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The Discourse of Good Governance in Development Cooperation Ireland:[1]

From Constructive Ambiguity to Written Policy

● Morina O'Neill

It is important to analyse donors' discourse on good governance, as their interpretation effects development policy and practice. The author looks at World Bank discourse on governance and its influences on development aid and examines Development Cooperation Ireland's (DCI's) discourse, in light of its forthcoming policy on governance. The absence of a written policy allows some ambiguity. DCI's commitment to tackling poverty, inequality and exclusion, and the issue of accountability to the Irish taxpayer in the context of debates on corruption are significant factors.

Introduction

Since its emergence in the new policy agenda of donors after the end of the Cold War, "good governance" has been increasingly used as a condition of development aid. This use of governance has prompted analysis of different interpretations of the term because, as Kirby points out, "different understandings... motivate different practices of development" (Kirby, 1997: 3). For example, the idea of good governance is held up by some as a transformative concept that can facilitate poverty eradication. Kofi Annan has stated that "Good governance and sustainable development are indivisible...Good governance will give every citizen, young or old, man or woman, a real and lasting stake in the future of his or her societies – politically, economically, and socially".[2] As a dominant theme in development aid, however, it is often used by donors in a narrow, technocratic sense, with an emphasis on the facilitation of economic growth. The World Bank's view of governance, for example, prioritises "sound economic management" (World Bank, 1998). This article examines DCI's discourse on governance to date, and explores some of the factors that may influence DCI's policy elaboration on governance in recipient countries, particularly its commitment to tackling poverty, inequality and exclusion, the influence of the dominant actors in development aid and the issue of accountability to the Irish taxpayer vis-à-vis the debate on corruption.

Why is it important to attend to discourse?

Development discourse plays a powerful role in framing and constructing the relationship between aid donors and recipients in development cooperation.[3] Although aid by its very definition is a manifestation of inequality (Robb, 2004), there is a widely held view that aid interventions are addressing this inequality. These interventions are "so characterised by rhetoric and persuasion [that a] critical awareness of ideological processes in discourse is essential" (Porter, 1995: 63), especially given the sense of "self-evident-ness and normalisation of the development rhetoric" (Crush, 1995) generally present in the discourse of aid donors.

Apthorpe and Gasper (1996) define discourse as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena: they act as an intellectual framework. In linguistics, discourse relates to the stretch of language rather than simply the sentence, and draws out what has been connoted in what has been denoted. Apthorpe and Gasper point out that a combination of these two components results in an "extended discourse within a particular framework". In this sense, discourse is not just a set of words, it is "a set of rules about what you can and cannot say and about what you can and cannot discuss". Issues of power are central to any analysis of development aid (Escobar, 1995). A critical approach is useful here. This differs from non-critical approaches: it involves "not just descriptive discursive practices, but also showing how the discursive is shaped by relations of power and ideologies and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief..." (Fairclough, 1992: 13). A critical analysis of the discourse of aid donors can, by interrogating the dominant language and concepts used in this "ideological and political battlefield" (Moore, 1995: 7), reveal how this discourse can both mask and sustain the underlying power relations in the aid relationship.

A framework for analysis

To provide a framework to examine good governance in development discourse, I have built upon a distinction highlighted by Crawford (2001) between a narrow and a broad interpretation of the term. The narrow interpretation emphasises effective public administration management and institutional development, with associated measures to strengthen the capacity and efficiency of executive institutions. The broader interpretation includes this narrow dimension – as Leftwich asks: "Who could possibly be against good governance in its limited administrative sense?" (Leftwich, 2000: 123). But it is also openly political and normative, focussing on the importance of the democratic accountability of a country's governing institutions to its citizens, and the realisation of human rights and social values. While the first interpretation is possible without a democratic regime, there is clear overlap between the broader interpretation of good governance and democracy itself (Crawford, 2001).

World Bank's role in shaping discourse on good governance

The emergence of World Bank discourse on good governance can be traced back to its 1989 report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From*

Crisis to Sustainable Growth which stated that what was needed was "not just less government but better government – government that concentrates its efforts less on direct interventions and more on enabling others to be productive" (World Bank, 1989: 5). According to Abrahamsen, the World Bank's discourse on good governancc started here as a rejection of the development models of the recent past. Africa's development failure was blamed upon "a fundamental flaw in the prevailing development paradigm" (World Bank, 1989), and the new good governance discourse served to dissociate the World Bank from these development failures (Abrahamsen, 2000). According to Leftwich, a "veritable torrent of pronouncements on governance, democracy and development" followed from a number of sources, including the OECD (1989); the Nordic Minister of Development (1990); the US, British and French governments (1990); *Africa Confidential* (1990); the EC Commission (1991) and the UNDP (1991), (UNDP, 2000: 116). As a dominant force in the framing, of development discourse the World Bank has been a driver in using the concept of governance in development aid since that 1989 report.[4] The influence of the World Bank has increased as donor harmonization and alignment become the norm in aid delivery. Donors take the lead of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The World Bank is seen as a repository of development and finance expertise, although donors are also aware that it "is an exceptionally powerful institution, which has in the past been accused of dominating borrowing countries and, at times, of ignoring wider donor views" (Ireland Aid Review Committee: 2002: 98).

Governance as a conditionality in development aid

The World Bank has replaced the highly interventionist Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), or as it refers to them "the now-retired adjustment lending with a policy based lending approach". This World Bank report, *Review of World Bank Conditionality*, states that in relation to governance "in recent years, the content of conditionality has strongly emphasized improvements in public sector governance [which] now account for the largest share of conditionality" (World Bank, 2005: 11, 39). Aggregate governance indicators, covering more than 200 countries and based on more than 350 variables, are captured in the Bank's six dimensions of governance (see Table 1). Aid donors have tended to "define governance as both politically and culturally neutral, as calling simply for the efficient and optimal management of a nation's resources and not prescribing a particular system of rule" (Abrahamsen, 2000: 11), and largely present interventions in this area as simply technical in nature. However, once governance is used as a conditionality in development aid to this degree, donors' involvement in domestic affairs at the highest level is inevitable, as demonstrated by the range and nature of the indicators used by the World Bank. What is significant about these indicators is their narrow focus on the facilitation of economic growth, leading to criticism that the World Bank is concerned "with the effectiveness of the state rather than the equity of the economic system and the legitimacy of the power structure" (Santiso, 2002).

Table 1: World Bank's six Clusters of Governance

Cluster	*Specific indicators*
1. Voice and accountability	Measuring political, civil and human rights
2. Political instability and violence	Measuring the likelihood of violent threats to, or changes in, government, including terrorism
3. Government effectiveness	Measuring the competence of the bureaucracy and the quality of public service delivery
4. Regulatory quality	Measuring the incidence of market-unfriendly policies
5. Rule of law	Measuring the quality of contract enforcement, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence
6. Control of corruption	Measuring the exercise of public power for private gain, including both petty and grand corruption

World Bank (2005)

A neutral economic agenda in relation to governance?

Although use of the narrow interpretation of governance by donots and the World Bank in particular is presented as neutral and non-political in its nature,[5] I would argue that in practice it is highly political in its impacts. While the broader interpretation of governance emphasises the importance of a downward accountability[6] to the citizens of recipient countries in aid, the narrow interpretation, such as is characterised in the World Bank's policy based lending approach, privileges the requirements of the aid donor. It focuses more on governance as a tool for upward accountability to donors and taxpayers in developed countries, as well facilitating its economic policies which effect the lives of millions of people in recipient countries on a daily basis. The direction of accountability in development aid has significant implications for governance: there is a clear tension between the nature of emerging democracies on the one hand, and the need to instantaneously "obey the dictates of international organizations" on the other (Stiglitz, 2003: 117). It must be asked which of these is of greater concern to aid donors in their approach to governance in development aid.

A selectivity strategy to achieve governance

The World Bank's growing usage of a selectivity strategy in development financing (World Bank, 2001) is significant in relation to governance (see Table 2). This strategy picks development winners and grants aid as a reward to countties with a proven record. This differs inherently to a capacity building approach: a focus on a state's weak governance capacity allows for the use of aid to strengthen governance systems, whereas the selectivity strategy may in fact deny aid based on the very reality of weak governance. As Hout points out, the "poor countries that would need enhancement of their governing capacity may be exactly the ones that are punished by the application of an *ex ante* governance criteria...the governance criterion in development assistance policies may thus easily turn out to be its own worst enemy" (Hout, 2002).

Table 2: Possible donor strategies to achieve improvements in governance

Persuasion strategy	Donors can use their formal and informal contacts with recipient countries to persuade them to improve their governance.
Capacity building strategy	Donors might channel some of the aid into projects whose objective is to build up the capacity for good governance within a country.
Conditionality strategy	Donors could impose conditions on the aid that countries receive to the effect that they reform their policies and succumb to specified criteria.
Selectivity strategy	Donors can try to allocate non-conditional aid as rewards to countries with a proven record of good governance, and to punish those with bad governance.

Source: Neumayer (2003)

DCI and good governance

DCI's current lack of a written policy on governance is noteworthy given that the concept has been in general use in development discourse and practice for over 15 years, and that DCI itself has been using the concept for much of this time. In practice, Ireland is a member of a number of donor coordination groups working specifically on the issue of governance[7] and there is a governance team within its staff in Ethiopia,[8] and a number of governance advisors in other programme countries. Governance is a key issue in donor harmonization groups, in PRSPs, and in multi-donor arrangements for general budget support, an aid modality in which Ireland is becoming increasingly engaged.[9]

The fact that DCI has no written policy nor articulated common understanding of good governance has allowed flexibility and ambiguity to prevail in its use of the concept. In analysing a number of DCI's Annual Reports, Country Strategy Plans (CSPs), website text and some newspaper articles in relation to governance, it becomes clear that the term is used in a number of different ways, in different contexts, for different purposes. Building on Crawford's framework of broad and narrow interpretations, along with Neumayer's distinction between donor strategies, I have evaluated the emphasis given to the narrow and broad interpretations, and the key factors shaping those interpretations.

DCI Annual Reports (1993–2004)[10]

The 1993 Annual Report shows the origins of governance related funding as being "in line with EC policy[11] (p.18), resulting from an EU resolution which included the concept of good governance.[12] DCI's own "recognition of the importance attached to the promotion of good governance and participatory development" (1994), however, was grounded in a broad interpretation, allied with the concepts of human rights and democracy. It continued to be associated with these concepts, and in 1997 under the heading of good governance, Liz O'Donnell, then Minister for Overseas Aid, stated that "productive economic activity cannot flourish in an atmosphere of oppression.... In recognition of the importance of politics in the development process, a concern about democratic principles permeates all Irish Aid's actions",[13] thus linking the importance of economic growth to a broad, political interpretation of development generally and governance specifically.

In 1998, DCI's "growing awareness of the essential need for good governance as a pre-requisite for real development",[14] was demonstrated by a study which showed that 15% of priority country expenditure was allocated to support participatory development and good governance. Over the next two years, discourse points to the emergence of a capacity building approach to conditionality with partner countries: "Building good governance capacity in poor countries is central to their development"[15] and issues relating to human rights, democracy and governance "now form a key element of the policy dialogue process which is undertaken with partner countries".[16]

The 2001 and 2002 Annual Reports state that public concern about accountability and corruption are addressed through DCI's work on good governance in programme countries. The 2001 Report does state that while "Doubts about the effectiveness of aid also helped give eredence to the view that aid should bypass governments in poorly performing countries....[this view] fails to address the vital question of how dysfunctional governments in poor countries can be reformed and transformed into developmental rather tban anti-developmental forces",[17] supporting a capacity building approach. However, concern with corruption seems to be the driver in this 2002 statement:

> Corruption can pose problems anywhere…. In addition to implementing a range of financial controls and other safeguards, Development Cooperation Ireland, in line with international best practice, funds a range of programmes to promote good governance in developing countries. Governance relates to the way in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. In particular, programmes promote respect for human rights and for the rule of law; political openness and participation; accountability and transparency, and administrative capacity and efficiency.[18]

This latter interpretation mixes both a narrow and broad definition of governance, using the World Bank's narrower interpretation in relation to corruption. In 2003, the Report states: "To many developing countries, General Budget Support is the preferred aid modality…. However, donors must have confidence that a basic level of governance, public administration and accountability exists *before* they can channel aid in this way"[19] (emphasis not in original). This indicates potential use of a selectivity strategy in the context of the risks inherent to general budget support, and that the perceived need for upward accountability to donor publics is increasingly influencing DCI's presentation of governance issues.

Good governance on the DCI website

Although DCI's website generally lacks policy information, there is a section on governance. In this text, DCI again draws on the World Bank interpretation of good governance and associates it with "strategies for pursuing accountability reforms and improving institutional capacity" indicating a narrow, technical definition. However, it also asserts good governance to have principles that are "universal: they include respect for human rights; respect for the rule of law; political openness; participation and tolerance; accountability and transparency; and administrative and bureaucratic capacity and efficiency. Clearly then, it must be recognised that governance has many attributes". In this, DCI shows a mixture of usages of the concept of good governance, without explicitly "owning" any of them itself. This text also associates governance with aid modalities, stating that it "increasingly inform[s] and shape[s] the nature of Development Cooperation Ireland interventions…."

Country Strategy Plans (CSPs)

The CSPs are of interest as they are not designed for public consumption, but are rather working documents agreed between DCI and its key partners, national governments, along with a number of other donors. The three CSPs reviewed clearly have DCI's overarching aim of poverty reduction as their focus and are firmly grounded in the strategic plans of the national governments.[20] A link is made to varying degrees in each CSP between governance and poverty eradication, citizen accountability, and democracy and issues of power, as well as the need for efficient administrations. For example, the Ethiopian CSP states: "governance seeks to bridge the gap between people and power in Ethiopia" going on to state "the basis of our investment in governance [is] both political (in terms of supporting progressive forces – both governmental and non-governmental – who are promoting the democratisation and participation agenda) and economic (in terms of improving capacity for accountability and the transparent stewardship of national resources)". DCI is concerned with issues of "voice" – how effectively Ethiopian women and men can articulate their needs (and views), and how proactively government responds to these voices.[21]

The Tanzanian CSP refers to the "the ideal of ordinary citizens taking lead roles in matters of governance and their [own] development" and notes "a sense of growing African nationalism in Tanzania with an increasing tendency to criticise donors and accuse them of undue interference in internal affairs".[22] The Ugandan CSP uses the definition of Professor Apollo Nsibambi, the Prime Minister: "the efficient, effective and accountable exercise of political, administrative and management authority to achieve society's objectives including the welfare of the whole population, sustainable development and personal freedom".[23] What must be considered in analysing the CSPs as part of this exercise is that without a written policy on governance, the CSP in any given country may rely heavily on the personnel responsible for drawing up the document. Without an overarching policy to underpin and mandate a particular approach, any change of personnel may result in a change of approach in such a policy vacuum.

Risk management in the context of general budget support as an influencing factor

It is to be expected that DCI should use a mixture of interpretations of governance in its discourse, as illustrated above. However, the increasing instrumental use of good governance in its public discourse is significant. An assumption can be made that as the volume of the DCI programme continues to grow, the discourse of governance as a mechanism for donor accountability may increase. This will be particularly so if the shift to direct budget support continues, as "these new aid modalities, the ones where we work hand-in-glove with governments carry new risks...in effect the more harmonised the engagement, the more pooled the financing, the more the risks arising from misbehaviour transfers to the donor".[24] This trend would lead to a use of the concept of governance more as a tool for donor assurance than as a development end in itself.

Irish public debate on corruption in development aid

Without doubt corruption is a real issue in development cooperation: effective systems of oversight and accountability are vital, and donors need to apply fiduciary conditions to ensure their money is being used for the purposes for which it was intended (de Barra, 2005). However, newspaper articles show that, in the media, DCI has been using good governance in a predominantly narrow, reactive way as a safeguard against corruption, rather than pro-actively pushing a broader progressive dimension. In 2003 one article reported that the government was becoming increasingly sensitive to criticisms of the aid programme to Uganda in relation to the issue of corruption, adding that "Government aid will rise from €450 million this year towards €1 billion by the end of the decade. This will result in more questions being asked about where Irish aid is being directed".[25] Tom Kitt, then Minister for Development Cooperation, defended the programme, and used the concept of governance. In an article subtitled "Good governance is an integral part of Ireland's approach to development", he stated: "Investing in development is not without risk: we are constantly vigilant that Irish taxpayers' money is not misused.... Ireland has systems for accounting for funds expended and for measuring their impact. This is achieved by annual external audit and frequent internal audit of programme funds, together with a stringent monitoring system backed by a rigorous evaluation system".[26] Viewed in context, this narrow interpretation of governance was an unsurprisingly reactive response to the media debate. The point is that this and other similar debates in the media have largely been at the expense of any public debate on governance as a means to engage with the broader political issue of the exercise of power in society and the challenges it poses for development.

A move towards selectivity as a donor strategy?

In a recent public speech, Conor Lenihan, Minister for Development Cooperation, pointed to a potential use of the upcoming governance policy: "A policy for the promotion of good governance is being developed [in DCI] to bring together in a strategic way all of our engagement in this area, to increase the assistance being given to help partner governments to lift their game and, where they fail to move with us or to meet their commitments on democratisation, to use the leverage of the aid programme to put them under significant pressure".[27] Given that "the present tendency on the donor front is to move...to selectivity",[28] a question arises as to whether DCI, which currently "places emphasis on capacity building at all levels of government" (OECD: DAC, 2003), will also move in this direction.

The pliability of the concept of good governance

Summarising DCI's various uses of governance, the CSPs, designed primarily for use in programme countries, show a predominantly broad, political interpretation of the concept in its work at programme level, rooted in the aim of poverty reduction and social inclusion. This broad interpretation also applies when DCI is working at programme level with actors such as the like-minded group of donors.[29] However, in looking at the Annual Reports and the website text on governance, both aimed principally at the Irish domestic audience, a trend towards a narrower interpretation of the concept is evident in recent years, and this is supported by analysis of newspaper coverage of DCI's approach to governance.

Based on the exploration above, it appears DCI has to date used a form of constructive ambiguity in relation to its approach to governance in programme countries, using different interpretations in different contexts. There are three key drivers currently shaping the discourse which will influence the forthcoming policy. First, the strategic aim of the programme: a real commitment to poverty reduction and social inclusion; second, the nature of DCI as a relatively small donor on the international stage amongst other, more powerful donors; and thirdly, the need for upward accountability in the context of the Irish public debate on corruption and an increasing aid budget.

The question is which will be the strongest driver in shaping DCI's forthcoming written policy on governance? To what degree will DCI reconcile the different uses of the concept to produce a coherent policy framework for good governance in development cooperation, and will one interpretation be favoured over the others? A mixture of interpretations is to be expected. In the context of the dominant discourse of powerful donors such as the World Bank, it remains to be seen if DCI can resist the increasingly narrow, instrumental, discourse of the World Bank and many international donors. Will the policy consolidate the broad progressive use of governance at the programme level, prioritising capacity, democracy and accountability to citizens within partner countries, or will it curtail it, focusing predominantly on upward accountability to the Irish taxpayer?

Conclusion

This article argues that the good governance concept being used in donors' development discourse in an increasingly narrow, technocratic sense is in danger of losing its potential to transform the aid relationship into more equal terms by enabling partner countries to be not only efficient administrations but self-determining actors in the global arena. In this shift, good governance is in danger of becoming more a tool for addressing donor interest rather than recipient need. Although many countries remain dependent on aid as a financial foundation for their development, donors surely should not have the right to dictate the architecture of their economies and societies.

In a recent article relating to governance Minister of State Lenihan states:

> Those challenges [of delivering development aid] underline rhe reasons we are working in those countries in the first place.... Ultimately, we want to equip governments to provide the services and supports demanded and needed by their citizens.... Uganda ranks 117th on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. It also ranks 144th on the UN Human Development Index. The first statistic tells us it is hard to work there. The second underlines just how important it is that we do.[30]

It will be interesting to see if this proactive, broad approach to the concept of governance in development aid signals the tone of the forthcoming policy.

Footnotes

1 Development Cooperation Ireland became Irish Aid from 27 February 2006. However for most of the period covered by this article the organisation was known as DCI and so this name has been retained in rhe text.
2 http://magnet.undp.org/icg97/ANNAN.HTM
3 See, for example, Crush (1995), Moore (1995), Escobar (1995) and Sachs (1992).
4 Mawdsely and Rigg (2002); Escobar, (1995); Sachs (1992)
5 Abrahamsen (2000); Storey (2004)
6 For a discussion on accountabilities in development aid see Dillon (2004).
7 For example, DCI is member of tbe Donor Democratisation and Governance Group (DDGG), Uganda *(DCI Annual Report 2004).*
8 See DCI, *Country Strategy Plan for Ethiopia, 2005-2007* available from DCI.
9 *Report of the Ireland Aid Review Committee, 2002*
10 The first annual report issued by DCI was that for 2002. Prior to this date the programme was known as Ireland Aid and after 27 February 2006 the name changed to Irish Aid.
11 As outlined in the resolution of the Development Council on 28 November 1991
12 http://archive.idea.int/lome/bgr_docs/resolution.html
13 *Foreword to Ireland Aid Annual Report 1997*
14 *Ireland Aid Annual Report 1998:* 16
15 *Ireland Aid Annual Report 1999:* 2
16 *Ireland Aid Annual Report 2000:* 56
17 *Ireland Aid Annual Report 2001:* 7
18 *DCI Annual Report 2002:* 36
19 *DCI Annual Report 2003:* 61
20 The CSPs of Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania were reviewed.
21 *DCI Country Strategy Plan for Ethiopia:* 20, 26
22 *DCI Country Strategy Plan for Tanzania:* 5, 6
23 *DCI Country Strategy Plan for Uganda:* 5

[24] Development Cooperation Ireland (2005)
[25] *Sunday Business Post*, 17 August 2003
[26] *The Irish Times*, 11 July 2003
[27] Speech by Minister of State, Conor Lenihan, to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs on 14 June 2005
[28] Doornbos (2003): 14
[29] The like-minded group includes the Nordic countries, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
[30] *The Irish Times*, 14 December 2005

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