

Can Political Science Speak to Policymakers?

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Introduction

Governance has moved to the top of the development agenda. Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and the justification for significant increases in aid, are said to hang on plans to improve governance and reduce corruption in some of the world's poorest countries. "First and foremost" claims the British government's 2006 White Paper, "the fight against poverty cannot be won without good governance". The same message is echoed in different ways by the World Bank, the UN Millennium Project, the European Union's Cotonou agreement, the US Millennium Challenge Account, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

How far does this offer an opportunity for political scientists to influence the policy debate? Do they have anything relevant or useful to say? Or is there simply too much of a gap between the interests and expectations of policymakers and what the research can offer? Where are the barriers? Could political scientists do more to overcome them?

This paper draws on the experience of the Centre for the Future State (CFS) -- a multi-year research programme based at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (IDS) -- to help address those questions. It argues that the current focus on governance does offer an opportunity for political scientists, but also significant challenges. Political science offers insights into the "why" and "how" questions of development: what are the underlying causes of bad governance, low growth and failing services, and what sort of political processes might be involved in making progress? It offers less by way of direct answers to the question that tends to preoccupy policymakers: "what" to do about these problems? Political science confronts policymakers with some inconvenient propositions about the complexity and uncertainty of social and political change, and highlights the limited ability of external actors to influence it directly. It does not often offer quick solutions. Moreover policymakers often complain, with some justification, that messages from researchers are too inconclusive, too abstract, too academic, and too negative. Overall, the impact of political science research has been patchy. Policymakers may be talking about politics, while still thinking in quite conventional ways about governance and development.

On a more positive note, CFS experience suggests that research can offer positive messages for policymakers, and that it is possible to influence both discourse and practice. This is particularly the case where context-specific research engages the attention of a local audience, or where there are tangible entry points and clear operational implications. For instance, there is rapidly growing interest in CFS work linking tax to the quality of governance, and in related research into the impact of OECD governments and businesses on governance in poor countries. The interesting

question is whether this engagement with policymakers can provide an entry point for a more fundamental discussion that challenges conventional ways of thinking about governance, and moves the debate away from a focus on formal institutions towards a real concern with politics. Unless this happens, the research will have limited impact, and the "good governance" agenda risks being discarded -- like so many other development initiatives before it -- once it becomes clear that it has failed to meet the unrealistic expectations held out for it. That would be a great pity, because if policymakers could once be convinced that politics matters for development, they would find that political science does offer operational insights, albeit ones that point to indirect, incremental ways of nurturing an environment conducive to progressive change, rather than instant solutions.

How Receptive are Policymakers?

There is widespread, and increasing, concern within the development community (including donors, and citizens, politicians, public officials and civil society organisations in developing countries) about the links between persistent poverty and poor governance. So there should be a ready-made audience for research into the politics of development, and specifically into how to find ways of increasing the effectiveness and accountability of public authority in the South.

There are signs that policymakers are indeed becoming more receptive. The current emphasis on governance reflects a genuine shift in thinking on the part of development actors, based both on their own experience and on research findings. There is growing recognition of the limited impact of much development assistance to date, and (as a DAC Govnet paper on anticorruption puts it) that "importing formal institutional models... regardless of the governance context is unwise" (DAC 2006: 7). There is a refreshing willingness -- reflected in DFID's framework of "capability, accountability and responsiveness"-- to focus on the essential attributes of governance, rather than on specific (democratic) systems. The need for country-led approaches to development, for local "ownership" of reform, for "commitment" of developing country leaders to a pro-poor agenda has become commonplace in donor and partner country statements. There is evidence of more nuanced thinking about corruption: the DAC sees this as a symptom of unresolved governance problems, resulting from "incompleteness of the process of building an effective and accountable state" (DAC 2006:9). There has been growing concern (evident in the joint ministerial declaration in Paris in 2005) about the damaging impact of uncoordinated donor behaviour on local policy and administrative systems, prompting, among other things, a move away from stand-alone projects to general budget support. More recently, statements from the World Bank, the DAC and DFID all recognise the role of business and governments in rich countries in fuelling corruption and bad governance in poor countries.

Over the past five years or so, a number of donors have shown increasing interest in exploring the informal relationships that underpin formal public institutions in many developing countries, and the links between social, economic and political change. Initiatives include DFID's Drivers of Change work, Sida's power analysis, political economy studies from the World Bank, and more recent analytical approaches being developed by the Netherlands. The urge to "look behind the facade" and to

understand what really motivates policymakers, politicians, business and civil society groups is particularly strong among donor staff resident in developing countries. Within DFID, over 20 country offices have undertaken Drivers of Change studies, which are clearly influencing internal debate, and are reflected to some extent in country strategy documents and programming.

Even more intriguingly, some donors have started talking openly about politics. "Politics determines how resources are used and policies are made. And politics determines who benefits. In short, good governance is about good politics." (DFID 2006:23). The same Paper tells us that building better governance takes time and has to come from a political process within each country: outsiders cannot impose models. Good governance is about how citizens, leaders and public institutions relate to each other, to make change happen. But despite these insights, the White Paper goes on to advance a technocratic and largely conventional agenda for enhancing growth and improving basic services, with barely a nod in the direction of politics.

The challenge for political scientists seeking to influence policy-making is evident from the fact that, despite a more sophisticated approach to governance, donors are often still not thinking and acting as though local political process really mattered. For example:

i) There is no real recognition of the scale of the challenge involved in improving governance in poor countries. The 2005 Paris Declaration commits aid donors to important changes in their own behaviour that are politically demanding but should be do-able: harmonising procedures, rationalising activities, untying aid, increasing predictability and transparency of funding. (In practice this is proving far from straightforward). By contrast, it commits developing countries -- many with weak administrations, unstable politics and limited policy capacity -- to what past experience would suggest is an impossibly ambitious agenda, including developing and implementing results-driven development strategies; ensuring that administrative arrangements for managing aid are effective, accountable and transparent; undertaking public management reform; and creating an enabling environment for public and private investment.

ii) There is still little reflection in donor statements about the underlying causes of bad governance, or the social and political processes involved in building more effective, accountable institutions. Instead, there is continuing faith in the effectiveness of aid "partnerships", and "dialogue". The British government's White Paper is quite explicit about this: the commitments made by donors in 2005 represented a "deal" -- "a contract in which increased aid and debt relief was offered in return for a commitment to better governance". This commitment extends to upholding human rights and other international obligations, improving financial management and fighting corruption. Yet years of experience suggests that funding, or the threat of ending funding, has remarkably little effect in changing political behaviour of recipients.

iii) Donors are still thinking along fairly conventional lines about state-society relations. DFID, the World Bank and the DAC all refer to working on the "supply-side" by supporting capacity building of formal institutions; and on the "demand-side" by supporting parliaments, the media, pro-reform elements of civil society, and users

of services. There is surprisingly little interest in what stimulates collective action by different interest groups, or in the political and institutional dynamics of state-society interaction.

iv) The overall message -- for example in the World Bank's paper on strengthening engagement on governance and anti-corruption (World Bank 2007) -- is that everyone needs to try a whole lot harder. The "uneven record" in addressing governance and corruption indicates the need for a stronger governance and anticorruption strategy. In learning the lessons of experience and integrating them into a strengthened strategy, the Bank aims to scale up engagement on governance and anticorruption so as to ensure more systematic and consistent treatment of governance issues across countries, and attain "measurable and demonstrable improvements". The DAC paper on anti-corruption refers to the need for a "concerted approach" and a "coherent agenda" to ensure that all important entry points for anticorruption work are covered.

v) One area where political science research has clearly been influential is the increasing recognition of the impact of the global environment on governance in developing countries. The British government's 2006 White Paper devotes an entire chapter to "Supporting Good Governance Internationally". It recognises that "incentives for good governance are heavily influenced by the international economy, the behaviour of other governments and the private sector". But the focus is on the *direct* impact of international action to contain corruption, crime or conflict, and to promote the better use of resources. There is little interest in the *indirect* impact of such action on local state-society relations, or on the institutional incentives faced by politicians, policymakers, businessmen or taxpayers. For example how, in specific contexts, could more transparency about oil revenues translate into stronger pressure for improved public expenditure management? How will changes in EU regulations covering the import of timber affect relations between governments of exporting countries and powerful groups of citizens such as timber merchants?

vi) A direct result of the preoccupation with scaling up aid is a new emphasis among a number of donors – including the World Bank, the European Union and DFID – on measuring the quality of governance, monitoring trends, and identifying reform interventions. It remains to be seen whether this more normative approach will eclipse the earlier interest – evident in the Drivers of Change work – in understanding the underlying causes of weak governance, and the processes involved in creating more effective, accountable public authority.

It seems that some messages from political science research are getting through, but selectively. The rhetoric of putting local political process at the heart of development is not being matched by rigorous pursuit of the implications. Why is this?

Barriers to Influence

Development actors and political scientists tend to have very different approaches to thinking about development. These may be converging as the limitations of past interventions become more apparent, but the gap is still wide. Policymakers, and international donors in particular, may increasingly recognise that -- whatever area of policy they are working in -- the problems are not just financial, technical or

managerial, but relate to underlying politics and institutions. Yet their thinking still, for the most part, revolves around formal institutional models that have worked well in stable, rich, developed societies. Policymakers are often not very interested in history, and donors in particular have neglected both the specific historical experience of the countries in which they work, and historical processes more generally. They have shown surprisingly little interest in understanding the social, economic and political circumstances in which current institutional models were conceived and negotiated, or in how new institutions can be created. Donor agencies recruit staff for their technical expertise, and prioritise that over country knowledge. Until recently, they employed few political scientists (governance advisers came from a variety of other backgrounds, including law, accountancy, public sector management and economics).

Of course there are honourable exceptions to all this. Informal discussion among policymakers is often much more open and perceptive than their public statements would suggest. But in general, the bureaucratic pressures on policymakers reinforce a preoccupation with trying to change how the world works, rather than encouraging analysis of why it works as it does. The focus is on identifying problems and finding solutions to them, and on tangible, direct action to change policy, improve service delivery or build institutional capacity in poor countries. For international donors, these pressures have been reinforced by recent pledges of large and rapid increases in aid, and renewed focus on the Millennium Development Goals.

Against this background, the messages from political scientists are not only conceptually challenging, but decidedly inconvenient. Indeed, they are potentially quite destabilising, because they challenge the whole notion of policymakers, and particularly donors, as experts who can orchestrate change. They emphasise the need for development to be rooted in local social and political processes; the uncertainty and turbulence of political and institutional change; its long-term nature; the diversity of different country circumstances, and the need for strategies tailored to particular contexts; and the limited influence that aid givers have when domestic political interests are at stake. None of this sits well with an activist donor culture; with bureaucratic incentives to find solutions, and to launch initiatives; or with the need to respond to multiple domestic lobby groups with their own strong normative agendas, and to convince Ministries of Finance as well as taxpayers that aid is "working".

Moreover, from the point of view of a policy maker, political science can be a very unsatisfactory discipline. It offers conflicting, and at best partial, explanations about how change happens. It seems to lack a common language, and clear definitions of commonly used terms ('politics', 'institutions', 'capacity building'). Political science offers little definitive guidance on key issues such as the causal links between governance and growth, or poverty reduction. It has little to say about sequencing or priorities. There is a gap between much of the research literature and the operational concerns of policymakers: cross-country statistical studies at high levels of aggregation on the one hand, and detailed case studies on the other, offer little direct guidance for policymakers. Overall, political science has been better at explaining why governance is poor, and corruption rife in many poor countries than it is at suggesting what might be done to improve things.

Centre for the Future State

The experience of researchers at the Centre for the Future State illustrates both the opportunities and difficulties of seeking to influence policymakers. CFS, which is funded by DFID, consists of a network of research institutions that links IDS with collaborating partners in Ghana, India, South Africa, Brazil, Pakistan and (more recently) Kenya and Indonesia. The first five-year phase ended in June 2005, and funding has been renewed for a further five-year period. During phase 1 there were three main research programmes, covering:

- i) The tax relationship, and the way this has shaped political and administrative institutions, both historically, and in the present day.
- ii) The way poor people organise to make demands on public officials, and how the state itself influences opportunities for different groups to participate.
- iii) New forms of collaboration emerging between state and citizens for the provision of services.

Approaches have included new research (both case studies and intra- and cross-country comparative work), reviewing and synthesising the state of knowledge in particular areas, stimulating research by others, and disseminating results.

The Centre has sought to engage with three main audiences: donors and other international development policymakers located principally in the North; politicians, public servants, researchers and journalists in developing countries; and the academic community. It has used a variety of different approaches to communicate with those audiences, disseminating material as widely as possible in order to maximise the chances of a "hit". These include the Centre's own website, websites of collaborating institutions, the DFID funded Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, IDS Working Papers, journal articles and academic books. At the end of phase 1 a fifty page synthesis report ("Signposts to More Effective States: Responding to governance challenges in developing countries") and a four-page Policy Brief ("Getting Real About Governance") were prepared to capture the main research messages for a policy audience. There was also extensive face-to-face contact with policymakers, especially with DFID staff, from the outset of phase 1; and feedback mechanisms to channel concerns of policymakers back into the research.

Messages from the Research

The overarching message from the research is quite challenging for policymakers, both conceptually and operationally. It is that effective public institutions evolve through a political process of bargaining between the state and organised groups in society. They cannot be constructed just by transferring institutional models from rich to poor countries. So applying financial resources or technical assistance to reform or "strengthen" formal institutions is likely to have limited impact. Policymakers need instead to focus more on the informal arrangements and relationships that underpin formal structures. This implies a different way of thinking

about governance: not assessing how existing arrangements measure up against a normative standard, but looking at what works in actual poor country environments, and the opportunities to increase constructive state-society engagement across the whole spectrum of public action. This in turn implies much more realism about the likely pace of institutional change, and the scope for external actors to contribute directly to it.

But if these apparently dispiriting messages can be digested, the research offers some real causes for optimism. Specifically, it suggests that:

i) tax is not just a fiscal issue: it matters fundamentally for accountability. The tax relationship -- bargaining between state and society around tax -- is central to building effective and accountable public authority. Historically, the need to raise tax gave governments incentives to nurture broad economic growth, and to build bureaucratic capability. By contrast, the current global context offers political elites in poor countries access to external military support and sources of revenue from natural resource rents and aid, thus lessening their dependence on citizens for tax. A weak tax relationship is one of the fundamental reasons for bad governance in the South. But the research also offers a way forward, suggesting that policymakers and businesses in rich countries could do much more to limit their own collusion in corruption, reduce opportunities for money laundering, control the sale of small arms and conflict diamonds, and encourage more transparency by companies and governments about revenues from oil, gas and minerals. Indirect action of this kind could ultimately do far more to strengthen accountability in poor countries than any amount of assistance to the Public Accounts Committee. The research also suggests ways of building on existing programmes of tax reform to encourage more constructive relations between revenue authorities and taxpayers.

ii) The research on collective action also offers cause for optimism. It emphasises that the state itself can help create incentives and opportunities for different groups to organise. This implies more room for agency than is sometimes assumed. In particular, state institutions and public programmes can be designed and implemented in ways that encourage the participation and organisation of poor people. There is scope for making progress by constructing common interests through processes of bargaining between the state and societal actors. Policymakers need to rethink conventional ideas about civil society as an autonomous sphere, which acts independently to bring pressure on the state. Instead they should think more about the dynamics of state-society interaction, which can enhance the effectiveness of both.

iii) Finally, the research suggests new ways of thinking about service delivery, emphasising that policymakers should not be bound by preconceived models, but should take more account of the great diversity of arrangements actually in place, some of which work well, albeit in unconventional ways. Although the ultimate goal may be formal Weberian institutions, these are a distant prospect in many poor countries, so unconventional arrangements based on informal practices and relations may offer the best interim solution.

Reaching Policy Audiences

How far have these research messages been successfully shared with policymakers? There are two main groups. First, CFS has a good record of reaching out to politicians and public servants in developing countries based on specific case study material. Research partners in South Africa and in Ghana have shared findings (about relations between the South African Revenue Authority and taxpayers, and about taxing the informal sector in Ghana) with senior personnel of their national tax agencies. The South African Revenue Service has in turn shared findings with colleagues in Kenya. The dissemination of CFS research findings on participatory policy-making institutions in Brazil led to contacts with the office of the Mayor of São Paulo, and provided an opportunity for influencing thinking about the role of different kinds of representation processes. CFS research on the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra had direct policy relevance, given the decision by the Government of India (elected in 2004) to introduce a variant of the scheme nationally. The Centre for the Study of Law and Governance in Delhi organised a two-day national conference in April 2005 to present the CFS findings. The UNDP has picked up on research into informal village level institutions in Karnataka, in the context of its interest in decentralization. Most recently, as a result of its research under phase 2 of the CFS programme, the Lahore University of Management Sciences (CFS's research partner in Pakistan) has been invited to collaborate with the Planning and Development Department in Punjab to map inequality in service provision at village level, and explore the factors that keep some villages backward.

A tougher challenge has been to engage with donors and other policymakers on the broader messages coming out of the research. Significant progress has been made on two related issues. The first is tax, and its implications for governance. Tax has traditionally been seen as an issue for technical experts. Slowly over the past decade there has been growing interest – initially among a relatively small group of staff in DFID and the World Bank – in the tax relationship and its implications for state-society relations more broadly. This has been supported by a growing body of research from the CFS and other scholars; extensive face-to-face contacts, individually and through formal presentations and informal meetings; an IDS bulletin on tax and governance in 2002; a two-day multi donor tax group meeting organised on behalf of DFID and the World Bank in the same year; and specially commissioned research for DFID on tax reform in Latin America, and in middle income countries. Over the last 12-18 months there has been an acceleration of interest and activity, involving a wider group of policymakers (economists as well as governance advisers; specialists from the IMF and the International Tax Dialogue as well as generalists; a growing number of bilateral donors; and NGO networks such as the International Budget Project). A decision by the DAC Govnet group to adopt tax and governance as a work theme for 2007 has further increased visibility and momentum.

The second “success” story concerns the related CFS work on how aspects of the global environment exacerbate governance problems in poor countries. Once again, interest and awareness has built up gradually over a period of years, fed by the CFS research; work by other scholars on the “resource curse” and its implications for conflict, and for fragile states; and campaigns by organisations such as Global Witness. The issue gained prominence with the publication of the British government's White Paper. It also features in recent statements from the World Bank

and from the DAC. Here the CFS research was particularly well aligned with the interests of its main funder. The creation of DFID in 1997 clearly signalled that there was much more to development policy than aid. Issues of trade, investment, money laundering, OECD anticorruption measures, the Kimberley process for controlling the sale of conflict diamonds, and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative have all featured prominently on DFID's agenda. The White Paper contains the most explicit statement yet of the government's intention to pursue these issues rigorously, and to extend their reach. It remains to be seen how far they will succeed in practice.

Moving from 'What' to 'Why' and 'How'

Sharing these research findings on tax and global “drivers of bad governance” with policymakers represents a real achievement. Paying more attention to the governance dimensions of tax reform, or taking more concerted OECD action to curb corrupt dealings with developing countries could yield real policy benefits. However there is little evidence that engagement with policymakers around these issues is providing an entry point for a more fundamental discussion about governance. The interest and focus of policymakers is still on research findings that suggest “what to do” (for example, how to design better tax reform programmes). There is disappointingly little interest in what the research has to say about the causes of bad governance, or the political processes involved in negotiating better arrangements (the “why” and “how” questions). For example, the historical experience of revenue bargaining as the foundation of state building in Western Europe is interesting because of the insights it offers into the political processes involved in building more effective, accountable public institutions. Although the current context for developing countries is very different, processes of conflict, negotiation and compromise between state actors and organised groups in society remain central to understanding how to make progress. Yet most development actors are still thinking about governance (at least implicitly) in terms of transferring OECD institutional models to poor countries through programmes of capacity building for state institutions, and “strengthening” civil society demand for reform. They are not thinking about the local political and institutional incentives involved, or what might start to change them.

Some of the reasons for this are explored above (“*Barriers to Influence*”). The kind of policy messages that derive from political science research are not, on the whole, the ones that policymakers (and especially donors) want to hear. Accepting that local political processes are central to the whole development endeavour would have far-reaching implications. It would mean accepting that most poor countries are unlikely to achieve significant improvements in governance within the timescale set for the Millennium Development Goals. It would mean recognising the limited impact of many direct donor interventions to strengthen state capacity, increase civil society demand, or change the behaviour of individual actors. Donors would have to invest far more in developing local knowledge and relationships, with much more modest expectations of their ability to orchestrate events. Instead of starting with policy problems identified by donors and importing solutions based on an external agenda, they would have to start from an assessment of local pressures for progressive change. This would mean re-evaluating the current high profile, interventionist stance on governance and anti-corruption, and recognising the extent of the challenges involved in addressing human rights abuses. In short, despite the rhetoric about country-led development, it is far from clear that donors are yet ready for this.

This matters, for several reasons. Firstly, as it becomes clear that conventional approaches are not going to deliver, the temptation may be to discount the importance of governance altogether, and revert to an even more technocratic agenda driven by donor-inspired policy prescriptions. Secondly, past mistakes are likely to be perpetuated or repeated if external actors do not become more alert to the potentially damaging impact of their own behaviour on poor countries. This includes aid modalities that reinforce patronage systems and aid dependency; pressure to adopt procedures or policy prescriptions that overburden weak administrations; and action at a global level that further reduces incentives for governments to engage with their own citizens. Thirdly, policymakers will miss out on opportunities to build on or nurture local relationships and arrangements that are working, albeit in unexpected and unorthodox ways. And finally, they may lack the incentives to do things that are politically costly for them, for example action to curb the involvement of OECD governments and businesses in corrupt relations with poor countries.

What More Could Be Done?

A number of factors seem to have contributed to the ability of CFS researchers to share some of their findings with policymakers. They include:

- persistent efforts, over quite long periods of time, to build a network of contacts, and personal relationships with policymakers. This can be time-consuming, but has clearly been important, particularly in the case of tax.
- Linking up with other scholars to stimulate research and collaborate on synthesising and sharing knowledge. This increases credibility with policymakers, and extends the network of contacts.
- Producing written material specifically tailored to a policy audience, using accessible language and drawing out the operational implications.
- Making (often opportunistic) links to existing preoccupations of policymakers. For example, interest in tax as a governance issue has increased as a result of a) concerns about aid dependency in the context of scaling up assistance, particularly in Africa; and b) increasing use of budget support, which has heightened concerns about corruption, and the risks of distorting local accountability relationships.
- Looking for tangible entry points that connect with larger, more abstract policy ideas -- for example the tax relationship as a way of stimulating new thinking about state-society relations and accountability.

The challenge, looking ahead, is how to move from having an influence on specific areas of policy, to helping policymakers -- and particularly international donors -- think through the implications of prioritising local political processes. This is particularly problematic in the context of recent commitments to significant increases in development assistance, especially for poor, aid dependent countries. Here are some specific things that political scientists might do to increase their impact.

- As governance becomes more central to the whole development agenda, there is an opportunity to engage with a wider range of policy actors. These include economists, engineers, agriculturalists, health and education specialists and social anthropologists within development agencies; diplomats; officials from Ministries of Finance, Trade and Agriculture; parliamentarians and journalists. Each group has its particular interests and ways of looking at the world. Finding the right entry points will be critical. For example, research under phase 2 of the CFS is exploring state-business relations, the different kinds of public action that could stimulate increases in productive private investment, and the scope for creating common interests between public actors and investors. This has the potential to connect with a number of new policy communities, including economists and private sector actors.
- Make more systematic efforts to get research findings into the mainstream media, in order to increase visibility, and provide an additional channel for reaching policymakers. For example, CFS is financing a small project by a partner institution in Brazil which aims among other things to create a network of journalists -- both print and broadcast -- interested in receiving and using tailor-made, policy oriented briefing papers based on their research findings.
- Make efforts to engage policymakers in developing countries in a debate about the broader findings and implications of the research, not just country-specific case studies. A start has been made by CFS's partner organisation in South Africa (the Centre for Policy Studies).
- Be readier to engage with the knotty, day-to-day issues that preoccupy policymakers. In particular, undertake research into the impact of donor behaviour on local capacity and incentives. What is the impact of the proliferation of donor agencies and channels of assistance? (Phase 2 of the CFS research is looking into this). Does more predictable funding create a moral hazard, or provide incentives to improve local planning and budgeting systems? Could it contribute to a move away from opportunistic, patronage politics? Are there ways of managing budget support that minimise fiduciary risk without undermining local accountability? What is the impact of different approaches to conditionality? Are there more effective strategies for dealing with corruption? Political science may not have "quick fix" solutions to these problems, but thinking more politically about them could yield operational insights. Failure to engage at this level risks seeming irrelevant.

Conclusion

Political scientists are having an impact on development policy -- up to a point. Debates about governance are more sophisticated than they were five years ago. Some research findings are influencing policy, albeit still in a fairly self-contained way. There is a potentially receptive audience, particularly among donor staff resident in developing countries, and some local policymakers. But at a corporate level, most international agencies have not come to terms with the implications of putting local political process at the heart of development.

Perhaps this message is simply too radical. But the risk is that the current high-profile, intrusive efforts by donors to strengthen governance and reduce corruption in poor countries will overload the agenda in unhelpful ways, and could backfire. That would be a pity, because although political science can't offer solutions to the underlying tensions inherent in any aid relationship, it can provide some ideas about how to manage them more effectively. It can help people focus on what is do-able, instead of wasting time and effort on things that are not susceptible to short-term change, or external influence. It can offer ideas about ways of designing public programmes that take more account of local political context. It could help re-orientate donor policy away from trying to have a direct impact on the behaviour of their "partners", to looking for more indirect ways in which external players could help change some of the very perverse incentives that they themselves create. That in itself would be worthwhile.

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