Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office



People-Centred Governance in an Age of Uncertainty:

Marking the Anniversary of the 2006 UK Development White Paper

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Foreword

Chris Elmore MP - Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

In 2006, the UK government published a White Paper, Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor, which put governance at the heart of our development approach for the first time. This recognised that governance was important not only to secure more equitable economic growth, but also to ensure respect for people's human rights. In a break with existing practice, it called for an understanding of governance that was not technocratic, but instead rooted in the needs of people, and one that was more aware of how politics shaped their lives.

Nine years after the launch of the White Paper, we saw the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. SDG 16 marked an important agreement that effective governance represented a universal aspiration, not confined to any geography, culture or tradition. Our global conventions on human rights reinforce this universality. The desire for democratic, rights-respecting government is something that people across the world share.

Today, that aspiration remains important but contested. Much has changed in our world since 2006. At a global level, we have seen reductions in poverty, child mortality and illiteracy. Despite these gains, though, governance challenges continue to hold back human development. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports that 72% of the world's poorest people live within unstable, fragile or conflict-affected states. We also see stark risks from climate change, illicit economies and the spectre of autocratisation. In 2026, approximately 74% of the world's population (6 billion people) lived in an autocracy, up from 48% in 2013.

These are not just statistics: real people are being denied their rights and voice. We in the UK recognise that these are challenges we cannot ignore. Pursuing fair and accountable governance is not simply about our intrinsic and deeply rooted values. We know that it shapes our own future as well: it is key to creating a safer, more prosperous and more resilient world. We cannot ignore issues that spur irregular migration, illicit economies and the erosion of a rules-based international order.

It is therefore in the UK's interests to support global aspirations on governance – and it is the right thing to do in enabling progress on development, climate and economic growth. Our view is that the needs of citizens must remain our lodestar in tackling these problems – just as they did in 2006. This publication points to why. While some contributors comment on a decline in the idealism and confidence of old models, they also point to hope – in particular the key role that inclusion, locally led action and accountability can play.

Moazzam Malik, who led the 2006 White Paper team, puts it well, saying that we must move to ***"bottom-up legitimacy: working at home and abroad to tackle global governance challenges that are holding local progress back; relentlessly defending international human rights standards and institutions; and resourcing and empowering local allies and change-makers that are demanding accountability."***

Real partnerships should reflect these principles, and this hope for the future. This does not mean going back to any naïve optimism and idealism of the past. Rather, it means a willingness to dig in and pursue our values despite the obstacles. The UK wants to work with partners on these issues – with humility, but also with an awareness that these are universal and shared aspirations that deserve our continued commitment and perseverance going forward.

Introduction

This publication marks the 20th anniversary of the *UK Development White Paper: Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor*. It brings together the views of researchers, practitioners and local people to answer two linked questions: What will it take over the next decade to build governance that puts people first? And what role should different stakeholders play to achieve this?

The White Paper identified governance as "the single most important factor that determines whether development is successful or not." It called for an agenda for action focused on building states that were capable but also accountable to citizens and responsive to their needs. Some contributors here point out that, 20 years ago, in an era of greater optimism, achieving people-centred governance felt more "doable." Yet, even at that time, the White Paper itself represented a reaction to some of the misplaced optimism of the past, as it called for a more realistic, politically informed and context-specific approach.

Contributors to this paper provide a frank acknowledgement of the scale of the challenges we face today, not least from rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and the rollback of human rights. However, they also propose new and important ways for overcoming these challenges, drawing on a rich seam of research evidence and practical experience.

Each of the contributors is writing personally; we are grateful also to The Asia Foundation for collating views from communities with which it works in Bangladesh and Nepal. None of the opinions represents the views of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Instead, this publication is intended to open the space for a dialogue on how we can work more effectively together and at different levels to promote change. The top-down development models of the past are now increasingly questioned, and international partners are being encouraged to listen as part of new and more equal collaboration. This publication is a contribution towards these goals, as it seeks to encourage a forward-looking debate on how change can be achieved.

Globally, 800 million people still live in absolute poverty. In many contexts, poor governance remains a central factor in stalled progress on poverty reduction. Some 122 countries have Corruption Perceptions Index scores indicating that corruption remains inadequately controlled. Globally, one in five people has experienced discrimination prohibited under international law, rising to 24.3% in the world's least developed countries. In many areas, it is women and girls who bear the brunt of governance failures; women still enjoy only 64% of the legal rights enjoyed by men.

People-centred governance therefore remains critical to tackling the challenges of the current moment, and our contributors point to the need to think differently about the coalitions and approaches needed to deliver progress. They also call for a humbler agenda, more aware of the shortcomings of past approaches and outdated paradigms. In doing so, they offer a range of perspectives on how we can reimagine governance at global, national and local levels, while retaining the ambition of an agenda that puts people at its very core.

“They should listen to us first”: voices from two communities in Bangladesh

A contribution to the UK Development White Paper on Governance, September 2026

The Asia Foundation - The Asia Foundation is a non-profit development organisation working for over 70 years across more than 20 countries in Asia and the Pacific. Grounded in local presence, it works with governments and communities on the region’s toughest social and economic challenges.

In September 2026, we spoke with three people in two Bangladeshi communities about what governance looks like from where they live: a small business owner in her 40s in Tangail and, from the Manta community in Laharhat, Barishal, a fisherman and a female community leader. Tangail is a district in central Bangladesh and one of the country’s largest sources of overseas labour migration: many households depend partly on remittances from relatives abroad. Laharhat is a settlement on the Arial Khan River in the south, one of the riverbank clusters where the Manta anchor their boats. Because the Manta live on the water, a fixed address or a birth certificate, something that most citizens take for granted, is often out of reach.

We asked each of these interviewees who decided what happened in their community, whether those in authority listened, how their relationship with the state had changed over time and what it would take for the governance they experienced to put people first. Three interviews in two communities cannot represent Bangladesh, or even Tangail and the Manta more widely. We thus offer these accounts as anecdotes rather than as findings. They differ in many specifics but converge on one point: for all three interviewees, the first desire was to be consulted before decisions affecting them were taken.

None of the three described feeling heard by their local government. ***“The entire decision is the municipality’s,”*** the woman in Tangail said of local roads and water supply. ***“We have nothing in this; we do not know about this matter.”*** The Manta community leader talked about going to where such decisions were made and being turned away: ***“You are not needed here. Go away.”*** She returns nonetheless: ***“They try to keep us behind. No matter how much we try to move forward, educated people keep us behind.”***

When the government built a ghat, a riverside landing, beside the Manta boats, the fishers who were to use it were not consulted. By the fisherman’s account, traders and shopkeepers were asked but the boat-dwellers learned of it only once work had begun. He was matter of fact about this: ***“We live on the river, we’re fishermen, we catch fish. But for us there’s no question of asking.”*** In the end, the landing proved useful to the Manta community. It provided a dry place to sell fish out of the rain. But in his view this was through luck rather than consultation.

For the community leader, consultation is itself the basis of fairness. ***"They should listen to us first,"*** she said; she would accept even an unfavourable decision provided the community had been heard first. ***"If they came to us... even if they could not provide everything we asked for... but listened to us and asked what we thought, then I would consider that a fair process."***

On the interviewees' testimony, securing any response from the state requires persistence. On one occasion, the Tangail business owner could not reach the land officer she needed: for two days she could not find him and for two more she was refused; ***"On the fifth day, I got in there by putting a little pressure."*** The community leader gave an example of a collective effort: her community had pursued a rice allocation for months, encountering contradictory answers from different offices, until, in her words, ***"We took the families from our community and marched to the union parishad."***

Two obstacles kept coming up in these conversations. The first was the need for an intermediary. Poorer residents, the Tangail woman explained, often cannot approach a government office alone and must go through a local leader or intermediary. This brings a little more attention but, in her words, means that ***"an opportunity for a transaction is also created."*** She herself had paid a ***"fee"*** above the official charge for a trade licence.

The second was the issue of documentation. In the Manta leader's account, children cannot obtain birth registration because their parents lack certificates of their own, and officials continue to demand documents that do not exist. She attributed the persistence of this issue to the community's lack of standing rather than to any official: ***"We were not given opportunities. Because we are Manta people, we were not given opportunities."***

Beneath these grievances, then, interviewees expressed a concern regarding recognition. For the Manta, this is connected to the absence of a fixed home. ***"If we had land, we would be very valuable,"*** the fisherman said. ***"Then they wouldn't call us 'manta.' They would call us people of the bank too."***

Where the state is distant or costly to reach, both communities undertake a good deal of self-governance, though the interviews described this unevenly. The Manta resolve most disputes through their own leadership across some 22 riverbank settlements, hearing both parties and setting compensation. They go to the courts only as a last resort. This is a genuine capacity, but also a burden assumed for want of accessible alternatives. A government intending to put people first might build on such capacity, while asking why so much of it exists to compensate for services that never arrive.

The aspirations the interviewees expressed were modest and concrete: a permanent home and schooling for their children. ***"I want to see all our children in school. I want to see our families living in proper houses. We do not want to continue living on the river,"*** the community leader said. They want public services obtainable without informal payment, intermediaries or repeated visits. Neither Manta interviewee sought open-ended assistance. Both framed outside support as a route to eventual self-reliance. ***"Give us a bit of housing. With this we'd be very happy,"*** the fisherman said, adding that, with public money at his disposal, ***"I'd set up a business for the poor people, so that they could get by."***

On what the coming decade would require, the three accounts converged before diverging. All three placed ultimate responsibility with the government, on the grounds that only the state can provide land, housing, documentation and equal access to social protection. None regarded it as having delivered on these. The fisherman still saw the government as the most important actor, precisely because what his community most needed lay within the remit of the state.

The community leader was more critical of its record: ***"We have not received much from the government. Non-governmental organisations have done the most for us."***

In these accounts, though, neither channel was seen as dependable. Support that runs through local representatives relies on particular individuals and does not survive when they move on: the fisherman noted that the chair who had helped the Manta had lost her authority when the government changed, while the community leader observed that politicians promised housing before elections and did not honour the promise afterwards. Support that runs through donors is time-limited, and in the community leader's experience it tends to withdraw before the community can make the effects last. Beneath both lies an asymmetry that the fisherman explained plainly: ***"They have the power, but we don't have education. We don't have their understanding or knowledge either."***

The conversations returned, in the end, to the request voiced most often: that people be consulted before decisions affecting them were made, on the water or in the municipality. As the community leader put it, in relation to any scheme intended for her community, matters would change decisively if officials were simply to come and say, ***"We want to do this. Do you agree?"***

Interviews in Tangail and the Manta community of Laharhat, Barishal, September 2026

The end of hubris: global governance for the people in an era of power asymmetries and global disorder

Len Ishmael PhD - Was Ambassador for the Eastern Caribbean States to Belgium and European Union, She holds several Fellowships and is a Senior Fellow at Policy Center for the New South.

The end of hubris

A series of crises over the past decade has profoundly altered the landscape within which development cooperation operates. Principles of shared values, norms and a sense of common purpose seem distant. The post-Second World War global compact and its foundational pillars of human rights, the rule of law, free trade and open markets is crumbling, contested by external actors but also systemically undermined from within. Waves of geopolitical uncertainty and a world order in transition hold the future of development cooperation in flux.

The postwar period was marked by idealism. Exhausted by war, a group of 44 allied nations gathered at Bretton Woods to map out a path to peace, designing a global governance architecture around liberal values. Common purpose and shared ideals provided the template for tackling global challenges. Shared prosperity, freedom and human rights were lofty goals. A framework of rules was designed, along with institutions to regulate and monitor their application.

The message appealed: sovereignty and territorial integrity were inviolable; all people were to be seen as equal; and the rules would protect the weak from the blunt force of unbridled raw power. Implicit was the understanding that the powerful would agree to be restrained in the interests of the common good. Targets were set for official development assistance (ODA) to be monitored by multilateral institutions including the newly established United Nations system, in which former colonies sat as newly independent states.

While the liberal world order and its rules have been criticised for having primarily served the interests of a few, the structure nonetheless ushered in a long period of relative stability and growth, which lifted millions out of poverty.

By the early 1960s, this spirit of idealism had sparked a desire for social equity and environmental responsibility, as captured by Rachel Carson's pioneering book, Silent Spring, in 1963. Other advocates pushed for an approach to development cooperation driven by principles of human dignity and individual empowerment. The concepts of people-centred development and making governance work for the poor, which were central to the UK Development White Paper 2006, were a product of these times.[1]

1 Other early proponents of this view included E.F. Schumacher (Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered, 1973); Robert Chambers (Putting the Last First, 1983), David C. Korten, a former United States Agency for International Development advisor (People-Centered Development, 1984) and others such as Amartya Sen (during the 1990s).

Advocates of this approach also questioned the efficacy of donor-funded external "experts" and pre-packaged interventions, pointing instead to the benefits of local leadership and knowledge. A series of international conferences and their outcome documents, including the Manila Declaration on People's Participation and Sustainable Development in 1989 and the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992, also supported the popularisation of this approach.

Within a few decades, however, people-first principles receded, to be replaced by a focus on quantifiable target-driven frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals and gross domestic product growth. Globalisation reduced the fiscal space available to poorer states to protect local communities, and the events of 9/11 in 2001 turned the tide towards aid securitisation. A chapter closed.

Realism and pragmatism – but not all doom and gloom

The past few years of rolling crises have set the stage for deep division in the international community, including fractures in the Western Alliance. A zero-sum game – with a "winner takes all" mentality – underpinned by widening geopolitical tension is threatening the spirit of multilateralism and prospects for traditional forms of development cooperation. Increasing polarisation has led to the formation of blocs around interests and hardened geopolitical positions, leading to a crisis of trust on the ability to tackle global challenges. This chasm was in full display when world leaders gathered earlier this year at the annual United Nations General Assembly High-Level Week.

A trust deficit is also found within countries. Recent Pew Polls show that in many countries the level of trust between citizens and their government is at an all-time low – as is trust in institutions. Within mature western democracies, illiberal populist tendencies are on the rise, blurring the lines between democracy and autocracy. Far-right groups have won elections in several countries.

For many citizens, migration, globalisation and other elements of the liberal approach to international cooperation have left them worse off. They see no reason to support others in far-away lands when so much seems to need fixing at home.

The Trump administration's abrupt dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development and withdrawal from several United Nations agencies and other multilateral institutions in 2025 sent shock waves throughout the system. And yet ODA has been decreasing across the traditional donor community. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported a 23% decline in ODA in 2025, with additional cuts forecast, as western donors face a complex array of competing priorities focused more narrowly on issues of strategic national importance, including defence and security.

However, while not at the level of traditional flows, the OECD identifies South–South cooperation as the fastest-growing element of development cooperation in recent years. Remittances in several parts of the world have outpaced foreign direct investment. These are being channelled into development instruments to finance capital infrastructure in home countries.

Meanwhile, global output and wealth are shifting from west to east. By 2030, three of the world's largest economies will be in Asia. And while Asia's three most populous countries – China, India and Indonesia – are climbing the income ladder at variable speeds, the fact that 3.2 billion people live in these countries has significant implications. Their growth will create opportunities for other countries of the Global South, which will benefit from an increasingly multipolar world.

In addition, a growing number of "middle powers" are moving out of their normal spheres of influence and providing another pole of attraction for less wealthy countries – as well as more choice. No longer content to sell only raw materials, countries of the Global South can exercise agency in demanding better offers from investment and other partners, to keep more value at home and create the jobs needed for burgeoning populations.

At the same time, outside the United States and China, much of the rest of the world is engaged in what has been called a "frenzy of coalition shopping." Countries are in search of like-minded partnerships as a pragmatic response to fragmentation when universal consensus is not possible. Brazil, Canada and the European Union, joined by Australia, Barbados and India, launched the newest of many such initiatives, Partners for Multilateralism (P4M), on 26 September 2026.[2]

While the proliferation of new entities geared towards multilateralism is a positive sign, the real test lies in the ability of coalition partners to hold fast to commitments made, and also to hold both foes and allies to account when rules have been broken.

Where does this lead? A few reflections

The legitimacy of the old development cooperation framework is being openly questioned as the world changes and resources for development cooperation dwindle. Countries of the Global South are intent on negotiating equitable partnerships based on several core desires: national sovereignty and non-interference; partnerships among equals; tangible mutual benefits; practical peer learning; and technology and capacity transfers. Below are some key recommendations:

1. **Support a more inclusive global governance architecture:** Adapt to the reality of an increasingly multipolar world rather than maintaining western dominance. The upcoming G20 presidency provides a useful platform for this transition.

2. **Reinvigorate the concept of shared purpose around global public goods and development:** Build trust through a whole-of-government approach that prioritises credibility, reliability, building institutional depth, sustained presence and respect for local systems.

3. **Renegotiate global rules that ensure fairness:** Support rules that give Global South countries a fair chance to move up the value chain, retain local value, create jobs and improve prospects.

4. **Prioritise to do more with less:** Focus on joint investments in skills training and human capacity development in partner countries facing high youth unemployment, and support value-added industrialisation.

2 Recent additions also include Germany's South-North Commission (2025) and the Friends of Multilateralism Group (2025). The OECD Development Assistance Committee has engaged in a review of its role and function, and the future of development cooperation. The UK government (among others) is also preparing to host conferences on this subject.

5. **Find the right niche for added value:** Treat development as a zone of cooperation rather than competing with other global actors.

6. **Build on existing trends:** Leverage current momentum in South–South and triangular cooperation. Global South countries are particularly interested in knowledge and capacity transfers from countries with similar challenges of development. Consider joint investments in knowledge hubs.

7. **Engage in real political outreach at home:** Educate citizens on how shared global prosperity and supporting those in need benefits national security. Engaging citizens in community-level initiatives helps foster understanding across backgrounds and counter rising populism.

From Doncaster to Dhaka: governance that puts people first

Moazzam Malik - Led the development of the 2006 UK White Paper. He was the UK's Ambassador to Indonesia and Director General for Africa at FCDO. He is now Chief Executive Officer at Save the Children UK.

In 2006, I led the team that authored the UK government's White Paper, Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor. Its central idea sounds obvious now: the quality of governance is a major determinant of outcomes for people living in poverty. Social progress, we argued, is a political process, not merely a technical question or a development finance issue. That meant improving the accountability and responsiveness of the state to citizens as well as building the capability of state institutions. These insights established governance as a key component in efforts to reduce poverty and promote social change and were widely taken up by international development agencies.

But the White Paper was written at a particular moment: hot on the heels of the Make Poverty History campaign and the UK's leadership of the G8 at Gleneagles in 2005, in what might be thought of as a golden age for "international development." Optimism was rooted in a belief that richer countries had the legitimacy to play a role in collective action to support the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including enabling Global South governments to be accountable to their people.

Today the world looks starkly different. In place of that optimism, we have contestation and geopolitical fracture as power shifts towards a multipolar world. ***The idea that the so-called "Global North" acts in the collective interest has largely collapsed.*** Rhetoric about the importance of an international rules-based order rings hollow. Growing acknowledgement of the need to strengthen governance in all countries and in international institutions, coupled with failure to invest adequately to address shared global challenges – culminating in dramatic aid cuts – has raised questions about the commitment to global progress. Many in the Global South have lost trust.

The White Paper itself perhaps underplayed how far "development" is shaped by governance issues beyond poorer countries' borders such as illicit financial flows, inequitable tax rules, the cost of capital and debt terms, carbon emissions, unequal access to intellectual property and so on. Inaction on these has deepened this breakdown in trust.

With the end of the Cold War, the paper was also anchored – perhaps naively – in a sense of collective commitment to multilateralism, buoyed by the Responsibility to Protect, expanding peacekeeping and the spirit of cooperation around the MDGs. Today that cooperation is giving way to bilateral and plurilateral deals; international law is systematically ignored; and development gains

are reversing. And the world is more dangerous: 2025 saw more state-based armed conflicts than in any year since 1946;[1] the climate crisis is devastating lives; and 3.4 billion people live in countries spending more on debt interest payments than on either health or education.[2]

These are governance challenges writ large, that will shape the future for us all, whether we live in richer or poorer countries. Stability and prosperity depend on whether international, national and local institutions can mediate different perspectives to find practical solutions. Climate adaptation depends on early warnings reaching villages and finance reaching those who need it. In conflict, governance shapes whether civilians can access protection and whether violence and displacement become entrenched. Peace depends on states being seen as legitimate and inclusive, not merely strong. Equitable growth rests on a fair social contract, in which taxes become services that reach those most in need.

So while the context has changed dramatically, the question we grappled with in 2006 matters more than ever: ***how can those who care about social progress activate the underlying governance and political process?*** Where once we thought legitimacy could be conferred through international cooperation and government action, now it must be earned from below, with credibility, integrity and authenticity becoming the decisive assets. What, then, does it take to build governance that puts people first?

First, we should judge governance by what people experience, both because outcomes matter and because this is a key route to rebuilding trust. For most citizens, the state is the teacher, the health worker, the land registry and the police officer. Citizen feedback, open budgets and access to information should become the norm, especially for those with the least voice: women, people with disabilities, displaced people and children. With corruption a consistent concern across every continent,[3] backing public accountability systems and civil society engagement is critical. Both of course are under pressure, with governments in many countries becoming opaquer and actively shrinking civil society space.

Second, governance starts at home. It cannot be something the Global North asks only of others. Choices made in London or Brussels or Washington – on trade, intellectual property, finance, technology, the rule of law and so on – shape choices for those around the world. National interest is bound with the interests of others. We know that "beggar thy neighbour" policies rarely create lasting prosperity and often leave everyone worse off. Richer countries must be ready to listen, share learning and work jointly rather than imply they have the answers.

Third, and linked, governance of the global system must be fit for the modern age: more equitable, with all countries contributing and benefiting in line with their economic capacity, and with avenues for citizens to participate. Stronger action is needed to build fairer and more equitable global systems for debt relief, taxation and sustainable financing for investment, and to tackle illicit financial flows and hidden ownership. In addressing these challenges, regulators must engage with the huge power the private sector wields, especially transnational corporations. Again,

1 Rustad, S.A. (2026) Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2025. Oslo: PRIO.

2 UNCTAD (2025) A World of Debt 2025: It Is Time for Reform. Geneva: UNCTAD. See also Save the Children and Debt Justice (2026) Now Is the Time to Act: Six Reforms for the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatments. London.

3 See for example Transparency International (2026) 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index.

in an interconnected world, we need to face up to the fact we sink or swim together: global challenges have real domestic ramifications, so pitting domestic against international investment makes no sense.

Finally, and most importantly, we must walk the talk on locally led action. Communities closest to the challenges know best how to tackle them. This is true in Doncaster as well as in Dhaka. This means shifting power, resources and accountability to those closest to the challenges at hand. Outcomes last when local communities and social justice movements have the power and freedom to set priorities and lead solutions on issues affecting their lives.

For Save the Children, with roots in social activism in the aftermath of the First World War, the implications are profound. As an international network, we too must reform and democratise our own governance and ways of working, and shift power to local teams and organisations. We are helped by the fact that we have a universal focus on child poverty and children's rights, working in the UK as well as around the world. Our credibility in Yorkshire as elsewhere rests on our connection to communities and our capacity to build coalitions for change. Present in over 100 countries, we seek to ensure that the voices of children and their families are heard in townhalls, in parliaments and in international gatherings to unlock investment and services, defend rights and uphold international law. The universality of the fight for child rights creates space for mutuality, in which no one is simply donor or recipient, and all are co-creators, co-learners and co-activists.

The 2006 White Paper made an important contribution in suggesting that we had overfocused on state capability, and ignored the deficit of accountability and responsiveness to citizens. Twenty years later, this still holds true. ***But it is clear now more than ever that governance is not just a challenge for poor countries, but rather a collective challenge for us all.*** And states rarely give away accountability and responsiveness; rather, social progress and the struggle for rights lie in communities, civil society and activists coming together to demand change.

This reframes the challenge at the heart of the 2006 White Paper "making governance work for the poor." The goal is not to deliver accountability on others' behalf. Rather, it is to help pave the way for bottom-up legitimacy: working at home and abroad to tackle global governance challenges that are holding local progress back; relentlessly defending international human rights standards and institutions; and resourcing and empowering local allies and change-makers that are demanding accountability. This is the route to making governance work for social progress and poverty reduction - for communities and for children everywhere.

From governance for people to governance with people

Lilya Afrikyan - Head of Department of the Participatory and Open governance issues, Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia.

A government can consult citizens regularly and still fail to give them meaningful influence over public decisions. It can publish information and still struggle with public trust. It can invest in public communication and still remain vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation. And a reform can be implemented locally without being genuinely locally owned.

These may look like different governance problems, but in practice they often come back to the same issue: the relationship between institutions and people.

For me, this is where the next decade of people-centred governance needs to focus. Better services and more opportunities for consultation matter, but they are not enough. We also need institutions that can work with people – where participation can influence decisions, institutions are responsive and trust is built through practice rather than assumed.

Voice is not enough

Citizen participation is now a familiar part of good governance. Governments hold consultations, publish draft policies, create digital platforms and establish mechanisms for dialogue with civil society. But having a mechanism does not necessarily mean that people have influence.

In practice, the more difficult questions come afterwards. Was public input sought early enough to affect the decision? Was it taken into account? If not, was the reason explained? Can people see what happened after the consultation?

Our experience in Armenia has made these questions increasingly important. We have different participation mechanisms, including digital consultations, public councils and participatory budgeting. But much of the work now is about what happens around these mechanisms: engaging people earlier, improving feedback, monitoring how participation works and strengthening the capacity of public institutions to manage it properly.

One practical lesson is that creating a channel for participation is easier than making participation consequential.

This is why participation needs to be part of the policy process itself – from identifying problems and priorities to developing solutions, monitoring implementation and assessing results. It requires platforms, but also clear responsibilities, skills and feedback inside government.

It also changes how we measure success. The number of consultations tells us whether participation happened. It does not tell us whether it made a difference. ***Voice needs to lead to influence.***

Capacity is not ownership.

I see a similar issue in international cooperation.

There is a difference between doing something for a partner, helping a partner develop the capacity to do it and allowing that partner to define the problem and shape the solution from the beginning.

Capacity development remains important, but ***capacity-building is not the same as local ownership.*** A reform can strengthen local skills while its priorities, model and expected results are still largely defined elsewhere.

Ownership therefore starts with basic questions: ***Who defines the problem? Who shapes the solution? Who decides what success looks like? And who remains accountable for the result?***

This does not make international expertise or support less important. It changes how that support is used. International partners can bring knowledge, resources, comparative experience and connections while leaving more space for locally led problem-solving and adaptation.

The Open Government Partnership is one example I know well. Its value is not only in national action plans. The process itself matters: governments and civil society identify priorities together, commitments are developed in national contexts, progress is subject to accountability and countries learn from their peers.

This suggests a useful direction for international cooperation: ***from doing for, to building capacity, to enabling ownership.*** Sometimes, immediate support is needed; sometimes, skills and institutional capacity need to be developed. But over time, institutions and societies should become better able to identify problems, develop and adapt solutions and sustain reforms themselves.

Peer-to-peer and community-to-community cooperation can support this shift because experience can be shared without assuming that a model developed in one context can simply be transferred to another.

Communication is not trust.

Governments now work in an information environment shaped by digital platforms, algorithms, disinformation, polarisation and foreign information manipulation. Public communication and the ability to respond to information threats are necessary. But better communication alone does not produce trust.

Trust cannot be built as an emergency response.

It develops through everyday experience with institutions: whether people can access information, understand why decisions were made, participate when decisions affect them, receive a response and hold public authorities accountable.

When people lose trust in public institutions, media or other traditional sources, that trust does not necessarily disappear. ***It may move elsewhere*** – to other communities, platforms, personalities or, increasingly, algorithms that decide what information people see.

For governments, this matters. Rebuilding trust cannot primarily be a communications exercise. ***It is a governance issue.***

This is why I see open government and democratic resilience as closely connected. Transparency, access to information, accountability and participation help build relationships between institutions and society before a crisis occurs.

Strategic communication, cybersecurity and capacities to address information threats remain necessary. But when a crisis comes, people already have an experience of whether institutions explain, listen, respond and can be held accountable. That experience matters for resilience.

The relationship is the reform.

These experiences lead me to a practical conclusion. We do not necessarily need more governance mechanisms. We need the mechanisms we create to improve the relationships around them.

For governments, this means making participation, responsiveness and accountability part of normal institutional practice. Civil society needs space to question government, contribute knowledge and help shape solutions. Citizens and communities need opportunities to participate in decisions rather than only receive their results.

The same applies to international cooperation. International partners will continue to bring expertise, resources and connections. But locally led cooperation requires space for countries and communities to define priorities, test approaches, learn from mistakes and adapt reforms to their circumstances.

Local ownership should not mean that human rights, inclusion or accountability become optional. These remain essential. Lasting reform is more likely when institutions and societies that have ownership of the process support these principles.

Twenty years after Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor, I think the next step is simple to describe, even if it is difficult to achieve in practice: moving ***from governance for people to governance with people.***

Perhaps the best international cooperation is the kind that becomes less necessary over time, because countries and communities become better able to shape, adapt and sustain reform themselves.

Perspectives on governance that works for people in the next decade in the Peruvian Amazon

Elaine Shajian - President of the indigenous organisation Regional Coordinator of the Indigenous Peoples of San Lorenzo (CORPI-SL), which represents eight indigenous peoples in the Loreto Region, in the northern Peruvian Amazon.

The Peruvian Amazon is home to 51 Indigenous Peoples. In our living territories, there are still approximately 20 million hectares of the planet's most biodiverse forests, and these are our home. Regrettably, these territories are also areas with minimal state presence, low human development indices, limited development infrastructure and – increasingly – greater violence, environmental threats and insecurity, owing to governance that does not work. Consequently, Amazonian Indigenous Peoples are among the most vulnerable and excluded populations in the country. And we refuse to accept that this trend will continue over the next decade.

Despite the existence of laws, institutions, policies, budgets and plans established to govern the country, these Amazonian territories exhibit weak governance, with inadequate public services and development infrastructure that limit our economic and social growth, as well as illegal economies that advance and plunder ecosystems, leaving in their wake deforestation, rights violations and some of humanity's gravest crimes, such as child exploitation and modern slavery in various forms.

From my perspective, one of the reasons for the currently low levels of governance originates is the pretension of governing a territory in a manner disconnected from the actors and the ways in which local governance functions in practice. I consider it important to recognise the ways in which Indigenous Peoples and our representative organisations are sustaining governance in our living territories. And we have been doing so for millennia, even before countries existed. For our governance to remain effective and to overcome the challenges of growing environmental threats, illegal economies and our own needs for inclusive human development (health, education, security, economy, etc.), Indigenous Peoples must be more closely involved and integrated into the governance processes driven by states.

We do not understand how we can afford for the state to establish costly management units to care for forests and ecosystems that it has designated as state-administered protected areas, when it could simply support us directly to strengthen the indigenous surveillance systems through which we are already protecting these ecosystems. This doubles the work and expenditure and only contributes to weakening local governance and

exacerbating social tension between Indigenous Peoples and the state apparatus, as many of the methodologies applied in protecting these areas end up – in practice – restricting access to and sustainable use of resources, as well as weakening the protection that was already functioning under local governance. With this duplication of efforts and growing antagonism, governance is weakened. And we all lose. This is a mistake we must not repeat in the next decade.

The scale of the challenge of improving governance in the Amazon is very great and I firmly believe that it is necessary to join forces. And, for this, it is critical that the role and contribution of Indigenous Peoples in the governance of these territories are recognised. Indigenous Peoples must also redouble their efforts at coordination and building alliances. Only thus will effective conservation of the Amazon be possible, which is pivotal for the well-being of all humanity in the face of the challenges that climate change and the advance of illegal economies are already imposing upon us.

The governance imperative – then and now

Thomas Carothers - Author of numerous books and articles on governance and democracy and currently Senior Fellow, Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, Harvey V. Fineberg Chair for Democracy Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The UK Development White Paper 2006 represented a critical advance in a new approach to thinking and action in development aid that emerged in the first decade of this century. This new line centred around the idea that the nature and quality of a country's governance were determinative factors in its overall developmental trajectory. Although this idea may seem self-evident now, it was a major shift for a practitioner community that had long held onto technocratic or narrowly economistic theories of how positive developmental change occurred, or even of what development itself consisted of.

The governance insight is only more pertinent today. In this age of widespread citizen anxiety, anger and alienation from existing institutions, governance is never far from the centre of the story. This becomes evident when we examine the remarkable surge of anti-government protests that has swept across the world in the past 10 to 15 years. Three issues lie at the heart of such protests: government corruption, economic injustice and political overreach by sitting governments, such as electoral or constitutional manipulation to extend a leader's time in office. Protestors mobilise to demand changes in political and economic governance that will alleviate these wrongs.

In addition, major transnational threats to human well-being, like climate change, the possibility of destructive new forms of artificial intelligence and the risk of a new global pandemic, all point to the imperative for new, better forms of governance.

Achieving governance change that will satisfy citizens' restless, often sharply expressed, unhappiness starts with citizens themselves, often through new forms of civic or political organisation and mobilisation. We have seen this dramatically in the past 2 years in countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, where large-scale citizen action has forged openings for system-wide governance change. Can international aid providers be useful partners in navigating this turbulent context of widespread citizen anger and assertive demands?

There are some serious reasons for doubt. The donor domain is facing a major decline in public support for the value of development aid and consequently a reduction in governmental commitments. The abrupt closure of the United States Agency for International Development last year was a striking manifestation of this. In many other donor countries, aid budgets are shrinking; while less drastic, this is also significant. In financially straitened circumstances, some aid providers may retreat to a "back-to-basics" approach to aid, focused on near-term, narrowly conceived delivery of tangible goods rather than in-depth, longer-term efforts to foster lasting change.

There are also reasons for cautious optimism. To start at the macro level, even if development aid is put under serious pressure to conform to a framework of clear national self-interest and transnationalism – and to shed all traces of an earlier spirit of idealism and generosity – it can meet this challenge. It is evidently not in a nation's self-interest to live in a world dominated by crescendoing cases of political instability, unpredictable surges in the cross-border movement of people, spiralling disease crises and other ills resulting from governance failures.

With regard to aid relating to governance, there are encouraging signs of progress and opportunity in several areas. **First, many aid practitioners have moved a long way down a crucial learning path over the past 20 years, away from formalistic, top-down governance work towards the understanding that supporting civic action is key.** For example, supporting a small but highly capable organisation committed to investigative reporting that unearths government wrongdoing may have a much more positive effect on a country's governance than attempting to train a set of judges to make them more capable in their work.

Second, the combination of reduced aid resources and the sobering reality that aid-providing countries are themselves experiencing many serious governance challenges – frequently ones highly akin to those they seek to help others address – is making the aid community finally take localisation of aid seriously. Shifting resources and decision-making directly to people and organisations in the countries that an aid provider intends to help does not just make aid more cost effective. It also stimulates the sorts of innovation and heterogeneity of approaches that are needed in the new landscape of shared governance challenges across countries of all types – aid providers and aid recipients alike.

Third, the sweeping tide of digitalisation has transformed transnational communication in ways that greatly facilitate information - and knowledge-sharing across borders. Creating and supporting new networks of learning and exchange among relevant actors in any area of governance is in many ways much easier now than it was in earlier decades. And unlike traditional forms of development aid, governance support is precisely about the transmission and diffusion of knowledge, carried out in purposeful, targeted ways. It is thus well suited to the world of the present in this way as well.

Governance matters, but capable states are built from within

Professor Adnan Khan - Formerly Chief Economist at the FCDO and Research and Policy Director at the International Growth Centre, he taught Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and is now Professor in Practice and Executive MPA/MPP Programme Co-Director at the School of Public Policy, LSE

The UK Development White Paper 2006 deserves more credit than it receives. It shifted the approach to governance away from institutional checklists and towards capability, politics and context, to judge governance by what it delivers rather than its form. These ideas still hold. The assumptions underpinning the architecture built around them, however, have proved less durable: that external actors could drive change, that budgets would continue to increase and that donors could reliably assess governance and allocate money accordingly.

Several things have changed since 2006.

First, the global conditions that once supported development have weakened. Growth has slowed, populism has risen and geopolitical rivalry and technological change are undermining the use of exports as an engine for development. Whatever replaces this engine will have to be financed and delivered domestically.

Second, governance has deteriorated in the countries that once supplied governance advice. The UK's own World Bank Government Effectiveness score is lower today than in 2005, and V-Dem finds that rule of law is declining in 22 countries, several long-established democracies among them; it is improving in only seven. This trend calls for humility among leaders in governance, and for a broader view of where governance lessons come from.

Finally, aid has fallen sharply: grants to low-income countries have fallen from around 6% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the early 2000s to around 3% today, and net official development assistance fell by more than a fifth in 2025 alone. Public services in partner countries are overwhelmingly financed domestically.

Taken together, these points shift the focus from better governance programming to capable states – those able to enforce rules, regulate economic activity, deliver services, design and implement programmes and course-correct when things go wrong. ***Fiscal capacity is central to building states of this kind.***

Fiscal capacity is not a synonym for taxation, nor a niche concern for ministries of finance. It has three parts: revenue, delivery and responsiveness. It means designing taxes without discouraging economic activity or placing the burden on those least able to carry it. Moreover, revenue must translate into services that are not simply accessible but actually improve learning, health and judicial

outcomes – the foundation of both growth and adaptation to climate change. Finally, the state should be able to report what it has collected and from whom, and what it has bought – and should answer when asked.

These three dimensions are hard to separate in practice. Revenue that does not translate into better services is experienced as extraction; better services without revenue leave a state dependent on others. Neither builds the relationship between a state and its citizens on which governance rests.

Building fiscal capacity is not about meeting a universal tax-to-GDP target. How much revenue a country needs depends on its priorities, its institutional capacity and the quality of its spending. The Marginal Value of Public Funds framework captures this idea: whether to raise a pound depends on what it buys and who bears the cost of raising it. Revenue and expenditure cannot be separated.

The World Bank's new policy research report, Raising Revenue Right, which I have endorsed, introduces the concept of the fiscal frontier – that is, the best combination of efficiency and equity attainable at a given level of revenue and structural constraint. The report's central finding is that most countries – around two-thirds of those with stronger foundations and nearly three-quarters of those with weaker ones – sit well below this frontier. Thus, building fiscal capacity does not require squeezing the poor harder, as most countries are not yet up against the classic trade-off between efficiency and equity, and can improve both at once.

When it comes to increasing revenue, the relevant margin is usually the base, not the rate. Many developing economies already impose high rates on formal firms yet collect little, owing to exemptions, preferential regimes and weak enforcement. The World Bank report estimates that tax concessions cost governments roughly a quarter of total tax revenue. This pattern of high rates and low collection reflects political choices about who is asked to pay, more than the technical limits of revenue administration.

How a government is financed changes how it spends – a link that is now empirical. In Brazil, revenue raised through municipal tax capacity has funded better education infrastructure. Equivalent increases in grants, over which municipalities have had identical discretion, have produced no improvement at all. In Kananga, in Democratic Republic of Congo, the first property tax campaign most residents had encountered raised compliance from near zero to around 11%, and political participation by roughly a third, at real personal cost to those taking part. Being asked to pay appears to have made citizens more inclined to make demands of the state. ***Whether the state responds is a separate question.***

This is where political economy constraints bite. Where a policy has no organised loser, evidence travels easily and good ideas tend to get adopted. Where reform redistributes rents, good policy is not enough. In Kenya, for example, teachers on identical contracts showed substantial learning gains under non-governmental organisation (NGO) implementation and none under government implementation. Union and bureaucratic opposition reshaped how the terms were interpreted and delayed rollout – pressure the government was exposed to and the NGO was not.

Political economy constraints are not insurmountable, though. My own work on property tax in Punjab suggests that the incentive problems inside revenue bureaucracies are tractable, and that there is more room than is usually assumed for building political

coalitions around progressive tax reform. The task is to find and widen that space, not to design around it.

This view, that political constraints are real but not fixed, has concrete implications for different actors.

Partner governments must treat revenue administration and public financial management as core governance institutions, not back office functions, and publish the fiscal contract in both directions: collected from whom, spent on what, with what result. Start with tax expenditures, which are spending decisions made invisible by routing them through the tax code.

External actors should stop building parallel accountability. Every bespoke results framework, audit trail and report addressed to a foreign capital is a claim on the time and resources of officials who could be answering to their own legislature. The management evidence suggests that compliance-oriented control demotivates the mission-motivated, and can produce more malfeasance, not less.

More concretely, this means ending parallel implementation units, donor-specific reporting where a national system exists and technical assistance priced above the salary structure it is meant to strengthen. It means fewer engagements over longer horizons and accepting that this will make attribution harder.

Researchers, including me, know far more about interventions than systems, because the field has drifted towards questions its methods can answer. Fiscal reform is one of the few system-level domains where administrative data, government partnership and rigorous design combine at scale. That is where the effort should go.

Whether the next decade is people-centred is measurable. ***Does the share of public spending financed by citizens rise? Does its composition shift towards services people can see? Can citizens find out what was collected and what it bought?*** All three are moving the wrong way in many countries, and all would improve if external actors did less, more patiently and through systems they do not control.

That is a humbler agenda than that of 2006, but it is more realistic and, over time, likely to be more effective.

Transparency, accountability and delivery: local voices from across Nepal

A contribution to the UK Development White Paper on Governance, September 2026

The Asia Foundation - The Asia Foundation is a non-profit development organisation working for over 70 years across more than 20 countries in Asia and the Pacific. Grounded in local presence, it works with governments and communities on the region's toughest social and economic challenges.

For two decades, international development has sought to strengthen governance through improved state capability, accountability, participation and public institutions. This paper draws on conversations with community representatives in each of Nepal's seven provinces, guided by an agreed set of questions, alongside a desk review and findings from The Asia Foundation's Survey of the Nepali People (SNP), to ask: in 2026 and beyond, what do Nepalis want from their government? All quotes are from these conversations.

Demands for better government underpinned Nepal's post-2006 political transformation, including commitments to inclusion and decentralisation. Federalism emerged from calls by Madhesi, Janajati and other historically excluded groups for greater representation and influence. Although demands for further change continue, including through the 2025 Gen Z movement, most Nepalis view federalism positively, citing improved access to services and decision-making closer to their communities.

1. Dwindling trust means dwindling legitimacy... and dwindling patience

Since 2020, the SNP has shown declining trust in government institutions: political parties down from 44% to 24.8%, provincial government from 51.6% to 32.7%, federal government from 56.2% to 40.3% and local government from 75.1% to 57.6%. Municipal wards, the unit closest to citizens, held the highest trust at 79.2% in 2022 and dropped only 11 points to 68.8% in 2026, to remain the most trusted elected body.

"When small problems arise, meeting the ward's people's representatives gets them solved. I consider that there has been development and [there is] greater convenience compared with before." (38 year old)

The breakdown in trust peaked in September 2025, and people made it clear what they wanted from their government. Largely driven by Gen Z actors, people took to the streets demanding an end to corruption, more efficient government services and greater accountability. People now look to rebuild trust through transparency and action.

"This responsibility [to bring change] belongs first of all to the constitutional side – parliament – where laws are made and where laws are passed. I place the responsibility on parliament itself. Because if that place is not clear [impartial], [everything is lost]."

2. Increase access... better yet, increase opportunity

Federalism has brought services closer to the people and digitised simple procedures, like vital registration and tax payment. Yet the most marginalised still face information gaps and therefore continue to experience limited access to services, particularly in health and education.

"Obtaining government services is somewhat easier now than before. Because much of the work is done right in the ward or the municipality, one does not have to travel far." (40 year old)

However, digital service systems are sometimes offline, with no paper-based alternatives, frustrating users.

"There is clear improvement in physical infrastructure and development works. However, in administrative work, the online system being introduced is good, but at times the problem of the server going down or jamming makes it cumbersome and inconvenient."

What citizens want from local government has also shifted, from material "things" to "opportunity." In the 2018 SNP, roads and physical infrastructure topped the list of demands, at 36.5%; in 2026, employment and education are jointly top, at 26.7% and 26.6%. When asked about the biggest gap over the 10 or so years since the 2015 Constitution had come into forced, 63% of respondents named youth unemployment and forced foreign migration, ahead of corruption at 55%.

"Our community's economic condition is weak, and it is hard to educate our children. My son was studying, but because I could not pay the fees, he could not obtain his character certificate, and so he could not fill in the Public Service Commission form." (48 year old)

"My expectation is that my children will get a good education and find good opportunities in our own village too, so that they are not compelled to go abroad." (38 year old)

"Let there be sustainable and environment-friendly infrastructure development, equality and social justice. Infrastructure development must be inclusive and accessible. Persons with disabilities, senior citizens, women and children must all be able to use it." (52 year old)

3. Meaningful engagement in decision-making still requires work

There is a serious discrepancy in terms of who can participate "meaningfully" in decision-making. Most respondents do not feel fully heard, or feel heard only under certain conditions.

"Our voice gets no hearing; we are included only for the sake of formality." (40 year old)

"Only some of it happens. Mostly the demands are met with, 'We will do it.' But we in the community put our demands in writing through the tole development body, and those demands, though delayed, do get fulfilled." (38 years old)

One respondent, from the marginalised Musahar community, was elected chair of a school management committee. He faced sustained caste discrimination and hardship throughout his tenure, as his proposals went unheard.

"It is like this: 'A boat on the river carries people from this bank to the other, but the boat itself stays exactly where it was.' That is precisely our condition as Musahars." (48 year old)

"No, they [voices of ordinary people] are not [heard]. Who is going to give us a day's wage?"

This respondent, a daily wage labourer, said that attending a consultation cost a day's earnings with no compensation. The barrier is material, not a lack of interest.

4. Transparency in decisions matters

Domestic resource mobilisation matters more as aid declines in Nepal, but public trust in how tax money is used is draining away. Willingness to pay more local tax if roads, education or health care improve has fallen steadily: 77.6% said yes in 2017; this figure was down to 55.7% in 2025.

Almost all community voices felt that the next decade should focus on:

- impartial and inclusive service delivery;
- transparent decision-making processes;
- a people-centred local government that is accountable to the people.

"My expectation is that in the future the government will work in an even more transparent and accountable way, and closer to the people." (38 year old)

"If something wrong is done, we must not sit silent. We must also take an interest in the development work of our own area. We must watch what the leader is doing, and say it is good when the work is good and say it is bad when it is bad. If all of us could do even this much from where we stand, good governance can come." (40 year old)

The pillars of capability, responsiveness and accountability of the UK Development White Paper 2006 are still the right ones. But capability must now mean distributive capability – that is, whether excluded groups can convert their own effort, and the state's, into real mobility, not merely whether the government delivers services. The expectation is a society where everyone can realise their potential, as well as a more stable, accessible economy.

This requires action at several levels:

- **Build agency alongside reform:** Address barriers faced by women, marginalised groups and low-income citizens. Provide targeted support so those most affected can participate in decision-making processes and voice their concerns.
- **Protect the digital public sphere:** Strengthen the governance of digital platforms, data and artificial intelligence to safeguard rights, accountability, inclusion and democratic participation as political debate moves online.
- **Invest in the institutions that are the closest to citizens:** Prioritise ward offices, which remain trusted and responsive service providers, and strengthen their capacity to deliver locally relevant solutions.
- **Support community-based organisations:** Invest in tole lane organisations and other grassroots platforms that create space for participation, collective action and local decision-making.
- **Adopt a people-centred approach**: Start by understanding citizens' priorities and empower communities to shape and lead development from the ground up.

For external partners, this means moving from designing reform to resourcing what communities already do: fund ward-level and tole lane institutions directly, accept their priorities and measure success by whether excluded groups gain mobility.

Artificial intelligence use disclosure: Anthropic's Claude was used to translate seven Nepali language community interview records into English. The translations were checked against the Nepali originals by the author. CoPilot assisted with language editing, improving prose clarity and refining structure. The argument, analysis and conclusions are the author's own. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and final content of the publication.

SNP 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2022 are available here. SNP 2025/26 is forthcoming.

The beautiful ones are not yet born: a chance to *really* put politics back into governance

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Dr. Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou – Was Head of Unit and Head of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Secretariat at the OECD, then Director of Politics and Governance at ODI Global, where is now Director of the Centre for Political Ideas, Narratives and Culture.

Today's geopolitical order is evolving rapidly and becoming increasingly unequal. The rollback of rights and the reassertion of autocratic regimes have undermined the ability of "global governance" institutions to act collectively in addressing conflicts, the climate crisis and the challenges posed by digital innovations. The fragmentation of global governance is clearly political and geopolitical: questions of who has power, how they wield it and who lacks it explain much of today's dysfunction.

This is obvious when considering global governance. Yet those working in the governance field, traditionally focused at the national level, have often sidestepped or depoliticised similar questions. Despite commitments to "think and work politically," in practice governance programming frequently remains a hotchpotch of externally conceived, technocratically crafted interventions.

Beyond project-level gains, little has been truly transformative. Decades of investments have not delivered Sustainable Development Goal 16's vision of peaceful, just and strong institutions. Instead, the door has been left open for the backlash against accountable and inclusive government we are witnessing toady. Being honest about why may help clarify the choices needed to develop a governance agenda fit for a chaotic future.

Governance technocracy: the original sin

Despite ambitious beginnings and the critical scholarship that inspired the development of the governance field (including Adrian Leftwich and others), governance practice since the 1990s has struggled to embrace politics. "Governance" as a term may always have been a misnomer: a technocratic way of acknowledging the centrality of politics to development, without actually talking about thorny political issues.[1] The terminology suited

1 Incidentally, university politics departments (not development studies departments) have tended to speak about government and politics rather than governance as such, which is reserved for regulatory or corporate matters.

partly because the World Bank, an important player in the governance as practice space, was legally prohibited from engaging in the political affairs of its member states (and many others were nervous about being seen as partisan).

Prioritising an understanding of governance as administration rather than as a site of contested power may have been pragmatic, but it carried costs. Governance programming became risk-averse and (like much of aid programming) preoccupied with processes and measurement. The "governance sector" always contained competing strands, from public sector capacity-strengthening and financial management to more normative rights-based approaches to "good governance." However, because of the technocratic bent, all were highly projectised and insufficiently sensitive to societal dynamics or popular mobilisations for change.

Nigeria offers a prime example. Twenty years of UK governance programming produced valuable lessons about orchestrating dialogue between government officials, parliaments, civil society and the media to improve outcomes in policy, budgets and governance, health and education. ***Yet such structures, despite scoring well overall, were ill equipped to respond to EndSARS,*** a decentralised social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria in October 2020.

Likewise in the Niger Delta, programmes such as the Facility for Oil Sector Transformation (FOSTER) focused on transparency and the management of the oil and gas sectors. They did so despite the persistence of deeper political struggles, such as those represented by Ken Saro-Wiwa, founder of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, which successfully managed to keep Shell from operating in Ogoni up until 30 years after Saro-Wiwa was hanged for his activism.

But at that time UK development support to governance programmes focused on what it knew best, without necessarily confronting the fundamentals of Nigeria's elite capture and corporate complicity.[2] Long after the FOSTER programme wrapped up, the consequences of poorly regulated oil and gas extraction continue unabated, as does sustained community mobilisation to advocate for clean-up and repair.

"Democracy support" shows similar limits. Its typical attention to the functioning of democratic institutions, such as electoral management bodies and media institutions, is limited in an era of democratic reversals. As Ken Opalo eloquently describes, this can lead to a focus on an idealised form of democracy over the substance of political struggles: "organizations continue to train observers, collect data, convene dialogues, and publish reports—often with admirable tenacity—but the real power has long shifted elsewhere."

The instrumental nature of the governance field (seeking to understand politics insofar as it shapes economic development) has also encouraged it to take the postcolonial state as a given, to be reformed but not critically examined. This has meant limited attention to the roles international public and private actors play in shaping national capacity and legitimacy, including through debt issues, the defence and extractive industries and the unbridled power of transnational corporations.

Likewise, attention to the role of the state in society is circumscribed. Political settlements analysis, for example, usefully examines the extent to which the state is insulated

2 See: Twenty years of UK governance programmes in Nigeria: achievements, challenges, lessons and implications for future support | ODI: Think change

enough from societal demands to implement reforms.[3] But when questions of legitimacy are addressed, they tend to be focused on legitimacy relative to such state functions, such as service delivery, rather than through broader struggles over authority, justice and belonging.

Governance: what is to be done?

In an era of open struggle between leaders dismantling democratic norms in their pursuit of power, and those opposing them, making choices matters. At ODI Global, our recent decision, as outlined in our strategy, is to reframe our evidence-based policy ambition as a commitment to steering change in the direction of justice and equity, including through a new Power and Rights Group.

This requires a leap of faith about which side to stand on, even at the risk of error. Those working in governance can no longer afford to fence sit. This may mean finding partners in unlikely places, doing away with isomorphic mimicry, ending orchestration and allowing space for agency, rather than predetermined outcome, to lead.

The continuing need to build effective administrations should not be an excuse for the governance field to retreat into public financial management and capacity-strengthening, especially as bilateral aid is rechannelled through multilateral sources. Nor should "partner-led" mean "government-led" alone. Broadening out rather than narrowing down what it means to be partner-led is key, with much to be learnt from the evolving civil society-driven local leadership agenda. Likewise, democratic resilience generally requires civic action; supporting this means challenging some forms of power while strengthening others. It is not a neutral endeavour – but risk avoidance has also failed.

Putting politics back into governance means bringing society back in. This includes new sites of political contestation, online and offline social movements, community ownership and demands for justice and reparations. It also requires examining politics from above: how international actors from the public and the private sectors (funders, their governments and the corporate entities that have birthed their philanthropic foundations) shape a changing geopolitical context and what it means to govern effectively and inclusively at the national level.

Recent democratic reversals have highlighted how the rolling-out of rights is not immutable or irreversible, but the product of political struggles over competing visions of how power should be exercised. These struggles require sustained political and material support, just as anti-rights movements have significant, sustained support of their own. The expansion of democratic rights and a welfare state in postwar Britain is an eloquent example of what can be done against all odds.

Putting politics back into governance therefore means investing all the way, in institutions and civic coalitions that defend rights. Otherwise, the field risks irrelevance, becoming misaligned with the aspirations of an increasingly digitally connected, mobilised young population, particularly in Africa. Putting politics back in means giving the beautiful ones not yet born a fighting chance.

3 See Kelsall, T. et al. (2022) Political Settlements and Development: Theory, Evidence, Implications. Oxford: Oxford Academic.

Governance that works for people when government is struggling to function: reflections from Palestine

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Over the past few years, I have spent much of my time supporting Palestinian institutions through an increasingly severe fiscal crisis. Like many governance practitioners, I started from a fairly conventional set of assumptions: stronger institutions, better systems, improved coordination and more effective public financial management should contribute to better governance outcomes.

I still believe this. What I am less certain about is whether the governance community spends enough time thinking about what happens when governments are operating under conditions of prolonged stress and uncertainty. This matters for any discussion of governance that works for people, because in such contexts citizens may judge government less by the ambition of its reform agenda and more by whether it can continue to provide the basic services and reassurance they depend on. Governance that works in a crisis – "good enough governance" that meets people's needs – can get lost in the drive by donor organisations to demonstrate ambitious results for change.

The Palestinian experience is a good example of our need to rethink expectations.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) is not a typical fragile state. It is certainly not perfect, and there has been no election for over a decade. However, it does have many of the characteristics that governance programmes seek to build: functioning ministries, capable civil servants, established public financial management systems, policy processes and a relatively sophisticated administration.

And yet, despite this, the PA is facing one of the deepest fiscal crises in its history. Revenue shortfalls, uncertainty surrounding clearance revenues (taxes collected by Israel on behalf of the PA) and broader political constraints have significantly reduced its ability to perform core government functions.

The consequence is not only institutional strain, but also a gradual weakening of the state's ability to meet the basic expectations citizens have of government: that services continue, salaries are paid and public institutions remain present for communities. This is not an abstract concern: in recent years, repeated salary reductions and delays, uncertainty around ministry operating budgets and pressure on essential services have made the link between fiscal governance and people's daily lives increasingly visible.

What I have observed while supporting Palestinian institutions, through two Foreign,

Commonwealth & Development Office-funded programmes, is that the governance challenge has often had little to do with technical capability. The challenge has been survival: not survival for its own sake, but survival in the most basic governance sense – that is, preserving enough institutional functionality to keep services running and maintain some practical relationship between citizens and the state.

During the current fiscal crisis, many of the conversations taking place across government have been relatively basic. How can ministries continue operating with severe resource constraints? Which expenditures should be prioritised when resources are insufficient to meet competing demands? How can decision-makers maintain public confidence while managing a crisis that shows little sign of ending? These are governance questions too – not because institutions matter in the abstract, but because citizens experience the answers in terms of health, education, getting official documents, even registering births or marriages.

As a result, in Palestine, some of the most important achievements I have witnessed have involved ***preventing deterioration rather than delivering transformation.*** In Palestine, preserving functionality can itself be a significant achievement.

Palestine also illustrates that we should not view governance challenges primarily through the lens of political will. Governance practitioners often ask why governments do not implement reforms that appear both necessary and beneficial. The implicit assumption is frequently that governments are unwilling to act. Reality is often more complicated. Many Palestinian officials understand the reforms required and the rationale. But delivering these without resources or political capital is another matter, particularly where competing demands exist.

In such circumstances, governance becomes less about choosing between good and bad options and more about navigating between difficult and often imperfect choices.

Citizens experience governance differently than donors

For donors, the starting point should be to understand how citizens experience governance. Development practitioners frequently discuss governance based on conversations with technocrats, or on data about institutions, processes and systems. Citizens view it as real experience.

People have daily interactions with the state. Whether schools remain open. Whether health services continue functioning. Whether pensions are paid. Whether salaries arrive on time. Whether public institutions remain present and responsive. Citizens judge government through the quality, accessibility and responsiveness of services. And in the current fiscal crisis this is no different. When resources become scarce and institutions come under pressure, citizens are rarely concerned with whether a strategy has been approved or a new process introduced. What matters is whether government continues to perform the functions that citizens rely upon.

If citizens experience governance primarily through basic outcomes, should we place greater emphasis on whether institutions continue delivering meaningful results during periods of crisis, rather than focusing exclusively on reform milestones? Programmes also need a better appreciation of whether governments possess sufficient political space to absorb the consequences of reform. This distinction matters because it leads to very different responses.

It also changes the reform question. Rather than asking only what reform is technically desirable, programmes may need to ask what can realistically be changed now, what capability needs to be preserved for later and what absolutely has to continue functioning in the meantime.

In Palestine, this is also a question of legitimacy. In the absence of normal democratic accountability mechanisms, difficult policy choices are harder to explain, contest and legitimise. This makes engagement with citizens and civil society especially important, not as an alternative to reform, but as part of how reform is prioritised, sequenced and sustained.

If governance problems are primarily a question of political will, the solution is often incentives and accountability. If governance problems are primarily a question of political space, the solution may involve helping governments manage risks, navigate trade-offs and maintain sufficient legitimacy to continue functioning while change is pursued.

What does this mean for governance programming?

Returning to an understanding of governance that can be good enough means:

- Governance programmes should place greater emphasis on resilience alongside reform.
- Preserving institutional functionality during periods of crisis is a legitimate governance outcome, not simply a temporary holding measure.
- Public financial management should be viewed as a core governance discipline rather than a separate technical specialism.
- Programmes should devote greater attention to helping governments manage difficult trade-offs under conditions of uncertainty and constraint.
- Programmes should support governments not only to manage trade-offs technically, but also to explain and legitimise them through engagement with citizens and civil society.
- Success should be defined not only by institutional reform milestones, but also by whether citizens continue to experience government as present, responsive and capable of meeting basic needs, especially during periods of crisis.

Governance reform is not unimportant. Strong institutions, accountability, participation and effective public financial management remain fundamental. Nor should governments entirely abandon reform in favour of managing crises. Resilience and preservation should not become a justification for permanently lowered expectations. Rather, they should be understood as ways of protecting the institutional foundations from which future reform remains possible.

The challenge for external actors is to get the balance of support right. We may spend too much time designing governance programmes that help states reform and not enough time thinking about how they endure in ways that still matter to citizens. We may also not have the right tools to focus on survival rather than longer-term aspirations.

Governance that works for people is not only governance that is accountable, inclusive and effective when conditions are favourable; it is governance that citizens can still recognise in practice when conditions deteriorate.

Governance that puts people first in an age of uncertainty

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Twenty years after the UK's Development White Paper 2006, its emphasis on politics, context and practical improvements in people's lives remains relevant. Over the next decade, we need to apply these insights more consistently to governance cooperation itself: who defines priorities, whose knowledge counts and how partnerships can strengthen both institutions and people's ability to shape them.

Growing fiscal constraints, declining trust, rapid technological disruption, climate pressures, demographic change, democratic backsliding and an increasingly complex geopolitical environment have fundamentally changed the world in which public institutions operate. At the same time, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) policy brief on official development assistance (ODA) projections for 2026 and the near term projects a third consecutive annual decline in net ODA. These pressures make choices about governance support more consequential: short-term reductions can weaken the institutions and civic capabilities needed to sustain development gains.

OECD Guidance on Reducing Poverty and Inequalities through Development Co-operation highlights the importance of governance systems that respond to the needs, rights and priorities of people experiencing poverty, discrimination and inequalities. Gender equality is central, including women's ability to exercise economic autonomy and influence public decisions. Policy frameworks and implementation are stronger when they address structural barriers rooted in discriminatory social norms, unequal power relations and exclusionary governance systems. These barriers manifest in unequal protection of rights; unequal access to services, resources and opportunities; and unequal participation in decision-making. The practical question is whose interests institutions serve, and whether those who are excluded can change that.

Over the next decade, strengthening inclusive governance systems will be critical to delivering effective, accountable and country-owned public action, to sustaining development gains and to building resilience to shocks. State capability and accountability must advance together. Administrative effectiveness does not automatically ensure inclusion, and opportunities for participation achieve little when institutions cannot respond.

Governments need the capacity to translate political priorities into actionable policy and tangible outcomes. This requires formal rules, professional norms, organisational culture and merit-based practices, supported by credible budgets, effective procurement and coordination across government. Local authorities also need resources and authority commensurate with their responsibilities.

Inclusive governance requires leadership to guide change, encourage innovation and build partnerships around long-term national objectives. It also requires an understanding of why reforms encounter resistance. Changes to taxation, public employment or access to resources redistribute benefits and authority. Technical solutions will have limited effect where political incentives favour patronage or selective enforcement. Where government commitment to people-centred development is limited, external actors need deliberate, context-specific, politically informed and adaptive engagement. This means identifying feasible pathways and coalitions for reform while maintaining clear commitments to rights and inclusion. Adaptation should be guided by evidence of whose circumstances are improving and who remains excluded.

Persistent inequalities can weaken social cohesion, legitimacy and trust in public institutions. Trust must be earned through reliable performance, fair treatment and credible constraints on abuse. Public scrutiny and disagreement are essential to this process. Equitable tax and fiscal policies, stronger oversight and greater tax expenditure transparency are important for sustainable domestic revenue mobilisation. Support should connect revenue collection with how resources are allocated and spent, including scrutiny of exemptions, royalties and state-owned enterprise revenues. International partners must also address practices in their own jurisdictions that facilitate corruption, tax evasion and illicit financial flows.

Technology, including artificial intelligence, could help reduce corruption, lower transaction costs, improve accessibility and strengthen service delivery. Stronger data and information systems can help governments identify, reach and respond to those most in need. However, technology must be designed around people's needs and accompanied by adequate infrastructure, digital literacy, equitable access and effective safeguards. Its contribution to democratic governance depends on how it is controlled and used. Governments need the expertise to oversee systems and suppliers, while people need data protection, clear explanations and effective remedies for consequential decisions. Essential services must remain accessible to those who cannot use digital channels.

Governments that put people first work for everyone, particularly the most marginalised, including women, youth and those in remote areas. OECD Policy Guidance: Enabling Inclusive Governance emphasises equitable, transparent and accountable processes and institutions. Meaningful participation strengthens responsiveness by ensuring that policies reflect people's lived experiences, needs and priorities. Participation must influence decisions while options remain open, and include explanations of how contributions have been considered and opportunities to challenge implementation. Participatory budgeting, community monitoring and accessible complaints mechanisms can connect people's voices to an institutional response, provided that safeguards address unequal influence and elite capture.

Meaningful and equitable partnerships require engagement with civil society, trade unions, the private sector and other local actors, although their responsibilities differ. Civil society organisations and trade unions can bridge communities and institutions, amplify under-represented voices and demand accountability. Parliaments scrutinise legislation and budgets; courts, audit institutions and ombuds offices provide checks and remedies. Independent media enable informed debate and expose abuses. These actors need independence, resources and access to information, including when they challenge governments or development partners.

Governments must protect and strengthen the enabling environment for civil society. The 2026 Report on the Implementation of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society identifies priorities that include coordinated action on civic space and improvements in the quality and quantity of funding. Predictable, flexible support and proportionate reporting requirements are particularly important for local organisations. These organisations must, in turn, remain accountable to the communities they represent. The Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment provide a basis for adapting support to a changing information environment.

The private sector has an important role in infrastructure, innovation, digital transformation and job creation. Partnerships must align with the public interest and remain subject to oversight. Responsible conduct includes paying taxes, respecting labour rights and preventing corruption. Governments must assess public value, fiscal risks and conflicts of interest, and retain the capacity to enforce commitments.

Development partners must also rethink their role. Countries increasingly want equitable partnerships based on knowledge exchange, peer learning, mutual accountability and locally led solutions. This requires changes in who defines problems, who controls resources and who judges results. National ownership must encompass public debate and independent scrutiny alongside government leadership. Partners can support nationally defined objectives, strengthen institutional systems and coordinate their efforts to reduce administrative burdens.

Longer-term engagement and fewer parallel structures would make these commitments more credible. Peer-to-peer, South–South and triangular cooperation can broaden opportunities for learning, provided that all participants are willing to examine their own institutional challenges.

The OECD and the DAC can contribute comparative evidence, peer learning and accountability for development partners' practices. Governments must lead – but they cannot do it alone. Success over the next decade should be judged by whether institutions can deliver, people can influence decisions and failures can be challenged and corrected. Governance puts people first when public capability and public accountability reinforce one another.

People-centred governance? You cannot be serious

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How this anniversary has been framed betrays a confidence that, in light of the 20 years that have passed since 2006, surely is not warranted? Indeed, looking over the long history of state-building, few states have come close to being "people-centred." Can we name here the postwar welfare states of Scandinavia – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden? Should we include postwar Britain following the creation of the National Health Service? Looking further afield, what about Costa Rica after 1948, when the government abolished its army and invested heavily in education, health, social protection and democratic institutions?

This "list" seems miserably short. It raises the question of whether being "people-centred" is politically feasible in any governance system. Those of us who think of ourselves as "governance advisors" look first for interests and incentives. We do not take political rhetoric at face value. Since I came across the following quote by the famous British philosopher, Julian Baggini, I have incorporated it into all my presentations on "governance." It never goes down well.

"But at its best, cynicism is a greater force for progress than optimism. The optimist underestimates how difficult it is to achieve real change, believing that anything is possible and it's possible now. ***Only by confronting head-on the reality that all progress is going to be obstructed by vested interests and corrupted by human venality can we create realistic programmes that actually have a chance of success.*** *Progress is more of a challenge for the cynic but also more important and urgent, since for the optimist things aren't that bad and are bound to get better anyway."*

Julian Baggini, 'In Praise of Cynicism', The Guardian, 11 July 2013 (emphasis added).

When I was helping draft the 2006 White Paper, I was most definitely not a cynic. I was working with supremely able colleagues and a committed secretary of state, and in an organisation at the height of its influence. I did not realise how rare this constellation was, and I never found it again. What changed? Two decades, three organisations and a hundred governance programmes later, that is what changed.

I now doubt that "people-centred governance" will be achieved at scale anywhere, anytime soon. The very idea requires the key individuals and organisations to behave in ways that run counter to their institutional incentives and interests.

People-centred governance assumes that public institutions can balance responsiveness with fairness, participation with efficiency and local voice with national coherence. In practice, these goals usually collide. Surely the governance discourse now accepts that the most fundamental obstacle to people-centred governance is political economy? Existing governance arrangements benefit some more than others. Those who hold authority, resources and institutional influence have few incentives to share power. People-centred governance will not happen simply because it is normatively attractive and because it is embraced by well-meaning politicians (and public servants).

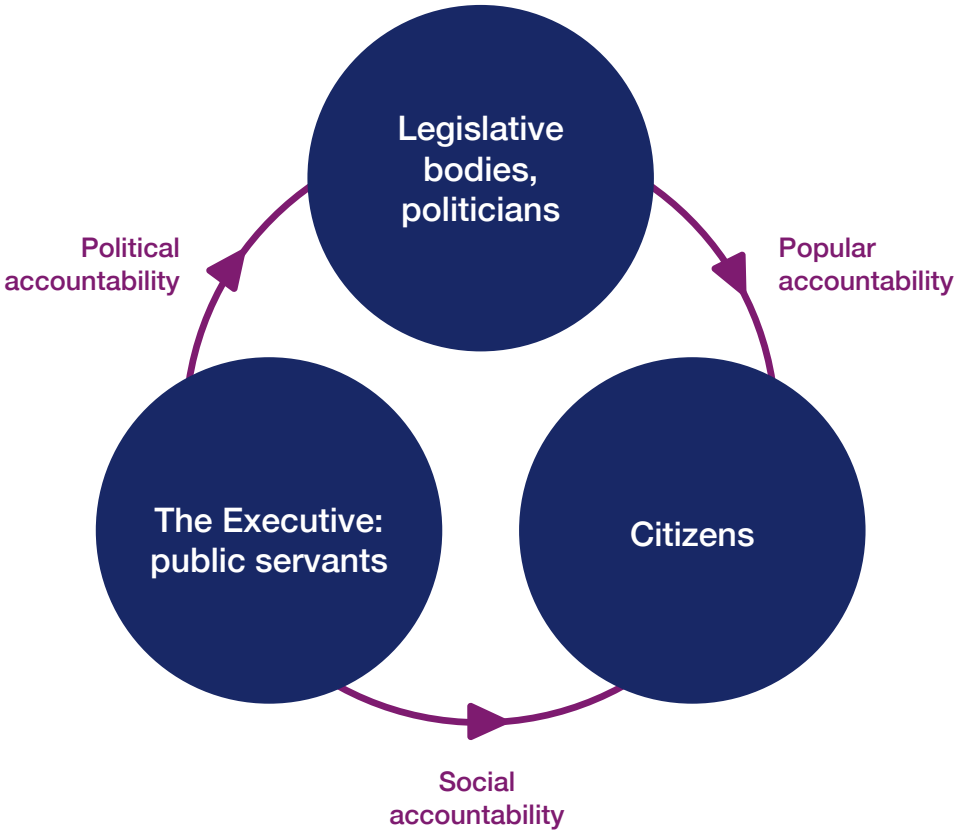
For these reasons, the question is not whether people-centred governance can be achieved, but whether institutions can move in that direction. The goal remains a worthy one: over 800 million people remain in absolute poverty. International and domestic institutions, formal and informal, need increasingly to reflect the voices of the poor and the marginalised. However, a quick scan of institutions at the global level do not provide us with much encouragement. We have entered a Hobbesian world where might trumps right and interests trump values. (Every programme design or project memorandum I read today starts with a statement that this investment "is in our national interest.") This acknowledgement at least is honest. What is less so is the rhetoric of the investment: how change will happen and how we will bring it about. ***We need to be far more modest.***

The realistic ambition regarding national-level institutions – which are embedded in the social and political fabric of the country concerned, what is often called the political settlement – is partial and sporadic, incremental and stop-start. What will move states to become more people-centred? The contributions in this volume outline many options.

Twenty years and a hundred projects on from the 2006 White Paper, I am convinced that only one dimension of the governance agenda really matters – and that is accountability. Regarding this, I am not a cynic at all. Accountability for institutions, organisations and individuals. In many of the places where I now work (mostly Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands), accountability is notable by its absence.

Accountability is a simple idea: those who are privileged to hold either political or executive power are accountable for their words and their actions. Words and actions have consequences; therefore, individuals and organisations must take responsibility for the results of these words and actions.

Accountability matters for three reasons. First, accountability systems confront the biases in favour of ruling elites. Effective accountability systems ensure that the rights of the excluded are considered. Second, accountability systems confront corruption. They can improve the likelihood that the use of public power for private gain is minimised. And third, the poorest and most vulnerable suffer most from the abuse of power and are least able to do anything about it.



There are three main dimensions of accountability: the accountability of politicians to constituents; the accountability of the executive to the legislature and public servants to their superiors; and the accountability of service providers to consumers and clients. The figure shows the relationship among the three.

I would suggest that during the governance discourse since 2006 we have learnt that politicians tend to resist accountability. They do not care for it at all. Politicians are often (usually?) supported because of who they are, where they are from and what they say, rather than the policies they espouse or their record on programme implementation. I fear that the potential for deepening popular accountability is limited. Indeed, the "decline of democracy" since 2006 shows we are moving in the other direction.

There is evidence that social accountability initiatives have had localised impact, starting with Ritva Reinaka's path-breaking work in late 1990s Uganda – nailing school budgets on village hall doors (a sort of Martin Luther moment for social development colleagues).

That leaves political accountability – of the executive to the legislature, and of public servants to their bosses. In terms of the latter, I see little of this in the programmes on which I work. Public servants are rarely rewarded for good performance, and there are few if any consequences for poor or non-performance. Under such circumstances, why bother at all? One depressing fact (apart from the obvious and immediate one) is that development partners usually interpret this as a lack of capacity (individual skills and competencies

and/or organisational capability), rather than the absence of accountability. So, we design training courses and provide technical advisors to get the job done. It seems we are not brave enough to call out this lack of accountability when we see it. The bilateral relationship is too important.

Concluding, there is no doubt that designing and implementing "accountability" initiatives present donors with fundamental challenges: accountability often constitutes simultaneously a partner country's principal development constraint and the constraint that is the most resistant to resolution. It is the principal constraint because the absence of consequences for poor policy and programme performance means there are few incentives to deliver results or improve organisational effectiveness. It is the most resistant to resolution because the country's political economy means that acting for private gain trumps acting for the public interest. So maybe I am a little cynical about accountability after all.

Governance that outlasts the funding: reformers, citizens and the unfinished business of 2006

This piece distils and updates TPP Working Paper 6, Governance in a New Development Paradigm: Reformer Leadership and Partnership Humility (The Policy Practice, November 2025).

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The unfinished promise of 2006

In 2006, the UK's White Paper on governance told Parliament that outsiders could not impose models, and that people and governments in developing countries had to choose better governance for themselves. It warned that technical assistance worked well only when institutions wanted change and were ready to lead reform.

The principle was right. But reviewing it at the time, Moore and Unsworth (2006) warned that donors "cannot for much longer expect to influence developing countries simply because they provide grants" (p. 715). Twenty years later, aid budgets are shrinking, and influence can no longer rest on grants alone. On preliminary figures, net official development assistance from Development Assistance Committee members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development fell by 23.3% in 2025, the largest drop on record. A further 6.9% fall is projected for 2026. Reformers also have more choices. Climate funds, private investors and Southern partners now provide financing on a far greater scale than governance aid.

Outside partners will increasingly be chosen for how they work, not how much they give.

The question is no longer how to do more with less. It is what should outlast outside support. Reform is never finished. What should last is the result: services that work, rules applied fairly and people able to hold power to account. That is not the same as making a reform last. A reform can be locally led and endure while serving a narrow group.

Why so much support has not lasted

Over two decades, I have managed governance programmes worth more than £280 million for the UK Department for International Development and subsequently the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and the United States Agency for International Development. I helped build some of the systems I now question. We ran workshops and training courses, built dashboards and reported how much we had done. Many of the changes these activities were meant to bring about did not outlast the funding. I call this performance theatre. It persists because aid systems reward

spending and visible activity over lasting change. Training 500 officials gives you a number to report. Whether they have the authority to use what they learned is another matter.

Domestic leadership matters. Ukraine's ProZorro public procurement platform was built by a coalition of reformers from government, business and civil society. It has kept working through the pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion. In Nigeria's Jigawa State, a review found that, after 20 years of UK support, several governance processes seemed established enough to endure without it. These cases are illustrative, not a representative sample. A 2025 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office-commissioned review also found that most of the innovative governance programmes it examined had begun with national actors, with outside partners in a supporting role. By national actors I mean officials, civil society and businesses able to change the rules.

Lasting is not enough

Lasting change is not necessarily good change. Ownership describes who directs a reform, not whose interests it serves. Domestic reformers push for the changes they need, whether for material gain or for conviction. They need not be saints. Many reforms succeed because they line up public benefit with powerful interests. But motives are not evidence of public value. So outside partners face a real dilemma: back the reforms most likely to last, or back citizens' voice when powerful people resist it?

The two aims can reinforce each other, but not automatically. Reforms that serve different groups can build a wider base of people willing to defend them. ProZorro's contracts are open to anyone, and civil society monitors them. But benefiting people does not automatically give them the power to protect those gains. Building that power is part of the work.

The case of Benin shows citizens influencing a public decision. In 2021, citizen monitors working within the open-budget process found textbook shortages, and the government raised the textbook budget. Accountability in practice means people can name a problem, raise it through a recognised channel and see whether government responds.

Where the state blocks reform, the choice is harder. When Uganda's president suspended the externally funded Democratic Governance Facility in 2021, funding critical to many civic organisations was put at risk. This showed the limits of outside funding when a government restricted independent civic activity. There, support may need to protect civic space and independent voices, and be judged by what that protection preserves. Lasting support for the status quo is not success.

The UK and other partners cannot be neutral, and should not pretend to be. But choosing what to support is not the same as controlling how reform happens. The UK should say openly that it backs reforms that widen who benefits and who can hold power to account, then let domestic partners decide how to get there. Those purposes should be tested with the people affected, not defined by outside partners and their government counterparts alone. Where a powerful partner refuses meaningful scrutiny, local ownership alone is no reason to keep funding it. Outside partners can renegotiate, work with other domestic actors or step back. The aim is to help domestic actors secure results that serve citizens and stay open to their influence.

What partners must do differently

The evidence and my own experience point to five changes.

1. **Be clear about whose interests a reform serves.** Before investing, ask who benefits, who may lose and how the people affected can influence the change.
2. **Give domestic reformers authority, and share the risk.** Agree purpose and safeguards, then let domestic partners decide and adapt. Reform windows can close before funding approvals arrive. Outside funders should accept that some efforts will fail, and use their influence to help protect those who take political risks.
3. **Fund data and channels that citizens demand.** Information should help people question decisions and get a response, not just help funders complete reports.
4. **Facilitate coalitions beyond those already in power.** Outside partners can convene citizens' groups, businesses and officials but should not set their agenda.
5. **Build for lasting public benefit, not permanent funding.** From year one, agree who will carry the gains forward, how they will be paid for and how citizens will hold those responsible to account. Sometimes what should last is a stronger institution. Sometimes it is a changed rule or an independent voice.

None of this removes the UK's responsibilities for public money, safeguarding and the objectives it supports. Both sides should agree at the start what they seek to achieve, how decisions are made, what risks each carries and when support should change or end.

Two tests for the next decade

First, if your support ended tomorrow, what would remain, and who would carry it forward? Second, whether support continues or not, who benefits, and can the people affected hold those responsible to account? Support that passes the second test but not the first may still be worth giving, for example to protect civic space during repression.

The 2006 White Paper said governance was about politics: the way citizens and government relate to each other. Reformers need authority to change institutions. Citizens need the power to influence what those institutions do and to hold them to account. Outside partners should strengthen both, and substitute for neither.

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