

Session 3.1. Assessing Local Governance and Decentralisation

INTRODUCTION

Before starting with designing strategies, programmes and operational actions, it is important to properly assess and analyse the context. Analysing the context in which decentralisation develops and the forms that decentralisation takes in a particular environment is not an exact science. Moreover, not one tool has been developed that answers all the questions, and there are numerous practices, assessment models and schools of thought. Given this diversity, the first part of this session presents the “universe” of governance assessment tools and the impact they can have, in order to give a good overview of what is available. Experiences working with assessment tools will be shared in small-group discussions.

The second part of the session examines how the collection, assembly and publication of results for local governance performance can have an impact on public policy making at the local (and national) level.

The third and final part of the session discusses the relationship with aid effectiveness of methods for assessing decentralisation and local governance, and includes an analysis of a case of joint governance assessment.

The background of this session is formed by three pillars:

1. DAC GOVNET on donor approaches to governance assessments

The DAC Network on Governance—with support from all the members of the DPWG-LGD—has undertaken important work on donor approaches to governance assessments, which is highly relevant for this training module. The resulting GOVNET sourcebook on governance assessments is a very user-friendly, insightful and snappy document that helps users to see the wood for the trees. It distinguishes between more normative and more analytical approaches—a distinction also adopted here. It also deals with some of the confusion in the area of analysing or assessing context and governance (conceptual, theoretical and practical). The DAC sourcebook summarises and explains five guiding principles, one of which encourages donors to utilise a diversity of governance assessments tools as much as possible.

2. A User's Guide to Measuring Local Governance

Substantial work on assessing local governance has been undertaken, but it remains fragmented. The UNDP has made an important effort to providing guidance on measuring local governance. Its source guide provides an overview of 22 globally applied tools that focus exclusively on assessing local governance. It is impossible to present all of these here, so we will deal primarily with a number of key guiding elements: (1) the purpose of assessing local governance and (2) how the purpose affects the choice of tools or of assessment approach.

3. Experience with assessing or measuring governance at the local level

You may have relevant experience working with one or more of the assessment tools, which can provide useful input for further discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of working with such—often prescriptive—assessments. The discussions could illustrate the need for combining such assessments with more analytical work, not only on local governance, but also on core assumptions and on refining the understanding of governance processes and their links to development.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Part 1: Introduction—looking for clues

This part presents the highly complex field in which donors operate. Multiple tools have been developed to better assess governance, its context or a particular problem area. But practitioners often get lost. Building on the findings of the DAC Network on Governance, this part presents a few generic findings that are highly relevant for practitioners who are looking for appropriate ways to better understand or assess the context in which they work. A step-by-step question-based methodology is proposed to help with identifying the key issues one has to take into consideration when developing an assessment approach to governance:

- What is being assessed?
- What is the purpose of the assessment?
- What approaches are taken to data and analysis?
- What role do country partners play in the assessment process?

Part 2: Assessment tools and decentralisation

This part introduces the existing tools that practitioners may want to consult. It has four sub-components.

Introducing the UNDP source guide. The UNDP (2009) guide deals with 22 local governance assessments and provides some guidance on *how to use the UNDP guide*. What should one consider when identifying approaches to assessing local-level governance? What can be expected from such assessments? And what are the limitations? It is a very comprehensive document that provides good information on what is available and what the biggest differences and similarities between the tools are.

Assessment tools for the local public-finance sector: examples. There are two common assessment tools that have been adapted for use at the local level:

PEFA stands for public expenditure and financial accountability. There are six main dimensions:

- the credibility of the budget
- comprehensiveness and transparency
- policy-based budgeting
- predictability and control in budget execution

- accounting, recording and reporting
- external scrutiny and audit

The assessment is based on a set of 28 indicators, with each indicator seeking to measure the performance of a key element of public financial management against a four-point ordinal scale from A to D. This allows cross-country comparisons and monitoring over time. At the sub-national level, it includes the 28 “normal” PEFA indicators plus one that assesses the “predictability of central government transfers”. The participatory assessment is a demanding exercise, but a well-functioning PEFA secretariat (www.PEFA.org) provides back-up support and undertakes support studies.

PETS stands for the public expenditure tracking survey, which is a quantitative survey of the supply side of public services. PETS tries to detect problems in budget execution and does so by measuring the funds received at each link of the delivery chain. The unit of observation is typically a service facility or local government (frontline providers like schools and clinics). While there is no standard formula, typically some of the steps involved in such a survey are as follows:

- Identification of scope, purpose and actors
- Design of questionnaires
- Sampling
- Execution of survey
- Data analysis
- Dissemination
- Institutionalisation

With the PETS example, it should become evident that one needs to better understand—and hence tackle—political dimensions in a particular context. The political economy approach to context analysis that was discussed during the session on political decentralisation can be complementary to local governance assessments.

It is important to remember that local government assessments do not “do” much in and of themselves. They are merely snapshots of the situation, and they are only useful if their findings are acted upon. This leads us to the next part of this session: after you have carried out a governance assessment, what can you do with the results?

Part 3: How to act on the findings of local governance assessments

Key contextual factors influencing the policy impact of assessment results. The collection, assembly and publication of results for local governance performance serve little purpose if they do not have an impact on public policy making at the local (and national) level. If an assessment is exclusively donor-driven, there is the real danger that such an initiative will be reduced to a one-off exercise. However, even when the government is financially supporting the exercise, the issue of policy uptake and sustainability is still a serious challenge.

The context of the assessment varies greatly across countries, according to three main factors: the agent responsible for carrying out the assessment, the relative openness of the political process to reform and the voice that the assessment gains in the local public domain. Differences across these contextual features of each assessment have an impact on the character of the assessment itself and the degree to which policy uptake and reform is possible in the future. These factors are explained in more detail in Box 3.1.1.

Box 3.1.1: Key contextual factors influencing the impact of assessment results on policy

1. The main agent that carries out the assessment

The key distinction is between those assessments that are government-led and those that are led by civil society. Government endorsement adds official legitimacy to the exercise but, in some contexts, may negatively affect perceptions of its independence and validity. In addition, there are related issues, particularly in deeply divided societies, concerning the ideological or political affiliation of the agent and the composition and the representativeness of the team actually carrying out the assessment. Clearly, in order to maximise the political space for influencing policy uptake, an assessment team should be as broadly based as possible in order to bring all major local stakeholders and different sets of interests on board. A team that is too narrow or one that is unbalanced or biased in some way can affect the legitimacy of the assessment and, ultimately, the possibility for reform.

2. The relative openness of the political process to reform

The more the local governance system in general is open to reform, the more likely it will be that the specific assessment proposals themselves are better received and that the reform process will be easier to initiate, implement and maintain. The impulse to carry out a local government assessment is often associated with some sort of crisis of governability, popular dissatisfaction or disquiet about the political status quo. In many countries, the “trigger” for carrying out an assessment is precisely the recognition that a recent decentralisation programme has not generated the expected improvements in local governance and service delivery.

3. The voice that the assessment achieves in the local public domain

There is a growing recognition that the failure of research to influence policy formulation is often the result of the absence of a clear communication strategy targeted at policymakers. For this reason, right from the start of the initiative, the agent carrying out the assessment needs to develop a clear strategy for communicating the results, rather than leaving the design of such a strategy until after the results are available. This strategy should be innovative, identifying and prioritising “multiple points of entry” by which the results can influence opinion shapers and policy makers and should include an agreed-upon minimum expenditure for research communication in the overall budget.

There is often an implicit tradeoff when the policy uptake of a local governance assessment is considered. On the one hand, official government-led assessments may have a more formal voice, but they need to be careful to ensure that they are representative, valid and legitimate exercises that include broad representation of key stakeholders. On the other hand, assessments led by civil organisations or academic think-tanks may benefit from a certain autonomy, independence and validity but may well have to compete for control of the public space in communicating their results, and they will need to achieve consensus with government actors in order to bring about a reform process.

Source: Adapted from UNDP (2009).

There are several broad areas in which the tools for a comparative measurement of local governance performance can be operationalised by using the results to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy. What they have in common is that they all seek, in different ways, to activate and/or strengthen the various accountability mechanisms that are implicit in a devolved system of local government—downward accountability to citizens and upward accountability to central government (see box 3.1.2).

Box 3.1.2: Using assessment results to strengthen downward and upward accountability

Strengthening the downwards accountability of local government to its citizens

The assembly and dissemination of comparative data on local governance performance can be used to strengthen the downwards accountability of local government to its citizens by seeking to influence the very basis on which citizens make their voting decisions. In many countries, a political culture rooted in populism, patronage and clientelism can be found, through which politicians are re-elected despite poor governance performance. Disseminating the results of local governance assessments in an index has the potential to change voting behaviour. When citizens start to recognise that their voting patterns do not match the rankings of the candidates, it is likely that their decision will be focused more on “programmatic” considerations in future elections. Thus, by strengthening the accountability of elected officials to the electorate, local elected officials are pushed to perform better.

Strengthening the upwards accountability of local government to central government

The assembly and dissemination of comparative data on local governance performance can also be used to strengthen the upwards accountability of local government to central government by influencing the allocation of fiscal transfers from central to local government. General local governance performance may be used as a criterion for allocating fiscal transfers from central government to local government. The justification for linking fiscal transfers to this wider performance is simple: the better local governance performance is in general, the greater the probability that the transferred funds will be used effectively, irrespective of whether they are ear-marked.

The measurement of governance performance also helps to identify deficiencies in the internal management of local government. Such measures provide a practical means of identifying those local governments in need of special assistance in capacity building. In many countries, central government support for capacity building in local governance is limited by a shortage of financial and human resources. Measurement of governance performance enables training bodies to allocate these limited resources in a more efficient manner by concentrating efforts on the more poorly performing local governments. Such assessments also provide evidence for identifying those high-performing local governments, which could play a supportive role in knowledge transfer and technical assistance to their weaker counterparts.

Source: Adapted from UNDP (2009).

Institutional opportunities for policy uptake. Irrespective of the particular area for which the results of an assessment may be used, reformers face a major challenge in ensuring that policy uptake actually occurs and that it is sustained. UN-HABITAT has identified a range of institutional mechanisms that strengthen local governance by promoting transparency and accountability. Some of these provide convenient entry points by which the assessment results of local governance performance can be fed into the policy-making arena.

Part 4: (Local) governance assessments and aid effectiveness

The final part of the session, will look at the relationship with aid effectiveness of methods for assessing decentralisation and local governance and will specifically focus on joint governance assessments.

Critiques of application. There are numerous criticisms of the measurements commonly employed for conducting assessments. These are related to specific types of assessments and to governance assessments, in general, and there is criticism of the traditional form of applying governance assessments:

- There is debate over the sources used: whether sources are reliable and how many and which sources provide the best measurements. For example, Knack (2006) states that a change in the mixture of sources used has an impact on conceptual and statistical precision.
- The margin of error is often routinely ignored by those who use these measurements, such that cited differences between countries and between times periods are, in fact, not statistically significant (Hoyland et al., 2009).
- Other criticisms are that measurements lack transparency, suffer from selection bias and do not help developing countries identify how to improve the quality of governance.
- Development agencies fail to build on country systems or to harmonise with other development agencies, and they often lack clear a purpose to drive the choice of assessment tools (OECD DAC, 2008, 2009).
- Governance assessments are generally driven by agency needs and concerns; there seems to be less interest in learning about the links between governance factors and development outcomes (OECD DAC, 2008, 2009).

Trends in governance assessments. Access to the enormous amounts of information available online allows policy makers and advocacy groups to make better informed decisions and to measure improvements more accurately. The World Bank, for example, provides free and open access to a comprehensive online dataset on development in countries around the globe, together with other datasets cited in their online data catalogue. Websites such as Gapminder (www.gapminder.org) or Google maps (<http://maps.google.com>) also provide valuable sources of information.

Furthermore, new forms of assessments are increasingly country-led. Knack et al. (2003) have argued for a second generation of indicators, generated through a transparent process, available across many countries over time, of high quality, accurate and specific. To move beyond both uncritical acceptance and overt scepticism of governance assessments, Hood et al. (2008) suggest ranking different types of governance assessment methodologies. Crawford (2003) criticises the logical-framework approach and advocates a “genuinely” participatory approach to governance assessments. He states that national actors should take control over the process and provide the key input and that the assessment process should be used as a tool for building democratic governance, itself.

In spite of calls for a more harmonised approach that encourages country ownership and that draws on, and is aligned with, nationally driven or peer-based assessments, examples of

such assessments are rare (OECD DAC, 2009). The model of a joint governance assessment has attracted interest as an alternative to conventional practice where donors undertake separate assessments with little or no government involvement. Such an exercise could be an important way to advance the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment

The Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment (JGA) is a good example of a case in which the principles of harmonisation and alignment are built into an assessment, and it illustrates the opportunities and difficult challenges involved.

You are going to analyse this case and discuss the value and feasibility of carrying out a joint assessment for local governance and decentralisation in the country context, subsequently answering the following questions:

- Could a joint governance assessment be useful for measuring local governance and decentralisation in sectors in your country? Why or why not?
- To what extent can a joint approach to local governance assessment help to improve aid effectiveness?

Case study: Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment⁴

How did the Rwanda Joint Governance Assessment come about?

The Rwanda JGA arose from a particular context and set of circumstances. Among all parties there was a sense of dissatisfaction with existing processes of governance assessment and dialogue, which were fragmented and had led to miscommunication and misunderstanding. The weak evidence base on Rwanda's governance performance was a key obstacle to informed discussion. This was partly a reflection of the fact that "objective" assessment of governance problems is particularly challenging in Rwanda because there are still important social and political divisions in society left by sectarianism and genocide.

There are a number of existing information sources on governance in Rwanda, but their quality is mixed and coverage is incomplete. The report published in 2006 under the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM, 2006) is generally well regarded but has generated little in the way of follow-up actions and monitoring. While the increasing number of studies and indicators have brought many issues to attention, some stakeholders in Rwanda have criticised certain sources (indicators of corruption in particular) for being inaccurate or insensitive to Rwanda's specific history and institutional context. Because of Rwanda's troubled history, international comparative indicators are of only limited use in informing the design of governance reforms at the national level. There is a particular sense of frustration on the part of the Government of Rwanda that many of the indicators and commentaries on governance in the country appear to repeat the same message year after year, without acknowledging the important governance reforms that have taken place.

⁴ Adapted from Williams et al. (2009).

The JGA was initiated in response to the recognition by both the government and donors that processes for assessment of and dialogue on governance were not working well. At the Development Partners Meeting in November 2006, President Kagame called for governance issues and concerns to be discussed much more openly between the Government of Rwanda and its development partners. The President's challenge provided an important impetus for the JGA and a signal that the process would be taken seriously at the highest political levels.

Division of Tasks and Responsibilities

Reflecting the joint ownership of the JGA by the Government of Rwanda and the development agencies, the assessment was directed by a steering committee co-chaired by the Minister of Local Government (whose portfolio includes responsibilities for broad programmes of governance reform) and the Manager of the World Bank Country. Members included other government ministers and heads of agencies. Supporting functions were provided by a technical committee and the Rwanda Governance Advisory Council. A team of international and local consultants managed by The Policy Practice Ltd undertook the research and analysis, organised consultations with key stakeholders and drafted the report in consultation with the steering and technical committees. The primary responsibilities for each stage in the assessment process are shown below:

Action	
Decision to conduct assessment	Government and development partners at 2006 Development Partners Meeting
Terms of reference for assessment	Joint Steering Committee
Funding of assessment	Selected development partners (DFID and EC)
Recruitment of consultant team	International competitive tender managed by UNDP. Decisions taken by Joint Steering Committee.
Research, consultations, logistics, drafting	Consultant team
Comments on first draft	Channelled through Joint Steering Committee
Preparation of final draft	Consultant team
Adoption of report	Joint Steering Committee, Cabinet
Dissemination of results	Government and development partners
Practical follow-up	Government and development partners

Objectives and Guiding Principles

The JGA was designed to be jointly owned and directed by the Government of Rwanda and its development partners, to strengthen donor coordination and to follow the principles set out below.

The Joint Steering Committee defined three objectives for the JGA:

1. to undertake a thorough and rigorous analysis of existing institutions, laws and practices affecting governance in Rwanda and to propose policy improvements
2. to define and monitor indicators to measure performance, assess progress, highlight weaknesses and establish priorities for action
3. to make recommendations on establishing an ongoing system for monitoring the agreed indicators, including training for the Rwanda Governance Advisory Council

The committee defined ten principles for the assessment, namely that it should

1. be jointly owned by the Government of Rwanda and its development partners
2. be conducted in an open and consultative manner
3. be forward looking and aim to provide a basis for identifying priorities for action
4. be acceptable to development partners as a basis for their own governance reporting
5. be credible by virtue of the thoroughness and rigour of the analysis
6. take due account of the specific governance and historical context of Rwanda
7. analyse underlying explanations of governance that need to be addressed to bring about improvements
8. be of high professional quality and based on sound evidence
9. provide a basis for well-informed ongoing dialogue among stakeholders on governance issues
10. establish a monitoring framework for continuing assessments over the coming years

It was recognised from the outset that there would sometimes be tradeoffs and compromises to be made between these objectives and principles. In resolving potential conflicts, it was agreed that the guiding principle of the joint governance assessment would be to provide a basis for joint ownership and constructive discussion in order to improve the quality and usefulness of dialogue around issues of good governance.

What did the Joint Governance Assessment achieve?

It is too early to judge the results of the Rwanda JGA, particularly because it is intended to be an ongoing process rather than a single report. However, the most significant thing is the strong government involvement: the initiative originated principally with the government, senior political figures reviewed drafts, the final report was approved by the cabinet, and the government has led in the development of a results matrix of governance indicators. In addition, initial reactions suggest that the JGA has so far been quite successful in creating a common focus on some priority issues, even though there are areas where the government's view differs from that of some of the donors. The report provides a wide-ranging analysis of governance issues, identifies clear priorities and recommendations, and proposes 45 indicators for ongoing monitoring. An implementation working group on governance under

the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy is being set up and will be responsible for devising and implementing an integrated governance action plan.

Reaching this point has not been a straightforward process. At times there were difficult exchanges on the more politically sensitive issues raised by the report. Viewed positively, these difficulties are an indication that the process enabled meaningful discussion to take place. Although the final report represents a degree of compromise between the views of the various parties, it is by no means a lowest common denominator, and it has succeeded in opening up the debate on sensitive issues. However, it was also evident to the consultants that it was difficult to move the discussion beyond the functioning of formal institutions to examine the underlying structural political factors and informal power relationships that many governance professionals regard as being of fundamental importance. This reflected the limitations of the terms of reference, the preference given to easily measurable indicators and the sensitivity of some of the issues raised by the political-economy analysis. Consequently, the final report adopts a rather technocratic view of good governance and focuses its recommendations on reform options for improving formal institutions.

In making this observation, it is important to note that the JGA report does not ignore issues related to informal institutions and how power is perceived and operates in practice. There is a good deal of discussion in the report on sensitive questions relating to political space, the fairness of political competition, party financing, inclusiveness, non-discrimination and the use of laws to prevent sectarianism. In addition, issues of perception relating to government legitimacy and inclusiveness are also discussed and reflected in the framework of indicators. In the view of the consultants, these are essential elements of the analysis, and the discussion needs to be taken further. It is hoped that the JGA has provided the groundwork for further analysis and dialogue.

Acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of the JGA, most participants have expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the process so far. It is recognised that the JGA represents a great improvement on previous processes for governance dialogue and assessment, and there has been a significant opening of the debate on challenging issues. The report is generally considered to be a balanced statement, which recognises the achievements that have been made, does not make light of the remaining governance challenges and sets out a substantial and meaningful agenda for change.

KEY READINGS AND BACKGROUND MATERIAL

OECD DAC. 2008. Survey of Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment. OECD DAC, Paris.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/26/5/40049776.pdf>

Many development agencies are engaged in assessing governance. What are their approaches and how can these be more effectively harmonised? This study from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development surveys the use development agencies make of general and thematic governance assessment. Most approaches are driven by policy dialogue, detailed planning of governance-enhancement activities and strategic decisions regarding aid to specific countries. Linkage to a donor's programme, demand from

the field and removal of institutional disincentives are important in determining how governance assessments are used.

OECD DAC. 2009. Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments: Guiding Principles for Enhanced Impact, Usage and Harmonisation. OECD DAC, Paris.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/27/31/42338036.pdf>

This note presents the findings of an initial survey of donor governance assessments, which pointed to the risk of frequent duplication and overlap among donor tools, as well as the need to improve practice with regard to greater reliance on partner-country assessment processes. The guiding principles for enhancing the impact, use and harmonisation of governance assessments are presented in five areas: (1) building on and strengthening nationally driven governance assessments, (2) identifying a clear purpose to drive the choice of assessment tools and processes, (3) assessing and addressing governance from different entry points and perspectives, (4) Harmonising assessments at the country level when the aim is to stimulate dialogue and governance reform and (5) making results public unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

UNDP (2009). A Users' Guide to Measuring Local Governance. UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, Oslo.

<http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs09/LGGuide2July.pdf>

This publication provides guidance to practitioners in the field on the multiplicity of tools and methods that are used by different donor institutions to measure, assess and monitor governance at the local level. The first part is a discussion of theoretical/conceptual issues relating to local governance. It outlines what is meant by local governance and describes the kinds of issues, concepts and priorities for local governance that existing measurement and assessment tools tend to focus on. It also provides guidance (based on direct feedback from users of assessment tools, a distillation of good practices and four illustrative case-study examples) on challenges and opportunities for assessing local governance.

The second part, or *source guide*, is an inventory of 22 existing assessment tools and methodologies produced by different institutions specifically for assessing local and decentralised levels. Detailed information is provided on each tool, including history, objectives, applicability, the types and sources of data used, methodology, key actors/stakeholders involved, the format for reporting results, the gender and poverty focus (if there is one), strengths and weaknesses, coverage, timeline, the assumptions in the method, contact details and any supplementary tools/guidelines related to the particular instrument.

Williams G., A. Duncan, P. Landell-Mills, S. Unsworth, and T. Sheehy. 2009. Carrying out a Joint Governance Assessment: Lessons from Rwanda. The Policy Practice Ltd, London.

<http://www.thepolicypractice.com/papers/15.pdf>

Can a joint approach to governance assessment help to improve aid effectiveness? What can be learned from the first JGA undertaken in Rwanda during 2008? A JGA aims to bring government and development partners together to review governance performance, based on commonly agreed-upon indicators. This brief from The Policy Practice Ltd recommends that such an assessment can prove to be helpful to advancing dialogue but is likely to be a long-term and difficult process that is only suited to particular circumstances where the process can address the joint concerns of the government and donors.

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WEB SOURCES

Governance Assessment Portal//Assessing Local Governance and Decentralisation
www.gaportal.org

Local Integrity Initiative of Global Integrity
www.globalintegrity.org

Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability Assessment Reports
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OTHER INTERESTING MATERIAL SUGGESTED DURING THE SEMINAR

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