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Working Paper 1

Improving the delivery of public services

What role could a local governance index play?
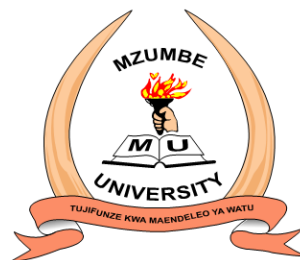
Anna Mdee and Lisa Thorley

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Project background

In 2012, former Director of the Foundation for Civil Society (FCS) in Tanzania, John Ulanga, posed the question of whether a local governance performance index might stimulate greater public engagement in holding local leaders and institutions to account for their performance in delivering services and reducing poverty in the country.

To respond to this question, the University of Mzumbe, in partnership with the FCS and the International NGO Training and Resource Centre (INTRAC) (UK), began to research the viability and value of such an index at the district level in Tanzania. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London joined the project in 2015.

With funding from the UK Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC)/Department for International Development (DFID) from 2014 to 2017, the partners will explore whether it is possible to create an index that reflects the performance of different local governments. More specifically, the research wants to know how such an index might be used to encourage local governments to prioritise the needs of the poorest and most excluded. Further, can citizens use such an index to demand accountability from local leaders and civil servants?

1. Summary

One of the most powerful ideas in development in recent years has been **good governance**. At its most basic, good governance describes all the things governments do in order to allow development to happen. Checklists of good governance have usually contained elements such as transparency, accountability and the practice of democracy and the rule of law. In this sense, good governance is about having national institutions that can make fair and appropriate decisions about how a country is governed, and effective systems in place to deliver public services.

Powerful international institutions (such as the World Bank) and donor agencies found the idea of good governance highly attractive, and tied much aid spending to good governance conditionalities. Measures of good governance were created to track the performance of governments. Examples are the World Governance Indicators (WGI) and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG).

However, others have pointed out that 'good' governance is a relative term and the ideas contained within the checklists and prescriptions are aspirational and often unrealistic when government institutions are weak and poorly resourced. The relationship between good governance and development (defined as either economic growth or poverty reduction) is also not clear. It may be that considerable economic growth and poverty reduction are required first, allowing for the strengthening of national institutions before good governance can be attained. In addition, examples of countries with bad governance (according to the checklists) have achieved impressive outcomes in terms of poverty reduction and economic growth.

These problems in the theory and practice of good governance checklists have led others to think about what is 'good enough' or 'best fit' governance to fit local contexts. This approach suggests it is better to work adaptively from the local context, through identifying where local institutions can be gradually and incrementally improved to deliver better services and better outcomes for citizens.

It is against this background that this review of available evidence considers how the performance of local governance can be improved in relation to the better delivery of services, through the use of a local governance performance index. We also consider how the public tracking of locally meaningful measures of governance can be used to improve the accountability of local government bureaucracies and politicians.

Why is an index different to other accountability tools?

Many other tools of accountability for service delivery have been piloted. These include public expenditure tracking, citizen and service user score cards and beneficiary feedback mechanisms. These work on the basis of stimulating citizen involvement or evaluating services or delivery. They start with a theory of change that assumes local government does not deliver improvements to services as citizens do not demand them or hold officials to account. Therefore, if citizens have information on the resources available to a given service or can give their views on how a service works, then this will incentivise better delivery of services and reduce corruption. However, this is too simplistic to account for how local government really works in practice. Institutional blockages and incentive structures create a huge gap between the rules in theory (agreed policies) and the rules in practice (what actually happens).

Rather than looking at information or feedback leading to improved performance, we are interested in testing the idea that a better understanding between citizens and officials of what local government can feasibly deliver will stimulate adaptive and incremental improvements in how services are delivered at the local level. We want to explore whether a local governance performance index can help achieve this goal. An index is the aggregation of a number of indicators (used as proxies of different aspects of an issue) and can be tracked over time.

Such an index needs to track or to reveal:

- Outcomes: what has local government delivered to citizens?
- Improvement in services over time: is local government gradually making improvements in service delivery?
- Rules in practice: what actions have been taken to make things happen?
- Rules in theory/rules in practice: what is the size of the gap between the rules in theory (formal policy implementation and service-level commitments), the rules in practice (the actions taken to make things happen – e.g. patronage, additional payments to officials) and expectations of who is responsible for delivery?

There are a handful of existing indexes or multi-indicator systems that attempt to capture the quality of local governance, but none is rooted in an adaptive development approach. Unlike with other accountability tools and systems, we aim to create an index that stimulates a process of discussion, negotiation and engagement at the local level about why services are delivered as they currently are and how things can be improved. Our theory of change is therefore that information provision and negotiation around service delivery will lead to more realistic expectations of performance, which can be monitored through an index, leading to incremental changes in performance.

We work on the basis that the performance of local governance is subject to multiple pressures: from above (central government) and from below (citizen expectations). Measuring and tracking the performance of local governance needs to take account of the links in the whole system. Blaming local governments for the poor delivery of services is pointless if they have no control over the recruitment and training of key personnel or do not receive allocated budgets from central government. The nature and effectiveness of decentralisation is a critical component of this issue.

The technical detail of making an index is not a background issue: it involves fundamental decisions about what is important and what can be measured. The process of creating an index can sometimes obscure these decisions. Indicators are proxy measurements and so need to be treated with caution. For example, a focus on getting children into primary school leads to declines in educational quality if adequate resources are not available.

Our conclusion is that an index might be useful but it is not for external agents to design the indicators and apportion lines of blame for non-delivery. As dialogue between different stakeholders reveals the gap between theory (a policy on paper) and practice (what is implemented and how change happens), in this sense the construction of an index and selection of indicators becomes a process tool for local problem-solving on the blockages and distortions in local government service delivery.

2. Good governance, decentralisation and pro-poor service delivery: myth or reality?

For more than a decade, an orthodoxy has been established that good governance and the decentralisation of service delivery will increase efficiency, effectiveness and equity of access, and therefore reduce poverty (e.g. World Bank, 2004). It is further assumed that engaged and effective civil society actors are a vital component in increasing awareness of issues of local politics, resource allocations and service delivery (Mushi, 2011). Such actors may also be delivering services and mobilising citizens and, alongside local government, should be held accountable by citizens (Mdee, 2008; Poku and Mdee, 2011). For decentralisation to function effectively in enabling local government to oversee and facilitate progressive social and political accountability (albeit in partnership with other actors), research suggests that wider knowledge of local governance performance may encourage citizens to become members of local organisations and engage in local public projects (Capuno and Garcia, 2010; Sujarwoto, 2010; Farrington, 2011).

2.1 The idea of good governance: what is it and is it still relevant?

Good governance is used in multiple ways: as a concept, as a theory and as a set of principles.

According to Jørgensen & Sørensen (2012), good governance is a concept that became a policy strategy and one that is used by organisations to 'inform' states how they should be governed. Kjaer (2014) provides a useful definition: good governance is the '*institutional capacity of public organisations to provide the public and other goods demanded by a country's citizens of their representatives in an effective, transparent, impartial and accountable manner, subject to resource constraints*' (p.2).

Van Doeveren (2011) describes good governance as a convergence of common principles, these being rule of law; participation and transparency and openness; efficiency and effectiveness; and accountability. One of the essential factors for good governance is effective, productive and well-functioning public services (de Vries, 2013). Conversely, 'poor' governance is characterised by arbitrary policy-making, unaccountable bureaucracies, unjust legal systems, the abuse of executive power and unengaged civil society and widespread corruption (Gisselquist, 2012). This theory of good governance has resulted in the production of policies based around these central principles even in contexts where institutional capacity is severely constrained (Booth, 2012).

Hyden (2008) cautions that the multidimensional ways in which the notion of good governance has been applied has made it very difficult to operationalise in academic studies and that directional causality between improved governance and poverty are far from certain. Using the WGI, Kwon and Kim (2014) demonstrate there is no statistical connection between measures of governance and poverty reduction. They suggest this is evidence of the need for universal rights-based social protection rather than governance reform. It may be that idealised notions of good governance have created too much attention to the rules in theory rather than how things work in practice. This results in a gap between the 'rules in theory' (what the policy says) and the 'rules in practice' (what is actually done). In contexts where decentralisation is a central strategy for service delivery, the disconnection between theory and practice is exacerbated at the local level (Cleaver and Toner, 2006; Wild and Harris, 2012).

2.2 Good enough and good fit: adoptive governance in practice

The realisation that it is more appropriate to work from where governance is in practice is not new. Grindle's (2004) idea of 'good enough' governance critiques unrealistic and prescriptive notions of good governance. Grindle suggests a nuanced approach to the evolution of governance institutions and in specifically identifying what works. Good enough governance is the need for governments and citizens to be able to count on public organisations to perform well and should not be simply a list of prescribed behaviours or characteristics. Grindle cites Tanzania as being on a list of countries with some institutional capacity at the local level but that face the challenge of needing to expand public services to meet the needs of a poor majority at the same time as diminishing 'development-averse' corruption and improving the management of public resources. Hyden (2008), using his extensive experience as a political and economic analyst of the African context, supports the good enough governance approach, arguing for gradual evolution of existing governance institutions and the active identification of 'pockets of productivity' that demonstrate what works and what does not.

This line of argument is taken further in Booth (2012) in synthesising a major research programme on African power and politics. This suggests there are significant problems in one of the central tenets of good governance: the assumption that openness and transparency to citizens can create a virtuous circle whereby citizens can hold governments to account. Instead, the assumed relationship between governments providing services and citizens holding them to account is beset by errors on the supply (government service delivery) and the demand (citizen accountability) sides. The African Power and Politics Programme found three intermediate factors to explain poor performance in public provision of services:

- Policy-driven institutional incoherence (often caused by multiple and contradictory policy advice from the aid industry);
- Weak top-down performance disciplines (little oversight and incentives for improved performance);
- Inhospitable environment for local problem-solving.

Booth (2012) argues that the problems of clientelism and political patronage that characterise state bureaucracies cannot be wished away by having slightly more informed citizens. There is a danger that it can even deepen clientelism, as also evidenced in Tanzania by Green (2014). Booth asserts that donor money can actually undermine self-help and problem-solving through creating an external focus and through the provision of technical expertise. Again, this is a point also supported by the ethnographic fieldwork of Green (2014), as well as Mdee (2008), in Tanzania.

2.3 Decentralisation and local service delivery

So the challenge for governance and better service delivery is to ask: what stimulates local problem solving?

'The evaluation of public policies in Africa should not be based only on accountants' reports and official technical aid documents, but should start from enquiries about implementation on the ground at the front line of service delivery. The principal objective should be to identify the bottlenecks and policy inconsistencies as they present themselves on the ground to identify realistic and credible solutions.' (Olivier de Sardan 2012:4).

The central idea is to identify the political incentives at local level and to examine how elites extract rents. Is it possible for these to be used developmentally in the long term? This requires action that is locally specific. Booth (2012) contends that policy and political noise around decentralisation detracts from considerations of localisation and specificity in incentivising change.

Wild et al. (2015) consolidate this research and apply the ideas to the delivery of public services. This work also stresses the need for locally adaptive and politically smart development. This is fundamentally not a return to ideas of community-driven or participation; rather, it is a more nuanced political entrepreneurship: seeking to understand how things work in practice rather than to apply rules in theory.

More thought needs to be given to how to measure and monitor service delivery, particularly at the local government and community level (Collins, 2012). There is a particular tension between scale and voice in relation to service delivery, in terms of the resource capacity needed to deliver services while being able to create a meaningful space for public voice (Devas, 2007). The empirical evidence does not support many of the assumed dividends from decentralisation of local services through a good governance framework that stresses accountability, transparency and participation (Coulson, 1998; Steiner, 2010). Steiner's case study from Uganda does suggest local governments with greater capacity, as defined by her study, are indeed able to deliver better services, but she also argues that the available evidence is far from conclusive. Decentralisation of service delivery can lead to elite capture at the local level and even to increased inequality in access for the poorest and most disadvantaged (see Cleaver and Toner, 2006; or O'Neil et al., 2014).

2.4 Accountability and service delivery: to whom and for what?

The idea of accountability is central to trying to understand how to enable improvements in service delivery. Schedler (1999) proposes that accountability is the '*ability to ensure that public officials are answerable for their behaviour… to justify and inform the citizens of their decisions and about their decisions and possibly eventually be sanctioned for them*' (p.14). For Ackerman (2005), accountability is '*a proactive process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour and results are sanctioned accordingly*' (p1). Accountability relations are concerned with relations of power (Jenkins, 2007), which is why development interventions are more commonly accountable to their funders rather than their beneficiaries; and states are more accountable to their donors than to their citizens.

The concepts of procedural and social accountability are useful to our attempt to understand how to ensure better service delivery.

Procedural accountability works on the supply side of government. The mechanisms and processes the state uses to hold itself to account are defined as procedural accountability. The mechanisms may work in two ways: **vertically** – concerned with voters holding governments accountable, for example through formal democratic elections; and **horizontally** – the state holding itself accountable to its citizens through institutional checks, audits, expenditure tracking and the effective delivery of services (Classen and AlpÌn-Lardies, 2010).

Alternatively, social accountability focuses on the demand side of governance in aiming to strengthen the voice of citizens to ask for greater accountability and responsiveness directly from public officials and service providers. According to Agarwal et al. (2009), '*Social accountability is an*

approach that relies on civic engagement in that citizens participate directly or indirectly in demanding accountability from service providers and public officials' (p.1).

Social accountability mechanisms have been particularly popular with a wide range of donors and civil society actors over the past decade, leading to a collection of donor-funded pilots using rights-based approaches, citizen scorecards, public expenditure tracking and beneficiary feedback mechanisms. Examples include Oxfam's work (Green 2015) and Plan International's citizen scorecards in Malawi (Wild and Harris, 2012). However, in a review of the evidence on social accountability, Fox (2014) finds too much emphasis is placed on the provision of information alone to citizens, and that this is ineffective, with more nuanced and negotiation engagement between government and citizens necessary. The problems in the conceptual basis of most social accountability approaches may be why those that rely on civic engagement, notably through transparency of information, remain pilot projects without significant scale-up (Marcus et al., 2016).

In practice, both procedural and social forms of accountability suffer from problems. Elections are a very blunt and weak way in which to hold governments accountable. Joshi (2010) notes that procedural accountability is quite often ineffective, especially in the context of developing countries and service delivery. There is no guarantee services will improve when there is a change in government, given resourcing issues. Internal incentives and a wide gap between rules in theory and delivery in practice may render horizontal accountability fairly meaningless.

In relation to social accountability, citizens are also likely to be unaware of what services they are supposed to be offered and so struggle to hold duty-bearers accountable. Social norms and relationships of patronage also prevent citizens holding leaders to account. Examining relationships of power and the political settlement within a country is therefore critical to understanding where accountability lies in practice, rather than in theory (Booth, 2012). Booth (2012) argues that accountability cannot be fully meaningful without being embedded in locally relevant social institutions (Tembo, 2012; Hyden, 2014; McGee, 2014), which must go beyond aid-funded 'civil society' mobilisation if it is not to crowd out more locally embedded collective action (Green, 2014).

3. Could a local governance index act as a locally embedded and politically smart social accountability mechanism?

The evidence on both good governance and social accountability mechanisms highlights significant deficiencies between theory and practice. As a basis for a project that is exploring the potential for an index of local governance, we need to think through the implications of this.

An index is a tool that combines a number of indicators to give an assessment of a concept such as poverty, development and governance. For example, the Human Development Index combines indicators on literacy levels, life expectancy and income per capita. Indicators are themselves proxies for the area of focus; hence literacy levels might be an indicator of education. Indicators for specific parts of the concept can be combined to produce a score, ranking or qualitative assessment. Indexes are an attractive quantitative tool, particularly for making 'quick and dirty' comparisons between units and in tracking change over time (Foa and Tanner, 2012).

The use of an indicator or any target is a necessary simplification of complex and integrated political processes. There is a danger that the creation of an index will promote only a narrow public gaze on the indicator rather than attention to the wider processes of change that it seeks to represent. Bevan and Hood (2006) warn that such attempts at measurement and target-setting in the UK context led to a 'gaming' approach by local government and politicians. We therefore need to consider carefully the extent to which such an index might be useful to different actors and stakeholders; whose voice it represents; what the results will signify; how they will be used; and ultimately whether it will have an impact on the outcome desired, better governance.

Following the selection of indicators, weights need to be assigned to these. It is through this process that the final index will be produced. The weight used will depend on the purpose of the index. Therefore, weighting involves elements of subjectivity and ranking as to the relative importance of the indicators as proxies of the concept being assessed (Foa and Tanner, 2012). For example, the Multidimensional Poverty Index uses 10 indicators but the weighting of each of these within the final index depends on where they fit into the schematic design.

3.1 Indexes to measure national governance

A range of index tools exist that aim to track aspects of governance and to provide data necessary to support social accountability work. Examples include the IIAG, the WGI, the Open Budget Index and Afrobarometer (Langbein and Knack, 2010; de Renzio and Masud 2011; Farrington, 2011). Afrobarometer is not strictly an index but does provide social accountability data through the collection of national perceptions surveys on aspects of governance.

The IIAG is a composite index, constructed by combining indicators in four main conceptual categories: safety & rule of law, participation & human rights, sustainable economic opportunity and human development. The index is an example of expert-based governance assessments. While such assessments can offer inferences on the 'quality' of governance as defined by experts, they do not measure how governance works (Farrington 2011). There are also issues with the cross-country comparability of the data used in compiling the index, and the criteria used for assessment are too universalistic (Farrington, 2011).

A similar critique is made concerning the WGI, insofar as 'they are largely normative, encompassing policy preferences, rather than measuring the satisfaction of citizen request priorities' (Rotberg, 2014: 514). Furthermore, the WGI are centred on a 'one-best-way' model ideal for developed countries like Sweden or Denmark. The implied model lacks consistency and seems inappropriate for use in the development dialogue, as it is not easily replicable in developing countries. It would be better to have ideas about the factors that influence what works, when and how, instead of just a list of what should work (Andrews, 2008; Sundaram and Chowdhury, 2012). Moreover, Andrews et al. (2010) argue that the WGI are theoretical and biased, maintaining that appropriate governance indicators call for thorough theoretical grounding. Kaufmann et al. (2007) highlight five problems with the WGI: 1) ill-suited to comparisons over time and between countries; 2) analytically biased; 3) correlation errors in the various data sources distorting the index; 4) lack of 'construct validity' in that many of the definitions employed are inadequate; 5) insufficiently transparent. Some of the data informing the indicators are unavailable to other researchers, thus impeding evaluation, replication and peer review.

3.2 Indexes to assess local governance

There appear to be very few examples of governance indexes designed to use at the level of local government. One example of a local government composite index is from a pilot study from the Philippines (Capuno and Garcia, 2010). Figure 1 shows the three equally weighted categories of indicators from which this index was calculated.

Figure 1: Dimensions of a local governance performance index
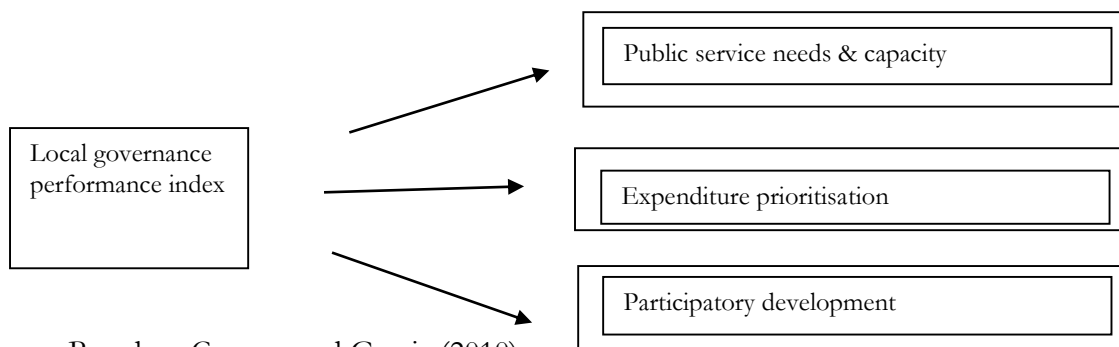
Source: Based on Capuno and Garcia (2010).

Capuno and Garcia's research suggests public knowledge of the construction of the index enhanced local engagement and increased the responsiveness of local officials. Detail of the specific indicators is not available in the published research paper and further attempts to find more information have been unsuccessful.

Another attempt to create a local government performance mechanism is noted in a pilot project implemented by Plan with funding from the US Agency for International Development in collaboration with a number of other non-governmental organisations in several countries. The local government barometer used a collaborative approach with local stakeholders to generate an assessment of performance (Bloom et al., 2007). The project does appear to have taken an adaptive approach through working with local stakeholders to make a joint assessment of local governance. This combines measures of public service delivery, participation in decision-making and transparency on public expenditure. While this approach seems highly relevant, it is also difficult to find more detail on this project and it seems to have generated little evidence of longer-term impact.

One other example of an attempt to apply an index approach to the subnational level is the regional governance index described in Morrison (2014). Morrison tries to identify factors that lead to effective regional governance and proposes a regional governance index calculated using four indicators: 1) engagement in regional networks; 2) diversity and synergies across the instrument mix; 3) robustness and adaptability in instrument design; and 4) broader fiscal, administrative and democratic support. These indicators are tested using a case analysis of two rural regions in the US and Australia, with Morrison making an expert-based assessment of these elements. This is a theoretical study but does offer some conceptual guidance as to the need to combine the very complex and multiple responsibilities of regional and local government in order to make an assessment of regional government capacity and performance.

So there are no ready-made and widely used indexes of local governance in existence. We need to reflect on why this might be and whether the creation of such an index is useful. Our proposal is that the process of trying to create an index creates a learning process, which makes visible both

the rules in theory and how things work in practice at the local level. It asks who is responsible for delivering what, but seeks the reasons behind the lack of delivery, rather than to apportion blame.

4. Conclusion

Quality of governance has considerable normative and political dimensions. Simple correlations of good governance and development and/or poverty reduction are far from clear. Current analysis suggests that, rather than adopting rigid and aspirational measures of good governance, we need to seek 'good enough' or 'good fit' governance that starts from existing political and institutional realities. There are very many small initiatives working on social accountability tools, but this is only one component of assessing governance, and the creation of an index of local governance will have to go beyond this, as it needs also to account for the bureaucratic and political environment in which local government operates.

The greatest potential for a local governance index appears to be as a locally adapted and co-produced tool of engagement and problem-solving. Co-production could happen through the engagement of relevant stakeholders in a process of dialogue and negotiation, for example through a perception-based survey of citizens on service delivery alongside work with local government administrative and elected officials. The indicators selected must be locally relevant and fair. For example, if the construction of school toilets is used as an indicator of infrastructure development, then we must also assess whether the institution tasked with building had sufficient resources, time and expertise. This is where understanding the gap between rules in theory and rules in practice is vital. Tracking progress over time is key to the success of a locally relevant index so trajectories of change can be observed.

The selection of indicators is political and will be shaped by normative ideas and aspirations depending on the interests being served in the creation of the index. This can be further exacerbated by the application of weightings to component parts of an index. Being aware of these limitations of an index is important but it also provides an opportunity to use construction as a process of action research and dialogue. It is critical to ask: what does good local governance look like to you? The answer to this question will be different from the citizen in the village, to the local government councillor, to the administrative official or civil servant, to the member of parliament for the area.

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