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Promoting Good Governance in Africa – Three Popular Misconceptions

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Despite the rise of multiparty democracy, many African governments still struggle to control corruption and to improve the legitimacy of the state. To promote better governance, international development assistance supports ambitious reform agendas and idealistic models of governance. However, these programmes and interventions frequently misunderstand the realities of governance in weak and fragile states.

- Corruption and patronage are usually not clandestine, but highly visible. It is not a lack of information or awareness that keeps citizens from holding their governments accountable, but a lack of effective and legitimate channels for public dissent. In many countries, elite networks continue to protect their members as they violate laws – and also expect them to bend formal rules to advance the interests of their group.

- Public participation can only contribute to government legitimacy if it has a genuine impact on political decisions. However this is often not the case, because elites have little to gain from building political consensus or aggregating competing interests into collectively rational decisions.

- Decentralisation reforms result in the proliferation of local-level institutions, but fail to bring the state closer to the people. Most African states have never had strong control over peripheral territories, and have relied on informal gatekeepers and traditional authorities to access local populations. Neither central governments nor local gatekeepers have strong incentives to cede real authority to local-level political institutions.

Policy Implications

Well-intentioned reform programmes fail to have the desired effects, because they attempt to change the political reality to conform to idealised conceptions of governance. Governance reforms might be more successful if they focus instead on reducing the contradictions between formal institutions and informal practices in weak and fragile states. To this end, development organisations should actively engage in research and innovation.

Photo:

For international development assistance, promoting good governance is one of the top priorities in Africa. More than in any other region of the world, fragile public institutions, rampant bureaucratic corruption, and the problematic legitimacy of governments all impede the provision of essential public goods and services. Yet, despite significant reform efforts in many countries, the continent as a whole trails other world regions on measures of corruption and state fragility. Are governance failures in Africa simply intractable, or do we have the wrong ideas on how to fix them?

This contribution will critically examine three powerful, recurring ideas about governance failures in Africa to which numerous international development organisations have subscribed in one way or another: (1) that greater transparency will reduce corruption; (2) that the legitimacy of state institutions can be increased by promoting citizen participation; and, (3) that decentralisation reform brings government "closer to the people." Proponents of these ideas understand the failure of states to provide public services as a failure of accountability. Public service providers (such as schools, health services, and local administrations) are insufficiently monitored, citizens lack "client power" over these service providers – or ways of holding politicians accountable for overseeing service providers. Originally popularised by the 2004 World Development Report, the underlying concept is that of a "triangle of accountability": elected politicians supervise a bureaucracy that provides services to citizens. Citizens hold service providers accountable by voicing concerns to politicians (the "long route of accountability"), or by exerting client power over service providers (the "short route of accountability") (World Bank 2003: 32). Information asymmetries between citizens and politicians and politicians and service providers are assumed to be among the root causes of governance failures. This emphasis on accountability problems has guided the design of reform projects, development programmes, and non-governmental organisation initiatives to promote better governance. However, the impact of these types of interventions lags far behind the idealistic visions of governance that motivate them in the first place. Why?

In the context of African politics, problems of governance run much deeper than ensuring the accountability of the public sector. Many states lack societal backing and legitimacy, and this has fundamental consequences for how they operate (Englebert 2009). As scholars of African politics have argued, political power is not derived from the formal institutions of the state nor is it legitimised by the provision of public services (Bratton and van de Walle 1994: 458ff.). Instead, patron–client networks – often organised along ethnic community lines – function as the main sources of political power (Hyden 2012; Lemarchand and Legg 1972). Patronage sustains the social influence, prestige, and negotiating capital of elites, and is used to co-opt political challengers (Arriola 2009). Informal social relationships are integral to governance processes, and so are the social norms and principles that govern them.

Promoting better governance in weak and fragile states thus poses a different set of challenges than it does in countries with strong state institutions, where governance failures can be addressed by identifying and addressing formal accountability deficits. Above all, it is necessary to keep in mind that modifying formal rules is not sufficient to change the behaviour of public decision makers if they are not the main constraint on their choices. Political and administrative elites rely on formal laws and institutions where it is opportune to do so, but, by themselves, rules and institutions are often far from being self-enforcing. Political authority remains highly personalised, and the boundaries between the public and private realms are blurred. Politicians and public servants rely on face-to-face reciprocities to get things done (Hyden 2012: 74), and by doing so become entangled in a web of conflicting formal responsibilities, material interests, and interpersonal loyalties. Reforms that focus on the formal institutions alone, without changing the informal norms and obligations that shape the behaviour of officeholders as well as the expectations of citizens, tend to remain perfunctory. Unfortunately, this awareness has been lacking in many donor-led attempts to promote governance reform or develop the capacity of state institutions in Africa.

To make this point, this contribution critically examines three widespread assumptions that have frequently been adopted by development organisations seeking to promote better governance and public service provision in Africa:

- "Greater transparency will reduce corruption"
- "Promoting citizen participation will increase the legitimacy of state institutions"
- "Decentralisation brings the state closer to the people"

It concludes by calling for a more realistic approach to governance reforms. This modified approach should first and foremost seek to understand the informal norms and social expectations vis-à-vis public decision makers, prior to conceptualising institutional solutions to governance failures.

"Greater Transparency Will Reduce Corruption"

Transparency initiatives rank highly on the priority list of anti-corruption efforts. It is, however, important to distinguish between two different goals in transparency initiatives: deterring foreign corrupt practices by international corporations and increasing the domestic accountability of public decision makers. Growing law enforcement against foreign corrupt practices has become an effective deterrent for international corporations in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. However, efforts to increase domestic accountability regarding corruption in African countries remain troubled at every level.

The list of corruption scandals in Africa is substantial. Often enough, however, even high-profile international attention fails to result in actual consequences. A famous example is the "BAE Systems scandal" in Tanzania. In an obvious case of corruption among top-level decision makers in Tanzania, the British defence company BAE Systems secured an inflated contract for a radar defence system for which no obvious military need existed. An investigation by the United Kingdom's Serious Fraud Office resulted in legal consequences for BAE Systems, who were ordered to pay GBP 30 million in compensation to the Tanzanian people. While the government gladly accepted the compensation on behalf of "the people," Tanzania's chief anti-corruption officer cynically claimed that "no Tanzanian was involved in the scandal" (Heritage 2012). The case illustrates that while transparency may be helpful in protecting against foreign corrupt practices, domestic accountability is lacking even in such blatant, highly publicised corruption scandals. Why, then, do public scrutiny and international attention remain so inconsequential?

What is often misunderstood is that, in many Africa countries, corruption is generally not clandestine or hidden from society. Instead, it is rather conspicuous. This not only includes grand corruption, such as fraudulent government contracts, but also petty corruption such as the collection of bribes by police or low-level administrators, or the misappropriation of food aid or agricultural subsidy vouchers by village leaders (Lierl 2018). Petty corruption is experienced by millions of citizens as part of their everyday lives.

An implicit assumption of transparency initiatives is that citizens are lacking information on corruption, and if they were made aware of the practice or of deficits in government performance then they would act collectively to pressure state institutions. However, the overwhelming precedent is that public decision makers do not have to fear legal consequences and can get away with corruption as long as they stay in the good graces of their supporters. Ethnographic research has long provided examples, pointing to a remarkable tolerance for corruption (Ensminger 2012; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Platteau and Gaspart 2003) – as have behavioural experiments with citizens and public decision makers (Lierl 2015, 2018, 2019). Likewise, research on the electoral consequences of information campaigns in Africa highlights that changes in voters' beliefs about the quality of politicians do not generally precipitate ones in their voting behaviour (Bhandari, Larreguy, and Marshall 2019; Lierl and Holmlund 2019). Further, voters' interpretation of such information is contingent on other social factors – such as whether a politician is a co-ethnic (Adida et al. 2017).

To the extent that one can generalise from the existing evidence, it is not for a lack of public information and evidence that African states fail to prosecute and punish corruption. Conversely, it is not a shortfall of awareness that keeps citizens from holding their politicians accountable. Instead, citizens' expectations towards the state tend to be low. As the 2016/18 Afrobarometer surveys suggest, in many countries citizens do not expect that reporting corruption would result in any kind of response (for example, only 8 per cent in Nigeria, 12 per cent in Kenya, or 20 per cent of respondents in countries like Ghana or South Africa consider this to be very likely). Citizens who experience a weak and dysfunctional state are unlikely to resort to formal institutions and political mechanisms to seek redress for their grievances. This may be the main reason why transparency initiatives that primarily supply information to citizens and civil society have few successes to show for their work. Information supplied to citizens may not be that which they demand, and the actions for which it would be helpful may not be the ones that citizens themselves would choose to take.

The conspicuousness of corruption in many African states and continued impunity imply that policymakers should re-think the assumed causality between transparency and corruption. Deliberate transparency efforts are adopted if public decision makers are not planning to engage in corruption anyway, and expect to benefit from showing this. If the circumstances are right, it is easy to envision a virtuous cycle of decreasing corruption and increasing transparency and public trust. However, a lack of transparency is not the reason why corruption persists in many African states. The causes must be sought rather in the social acceptance of corruption and in the expectations that political decision makers are confronted with.

“Promoting Citizen Participation Will Increase the Legitimacy of State Institutions”

In a special paper on *Promoting Resilient States and Constructive State–Society Relations*, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development claims that: “Promoting political involvement strengthens the legitimacy of state institutions and the democratic accountability of political players” (BMZ 2009: 3). The paper further argues that political involvement “makes the actions of government and public administration more transparent, strengthens checks and balances, and allows effective action to be taken against corruption, arbitrary state rule, and abuse of power” (ibid.). This widely held belief is the basis of a whole class of development interventions designed to increase citizen participation in governance. These programmes come in a variety of shapes and forms, including participatory budgeting, community-driven development, community monitoring of public services, as well as the promotion of civil society organisations (CSOs) and support for closer coordination between civil society groups.

While the contested legitimacy of many African states is undisputed, it would be wrong to think that it is *caused* by weak civil society or insufficient civic participation. Much more important here is the fact that civic participation is unlikely to have political consequences. The majority of African political systems do not offer efficient, cooperative ways of including different interest groups in public decision-making. Even in competitive, multiparty democracies such as Benin, Ghana, or Senegal, political parties overwhelmingly rely on clientelistic mobilisation strategies – at the expense of programmatic politics and collective interest articulation. Political clientelism is even more fundamental to ethnically polarised political systems, such as Kenya, and to single-party-dominated systems, such as South Africa. While power-sharing among different ethnic groups is common in African politics (Francois, Rainer, and Trebbi 2015), it usually is the result of elite-level bargains rather than a sign of political inclusiveness. Clientelism and ethnic polarisation cause state institutions to serve and burden different groups in society unequally. This unfair allocation of the costs and benefits of government actions lies at the heart of the legitimacy crisis of African states. It is not for a lack of opportunities for political participation that citizens are estranged from the state, but due rather to the low likelihood that participation would make a difference in a political system that is organised along clientelistic structures.

The problem of political clientelism is compounded by the lack of a political culture of public dissent. Despite the young demographic majority in Africa, political systems there remain organised along the values of subordination to elders and authorities – ones which have been cultivated during decades of authoritarianism. For all except the most courageous of journalists and civil society leaders, publicly aired dissent is often socially or politically inopportune. For individual citizens, their own and their family’s relationships with authorities are vitally important. Risking the well-being of one’s family by publicly confronting authority figures can be irresponsible, even if there is no overt repression. Under these circumstances, political dissent is rarely expressed through individual participation in public affairs. Political contention is more likely to occur in the form of protests or riots, where individual protesters are protected by the crowd. Participatory governance mechanisms are designed on the assumption that citizens will freely express their concerns and be listened to. This may be an unrealistic expectation, however.

A third issue that limits the effectiveness of participatory approaches to governance aiming at increasing public legitimacy is their inability to engender true political representation. Decades of foreign assistance have left their mark on civil society in many African countries. Down to the grass-roots level, there are an abundance of non-profits and CSOs that exist mainly as platforms for acquiring lucrative contracts from the government as well as from development agencies, or as launch pads for political careers. For obvious reasons, these types of CSOs and their members are particularly eager to take part in donor-driven "participatory" interventions. Yet, even if they are descriptively representative of society or of marginalised groups, they cannot be understood as faithful representatives of collective interests. Consequently, their involvement in political decisions will do little to increase the trust of the remainder of the population that their needs and views have genuinely been taken into consideration.

Finally, besides their questionable impact on state legitimacy, interventions to promote citizen participation in politics tend to have significant practical risks and downsides to them too. It is costly to establish institutional structures for citizen participation – for example, public forums in the context of participatory budgeting or community-driven development – or community monitoring committees. These structures are often not sustainable on their own, and tend to fall apart if external funding is withdrawn (Mansuri and Rao 2012). During their short-lived existence, participatory governance mechanisms are vulnerable to capture and corruption by local elites. If self-motivation among citizens to be involved is weak, they are all too often paid or coerced by local authorities to participate – that in order to satisfy the demands of external donors or of the government. As a consequence, participatory approaches can easily become more of a burden for citizens than they are an opportunity to voice their views.

For all of these reasons, participatory governance mechanisms and civil society involvement in government affairs are seldom a serious concern for political leaders in Africa. Politicians there are willing to go along with foreign donors' demands for citizen participation, knowing that their true sources of political power are mostly unaffected by it. Since externally promoted citizen participation does not generate serious threats to the political status quo, it is, in practice, unlikely to amount to more than mere window dressing.

"Decentralisation Brings the Government Closer to the People"

In the late 1990s and early years of the new century, a wave of decentralisation reforms spread across Africa. Foreign aid donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank were enticed by the idea of creating independent local institutions that would manage public funds autonomously and deliver basic public services to the population. Decentralisation would allow donors to finance local-level public services directly, bypassing central government structures that were perceived as corrupt, inefficient, and sometimes undemocratic too. Above all, advocates of decentralisation believed in its potential to increase public accountability. Decentralised governments were believed to be "closer to the people" and better informed about local needs (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000).

Decentralisation reforms devolved central government powers to newly created local-level institutions, such as mayors and local councils. Through local elections and a variety of consultative forums, typically connected to the elaboration of local development plans and annual investment decisions, the new institutional framework was supposed to give rise to a democratic process at the local level. Citizens, CSOs, and public service providers would articulate their demands to local decision makers, and demand accountability from them. Local governments, empowered to raise local taxes and entitled to regular fiscal transfers from the state, would be responsible for providing essential public services such as primary education and healthcare, water and sanitation, as well as local infrastructure. Elected representatives would oversee local administrations and service providers meanwhile.

The institutional design of decentralisation reforms in Africa followed similar templates in most countries (Dickovick and Riedl 2014). For example, in former French colonies, concepts of France's decentralisation reform in 1982 were replicated. "Best practices" advocated for by international donors were copied from country to country as decentralisation reforms spread across the continent. Almost identical decentralisation-support projects were financed by donors in different countries, and ensured that it was carried out in very similar ways. Despite their respectable intentions, the institutional design of decentralisation reforms had three conceptual shortcomings to it.

First, in areas where central governments had limited presence prior to decentralisation there was very little actual authority to be transferred to local institutions. Throughout their colonial and postcolonial histories, many African states have depended on local gatekeepers to implement policies and enforce the law in peripheral areas and among minority communities (Boone 2003). In only a few countries – including Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Tanzania – does the reach of state bureaucracies extend right down to rural villages without the need for formal or informal intermediaries. This can largely attributed to these countries' unique historical experiences, such as Tanzania's forced "villagisation" policy in the 1970s. In many other African countries, traditional authorities have retained their role as gatekeepers to local populations (Baldwin 2016) – or alternative and concurrent classes of gatekeepers have emerged, including ethnic leaders, warlords, local power brokers, or parliamentarians in their respective constituencies (Lindberg 2010). To work in rural villages or peripheral areas, central government agents routinely needed the consent and cooperation of local gatekeepers. Local governments that were established in these contexts thus had very little authority in their own right. They were sandwiched in between the central state and local populations, lacking both the coercive power and resources of the central state and the independent mobilisation capacity of local gatekeepers.

Second, since central governments did not materially benefit from decentralisation (other than through the injection of donor financing) they had every reason to prevent local governments from evolving into independent centres of political power. Parallel to decentralisation, state bureaucracies multiplied the number of administrative units, which allowed them to supply patronage positions for their local supporters and outweigh pressures (Grossman and Lewis 2014). Central government's most powerful lever, and up until now the greatest constraint on the autonomy of local governments, is central–local fiscal relations. The slow pace of expenditure approvals from fiscal oversight authorities and a lack of predictable revenues are hamstringing local governments' planning and implementation of projects. Insufficient capacity for procurement and fiscal management at the local level continues to provide central governments with justifications for limiting the fiscal autonomy of local ones. As efforts to resolve these issues remain only sluggish, regional inequalities persist – and the performance of local governments continues to disappoint.

Third, the problems that prevented national-level political institutions from functioning like their equivalents in advanced, industrialised democracies naturally also occurred at the local level too. The clientelism and public sector patronage that undermine the effectiveness of centralised bureaucracies endure in decentralised systems. Elected local politicians are often poorly qualified to oversee local bureaucracies, and it is easier for them to collude with corrupt bureaucrats than it is to defend the interests of their constituents (Raffler 2018). Political competition continues to be shaped by national-level divides, especially in ethnically polarised countries. If anything, decentralisation has allowed political parties to establish regional or ethnic strongholds – where they are quasi-hegemonic. In most local elections political competition therefore remains weak, and decentralisation does not lead to greater electoral accountability.

Thus, these decentralisation reforms failed to have their intended effect – namely, bringing government closer to the people – because they were based on unrealistic assumptions about the nature of state authority in peripheral areas (Englebert and Mungongo 2016). Central governments either had no actual political control over local affairs that they could have ceded to local governments, or had no political incentives to do so. As local governments had little institutional legitimacy of their own, they also had no political commitment to serve their constituents – and focused their efforts instead on administrating themselves. National politicians benefitted from exploiting the patronage opportunities associated with decentralisation, but otherwise had every reason to keep local governments weak, so that they would not evolve into hotbeds of political opposition. Worse still, the more it became apparent that local governments had failed to deliver on their mandate, the easier it became for central governments to resist the actual transfer of political power. Rather than fostering the development of a "local state" able to effectively serve the population, decentralisation reforms instead replicated and perhaps even exacerbated problems of state capacity and state legitimacy at the local level.

Improving Governance in Africa

The three examples mentioned in the preceding discussion – transparency and accountability interventions, participatory governance, and decentralisation reforms – highlight the pitfalls of attempting to change the political reality in Africa to conform to idealised conceptions of good governance. Assumptions about governance that may seem perfectly plausible in the context of advanced, industrialised democracies miss the realities on the ground in many of Africa's weaker and more fragile states:

- Corruption, for example, does not have to be hidden from public view, if those who commit it can count on impunity. Transparency interventions miss the point if they are based on the assumption that citizens would collectively address their grievances if only they were sufficiently informed about them.
- Citizen and civil society participation, as encouraged by international donors and NGOs to increase the legitimacy of public decisions, falls flat in political systems where political authority remains personalised and sustained by clientelism.
- Decentralisation reforms, promoted as a way of bringing government closer to the people, have exposed the weakness of many African states as if under a magnifying glass. States that previously failed to serve their citizens did not begin to perform better just because a parallel layer of local government institutions was established.

What, then, can be done to improve governance in Africa? For policymakers, the first implication of these findings is to avoid misdiagnosing governance failures. Analyses of governance problems must not be limited to formal institutions and accountability structures, but should rather seek to understand how public decision makers instrumentalise formal institutions for their own private interests – and how informal power structures enable them to do so with impunity. Many well-meaning approaches to governance reform presuppose that legal norms and formal institutions are the primary sources of citizens' rights, and of constraints on the discretion of officeholders. In Africa's predominantly weak and fragile states, however, this fact cannot be taken for granted.

Second, one should not discount the power of informal norms and institutions to constrain corruption and abuses of power. The reality in many African countries is that public decision makers can bend formal rules with impunity, but not everywhere and at all times. Whether or not public officials can get away with corruption and abuse of office is not the salient question here; often enough, they can. Much more important is a better understanding of how much corruption will be tolerated in a particular setting, and why. What is off limits for politicians and public servants? Under what conditions do political parties and patronage networks stop protecting their members? How much power do political leaders need to share with rival political communities and ethnic groups? When do citizens protest? When are they willing to express disagreement within the political process, rather than avoiding dealing with the state? Questions like these require substantial research and thought, but they can be starting points for designing governance reforms that are more in line with current realities.

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- A DFG-funded one examining the effects of reforming presidential term limits on the quality of democracy in Africa and Latin America.
- One on social norms in Kenyan politics, supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which examines norms around corruption and ethnic discrimination as well as their influence on rising politicians.

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