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Governance in Africa-Europe relations:
MODESTY, REALISM AND WORKING POLITICALLY

By Geert Laporte

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Since the 1990s governance has been a top priority in the Europe-Africa partnership. This briefing note identifies some of the political and bureaucratic hurdles in dealing with poorly governed states and suggests possible ways forward.

In the recent past we have moved away from overly normative to more realistic approaches in promoting political and economic reforms. The limitations of technocratic investments, informal democratic institutions and electoral processes are now increasingly recognised. The rather simplistic belief that it is possible to 'buy' governance reforms with aid conditionalities is waning. Thinking and working politically has become the new mantra.

Effective governance institutions have to be locally rooted. External partners can play a supportive role in facilitating change processes, but never a leading role. Their support can only be effective if they lead by example and do their homework well by better understanding the complexities of domestic reforms, including the obstacles and incentives for change. Acting upon that knowledge is paramount. But why is it so difficult to apply the lessons learnt and change current practice?

This note calls for a large dose of modesty and realism, a more cooperative engagement towards coalition building, and fundamental changes in the political and bureaucratic culture of development agencies and diplomatic services.

The changing governance context

Since the early 1990s, promotion of 'good governance' in Africa has been a key priority of the international community and external partners. Though sometimes vaguely defined, the concept was mostly understood to cover issues such as democratic elections, rule of law, civil society development, human rights, a competent public administration, decentralisation and inclusive societies.

At first, governance support programmes were strongly embedded in overly ambitious normative approaches, and sometimes even naïve assumptions about how development or economic transformation could take place in often fragile African societies. External partners tended to look at local situations through the lens of a future ideal state of governance (the so-called Denmark model). The focus was on formal institutions, and less on influencing underlying norms, values and cultural patterns. There was a strong belief that it was possible 'to buy' governance reforms in African states by rewarding or penalising partner countries with more or less aid resources. Budget support was considered the best instrument to push for governance reforms, as it allowed partners to engage in regular policy dialogue with African governments on the functioning (or malfunctioning) of their governance institutions, while also enabling elaborate conditionality frameworks and performance contracts to push for detailed best practice reforms.

Around 2005, doubts arose about the effectiveness of this approach. In policy terms, governance remained a key priority in most development strategies. However, external partners increasingly realised the limited impact they had in promoting 'wholesale governance reforms' in Africa. There were calls for more modesty and a less normative approach, focusing on promotion of 'good enough governance' (WRR 2010, Grindle 2007).

To deepen context specific knowledge and feasibility analysis, international partners such as the World Bank, the United Kingdom (UK) Department for International Development (DFID) and the Netherlands developed political economy frameworks. An example is the Dutch Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis (SGACA) framework.

While global relations have changed and the share of aid in the budgets of many developing countries has declined, other development models, such as China, have grown more attractive, particularly in Africa. At the same time the European Union's (EU) credibility in promoting governance has been affected by governance problems at home in some of its member states. Recognising their lack of influence in improving governance through African central governments, many European and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) donors gradually shifted the focus of their interventions to civil society and the private sector. The assumption was that these 'new' actors would help boost the 'demand side' for better governance (e.g., through enhanced domestic accountability, particularly at the sector level). The importance of budget support to central states was substantially reduced, as it was seen to fuel corrupt regimes and hinder effective governance reforms.

Today, the old dilemmas of *who and how to support* are firmly back on the agenda. Development is essentially about politics (*who gets what and what rules apply*), and hence the governance question remains central. This holds particularly true in addressing Africa's daunting challenges. The international community, also out of self-interest, is therefore 'condemned' to continue investing in governance, even while the prevailing conditions on the ground deteriorate and the space for civil society, non-state actors and local authorities is shrinking in many countries. Authoritarian leadership, sometimes with ideological affinities with the Chinese model, is gaining ground, inspiring some of the 'developmental states' in Africa. But authoritarian rule is not confined to Africa. It has become a global phenomenon, nurtured by frustration, populism and feelings of social exclusion in Asia, Latin America, the United States, Russia and the EU.

With the pressing new agenda of global challenges and the sustainable development goals (SDG 16 targets peace, justice and strong institutions), the issue of governance is gaining ground again on the policymaking

stage. Governance will continue to be an important element of any renewed Europe-Africa partnership, since both continents are dealing with many similar challenges of growing inequalities, equitable tax systems and climate change adaptation. Moreover, central governments in Africa remain crucial players with whom the EU must, unavoidably, establish and maintain dialogue and cooperation, while helping to safeguard space for non-state actors and local authorities.

External partners should not give up on the governance agenda, but less *hubris* and a good dose of realism are required in designing and implementing sensible policies (see World Bank, 2017).

Key questions

What types of 'innovative' and politically feasible approaches could work in promoting governance reforms and new state-society relations that deliver development outcomes?

Why do certain approaches succeed in some contexts but fail in others?

What roles can bilateral and other external partners play to reinvigorate governance agendas in Africa, and what are the limits of external interventions?

What effective governance contributions can external players make, given their own political economies?

Is it possible to reconcile the views of 'believers' and 'non-believers' on the importance of good governance as a precondition for development success (see Booth 2015)?

Lessons learnt: The do's and don'ts of governance reform

Before focusing on new governance initiatives, it is useful to take stock of lessons drawn from more than two decades of governance reform programmes.

Think and work politically. Grand-scale, externally designed and technocratic programmes of governance and institutional reform (e.g., transplant of best practices) rarely work. Over the years, consensus has grown that governance support strategies must be firmly embedded in the local context and political realities. Practitioners increasingly use political economy analysis and diagnostic tools to come to grips with the local context, vested interests and the obstacles and incentives for change. Thinking more politically has helped develop politically smarter and fine-tuned analysis at the regional, country and sector levels.

Demystify formal governance institutions. Most countries in Africa have established formal democracies with regular elections. In the past decades, the international community has invested a lot in supporting electoral processes and formal democratic and accountability institutions (e.g., parliaments). Yet, investments in these formal systems have not resolved the structural political and socio-economic problems of most African countries. Mistrust of political parties, parliaments and governments is rife, and many African countries still lack the foundations for well-functioning and accountable states able to provide effective services and uphold the rule of law (Rocha Menocal and Domingo 2018). This calls for a deeper analysis of where real traction for change can be found, including in less visible informal institutions, norms and practices.

Aid conditionalities and 'more for more' no longer work. Gradually donors have become aware of the limited role of external partners in facilitating change processes. Conditional approaches with stringent eligibility criteria linked to governance, democracy and human rights agendas have been largely ineffective. Legally binding agreements such as the Cotonou partnership agreement have very limited impact these days

on 'poorly behaving' African countries, due in part to the gradual loss of bargaining power of European external partners (Rocha Menocal and Domingo 2018).

One-size fits all forms of governance support should be avoided. Standard recipes and external pre-cooked solutions have had limited success. External partners have to learn 'to work with the grain', putting supply-driven approaches aside and building on indigenous processes of governance, even in situations of extreme fragility.

Scale down expectations and invest long term. External partners have become more realistic about the potential for governance change in short periods of time. Governance support requires 'muddling through', careful navigation and accepting that the time needed to see effective structural changes in a given country context is unpredictable and subject to many variables beyond the control of external agencies.

Why is operational change slow towards adopting realistic governance approaches?

Despite these significant lessons from past governance approaches, it has proven difficult to move from better analysis to better practice (Unsworth 2015: 49). The stated objectives of 'thinking and working more politically' and putting context first have not, as yet, been translated into concrete operations. There are several reasons for this gap. First, political pressures and demands for financial accountability force development and international cooperation bureaucracies to demonstrate significant, measurable and short-term results. The systematic call for 'value for money' has skewed attention away from local political economy dynamics towards a pre-set donor agenda's (Unsworth 2015: 57-58). A second key constraining factor is the growing focus on the external partner's own interests (linked to geopolitical, economic, migration and security concerns) and related incoherencies in dealing with poorly governed states. Finally, at a more mundane level, agencies for international cooperation seem increasingly less equipped at headquarters and in the field, in terms of incentives, capacities and instruments, to ensure tailor-made support to governance.

How can external partners improve the dialogue with African governments on 'good enough governance'?

At least on paper, there seems to be consensus across the board that development is a largely endogenous political process and that effective and legitimate governance institutions have to be locally rooted and nurtured. It follows that external partners, as outsiders, can play a supportive but never a leading role in facilitating progressive change. This sense of realism about the potential for change calls for customised approaches in which external partners need to play different cards at the same time. Some of these are set out here below.

Work in a different way with central governments on the basis of political incentives beyond aid. A diversified and integrated external action agenda, covering areas such as economic and trade relations, mobility and visa regulations, and other major domestic foreign policy concerns, may provide better incentives to build relationships of trust and influence that could potentially lead to governance reforms.

Invest in a mix of key stakeholders. It is crucial to identify, work with and channel resources to a mix of different players at various levels who have the capacity and the willingness to promote change. These reformers could be located in central or local government, the private sector, civil society and grassroots

organisations. External partners could facilitate interaction and nurture linkages between individuals and groups of reformers in civil society and government. Investing in these reform coalitions requires a solid knowledge of the country context and a subtle way of reaching out to these reformers.

Work around specific agendas and concrete problems. Rather than seeking to foster comprehensive governance reforms (e.g., of the justice sector) in the form of 'masterplans' that mobilise large amounts of external funding, the way forward is to focus on specific problems that can be tackled in a concrete manner, with the relevant stakeholders and relying as much as possible on domestic funding. As progress is achieved, other issues can be taken on board (the so-called problem-driven iterative approach).[1]

Support African institutions and home-grown governance initiatives. Emerging initiatives at the level of the African Union and the African regional economic communities (RECs) may hold over time promising comparative advantages. African-initiated mechanisms of peer pressure could be more effective in helping to strengthen domestic accountability than externally driven donor accountability. At the same time, these mechanisms could provide more scope for African societies to pursue and shape their own priorities. To ensure success, the challenge for any external partner will be to find creative ways to link governance support programmes to African processes and initiatives.

Build coalitions among external partners. It is difficult for a bilateral partner acting alone to make a substantial difference in any local country context. For real impact, dialogue and interaction with a partner country is better organised through multilateral and EU channels. As an example, when specific EU ambassadors were asked to leave, respectively, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) because of differences on governance issues, EU member states could have engaged more forcefully in collective EU action. A similar observation could be made in regard to economic governance and improvement of the investment climate. Here, too, a bilateral partner could be more effective working in coordination with the EU (and its External Investment Plan) and with multilateral and regional development banks and institutions, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Investment Bank (EIB), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and African Development Bank (AfDB) (all these institutions have EU member states as shareholders). Working through them could be a more effective route towards facilitating sustainable investment.

Conclusion

We have travelled far in the governance debate. Several elements of the rather broad governance agenda are seen as essential for achieving development outcomes and the ambitious global 2030 Agenda. Yet, a number of sobering lessons have been learnt on ineffective governance approaches. These debunk quick fix technocratic solutions, over-investment in formal governance institutions, prescriptive approaches, conditionalities and the sidelining of central government.

External partners now realise that a more political approach is needed to better understand the complexity of change processes in the often very diverse African country contexts. External actors can play a supportive or facilitating role, but never a leading role.

In the rapidly changing global and African context, this calls for preparedness to invest in knowledge development, to allow for a real 'thinking and working politically' agenda or 'doing governance differently' with central governments and other relevant African stakeholders. Above all, this requires modesty, a large

[1] The European Commission has largely abandoned direct budget support to national decentralisation processes framed as "good governance" reform. It now chooses to support concrete decentralisation agendas by promoting local/territorial development from the bottom up. The underlying theory of change is that such an approach will be less resisted by central governments and may help to create over time a genuine demand for real decentralisation.

dose of realism, tailored approaches in dealing with the complexities of domestic reforms, a more cooperative engagement towards coalition building, and fundamental changes in the political and bureaucratic culture of development agencies and diplomatic services. Policymakers and practitioners in diplomatic services and agencies for international cooperation are quite familiar with this body of knowledge. But are they prepared to not only *think* politically but also *work* more politically if this also has major implications for their own operations?

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HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE
Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands *Pays Bas*
Tel +31 (0)43 350 29 00
Fax +31 (0)43 350 29 02

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES
Rue Archimède 5
1000 Brussels *Bruxelles*
Belgium *Belgique*
Tel +32 (0)2 237 43 10
Fax +32 (0)2 237 43 19

info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447