to be given in this regard to successive shifts in the relevant policy thinking of the World Bank.

The concept of good governance became prominent in international aid circles around 1989 or 1990. First launched as a donor discourse, it came just as unexpectedly as the fall of the Berlin Wall, which happened only slightly earlier, and in fact the two developments do not appear to have been entirely unconnected. Prior to these events, aid agencies and other development institutions had not approached program relations with counterparts in terms of good governance criteria. Nor had, for that matter, the term "governance" constituted a significant part of the vocabulary of political science courses at European and American universities. For a long time the word had a somewhat obscure dictionary existence, primarily carrying legalistic connotations, as in respect to bodies having boards of governors whose institutional role required a designation that was more grand than "administration," less business-like than "management," and suggested

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they handled their political concerns in a discreet but firm manner.

But all at once, the notion of good governance was there, referring to the way in which cities, provinces, or whole countries were being governed, or should be governed. Contextually rather than intrinsically, it soon transpired that these references somehow pertained to states and entities in the South, rather than in Europe or North America where the concept was launched. Moreover, with the adjective "good" added to it, it became unmistakably clear that the concept of good governance could invite judgment about how a particular country, city or agency was being governed. It enabled the raising of evaluative questions about proper procedures, transparency, the quality and process of decision-making, and other such matters.[1]

Looking back at the interval since the launch of the good governance discourse, it is striking to see how quickly the term "governance" became a household word, heading the list of concerns of aid agencies, government researchers and the media. As is often true with new buzzwords, though, there has hardly been a consensus as to its core meaning, and less and less of a common idea as to how it could be applied more concretely. Still, it is there, and it has gained a key function by virtue of its capacity all at once to draw attention to a whole range of often largely unspecified issues concerning processes of public policy-making and authority structures. In that sense it has appealed to the imagination of analysts as well as practitioners, and become a focal point for intellectual and policy discourses.

Today, almost a decade and a half after its rebirth, several questions persist about the use of good governance as a policy metaphor. What exactly was it supposed to mean? What is it used to refer to? Is it a universal concept or does it vary from context to context, and from one perspective to another? What meanings has the donor community, led by the World Bank, attached to the term and how useful has this conceptualization been? What critiques does it invite? What does it offer when judging countries in connection with the allocation of aid funds? And is it useful to make aid conditional on good governance? By imposing conditions on practices and structures of governance, changes in governments have tended to become, at least partly, externally determined. Is this right, and why or why not would this be the case?

A reflection on the origins and evolution of the notion of good governance, especially regarding its use as a reference point in donor-recipient discourses, must ask why it emerged at the time it did and what its track record has been since then. In light of the latter, we should ask whether it is likely to receive the same level of priority it initially drew and what changing policy objectives are now being associated with it. This paper seeks to address these questions.

The Pliability of the Governance Concept

From a global policy-making perspective, in its scope and potential coverage, the notion of governance had an a priori attractiveness. It could refer to a good deal more than just sound administration or management, and it could address political structuring and its handling while at the same time including issues of administration and management. Though not to be equated with "politics," let alone "political leadership," it nonetheless opened a window for focusing on how politics or the political process were embedded and conducted within larger structures. Though many practitioners and analysts were used to thinking about politics and administration in a dichotomous manner for years, there was no single phrase connecting these two distinct yet closely related and overlapping spheres. Part of the term's appeal was that it seemed to be able to fill that gap. Curiously, though, while in principle comprising a political dimension, in actuality the use of the term "governance" and "good governance" on the donor front soon seemed to imply and favour a certain de-politicization of political processes: By using the concept to frame an argument, it could seem that aid agencies were passing objective judgment on the ways governments behaved.

However, while the term itself points to a general area of common interest, it hardly carries a specific meaning. Rather, its intrinsic open-ended quality, vagueness, and inherent lack of specificity have tended to generate a good deal of searching and debate as to what its proper meaning is or should be, prompting multiple efforts to appropriate it and define it in particular ways.[2] For bankers, financial accountability might represent the crux of good governance, while ordinary villagers and citizens in various countries might stress the maintenance of security as their prime criterion. The lack of specificity is not particularly surprising: A pliable term like governance, rather than constituting a concept in its own right, is a flexible carrier that can be used to convey varying combinations of messages or consignments, though largely remaining within the same general specialization. Thus, there has come to be a fair amount of oscillation in its usage, some of it more policy-oriented and some more academic.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to deal with the academic stream of writing on governance, on which a substantial body of literature has developed.[3] Suffice it to say that the academic stream has been largely concerned with developing a better understanding of different ways in which power and authority relations are structured in different contexts, focusing on different modes of interpenetration of state-civil society relations. Interestingly, following their adoption in donor circles, notions of governance rapidly found their way into academic usage, and in recent times they have stimulated lively discussion on various aspects of the themes they denote. One advantage, as Goran Hyden once remarked, is that it does not specify the locus of actual decision-making, which could be within the state, within an international organization or within another structural context.[4] In that regard, a concept of governance facilitates analytical pursuits into the exercise of political power unhindered by formal boundaries, and may fit discourse analysis, embedded structuralism, Marxism and mainstream thinking alike.[5] Today, many political scientists and sociologists, and increasingly also economists, could hardly do without the term.

By contrast, the donor-directed and policy-oriented governance discourse has focused on state-market relations, and more specifically within this context, on state structures designed to ensure accountability, due processes of law and related safeguards. Naturally, there has been interaction between the academic and policy discourses, which can be fruitful as long as both sides remain open to it. But obviously the basic purposes have been different: Academic discourse is primarily oriented toward better analysis and understanding of the institutional linkages between state and society in different contexts, while the donor-driven discourse is geared towards enhancing policy effectiveness and conceptually preparing the terrain for policy intervention. Some would say the guiding motive of this interventionism has been to establish new institutional patterns of global hegemony, through a "disciplining," in a Foucauldian sense. This includes both discipline from above and the governance of "self," and compels state and policy structures in individual countries to conform to the norms set by global institutions. There are intriguing overlaps, though also differences, between notions of governance and Foucault's "governmentality." However, historically derived social, economic and institutional structures, or the specific needs and potential of particular countries, do not figure in as points of departure in the respective policy designs. Instead, a key aim has been the importing to developing countries of state-market relationships that are characteristic of Western liberal-capitalist systems.

As observed above, the impetus for renewed interest in a concept of governance did not originate in an academic context, but rather in the circle of international donor agencies, the World Bank in particular. Increasingly, these agencies felt a need for such a concept—though a a different one from that of academia. To appreciate this, it is instructive to recall the transitions and expectations that at that time were occurring at the global level.

Good Governance and Political Conditions

With the demise of the Cold War, the urge to divide the world into opposite camps came to a standstill. Until that moment, the firmer or more strong-handed a client state was, the easier it often appeared for global powers and institutions to conclude alliances and aid relations with them. Authoritarianism and dictatorships thrived during those years, although in the late 1980s donors began to attach certain conditions to granting development aid. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and at least until the aftermath of September 11, things changed. There no longer appeared to be the same imperative to get support from, or give support to, regimes with dubious track records in the handling of their internal affairs, including human rights issues. Instead, it seemed justified to set conditions on, and prescriptions for, the manner in which client states managed their governmental affairs. Rolling back many developing countries' state systems and reducing their political weight became a key element in the thinking of global institutions. A new chapter of conditionalities—of internally directed political conditionalities addressing the structuring and operation of recipient countries' institutions—was opened. However, this required a suitable conceptual framework that would enable and justify such interventions.

Political conditions per se were by no means unknown at that time: They had been the essence of many client relationships built during the Cold War. Developing countries' support for the West, or what was then called the Eastern bloc, was a key condition for aid for the regimes concerned (as in a new era willingness to support the US-prosecuted war against terrorism may become once again). These basically externally-oriented conditions did not specify how the governments concerned should structure their administration and policy-making processes, what priority they should assign to certain policy initiatives, or how they should handle a range of matters that might now typically come up in "policy dialogue." The new, post-Cold War generation of political conditions aimed to do exactly this. The idea was to establish a grip on recipient developing countries' handling of policy processes, and on whether multi-partyism or some other concept would structure the government and its constituent political processes. National sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, long held in high esteem in international politics, were increasingly met with impatience. In World Bank circles, there was an awareness that one was about to step into "sensitive" matters. As then-Bank President Barber Conable put it, "[i]f we are to achieve development, we must aim for growth that cannot be easily reversed through the political process of imperfect governance".[6] In other words, the realm and role of politics needed to be contained. In 1991, when the Bank, for the first time, devoted a portion of its Annual Development Economics Conference to the theme of good governance, anticipation about what this implied for the Bank's future agenda was quite high, and in principle comprised nothing less than a reform of politics in aid-dependent countries.[7]

However, to call for conditions of political and administrative reform, a new standard or criterion was needed. This is where the notion of good governance came in. It was broad enough to comprise public management as well as political dimensions, while at the same time vague enough to allow a fair measure of discretion and flexibility in interpretation as to what "good" governance would or would not condone. In the donor world, the reinvention of the notion of good governance thus came to figure as a necessary vehicle enabling the launching of a new generation of political conditionalities.

Significantly, the World Bank's key role in this respect was enhanced through the adoption of this line, as individual donor countries were not always certain as to what could be subsumed and demanded under good governance. Thus, they often felt more secure in going "multilateral," accepting the World Bank's lead and signals in the matter.[8] For the World Bank itself, venturing into these new areas was ironic, as its statutes had prohibited it to enter into "political" lines of action. When the new line of activities listed under the label of governance was proposed and elaborated upon by Bank staff, the Bank's governors deliberated as to whether the strictly non-political mandate should be maintained or broadened. They decided to maintain it, and with successive definitions of the concept, for several years the Bank stuck to a strictly non-political view of governance. Already, there were significant differences in this regard between staff papers presented at the Bank's 1991 Annual Development Economics Conference, which departed from a broader understanding that was explicitly inclusive of the political dimension, and the published versions of the same papers.[9] Nearly six years later, with the publication of its 1997 World Development Report, which included a reappraisal of the role of the state and attention to matters of citizen participation, the Bank again moved to a broader, though still essentially apolitical, conception of governance.[10]

The Bank's earlier repositioning also included adoption of a formula allowing it to play a pivotal role in the donor-recipient country relations concerned. In its own dealings with loan-recipient countries it stuck to strictly non-political matters—financial accountability and notions of transparency—but the Bank accepted the role of secretariat for the consultative meetings of various donor consortia, which stipulated what political conditions would need to be met.[11] In principle this placed the Bank in the strategic position of being able to convey political conditions set by the respective consortia for the recipient countries concerned, and subsequently to monitor their implementation, without directly compromising its own non-political mandate.[12]

Universality and Globalization

It is useful to place the construction of an intervention-oriented good governance agenda within a broader perspective and examine its implications. There are two rubrics under which the emergence and evolution—as well as the possible eclipse—of notions of good governance might be considered further. First, there is the question of how universal the standards designed by the Western donor community of good governance are. In this regard, as already noted, the standards do not seem to go very deep; thus, it could be argued, their universality may not reach very far either. More important, standards of good governance in principle are conceivable within quite different socio-cultural and political contexts, and would constitute a rich field for comparative political anthropology or political science. But it is unlikely that the world's donor community wants to borrow its standards from comparative political anthropology or different socio-cultural contexts. Rather, donor standards are likely to be derived from the way donors perceive and handle the world around them: from their own particular—and cultural—perspective, even though, in the end, these may be presented as having universal value.

Historically and currently across countries there are many different ways in which state-society relations and processes for public policy-making—i.e. governance structures—are shaped. Some may be considered "good," others "bad." Judgments about this naturally vary. Almost all societies are likely to score "good" and "bad" judgments for different aspects of their policy performance. What one opinion, coming from one background or experience, considers positive, may be looked upon critically elsewhere. Besides, comparative judgments are almost inevitably about form rather than substance and practice. The same form may be handled well or badly in different contexts. If certain standards or practices are advocated for globally, this would not be because they are intrinsically universal but because the donor world would like to see them universally adopted—presumably because this would make life easier for them.

If donor-conceptualized standards of good governance were more fully elaborated and insisted upon, it would almost certainly imply an insistence that Western-derived standards of conduct be adopted in non-Western politico-cultural contexts. This is neither new nor particularly surprising, yet it remains important to recognize it for what it is, namely a confrontation of different practices and cultural premises.[13] In this regard, one may also note a basic distinction between academic and donor discourses on governance. An academic discourse, at least if it is informed by cultural sensitivity, presumably would take cultural variation as its point of departure, and try to better understand the merits and demerits of different configurations of governance in different contexts.[14] By contrast, donor discourses are likely to depart from just one general notion of governance, and to demand abiding by it.

Related to this is the effect that implicit or explicit insistence on good governance might have on globalization processes. Globalization of course has numerous facets, but one in particular is the way in which state functions seem to be gradually subsumed under broader transnational institutional constructs. This occurs in all parts of the world, though rather differently in the developed West in contrast to the "developing" South. The pattern is not unlike the way in which commodity production functions are being rearranged in globally integrated chains. If an emerging good governance agenda were to be actively pursued, then in the final analysis it would constitute one more, potentially key, route through which Western-derived institutional globalization would be furthered. Whether or to what extent that could become the case is a matter of further debate and analysis, and is likely to point particularly to the need to come to grips with evolving patterns of interaction and confrontation between different sets of norms and practices.[15]

Principle and Practice

In retrospect, the early 1990s may come to be viewed as one of the high points in good governance thinking. A broad set of interrelated concepts was formulated that delineated areas of concern with policy structures and processes, and more specific issues were put forward for reform in the context of aid packages with conditionalities attached. The dismantling of "over-developed" state structures in Third World countries seemed within reach, while multi-party democratization appeared to be waiting for an external nod of encouragement.[16] It was anticipated that carrot-type inducements would help facilitate these various transformations, thus bringing about a wholesale overhaul of the developmental state typical of the Cold War era. International expectations were high as to what the idea of good governance could highlight in terms of needed reforms and what the formulation and application of political conditions might be able to accomplish. The climate of the time, particularly as perceived from the heights of global institutions, was one full of promise regarding the potential for creating and directing a better, more "governable" world.

When putting principle into practice, however, some significant complexities became apparent. The idea of posing political conditionalities sounded easier in theory than it turned out in practice. Not surprisingly, in many countries there was a willy-nilly reception of and compliance with various donor-instigated political reform projects.[17] These projects and proposals were bound to affect stakes in local political processes and balances of power, which concerned actors would not readily give up. "Transparency" of political processes and the idea of level playing fields did not easily match prevailing political cultures and configurations of power, nor did they lend themselves to smooth translation into practical terms. Step by step, the anticipated applicability of conditions for good governance began to shrink. Two aspects in particular are worth noting.

First, in the immediate post-Cold War situation one broad area for international good governance attention was democratization and multi-partyism. There was, and still is, discussion about this, but not much changed. Some authoritarian regimes skillfully transformed themselves into dominant parties while retaining the facade of multi-partyism, such as in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Others continued unchanged, with as little or as much development support as they had before. Still other countries, such as Uganda, struggled to gain recognition for an alternative to multi-partyism, arguing that as it had evolved in the Western experience, multi-partyism did not necessarily constitute the sole route to democratic political processes, or, for that matter, to good governance.[18] Uganda's recent practices with the "Movement" system, however, have not sustained faith in the "no-party" alternative. By contrast, the 2002 Kenyan presidential elections that prompted the transfer of power from Daniel arap Moi to Mwai Kibaki, like similar transitions in Ghana and Benin, provided a notable instance of genuine multi-party democratization and government change. Clearly though, the credit for this must go as much to Kenyan voters as to donors.

All in all, this particular dimension of the governance theme is not living up to expectations. As already noted, the World Bank took the lead in de-emphasizing the political dimensions of governance in its own dealings with aid-recipient countries early on. Though the conditions of multi-partyism and democratization constituted key aspects of the political dimension of the international good governance agenda, they appear to be quietly slipping into the background.

Second, one of the original intentions of the good governance agenda was to enable donors to question aid-recipient countries' policy structures and processes, and to get them to alter them according to universal criteria and conditions established by the donors. Given the enduring definitional obscurities, nonetheless, the idea was ultimately to try to transform what donors perceived as bad governance into good governance. The feasiblility or universal validity of this approach could be questioned. More than ten years later, the experience of setting conditions appears to have become a sobering learning exercise: Donors and observers recount many examples of lip service and less than spontaneous implementation of conditions, which should not be too surprising.[19] Also, introducing policy conditionalities often meant inserting new, specific elements into highly complex processes and situations, leading to new complexities for which donors and recipients bear joint responsibility. In the process, donors ran the risk of becoming more enmeshed in the internal policy processes of recipient countries than they thought they bargained for.[20] After a few years of interplay between externally-initiated conditionalities and government-restructuring strategies, it became increasingly difficult to disentangle one from the other. In this light, attempts to measure the effectiveness of conditionalities also turned out to be problematic propositions and did not produce particularly promising results. Moreover, a strain on resources necessarily limited the scope of follow-up monitoring. Second thoughts about the practicability of the conditionality instrument as leverage thus began to preoccupy donors, along with recipients who naturally had their own reservations. It is primarily in the context of new sectoral policy involvement, in which several donors in recent years opted to concentrate their aid, that organizational and policy guidelines are now being stipulated in relatively great detail.

Discrepancies between words and reality are evident in other respects, as is illustrated in the case of Uganda. Various donors have chosen Uganda—the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as German, Danish, Dutch, British and American aid programs—for special support in light of its high growth rate in recent years, which is attributed to good governance. Yet, it ranks with Bangladesh and Nigeria on Transparency International's list of countries with the highest incidence of corruption.[21] Donors prefer to ignore this and hold on to official growth indicators, which enable them to keep betting on a winning horse.[22] Evidently, in more than one sense the area of good governance tends to invite double standards. The reason must be that, for the World Bank, IMF and various other donors, attaining high growth rates regardless of how they came about is a more important indicator of good governance than having a low corruption profile.

What Impacts?

If donor policies emphasizing criteria of good governance are less successful than anticipated, this is not to say they have had no impact. The phraseology of good governance in some ways has become as common in remote districts of African countries as it is in Washington, DC or other Western European capitals. This is partly due to a kind of echo effect brought about by many donor agencies—multilateral, bilateral and NGOs—repeating the good governance mantra over and over again, pledging their adherence to it and projecting it onto their target groups. In a recent Oxfam-assisted project document on participation and poverty alleviation in Uganda, it was put forward that people at the village level demanded good governance in terms of transparency and accountability from their rulers and administrators. Good governance recurs in speechmaking, in the context of public admonitions that in earlier periods would have called for proper administration, loyal service or perhaps pride in the nationalist party. Good governance also figures as a standard item for discussion at numerous seminars for civil servants and NGO staff, organized at hotels in African countries by various ministries with the support of different aid agencies. But it does not necessarily mean that basic structures and processes of government are subject to major change. Still, in the face of these limitations, as Graham Harrison reminds us, "we should not only stress the limits of reform or the problematic relations with broader social change, but should also recognize that any improvements in the efficiency of state action are significant in a generally difficult environment."[23]

In one respect, there is notable restructuring of governmental decision-making in various countries of Africa and Asia and, though perhaps not strictly following from the good governance discourse, it is often presented as closely related to it. With varying degrees of determination, decentralization is pursued in a number of contexts, commonly in response to donor pressures and encouragement, though at times also in conjunction with local interests in achieving greater autonomy for particular regions or groups. Decentralization has developed into a vast terrain of discussion and experiment, which is beyond the scope of this paper.[24] Suffice it to say that decentralization may provide some useful ground for enhancing local participation in some situations, but that participation often remains limited to the level of elites within particular localities. Also, some regions or localities have better natural resource endowments and planning capacities than others, which in turn may give rise to potentially unequal benefits from enhanced local autonomy. Meanwhile, due to fragmentation in the wake of decentralization, wider common interests between different decentralized entities may sometimes be neglected or impaired. These realities again underscore the difficulty of devising generally valid formulae for good governance.

From Conditionality to Selectivity

Given the mixed experiences with using good governance as a guiding principle for donor policies, and with trying to use aid as an incentive to induce improvements in governance practices, the present tendency on the donor front is to move from conditionality to selectivity. This move attempts to avoid the burden of monitoring policy processes, which require more attention and detailed knowledge than most donors, even the World Bank, can muster. Assessing Aid, also known as the Dollar report after its main author, David Dollar, finds that "good" performers in terms of growth rates are "best" able to absorb and utilize aid funds effectively.[25] It provides a policy rationale for a new approach: Through reference to the "scientific" evidence presented in this report, "selectivity" is advocated and rationalized as the most cost-effective and results-oriented donor strategy. Hence the keen interest with which this report is taken up in discussion in various donor circuits.[26] There are serious criticisms regarding the reliability and relevance of the way these particular findings have been construed.[28] Yet to several donor agencies, these appear of lesser concern compared to the perceived advantages on which the report seemed to open a window. These rest on the experience that attempts to steer governance restructuring programs from the outside turned out to be far more complicated and laborious engagements than optimistic aid agencies first assumed, and they welcome any "authoritative" report that appears to provide a theoretical justification for lessening their burden.

Conditionality Redefined

It is useful to ask what may happen to the notions of good governance and conditionality in light of these shifting insights and priorities. The Dutch policy reversal of a few years ago in favor of concentrating Dutch structural aid to a limited list of aid-receiving countries with strong governance records—measured by economic performance—constitutes one example of this new trend. Paradoxically, the encouragement of good governance through political conditions no longer figures as an area of prime policy attention in this new scenario. Good governance is assumed present to begin with, though elevated now as a key criteria for selection to the status of "most-favored" aid-recipient countries as far as Dutch aid is concerned.[28] Similarly, the U.S. government, also reflecting World Bank policy re-orientations, recently adopted the same basic position in redirecting its own aid policies, though it is uncertain of course whether it will maintain that stand in the wake of its war against Iraq. By contrast, Danish and other Scandinavian aid is not tied—yet—to the single criterion of good governance.[29] Other donors are presumably still making up their minds as to whether they will shift from "conditionality" to "selectivity," though the World Bank's lead in these matters would make a broader adoption of this approach likely.

Obviously, however, to take the existence of good governance as a criterion for deciding which countries qualify for assistance and which do not, is something quite different from trying to demand improvements in terms of good governance as a condition to aid. In the new thinking, "bad" governance in principle will remain bad governance, unless the government concerned is so keen to qualify for aid that it reforms its governing structures to meet the required criteria—which seems unlikely to happen. Even if it does, the question might arise again as to which criteria that would involve. On the side of donors as well as recipients, clarity as to what good governance would imply would be presupposed. In reality that clarity is still difficult to obtain, as the word itself, magic as it may sound, does not contain it. Rather than a step forward in the thinking in terms of good governance, it could be regarded as a setback in the face of the problematic attempts to come to grips with the complexities of good governance as a policy objective, both conceptually and in practice. As Jan Pronk has recently argued, "what really matters is not 'good policies,' but 'better policies,' better than before, to achieve a greater impact. Policy improvement and better governance should not be seen as pre-conditions for development and for development aid, but also as development objectives themselves."[30]

Thus one may justifiably ask what future there is for good governance as an operational concept in the context of aid policies. First, while it remains difficult to specify or reach consensus about its contents, it seems likely that good governance will continue to figure as a general, fairly open but still vague term with which to register one's approval or disapproval of the particular administrative and political practices of governments, by somehow suggesting that higher standards exist. In that case, the label of good governance becomes a political tool justifying and rationalizing choices that are made on other, possibly arbitrary grounds.

One sub-area that typically comes up for special attention in donor-recipient relationships under the heading of governance is that of financial accountability; indeed, it is a major motivation for raising issues of good governance. Quite possibly, when other, less tangible concerns lose their immediate pertinence or self-evidence, or when donors sense they do not have a grip on them, it is this core of financial accountability questions that stands out as the heart of good governance concerns. One already sees good governance, transparency and accountability posing as a trinity of synonymous bullet points with particular reference to financial management. It seems possible that if broader notions of good governance evaporate, their exit may well coincide with increased emphasis on the more tangible issues of financial accountability—which as a matter of fact is any bank's right, if not obligation, to raise.

Contemplating Alternative Priorities

The notion of good governance initially seemed full of promise as a donor policy concept and instrument. The question should be raised, however, whether it was strictly necessary—and prudent—for good governance and political conditions to be as closely linked as they have been. If good governance, broadly defined and allowing for different interpretations, is considered a worthwhile objective, why attach conditions? Could one not consider development assistance programs that support such objectives without attaching conditions?

What this would call for is a reversal of the relevant relationships concerned. It might be illustrated in the case of Somalia, now without an overarching state framework but with initial efforts in different regions to establish basic government services, such as in Somaliland and the regional state of Puntland in the Northeast. At this time the new governments and various civic groups in Somalia would welcome help in their efforts to reconstitute a different kind of state structure, but that is a complex challenge indeed. Only a few donors are prepared to give this even cautious attention, while most prefer a wait-and-see attitude. If the position of good governance first, then aid, were to be followed in this case, Somali efforts might not qualify for a hundred years for anything like structural development assistance. Yet, this is a case where needs are beyond dispute, and assistance in creating some meaningful form of good governance would be eagerly accepted, though constituting a goal in its own right rather than the fulfillment of a condition to qualify for aid. With cases like this, is it not valid to reverse the standard approach to thinking about international development assistance, seeing it in terms of recipient-donor, rather than donor-recipient, relations?

Illusory as this may seem at the present moment, in principle such a reversal would call for a situation in which donors would be available on demand, rather than being in command. In such an imagined situation, "demanding" countries—as an alternative expression to "recipient" countries—might be expected to take the initiative, basically saying, "this is our program for reconstruction, would you be willing to help?" "Supplying" countries, which through some forum could pledge to be ready to receive such requests, might respond by donating what they could afford, and what they believe constituted a reasonable contribution. This would reverse the prevailing situation in which donor governments typically develop their programs, preferences and priorities and revise them at an ever-increasing pace, while at best recipient countries try to figure out how they might fit in or if they meet the criteria underlying the latest preoccupation of donors. The idea would require much more flexibility and adjustment on the supply side—which is admittedly difficult from the point of view of budget control. However, it would allow demanding countries to regain some sense of command over their policy formulation and policy integration.

Concluding Remarks

Notions of good governance and political conditions form the cornerstones for a series of interlocking policy criteria and initiatives that have been prominent on the international aid front for well over a decade. Bestowed in the post-Cold War era with high expectations as to the broadened policy objectives they might help accomplish, it is increasingly becoming apparent that these expectations were rather overstretched. Posing political conditions to induce good governance clearly did not—and could not—work out as envisaged. As a policy metaphor, the phrase has thus lost much of its appeal. As a result, the particular ensemble of donor policy concepts and instruments associated with it is now in retreat. Conceivably, the good governance metaphor might have had a different career path if donors had not launched it with an eye on being able to attach political conditionalities to it.

Today, new kinds of donor-recipient relations are increasingly being favored. Donors prefer comprehensive sector programs, put in place through detailed contractual agreements with selected countries. Notions of good governance are likely to remain part of donor parlance, but with less ambitious anticipations about the scope for intervention and political restructuring that was attached to them earlier. Within the donor discourse, the policy metaphor of good governance has had a remarkable succession of connotations. While first figuring as a key objective in donor development and foreign policy in its own right, donors now increasingly present it as a selection criterion for aid recipient countries. However, to what extent the selections concerned actually measure up to the standards implied remains unclear and questionable. Meanwhile, "good governance" more broadly appears to evolve into a general—even often-used—figure of speech without much practical consequence.

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[1] Martin Doornbos, "State Formation Processes under External Supervision: Reflections on 'Good Governance,'" in Olav Stokke, ed., *Aid and Political Conditionality* (London: Frank Cass, 1995).

[2] A useful discussion of some such efforts is given by Joachim Ahrens, "Towards a Post-Washington Consensus: The Importance of Governance Structures in Less Developed Countries and Economies in Transition," in Niels Hermes and Wiemer Salveda, eds., *State, Society and Development: Lessons for Africa?* (CDS Report No. 7, University of Groningen, 1999).

[3] cf. Göran Hyden and Michael Bratton, eds., *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1992); Adrian Leftwich, "Governance, The State and the Politics of Development," *Development and Change* 25, no. 2 (1994): 363-86.

[4] Göran Hyden and Michael Bratton, eds., *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1992).

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