

Was the Good Governance Agenda Politically Neutral?

Written by Georg Berger

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The discourse on development rests on a persisting conception of the existence of what Hout describes as the presence of specific “gaps”. (Hout, 2007, p.11) Depending on the disciplinary background, policy-makers and analysts will emphasize different gaps that hinder the advancement of development in third world countries. Economists would for example argue that a lack of capital and infrastructure in developing countries is one of the main issues. Others would point to a lack of democratic institutions, whilst some stress a lack of education. Despite the differences in opinion on the causes of the gaps, there seems to be a broad consensus that the need for better governance is an essential requirement for the enhanced effectiveness of aid. (Ibid, p.12)

Governance, originally defined by the World Bank as “the exercise of political power to manage a nation’s affairs”, has since the 1990s, been pivotal in the discussion on political and economic reform in developing countries. (World Bank, 1989, p.60; Doornbos, 2001, p.93; Conzelmann, 2003, p.468) The negative results of the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, which were characterized by a seeming inability of African states to implement and profit from economic reforms, gave rise to the conceptualization of governance-deficits as a main barrier to successful development. Thus, the lack of good governance became the new gap which was hindering successful implementation of structural adjustment programs. Good governance was constructed as a technocratic approach towards solving problems of development, hence, the “good” in good governance referred to effectiveness and efficiency. (Konigs in Demmers, 2005, p.266)

This perception portrayed good governance as a concept that intended to go beyond the liberal, open-market paradigm which characterized the structural adjustment agenda, and take a depoliticized approach towards development. (Ibid., p.267) The seeming neutrality, coupled with apparent politico-cultural sensibility, reinforced by the intrinsic strength of the development discourse, being the belief to eradicate poverty, enriched the imagination of policy-makers and development theorists alike. (Doornbos, 2001, p.95-97) The very seductive belief of “doing good” has thus continued to survive, due to its apparent intrinsic ethical strength. Thus, one can think of good governance as a concept which restructured the development discourse in order to continue to please the desire of the donor community to “do good”, especially after the rather sobering experiences of structural adjustment policies.

However, the politics of “doing good”, whilst seemingly neutral, were politically charged. (Harrison, 2005, p.1) The good governance agenda outlined in the World Bank report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, has a wide range of political prescriptions, which mainly reflect the same neo-liberal, open-market paradigm of the structural adjustment programs. (Ibid., p.3) Thus, privatization and democratic reform, with a strong emphasis on the empowerment of civil society, are all interdependent key features of the good governance agenda. Whilst emphasizing an awareness of local tradition and culture, the discourse simply works towards justifying the continuation of structural adjustment policies. The next three sections will outline and evaluate the political components of the good governance agenda.

Cultural Awareness and the “Evil” Weberian State

The 1989 World Bank report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, will be pivotal to my analysis. This specific report is particularly interesting as it does not have any direct suggestions for political reform. The content ranges from topics such as “Sustainable with equity” and “Investing in people” to extremely practical

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chapters dealing with agriculture, mining and energy policies. (World Bank, 1989, p.v) The report does not include a chapter on democracy, transparency, or the rule of law. Thus, at first sight, it seems to be very technocratic, rather than politically prescriptive. However, as will be shown, the language and arguments the World Bank uses in this report have far reaching political implications.

The World Bank's argument commences by outlining the problems of post independence development efforts, arguing that the main cause for unsuccessful development was a lack of politico-cultural awareness of the governmental apparatus. Thus, in the words of the World Bank, "Africa's governments were grafted onto traditional societies and were often alien to the indigenous cultures." (World Bank, 1989, p.38) A similar argument was made by Landell-Mills, one of the Worldbank's leading policy advisors, who affirmed that "(...) both donors and many western-educated African leaders acted as though they were convinced that development could be achieved by the systematic application of rational "modern" techniques and concepts, using state institutions based on Weberian bureaucratic principles that were not compatible with the beliefs and practices of African society." (Landell-Mills, 1992, p.543) Because of this incompatibility, state inversion was inevitable, which caused an even stronger disconnect between the African peoples and their governments. (Forrest in, Villalon and Huxtable, 1998, p.45) In short, the post-colonial state was a "top-down approach", which had "demotivated ordinary people, whose energies most needed to be mobilized in the development effort." (World Bank, 1989, p.3) State-led development efforts failed because development strategies "did not build on the strength of traditional societies." (Ibid., p.60) The good governance agenda realized this disjuncture and claimed to have adopted a new and more suitable development strategy. Landell-Mills argued that governmental institutions need to correspond to "traditions, beliefs, and structures of its component societies." (Landell-Mills, 1992, p.545) The logical deduction is thus that development programs must reflect cultural values and be deeply rooted within the societies concerned. (World Bank, 1989, p.193)

Whilst agreeing with the World Bank on recognized that the Western state is "alien" to African indigenous society, and that a society should indeed organize in a manner which reflects its own values and tradition, the World Bank's argument fulfills two functions, which highly politicize the apparently purely technocratic good governance agenda. First of all, it uncouples the good governance agenda from past development strategies which had failed. Thereby, the World Bank and its good governance agenda maintain a moral right to continue the development discourse. A real departure from the hierarchical thinking which seems to be intrinsic within the development discourse is not achieved, and the thinking pattern of developing the underdeveloped only shifts to the technocratic approach of educating the uneducated, as the good governance agenda claims to provide the technical knowhow to solve development problems. More importantly, it does not only paint a picture of the Weberian state as conflicting with African society, but works towards disapproving state-led development. Hence, state-ownership of enterprises or redistributive policies, or state imposed trade-tariffs automatically carry a negative connotation, and are destined to fail since they do not correspond to indigenous customs and values. On the contrary, the good governance agenda does correspond to these values and is therefore the real solution to Africa's underdevelopment.

The African Homo Economicus

Whilst the western state apparatus is constructed as a hindrance to development, capitalism, "surprisingly" is not. The section of *The Development of African Enterprise*, in the World Bank's report portrays a tradition of African entrepreneurship. (World Bank, 1989, p.136-138) Many examples are presented, such as the trading of "fish, palm oil and other local commodities" in Western Africa organized by successful traders, often by women, referred to as "Market Queens"; the tradition of textile marketing in Togo; agricultural entrepreneurship in Côte d'Ivoire and small scale enterprises in Kenya. (Ibid., p.136) In short, Africans are portrayed as having a rich capitalist history and were extremely successful homines oeconomici. However, the post-colonial state emerged as an obstacle, curtailing entrepreneurial energy, and driving entrepreneurs into the informal sector. (Ibid., p.136-138) In contrast to the failure of state owned enterprises, business in the informal sector has been thriving. (Ibid., p.138) The main reason for the success of the informal sector is that maintains "close links with grass-root institutions" and is "supported by local values and traditions". (Ibid., p.138, 140) Financing for example, is organized around informal rotating funds called tonties or susus, and financial dealings are often agreed on "among family and friends." (Ibid., p.140)

The argument of the successful African entrepreneur and the alien state, form the key elements in the good

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governance's discourse on development. The administration of the post-colonial state has been oppressing the African entrepreneur, thus state curtailment becomes a strategy which would empower the ordinary African people. (Abrahamsen, 2000, p.51) It thereby moralizes the "rolling back" of the state, and accords with the strategies of structural adjustments. (Konigs in Demmers, 2005, p.267) The consequences flowing from this logic are far reaching. Within this argumentative framework economic liberalism emerges as the main element to solve underdevelopment in Africa. Additionally, the good governance agenda constructs an interdependent fusion between economic liberalism, democratization and civil society. (Abrahamsen, 2000, p.51)

Within the good governance agenda, economic liberalism becomes a necessity not only for economic, but also for democratic development. This argument is based on the assumption that economic liberalization creates alternative power forums, thereby decentralizing economic and political influence. (Harrison, 2004, p.103) Hence, economic liberalism should work towards dissolving neo-patrimonial networks and the ultra-privatization of the state apparatus which have hindered economic diversification and development. (World Bank, 1989, p.60) Additionally, this process should bring about a civil society that can counter balance the state and provide for more democratic politics.

The Role of African Civil Society within the Good Governance Agenda

The good governance discourse clearly states that in order for development to be successful, a "systematic effort to build a pluralistic institutional structure" must be undertaken. (World Bank, 1989, p.61) Thus, the role of civil society, which is supposed to "create links both upward and downward in society", is highlighted. (Ibid.) This should make the policy process more accessible to a wider variation of values and ideas. (Ibid.) At the same time, intermediate organizations can assert some pressure on public officials and make the policy process more accountable. (Ibid.) All in all, this should create a more democratic society. Within the argumentative framework of the good governance discourse, a reduction of the state and its institutions, and a liberalization of market forces, would by default enhance the workings of civil society, since such a process would decentralize political power and create a better opportunity for private organizations. Landell-Mills argues that such a process would automatically create "more participatory politics, greater public accountability, and hence basic democracy". (Landell-Mills, 1992, p.563) The good governance agenda portrays the state apparatus as the sole inhibitor of oppressive power, whilst civil society is seen as essentially liberal and democratic. Within this constellation, any curtailment of the state automatically represents an enhancement of democracy. Economic liberalism thus emerges as a tool for democratization. Unfortunately, this conceptualization oversimplifies the character of African civil society and is therefore rather troubling.

There is no doubt that civil society has contributed to the process of democratization, however, it has also opposed it. Like on any other continent, but particularly in Africa, "civil society is neither homogenous, nor wholly emancipatory". (Fatton, 1995, p.93) Additionally, it entails the potential of violent forms of particularisms. (Ibid., p.93) Civil society should therefore be perceived as a plural and non-unitary political and sometimes apolitical space. Authors such as Fatton, suggest that African civil society actually reflects the neo-patrimonial power structures of African societies. (Ibid., p.93) Fatton differentiates between three "ideal types", the predatory, quasi-bourgeois, and popular civil society, and only the empowerment of the latter would improve the outlook for democratic transition. However, "that empowerment faces huge difficulties", making the future of democracy on the continent highly uncertain. (Ibid., p.93)

Not only misconceiving the nature of African civil society, the good governance agenda also misinterprets the growth of voluntary associations. If the services of the state are retreating, numerous groups form in order to fill public services which the state is not providing anymore. (World Bank, 2002, p.2; Diouf, 1996, p.243) Such a process is only logical, and the willingness to undertake such projects should not be equated with an ability to support democratization. Often these groups were formed out of purely practical reasons, with no association to political parties or ideologies. (Diouf, 1996) Moreover, these associations often justifiably distrusted the state, which was either seen as predatory or irrelevant. (Fatton, 1995) This conflicting relationship between civil society and the state can in fact be seen as a hindrance for democratization, since civil society should normally engage with the state and thereby assert it. (Abrahamsen, 2000, p.55)

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Despite these ambiguities, the good governance agenda maintains that civil society is a crucial “force-multiplier” for the democratic project. The combination of the three concepts, the alien state, the indigenous African capitalist, and the importance of civil society, yields the following, highly politicized formula. The alien state is suppressive since it does not correspond to local values and tradition, and hinders the activity of the African homo economicus. Thus, any reduction of the state is seen as empowering the ordinary African. Economic liberalism, which reduces state activity and leads to a growth of civil society, is thereby conceptualized as a tool for democratization. This is in essence the same conclusion reached by Africanist and development analyst Rita Abrahamsen, who states that the good governance discourse continues to legitimize structural adjustment programs, whilst “simultaneously delegitimizing more interventionist and socialist strategies, which by implication become examples of poor governance”. (Abrahamsen, 2000, p.65)

Conclusion – Four Points of Criticism

The good governance agenda attempts to distance itself from past development projects that had failed. It does that by especially highlighting its politico-cultural sensitive claiming that it takes local costumes and traditions into account. It appears that the good governance discourse has the advantage to counter Eurocentric perceptions of political processes and incorporate traditional elements of societies in developing countries into the development discourse. (Adam, 2000, p.3) However, the main task which the good governance agenda seeks to fulfill is to justify a continuation of the policies of structural adjustment as a tool for democratization. Whilst on first sight, the “good” in good governance seems to be politically neutral, it soon shows that within its argumentative framework, good governance is not achievable without economic liberalism. The reduction of the state and its institutions thus remain a central objective and the good governance discourse ensures that this strategy attains a democratic connotation.

Considerations that liberal economic policies might damage the economy of the country are sidelined. Without getting into too much detail on economic theory, it is widely accepted that neo-classical thinking of open markets and comparative advantage do not play out as smoothly in the real world as in theory. (Kotte, 2010, p.17) The negative trade experiences which many developing countries faced in the 1980s and 1990s after opening their markets in accord to structural adjustment is prove enough. (Ibid., p.18) In this context it is more than justified that many African governments lament the loss of “policy space” in order to pursue national development strategies. (Ibid., p.21)

Connected to this problem is that the governance discourse entails some highly undemocratic tendencies. The donor community, especially the World Bank and the IMF, can dictate domestic policy of developing countries, which threatens to greatly decrease the ability of self-government and self-determination. This kind of democracy is politically “emasculated”, since externally imposed policies can only be slightly adjusted and political dissent is “persistently overruled by the government’s accountability to its financial sponsors”. (Konings in Demmers, 2005, p.270) By linking good governance with economic liberalism, the good governance discourse reinforces this tendency. The fact that good governance can only result from economic liberalism is in fact an undemocratic conditionality since it limits the choice of economic strategies. Thus, Thandika Mkandawire has come to refer to African countries as “choiceless democracies”, in which adherence to economic liberalism is the only available strategy. (Ibid., p.270)

The perception of African agency as placed in the realm of passivity is common place. However, African agency within international political processes is often underestimated. Thandika Mkandawire paints a picture of a rather passive African agency, whilst Jean-Francois Bayard highlights the strong influence of African agency. (Bayart, 1999) The logic of the good governance discourse might have worked out smoothly within a Western setting, but in Africa the effects of structural adjustment have been Africanized.

In fact, when examining the actual effects of privatization and economic liberalism, instead of the assumed benefits, the high level to which good governance reforms have been subsumed by the interests of African actors, is astonishing. (Bayart, 1999, p.70) Instead of countering neo-patrimonial networks and nepotism, liberalization measures were so effectively incorporated into the workings of African political economies, that they reinforced the tendencies they were intended to counter. (Ibid., p.70) This has occurred to an extent that Béatrice Hibou has claimed that African countries are witnessing an “economy of plunder.” (Ibid., p.71) Thus, the nepotistic workings of

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neo-patrimonial networks were simply adopted to correspond and survive the privatization of public enterprises and the liberalization of the banking system. (Ibid., p.71-76) In short, economic liberalism has not led to stronger democratization. However, the good governance agenda has, and continues, to proclaim a synergy between economic liberalism and democracy. The fact that economic liberalism and privatization have caused an “economy of plunder” and undermined political equality and the logic of democracy, is expelled into the realm of the unimaginable.

Thus, from a Western point of view, the good governance agenda and its desire to “do good”, have failed. This conclusion is probably the greatest weakness of the development discourse in general. There seems to be an enduring inability to understand and accept that Africa is modernizing in its own way. The Western development discourse remains authoritarian and coercive. (Ziai, 2010, p.26-27) The good governance agenda continues the dualism of the developed and the undeveloped and whether there will be a fundamental shift within the discourse remains to be seen. Possibly the concept of substantial development is a positive drift. (Ibid., p.28) If the underlying insights of the substantial development discourse, which is that the Western model of industrialized economies is in the long run ecologically unsustainable, is taken seriously, then one can also depart from the idea that Western countries have a valid claim as role models. (Ibid.,p.28) In this case, the development of Western nations would not be conceived as desirable, but rather as regrettable “maldevelopments”, thereby abolishing the fundamental dualism between the developed and undeveloped. However, the substantial governance discourse already shows a tendency to locate the problem-solving competence in the political north and displays a focus on technical and market-oriented, rather than political and market-interfering solutions. (Ibid., p.28)

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