

The Future of Governance in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Attempting to predict the future of governance, or any other social or political process, is difficult and unlikely to be very accurate. There are so many variables involved in producing the outcomes that any prediction is almost certainly doomed. Further, the future may be very different in different parts of the world and in different countries. But, to begin to design future governance for the developing countries, we do need to think about alternative scenarios for providing effective governance in these societies. Good governance in some absolute sense may be difficult to obtain, but perhaps we can attain “good enough” governance (Grindle, 2007).

The first question is, however, what do we mean by the term “governance”. This term has been used in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts, and to some scholars it is merely an “empty signifier” (Offe, 2009). In this paper I will be discussing governance as steering the economy and society toward collective goals (see Pierre and Peters, 2020). Whether those collective goals are set through a democratic process or through more authoritarian means, governance focuses on the capacity to reach those goals. As such, governance is very much linked to the study of public policy, given that policy is the means through which collective goals can be attained.

Some of the scenarios for the future of governing in developing countries presented here will be similar to those for more economically and politically developed countries. All countries will be facing challenges such as climate change, food security, and migration and will have to find ways of confronting these “wicked problems,” and many of the governance challenges for the future will transcend national borders. And there are many similar domestic challenges, such as coping with populist demands against government. Likewise, all countries will have many of the same ideas and technologies available to help improve governance.

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But it is difficult to deny that developing countries will face their own particular challenges, and will have to do so with fewer resources, and often with less legitimacy, than do the governments of more developed political systems. Further, the nature of the social and economic systems within which the governments of less developed countries are embedded may make the process of governance more difficult. Much of the resilience and capacity of governance in more developed countries comes from the strength of civil society, and the capacity to delegate activities to non-governmental actors, or to collaborate with them (Ansell and Gash, 2007). That delegation appears less viable in many developing countries, or if there is delegation it may give away too much of central steering capacity to actors such as clans or warlords.

As we think about designing governance for less-developed countries we should perhaps begin with some standard critiques of governance in those countries. One critique is that government is inefficient and excessively bureaucratic, in the connotative meaning of the term. Another standard critique is that governments in many of these societies are corrupt. Yet another critique is that the civil servants have little public service motivation and serve themselves rather than the people. The question then becomes whether altering formal institutions and procedures of governance will be capable of altering the quality of governance provided to citizens.

The nature of governance depends in part also on what the responsibilities of the State are going to be. If the goal is to be only a Night Watchman state and provide minimal public services then the strategy for governance will be different from that for a Supermarket State that attempts to provide a wide array of goods and services to citizens (Christensen, 2003). A minimalist state is easier to manage and to sustain than is a more complex state delivering many public services, but the latter state tends to be what the public wants, and demands.

With all the above caveats in mind, I will now proceed to develop a set of alternative scenarios for governance in less developed countries. As already noted, some of these scenarios may be equally applicable to more developed governments. Even then, however, the context within which the scenarios are being implemented will affect the way in which they can be implemented and their likelihood of success.

1) Continued Centralized Governing

The first scenario for the future of governance is maintaining the status quo for many, if not most cases and function with a centralized form of governing. Despite pressures from international donors of increased decentralization there is a tendency for central governments to dominate governance activities. This centralized approach to governing may persist because of a perceived need to exert control over economic and social life in the country as well as to create uniformity. The desire to create uniformity through centralization may also reflect the existence of ethnic and regional divisions within the country that may be accentuated by more decentralized forms of governing. Further, having a centralized regime may make the best use of scarce human resources within a country.

Centralized governance has been successful in producing development in some countries. For example, the “Little Tigers” in Asia were able to produce economic development, and in most cases significant democratization, with highly centralized governments (Thompson, 2004). While that centralized form of governance was perhaps easier to implement in small areas such as Singapore, it was also successful in somewhat larger systems such as Taiwan and South Korea. And in Singapore that style of governance was successful in addressing potential tensions in a multi-racial society.

While there are virtues in the centralized version of governance, there are also reasons for considering moving away from that format. Centralized governance may be too rigid to adapt to changing circumstances and to differing needs across a country.

Further, centralized governance may limit participation and reduce chances for enhancing democracy. Finally, in more political terms, centralized regimes may be more amenable to control by autocrats and provide fewer checks on that autocracy.

2) Decentralizing and Deconcentrating Governance

The obvious alternative to centralized governance is to decentralize governance and give greater control over policymaking and implementation to sub-national governments.

The assumption of advocates of decentralization has been that a decentralized regime can adapt better to demands from the public and allow more options for public participation. In addition, decentralized governing reduces the burden of control from the center and may actually help improve the performance of central governments.

One standard strategy for moving control out of the center of government has been to create more autonomous or quasi-autonomous organizations usually referred to as agencies—within government itself (Lægreid and Verhoest, 2010). The organizations are generally given implementation responsibilities for a limited number of policies. By granting these organizations some autonomy they are able to focus more directly on that narrow range of policy priorities and can be insulated from political pressures. The danger is that, as has been true for numerous state-owned enterprises in developing countries, that the organizations become too independent and that they are also become subject to corruption.

Decentralizing governance may mean more than giving governance responsibilities to sub-national governments or to agencies within the central government. We can also think about decentralizing as creating enhanced opportunities for participation and allowing citizens more direct influence over policy choices. In a centralized conception of governing decisions tend to be made by central institutions within the State, especially the political executive and the public bureaucracy. Some of that decision-making can be delegated to the people through mechanisms such as referendums, participatory budgeting (Gilman and Wampler, 2019), and “civic populism” (Boyte, 2003). These are participatory mechanisms for making decisions about governance, and may still require formal public sector institutions to implement them.

3) Using the Private Sector

Governance is usually considered a public sector activity, and responsibility, but many aspects of governing can also be performed through the private sector. One characteristic of contemporary governing in the more affluent countries is a significant role for private sector actors in governance, to the extent that some scholars have talked about “governance without government”.

In particular, the capacity of civil society actors to make and implement public policy has been argued to replace the central role of government in policymaking and governance.

In addition to the observation of the large scale involvement of non-governmental actors in governing, there is a normative argument that widespread use of non-governmental actors will improve the quality of governance. The argument is that governments are slow, clumsy, bureaucratic and, even in democratic regimes, often unrepresentative of the wishes of the public. On the other hand, civil society actors can adapt more readily to changing demands and wants from the public, and can provide more direct representation of citizens in the policy process.

In addition to civil society as a source of governance, market actors can also play a role in governing. The neo-liberal movement that included the New Public Management has emphasized using market mechanisms as a means of allocating resources and implementing policy within the public sector (see Peters, 2010) as a means of improving services and reducing costs. Many of the functions usually performed by government can be performed by market organizations, and already are in some societies (Hodge, 2018). But care must be exercised when deciding whether public or private provision of services is preferable.

For both delegation to market actors and delegation to civil society organizations there are important questions about accountability. While those organizations do possess resources and in some instances may have greater legitimacy than government, there must still be means of holding them accountable when using public money. These organizations may have an incentive to shirk and to provide minimal services while still taking the public money. Further, many less-developed societies do not have sufficiently viable civil societies, or private economies, to be able to provide services effectively through these means.

4) E-government

One of the common remedies for governance, whether in more or less developed countries, is to utilize information and communications technology to improve governing.

The promise of “e-government” has been advanced for both more developed and less developed countries. Using technology is meant to have a number of important benefits for government and for citizens. For example, using information technology should reduce the cost and increase the speed of many routine government functions. In addition, by eliminating face-to-face contact between citizens and officials, e-governments should also reduce levels of corruption.

While extremely promising, and proven effective in countries such as Estonia, we should perhaps not be excessively optimistic about governing through ICT means. The most obvious barrier is access by citizens in societies with relatively low penetration by this technology. Cell phones have become ubiquitous, but computers less so, and the programs for delivering e-government must pay careful attention to access. In addition, some public services are perhaps better delivered by face to face contact. Social services are perhaps better delivered directly, albeit with support from the technology. And finally there can be concerns about privacy and data protection that arise whenever these technologies are present. E-government is not the panacea that some of its advocates would have us believe, but it is one more instrument that can be applied in the pursuit of better governance.

5) “Good Enough Governance”

International donor organizations, as well as national governments themselves, are in the pursuit of good governance (Weiss, 2010), usually understood to be government that is not corrupt, operates through the rule of law, and is at least moderately efficient. Good governance is a worthy goal, but perhaps at times an unattainable goal. Governments in developing countries face so many challenges that providing uniformly high quality governance across the country, and across all policy areas may be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Patterns of dysfunctional governance—corruption, red tape, etc. may be so entrenched that they are difficult to dislodge in favor of better forms of governing.

The alternative to attempting to create good governance throughout the political system is to focus attention on creating islands of excellence, and then building out from those organizations (Roll, 2014).

Reforming the entire government at once may require more resources that are available, so strategic choices may be made to focus on several key functions of government, or on organizations that appear already to be making progress in reform. For example, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) in Mexico was reformed during the 1990s and was able to manage the country's first truly free and fair elections.

Building good governance with this incremental strategy is slow and presents risks of backsliding when there are changes in government, or changes in priorities within a government. But it remains a viable approach to overcoming poor governance practices that have become ingrained within governments. The reformed services can be a beacon to the remainder of government, and to citizens, that better governing is possible. But then some clear strategy from building out from those islands of excellence must be established and implemented. Such a strategy will require identifying those parts of government most in need of reform, and the means of taking "lessons learned" from initial reforms and putting them into effect elsewhere in the public sector.

6) Making the Choices

I have presented the scenarios above as a set of distinct choices, but in reality the designer of governance arrangements may be able to fashion some hybrid choices to address specific governance problems. For example, even a centralized state may want to decentralize some of its activities especially those that provide direct services to citizens, and that confront different social patterns that may affect their delivery. Likewise, even a centralized state may want to involve the private sector-market or non-market—in the provision of services. And states that stress decentralization may find some services, e.g. defense or tax collection, are better conducted in a more centralized manner.

Designing governance regimes in less developed systems therefore involves making important, and difficult choices. It is easy to maintain the familiar patterns of governing that have been able to persist, if not to produce the type of governing that citizens and many political leaders would like to have. But there are also justifiable aspirations for more efficient, less corrupt governance in developing countries that need to be met. The challenge for political and administrative leaders is finding the means of producing change, but also means that are compatible with some of the traditions of governance within their own society.

The danger for these efforts is in adopting presumably quick fixes for major governance problems without understanding the governmental, economic and social contexts within which they will be implemented.

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