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The State of Governance in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The good governance agenda, advocated in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) and the Washington Consensus, has focused on the structural and formal institutional arrangements of the African state. It assumes that pointing out institutional problems will bring positive change. However, the experience of nearly 30 years of various forms of structural adjustment has not delivered the expected results. Is the problem that the good governance prescriptions need to be refined or are there other political forces and systems at work? Neo-patrimonial political practices, which dominate in much of Africa, are in constant tension with the norms of accountability, transparency and formal institutional rule. To understand why calls for good governance alone have not worked, one needs to understand how neo-patrimonial power is exercised, how it affects the operation of the state, and how it integrates formal and informal political processes and determines the nature of the 'social compact' between rulers and ruled. Governance must be good in terms that make sense locally. However, development requires a commitment to forms of management that may not be compatible with neo-patrimonialism. So, the search for an effective approach will demand a new conceptualisation of the relations between the politics and economics of accountability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT BRINGS LITTLE DEVELOPMENT

The thinking behind the move, in the late 1980s, from structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to the good governance agenda was informed by the widespread recognition that the African crisis was political rather than economic; or, to put it another way, that the lack of development was primarily due to political, rather than economic, factors. This in itself was a huge shift, since it had always been assumed in development circles that what was missing were the financial and technical means to enable Africa to reach the critical 'lift-off' stage of economic growth. Indeed, for decades, the focus had been on the delivery of aid to support the investment that would encourage development.

In this respect, it is instructive to revisit the grounds for, and the assumptions about, SAPs. At its heart, the decision, from the mid-1970s, to introduce SAPs derived from a double observation. The first was that, despite the promises of the early years of independence, there had been no substantial development in post-colonial Africa.The second was that the rapid move to one-party states during that period had led to the excessive dominance of a state that had become both bloated and ineffective. Since the state in Africa had taken charge of the economy, often by means of nationalisation and the creation of parastatals, the conclusion was drawn that there was a logical connection between these two factors. It was the state, and statism more generally, that was responsible for the absence of development.

Structural adjustment thus had simple aims, which, under the guise of financial and monetary targets, had serious, if unstated, political implications. Above and beyond the measures for better financial and budgetary management, which made good economic sense, the intention was to reduce the scope of the state.

This was to be achieved in two ways. One was to impose a vision of the economy that relied on the 'free market'. The assumption here was that an economy less controlled by the state would more readily respond to market pressures and incentives. This would encourage the development of a business mentality that would lead to the formation of capitalist competition, which fosters economic growth. The other was to force drastic reductions in the number of state employees and in state expenditures. The reasoning here was that the state was wasting vast amounts of resources, which were either diverted for purposes of corruption or invested in state enterprises that were unprofitable. A leaner state would mean a better state.

This is not the place to give an account of the impact of SAPs, in part because this is more complicated than many suppose. However, it is safe to conclude that the results were mixed. The push for more efficient and transparent budgetary and financial management was not in vain, even if it was rarely implemented as devised. However, this in itself did not respond to the needs of the countries concerned.

Not only did it fail to spur the development of a strong private sector with which to drive development, it also resulted in widespread cutbacks in state expenditures and subsidies, which often led to increased poverty, reduced social services and the degradation of infrastructure.

Those countries, like Ghana and Uganda, deemed by the World Bank to be making good progress on structural adjustment were rewarded with increased aid. But the bulk of Africa either failed to conform or prevaricated in the hope that half-measures would satisfy the donors. A few, like Tanzania, rejected these measures for a time.

There are many views on why structural adjustment did not have the desired effects, with clear divergences between the World Bank and African governments. The one explanation is often the mirror of the other. Without entering into this discussion, one should concentrate attention on the consequences, for donors and for Africa, of the manifest failure of structural adjustment to bring about any notable development. African governments became adept at 'playing' the SAPs card. To the World Bank, they would argue they were doing their best, but that the consequences of reduced state expenditure were dangerous. To their own constituencies, they would explain that the decline in standards of living was caused by the SAPs. For their part, the donors realised *both* that SAPs had nefarious costs, and so agreed to introduce social safety nets, *and* that they could not in conscience cut off aid to governments that failed or refused to implement the adjustment programmes. The result was a slow but significant dilution of the SAP agenda.

RECOGNISING THAT POLITICS MATTERS

By the late 1980s, the political aspects of economic development began to surface more clearly. The World Bank eventually recognised that it had been wrong in its analysis of the role of the state. If in principle it seemed a good idea to cut state wastefulness, in practice it turned out that SAPs weakened the state dangerously. In view of the terrible consequences of state failure, as witnessed in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zaire and Somalia, the donors began to fear further reduction of state power in other countries. The World Bank now put forward a plan that returned the state – albeit an enabling rather than controlling state – to the centre of development. Some key World Bank documents outlining this thinking were *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth – A Long-term Perspective Study* (1989), and *Adjustment in Africa: Reforms, Results and the Road Ahead* (1993). The idea here was the classic notion that the state must provide the framework – legal, infrastructural and financial – to make possible the unhindered operation of the market. Development would be market led, but it required a relatively organised and effective state.

At the same time, there began the process of 'democratic' reforms that was to sweep Africa in the last decade of the 20th century. Partly because of the failure of structural adjustment, partly for ideological reasons and partly because of the worsening socio-political situation in Africa, the West now deemed that 'democracy' would set the continent on the right path. This new set of political 'conditionalities', which came eventually to be enshrined in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), had two main aspects: one having to do with elections, the other with the role of civil society.

Although (unfortunately) the concepts of democracy and civil society are rarely discussed explicitly in the literature, which itself is a problem, there is an implicit consensus in Africanist writing. *Democracy* is essentially conceived in procedural terms: a constitutionally sanctioned system of multiparty elections in which there is freedom of political participation and competition; where elections are (reasonably) free and fair; where presidential and government changes are directly the result of the elections; and where these transitions take place peacefully and in an orderly fashion. *Civil society* is most often defined as those societal organisations that are not competing directly for political office and whose aims are charitable, developmental or advocatory. Accordingly, a vigorous civil society is one in which civil society organisations are seen to be free to form, act and operate without fear of intimidation or violence.

FROM SAPS TO PRSPS

The new political agenda sealed a remarkable move from a primarily 'economic' vision of development to an acceptance that politics was at the core of the process by which countries achieve economic growth. The assumption here was that democracy was a prerequisite to development. For this reason, aid now became predicated on the holding of multiparty elections and the involvement of civil society in setting policy objectives. There was a shift from SAPs to poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs).[1] This meant that the focus was now on the political and institutional framework whereby African governments would seek to put in place policies to facilitate development, reduce poverty and strengthen the mechanisms of the market.

This new programmatic injunction was enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals and Nepad, and at the 2005 G-8 Gleneagles meeting, which promised financial assistance. The message was clear: if Africa would help itself by improving its governance, then the international community would increase its support.

Today, the assumption is that if we identify and work to solve institutional problems, we shall be in a better position to implement these objectives. But can more insistent calls for good governance result in more development-oriented policies? Is the question primarily that of the refinement of good governance or are there other political issues that affect the way in which politics in Africa impinges on development-oriented policies? Before addressing these questions more systematically, we should step back and ask what good governance actually is.

In its most basic definition, which is the one commonly used by international organisations, good governance includes accountability, transparency and formal institutional rule. These are certainly key features, but another key ingredient should be added – i.e. an effective state, by which I mean one that can manage actually to implement the policies it may devise.

STATES, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Which aspects of the state are most relevant to economic growth and development? There has long been debate in comparative politics about whether the role of the state is that of 'enabler' or 'manager'. Whatever the case, there is little doubt that there are some minimal features of the state that are necessary for the running of a society in which economic activities can take place that are likely to contribute to development. These are to be found across the globe, from Asia to South America, and even, importantly, in countries where political systems differ widely, from democratic to authoritarian.

Of these, the most important include the following:

- The state must guarantee a minimal degree of order and peace, other than strictly by repressive measures, *and* uphold the rule of law, which requires a functioning legal framework and a working independent judiciary.
- It should maintain a basic administrative organisation capable, at the very least, of underpinning the regulatory and enabling mechanisms that make it possible for economic activity to develop over time.
- It needs, either directly or indirectly, to ensure that there is in the country sufficient, and sufficiently operational, infrastructure – of which the most important components are communications, transport, electricity and fuel.
- It ought to provide, or make possible, the provision of basic healthcare, social services and education, and, if possible, the expansion of appropriate higher, and particularly technical, training – now recognised, at least in the experience of Asian countries, as being crucial to economic growth.
- Finally, the state needs to ensure that there is in the country a financial and banking infrastructure that is able to make and implement business decisions other than for political reasons.

It will be immediately apparent that these features are in the main the hallmark of the modern bureaucratic state – many of which did characterise the colonial state – and that these are the very features that have been seriously eroded in Africa today.

What is less obvious, but perhaps equally important, is that these characteristics do not depend on political ideology. They are to be found, arguably in unequal measure, in countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, Singapore and South Korea – countries ranging from social democracy to authoritarian presidential systems. In this sense, they constitute 'good' (meaning here *efficient* rather than morally palatable) government.

Because of this, it would seem possible to draw a few lessons from the experience of those countries that have achieved the highest rates of economic development in recent decades: the so-called Asian Tigers (Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand). These lessons are relevant to the discussion of good governance.

- The first is that a strong state (meaning here an efficient government) is fundamental to economic growth.
- The second is that state-directed investment is critical.
- The third is that successful access to the world market is important in several aspects: achieving comparative advantage in trade and sharpening the economy's competitiveness.
- The fourth is that economic growth depends heavily on investment in human capital.
- The last is that culture is important – although not always in obvious ways: for instance, over the years, Confucianism has been identified as both a pro- and anti-development 'belief system'. The same argument rages about African culture.

Therefore, the question is, 'Why has the state politics of Africa not been conducive to development?'

FORMAL MEETS INFORMAL: NEO-PATRIMONIAL STATES

The African political order is best conceived as one in which in which the formal and the informal overlap. In an informal dispensation, rulers are 'patrimonial' – meaning simply that they are primarily accountable to their followers and that their legitimacy derives from their ability to deliver resources to these followers. Consequently, politicians are expected to behave in office as representatives – meaning, in effect, patrons – of their clients. Therefore, there can be no meaningful distinction between the public and private spheres. The logic of such a system is entirely at variance with that of the impersonal public Western bureaucratic state, which is supposed to preside over the destiny of *all* citizens and work for the improvement of the general well-being of the country *as a whole*.

A functioning neo-patrimonial state,[2] such as was to be found in a number of African countries in the 1960s and 1970s – of which the paradigmatic examples were probably Houphouët-Boigny's Côte d'Ivoire and Kenyatta's Kenya – managed to blend the logics and integrate the workings of the formal and informal spheres successfully. What this meant in practice was that the ruler and his officials ensured that the bureaucracy operated as efficiently as was compatible with the demands of the informal political order.

Government, firmly controlled by the presidential single party, would seek to balance the clientelistic demands of the widest possible constituency – with a marked preference, nevertheless, for the incumbent's own – *and* the rigours of state responsibility. Thus, the state would endeavour to maintain a minimal working infrastructure and sustain reasonable healthcare and education systems, and a modicum of social provisions. The one-party configuration of power required of the ruler that he seek to placate a wide range of ethnic, regional, religious and economic interests. The most successful politicians used the relatively efficient operation of the bureaucratic (formal) state to deliver wisely to the largest possible numbers the resources afforded by presidential control.

It is important to understand that the success of the neo-patrimonial state was measured *domestically*, by both rulers and ruled, in terms of how well it performed according to the criteria relevant to the workings of the informal political sphere. *Outside* Africa, however, achievement was gauged in terms of how the state performed according to the criteria applied to its modern Western bureaucratic equivalent. While African politicians attempted to placate both domestic and foreign (particularly donor) constituencies, their ability to do so rested on their being able to fulfil utterly divergent demands.

To secure their legitimacy as rulers, they used the revenues garnered by the state to deliver benefits to their clients. To obtain the resources they needed, they had to meet the donors' criteria of 'good' governance – broadly defined as the capacity to operate a state efficiently for the benefit of all the citizens according to largely Western management, bureaucratic and financial principles. So long as such criteria could be met, donors usually turned a blind eye to the informal practices taking place – especially since within the Cold War context, Western countries often sought African states as ideological allies, or clients. Again, Kenya (under Kenyatta) and Côte d'Ivoire (under Houphouët-Boigny) provide two of the most telling examples here. But the demands of formal and informal governance were ultimately incompatible, for a simple reason: neo-patrimonial governments cannot invest or promote the self-sustaining economic growth that the country requires because they need continually to spend in order to placate their clients.

Therefore, when state resources began to decline, the quality of governance eroded. Unable to put in place policies that would foster economic development and favour long-term productive investment, African politicians were locked into an ever more frantic search for revenues. This meant that African governments became increasingly dependent on donors, whose programmes varied according to the vagaries of Western domestic politics and changes in international relations. Once the Cold War was over, the scope for foreign aid diminished drastically and the ability of the West to impose stricter control on meeting the goals for which aid was given grew. Since by then foreign debt was out of control (in part because borrowing was so easy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when banks were careless and African debt was easily rescheduled), aid became more difficult to get.

Diminishing resources spelled the end of the functioning neo-patrimonial state, which made it impossible for politicians to continue successfully to balance the demands of formal and informal politics. While officially, African states continued to behave according to the norms of the former, in effect the informal came to predominate. This had serious consequences. State capacity was reduced, corruption increased and competition for power among politicians grew more acute. Politics became an increasingly violent zero-sum game in which the aim of those in power was to exploit the resources of the state before rivals did. In this context, the move to multiparty politics and the privatisation of state (or parastatal) enterprises contributed further to the frenzied use of the formal sphere for informal purposes.

Although there is today in Africa some considerable difference between the better (Botswana) and worse (Liberia) states, there is generally an overall process of decay. All countries suffer from the same problems, to a greater or lesser extent, when it comes to the overall decline in resources and the inability to induce higher rates of economic growth. The recent 'success' stories – chiefly Ghana, Uganda and Mozambique – are countries that had all but collapsed and where progress today, though rapid, has not yet made up for the consequence of the previous breakdown. Undoubtedly, some countries, like Mali and Benin, have also made headway, but again only relative to very dire antecedents. Overall, however, there is no gainsaying the trend of a decline in state efficiency, or 'good' governance. So why are we where we are? And how can this be reversed?

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Some analysts – including many Africanist political economists – stress external factors, arguing that the structure of African economies and their place in world trade made them vulnerable to the vagaries of the market and impeded the long-term growth required for development.[3] Others, such as most Africanist political scientists, point to the structural weakness and political instability of African polities.[4] The latest thinking identifies the failure of the state as the primary reason for the current situation.[5] Whatever one may think are the reasons for state decay, there is ground for thinking that such decay may be even more serious than at first imagined and that reversing the trend will be more difficult than we think. This is for two main reasons.

The first is that state decline does not have gradually negative effects: below a certain threshold, the efficiency of the state falls off rapidly, until it ceases to have much governance capacity, other than strictly clientelistic.[6] The second is that such decline is more than mere administrative corrosion. It means the domination of the informal over the formal, thus contributing to the ever more rapid destruction of the modern bureaucracy so painstakingly established at independence.

There is frequently an assumption in aid circles that (de- or re-) institutionalisation is merely a technical, or administrative, question. It is clear, in fact, that such would only be the case in a situation where there is still relatively 'good' or efficient governance. Here, one can conceive of forms of practical assistance that would help to improve bureaucratic efficacy. Where, however, state decline has gone through a threshold of minimal 'efficiency', there may no longer be scope for repairing the damage by 'technical' means. Whatever its formal appearance, the state is then liable to cease existing as a bureaucratic organisation, insofar as it is no longer able to discharge those responsibilities identified above as critical to development.

Below a given threshold, therefore, it is not just a question of the state working less well; it is a question of it no longer working at all. Here, the state no longer serves any substantive administrative, technical or regulatory purpose. The functions it used to fulfil either come to an end or they become the arbitrary preserve of individuals and groups.

The danger is when the informal fully invests, or takes over, the formal structures of the state. What this means in concrete terms is that politicians and functionaries increasingly neglect their formal duties in order to exploit the state for their own particularistic, clientelistic ends. In effect, this entails the plundering of public resources for patrimonial purposes. When this happens, there is a rapidly accelerating and self-reinforcing spiral of state decay, which results in the increasing inability of governments to function. In extreme cases, bureaucrats begin to 'privatise' the business of dispensing public services, charging 'fees' for performing their duties, such as delivering official documents, like passports, or processing information as they are required to do.

Politicians, for their part, seek above all to appropriate transfers from outside, which become in this way a rent on their holding office. In this enterprise, of course, they must do battle both with their domestic competitors and with foreign donors, who insist on attaching conditions to the disbursement of aid. But here, those who control the state have an immense advantage over all others: they clutch the symbols of sovereignty. Since on the whole foreign donors and businesses must continue to deal with the official representatives of the state – in part because of their own domestic (legal and political) constraints – they have no choice but to go through local political leaders.

HOME-GROWN SOLUTIONS

So, how will it be possible to improve the quality of governance in Africa so as to give development a chance? Are African countries locked into a vicious circle of 'bad' governance that casts a curse on their peoples? Certainly not, but the way forward may not be what is presently being envisaged either in donor circles or even within Nepad. To begin at the beginning, the search for an effective approach will demand a new *conceptualisation* of the relations between the politics and economics of accountability. This means acknowledging that political problems, such as a weak or non-functioning state, have a direct bearing on the potential for economic development. And that will require an acknowledgement of the role of the informal, or the so-called 'traditional', which so far is missing in all the blueprints agreed between donors and recipients.

The first step would be overtly to recognise the ways in which the formal and informal influence the work of government, instead of pretending there is no such thing as the informal. To do so would be to bring into the open the so-called 'traditional' factors that affect accountability among politicians and those who are or who are not their clients. It would also force politicians to make explicit the criteria that guide their actions and the pressures they experience because of such 'traditional' forms of accountability.[7]

The second would be to invert the current way of formulating and implementing the good governance agenda. Today, the agenda is conceived and conveyed by Western donors and institutions. It consists of a programme of governance that seeks to replicate the key tenets of political accountability and transparency in the West today. What should happen is the reverse. African politicians should be asked to explain how the realities of representation, legitimacy, accountability and responsibility in their own countries can be reshaped to serve a more vigorous developmental agenda. In other words, policymakers should be looking to operationalise the so-called informal and 'traditional' constraints on the exercise of power – with a view to strengthening the state's ability to govern for all. Politicians must be asked to show how they intend to be accountable in the informal sector so that measures can be put in place to assess their performance. This will not happen if it is not attempted.

The third, therefore, would be for African governments to construct their own blueprints rather than work merely to show how they accept and will implement the donors'.[8] The experience of East Asia shows clearly that their governments went about defining for themselves the parameters of accountability, transparency and efficiency that they deemed essential to their developmental plans. These may or may not have accorded with those advocated by the West. In particular, it is clear that many regimes (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan or Malaysia) continued, and some still continue, to be corrupt and/or authoritarian. However, this was offset by the fact that they achieved levels of economic growth that eventually made possible a type of development beneficial to the majority. Corruption, as it were, was channelled into nationalist developmental purposes.

The fourth step, therefore, would be for African governments to devise – and publicise – the ways in which their commitment to accountability can, very concretely, contribute to the improvements of the lives of the population. Today's practice of committing to the governance agenda of donors at a formal level while continuing to practise politics according to informal demands and constraints is doomed to failure. The cynical view is that it does not matter, because official acceptance of the West's conditions secures aid transfers. This is true, but, ultimately, it is a self-defeating policy that only serves to maintain Africa in a fragile state of undevelopment. Lack of development feeds political violence because of a perennial lack of resources for clientelism; and political violence destroys the state.

For this reason, accountability is the key to making progress in governance. African politicians need to be convinced by their own peoples that a continuation of neo-patrimonialism will in the end rebound on all, rulers and ruled alike. In Washington Consensus parlance, this accountability is translated into a system of multiparty elections. But it is clear that multiparty elections have not brought about the type of accountability that would favour a developmental agenda. More often than not, they serve as an exercise in legitimising governments that have already failed in this respect. In the process, democracy is further devalued, since it is obvious to ordinary Africans that it has not either changed governance or brought about development. This in turn gives more credibility to the informal modes of accountability, such as the allocation of resources to one's clients, which alone provides the means to survive. And so on.

The mechanisms for accountability and transparency advocated by the West are but instruments to an end. It is the end that matters, and if the instruments are found wanting, they must be changed. Without necessarily advocating the type of accountability that is found in Somaliland, based on the 'traditional' clan socio-political order, it is important to note that it is home-grown, indigenous and that it works. It is has brought about an end to violence, the reconstruction of a basic infrastructure, the organisation of a functioning administration and the establishment of a system of political representation that appears to be congruent with the realities of formal and informal politics. It is therefore a great paradox that the international community refuses to recognise either the country or the regime. The contrast with what is happening in Somalia, where there is no political order other than violence, is brutal, if not gross.

The Somaliland example suggests that the way to better governance and more development can ultimately *only* be found in the *actual* commitment of politicians, civil servants, NGOs and policymakers to use the local measures of legitimacy, representation, accountability and transparency for development rather than clientelism. Outside pressure to abide by the Washington Consensus or to make Nepad a carbon copy of 'best practice' will make no dent on the problem until those who exercise power in Africa, and those who advise them, face up to the task of translating such an agenda into policies that can overcome neo-patrimonialism.

It would be a tragedy if this required greater catastrophe on the continent before politicians delivered such policies. The example of Somalia does not suggest that violence on its own can lead to the emergence of locally progressive policies. But it is well to notice the recent spate of books arguing that aid is counterproductive in respect of development and that nothing will change until aid reduction, or even the end of aid, begins to focus the minds of those politicians who presently run their countries.[9] It is a tough challenge, but there is no choice. Only those who benefit from disorder and aid would wish to continue on the same fruitless path.

ENDNOTES

1. The PRSPs were intended to ensure that governments consulted 'civil society' as a condition for the submission of requests for aid, often in the shape of budget support.
2. The concept of the neo-patrimonial was introduced by Africanist political scientists to suggest a political order in which the apparently formal 'rules of the modern political game' were subverted by the realities of informal patrimonial practices.
3. This school is represented by most Africanist political economists, writing in journals such as the *Review of African Political Economy*.
4. See, for example, Hyden G, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
5. See the work of Jean-François Bayart as exemplary of those who historicise the state.
6. The threshold is not measurable in advance. It is like a car that works less and less well, then suddenly stops functioning altogether. The point is to emphasise that it is not a steady decline; at some stage the state simply fails to function in any meaningful way.
7. See Chabal P, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London: Zed Books, 2009.
8. In my view, governance initiatives such as the African Peer Review Mechanism that purport to be African owned and African driven exist because such a mechanism was in effect made a condition by the West for increased aid.
9. See, for instance, Calderisi R, *The Trouble with Africa: Why Foreign Aid Isn't Working*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers is the first in-depth study of the APRM, examining its practical, theoretical and diplomatic challenges. Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius and South Africa illustrate difficulties faced by civil society in making their voices heard. It offers 80 recommendations to strengthen the APRM.

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