

A shift in Western development thinking? An overview of three recent publications

Simon Bekker and Norman Bromberger

“(There is) something truly extraordinary about coming up with a comprehensive governance reform programme for low-income countries by describing the characteristics of the world’s most affluent, and most open societies and then reverse engineering them.” (Levy: 7)

Synopsis

Western development thinking appears to be turning. A new multipolar global order has emerged with China as one of its dominant members purportedly offering an alternative development trajectory. Most importantly for us here however is the less than optimistic assessment of the impact of Western development interventions over the past two decades. In particular, the application of a “good governance” agenda – democracy, accountability, rule of law and transparency - as an addition to the original version of the Washington Consensus with its emphasis on the market economy and fiscal discipline, has had a poor track record, in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

As is pointed out in the prefatory quotation, new development thinking involves a turn away from embedding “good governance” institutions of today’s sustainable democracies in developing countries. We will begin this review essay by illustrating this turn in two recent publications by authors with long careers in Western development institutions. The first publication by Booth and Cammack underlines the importance of governance for the provision of basic public goods which in turn they see as important for development. Levy, the author of the second publication, underlines the centrality for development of integrating governance with inclusive economic growth. Both publications, which are intended for development agencies but also for African “reformers”, explicitly reject – at least for the short to medium term – a comprehensive “good governance” approach to development.

Subsequently, the work by three American scholars with an interest in the role of institutions in historical change, North, Wallis and Weingast, will be reviewed. Their publication entitled *Violence and Social Orders* is, in our opinion, one of the crucial intellectual influences that consolidated this turn in Western thinking. We conclude our overview by reflecting briefly on this new development thinking that is emerging.