

Working for better governance: a personal view

Peter Owen

There is no shortage of material making the connection between good governance and development. It is fairly easy to show that rich countries on the whole have higher scores on most of the indicators used to track governance. Unfortunately, the relationships between governance and development are complex and often poorly understood. There are still some who have forgotten their basic statistics – i.e. that correlation does not imply anything about causality. While the reform of some aspects of governance might remove a key constraint, others might improve only after development has already taken place. And both governance and development are influenced by other factors, such as politics, the international environment and the changing climate of ideas.

Bad governance can create high costs and cause widespread suffering. But it is not very helpful to suggest that all governance problems should be tackled all at once. Most countries can only handle a limited amount of reform at one time. 'Good enough' governance is often regarded as a more realistic objective: address binding constraints, work with the grain and where there is political space, and pursue reforms that societies can afford. But identifying where to start, what to do and in what order is not at all straightforward. There is, however, a growing body of research by academics, multilateral and bilateral agencies that demonstrates the need for a sound understanding of context and a greater willingness to experiment: try a few things out, see if they work, and learn from the experience.

Opportunities for governance reform may not have an obvious governance label. The desire to improve the workings of, for example, an education system or road maintenance will generally involve a range of governance issues. These might include arrangements for funding, administration, management and monitoring, as well as broader issues involving state–society relations and empowerment of citizens. There is a growing literature too on governance and growth, demonstrating that well-informed pragmatism by policy-makers is preferable to grand state plans founded on generalities.

This all sounds very obvious but it is striking how often the principles are not observed. Evaluation material suggests that reforms are often started in areas where the incentives, motivation and capacity are not supportive. Sometimes reforms are designed on the basis of a short consultancy carried out by 'experts' who lack the contextual knowledge and necessary relations with stakeholders to design programmes that work, and sometimes the monitoring is too slow or unsophisticated to pick up what is really happening. There are examples of good practice but these tend to make heavy demands on professional and management capacity and require long timescales. These requirements sit uneasily with the demand by some donors for a hands-off approach and a short timescale; but donors need to recognise the need to build their own capacity before trying to help others.

Good diagnosis often begins with some knowledge of the lessons drawn from good practice and by research. The internet has made much of this more accessible, such as the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) website (www.gsdr.org) and the U4 Anti-Corruption (www.u4.no) website. Evaluation material on the U4 site, for example, contains advice illustrating many of the above points. Again, it may seem obvious but the same points have been made repeatedly over the past several years.

Anti-corruption initiatives fail because of over-large 'design-reality gaps'; that is, too great a mismatch between the expectations built into their design as compared to on-the-ground realities in the context of their deployment.

Richard Heeks, U4 Brief, 2011:2

The Commonwealth is well placed to work for a more informed approach to governance reform by challenging the mindset that takes an oversimplified approach to diagnosis design and implementation. There is scope too for developing its website for disseminating more of what the Commonwealth has learned, informed by good practice and research.

Peter Owen worked for several years as a DFID senior governance adviser. The views expressed are entirely personal.