What does governance mean for the Commonwealth?

The past, present and future

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This article discusses how the Commonwealth Secretariat’s position on the concept of governance has changed over time. In the past, it was informed by declarations, speeches and policies. In the present, governance is based on the concept of good enough governance. In the future, it will be guided by good governance initiatives.

Current changes respond to a call for a common framework to guide the Secretariat’s governance-related activities across the Commonwealth. The main argument in this article is that, until recently, the Secretariat did not have an overarching framework that defines governance and its general principles within the Secretariat. The lack of a single definition and meaning of governance within the Secretariat has engendered differences in ways various parts of the organisation view governance.

Background

There is no commonly accepted definition of governance among scholars and practitioners since the concept emerged in popularity in the 1990s. The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) definition of good governance more or less places greater emphasis on sustainable human development, the elimination of poverty, and public administration. The World Bank puts emphasis on economic and social resources for development, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasises human rights, democracy and legitimacy of governments. Indeed, the OECD suggests:

*Good, effective public governance helps to strengthen democracy and human rights, promote economic prosperity and social cohesion, reduce poverty, enhance environmental protection and the sustainable use of natural resources, and deepen confidence in government and public administration.*

Previously, the Secretariat has not had an overarching definition of governance used as a basis for inter-divisional engagement within the Secretariat or for discussion among member countries beyond the general tenets of good governance.

The Commission for Africa emphasises that the issue of good governance and capacity-building is what lies at the core of all of Africa’s problems. The Commission holds the opinion that the absence of good governance has proved to be particularly damaging to the corrective intervention role of government. Programmes of poverty alleviation and environmental protection, for example, can be totally undermined by a lack of public accountability, corruption and the capture of public services by elites. It puts more emphasis on management capabilities, competencies and achieving set goals with limited resources.

Despite the lack of a commonly agreed definition, good governance is almost universally accepted as a key factor in promoting socio-economic development and alleviating poverty. There is a general agreement that good governance is the highest state of development and management of a nation’s affairs. It is good that a democratic form of government is in place, that people participate in decision-making processes, that services are delivered efficiently, that human rights are respected, and that the government is transparent, accountable and productive – a position highlighted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Declaration.

The lack of a commonly agreed definition reinforces the need for a Commonwealth-specific, and pan-Commonwealth, approach to framing and defining ‘governance’ and ‘good governance’ – at least to provide a common basis for understanding and discussion among member countries, external partners and the Secretariat. The inherent value of developing a conceptual framework on governance further emphasises the need for the Secretariat’s position to actively participate in the international dialogue.

The past

In the past, the Secretariat regarded good governance as a means to an end in that, in general, it contributes to economic growth, human development and social justice. Within the Commonwealth, good governance is used as a means of addressing other contemporary issues such as:

- institutional development
- capacity-building
- decentralisation of power and authority
- relations between politicians and appointed officials, and
- co-ordination and the roles that Heads of Government play in promoting good governance.

Thus, governance can be viewed as the conceptual middle ground between the ‘statist’ development interventions of the 1970s (goods can be developed and provided by government), and the free market, structural adjustment era that followed through the 1980s and early 1990s (goods can be developed and provided through markets, government’s role should be minimised).
The Commonwealth had shown its commitment to good governance through declarations made by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their biennial summits. The 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration, for example, committed members to the democratic process and institutions that reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government, and fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief. These declarations had generally guided the Secretariat’s work on governance.

The present

It is important to note that the Secretariat currently works to strengthen in-country governance arrangements through many of its programmes, and has articulated positions on the subject in the past through speeches, declarations and policies. The current work on governance in the Secretariat, predicated on these existing bases, lacks clarification, and a unified and coherent approach. The lack of a single definition and position on governance within the Secretariat has engendered differences in the way various divisions view governance. To this end, there are calls for the Secretariat to develop a framework that will define governance and its general principles within the Secretariat.

There is also international current thinking that has called for a reversal of donor-led aid practices so that ‘donors would be available “on demand”, rather than “in command”’. The argument is that too much of current practice allows donor institutions to develop their programmes, preferences and priorities, while recipient countries are forced to try to fit in and determine whether and how they can meet off-changing criteria and benchmarks, rather than countries directing their own initiatives with support from partners.

This approach fits well with the Secretariat’s current philosophy in which country requests tend to drive programmes. Building on this existing approach may allow the Secretariat to demonstrate leadership in this area as many donors are struggling to fully implement the commitments. The Paris Declaration also speaks to the need for the Secretariat to focus on strategic partnerships to ensure co-ordinated and streamlined delivery for member countries and to strengthen evaluation to promote a result orientation.

This shift in thinking taken by some bilateral and multilateral donor agencies in dealing with good governance requires the Secretariat to consider a strategic position for itself in this sphere – particularly that some donor agencies and countries have shifted away from programming to strengthen governance, and are instead using governance indicators as a means of determining which countries are ready to maximise the utility of aid. Given this pre-selection approach to working with countries, the Secretariat may strategically position itself to support member countries in accessing needed investments by providing technical assistance that strengthens governance. In this way, the limited funds available through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) can be leveraged by the Secretariat and member states to secure much greater infrastructure-building investments from other donors.

What is clear is that each player in the field of governance, whether academic or development-oriented, has developed a definition suitable to their unique context and mission. While there is no agreement on what conceptual framework to employ, a common framework may not be desirable since a variety of approaches may generate useful contrasts and insights. Thus, an approach based on the Commonwealth’s core principles and the Secretariat mandate may add value to the discourse and would promote contextual alignment with Secretariat programmes.

The future

In the past, the Secretariat viewed good governance as context-specific in that the needs and preferences of one country may not necessarily mirror those of another. The Secretariat therefore considers that an all-encompassing approach seeking to institutionalise the ideal state of governance risks overloading both the organisation and developing member countries with an imposing list of reforms. These countries have little sense of how to stage or prioritise discrete improvements, what is feasible and what is not, and what is most desirable and appropriate given the country context and political will. From this perspective, it seems ‘better to assess capacity and feasibility more carefully, target fewer changes, and work towards good enough rather than ideal conditions of governance’. According to Fritz et al:

…the ‘good enough governance’ agenda emphasises the minimal conditions of improved governance that are necessary to enable further political, social and economic development. Compared with the good governance agenda, it is less normative and more ‘situational’ and pragmatic. It is less concerned with setting general or idealised benchmarks of governance. It directs attention to the next steps to be taken, given the current state of affairs and the political opportunity structure in a country. The ‘good enough’ governance concept thus bridges key concerns of both the developmental state agenda (achieving results on social progress) and the good governance agenda (the development of fair and humane rules of the game).

Given that the majority of Commonwealth countries are developing states, and that 32 of the 54 current members are considered small states that face inherent capacity challenges, the doctrine of tailored, step-wise and necessary interventions provided by the good enough governance approach offers a strong foundation for the Secretariat’s engagement in governance realms.

The approach focuses attention on strengthening processes and institutions, which are much longer-term, country-specific challenges compared to prescribing a set of generic policies to spur development. As such, the Secretariat will continue to treat each member country individually, with particular sensitivity to the political environment, culture and unique needs. While a generic approach based on a scorecard or other evaluative tool may not correspond with an in-country context or may overload capacity, a tailored, country-led approach focused on developing systems rather than prescribing policy has a greater chance of providing sustained benefits.
In addition, the Secretariat’s ‘trusted partner’ status might strengthen the argument that it should not attempt to promote a broad, idealised framework that may engender a ‘top-down’ approach, but rather continue to work co-operatively and responsively with members. However, this should not be taken to suggest that in the Commonwealth good governance is not important to development; rather, incremental, targeted improvements that are sensitive to a country context are more credible than adopting a slate of reforms in a wholesale fashion on the basis that development is impossible without ‘ideal’ governance. Hyden also notes that ‘the roads to good governance are not paved in a linear or identical fashion. There are historical differences among regions, bound to affect the way forward’. These notwithstanding, the Secretariat recognises the need for a common framework to guide its governance-related activities.

**Good governance initiative**

The Secretariat identified the need for an encompassing conceptual framework to achieve governance-related outcomes across the Commonwealth. The framework is intended to offer a whole-of-Secretariat view of good governance that will promote shared responsibility for strategic decision-making, country-needs assessment, project approval, programme evaluation, partnership opportunities and programme development. Ultimately, this initiative will enable the Secretariat to forge a clear niche in a crowded field, demonstrate thought leadership on an issue of concern to members, and strengthen its reputation for delivering value to members.

Just as many major bilateral and multilateral agencies have developed definitions or frameworks of good governance, so the Secretariat seeks to define good governance as a basis of giving focus to the organisation of its activities and for evaluating member country progress in building the preconditions for democracy and sustainable development.

The Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) of the Secretariat worked with other divisions to develop a governance framework to support Secretariat activities that have a governance dimension. As a starting point, the framework provides the following working definition of good governance in the context of Commonwealth countries.

> The Commonwealth views governance as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. Good governance enables the development of public value by promoting the principles of accountability, transparency, predictability, capacity and participation throughout the institutions and processes that regulate the public realm.

The framework offers strategic direction and a focus, for governance activities and to influence other plans and initiatives, like the strategic plan. Research and consultations to develop a concept paper have been undertaken. The governance framework includes:

- a statement or definition of good governance
- a set of good governance principles
- a proposal for how various Secretariat activities fit together under the framework.

It also seeks to develop a series of measures or indicators of progress on each principle based on further research and collaboration across the Secretariat and within the Commonwealth.

The Secretariat has the view that a robust and inclusive framework would provide a foundation for governance-related programmes and activities in the Commonwealth, specifically by:

- providing common direction and goals – working together
- supporting the identification of key strengths and areas for attention – strategic programme development
- establishing a basis by which to assess partnership opportunities – partnering to deliver, and
- focusing on measurement through indicators – demonstrating value-added.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, we:

- established a cross-Secretariat project team to support research and development of the framework
- prepared a draft concept paper on good governance, followed by consultations inside and outside of the Secretariat, and
- developed a definition, and identified five principles of good governance – as listed below.

**Principle 1: Accountability** – is the ability of citizens to hold elected and appointed officials responsible for specific actions, activities or decisions.

**Principle 2: Transparency** – is the public access to knowledge of the rules, policies and strategies of government.

**Principle 3: Predictability** – refers to (i) the existence of laws, regulations and policies to regulate society; and (ii) their fair and consistent application.

**Principle 4: Capacity** – refers to the institutional and organisational infrastructure and capability necessary to formulate and achieve desired policy outcomes.

**Principle 5: Participation** – recognises that people are at the heart of democratic development, and therefore participation is a key principle for good governance.

The next steps are to:

- develop a strategy paper focused on implementation, and
- research and collaborate with member countries on assessment indicators associated with the governance principles in their countries.

**Conclusion**

Recognising the need for a common framework to guide its governance-related activities, the Secretariat has acknowledged the need for a common conceptual framework to achieve governance-related outcomes across the Commonwealth. The framework envisages a whole-of-Secretariat view of good governance that will promote shared responsibility for strategic decision-making.
country-needs assessment, project approval, programme evaluation, partnership opportunities and programme development. Eventually, this initiative will enable the Secretariat to forge a clear niche, demonstrate leadership on issues of concern to member countries, and strengthen its reputation for delivering value to members.

Endnotes
9 Doornbos, ibid.; Kjær, op.cit.
10 Dahl-Østergaard et al, op. cit.
13 Hyden et al, op. cit.

Mission
To protect members of the Public against acts of maladministration and violation of human rights in the Public Sector through independent and impartial investigations.

Vision
To be the leading Institution in the promotion of good governance and respect for human rights in the Public Sector.

The Botswana Ombudsman was established by a 1995 Act of Parliament and started operating in 1997. The Ombudsman is a presidential appointee in consultation with the Leader of the Opposition on a four year contract. His duty is to investigate administrative actions or decisions taken by public institutions and to recommend corrective action to the public authorities. He investigates upon receipt of complaints from members of the public or of his own motion and makes recommendations for remedial action.

The Botswana Ombudsman, as a public protector, is independent of the government of the day or any political party ensuring finality of and respect for Ombudsman decisions.

The current Ombudsman, Mr Ofentse Lepodise, is assisted by support services staff who are appointed on a permanent and pensionable basis.

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