

# Improving Governance for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: Scenario Forecasting the Next 50 years

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**Summary.** — Covering three fundamental governance transitions historically characteristic of modern states—the provision of *security*, the building of *capacity*, and the deepening of *inclusion*—we offer a pioneering forecast of the future of domestic governance through the year 2060 for 183 countries utilizing a long-term, dynamic, integrated global futures modeling system. While our Base Case forecast anticipates global gains in security, capacity, and inclusion, extended scenario analysis suggests that timely and effective interventions to strengthen governance and implement pro-poor development policies will result in much greater advances on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of governance for human development and the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is widely acknowledged by the United Nations and most international organizations, domestic and global civil society actors, academic scholars, and policy analysts (Fukuyama, 2013; Hyden, Court, & Mease, 2004; Rothstein, 2011; UNDP, 2012; World Bank, 2011). The negative costs of ineffective governance in terms of the loss of human lives, stunted human development, environmental degradation, and waste of financial and organizational resources are enormous. For example, it is estimated the developing world experiences 140,000 child deaths and loses \$1 trillion every year because of corruption and poor governance (Hanf *et al.*, 2011; Kar & Curcio, 2011).

Governance broadly refers to “the formation and stewardship of the formal and informal rules that regulate the public realm” (Hyden *et al.*, 2004, p. 16) with the United Nations conceptualizing governance as a system “consistent with international human rights, norms and standards” operating at multiple levels—global/international, nation-state, and sub-national/local (UN, 2012, p. 23). Two of the twelve SDGs (number 10 and 11) proposed by the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda seek to advance “good governance” (inclusion, transparency, access to information, freedom of association and participation), “effective institutions” (state capacity, rule of law, property rights, reduced bribery and corruption), and “stable and peaceful societies” (reduced violence and conflict, accountable and professional security forces, access to justice institutions), but this agenda is still under discussion (UN, 2013, pp. 50–53).

The SDGs provide an opportunity to atone for various deficiencies attributed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which have been criticized for setting unreasonable expectations, lacking governance goals, ignoring the role of human rights (especially civil and political rights), and being identical across countries despite vastly different starting points (Clemens, Kenny, & Moss, 2007; Easterly, 2009; Nelson, 2007). Critics also argue the MDGs aim to deliver “quick impact” by treating symptoms of under-development, rather than “addressing complex social systems” to provide individuals and communities with a means to hold

governments accountable for their MDG commitments (Nelson, 2007, p. 2047).

Participants in debates over SDG-related goals have considered what role governance should play in light of perceived defects of the MDGs; however, assessments of its importance are often speculative, and there have been almost no attempts to systematically forecast the developmental impacts of possible future patterns of governance around the world. Though some scholars have offered general extrapolations from long-term historical trends (e.g., Keane, 2009; Lewin, 2012; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009), most governance forecasts in recent years have been short-term, qualitative, or prescriptive (e.g., Brandt, Freeman, & Schrodt, 2011; Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, & Gurr, 2012; Kurki, 2013; Kurlantzick, 2013; O’Brien, 2010). With a few exceptions related to the future of violent conflicts (Burke, Miguel, Satyanath, Dykema, & Lobell, 2009; Busby, Smith, White, & Strange, 2013; Dyer, 2010; Gleditsch & Ward, 2013; Hegre, Karlsen, Nygård, Strand, & Urdal, 2013; Theisen, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013), long-range, quantitatively, and empirically based governance forecasts are nearly non-existent with respect to government performance (including public finance, bureaucratic effectiveness, corruption, and the rule-of-law) and very sparse in terms of predicting the future of transitions away from autocracy and the further movement toward democracy in partial democracies.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing these gaps in the literature, this article contributes to on-going debates over the formulation, implementation, and prioritization of the SDGs in two ways. Firstly, it provides a historically and theoretically grounded conceptualization of “governance” supportive of the SDGs. Secondly, it forecasts where domestic governance is likely heading for countries around the world in the absence of additional

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focused interventions as well as under alternative scenarios including major strengthening of governance and the adoption of pro-poor policies.

The article proceeds as follows.<sup>2</sup> The first section discusses our conceptualization of governance based on the idea of three fundamental transitions on which currently high-income countries have made long, halting, and somewhat sequential historical transitions but with which most post-colonial states today simultaneously struggle; (a) providing *security* against intra-state conflict, (b) building state *capacity* to govern effectively and efficiently, and (c) broadening and deepening *inclusion*, i.e., the extension of democracy. The second section discusses our methodology for forecasting the future of governance and why we believe it marks an advance over previous efforts. The third section discusses our empirical results including a pioneering forecast of governance across three dimensions and its effects on development for 183 countries. That section discusses the governance future we would anticipate in 2060 based on past and current trends. The next section considers two alternative governance scenarios, one which is more pessimistic and the other which is more optimistic, and their implications for human development. Finally, we conclude by discussing strengths and limitations of our forecasts and their implications for the SDGs.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING GOVERNANCE

A large literature has sought to define and conceptualize governance (e.g., [Bevir, 2009](#); [Fukuyama, 2013](#); [Grindle, 2004](#); [Hyden et al., 2004](#); [Levi-Faur, 2012](#); [Weiss, 2000](#)). As [Bevir \(2012, p. 5\)](#) points out, “governance can refer abstractly to all processes of governing. It supplements a focus on the formal institutions of government with recognition of more diverse activities that blur the boundary of state and society. It draws attention to the complex processes and interactions involved in governing.” Although the trend among aid agencies over the past decade has been “donor selectivity” with more aid given to better governed countries ([Winters & Martinez, 2015](#)), there is disagreement over what constitutes better governance. For example, the World Bank has promoted a greater role for the private sector compared to the United Nations ([Joshi & O’Dell, 2013](#)) and the UK Department for International Development’s drivers of change framework emphasizes building up the capacities of less developed country governments more than the US Millennium Challenge Account ([Chhotray & Hulme, 2009](#)).

Although there is no underlying consensus on what “governance” entails, most scholars have concentrated either on government input, output, or the social and international context in which governments operate. Those who focus primarily on outputs highlight issues such as government effectiveness, bureaucratic autonomy, the rule-of-law, and/or state capacity all of which have an impact on what goods and services are delivered by governments to their populations ([Fukuyama, 2013](#)). For example, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012, p. 305\)](#) discuss the importance of the “rule of law” defined as “the principle that laws should not be applied selectively or arbitrarily and that nobody is above the law.” [Fukuyama \(2013, p. 4\)](#) defines governance with respect to outputs as “a government’s ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not. . . governance is about the performance of agents in carrying out the wishes of principals, and not about the goals that principals set.” In a similar fashion, [Rothstein \(2011, p. 6\)](#) identifies “impartiality in the exercise of public authority” as

the defining feature of “quality of government” because of its impact on both output and legitimacy. As [Rothstein \(2011, p. 92\)](#) argues,

Your ability to vote is unlikely to have a clear and significant impact on your life chances: the likelihood that your vote will be decisive is, of course, minuscule . . . However, if the police do not protect you because you are an X-type citizen; if the fire brigade does not come to your house because you are a Z-type citizen; if your children are systematically discriminated against in the schools because they are Y-type children; and if the doctors at the hospital ignore you because you are a P-type person, then you are in real trouble. To be blunt, while what happens on the input side usually has little consequence for the immediate welfare of the individual citizen, what the state does or does not do on the output side may be life threatening.

By contrast, a second approach to governance focuses primarily on the input side of government, particularly the role of stakeholder involvement ([Bevir, 2009, p. 29](#)). This vision highlights new tools of citizen involvement in “quasi-legislative” and “quasi-judicial” governing processes such as “deliberative democracy, e-democracy, public conversations, participatory budgeting, citizen juries, study circles, collaborative policy making, and other forms of deliberation and dialog among groups of stakeholders or citizens” ([Bingham, Bunachi, & O’Leary, 2005, p. 547](#)). Scholars focusing on the input side of governance have variously focused on the “quality of democracy” (e.g., [Diamond & Morlino, 2005](#)), the role of different varieties of democracy ([Coppedge et al., 2011](#); [Kurki, 2013](#)), “the interaction between formal institutions and those in civil society” ([Mander, Asif, Sasi, & ActionAid, 2004, p. 11](#)), social capital and interpersonal trust ([Joshi, 2012](#)), and inclusion as a basis for the deepening of democracy (e.g., [Dryzek, 1996](#); [Phillips, 1995](#)).

A third major approach to conceptualizing governance is a contextual or “multi-level” approach which looks to “horizontal networks of public, private, and nonprofit organizations as the new structures of governance as opposed to hierarchical decision making” ([Bingham, Bunachi, & O’Leary, 2005, p. 547](#)). This approach emphasizes the role of markets, networks, non-governmental organizations, and state-society relations to analyze international and multi-national organizations like the EU ([Weiss, 2000](#)). For example, the [Commission on Global Governance \(1995, p. 2\)](#) has defined governance as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is the continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action may be taken.” Furthermore, the concept of “decentralization” often appears in the context of governance reforms as a potential means to make governance more inclusive/responsive or capable/effective ([Faguet, 2014, p. 2](#)).

Incorporating the respective contributions of these approaches to understanding governance, we conceptualize governance as a dynamic and inextricably interconnected process of governing inputs, outputs, and context(s). Acknowledging the importance of government output, we believe that participation of those affected by government also matters and that civil society and a broader contextual environment impacts how governance functions in practice. Addressing this governance triangle, our analysis focuses on three fundamental governance transitions that have historically characterized the development of modern states; achieving greater domestic *security* (context), building stronger state *capacity* (to effectively and efficiently deliver government output), and broadening and deepening *inclusion* (to expand and open channels for members of the public to provide input on what tasks government should undertake and how). These three pillars partially resemble [Skocpol’s \(1985\)](#) governance trio of authority, legitimacy, and

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