

Development Programs Promoting Good Governance: Engaging Civil Society

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Introduction

I'd like to provide you with a brief critique of some issues underpinning current approaches to good governance development programs, and then raise some points about the importance of having engagement with civil society and developing communities in these governance programs. I'll be particularly looking at what donor governments could do differently in their approaches to 'build good governance', but there are also some salient lessons that apply to non government organisations, NGOs, working in international development.

Defining good governance

Our starting point needs to be establishing an understanding of what governance means. Across donors, NGOs, UN agencies, academics and everyone else there is a high degree of ambiguity and inconsistency on the understanding of 'good governance' in a development context.

Governance is more than the operations of government. We argue that governance should refer to how civil society, government, the business sector and all other institutions and bodies interrelate to manage their affairs. Good governance, both a process and an outcome, is when this management of society is participatory, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive. It should also be responsive to the present and future needs of society.

Good governance is crucial to guarantee that a state's political, economic and social activities benefit the whole of society, not just selected groups of individuals. For this to happen, good governance needs to be adhered to at all levels, from the local and national, to the transnational and global.

As we all appreciate, in the absence of those attributes of 'good governance', the conditions for widespread government and corporate corruption, judicial systems operating without accountability, poor management of natural resources and a lack of process to respond to the voice of civil society can flourish. These, amongst other impacts of poor governance, undermine development efforts, hinder progress towards poverty eradication and infringe on human rights.

Donor governments focus on good governance

The focus on good governance in development assistance has now been incorporated into most multilateral and donor government development programs. However, many donor development strategies have taken a rather narrow approach to what good governance means, and how good governance can be achieved. Addressing poor governance practices has come to be viewed as

reform of government and fiscal policies, building democratic institutions or training for the judiciary or the public service. These make up largely top-down, or 'supply-side' approaches. The majority of good governance projects are not directed at the community level.

For example, as reported to the OECD Development Assistance Committee for 2001, approximately 70 per cent — over \$250 million — of the Australian Government's good governance programs were directed at activities that focussed on personnel at a senior level in government or industry. In the Australian aid program budget for 2005–06, 38 per cent of the good governance sector was allocated to 'economic and financial management' and 'public sector effectiveness', 47 per cent was allocated to 'law and justice', while only 13 per cent was provided for 'civil society and human rights'.

Are these sectors delivering programs that are reflective of the needs and concerns of poor and marginalised communities? Good governance programs require an expansive, holistic approach focussing on both building community capacity for participation in decision-making and working with governments to operate with transparency and accountability. Efforts to promote transparency, accountability, equity, sustainability, that is efforts to promote good governance, must target all levels of society. But they must especially focus on the needs and rights of the poor and marginalised. Programs that operate only from the top down will usually lack ownership and participation from communities. There is a risk that with having a skewed focus on top-down programs, donors will simply be imposing their own governance agendas on developing states.

So, let me present three key areas where donors could make some changes in order to shift the current imbalance within 'good governance' development programs.

Establish good governance as a pillar of a wider human rights agenda

A human rights framework that includes the promotion of good governance reinforces internationally agreed and legally binding fundamental human rights. A human rights framework ensures development objectives are focussed on meeting the civil, political, economic social and cultural rights of the poorest communities and the most marginalised.

Why should governance and human rights come together in development programs? Good governance within a human rights framework orientates recipient communities to the centre of development programs. Using a human rights approach to not only the outcomes, but also the process of development is a means to assist communities to operate with good governance, in a way that is culturally and socially appropriate for them.

Participation of a strong civil society in any good governance ventures needs greater attention in development strategies

Respect for the rule of law, creating systems that support rather than block transparency and accountability, and eradicating corruption can only be sustained if it is built upon a foundation of a strong and active civil society.

The Australian Government's aid program states, "good governance requires a strong and pluralistic civil society, where there is freedom of expression and association".

The statement sets the right tone, but should be expanded. Good governance strategies should not only encourage freedom of expression and association, but also locate and support social structures to *facilitate* active participation. Otherwise, we risk development addressing the real needs of communities through only coincidence, rather than strategy.

Without the commitment to build and enhance civil society, the poor, the marginalised and the disenfranchised will continue to be on the outside of decision-making processes. They will remain excluded from providing informed consent about activities that will impact on their lives. They will be unable to accessing the means and tools to equip them to advocate and speak out on their own behalf.

To change this situation, the values and principles of donors must include the need for any outside interventions to be based on the authentic participation of people in those programs. But we need to take care here — the assumption from many donors that participation structures do not exist outside western democratic forums must be dispelled.

For instance, participatory processes established by many Western organisations and companies for consultation with local communities have frequently proven to be inequitable in representing the concerns of local women. Outsiders might assume that formal committees would be sufficient for community consultation. Yet as men usually provide official representation, such formal negotiations would mean company management would fail to hear the concerns of local women.

Structures for participation exist in many different forums, and are dependent on a range of social structure factors including power relations, religion, class, gender, education and wealth distribution. These factors may very well complicate consultation and participation. They may also cloud an outsider from recognising culturally legitimate and appropriate participation forums. That does not detract from their legitimacy as participation processes.

We should, of course, readily acknowledge that working with communities to build an understanding of the social norms and traditions of participation will be a time consuming and resource intensive process. Partly for this reason it is perhaps one of the most neglected areas of donor governance

programs. Aid programs are restricted by yearly budgets, short program lifecycles and often in an approach that assumes rights are protected by simply installing good governance. This only compromises the detailed, patient background work that ought to be mandatory to development. Seeking to understand communal needs and working with people to hear *their* views on what they think are 'poor governance' practices will be a lengthy process. It means being in the game for the long haul, to build trust and understanding. It means placing communities in the driving seat, and adjusting the measures of success of good governance not in economic terms but in participation benchmarks and human rights objectives.

The role of basic education needs more attention from governance programs

One of the barriers for the poor to participate and actively monitor the organisation and systems of their society is a lack of access to basic education. Progress towards communities operating with good governance can only be built on investment in basic education, which includes addressing basic literacy for adults and children. Access to basic education is a first step in building citizens' capacity to participate in civil society, and thus be able to hold their governments accountable for the delivery of basic services and protection of human rights.

These three areas do not only apply to government aid programs. As a non-government representative, I know that we too have a crucial role to play in a comprehensive good governance approach. NGO programs need to make better links the micro and the macro, between grassroots and community-level programs, and changing policy and practice at often a regional or national level.

Development NGOs need to engage with donors to expand and diversify the focus of good governance agendas. There needs to be more debate, discussion and research to provide evidence-based critiques of current practices and highlight where shifts in development policy and practices are required.

We have some success stories. The work of NGOs in helping communities in many difficult environments to take real ownership of social change has led to more effective and proactive liaison with local government and police forces in Papua New Guinea, has worked to influence governments to include specialised care in their health services in South Africa and has addressed the issues that prevent marginalised groups from receiving equitable treatment from law enforcement authorities in Sri Lanka. But we can go much further than isolated and individual success stories. For the most sustainable and durable outcomes in governance programs, both donor governments and NGOs need to pool their strengths and better integrate good governance and capacity building into basic service delivery, emergency relief and public education programs.

Conclusion

The imbalance of current governance programs that are disproportionately top-down points to an urgent need for a reordering of governance strategies. Without the involvement of civil society and

communities, good governance programs will not take root or survive beyond the donor intervention. Donor programs must look to innovative and effective community-based programs, primarily supported by NGOs. Donors must provide greater attention and more targeted funding for integrated development programs that involve all aspects of society in building good governance. Only by offering a genuine means for all people to make a contribution alongside government and donors in the decision-making processes affecting their lives can the good governance agenda build real human security and achieve lasting change.

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