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**What is Good Governance about?  
The Roots and the Key Elements  
of the Concept**

Petr Vymětal

**Faculty of International Relations  
Working Papers**

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Volume II



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## **What is Good Governance about?**

### **The Roots and the Key Elements of the Concept**

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#### **Summary:**

Good governance seems to be a very popular schema and a modern recommendation how to solve problems of current world. Some international institutions have issued some manuals for best practices in this area. But among these various recommendations which focus on and cover only small piece of the world, there is no general theoretical approach to good governance as a concept. This paper focuses only on finding out the origins of the concept, and on describing the key features and the contents that are mostly labeled as “good governance”. As we can see, it is one example of so called “new form of governance”, a very flexible vehicle and opportunity for coping with conflicts and problems.

**Keywords:** good governance, accountability, transparency, participation.

## **Co znamená dobré vládnutí a správa?**

### **Původ a hlavní charakteristiky konceptu**

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#### **Abstrakt:**

Dobré vládnutí a dobra správa je populárním schématem a moderním doporučením pro řešení problémů současného světa. Některé mezinárodní organizace vydaly několik manuálů tzv. nejlepšího jednání a dobrých praktik. Většina těchto doporučení se ale soustředí a pokrývají pouze omezenou oblast a citelně chybí obecnější zarámování “dobrého vládnutí a správy” do teoretického konceptu. Tato studie se zaměřuje pouze na původ konceptu a popis hlavních rysů a charakteristik s dobrým vládnutím a správou spojené. Je to jeden z příkladů tzv. nových forem vládnutí, jedním z flexibilních nástrojů potýkání se a řešení konfliktů a problémů.

**Klíčová slova:** dobré vládnutí a správa, odpovědnost, transparentnost, participace.

**JEL:** G3, H83, O19

## **Content**

Introduction.....	7
1. History of the concept of “good governance”.....	7
2. The key features of the good governance concept.....	9
3. What is “good governance” like? .....	12
4. Conclusion.....	14
References.....	16

## **Introduction**

The „good governance“ concept is frequently used as the miraculous cure for many diseases of current complex societies. On one hand it offers a lot of opportunities how to tackle both old and new problems, but, on the other hand, it could be accompanied by some biases that are not in the centre of the scholars' observations. However it sounds very well, the question is if it could be universally applied round the world and if the concept itself is really a rigorous tool for current problems of bureaucratization, public management malfunctions, corruption and poverty.

The good governance approach at the international level, as well as at the national, sectoral and corporate level, is broadly applied without any deep reflection of its background. It has some basic elements built upon of and several specific attitude toward the problems solved that could be characterized as “process driven”. To understand more what the concept is about, we need both to introduce the basic elements of good governance practices and their characteristics, as the history and ideological background.

### **1. History of the concept of “good governance”**

The concept – or precisely speaking its expansion – is relatively recent. However we can identify several tendencies and features of the “good” [governance] practices, the issue itself has not been conceptualized until 1980s or later. At that time, the international institutions – under the circumstances of dept crises of the Latin American and other countries and due to the fact of unclear public financing both at the national and local level – introduced the program for setting up some standards for improvement of these and similar situation in the future. Later on it had an ambition and it was perceived as preventive tool for avoiding plentiful varieties of the conflicts, failures and threats.

The very very original roots could be found in managerial disciplines describing how to tackle problems and conflicts connected with managing and influencing people, resources, concepts, ideas etc. The roots were visibly set up in the 1970s and are accompanied by the theories and practice of New Public Management and New Public Administration in the state or administration sector. This shift was caused by the situation of the crises of public finance and state budgets, global economic and natural resources crises, proliferation of new technologies and growing importance of international corporations and redefinition of the role of international organizations.

Interesting is, that the ways for forming the concept were twofold: first, originally it is associated with the donor's activity and its interest to insure provided money, investments or other form of support and aid. The activity

could be understood as “from below” pressure – it was very diversified in its occurrence and there could not be found any clear and concrete universal principles at all. Although this practice is known for ages and connected with the patrons or charity activities, more popularity and broader impact it has gained in last century. In some areas these “bottom-up” activities are popular and supported.

Second additional way linking the first one was caused by the circumstances – due to the fact of several crises – the big international organizations run the debate about the “good governance” activities. This was not an original schema, because it was inspired and adopted from the managerial studies and theories, but these organizations were able to start broader discussion about it. During the 1980s and 1990s several recommendations have crystallized to be a tool for avoiding problems in the future. Interesting is it was primarily associated with the economic problems, such as growing ineptness, ineffective public sector, poverty and corruption – investors introduce some characteristics that should help in the future. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund use this concept until now and together with some national governments, they are the representatives of the “from the top” or “international” (push) approach.

Originally we can see that at the international level the concept is connected with the economic problems and developmental studies, but it is applied on and in other areas of the society. On one hand it is very popular and many institutions and organizations adopted it as a useful tool for coping and preceding potential risks. It seems to be a proactive and “neutral” in nature and is supposed to be important for countries at all stages of development (EC 2001) and therefore understandable, but – on the other hand – it could be very vague and hardly achieved in fact.

Today it is associated and applied to various disciplines and fields of interest: because of its roots, it is narrowly connected with the management theories and in private sector is linked with corporate governance, management and social corporate responsibility; but it has slowly proliferated in developmental literature, such as promoting basic human rights, integration and conflict solving and prevention; in economic affairs like transparent contracting, sound public finance, tax policy, rent-seeking and non-corruption; in political sphere like misusing public power of officials, transparency of decision-making processes, political influence, lobbying activities; in the local government, like urbanization, service provision; in civil society such as conflict solving, right for information; and other areas influenced by the “good governance” practice could be added.

## 2. The key features of the good governance concept

As noted above, the roots of the concept lie far in history. Paradoxically, as the “bad governance practices” became perceived as something wrong and misleading, the new wave of interest in it had raised a “universalistic” consideration of the term. Both the tendencies – bottom-up and from the top – could be recognized and it is not easy to find out what direction is more influential. Many examples show that good governance practice or various codes connected with it was formed by big investors in private sector or by umbrella associations in civil sector, as well as by the governments if some problems had become apparent and was seen as a political problem. That is, it is clear good governance could cover various levels of influence – it could be designed for the individual firm, for the whole industry as well as for international community.

But the crucial question is what good governance is? The widely accepted definition says good governance is “*the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented*” (UNESCAP 2008) or “*things are properly done*” (Clark 2006: 1). It refers to the way how the resources (in any form) are used at various levels and in various areas of society’s life – frankly speaking the ***procedural aspects*** are the most important. That is why the concept is not concerning on the explicit and concrete final outputs – it focuses more for designing the proper processes that result in and ensure the sufficient (preferable “good”) outcomes. Many recommendations had the character of ex ante recommendations that determine compliant results that are afterwards ex post examined if they had been into accordance with the goals. The feedback is very important for the concept.

Mostly it is defined by a list of basic principles introducing the fundamentals of the concept. The lists could be very broad and here we try to synthesize the basic characteristics that are most often associated with it. These are:

***transparency*** – means that process (together with responsibility depending on roles and functions) of decision-making and enforcement of it are done in manner that follows rules and regulations (APSC 2005: 3, UNESCAP 2008); it is build upon free flow of information, on their availability, direct accessibility, clearness and in an understandable way for all stakeholders (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008);

***participation*** – both the men and women should have voice through direct or intermediate subjects representing their interest. The precondition for that is that basic rights such as freedom of association and freedom of the speech are present for broad participation, as well as the capacities for participation are developed (organized civil society) (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008);

***rule of law*** – the fair enforceable legal frameworks could primarily protect the human rights of all members of society. A crucial precondition is the independent and impartial judicial power, impartial police and investigation and non-corruption (UNESCAP 2008);

***accountability*** – is seen as the key requirement of the concept. The understanding of the word and its difference compared to the Slavic languages is very difficult, because it is understood as responsibility. But it is not. Accountability means to be answerable for decisions and having meaningful mechanisms in place to ensure adherence to all applicable standards (APSC 2005: 1). It is dealing all the government, state administration, private and the civil sector, which should be accountable to the public, as well as to their institutional stakeholders – generally to those who will be affected by its decisions or acting. This means that it covers a different range of insiders as well as outsiders. Accountability cannot be enforced without rule of law and transparency (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008);

***responsiveness*** – means that institutions and processes serve to all stakeholders within a reasonable timeframe (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008);

***consensus oriented*** – is in the pluralist society a vehicle of mediating various interest and reaching of a broad acceptable consensus on what is in the best interests of the whole community and how this could be achieved. Finally it means the broad agreement on the policies and procedures. It means a long-term perspective on the issue of what is necessary for sustainable human development and the way how it should be achieved in the light of the fact of historical, cultural and social context of the society (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008);

***equity and inclusion*** – refers to the opportunity to improve or maintain their well-being (UNDP 1997) and that all are included and have a stake in the mainstream society (UNESCAP 2008);

***effectiveness and efficiency*** – says that all processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of the society while making the best use of resources at disposal (UNDP 1997); (UNESCAP 2008). In the light of the fact of several last decades, it also covers the sustainability use of natural resources and the protection of environment (UNESCAP 2008).

These eight features are supposed to be the basic ones. Very often they are expanded by the ***strategic vision*** meaning that both leaders and the public have

a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, together with a sense of what is needed for such development. The precondition for it also understands of the historical, cultural and social complexities and context in which that perspective is grounded (UNDP 1997).

This list is not complete several other features could be also added, as:

integrity – meaning acting impartially, ethically and in the interests of the agency, and not misusing information acquired through a position of trust (APSC 2005: 2);

stewardship – means to use every opportunity to enhance the value of the public assets and institutions that have been entrusted to care (APSC 2005: 2);

leadership – seen as leadership from the top is critical to achieving an agency-wide commitment to good governance (APSC 2005: 2);

predictability;

openness (EC 2001: 10); and many others.

All here above mentioned characteristics and features are on one hand very popular and preferred as an easy manuals and schemas for resolving problems of agencies, organizations and society and its vagueness enables to fit well in various disciplines and fields of interest, but on the other hand is too abstract and a concrete recommendations could not be easy to draw. Together with various problems solved and specific contexts, there are many more or less concrete recommendations done by various subjects that make the concept fragmented.

In other words, the concept of good governance could be described by several attributes – it is about conflict solution, about checks and balances, about openness, impartial law, professionalism, capability and honesty, about sound policies and activities at all levels of society (Kabudi 2008: 1). All features make the concept complex, because they are closely interrelated and each could support the other one.

All here presented recommendations are rooted especially in the developmental studies, as well as in the areas dealing with either significant problems (public service and public expenditures, corruption, etc.) or using the concept as a competitive advantage compared to the others subjects (mostly by private firms). It is focused on the processes and behaviour that is a result or consequence of these “good procedures”.

### 3. What is “good governance” like?

The good governance concept is very popular and fashionable – everybody talks about it but – in fact – nobody exactly knows what it tangibly is. Although the general features are understandable, the question is how it could be achieved, which measures to take, how to select priorities and if the results could be predictable and the space for unintended consequences is limited. Although there are several successful stories as a result of applying good governance approach, it is not a worldwide practice up to now.

Why? There are several doubts about the concept itself that have raised several critique. First, it is an *ideal model* that could not be fully applied and achieved – it *lacks* the *universal usage*. This is due to the different interpretations of some words and mostly caused by different cultural context and understanding of some characteristics and concept itself. Although there are trials to give a basic overview, manual and best practices (World Bank, IMF, UNDP, EC, national governments, etc.) and there could be an agreement of specific programs designed for solving the problems, it could not be universally applied for all countries, regions or societies according to the differences of legal system, values or history. Many cultural studies are dealing with this issue and however the initiatives for improving governance are welcomed, the universal application (or even “imperialism”) without taking into account the specific cultural, law, political, economic or social conditions mostly fail.

Consequently second, many institutions understand the good governance concept as the economic and administrative (and consequently sometimes political) reforms (WB, IMF). The problem is that such narrowing and linking good governance *ignores the broader context and mutual interrelationships and interdependencies*, for instance the social structures and divisions, power and decision-making centers that are important for managing society’s affairs. In the last decades the “good governance” is concerning for more dimensions and fields of activity than only economics. The reason is simple – the growing complexity and mutual influence of all sectors of the society cause interdependency of all parts of society. Omitting any important sectors could under the motto of “good governance” result into unintended consequences or “bad or malgovernance”. That means that the *context* is one of the most important variables.

Third, this view was – and until now very often is – mostly connected to be biased under the *neo-liberal doctrine* and focusing only on the reforms of economy. The dictate of effectiveness and efficiency is applied to both to the private sector, but also to the others sectors – the pursuit for markets, benefits, money – resulted into marketization and monetization of activities, that were traditionally out of market (health care services, provision of some public goods, etc.). This “*economism*” is popular from the crises of the Keynesian approach

to the economy and the welfare states when the neo-liberal approach was renewed and started to dominate. Under this paradigm, the privatization and deregulation were introduced. The “good governance” in that context means a better effectiveness of government and public expenditure, managing the (internal and external) debts and finally resulted into Washington consensus for countries stricken by economic crises and could differ from today understandings. The neo-liberal approach and “good governance” practices are until now proclaimed by several international organizations (WB, ADB, IMF) and is based on the reforms toward more effective public sector, sound policies and administrative reforms – or in other words, to maintain economic growth and stability. There are different approaches to good governance, as the concepts of human rights and democratic governance, but also those focus only on the specific features and narrow. That strengthens more the role of the context and could call for more general approach.

Fourth, the submitted definition here above deals primarily with the decision-making and the power that is connected with “*making decisions*”. It could be understood as game theory approach and resulting to the influence enforcing, opening space for pressure groups and therefore it is connected with managing the agenda of topics, procedures and measures taken. Good governance is here understood as: (a) the internal structural design of the organization that is both the architecture design and the processes compatible with the structural features of the organization, and (b) general behaviour and actions taken outside and among the organizations, institutions, associations and other subjects of the society, closely connected to the manner how the societal (both public, private and voluntary) affairs are done. The good governance here is a way by which all processes are properly run – all stakeholders have a voice to be heard, could participate in many processes like indicating the problems, in finding solutions, deciding, implementing measures and controlling them in an accountable and transparent way. Not all decisions taken are transparent and there are many areas where the transparency and other features accompanied with good governance is not demanded (security, nuclear industry) as many political decisions.

Fifth, in the light of the forth mentioned, it could be criticized for being too *formalistic* and *instrumentally* viewed and applied. It is due to the fact, that it is mostly narrowed to the managing of the debate, topics and decisions. If all of the characteristic of good governance are applied in a mechanistic way (e.g. following these instructions of what to do or not) it is simple, but it could not to follow the ideas and finally the goals behind the concept. It could result in the routine-based processes, that do not take into account the changing circumstances, new problems and could potentially close the communication only on the fulfilling the features that are “guaranteed” by well managed routines. It is also supported by emphasizing of the formal institutions and activities especially.

Consequently, sixth, using the concept could result in *overvaluation* and overestimation of all characteristics accompanied with and finally in *fetishization* of the concept as the only one possible way how to cope with problems. Moreover, by overestimating of some problems and characteristics it could omit the others (such as informal interrelations) that could harm the society, problems and also the concept itself very importantly. Although it could be a helpful “provisionary manual” for being successful in some respect, it is not redemptive. The good governance is a complex concept that could have an important impact for all members of the society both explicitly or implicitly.

Finally, the concept is – as implicitly suggested hereabove – vague, very flexible and variable due to the fact it is a construct. It is an ideal pattern seems to be hardly achievable for many reasons as already noted. Such *constructivism* and idealization is not a priori bad – it could force some things to change. The question also is, if there could be the only one concept of good governance found. Answer is that it is not. As every construct reflects some values, ideologies, experiences and interests, good governance is the same case. Therefore it could *not be value-neutral* in spite of the fact that it could be perceived as “good”. It is built upon values of western civilization preferring market, democracy and individualism and values of Christianity. Although some characteristics could be seen as universal, the contest of the terms could vary. Moreover, there are many critiques of the word “good” itself – it is very relativistic throughout various contexts, ideologies, ages and cultures – it is culturally based and both is formed and forms the experiences and perception of reality. Although on the first sight the concept seems to be positive, it is *normative* in fact.

The list is not complete and many other biases and problems could be added. The purpose of here presented was to find out and to present that the concept has had its history and development, and both the generally accepted “good” perspective, but also to point out several features that are not recognized at the first sight and therefore neglected and overlooked.

#### 4. Conclusion

The good governance concept – however it has been criticized – is very popular indeed. Although it is accompanied by broad range of characteristics, it is very contextual based and cannot be used universally throughout the society matters. It is not a neutral concept because it supposes what is good and bad those both are culturally determined – surprisingly a few studies deal with this problem. Good governance concept has plentiful shapes depending on the areas, where it is applied, but on the other hand it has an aspiration to be a pattern generally applicable worldwide and sometimes throughout disciplines. It has probably

gained the best recognition in economics, public management and developmental studies.

However the concept is useful in several areas and as a tool for solving several problems, due to fact of the complex reality and the mutual interdependences among disciplines, areas and issues, it could result in overemphasize of the narrow aspects and missing the implications for the broader context. Without being able to take into account unintended consequences, value-embedding and problems, “good governance” could be toothless. Some moderate and “sound” approach to the concept is need.

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