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## 1 FROM 'GOOD GOVERNANCE' TO GOVERNANCE THAT WORKS

During the last quarter century, the view has steadily gained ground that if sub-Saharan Africa is to become less poor, it needs to be better governed. But what does that mean? For many people, African and non-African, the answer is obvious: Africa's leaders must be convinced or compelled to practice 'good governance', the elements of which are straightforward and exemplified in the institutions and practices of the democratic capitalist North (see Box 1.1). For some global leaders, this view of matters is self-evident and hardly in need of further justification (e.g., Cameron, 2012). However, a growing expert consensus argues that the governance that Africa needs for development is not so easily identified with the good governance template.

This book agrees with that point of view, but also argues that not enough has been done to spell out its implications. It offers a new perspective on what an alternative agenda for

### Box 1.1: What is 'good governance'?

According to a typical overview, good governance has eight major characteristics: 'It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society' (UN ESCAP, n.d.).

governance reform in Africa might contain. It is addressed to governance reformers in Africa as well as to the international development organisations that in one way or another support the cause of improving governance for development in the region and, in the process, heavily influence attitudes and approaches on the ground.

### The big debate: from 'best practice' to 'good fit'

The leading edge of thinking about African governance has evolved considerably since the early 1990s, when the concept of good governance was first articulated. The idea that today's Northern institutions provide a suitable template for the governance of development in poor countries is, increasingly, being questioned. According to a view that is now widely adopted, the governance improvements that countries need are specific to time and place. In other words, the historical background against which a reform is attempted and the way it is sequenced with other changes in society and the economy will have a decisive effect on its results.

For these reasons, generic models based on internationally acknowledged 'best practices' (Fukuyama, 2004; Levy, 2004), or on 'institutional monocropping' (Evans, 2004), are likely to prove inappropriate and ineffective. Instead, reformers increasingly recognise that essential institutional functions for economic and social development can be fulfilled in quite varied institutional forms (Chang, 2007b; Rodrik, 2007a). As the discipline of economics has long recognised in relation to production and markets (Lipsey and Lancaster, 1956), what are technically termed 'first-best' solutions are unlikely to be optimal under real-world conditions. By analogy, the governance reforms that work for development may be

‘second-best’ options in terms of some ideal standard (Rodrik, 2007b; 2008). We should stop judging the appropriateness of institutions and proposing governance reforms on the basis of weak theory about the causal linkages between political institutions, especially democratic ones, and development outcomes (Khan, 2007; Andrews, 2008; Rocha Menocal, 2011).

Practitioners are beginning to take this reasoning seriously. It has become accepted in principle that promoters of institutional change should aim to identify reforms that fit the context in which they are working and that prioritise the immediate challenges. That is, external assistance to governance improvement needs to turn its thinking ‘upside down’, starting from the country reality and how to improve it, rather than from donor ideals, assumptions or preconceptions (Unsworth, 2009; Future State, 2010). Development agencies should, therefore, encourage their staff to undertake studies of the political economy of the countries and sectors in which they work (DFID, 2009; Fritz et al., 2009; Poole, 2011; ODI/TPP, recurrent). African advocacy groups, for their part, should focus on changes that meet the specific needs and possibilities of their situation, relying less on grand demands that mimic the institutional patterns attained in some of the most economically advanced countries in their very recent history (Grindle, 2007; Pritchett et al., 2010).

The APPP research was very much a product of such thinking. Aware that established forms of development support have often been ineffective for the reasons discussed above, we tried to determine what ‘working with the grain’ would look like, especially in the various contexts that present themselves in Africa today (Crook and Booth, 2011). We also picked up the basic idea of a ‘good fit’ approach and expressed it as ‘building on what works’ (Booth, 2011).

This shift in general ways of thinking is important. But it is not yet clear that the actual practice of international agencies or country reformers has changed very much as a result of it. Overall, development assistance policies are still more about financial transfers than about institutions. And when it comes to institutions, much of the new context-sensitive governance programming looks much like the old kind. This is, at least in part, because even the best donor governance advisers and consultants and the most reflective country activists have real trouble figuring out what to do differently.

There are exceptions of course, but while the proponents of ‘good fit’ in governance programming have been moving in the right direction, they are not yet addressing the real challenges of African governance. The idea of basing governance reforms on country realities must be interpreted in a more radical way. The APPP research findings indicate how such an outcome can be achieved.

## **Principal-agent versus collective action frameworks**

Our view is that not all of the reforms customarily offered as examples of good fit make a clean break with conventional thinking on good governance. In fact, most current understandings of this agenda have not gone far enough. They have, as it were, paused en route at a dilapidated half-way house, from which they need to be evicted before they settle in for good. This half-way house has a technical name: it is called the principal-agent approach to public management reform (see Box 1.2). The road ahead, in contrast, involves the identification and solution of collective action problems.

We shall make clear what we mean by this, but it will help to begin by explaining one of the most prominent manifestations of the central issue. This is the discussion of governance reform options in terms of a contrast between ‘supply-side’ approaches and ‘demand-side’ approaches.

For at least the past ten years, policy perspectives on improving governance in low-income countries have centred on a dialogue between so-called ‘supply-side’ and ‘demand-side’ approaches to governance reform. As will be seen, they are both versions of the good governance perspective. APPP research suggests that the demand/supply framework is a conceptual straitjacket and an obstacle to clear thinking about the challenges of African governance.

In the supply-side approach the implicit assumption is that governments are led by people whose central concern is to develop their countries. That is, they are genuinely, and without serious qualification, interested in effectively supplying the conditions for national development. They want governance and the economy to improve, with benefits for the population at large – this is their primary motivation. Therefore, donor-promoted reforms focus on how they can be assisted to supply the required changes and overcome the obstacles they face in meeting their objectives, especially by improving the functioning of public-sector institutions and the performance of public servants. Following the widespread failure of attempts to reform civil and public services directly by means of restructuring and training programmes, the favoured instruments of external support for the desired changes are budget support, technical assistance to public financial management and associated policy monitoring and dialogue.

In the ‘demand-side’ approach, the commitment of leaders to a development vision and to probity in public policy is acknowledged to be highly problematic in many instances – the primary political motivations are of other kinds. The supply-side approach to improving governance is criticised as managerialist and insufficiently sensitive to the political dimensions of the problem. It is argued that better governance and the effective provision of public goods are only likely when empowered citizens and mobilised civil societies begin to ‘hold governments to account’. At this point, the implicit assumption is made that the citizens of poor countries have an uncomplicated desire and at least the potential ability to make demands on their rulers in their capacity as providers of public goods. External support is therefore directed towards the strengthening of specific ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ accountability institutions and programmes to support citizen participation, ‘voice’ and empowerment, usually involving dissemination of information about rights and entitlements.

The dialogue between these twin perspectives has structured most thinking about both domestic reform options and aid delivery for the last 15 years or so. It was in the mid-2000s that thinkers in and around the World Bank (World Bank, 2003; Levy and Kpundeh, 2004) began to argue, in the name of greater political realism, for a relative shift towards programmes that address the demand side of governance. An encompassing shift in the

### **Box 1.2: The principal-agent framework**

*A principal-agent problem exists where one party to a relationship (the principal) requires a service of another party (the agent) but the principal lacks the necessary information to monitor the agent’s performance in an effective way (there is ‘information asymmetry’). It is assumed here that the principal wants and requires the service, so that the difficulty to be overcome is distinctly about the agent’s compliance with the principal’s wishes and the information asymmetry that affects this.*

thinking of the development assistance community as a whole, including international and national NGOs, followed in short order and has been the dominant perspective ever since.

In terms of volume, it is no doubt true that the bulk of donor funding for governance reform has continued to flow through channels viewed by their critics as supply-oriented, including, notably, packages of budgetary aid or policy-based lending and public financial management reforms. On the other hand, it is probably accurate to say that the battle for intellectual supremacy has been won by advocates of demand-side work. The results have included extensive support to community monitoring of public services (through the use of ‘score cards’ for instance), programmes aimed at ‘deepening democracy’ and a variety of initiatives under the broad heading of ‘social accountability’.

Most international development agencies still do a bit of both. Some are also making more deliberate efforts to link up what they do in the two areas. For example, they are earmarking a proportion of their budget-support spending to efforts to enhance domestic accountability, and encouraging more cross-departmental working between the teams managing budget-support operations and those working on citizen empowerment. To this extent, there is awareness that the ‘either-supply-or-demand’ structuring of governance-improvement options is unhelpful.

These bridging and rebalancing efforts do have a role to play. The ‘silo working’ that tends to characterise the departmental structures of development agencies is indeed an obstacle to effectiveness, and establishing more joined-up ways of working is a good first step. However, there is a more fundamental problem with the supply-versus-demand structuring of the options for governance improvement, one that is not so easily tackled and calls for a more radical solution.

This problem centres not on striking a better balance or generating more synergies but on something more basic. We need to revisit the assumptions both approaches make about the nature of African political reality. These assumptions produce analytical and policy weaknesses that mirror each other exactly. Since this has to do with the whole way the topic of governance for development is posed in Africa, it is an issue for domestic reformers and campaigners and not just for donors.

## **Throwing off the straitjacket of principal-agent thinking**

The demand-side approach simply turns the supply-side approach on its head. The two perspectives share an important feature: an implicit assumption that there are sets of actors who are committed, in an uncomplicated way, to public-good objectives. They just differ about who those actors are: the supply-siders assume that national leaders are drivers of development, while demand-siders claim that it is more realistic to see the citizenry playing this role. In both approaches, the challenge of getting better governance is reduced to that of getting the other side to comply. Another way to put this is to say that both approaches are, in effect if not in intention, wedded to what is technically termed a ‘principal-agent’ model.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, the suggestion here is not that practitioners working on ‘demand for good governance’ use principal-agent concepts. Their typical watchwords are of course ‘voice’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘accountability to citizens’. We also acknowledge that actual practice varies quite a lot, and sometimes involves many of the ingredients we promote in this book. On the other hand, what we sketch here and portray more fully below is very far from being our invention: it represents the dominant policy perspective for a large range of influential organisations which together exercise a massive influence on what happens on the ground in Africa.

Approaches that assume that either leaders or citizens in low-income countries have an uncomplicated commitment to improving governance and the provision of public goods are mistaken in roughly equal measure and for essentially the same reason. This is not to say there aren't individuals who have a genuine interest in the development and transformation of their countries. But for practical purposes this is less important than the fact that most actors at all levels spend most of their time responding to relatively mundane concerns and that, when it comes to pursuing more ambitious objectives, they often face prohibitive problems of collective action.

Summarising in everyday terms, then, our position is that governance challenges in Africa are not fundamentally about one set of people getting another set of people to behave better in the interests of development. They are about both sets of people finding ways of being able to act collectively in their own and others' best interests. Reformers and development agencies have something useful to contribute to improving governance in Africa, but only if they appreciate that this is the fundamental nature of the challenge and other issues are secondary.

In slightly more technical terms, we are critical of approaches that conceptualise governance failings and remedies in terms that – whether they recognise it or not – adopt a principal-agent perspective. We believe it is more realistic to understand governance limitations as the product of multi-faceted collective action problems, and to think about possible remedies on that basis. Principal-agent analysis still has some relevance to meeting development challenges, but it must be nested within an understanding of collective action challenges, not the other way round.

In articulating the APPP findings in this way, we have been inspired by the arguments developed with particular reference to the limitations of current anti-corruption programmes by Bo Rothstein and other members of the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg (Persson et al., 2010; Rothstein, 2011). They offer a key insight that has ramifications well beyond the particular field of anti-corruption (see Box 1.3). An underlying argument of the Gothenburg group, which we share, is that it is important not to make assumptions about what Africans want and will do, without reference to evidence and experience.

APPP findings agree with a good deal of other research and practical experience in suggesting that a realistic take on governance reform in Africa involves two things. First, it calls for an understanding of institutions and the underlying power relations that determine how they work in practice, and thus the nature of

### **Box 1.3: Collective action and anti-corruption**

‘... while contemporary anti-corruption reforms are based on a conceptualization of corruption as a principal-agent problem, in the African context corruption rather seems to resemble a collective action problem, making the short-term costs of fighting corruption outweigh the benefits. Consequently, even if most individuals morally disapprove of corruption and are fully aware of the negative consequences for the society at large, very few actors show a sustained willingness to fight it. This, in turn, leads to a breakdown of any anti-corruption reform that builds on the principal-agent framework ... Insofar a large enough number of actors are expected to play foul, everyone has something to gain personally from acting corruptly. Consequently, in a context in which corruption is the expected behavior ... there will simply be no actors willing to take on the role of controlling corruption’ (Persson et al., 2010: 1, 5).

politics in the region. Second, it means appreciating that both elite incentives and the behaviour of citizens and service users are strongly affected by coordination and collective action challenges. Some of the challenges we are referring to are merely organisational, for which we reserve the term ‘coordination’. The concept of collective action is used in a more technical sense, referring to the theory first elaborated by Olson (1965) and then developed by institutional theorists such as Hardin (1982), Sandler (1992) and particularly Ostrom (1990; 2005). This theory is concerned with the particular conditions that, in a wide diversity of social settings, lead to the under-provision of public or collective goods (here in the narrower of the two senses distinguished in the Introduction).

As we explained briefly in the Introduction, public goods are technically defined as benefits (including services) that are consumed jointly by members of a given community. In other words, we are dealing with a situation in which one person’s consumption of the benefit does not subtract from the availability of the good to others. More specifically, public goods are benefits from whose enjoyment it is impossible or difficult to exclude community members who have not contributed to their production. The classic instances extend from street lighting and unpolluted air to peace and security. The community in question can be anything from the families in a farming village, or the clients of a particular political patron, to the members of a country’s political class.

The critical feature of the theory is the element of ‘non-excludability’. This creates the so-called ‘free-rider problem’ (see Box 1.4), which leads to under-provision of the good. Common pool resources, such as shared forests and water systems, are distinguished from public goods proper by the fact that one person’s use of the resource may well reduce its availability to others. However, non-excludability does apply. Because people who have contributed to the cost of the good are bound to share the benefits with a potentially large number of free-riders, their willingness

to contribute will be undermined unless there are institutions (including forms of leadership) that limit such free-riding. The good will tend to be under-provided and, in the case of a common pool resource, may get over-used, resulting in a ‘tragedy of the commons’.

As Ostrom and her school have shown, small-scale communities commonly do have institutions that prevent the destruction of common property or open-access resources such as forests or rivers. They can and do control free-riding. On the other hand, unresolved but potentially resolvable collective action problems are otherwise widespread and at the heart of the challenge of development (Gibson et al., 2005; Mockus, 2005; Shivakumar, 2005; Bano, 2012). Those problems are, at least to some extent, subject to ameliorative action, but not so long as they are approached in a ‘best practice’ mode – where an internationally validated solution is applied without regard to the local context – or within a principal-agent perspective that assumes away the problems to be diagnosed and addressed.

It is important to appreciate the different policy and action implications of using a collective action framework rather than a principal-agent one. The latter approach assumes that there are principals that want goods to be provided or development to be promoted but have difficulty in getting the agents to perform and comply with their wishes because they lack relevant information. So the priority interventions are those enabling the collection and

**Box 1.4: The ‘free-rider problem’ explained**

Free riders are people who use more than their fair share of a resource and/or who cover less than their fair share of the costs of its production. This becomes a problem when it leads to the under-production of a public good or to the over-use of a common pool resource. Figuring out how to prevent or reduce free riding is key to solving this problem.

dissemination of information about entitlements and performance. Typical ways of doing this that have been enthusiastically adopted by the development business over the last decade have included systematic monitoring of policy implementation, public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS), community-level monitoring schemes using score cards and information campaigns focused on people's rights and entitlements. The fundamental idea is to mitigate the problem of information asymmetry, where agents have a great deal of information, especially about their own activities, and their principals have little.

Collective action theorists, on the other hand, are generally more sceptical about the motives that drive action. They are more keenly aware that many groups and individuals may want the benefits in the form of public or collective goods but will not work to obtain them, in part because of their expectations about the behaviour of others. Under these circumstances, providing them with better information with which to call others to account may be completely irrelevant. They will not be motivated to join with others to make use of this information, in part because they have other, easier and less risky ways of meeting their needs. For example, ordinary people may be linked to patrons who provide them with more reliable access to particular services, so they have little interest in contributing to public-wide efforts to improve provision. APPP research suggests that this situation is quite common, meaning that donor-funded interventions based on information-asymmetry assumptions have often been a waste of effort.

## **What's new and what isn't**

There are two large problems with the way thinking about governance reform has been held within the straitjacket of principal-agent thinking. At the macro level, it tends to result in elite incentives getting treated as a 'black box' about which nothing further can be said, whereas there are at least a few important and policy-relevant things that can be said on the basis of research. At meso and micro levels, the assumption that ordinary people in poor developing countries can slip easily into the roles assigned to them by demand-side accountability initiatives leads to neglect of opportunities to diagnose and act upon collective action blockages.

As Kelsall (2013) has shown, when the black box of elite incentives is opened up it becomes clear that both historically and in the present there are important differences among political regimes in the way governance and development challenges are handled. In particular, the contrasts between the more and less developmental types of neopatrimonial politics are highly significant in shaping variations in outcomes. And these, in turn, are explained by whether or not the elites have been able to overcome the collective action problems they face in the pursuit of public policies that lead to sustained processes of economic transformation.

In the context of macro-political systems that are not geared to the provision of public goods, sectoral and sub-national actors face their own collective action problems. The macro constraints are often completely overwhelming. Occasionally, however, some immediate problems are able to be overcome despite the macro constraints, and these experiences are of special interest in thinking about reform and aid options for the future. In this book, we are concerned in a limited way and indirectly with macro-politics, because our examination of institutional blockages in public goods delivery leads us back to questions about political regimes, including the nature and limits of African democracy. More particularly, however, we are interested in unpacking the different ways in which local problem-solving occurs, and how it might be more often encouraged and less often undermined.

It should be clear that this is not just an APPP agenda. Most of our concerns are shared with other recent and several ongoing international research efforts, including the Developmental Leadership Program (Leftwich and Wheeler, 2011; Wheeler and Leftwich, 2012) and the Copenhagen-based Elites, Production and Poverty project (Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011). Some of the central themes of this book were incorporated in a Joint Statement on the political economy of African development issued by no less than five current research programmes in March 2012 (APPP et al., 2012).

Our work also builds on, and adds to ten years of research at the Institute of Development Studies (Future State, 2005; 2010; Citizenship DRC, 2011). For example, one of the central conclusions from that research was that institutions that are successful in improving public services almost always involve actors on both sides of the divide between ‘government’ and ‘citizens’. The boundaries between social mobilisation and political action are often blurred as well. We agree, and in this sense the ideas set out in this book are not new. On the other hand, we do not believe the lessons of the IDS research have been properly taken up. Such findings have often been translated into a simple message of the sort criticised above about joining up the demand- and supply-sides of governance reform. Our proposition is not about joining up demand and supply but about the prior question of how to address the severe problems of coordination and collective action that typically affect actors on both sides of the so-called demand-supply relationship.

This leads us to emphasise arrangements that assist problem-solving, as distinct from the single-stranded solutions or ‘magic bullets’ that have undue influence over development practice. Good institutions solve problems arising in *specific* circumstances, meaning that generic remedies will often miss the point and may well do harm. As we shall see, APPP research also suggests that the institutional arrangements that permit and/or consolidate successful problem-solving will often be hybrid arrangements that blend modern state principles and popular expectations or elements drawn from local cultures in a creative way. These propositions validate in a broad way the initial APPP ‘hunch’ about the value of ‘working with the grain’ of African societies. As the following chapters will show, however, this translates into two more specific and empirically testable claims:

- institutions that permit an adequate provision of public goods often do so by solving locally specific collective action problems; and
- hybrid forms are useful in this context as they reduce the costs of institutional innovation by combining modern professional standards or scientific criteria with local cultural borrowings.

## **The problem of magic bullets**

Much of the preceding argument would be more easily accepted if it were not for the fact that most governance reform thinking is locked into one or other variant of the principal-agent approach. To give coherence to its own efforts, the development assistance business needs pithy, upbeat formulations that simplify complexity. It likes and needs panaceas, the silver bullets that can be counted upon to kill the evil-doer when all else has failed.

It is a familiar critique of the development enterprise that it is searching not for solutions to problems but for problems to which to attach known solutions. The more reflective practitioners often conclude that in particular fields ‘the solution is the problem’ (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2008). As Olivier de Sardan (2012a) says on the basis of long experience in Niger, each one of a succession of modalities of provision, or modes of local



governance, has been treated over time as *the* solution – the key that will open all doors. Following the first major setbacks to the bureaucratic efforts of the post-colonial state, there was a period in which ‘participation’ was the watchword and a variety of community-based committees and associations became the standard remedy. Privatisation of service provision, democratic decentralisation and even restoration of chiefly authority were each pursued with enthusiasm for a while. In reality, each of these modalities has had its serious problems and none has provided the expected miracle solution.

To the extent that there are solutions, they are to be found in the fine detail of implementation, within and across the modalities. As argued by Olivier de Sardan (2012b: 9-12), enlightened reformers exist, to some degree, within each mode of local governance, and progress is more likely to be made by providing new opportunities to such people than by treating any one approach as intrinsically superior. Later in the book, we flesh out this idea – an idea that rests on a radical interpretation of the ‘good fit’ approach and, therefore, what it means to anchor institutions in country realities. Here we discuss further three magic bullets or panaceas that remain influential or are still in the ascendant today: democratic decentralisation, client power and social accountability. Each may be considered to be rooted in the good-governance framework and each makes behavioural assumptions of the principal-agent type.

### ***Democratic decentralisation***

Devolution of power to elected district or municipal governments is often seen as the best way of addressing obstacles to public goods provision. Properly implemented, democratic decentralisation or a municipal mode of local governance is held to be *the* solution to the problem of persistent poverty. The principal obstacle is seen as the unwillingness of central governments to implement the measure properly, by actually conceding decision-making powers and providing the necessary resources to local actors.

Devolution of resources and decisions to elected local governments has been advocated on various grounds, some of them quite technical and carefully qualified (e.g., World Bank, 1997: Ch 7). Such devolution has been implemented by governments for different reasons, most of them highly political.<sup>1</sup> However, the most common argument among bilateral donors and NGOs starts from the assumption that the demand expressed for public goods by service users and the general population is an important influence on their provision. It then asserts that the physical distance separating the provider from the user affects the strength and effectiveness of user ‘voice’ and hence the provider response. Putting the argument more technically, the provision of public goods is a principal-agent challenge, where the principal is the client or service user, and the local authorities and service providers are their agents. It is suggested that the information asymmetry and the ‘agency loss’ (non-compliance) that affect principal-agent relationships in general are likely to be reduced by the factor of proximity.

There is in fact no body of theory underpinning this claim that democratic decentralisation obviously favours the provision of public goods.<sup>2</sup> Democratic decentralisation may be intrinsically desirable, but Treisman’s (2007) critique of the theoretical foundations of the decentralisation movement is comprehensive. He finds no valid theoretical argument for expecting decentralised governance to be more or less effective than a centralised system in terms of public goods performance. Two criticisms can be made of the assumption that decentralisation promotes public goods delivery. First, public goods’ provision is only partly about services for which there is ‘demand’ and about which, to any degree, it is sensible to see local populations as clients or principals. Second, where the

principal-agent concept may apply, the importance of physical distance on its own is highly questionable (World Bank, 2003: Ch 10; Golooba-Mutebi, 2005).

As for empirical research, it too points in a different direction. At the end of the first decade of intensive decentralising reforms, Richard Crook and associates (Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2003) concluded that the impacts of democratic decentralisation on outcomes such as the effectiveness of poverty-reduction efforts are indeterminate. That is, the outcomes depend heavily on factors other than the decision to devolve powers and resources to lower levels of public authority. The context, including the political complexion of the central government and the interest that the regime or other forces have in capturing local power for their purposes, makes a vast difference. The bulk of the ever-expanding literature on decentralisation continues to be clear on this: the ‘other’ factors are crucial.<sup>3</sup>

The obvious implication is that the focus for policy research should be on the nature of these ‘other’ factors. This has been followed up in one sense, with studies increasingly starting from what it takes to get better public services and working backwards to evaluate a large range of delivery institutions, as in the 2004 World Development Report, *Making Services Work for Poor People* (World Bank, 2003).

This shift on the part of the thinkers has, however, had little impact on the way decentralisation is promoted at country level and campaigned for at the global level. Democratic decentralisation has certainly lost some of its allure in international circles, partly because of the lack of decisive empirical support and positive outcomes. Nonetheless, significant vested interests, not least within African countries, continue to advocate for district and municipal government. In this context, bold claims continue to be made – and gain credibility by repetition – that local government has a ‘comparative advantage’, or at least a ‘potential comparative advantage’, in essential service provision. This, it is argued, is because of the ‘potentially greater pressure for responsiveness and accountability on local development decision-making’ or because ‘[l]ocal governments’ proximity to the people they are intended to serve fosters accountability, better governance and democratic learning’ (Bonfiglio, 2003: 68; Global Forum on Local Development, 2010: 4, 7).

This is unfortunate. According to the view we take in this book, both the local anchorage of governance arrangements and the scope for local problem solving are vital issues. However, they are not the same as decentralisation and suffer by association with this agenda. In short, the conventional case for decentralisation has become a source of ‘noise’ that is unhelpful to the case for more genuine localisation.

### ***Rediscovering ‘demand’: client power***

Despite the important advances it marked, the above-mentioned 2004 World Development Report (WDR) has itself become a source of magic-bullet thinking. Along with other World Bank publications (Levy and Kpundeh, 2004), it inaugurated a period during which all the innovative thinking about the governance of public services has been about ‘demand’. Considerable Bank lending and other donor funding have continued to go into so-called supply-side reforms, notably in the form of budget support and technical assistance to public sector management (despite very mixed evaluation evidence on their effectiveness). However, the exciting stuff has been about finding new and better ways to stimulate the demand for better governance-for-development.

The 2004 WDR is a finely documented study in which there is much that is still of interest. However, it was also the fulcrum upon which the aid business turned on the issue of supply-versus-demand approaches to the governance of service provision. It was the influential proponent of an elementary *non-sequitur*: aid needs to become more politically

attuned; therefore, it needs to focus on stimulating citizen demand for services and accountability. Since 2004, political governance programming has become almost synonymous with voice, transparency and accountability projects and other demand-side interventions.

Like Levy and Kpundeh (2004), the 2004 WDR began with an argument for moving from managerial to institutional reforms. It offered path-breaking flashes of political realism, for example:

‘Politicians often use the control of publicly provided services as a mechanism of clientelism – for both citizens and providers. ... Services are allocated in ways that reward (or punish) communities for their political support. Sometimes the ministry is the servant of the providers, not the other way around, and providers capture the policymaking’ (World Bank, 2003: 51-52).

However, this recognition of the lack of political interest in providing quality public services was not followed up. Nor were the reasons for weak citizen control over politicians examined further. Focused attention was given instead to the difficulties that an assumed governmental ‘principal’ has in getting service providers (its ‘agents’) to be performance-oriented. Since this and previous work in the same vein (e.g., Leonard, 2000) led to doubts about the feasibility of monitoring providers effectively, the authors changed tack. They questioned the viability of the so-called ‘long route of accountability’ – i.e., boosting accountability of providers to citizens/clients via policy-makers and politicians – and promoted the so-called ‘short route of accountability’, which became the main policy innovation with which the WDR has been associated since.

This new policy included a range of devices to make providers accountable *directly* to clients by mobilising client and citizen ‘demand’ for better provision. Various examples were set out which, it was argued, support the feasibility of short-route successes on a significant scale. All involved stimulating demand and empowering citizens by providing them with information. In the field, this often took the form of local ‘consciousness-raising’ initiatives and ‘civil society strengthening’ targeted at NGOs specialising in community empowerment.

The weakness in this thinking is that the flash of political realism that was used to shed doubt on the original supply-side version of the principal-agent story is not applied to the demand side. The cultural, social and organisational limitations that ordinary Africans face as principals ‘demanding’ better public services or more responsible governance are passed over very lightly. Discussion of these limitations is not entirely absent from the texts, but they are not given significant weight.

In our view, the results to be obtained from client empowerment through the promotion of information dissemination and government transparency have been seriously over-sold in the years since 2004 on the basis of a partial reading of key bits of evidence. The selective dissemination of WDR 2004 led into a wider problem of selective reading of studies and reports for the sake of agencies sustaining some simple, upbeat message about the potential of ‘bottom-up’ initiatives.

There are several well-worn examples. One is the Bangalore citizens’ score-cards experiment, which has been widely copied across the world, including in Africa. Others concern the claimed impact of publishing budget information on school funding in Uganda, and later work on community monitoring of health services in Uganda. A typical fault in the reporting of evidence – one that is not necessarily reduced by the use of advanced statistical techniques – is that an incomplete account is given of the importance of the contextual factors

that contributed to the success of the highlighted intervention. It is clear enough in the detailed descriptions of the experiments that top-down performance pressures and/or activities that affected provider incentives made important contributions to the recorded outcomes. Yet the role of these factors disappears from view when the results are summarised and disseminated. We have developed this criticism in the necessary detail in other published work (Booth, 2012b). Suffice it to say here that because contextual factors are vital to success, single-stranded summaries of how such interventions ‘worked’ are liable to be misleading and a bad basis for attempts at replication.

### ***Social accountability***

Social accountability (Malena et al., 2004) is undoubtedly the most engaging of the current mantras of the development business. A good deal of serious development work is being done under this heading, usually by local and international NGOs with official donor support. The flow of interesting writing on the subject seems set to continue. Unfortunately, however, the magic bullet mind-set is alive and well in this field too. Social accountability is promoted as one single thing with well-understood common features. In the predominant discourse, the richness of the actual experience of working with citizen groups on public goods issues is reduced to a depoliticised ‘widget’ or mechanism (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012).

Once again, the common feature for development success is assumed to be the mobilisation of citizen demand for accountability – citizens as principals, with national and local politicians and bureaucrats as their agents. The entry point is the enhancement of information-supply, transparency and awareness of rights delivered civil-society organisations or social movements.

The field of social accountability has been the subject of good previous critiques. The burden of this research is that client ‘voice’ is a weak source of accountability for performance unless accompanied by strong top-down pressures of some kind. What works to improve public service provision is an effective combination of initiatives that change behaviour among both suppliers and users.<sup>4</sup> According to the Future State Centre (2010), success has been achieved in various parts of the world, notably in Latin America, where all or most of the following elements have come together:

- emergence of a political leadership with an enhanced interest in winning elections on a public goods basis,
- interest within the professional organisations of providers in improving their public reputation,
- linkage of social movements to political parties, and
- client and voter interest in improved performance.

This is the complex combination that sometimes works. The Future State authors are explicit about two things. First, while not all the elements may be necessary, some sort of change in incentives and action on the provider side seems essential if user or voter pressure is to have any significant effects. Second, the whole process needs to be political. In this, they are supported by the Citizenship DRC’s *Blurring the Boundaries* (2011) which quotes Gaventa and McGee (2010: 34): ‘Competition for formal political power is also central, creating new impetus for reform, and bringing key allies into positions of influence, often in synergy with collective action from below’. In short, ‘social’ accountability is a misnomer – this is politics! What we would further suggest is that within each of the categories of actors

that contributed to these processes – politicians, leaders of parties, trade unions and social movements, and service-user groups – special efforts were no doubt needed to convince individuals to engage in what would have been a probably unprecedented level of constructive collective action.

What the research findings add up to, then, is that it is a serious mistake to treat citizens and service users as ‘principals’ with an uncomplicated interest in better governance and better public services. Although they are victims, they have options, most of which are less costly, less risky and more likely to yield the desired result than organising to demand improvement from an unresponsive state. In this sense, they are far more complicit in current patterns of bad governance than the principal-agent framework would imply. They are complicit despite the fact that they are victims. On the other hand, service delivery personnel are themselves, often enough, victims of the poor management and unreliable resourcing of public provision. In both cases, the disjunction between pursuing current interests and real, long-term interests happens because individuals and groups face collective action problems.

By any standards, this is a telling body of evidence against the simple idea of building the demand-side to achieve development, an idea that has steered governance work by official donors and international and local NGOs over the past decade. There are signs that it has put a serious dent in the orthodoxy. The latest evidence summaries from World Bank researchers acknowledge not only that the big remaining question is about the incentives of higher-level leadership, but that ‘the most important domain for greater accountability is via power and politics’. They also admit that ‘generalized, “best practice” initiatives for greater civil society engagement are likely to fail’ (Devarajan et al., 2011: abstract, 34). In belated recognition of positions advanced a decade earlier (e.g., Brett, 2003), a comprehensive review of previous World Bank initiatives in ‘participatory development’ has now been published (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). It provides a systematic, evidence-based critique of approaches that treat induced community participation as a substitute for forceful action on the part of the state.

In practice, some donor-funded technical assistance staff and NGOs actually engage in the facilitation of collective action solutions in ways that cut across the divide between providers and clients, or officials and private citizens. Sometimes they do this in the context of projects that are formally committed to one of the above-named magic bullets – ‘demanding accountability’, citizen score-cards, etc. There is no doubt, however, that their formal adherence to these tricks of the good-governance hinders the context-sensitive work they are doing. No less important, it prevents the accumulation of a reliable evidence-base on what they have achieved and why they achieved it. If our argument is correct, it is time for greater consistency between what these projects are actually doing and the ‘theory of change’ to which they are formally committed. Development organisations that have already moved on from a principal-agent diagnosis to creating space for local problem-solving and facilitating collective action should come out of the closet and say so!

Until this happens, we must expect a continuing flow of publications and blogs documenting social accountability initiatives in Africa and worldwide for largely promotional purposes (Odugbemi and Jacobson, 2008; McNeil and Malena, 2010). Without analysing other contextual drivers of change, large claims are made in this literature about the potential of citizen demand and social movements, or about the mobilising power of information. Practical ‘lessons’ are drawn. However, generating evidence on effectiveness has not been a priority, and this has not stopped the World Bank from launching, as recently as 2012, a new Global Partnership for Social Accountability, a mechanism to support beneficiary groups and civil society organisations operating on the demand side of service provision (World Bank, 2012)

One of the reasons for this inconsistency between practice and theory is undoubtedly the lack of an obvious alternative panacea for poor governance and low-quality public goods provision. This book does not aim to provide one. However, we agree with Merilee Grindle (2011) that researchers have a duty to provide more than negative messages and evidence of complexity. There needs to be a meeting point between researchers' recognition of complexity and practitioners' hunger for guidance. That meeting point is what we would call middle-range theory. This book has such a theory. It is about the centrality of collective action problems in governance for development in Africa.

## Summing up

We began this chapter with the growing expert consensus on the bankruptcy of a 'best practice' concept of governance improvement in Africa, and the need for this consensus to become more specific about the likely content of the alternative 'good fit' approach. The specific content we propose involves giving a more central place to the identification and resolution of collective action problems at the many levels where 'governance' is a problem for development.

We then argued that an obstacle to this realistic agenda is the fact that current policy responses rely heavily on a series of questionable magic bullets or cure-all remedies. Those that have remained prominent during the last decade – democratic decentralisation, client power and social accountability – rest on assumptions about good governance, and about citizen 'demand' that are empirically and theoretically questionable. They assume implicitly that ordinary citizens stand in a principal-agent relationship to governments and service providers, whereas the research evidence suggests that ordinary citizens face collective action problems, as do politicians and providers, and that the solutions that are sometimes found are both highly interactive and highly political.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See for example, Blundo (1998), Andersson et al. (2004), Cammack et al. (2007), Eaton et al. (2010) and Poteete and Ribot (2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Other than the literature on fiscal federalism, and that deals with a different set of issues.
- <sup>3</sup> See among others Smoke (2003), Ndegwa and Levy (2004), Ahmad et al. (2005), Bardhan (2005), Jütting et al. (2005), Olowu (2006), Crawford and Hartmann (2008), Saito (2008), ARD Inc. (2010) and Connerley et al. (2010).
- <sup>4</sup> See Goetz et al. (2001), Future State (2005: Ch 3), Joshi (2007), O'Neill et al. (2007), Houtzager et al. (2008), Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2008), Future State (2010: Ch 4), Gaventa and McGee (2010), McGee and Gaventa (2010) and Citizenship DRC (2011).

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