

Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Recenzované studie

Working Papers
Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů

1/2007

**Governance:
Defining the Concept**

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**Faculty of International Relations
Working Papers**

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October 2007



Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Working Papers Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů
Výzkumný záměr MSM6138439909

Tato studie byla vypracována v rámci Výzkumného záměru Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů Vysoké školy ekonomické v Praze MSM6138439909 „Governance v kontextu globalizované ekonomiky a společnosti“. Studie procházejí recenzním řízením.

Název:	Working Papers Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů
Četnost vydávání:	Vychází minimálně desetkrát ročně
Vydavatel:	Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze Nakladatelství Oeconomica Náměstí Winstona Churchilla 4, 130 67 Praha 3, IČO: 61 38 43 99 E 17794
Evidenční číslo MK ČR:	1802-6591
ISSN tištěné verze:	1802-6583
ISSN on-line verze:	Prof. Ing. Eva Cihelková, CSc. Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze, Fakulta mezinárodních vztahů Náměstí Winstona Churchilla 4, 130 67 Praha 3 +420 224 095 270, +420 224 095 248, +420 224 095 230
Vedoucí projektu:	http://vz.fmv.vse.cz/

Governance:

Defining the Concept

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Summary:

Governance has become one of the more fashionable concepts of the past, at least, fifty years. This working paper shall attempt to examine the most frequently offered definitions of governance. The first chapter looks at the basic historical roots of the term, mostly connected with the political sphere. The second chapter will show the basic differences made between “government” and “governance”; briefly described as the structural and procedural approaches. Although there are some general definitions given in this paper, the more issue-specific definitions will be used more frequently. Finally, we offer the UNDP definition which we believe to be the best one for economic policy, in any case, and which illustrates the current approach of the European and international community.

Keywords: governance, government, economic policy

Vládnutí:

Definice konceptu

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Abstrakt: (Garamond, 12 b., tučně)

Pojem vládnutí (často užívané v anglickém originále governance) se stalo jedním z módních konceptů minimálně v posledních padesáti letech. Working paper se snaží prozkoumat nejčastěji nabízené definice vládnutí. První kapitola nabízí základní kořeny toto pojmu, který má nejčastěji politické konotace. Druhá kapitola ukazuje základní rozdíly mezi vládou a vládnutím, stručně označované jako rozdíl mezi strukturálním a procedurálním přístupem. Ačkoli existují určité pokusy o obecnou definici, mnohem čtenější jsou úzce zaměřené definice. Závěrem je nabídnuta definice UNDP, jež považujeme za jednu z nejlepších pro hospodářskou politiku vůbec a která také prezentuje současný přístup jak evropské, tak i mezinárodní komunity.

Klíčová slova: vládnutí, vláda, hospodářská politika

JEL: H1

Reviewed by: doc. JUDr. Jana Reschová, CSc.

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Introduction

The governance issue one of the most frequently used terms these past ten years, at least. It has become a part of many studies, papers, declarations and recommendations in a wide range of subjects at all levels of society. Mostly it is connected with any proposals improving government activities, government measures, and also encouraging and improving the performance of the economy, and, indeed, society as a whole.

Although there could be agreement on what constitutes “proper” or “good” governance and, its advantages; the difficulties actually lie in the vagueness of the term itself. Are we really sure about the exact definition of the term governance? Do we not use this term to describe everything and nothing at the same time? Is there only one exact narrow definition, or is it better to use plenty of characteristics and broad definitions? Practical experience has shown that governance is a flexible and complex term used frequently in different disciplines to describe some aspects of the functioning of systems.

We can speculate all we wish, but the fact remains; the term governance is really vague. It exists in many disciplines that have adapted the concept to their main field[s] of interest. Therefore, we could identify many definitions more or less describing several common characteristics. At this point, the paper will try to define the concept by identifying the basic, prevailing, common features that can be found in many disciplines.

1. Governance: the term

To talk about the word “governance” appears very easy. “Governance” was, in the past, mostly understood to be a result of government activities, and primarily dealt with by the political science, political philosophy or anthropological disciplines. Although this idea was frequent in the past, and it still exists; the term “governance” has a slightly different meaning, today. But before explaining it in more detail, let’s go on a short historical excursion.

It is true that word “governance” has had a long history. It was used already in ancient Greece, and from the etymological point of view it is derived from Latin verb for “to steer”.¹ English adopted this term probably from the French “gouvernance”, which comes from the 12th century².

This refers more to the ability and capability to govern, to manage closed societies. Probably “to administrate” is more fitting explanation. This “political”

¹ The origin came from Greek „kubernān“ and next adopted to Latin (gubernāre), Old French (governen) and finally to Middle English (governen).

² Cited in Reschová (2005: 45), originally adopted from Ph. Moreau-Defarges lecture.

approach behind governance depicts the activity (that is: administration or steering) which the state executes over society. Down through history many historians have proven the advantages of such arrangements, as well as the centralisation tendencies all-over the nation states. Max Weber, in his theory on the three basic types of domination, leadership and authority, advocates the legal one, which is characterised by an impersonal bureaucracy, which is useful in the management and administration of a complex society. Governance – however this term was not used – was very often substituted by the term power. Power and its enforcement were at the centre of many analyses.

Due to modernization, which has been going on since the late 18th century, the term governance has gained its political significance. State (government and its administration) became the key method for dealing with the complexity and difficulties. Weber, at the beginning of 20th century, saw in bureaucracy the ideal means of coping with difficulties. Several decades later, criticism of such governance has been appearing in connection with the “pathological failures” such as, corruption, government failure, inefficiency of the public sector, misuse of power etc. And the perception of governance has suddenly started to change in some respects.

Governance has suddenly become a term joining two issues together. First, it is an expression for the *state/government policies*. It reflects either its form, and/or the effectiveness of the measures taken. This approach still refers to the exercise of power and authority of the state (government, its administration, but also, the whole public sector); as well as [possibly] to the failures resulting from government activities; and to economic and political issues. Next comes the *managerial approach*, the organization and efficiency of the processes of administration. It is not necessarily connected with the government or state activities. These could be described, too, as linking policy and its management, or as the procedural, structural, political or economic points of view.

This last difference is most important for the governance, arising as it does in the “modern” definition of it. It is impossible to draw a strict demarcation line between structural and functional (or policy/decisionmaking and administration); because both issues are closely interconnected. This may further complicate the defining and understanding of the term.

This difference has appeared most significantly in the past few decades. It is connected with the institutional schools of social science and public choice theories. The popularity it gained is due to the new approaches in the public sector that underline the intertwining of political and economic issue. Especially, the New Public Management and the New Public Administration, which arose at the beginning of the 1970's and were influential, and so contributed to the “new” meaning of the word.

Compared to the past, when governance was associated only with government activities which provided direct care, commanded and controlled through the top-down hierarchy and authority; the concept of governance has changed. With globalisation, the economic crises of the 1970's, problems in welfare states, continuing advanced integration, sharp-edged competition, the erosion of the power of the state in many areas of society, democratic deficits and the strengthening of post-material values and many others; the "old concept" is no longer the only possible explanation. Others have started appearing in order to deal with these problems. Now for some more detailed definitions of governance.

2. Definitions of governance

2.1 Some general contexts

Governance has become a fashionable word today describing a whole host of approaches and techniques for improving coordination among the different levels of society. Probably the nearest synonym for governance would be; from the modern point of view; coordination, based on partnership and dialogue.

Governance is a construct, or more exactly the context of the term is constructed depending on the area of interest. That is why the meaning of the term transfers to other (social science) disciplines. On the one hand, it is very flexible and covers many problems but, on the other hand, it makes the concept very unclear and vague. To explain what governance is, could seem quite easy in spite of the fact that there is a lot of disagreement among social scientists about the meaning of the word.

Today, many general dictionaries and thesauruses operate with the term governance. It has got mostly two different meanings. First: governance is: *the state of being governed* (Farlex Free Dictionary on-line). This aspect reflects the political origin and political implication of the word. It is the *passive* manner of its operation, it is a *result* – it refers to submission to the power and authority of the state and government. It is a result of (1) the exercise of sovereign authority and the right to administer public policy and affairs; (2) to control or take over control of; and (3) exercise of determining influence (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: 2000, the word "govern"). Other dictionary uses for governance are the synonyms of *government, control and authority* (The New Collins Dictionary & Thesaurus in One Volume 1992: 433). This approach still underpins primarily the political connotations of the word and its close relationship to the government, and hierarchical modes of coordination.

The second meaning of the governance is *the act, process, or power of governing* (Farlex Free Dictionary on-line). This approach, on the other hand, reflects the

active operations, a basic *precondition* of governing and a key characteristic of it. It is more *the action, manner and scope of using the influence, or the system, of governing* (The New Collins Dictionary & Thesaurus in One Volume 1992: 433). Varieties of these “preconditions” could be the determining factor and the center of the analyses and research of many disciplines and institutions and often denoted as the “new approach to governance” or “new modes of governance”. From this perspective, all measures taken are not arbitrarily taken, but are systematically assessed and analysed in advance. In some respects we can say that the causality is opposite – governance is not a final result, but it stands at the beginning.

By these explanations and before submitting definitions we must try to present several characteristics. First, both points of view – the precondition and result (or cause and consequence) approach – are closely interconnected, but the shift toward the determining (precondition) side is visible. Therefore, such concepts like good governance, responsible and accountable government, etc. demand attention.

Second, it is clearly impossible to separate *governance* from *government* and governing, although there is a difference between them. Sometimes this is simplified as the structural (organisational, infrastructural) or instrumental, and the functional (procedural) viewpoints. The former highlights the importance of the structural aspects of governance (definition of the areas of competence of bodies, the position and level of subjects, structure of hierarchies and authorities, etc.), later focus on the processes that shape governance, and finally, society. Although the definition of governance focuses more on the procedural side (or more precisely on the procedural beginnings), it includes also the organisational part as well.

Box 1 – Governance or government?

Plumptre and Graham (1999: 2-5) illustrate that there is an important difference between governance and government. The need for governance as a concept distinct from government began to manifest itself when government became an organization apart from citizens rather than a process.

“*Government*” is an organisational (institutional) setting that operationalises the basic principles of governance. It is almost never described as a process – it is either seen as an institution (organisation) or a set of organisations (Cabinet, government offices, state administration) as one of several societal ‘players’ or actors; but it is also a term broadly describing the forms, regimes and models of governing (and representation).

“*Governance*” involves the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say. Fundamentally, it is about power, relationships and accountability: who has influence, who decides, and how decisionmakers are held accountable. It is more like the art of steering societies and organisations and conflict solving.

Similarly, it could differentiate between the *state-centred* approach and the *society-centred*. The state-centred definition narrows the field of interest only to the state activities or governmental activities respectively. The command and control functions dominate and could potentially mix both the organisational and procedural aspects. It is true that the state-centred concepts of governance are designed for the purposes of the state and its administration in issues of inner management and inner decision-making. The society-centred approach highlights the fact that government bodies are not operating in a vacuum and that there are many other subjects that are under the decisions of government, but could be potentially part of the decision-making process, too. This interconnectedness is important for governance – the subjects are not isolated from the others, their operating influence on other subjects and their own behaviour, by the steps taken. It is related to the post-modern issue, like reflexivity and complexity.

Reflexivity – the process of considering one’s own behaviour/knowledge in broader frameworks, which retrospectively (that means at the same time (simultaneously) and/or often forward and/or backward) influences one’s current acts (see Beck 1998). Sharing knowledge and education is important. Complexity, on the other hand, refers to the system theory, but from the point of view of social science is mostly used in terms of mutual interdependence, which is the main feature of modern societies, as well as the process of globalization (see Bauman 1991, 2000; Beck 1998, 1999; Giddens 1990, 1991, 1999). It is a self-reinforcing dynamic system with many feedback mechanisms. In these complex systems operating in a social context, behaviour is modified by reacting to what other agents do (Thompson 2004: 412). Governance is, then, more about the interactions between subjects, responsibility, accountability and the transparency of processes and acting.

2.2 General or more issue-specific definitions?

There is no doubt about the change in the conceptualisation and context of the term governance. Although it is a fashionable term describing the new approach to economic, political and social affairs, it is loosely defined at the general level.

The expansion of “governance” in the past fifty years has helped several interconnected processes as were briefly described above. And the theories try to reflect this situation and to incorporate it (New Institutional Economy, Public Choice Theory, New Political Economy, behavioural theories, conflict solving theories, management theories etc.). Governance, then, takes on a new meaning under the new circumstances. It became a *multidimensional* and *interdisciplinary term* – but with different content and aim of description. There is almost no short, general definition at all. In some respects, the system definition could be accepted: governance deals with the *systems or processes by which the organization or the society operate* (Smiley 2007).

This definition is very general and refers both to the structural and procedural points of view. And, it clearly demonstrates that governance is not only a characteristic, but very often a system, with some subjects, some processes, some preconditions, causality and outputs.

But the term remains confused. It is supported by its development, which came from ancient times and has changed throughout the centuries. Governance is not a static term and has had its own evolution. It can be viewed from various perspectives. We can say, therefore, that there is no clear single definition, because there are many meanings. The concept of governance is, in social science, currently used at least in seven different meanings (Rhodes 1996: 652)³:

- the minimal State (Gray 1994, Rhodes 1996),
- corporate governance (OECD 2001),
- new public management (Rhodes 1997, Potůček 2005, Vymětal 2006),
- good governance (World Bank 1989, 1997, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007, UNDP 1997, 2004),
- new international order – global governance (Rosenau 1995, Commission on Global Governance 1995),
- social-cybernetic systems,
- self-organised networks (Rhodes 1997, Deloitte 2004)

Governance is a construct. It is flexibly redefined across the area of research and the discipline. We suggest focusing more on political and economic governance. There are many definitions of governance not only in different disciplines, but also within one discipline. Box 2 summarizes some definitions of governance given by various economic international organisations. All presented definitions deal with the abstract, broader aim of governance.

Box 2 – Different definitions of governance

Institute of Governance (IoG)

Governance involves the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say (Principles for Good Governance in the 21st Century, 2003).

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

Governance [...] is the manner in which power is exercised by governments in the management of a country's social and economic resources (Policy for CIDA on Human Rights, Democratization and Good Governance, 1996).

³ Cited at Democracy and Governance,
http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/governance/index_en.htm [2005-03-29].

Box 2 – Different definitions of governance – cont.

Report of the Commission on Global Governance

Governance is the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action may be taken. It includes formal institutions and regimes empowered to enforce compliance, as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions either have agreed to or perceive to be in their interest (Our Global Neighborhood, 1995).

European Commission

Governance refers to the rules, processes, and behaviour by which interests are articulated, resources are managed, and power is exercised in society. The way public functions are carried out, public resources are managed and public regulatory powers are exercised is the major issue to be addressed in that context. The real value of the concept of governance is that it provides a terminology that is more pragmatic than democracy, human rights, etc. In spite of its open and broad character, governance is a meaningful and practical concept relating to the very basic aspects of the functioning of any society and political and social systems. It can be described as a basic measure of stability and performance of a society (Communication on Governance and Development, 2003).

World Bank

Governance consists of the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; (2) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them (World Bank, Governance Matters 2007: The Worldwide Governance Indicators).

Asian Development Bank

[Governance is] the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development (Governance: Sound Development Management, 1995).

UNDP

Governance is viewed by UNDP as the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels and the means by which states promote social cohesion, integration, and ensure the well-being of their populations. It embraces all methods used to distribute power and manage public resources, and the organizations that shape government and the execution of policy. It encompasses the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and resolve their differences (UNDP and Governance, Experience and Lessons Learned, 1997).

Various authors say very similar things. The analyses from the standpoint of public policy are one of the most frequent. In these concepts “governance” is not understood as: policies and the role of politicians; but stresses the propositions of policy, development of society, effectiveness and efficiency, participation of as many actors as possible for co-deciding, and the adequate and timely reactions for stimuli from outside (Rhodes 1996, Salomon 2002). Other authors emphasise socio-political governance that is used for analytical and normative viewpoints for all “collective” social governance in any sphere of the public, private or civic sectors (Kooiman 2003). Most important are the interactions and the social processes.

2.3 Which one is the best?

Among the varieties of general, exact and issue-specific definitions, there is something common to all of them. Governance means steering, but with a new vehicle. Governance is not an expression for the top-down commanding and controlling or governing over; but for participative governance that takes the form of cooperation and guidance.

The EU White book (2001) definition on governance could describe in some respects the latest development – *“governance” means rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised [at European level], particularly as regards openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence.* Governance, therefore should reflect the complexity of society and all actions taken, reflexivity, conflict solving between actors and the adoption of decisions within defined rules (legality), the proper functioning of institutions and organisations and their acceptance by the other subjects (legitimacy), consensus seeking, respect for diversity, etc. The purpose of governance is finding effective measures for challenges in the postmodern and postindustrial world, and the responsibility, accountability and transparency which will apply to all these measures. This covers not only the politicians, but all members of society, nation states, as well as the international community at large. It reflects the non-existence of one enlightened overlord; rather it diffuses the power amongst the various stakeholders.

For the purpose of economic policy the new definition of UNDP seems to be one of the best general (while at the same time being potentially too vague and inadequate for other disciplines) definitions for economic policy that could be used; but must be specified for other disciplines: *Governance is the system of values, policies and institutions by which a society manages its economic, political and social affairs through interactions within, and among the state, civil society and private sectors. It is the way a society organizes itself to make and implement decisions—achieving mutual understanding, agreement and action. It comprises the mechanisms and processes for citizens and groups to articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations. It is the rules, institutions and practices that set limits and provide incentives for individuals,*

organizations and firms. Governance, including its social, political and economic dimensions, operates at every level of human enterprise, be it the household, village, municipality, nation, region or globe (UNDP Strategy Note on Governance for Human development, 2004).

Although this definition reflects the core of the concept of governance (variety of subjects, levels, functional and structural aspects, participation, etc.) it is still designed for the developed world where post-material values could be fully developed. Governance at all expects democratic steering as the main value supported also by the guarantee of broad freedoms, rights and competition. In one way – even if it does call for diversity – it could impose the Western developed viewpoint, and thus the goals, as being “good” for nearly everyone.

Conclusion

Governance as a term is still vague. Although there could be found some common features of all definitions, the steering characteristic should be the more or less ‘dominant’ one. Other aspects familiar to each field of research are added and it makes the concept even more fuzzy and complicated. On the other hand, broadening the definition could be good for the general theory on governance.

There are many aspects of governance which could be adopted for the best definition. They reflect the complexity of the participants, measures and contexts, they are reflexive in their reactions, cover a variety of subjects, levels and issues, are accountable and responsible, transparent and effective. All these characteristics are understood as the new forms of governance.

The term is very flexible, vivid, fashionable and vague. We offer the definition of UNDP that incorporate many of the typical characteristics for governance suitable for economic policy regardless of some of the problems we have referred to. Still the concept calls for clarification and more precise definition.

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Vydavatel: Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Nakladatelství Oeconomica

Tisk: Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Nakladatelství Oeconomica

Tato publikace neprošla redakční ani jazykovou úpravou

ISSN 1802-6591