Memo to Lucy

Some reading for your assignment

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Lucy, now that you have finished your time on the junior governance adviser scheme you will notice that there is a change in expectations towards you. Colleagues will seek your expertise and advice and even on your forthcoming trip you will be put on the spot. I have therefore pulled together some briefing pieces to help illustrate debates currently underway on institutions. I have sought out pieces by authors who are well known on their issues – and all of whom have a good capacity to provoke and challenge. Some are well-known academics, others work in think tanks, and a few have also spent long periods of time working on programmes.

But that is not all – I took the liberty of contacting some seasoned practitioners to ask them what they thought. You will not be surprised that their views differ quite markedly from those you will find in the briefings. Hopefully this will be useful to you, I will be interested to hear what you make of it all when you have time.

Personally I am not going to give you long lists of advice, you will quickly decide which guidance is useful and which is not. Instead, I thought that it would be useful if I simply outline here what others might be looking for from you – how the role of the governance practitioner has changed over time.

Governance is dead – long live institutions

I am afraid, Lucy, that anybody entering the professional world of "governance" at the moment would be forgiven for being confused (on many levels). Academics and economists agree like never before that institutions are crucial to economic and social performance, and yet practitioners are riddled with doubt about whether their mojo really works. Institutions are central to the delivery of the new sustainable development goals, but exactly how you get good institutions remains opaque, contested and often a question of ideological taste.

The broad journey that development has taken is at the same time both simple and profound. In simple terms, indeed at its simplest, we recognised quite early on that projects would only be as good as the environment in which they worked. Thus individual projects were "rolled together" in wider development programmes, which in the 1990s were themselves subsumed into wider sector programmes – development was swimming upstream. We then recognised that sector performance was in turn dependent to a great extent on the performance of the public service as a whole and the incentives operating on it. The result of course was a focus on the institutions of the state and the political structures and systems that animated it. We had swum so far up stream we had reached the source – politics.

That is the simple version. What follows is the warts and all story; the twists and turns of the interaction between academic research and policy practice. It is a demanding story – with no unequivocal answers to the question "what should I do on Monday morning?". I hope by the time you have digested all the papers enclosed you will agree that the only answer to this question can possibly be "you think, and think hard. And then you think some more".

I say this because the papers that follow themselves reflect the reality that there is a continual evolution of thinking on governance and institutions. We should view the continual drive to question and improve as a positive. The grey literature is substantial and underlines the fact that each sub-area of governance work is an area of debate in its own right. It is therefore important to be open minded: as Sue Unsworth reminded us in "An upside-down view of governance", "New art students are often advised to close off their pre-existing knowledge about the objects they are trying to draw, and instead focus on angles, spaces, lines, proportions and relationships. Development practitioners similarly need to close off their mental models about governance and development that are rooted in OECD experience."

Being open minded and inquisitive is important, particularly as we look for what works in context (rather than transposing alien models). For you will find you also walk a tightrope, with accusations of paternalism and interference on one side and charges of slowness and myopia on the other. You can only continue to respond to criticism by engaging with the ideas and issues involved, and by engaging with partners on the evidence and lessons to be learned. As a result the notes below also touch on the political economy of the governance practitioner, a key starting point in understanding what is really possible in supporting reform.

The weight of history

During your induction course you were told that the idea of governance is a relatively recent construct, emerging from ideas of technical assistance and capacity development which existed from the days of modernisation theory onwards. The Washington consensus, post-Washington consensus and move to national ownership of reform all leaned heavily on expectations of developing country systems. Advisers arose to work on programmes helping those country systems gain the characteristics seen as vital to development. Depending on the decade, those characteristics might be downsized, rightsized, streamlined, effective, strategic, responsive, accountable, capable and/or inclusive.

At the heart of the work, however, was a common thread of improved performance against expectations – helping counterpart systems to do their work. And in seeking to promote this aim there has been a recognition that external support to governance brings no monopoly of wisdom – local aspirations are central. Way back in 2001 then minister Clare Short made the point in a UK policy paper all about "making government work for poor people", that building institutions "is increasingly the major focus of our development work. We are determined to avoid the hectoring attitudes of the past that were often associated with the term 'good governance'. Too often OECD governments were simply trying to replicate their own institutions or to blame governments for the fact that they lacked the capacity to do what was needed."

Finding the balance between realism, context and theories of change has however been difficult. The arrival of new macro theories of reform, particularly New Institutional Economics and New Public Management, provided a further spur to the idea that certain approaches had a universal relevance. They also encouraged recognition that governance issues are by nature inter-related. Governance might still include specialists for rule of law or public financial management – but the institutions involved were recognised as all part of the same ecosystem.

As government capacity came to be considered as an organic whole – not ministry by ministry – the technical gave way to the political. Looking at the issue of governance across government naturally meant looking at cultures of reform. This also fitted strongly with the desire to avoid Short's "hectoring" approach, it opened up the prospect of working with the grain rather than against it. At this point Douglass North's view of institutions as rules and norms rather than organisations became particularly influential. Political economy analysis became the means to peer through the complex miasma of incentives, norms, drivers and culture that provided the "real story" behind the scenes. Governance was now defined as issues of "power" and how it is used to allocate and manage resources.

The drive for realism at the heart of this approach paralleled a process of thinking that began with the World Bank's Low Income Countries Under

Stress paper in 2001. This parallel stream advocated for a less ambitious approach to governance reform in conflict affected and fragile states. The "good enough" ideas Merilee Grindle favoured in her two papers on the issue, argued for greater focus and more realistic timeframes. Ultimately this thinking was to transform the concept of statebuilding as an external act driven by foreign powers into a recognition that states are built by largely domestic forces – driven by social and political dynamics to which either aid or intervening states would largely remain marginal.

Perhaps these twin revolutions of "good enough" and "political drivers" thinking coincided with the widest gap between the new science of governance and its original technocratic roots. To some degree, Lucy, this was the period in which a "typical" governance practitioner was no longer a specialist in public finance, elections, rule of law or capacity development – but more likely a political scientist, hopefully with a good knowledge of all of the above.

Certainly by the close of the decade the debate had also brought an epiphany that Weberian concepts of governance could be a hindrance. Indeed perhaps non-Weberian systems work better than anybody had realised – enabling a management of power that served the purposes of the leaders involved (if not necessarily those of their people). Ideas of neo-patrimonial development now made sense, even more so after the 2011 World Development Report, with its suggested timeframes for reform stretching into the distance. Long timeframes for reform that seemed particularly strange given the numbers of governance programmes deemed a success – "isomorphic mimicry" entered the lexicon.

So what?

While all this was going on governance practitioners largely got on with things. Attending the training on the latest approach to political economy analysis (PEA) and fragile states, and hiring consultants to plan or implement programmes. Practitioners learned to love results and struggled to find indicators for democratisation, rule of law and empowerment. The importance of results led naturally to some donors opting to review the performance of their work on governance – DFID and the World Bank most notably undertaking portfolio reviews that found some areas of real success, such as public financial and tax, and others more challenging, such as supporting civil service reform.

The pressure for governance results has itself varied in focus along with the mood of the wider donor community. The drive to deliver the MDGs placed an onus on enabling financial aid, including general budget support. The reaction against budget support often took the guise of aversion to corruption risk – and governance advisers duly focused on prevention, enforcement and tackling fraud. The political economy of the governance

adviser is perhaps inevitably shaped by the dominant risks in the minds of those seeking to maintain the direction of aid policy.

For you, Lucy, the debate around the Sustainable Development Goals will add another layer of complexity. A complexity that is complemented by the shift of development thinking to a "beyond aid" agenda. The reality is that aid is now a declining proportion of overall development resources, and for many countries remittances or foreign direct investments bring higher levels of resources. Non-traditional providers of aid have also changed the map – just as more equal platforms have shone a light on the performance of donors as much as recipients. The creation of the Effective Institutions Platform brings a different kind of dynamic to the conversation.

In the future it is likely that you and your colleagues will need to support reform efforts as much through your advocacy and influence as through programmes. When a counterpart asks a governance practitioner what they bring to the table, part of the answer will have to be the mix of expertise and evidence that complements any resources involved. Even so, programmes are unlikely to go away – not if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030 – and institutions must step up to the challenge. Programmes are the means through which most governance practitioners will really prove their worth – to what extent can they forge good partnerships and provide meaningful support to counterparts?

If in doubt blame the design

You will therefore face a very direct challenge as to how you make sense of all this in relation to actual programmes. I don't think that you need a governance programming "101", there are plenty of case studies and reviews kicking around. However, you will see from many of the papers below that the experts who write on governance are often particularly focused on influencing the aid agenda and the way that resources are used. Over time governance practitioners have been told that their programming should be highly prioritised, very flexible, measurable and looking for best fit approaches (delete where appropriate).

And so I will simply offer a note of caution on the need to look at programmes as a whole – with an eye to realistic timeframes, achievements and perseverance. Most importantly of all, remember that programmes are also the property of the partner – not the medium through which a theoretical debate is translated into a practitioner's work. Dialogue with partners is often the ground-truthing of our work, it helps us to avoid becoming prone to fads or unrealistic timeframes and expectations. For example it struck me recently, reading a 2014 Overseas Development Institute paper by Sue Unsworth and David Booth on politically smart development, that the best programmes they reviewed were often ones that were able to persevere over time.

Supporting institutions is not a short-term process – and yet development organisations can think that a programme older than five years must be doing something wrong. This is not helped by the relatively short posting cycles of many development agencies where new people arrive every 3-4 years and want to make their own mark on events. Often the benefit of hindsight usually suggests to the newcomer that what went before should have been done differently.

And so, Lucy, the materials we have gathered for you try to take a broader view – looking at programmes over their whole life and also viewing institutions and governance beyond the programme cycle. The real skill for the governance practitioner is to recognise what is going to happen on its own terms. As the international community talked of transition in Afghanistan in the run up to 2014 it was not uncommon to hear laments that the hoped-for Weberian institutions had failed to materialise. A quick backward glance at the 2001 World Bank/UNDP institutional needs assessment would of course have underlined just how far things had moved. It's just that the evolving Afghan institutions did not look a lot like a town council in Europe or America (and to work in Afghanistan – they shouldn't!). Don't measure institutions by the artificial yardsticks of our own idealised models.

And finally, making sense of it all

I am conscious that I have not given you a list of dos and don'ts, nor listed all the best reading for rule of law, public financial management and elections. There are some good websites to visit if you feel cheated, such as GSDRC,[1] but you will learn most by thinking things through based on all that you have read and heard, and your own experience on the ground.

My advice is to take lots of notes and give yourself a little time to think about them before you write your report. Don't be afraid to record your thinking, dilemmas and challenges – they may seem clearer when you put them all together in one place. When you come to try to pull together your report you will face the same problems as every practitioner who must distil something useful from all of the sources and voices that you hear.

As you try to make sense of notes, briefings and a flood of information I cannot offer any revolutionary wisdom, but I can summarise four observations shared with me over the years:

- Whatever analysis you did, you won't understand the context the way you want to, so treat your certainties with caution and respect the risks that you see.

- Your partner and counterparts will drive the reform that does happen, not you, and so respect their ambitions, organisational realities and inputs.

- Behaviours are crucial but hard to predict, governance reform is therefore less about the structure than the influencers of practice.

- And sustaining engagement will always be challenged by events, and indeed by your own political economy, so don't give up!

Feel free to send me your notes if it would help to talk things through, and don't forget to send me your thoughts on the papers that I enclosed.

Note

1. The Governance, Social Development and Humanitarian Resource Centre, www.gsdrc. org.