

How may Covid-19 be changing the governance discourse?

By Graham Teskey

The aim of this blog is to suggest ways in which the ‘governance discourse’ (what a grand term!) is changing – indeed has already changed - as a result of Covid-19.

I know that blogs are supposed to be discursive and informal. Recently our office was privileged to have a session with master-blogger, Duncan Green, who shared all his tricks and techniques on the art of blogging. However, just this once I am going to ignore everything he said and make my case in two tables.

But first a quick explanation is in order. I perceive (I may be wrong here) that Covid has changed both the *focus* and the *urgency* of the governance discourse more in the last six months than anything else has done over the last decade. I am aware I am (possibly hugely) exaggerating here, and I am so doing to make the point. It does seem to me that governance practitioners are now being challenged to transition from a general way of interpreting the world (a view that has clear relevance at every level and in every context), to a much more *specific* and *focused* set of questions regarding the immediate, here-and-now Covid implications of interpreting the world.

Questions that were rather peripheral in donor-led development circles (the ones with which I am most familiar) now seem to be central: questions about what determines the *effectiveness* of state responses to Covid-19? What is happening to state *accountability* as elections are postponed and due process in procurements are side-stepped? What is happening to state *authority* as inequalities are increasingly laid bare? What is happening to the *legitimacy* of states as citizens lose faith in the fairness and competence of governments?

These are all real and pressing issues, and they are issues on which governance practitioners must have something to say. There have been many articles and papers published to date – each one looking at a particular aspect. This blog merely tries to present an overview.

So Table 1 summarises what - I suggest - were the five dominant pre-Covid ‘overarching’ governance questions. Table 2 presents my initial judgement of what the five post-Covid governance questions may be. A short conclusion brings the blog to an end. Thankfully.

Table 1: My governance life pre-Covid-19

Five pre-Covid issues	The issues	Questions asked by practitioners
1 The grand historical sweep	How does a strong, effective and accountable State come into being? <ul style="list-style-type: none">what are the respective roles of institutional capacity, political legitimacy and functional authority?do we understand sufficiently the nature and direction of democratic transitions?what influences the transition from politics for private gain to politics for the public interest?	What should I prioritise as the core foundations of an effective state? How should I sequence interventions? What trade-offs may I have to make, and how do I decide? Given that growth and development always precedes ‘democratisation’, should I prioritise economic not political governance? How long does it take - my boss wants results in this three year project?
2 The state of the State	How can we assess the institutions and interests that make up the modern nation State? <ul style="list-style-type: none">what are the core collective action problems?how to discern the impact of political settlements and elite incentives?what is the role of rents and rent seeking in the modern state?how influential is patrimonialism?in whose interests does the executive work?	How can I know what sort of political settlement is in place, and how can I tell when it is changing? Can I ever hope to influence elite deals and make them more pro-poor? Where do rents come from and to what extent do they drive the political economy? How can I find out about them? How much ‘development’ can I expect anyway in this excessively patrimonial state? Or maybe I focus on bureaucratic capacity and forget about voice and accountability?

3 Constraints to inclusive growth	<p>What are the major governance and institutional constraints to growth and poverty reduction?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are political constraints more binding than the economic / resource ones? • what is the role of agency? • which institutions matter the most? • What does 'path dependence' mean in this country context? 	<p>Does the regime face internal or external threats that cannot be assuaged by aid or domestic resource rents?</p> <p>Should I design interventions around individuals or coalitions of reformers?</p> <p>What happens when reformers move on or die?</p> <p>Do I understand the 'business model' of rent seeking?</p>
4 The challenge of public service delivery	<p>What are the <i>institutional</i> characteristics of the good or service we are considering and does this imply a particular sort of intervention modality?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public v private goods? • how do we measure change in organisations? Is it by measurable developmental results or by demonstrable internal process / system change? • do we know enough about what incentivises individual and collective behaviour in the public sector? 	<p>Do the services I want to improve require simple <i>organisational</i> change, or will it require more complex <i>institutional</i> change?</p> <p>Should I bother with transformational upstream, centre of government reforms, or just go with transactional incremental change sector by sector?</p> <p>Do I pin all my hopes on a few 'champions of change'?</p> <p>Do I go all out for capacity development - and if so how – or do I need to think more about accountability and the emergence of a performance culture?</p>
5 More effective projects	<p>How can we design and implement projects that are flexible, and which respond and adapt to changing institutional and political environments?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PDIA • TWP • DDD • PEA • AM • And as many more acronyms and abbreviations as you can think of 	<p>Should I start with the problem or an objective?</p> <p>Can I really say PDIA out loud without colleagues groaning?</p> <p>How do I know I have identified the 'right' problem?</p> <p>How can I avoid the tyranny of the project framework?</p> <p>What on earth does it mean to be a searcher not a planner?</p> <p>What alternative modalities are at my disposal?</p> <p>How can I recognise development entrepreneurs and what do I do if I spot one?</p> <p>How can I work adaptively when the donor demands annual work plans and budgets?</p>

Table 2: What may become my governance life post-Covid

Five post-Covid issues	The issues	Questions now being asked by colleagues
1 States have become more introspective, competitive and distrustful	<p>To what extent will the liberal 'rules-based' order survive? What other forms of unilateralism, bilateralism and regionalism will prevail?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • which countries will best survive the economic fallout of Covid? • how will this affect their ascendancy on the global stage? 	<p>How can I even begin to answer this question!</p> <p>Is aid and development now a global competition? If so the odds seem stacked against me....</p> <p>What can our programs do to contribute to greater trust between (insert donor country) and partners?</p> <p>Should we do more to promote trade, cultural or sporting links?</p>
2 Explaining wide variations in State responsiveness	<p>What influences the extent to which states' responses are led by reason, evidence and data?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIC / MIC / LIC distinctions seem to be irrelevant here – will this change any of our mental models? • do differential Covid responses suggest some sort of return to reason, data and evidence in public policy making? • is there any pattern in state responsiveness as between centralised (unitary) and decentralised (federal) states? 	<p>How can I explain differing levels of acceptance by political elites of 'the science' of the pandemic?</p> <p>Do I think this mean there will be an increased demand for evidence in other (non-Covid) aspects of public policy?</p> <p>To what extent has deference to authority played a role in the effectiveness of state Covid-19 responses?</p> <p>Are governance practitioners at last going to engage with hitherto taboo issues of national culture?</p> <p>Will states be more responsive to the inequalities thrown into sharp relief by Covid?</p>
3 What will be the impact on	<p>Will Covid-19 offer states the opportunity to reduce their exposure to public accountability, scrutiny, and criticism?</p>	<p>What is going to happen in the US come November?</p> <p>What happens to my governance program if States enact new laws or extend existing ones, taking more power to themselves?</p>

State political accountability?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will States ‘give back’ their powers once the epidemic is over, or are we seeing an accelerating trend away from ‘democratic politics’? • To what extent are political elites taking advantage of the ‘urgency, immediacy and scale’ of the Coronavirus crisis to deepen structures of crony capitalism, and extend the scale of rent-seeking? • What is happening to extortion at the point of (supposedly free) service delivery? 	<p>What do I advise if elections in ‘my’ country are to be postponed or suspended, or voter registration is to be halted, and electoral rolls not updated?....? Are these safe and sensible or an assault on democratic freedoms?</p> <p>What should I do if opposition parties / voices are shuttered, and media freedoms curtailed?</p> <p>How can I tell if the social contract is coming under pressure?</p> <p>Do all these trends mean I should recommend a shift away from ‘State-building’ to ‘democracy promotion’?</p>
4 What will be the impact on State political authority?	<p>What will be the medium-term results of continued / extended State failure to respond to social distress, increasing poverty and greater social and economic inequality?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what will be the impact on the political settlement – will it become more or less inclusive? • will citizens look for solutions outside of the formal structures and processes of the State? • what may declining State authority mean for state legitimacy? 	<p>How do states weigh up the cost of the economic lockdown against the risks of increased Covid cases and deaths?</p> <p>How long can states fund significantly increased social protection expenditures and innovations?</p> <p>What may be the social consequences in the rich world if unemployment remains at historically unprecedented levels?</p> <p>What will happen if citizens feel their ‘State’ has deserted them? What chance is there of violent confrontation?</p>
<p>5 More effective projects</p> <p>This one refuses to go away. As long as there is ‘aid’ it probably never will....</p>	<p>How can we design and implement projects that are flexible, and which respond and adapt to changing institutional and political environments?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PDIA • TWP • DDD • PEA • AM • And any more acronyms you can think of 	<p>Should I start with the problem or an objective?</p> <p>Can I really say PDIA out loud without colleagues groaning?</p> <p>How do I know I have identified the ‘right’ problem?</p> <p>How can I avoid the tyranny of the project framework?</p> <p>What on earth does it mean to be a searcher not a planner?</p> <p>What alternative modalities are at my disposal?</p> <p>How can I recognise development entrepreneurs and what do I do if I spot one?</p> <p>How can I work adaptively when the donor demands annual work plans and budgets?</p>

Conclusions

It is not that any of the five ‘pre-Covid’ questions have been answered or have gone away. Far from it – we know they haven’t. But it does seem that Covid-19 has upended the contemporary governance discourse and inserted a bunch of much more urgent, shorter-term and more politically pertinent questions. If we are thinking and working politically then maybe Covid-19 offers an opportunity for governance practitioners to play a key role in identifying ‘post-Covid’ recovery strategies, and address some of the issues identified in Table 2.

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