The term 'chronically ill' is more appropriate than referring to AIDS. Quite apart from cultural objections to using AIDS as a diagnosis, HIV testing is minimal and the cause of death is irrelevant in relation to the impact on the household. Specific manifestations of HIV-related conditions do have specific impacts, however, such as bouts of recurrent illnesses requiring long periods of care from other household members. Even in these situations, where diagnosis of HIV infection is apparent, AIDS would rarely be mentioned and to target AIDS patients specifically would be counter-productive.

References


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The technocratic discourse: technical means to political problems

Erik Bryld

Introduction

Following the so-called impasse in the development debate in the mid-1980s, International Development Agencies (IDAs) sought to replace the unsuccessful top-down approach, which had dominated the development industry until about 1990. In the
late 1980s, the concept ‘good governance’ was introduced as the new buzzword. A transparent, accountable, participatory, and effective state is seen by many IDAs as the new panacea to development. Such an approach is supposed to reduce corruption, increase growth, and promote democracy. Today, most IDAs and development-oriented states are pursuing this strategy, among them two of the world’s largest development agencies, the World Bank and UNDP. With a combined budget of over US$22 billion in 1997 (Danida 1998), the strategies they follow and sponsor have major effects on the developing countries. It is therefore important to monitor the actions of these IDAs and to discuss the strategies that they and national governments pursue in seeking to ensure that the different needs and wants of the people in developing countries are met.

The good governance strategy, which aims to restructure the state in developing countries, is to be pursued through decentralisation. Decentralisation is supposed to bring the decision making closer to the people, in a less bureaucratic manner, and thus promote transparency, accountability, participation, and effectiveness.

In this paper, I shall discuss what I call ‘the technocratic discourse’, a discourse which focuses on technical and instrumental solutions to the problems related to developing countries.

**Good governance**

Decentralisation is seen by most IDAs as a way to achieve good governance. The World Bank and UNDP have produced publications that highlight its strengths in this regard (World Bank 1997; UNDP 1997a).

Good governance is, however, a subjective phrase. UNDP’s former Administrator James Gustave Speth defines it as:

... participatory, transparent and accountable. It is also effective and efficient. And it promotes the rule of

law—not the rule of men—and equal justice under law. Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard in decision-making ... (UNDP 1997b:2)

In one way Speth’s definition illustrates the diffuse goals of good governance. It is supposed to be participatory, accountable, transparent, and, at the same time, effective. It is supposed to involve the weakest social sectors in the decision-making processes while still being efficient. These goals are in some ways contradictory. More participation means that more people are involved in decision making (preferably everyone). This obviously reduces the chance of reaching a consensus, which thus undermines the efficiency of the process. An authoritarian regime with a single string of command is presumably the most efficient and least participatory government you can get. Most IDAs want to pursue and support a transparent participatory and decentralised governing system that is also efficient. It is, however, important to know where to place the emphasis—on the political goals, i.e. participation and accountability, or on the technical goals, i.e. effectiveness and efficiency. How good governance is defined indicates where the emphasis will lie.

In the political definition, emphasis is laid on socio-economic and cultural factors. Actors in the development process are recognised as being political so that their actions will have political consequences. In the technical definition, the emphasis is on efficiency and effectiveness: the key to successful development is an efficient state. When the state acts it does so ideally in the interest of all its citizens in order to provide the best services possible. The structure of the system is seen as the key to development. An instrument used in the process of achieving good governance, both political and technical, is decentralisation.
Defining decentralisation

Decentralisation is the opposite of centralisation, which means the concentration of power. It describes a transfer of power from the state to the local level—a diffusion of power in space. Decentralisation is, however, not the same as self-governance. The term is often used in relation to all kinds of processes where the points of power are removed from the centre to the periphery. This does not always entail a change in the power structures, however; sometimes it is merely a geographical relocation of power. We thus need to distinguish between different levels of decentralisation. Standard definitions encompass three main levels (OECD 1997; World Bank 1997): deconcentration, delegation, and devolution.

Deconcentration refers to the transfer of workload or responsibility to local administrative units that are part of the central government structure. There is no horizontal integration since all the power still lies in the hands of the state. Delegation refers to the transfer of responsibility for maintaining and implementing sector duties to semi-autonomous government agencies that operate independently of central government control. Certain public duties that were once carried by the state are placed in the hands of local authorities. And finally, devolution involves the transfer of discretionary authority to legally constituted local governments, where the role of the central government is limited to ensuring that local governments operate within a broadly defined national policy. Decentralisation through devolution creates systems where the local staff are responsible to elected councils (OECD 1997). It is often difficult, however, to distinguish between the three levels of decentralisation.

The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Expert Group on Aid Evaluation describes decentralisation as a means of promoting participatory development and good governance (OECD 1997). UNDP also sees decentralisation as a way of enabling people ‘... to participate more directly in governance processes and can help empower people previously excluded from decision-making’ (UNDP 1997a:19). These prophecies will, however, have to relate to the devolutionary level of decentralisation, since this is the level of decentralisation that promotes direct participation, accountability, autonomy, and periodic free elections.2

Since devolution involves the transfer of power to civil society, the subject is highly political and raises the question of how to ensure that the process is both ‘equal’ and ‘fair’?

The technocratic approach to decentralisation

In its discussion of decentralisation, the World Development Report 1997 states that: ‘The clearest and most important principle is that public goods and services should be provided by the lowest level of government that can fully capture the costs and benefits’ (World Bank 1997:121). Furthermore, it is claimed that ‘... decentralisation ... should be a practical endeavour to find the right balance between the roles of different levels of government, to ensure that high-quality services are provided in a timely manner’ (World Bank 1997:124). In conclusion, is argued that:

The evidence presented in this chapter has shown that improving the capability and effectiveness of the state rests with mechanisms to increase openness and transparency, to strengthen incentives for participation in public affairs, and, where appropriate, to bring the state closer to the people and communities it is meant to serve. (World Bank 1997:129)

These quotations show that the World Bank’s approach to decentralisation is more technical than political. Decentralisation is seen as a means to improve the effectiveness and capabilities of the state. It is a practical endeavour aimed at transferring the authority to the level of government that ‘can fully
The technocratic discourse

capture the costs and benefits—a technical means to provide services in a timely manner. The focus is clearly on efficiency rather than on political measures. The promotion of openness and participation is only put forward in order to improve the effectiveness of the state. The approach is thus technical.3

When decentralisation is treated only as a means to efficiency and not as an end in itself, important societal consequences are bound to be overlooked. Olowu and Wunsch (1990) argue that the World Bank as well as some UN agencies has claimed that where decentralisation has failed, this is because of governments’ failure to implement it properly. IDAs ignore important factors such as the diversity of developing countries and the role of their own élites. The failure is assumed to be of a technical character, an error in the implementation scheme. As Schönwälder (1997) states, decentralisation is seen by technocrats as a policy tool to improve the provision and maintenance of public services in developing countries4 when ‘... it is flaws in the planning and execution of decentralisation programmes, and not the social, economic, cultural or political environment in which these programmes are set, which ultimately determine their success or failure’ (Schönwälder 1997:757). Decentralisation is thus seen as an instrument to obtain successful development, independent of the political or social context.

IDAs engage in a technical decentralisation process in order to achieve good governance and thus promote development. A technical instrument is used to reach what is necessarily a political goal ‘... for at any point in any development sequence what is crucially at issue is how resources are to be used and distributed in new ways and the inevitable disputes arising from calculations about who will win and who will lose as a result’ (Leftwich 1994:365). If the state’s capability is central to providing a viable institutional framework for development, and if a decentralisation process is the means to achieve that capability, then decentralisation is political. But, decentralisation is not the same as development. Rather, it is a means through which it is possible to increase the opportunities for development.

The technocratic state

Technocrats view the state in a technical way, as a rational actor with a narrow focus on how to improve economic effectiveness and efficiency. Little attention is paid to non-economic factors, and the political aspects are overlooked. Thus, the complex political, social, and cultural landscape in which the state operates is grossly oversimplified. Economic efficiency equates with development, and the role of the state is primarily to put in place the appropriate institutional settings for providing the best services for the public (Hildyard and Wilks 1998; Martinussen 1998). In a technocratic world there is little room for political parties or élite states. A political issue such as development is addressed, with state involvement, through the use of economic techniques. Sensitive political issues are put in macro-economic boxes, where the highest priority is efficiency.

Hence, politics is not seen as a part of the state. When the state is identified as a rational actor guided only by the common interests of all its citizens, the definition becomes unrealistic. In authoritarian régimes the state usually responds to the ruling élite, and in democracies it responds to the parties in power. The state can never act apolitically, as the technocratic label would imply. In order to grasp the ‘true nature’ of the state, the technocrats need to incorporate:

[A] better understanding of the variety of ways in which different states are embedded in societies; a broader understanding of the non-economic roles of states; more attention to the social biases embodied in most institutional
arrangements; and the need for democratisation, not only to improve performance in the economic sense, but rather to improve performance in a political sense... (Martinussen 1998:73)

Decentralisation is the favoured instrument for creating effective states in developing countries.

Conclusion

Decentralisation is a way to promote democracy and pluralism. It can be used to promote both technical and political good governance by bringing decision making closer to the people. However, if a technocratic view is taken of development, then decentralisation is also seen as a technical matter. It is the efficiency measures of decentralisation that the technocrats utilise in the quest for development, although decentralisation is about redistribution of resources, and thus is political. Consequently, the technocratic approach to decentralisation can result in progress in one area within good governance—effectiveness—while setting back all the other key areas.

When politics is overlooked, the unregulated space this creates will eventually be misused by individuals or interest groups. Effectiveness and efficiency are needed in order to increase development potentials, but they need to be interlinked with the political aspects in a non-technocratic manner.

Decentralisation as the key to achieving good governance is seen by many IDAs as a general solution appropriate to all corners of the world. It has become a universal framework. The result is that context becomes less relevant, which in turn increases the ignorance of political issues and lowers the chances of successful development.

This tendency to neglect context is an extension of the advanced modernisation theories, as were neo-liberalism and, to some extent, neo-Marxism. This technocratic discourse is what has underpinned the development discourse that has dominated academic debate and practical approaches to development in recent years. It ignores the potentials and qualities of context, and thus disempowers the people it intended to ‘develop’. It becomes a general solution where global development is dictated from the technocratic IDAs of the North. One trusts that disempowerment is not what these IDAs set out to achieve, but the solutions adopted are heavily influenced by the geographical distance that separates the technocrats of the North and the different peoples of the South.

The technocratic discourse should be offering a way out of the development impasse. It seems, however, that it will direct the technocratic IDAs back to where they started—in the structural crisis of development.

Notes

1 Again, this illustrates the subjectivity of the concept. Who determines what is good? Schmitz sees good governance as ‘... the rescue operation that is needed to sustain the dominant economic development model and the “orderly” integration of developing economies into the global capitalist political economy’ (1995:72). This is, however, a somewhat narrow-minded view. Even though the more technical approach to good governance may include a more or less hidden agenda, concepts such as transparency, accountability, anti-corruption, and freedom of speech cannot be usefully reduced to this rather pessimistic vision.

2 Desai (1996:219) defines popular participation as: ‘... having access to and control over resources, where resources include both regulatory and decision-making institutions and the local resources necessary for production and reproduction’. Rahnema (1992:120) quotes UNRISD’s definition of popular participation as: ‘... the organised efforts to increase control over resources and movements of those hitherto excluded from
such control’. Popular participation is thus access to and control over decision making and the distribution of resources.

3 While the World Bank does mention the social aspects, emphasis is laid on administrative or technical issues.

4 Part of this discrepancy could also be due to the fact that one of the IDAs—the World Bank—sees development as synonymous with growth: ‘... the state is central to economic and social development, not as a direct provider of growth but as a partner, catalyst, and facilitator’ (World Bank 1997:1). The second phrase even substitutes the term growth for development. UNDP defines development as ‘... the enlargement of relevant human choices’ (UNDP 1997a).

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Integrating impact monitoring and assessment of microfinance

James Copestake

Introduction

This paper is concerned specifically with the requirements of microfinance organisations (MFOs) that seek both to reduce poverty and