

# **The Challenge of Good Governance**

**Michiel de Vries**

Chair in Public Administration  
Nijmegen School of Management  
Radboud University Nijmegen  
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

## **The Challenge of Good Governance**

**Michiel S de Vries**

### **ABSTRACT**

Governance has become a concept that includes more and more phenomena related to the steering of societal developments. The steering of developments had to be left to societal actors and had to be accomplished through networks in which hierarchy hardly played a role. The term “good governance” is abused by using so many indicators that it becomes nearly impossible to achieve good governance. At the same time, many governments but are also locked in conflicts of interests between trying to do the right things and doing the urgently needed things right. It is not self-evident that improving governance will result in a reduction of the societal and managerial problems. The innovations may provide short term responses to serious governance deficits, but may not provide long term solutions to them. This article addresses trade-offs and dilemmas in citizens’ responsibility for the development of policies were the basic right of each individual is respected while difficult choices can be made more democratically.

**Keywords:** Good governance, democratic governance, government improvement, citizen rights.

### **Introduction**

The goal of this first inaugural conference of AMEPPA was a very important one. As the conference site noted, AMEPPA's inaugural conference provided a welcoming venue for academics and practitioners to come together to explore how public policy and administration professionals can contribute to the region's transformation. The conference presented emerging ideas, new lessons from experience, and timely research findings to shape public policy and administration.

As president of the International Association of Schools and Institutes in Administration, I would like to congratulate the organizers with this excellent initiative and to thank them for the opportunity to deliver the keynote speech. At the same time this possibility enforced me to be modest in what I can tell you. I have not been part in the courageous demonstrations which showed that governance in many parts of this region has not been good enough. The Arab spring yearned for better governance, if not good governance.

The questions arising are what it is to have good governance, how to achieve that, and what are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in such a pursuit. This presentation will address some of the challenges involved in such a pursuit. First I will define governance, which is not so easy given that a myriad of definitions can and have been given. The same goes inter alia for the prefix “good” in the combination “good governance”. I will argue that Merilee Grindle was right when she concluded that striving for good governance as an ideal situation poses serious threats (Grindle, 2004).

In one of her articles Grindle argues that the good governance agenda is unrealistically long and growing longer over time. Among the multitude of governance reforms that “must be done”, there is little guidance about what’s essential and what’s not, what should come first and what should follow, what can be achieved in the short term and what can only be achieved over the longer term, what is feasible and what is not. If more attention is given to sorting out these questions, “good enough governance” may become a more realistic goal for many countries. Good enough governance is seen as governance that scores high on those factors that do matter for the reduction of societal problems, although it may fail on other indicators of good governance which are less relevant in a specific situation.

It can be argued that the term “good governance” is abused by using so many indicators that it becomes nearly impossible to achieve good governance, or only possible if one neglects the societal effects of governmental actions. Grindle tells us that most of the good governance agenda is about what governments need to do to put their political, administrative, and financial houses in better order. At the same time, many governments (in countries lacking the financial and/or human resources) not only have low capacity to carry out such commitments, but are also locked in conflicts of interests between trying to do the right things and doing the urgently needed things right, that consume their energies and resources (Grindle, 2004: 539). Furthermore, according to her it is not at all self-evident that improving governance in all its aspects will result in a reduction of the societal and managerial problems those governments face. The innovations may provide short term responses to serious governance deficits, but may not provide long term solutions to them. Furthermore, because the conceptualization is often a-historical, solutions often insufficiently take the difficult trade-offs and dilemmas into account, and neglect the different features of the contexts and the different levels of development in different countries.

This is congruent with the argument of Collier in his recent book about the bottom billion, namely that bad governance is only one of the traps in which poor countries are caught.<sup>1</sup> In everyday practice the unrealistic ambitions of good governance can only result in disappointment. This is reflected in so-called 100-day plans, in which governments and newly elected presidents, promise their voters before the elections some kind of ‘paradise on earth’, to be established by them personally within three months. The outcomes can only be disappointing and the doubtful success and the message that the goals have been achieved in such an unbelievably short period, can only be substantiated by bending statistics, by commissioning friendly evaluators to conduct research of which the outcomes are already prefixed in the research assignment, by repositioning the so-called “free press” and by replacing the editors-in-chief of the most important media.

### **What is “Good Governance”?**

Kofi Annan in his function of secretary general of the UN said about good governance that it is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development (United Nations University, 2002). This is nicely said, but what does it imply?

---

<sup>1</sup> Other traps he mentions are being landlocked, the resource trap and civil war.

What is that thing called governance, and what does it explain? Governance is a concept that many scholars have addressed before. However, when asked what governance is exactly, many different answers can be and are usually given. The most simple definition is that governance is nothing else than the conduct of government. This is nevertheless rather different from the interpretations given to governance in the last 15 years.

Governance has become a concept that includes more and more phenomena related to the steering of societal developments. Originally, it was seen as an alternative for government. It was – according to the scholars of that time - something like the final blow for government that had to accept that society cannot be hierarchically steered or controlled. The steering of developments had to be left to societal actors and had to be accomplished through networks in which hierarchy hardly played a role.

It is only recently that the role of government and the creation of good institutions by government are deemed important again. Scholars began to realize that government should do what it is supposed to do, that is at least to create security, protect property rights, reduce societal problems and take back its leading role in controlling and steering societal developments (See for instance the recent literature on failed states and nation building).

If the popularity of the concept would only be used to describe different trends in the steering of societal developments there would not be a problem. One can analyze what is going on, try to explain it and test the findings. However, the term governance has become dangerous in that scholars as well as (international) organizations have added a normative prefix to it, namely ‘good’, which is indicative for a neglect for outputs and outcomes and increasing the criteria for ‘good governance’ imposing an agenda on governments which by now has become overloaded.

Governments should act according to all the criteria of good governance. That implies on the basis of rule of law, voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption. If government would proceed in this way and improve itself as much as possible on these dimensions this is supposed to be sufficient for eradicating societal problems.

The idea that the way in which governments act is more important than what they actually do constitutes one of the many, many dubious assumptions, or (to put it benevolently) hypotheses, surrounding governance. It is a problematic supposition especially when human resources are scarce, when it would take a disproportionate part of the financial resources available to improve the process at the expense of improving outputs and outcomes.

Another assumption is that all the mentioned dimensions of good governance have such effects and that this goes also for any dimension added to the concept of good governance. This results in an overloaded agenda, squandering all the desperately needed resources to induce socio-economic growth and probably being counterproductive in that regard. An overloaded agenda emerges from no prioritization between the criteria or dimensions. Overlooking the period from 1995 until now many aspects and dimensions were added to the concept of governance. At first the numbers of criteria were not that many. The UNDP, for instance, saw five good governance principles, namely legitimacy and voice (including participation and

consensus orientation), direction (including strategic vision) performance (including responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency) accountability (including transparency) and fairness (including equity and rule of law) (Graham, Amos and Plumptre, 2003). The World Bank has given six dimensions to the concept, namely: Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law and Control of Corruption (provided by the World Bank)

Five or six dimensions do not seem to be too bad. However, behind each of the dimensions there are multiple indicators. If we only look for instance at the number of indicators measuring the dimension 'government effectiveness' as done by the World Bank, there are more than 40 indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2003: 93). A similar complexity in indicators is visible for the other five dimensions, resulting in an agenda for improving governance that is really huge with over 150 indicators.

In this sense the concept has become 'slippery' (Kettl, 2002: 119). One of the first critics to this abuse of the term good governance was Merilee Grindle. She tells us that most of the good governance agenda is about what governments need to do to put their political, administrative, and financial houses in better order. At the same time, many governments (in countries lacking the financial and/or human resources) not only have low capacity to carry out such commitments, but are also locked in conflicts of interests between trying to do the right things and doing things right, that consume their energies and resources (Grindle, 2004: 539). This is congruent with the argument of Collier in his recent book about the Bottom billion, namely that bad governance is only one of the traps in which developmental countries are caught (Collier, 2008).

But the challenges of good governance run deeper. If we only look at the first indicator of good governance, that is, 'voice', this can be interpreted in multiple ways. The World Bank defines it as '*The extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.*' The basic requirement is to have free and fair elections. It is democracy in the classic form as a state in which policy decisions are based on the preferences of the majority, usually through elections and/or elections open to all or the majority of citizens. It results in what Schumpeter called an institutional arrangement in which individuals get decision making power by a competition over the votes of the citizens. According to Anthony Downs this interpretation of democracy results in politics in which the main goal of politicians is not to maximize outcomes beneficial to the population, but to maximize the number of votes, and in which substantial views are only a strategic means to get a maximum of support in elections with the result being that the winner takes all and the legitimacy of policies is decided by 51% of the population.

A quite different and more modern view on 'voice' defines it in terms of the protection of minority rights from the sometimes brutal dominance of the majority. It is not about the majority but about the minorities. Good governance implies a role for government next to other societal organizations and actors instead of hierarchically above them to take care of minorities. This is similar to the definition of Raadschelders who sees governance as referring to all organizations and institutions that are involved in the structuring of society, including governmental as well as

non-governmental actors and independent agencies, without any one of them being dominant (Raadschelders, 2003: 4).

Drechsler (2013) aptly points out that this is also crucial in Islamic views on government (Drechsler, 2013). Democratic governance is not about transferring responsibility to a ruler in order to give him the authority to make decisions. In general one cannot transfer one's responsibility, but one stays responsible irrespective of vote casting. This is an actual point of view given the present *We are all Khaled Said* movement, referring to, honoring and accepting the implications of the deaths of Khaled Said (a young Egyptian man who died under disputed circumstances in the Sidi Gaber area of Alexandria on June 6, 2010) and Bouazizi (the informal fruit seller who burned himself in Tunisia). In this view all citizens are responsible for the policies as developed and all should take into account whether these policies take into account the interests of minorities, or are extraordinary detrimental for minorities and whether the negative consequences can be mitigated.

At the same time and also crucial in Islamic Public Administration is the responsibility of government to gain legitimacy of all the people and to consult the people. According to Shirazi (2000) it is imperative for Heads of State to consult with others, be it individual citizens, experts, religious leaders or representatives of societal organizations. Hence, in this interpretation of democracy, the authority in a democracy in terms of responsibility and authority granted to leaders is always conditional on the non-transferable responsibility of each individual in the population to give or to deny legitimacy to a leaders' actions and to ensure that the state's decisions respect the basic rights of each individual irrespective of his or her color, language, sex, nationality, race, profession, wealth et cetera and irrespective whether that individual belongs to a majority or minority group.

The above is just mentioned to point to the difficult choices to be made in order to become more democratic. The same dilemmas can be traced in the other dimensions of what is called good governance, i.e. the strategic vision, performance, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability, transparency, and fairness (including equity and rule of law). It is beyond the limits of this paper to address all these dilemmas.

### **The Importance of Neglect**

The crucial point is that choices are inevitable and that one cannot have it all, nor that it is possible to have it all simultaneously or immediately. Of course, the choice can be to try to have it all simultaneously and at once, but the most likely consequence of trying to achieve good governance as an internally perfect working government in conformity with all the procedural dimensions of governance is detrimental, because of the side-effect that the urgent societal problems are probably not addressed properly and all attention is internally oriented. If societies' problems are addressed, but in a biased way because all the procedural criteria are neglected, out of a solely external orientation, is as detrimental. To try to be perfect with regard to both procedural and external aspects of policy making seems ideal, but will most probably result in halfhearted policies which are likely to fail in all respects (cf. de Vries, 2009). The reason is that the amount of resources available is always less than the amount of resources needed, and because some criteria pose dilemmas. For instance, being extremely efficient can only be achieved at the expense of goal-achievement, effectiveness and democratic policy making. The

reverse is also true. Short term goal achievement often contradicts long-term effectiveness. Therefore, priorities have to be set and this implies that other aspects of good governance are bound to be neglected. The neglect can be acceptable for some time, but especially in post-conflict nations they can also induce serious criticism.

In developed countries such focus seems to work well as long as flexibility is ensured to address the neglected problems as soon as they start to become more urgent than the problem being addressed. In such countries there is a basis of ample trust between society and government as well as a mature democratic system in which government is allowed to govern to some extent, and in which institutions are built in the system to ensure the needed checks and balances ensuring that also the rights of minorities are not violated.

This is quite different in post-conflict countries. Interpersonal and institutional trusts are almost absent, institutions have to be built anew, and routines are to be established in a society in which the interests conflict, hierarchical relations are far from stable and violent outbreaks lurk. This makes for an extremely complex process full of uncertainty and unexpected dynamics. Such situations are known for the replacement of the much needed rational and substantial argumentation in which public interests are central by a dominance of either political-strategic, traditional or affect rationality in which only personal interests are considered (cf. Max Weber). All these adverse conditions make a prediction of the outcomes of such processes complicated and almost equal to coin tossing. It can either run good or bad, become a great success or a failure in which people are even worse off than they were before.

## **Where to Focus**

This brings me to the last and probably most sensitive part of this presentation. Outsiders cannot tell you what you should do. That would be arrogant. Nevertheless, I will tell you what it needs to improve. It was argued above that when a country tries to recover after conflict, it faces serious challenges in which absent trust, uncertainty and insufficient resources are crucial. The first thing to be accomplished seems therefore to restore trust, stability and to use the scarce resources in an intelligent way. The department of social and economic affairs of the UN addressed this problem in 2010 (UNDESA, 2010). They recommended a six step procedure, consisting of restoring trust in governmental institution, effective leadership, appropriate institution-building, a capable and inclusive public service, engaging citizens, and citizen-centric service delivery.

Although the report also concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the professionalism of the public service is seen as especially important and integral to the social, political, economic and cultural life of every country (p. xii). Priority should therefore be given to stabilize and if possible improve the knowledge, skills, ethics, attitudes and networks of the people working in the public sector (p. xii). As the report concludes, a representative, merit-based, service-oriented public service can provide a model for participation, inclusive decision-making, reconciliation and social cohesion, and proactive peace building (p. xiii).

These implies one should not increase the complexity by, for instance, replacing the people working in public service, but rather train the existing officials, socialize them in the new

situation and make the governmental apparatus as a whole more inclusive. Often, the experience, knowledge and skills of the existing public administrators are indispensable—indispensable for effective service delivery in education, health, infrastructure and public safety.

## Conclusions

In the end good governance is just the proper conduct of government. Grindle argues that the good governance agenda is unrealistically long and growing longer over time. Among the multitude of governance reforms that “must be done”, there is little guidance about what’s essential and what’s not, what should come first and what should follow, what can be achieved in the short term and what can only be achieved over the longer term, what is feasible and what is not. If more attention is given to sorting out these questions, “good enough governance” may become a realistic goal for many countries (Grindle, 2004, 2007). Good enough governance is seen as governance that scores high on those factors that do matter for the reduction of societal problems, although it may fail on other indicators of good governance which are less relevant in a specific situation.

One of the crucial factors that matters in good enough governance is a well-functioning public sector. The effectiveness of government does depend less on the acts of politicians who are only able to distort interpersonal and institutional trust by making empty promises. It depends to a much higher extent on the capacities of a public sector able to restore trust by actually delivering the needed services. Whether their work is done on behalf of a religious or secular government is of secondary importance. People may watch, listen, support or oppose politicians and media may scrutinize the acts of presidents and parliamentarians. At the end of the day, nothing will have been accomplished without a capacitated public service. If one thing should be stable, or if there is one thing where stability should be created immediately after conflict, it is within the public service. It has to prepare and implement the policies crucial for the development of the country and the well-being of society. This could be the focus of our common responsibility.

## About the Author:

**Michiel de Vries, Ph.D.** is the President of the International Association of Schools and Institutes in Administration (IASIA) and professor at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He can be contacted at: [m.devries@fm.ru.nl](mailto:m.devries@fm.ru.nl)

## References

Collier, P. 2008. *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

de Vries, M. S. 2009. *The Importance of Neglect in Policy Making*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

Drechsler, Wolfgang. 2013. Islamic Public Administration. In Mirko Vintar, Allan Rosenbaum, Gyorgy Jenei, and Wolfgang Drechsler, eds. 2013. *The Past, Present and Future of Public*



*Administration in Central and Eastern Europe: Twenty Years of NISPAcee, 1992-2012.*  
Bratislava, Slovakia: NISPAcee Press.

Graham, J., B. Amos and T. Plumptre. 2003. Principles for Good Governance in the 21st Century. *Policy Brief No. 15, Institute on Good Governance*. Accessed September 14, 2012 at: <http://www.iog.ca/publications/policybrief15.pdf>.

Grindle, M. 2004. Good Enough Governance: Poverty Reduction and Reform in Developing Countries. *Governance*, 17(4): 525 – 548.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2007. Good Enough Governance Revisited. *Development Policy Review*, 25(1): 533-574.

Kaufmann, D., A. Kraay and M. Mastruzzi. 2003. *Governance Matters III: Governance Indicators for 1996-2002*, June 30. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3106. Accessed October 10, 2012 at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=405841>.

Kettl, D.F. 2002. *The Transformation of Governance: Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Raadschelders, J.C.N. 2003. *Government, a Public Administration Perspective*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

United Nations University. 2002. Policy Notes. *World Governance Assessment (WGA)*. Accessed September 6, 2012 at: <http://archive.unu.edu/p&g/wga/index.html>.

UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). 2010. *Reconstructing Public Administration after Conflict. Challenges, Practices and Lessons Learned*. New York: United Nations.