

BEYOND MAGIC BULLETS IN GOVERNANCE REFORM

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Domestic reformers and external donors have invested enormous energy and resources into improving governance in developing countries since the 1990s. Yet there is still remarkably little understanding of how governance progress actually occurs in these contexts. Reform strategies that work well in some places often prove disappointing elsewhere. A close examination of governance successes in the developing world indicates that effective advocacy must move beyond a search for single-focus “magic bullet” solutions toward an integrated approach that recognizes multiple interrelated drivers of governance change.

Key Themes

- Reform prospects rely on the interactions among three governance pillars: political commitment, bureaucratic capacity, and state-society relations. Multiple factors shape each of these pillars and they can emerge in very different forms. It is nevertheless possible to identify common trends and emerging lessons.
- Initial donor efforts to transplant Western institutions and best practices into developing countries largely failed. Governance advocates have subsequently turned to other solutions, such as finding individual political champions, encouraging citizen demand for good governance, establishing technocratic enclaves within bureaucracies, and devising flexible context-specific reform strategies.
- The success of each of these approaches relies on supporting conditions. Political champions, for example, usually fall short without effective allies in government and civil society. Enclaves of bureaucratic excellence similarly require political support to maintain their independence.

Findings

Political commitment, bureaucratic capacity, and state-society relations are deeply interdependent. This can lead to apparent vicious cycles of low commitment, low capacity, and unproductive state-society relations, but substantial progress can also be made on all three elements relatively simultaneously.

Individual political champions or external incentive structures alone are not sufficient to produce political commitment. For change to occur, key actors must recognize a serious problem or threat and decide that governance reform is an advantageous and feasible response. This requires the right incentives and a significant role for ideas and leadership abilities.

Bureaucratic effectiveness can be improved even where patronage politics are widespread. Flexible approaches to reform implementation, the creation of technocratic enclaves, and managerial efforts to raise civil service morale and accountability, among other strategies, can yield positive results.

Productive state-society relations can be exclusive or inclusive. Public participation and civil society advocacy are associated with governance improvements in some countries. In other contexts, however, exclusive public-private relationships have helped advance developmental policies. Both models rely to differing degrees on political commitment and a capable state.

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