



**Elites, governance
and the public
interest in Africa:
working with the
grain?**

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Summary

At the heart of current policy thinking about Africa there is a significant knowledge gap concerning governance and development. This paper is concerned with what can be done about that state of affairs, drawing on the initial experience of a new research venture, the Africa Power and Politics Programme. The APPP proposes to discover forms of governance that might work better for development than those prescribed by the current 'good governance' orthodoxy. It aims to do so chiefly by examining systematically the range of postcolonial experience within the sub-Saharan African region.

The paper reviews the issues and challenges posed during initial efforts to implement this plan. They include the choice of a suitable approach to gathering and analysing the relevant data; how to arrive at some reasonably firm working hypotheses while finding a pathway through the conceptual and methodological disputes among Africanist social scientists and historians with which such attempts tend to get entangled; and avoiding 'reinventing the wheel' by failing to draw fully on the concepts and methods pioneered in other fields of comparative institutional enquiry. The writer's personal take on the work in progress in two of the programme's seven research streams is the subject of the final section of the paper.

Elites, governance and the public interest in Africa: working with the grain?

David Booth*

1 Introduction

Governance reform in Africa has lost its way. Twenty years after ‘good governance’ moved to the centre-stage in international declarations, official aid policies and non-governmental advocacy alike, the results of efforts to improve the way African countries are ruled remain seriously insufficient. This refers not just to the high-level, headline-grabbing episodes that tend to dominate media coverage of the region, but also to more mundane aspects of the everyday exercise of power. For every significant achievement such as Ghana’s tentative confirmation of the robustness of its multiparty political system (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009), one can cite a set of high-level political dramas of a much less edifying sort, Kenya providing the most obvious recent examples (Branch and Cheeseman, 2009). But below the apex of the national political systems and behind the headlines, in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa most of the time, governance is failing to work for development.

Specifically, not enough is being done by national governments, by local authorities or by anyone else to provide the elementary public goods that are key preconditions for progress in any poor market economy.¹ From the facilitation of economic enterprise to the maintenance of social peace or the protection of public health, today’s regimes perform badly. In quite a few cases, they do worse than they did in the still-remembered past. Corruption is ingrained and routine (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2006). As a result, in the typical economy there is some measure of economic growth, but vital investments needed for this to be sustained fail to take place. The better-off solve their livelihood problems privately, while for the majority life remains nasty, brutish and short. Above all, the synergies between economic, social and political progress that are the key to genuine development are systematically blocked.²

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¹ Public goods are defined as those goods (including services) that tend to be under-supplied when their provision relies on the incentives available to private actors because their benefits ‘spill over’ to other members of the community. There is no necessary correspondence between public goods and state or government provision (Leonard, 2000: 7-8).

² Some readers may consider that this paragraph reflects an excessive ‘Afro-pessimism’ involving the application of inappropriate performance standards and under-recognition of the unprecedented progress that sub-Saharan African countries have made in many fields since Independence and particularly in the last 20 years. The argument has been well made that some conventional judgements about SSA’s performance and prospects in the context of the Millennium Development Goals are flawed in this kind of way (Clemens et al., 2007; Kenny, 2005; Vandemoortele, 2009).

Everyone has their own view of who is to blame for this situation, and there is a correspondingly long list of obstacles to be overcome. These typically include both the vested interests of powerful elites in the continuation of the present arrangements, and the pusillanimity and mixed motives of the international community where Africa is concerned. These are important issues. However, the focus of the paper is on none of these matters, but on something else – the elements of the situation that have to do not with power or ill-will, but rather with ignorance and a shared inability to conceive alternative scenarios and pathways.

1.1 A knowledge deficit

At the heart of the current impasse in policy thinking in Africa and about Africa, I believe there is – among other things – a significant knowledge gap. International policy towards sub-Saharan Africa has rested for a number of years on the notion that improved aid flows to the region can be traded for improved country governance. This idea meets some of the political needs of the aid lobby in the North, but it is unrealistic in several ways.³ Among other things, it implies that someone, somewhere, knows how to bring about developmental governance, and this would be simple to achieve if only Africa's leaders would try harder. The truth is, however, that no one really knows how to build the type of governance that Africa needs. The forms of governance that might work better for development under the specific conditions yielded by African history and geography are not known. We know what is wrong, we know why things are not working, but we don't know for sure what would work better, even in broad and imprecise terms.

This lack of knowledge, or perhaps I should say of empirically rooted understanding, extends beyond the policy worlds to the research community specialising in African affairs. It is, to repeat, not the only barrier to forward movement; but it certainly renders the tasks of challenging powerful vested interests and producing coordinated and enlightened action very much more difficult than they would otherwise be.

This paper is concerned with whether anything can be done to address this particular part of the African development dilemma. It addresses the following questions. Is research capable in principle of filling the more important knowledge gaps? If so, what kind of research is needed? What are the obstacles internal to the Africanist research community that need to be overcome in getting the right research on the agenda? Are the findings likely to suggest viable alternative strategies? What chance do they stand of actually influencing the choices and behaviour of important political constituencies or policy communities?

However, it is also the case that the evidence of social progress in Africa is clearest in fields where simple technological fixes (notably, mass vaccination campaigns) have been sufficient to bring about real changes. In most other fields, the statistical and observational evidence is clear: that conditions on the ground fall far short of reasonable expectations, particularly in comparison with what has been achieved in other developing regions over the same period.

³ As argued by Joseph (2009), who also articulates well several of the other premises of this paper.

1.2 *The Africa Power and Politics Programme*

These are large questions. I dare to address them only because, I believe, I have some relevant, specific and practical experience to draw upon, namely the first two years of an international research initiative called the Africa Power and Politics Programme. The APPP is a five-year undertaking by a consortium of research organisations based in Ghana, Niger, Uganda, Britain, France and the USA (www.institutions-africa.org). Our declared aim is to identify forms of governance that would – if widely adopted – work significantly better for development and poverty reduction than the arrangements currently in place. We are dissatisfied with the conventional appeal for ‘good governance’ and convinced by Grindle’s (2007) argument that the priority is to identify solutions that are ‘good enough’ to meet the immediate challenges facing Africa’s peoples. We aim to design and begin to carry out a programme of empirical investigation that will support theorising about what would work better and why, filling a gap in both policy thinking and mainstream academic literature on African development.

One of the points of departure of the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) is that ‘good governance’ provides an inadequate agenda for Africa, because it contains a surfeit of purportedly universal notions about what is good which actually reflect certain rather specific features of the history of the West. We think it fails to reflect the more genuinely universal experience that institutions work better when they build on what exists, make use of indigenous institutional creativity or are otherwise rooted in their socio-cultural context. They work badly when they rely heavily on the implantation, without major modification, of models that have worked well in other times and places (Hyden, 2006; 2008; Shivakumar, 2005).

We began by expressing this metaphorically. Thus, one of our initial ‘hunches’ or working hypotheses was that better results are obtained by economic and political institutions that ‘work with the grain’ of the host society. In other terms, we were interested in how Africa’s own institutional resources and historical legacies might be harnessed for developmental purposes, rather than sidelined or viewed merely as barriers to changes whose desirability has been defined *a priori*. The first task we have confronted as a programme is how to turn this set of issues into a feasible agenda of research.

We do not yet have substantive findings. What we do already have, however, is a reasonably clear picture, based on hard-earned experience, on three topics:

- the major methodological challenges that are posed by the search for new knowledge about the institutions and practices of governance in sub-Saharan Africa today;
- some conceptual issues that arise in attempting to construct new theoretical propositions about governance for development in Africa;
- ways of translating the basic research design into feasible empirical strategies which provide a solid basis for efforts at theoretical innovation.

In each of these areas, I am able to summarise the problems that have been thrown up, expectedly or unexpectedly, what solutions we have been working with, and what the wider implications and learning seem to be. The remainder of the paper has three sections, devoted

to each of the three topics, and a concluding reflection on the implications, issues outstanding and prospects.

2 Some methodological issues

In defining the methods to be used in the programme, we have had to refine our thinking about a) the nature of the knowledge gap needing to be filled, b) the most suitable scope for the research and c) the applicable empirical and analytical approaches. In this section, I explain the nature of the gap as I see it, with brief references to literature that either stops where the really important questions begin or suggests avenues of enquiry that seem promising. A summary of the empirical scope of the programme then follows. Finally, I outline some of the discussion that we have undertaken about alternative approaches, or methods proper, highlighting the reasons for favouring a small-N comparative approach based on case studies.

2.1 *What sort of knowledge gap?*

Some readers may be surprised or sceptical about the claim that there is a gap in knowledge, given the recent outpouring of relevant research in both institutional economics and political science. However, I would insist that existing research-based literature does not provide clear answers to the questions now being posed about Africa.

Some questions have no doubt been settled. On the one hand, the large literature based on regression analysis and cross-country statistics has helped to establish that ‘institutions rule’ when it comes to the major determinants of development performance, including the effectiveness of aid⁴ (Chakravarti, 2005; Rodrik et al., 2004). It has been able to tell us that various institutional arrangements can perform certain essential functions – thereby placing a large question-mark over policy doctrines that prescribe only one basic way of doing things – what Evans (2004) calls ‘institutional monocropping’. However, it cannot tell us which arrangements are right for which group of countries at which stage in their development process. Leading practitioners of this art are inclined to recommend historical case studies using time-series data as the best way of handling these vital questions (Kohli, 2004; Rodrik, 2003). We agree.

On the other hand, the literature on Africa that sits squarely in this historical-institutionalist tradition has been preoccupied with the rather narrow question of what distinguishes African development experience from that of the rest of the world, or from the rest of the world as it now is. This was essential groundwork. Notably, the succession of political scientists who between the 1970s and 1990s adapted Max Weber’s concept of patrimonial authority to the analysis of contemporary African state formation performed an important service in relocating African experience into the mainstream of comparative history (Bratton and Walle, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1972; Levine, 1980; Médard, 1982). The concept of neopatrimonialism was

⁴ Among APPP researchers, several of us have been concerned with the narrow question of how some modes of delivery of development assistance do more harm and less good than others. However, we would also argue that the most important ‘aid effectiveness’ issues have to do with the perverse way the aid business interacts with countries’ political and economic institutions, not with the naïve and technocratic preoccupations with ‘country ownership’ and recipient transaction costs that surround the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (cf. Booth, 2008b; Whitfield, 2009).

useful in that it both identified a key common feature of postcolonial arrangements across the region, and took away the sense that African governance patterns are *sui generis*. Although, as it has passed into common use, this concept has acquired a baggage of negative connotations, neopatrimonialism was and remains a helpfully universal and non-normative concept.

What is true, however, is that establishing the specificity of the postcolonial state in Africa has rather got in the way of some other tasks. One is the task of explaining the general pattern – since it ought not to be taken as explaining itself (Leonard and Straus, 2003: 5-20). The other is distinguishing between the relatively benign and the plainly regressive forms of the general pattern. Those who deploy the concept of neopatrimonialism do not generally imply or believe that it or its manifestations are the same everywhere. But with a few important exceptions (Berry, 1993; Boone, 2003; Englebert, 2002), their work is not mainly or directly comparative across African countries or regimes. This has, undoubtedly, helped to create a gap in knowledge, and it is to this gap that the APPP is addressed. We argue that, when thinking about pathways towards development, it is worth distinguishing among the different forms that neopatrimonial rule can take. We should at least consider the possibility that there are forms of the neopatrimonial state that combine patronage politics with quite a high degree of developmental effectiveness, as recognised 20 years ago by Richard Crook (1989; 1990).

In this respect, we are influenced by those like Khan (2006) and Meisel and Aoudia (2008), as well as Grindle (2007), who question whether good advice on governance for development can be derived by fitting trend lines to large sets of cross-national statistical data, or indeed from the excellent studies now appearing on the broad sweep of institutional development in human history (Acemoglu et al., 2005; North et al., 2009). In the poorest countries of Asia and Africa, attention needs to be focused on immediate priorities and whether the standard, first-best institutional approaches are both practical and affordable. In general, pragmatic solutions that build upon what already exists are preferable.

With Crook and Khan, we suspect that, in Africa just as in Asia, patronage politics and corruption can work in ways that block provision of the public goods that are essential to reasonably inclusive economic growth and human development. But they can also work in ways that, while being second-best in many respects, are nonetheless consistent with rapid economic and social progress. With Moore (1994) and Granovetter (1985), we are persuaded that social networks and other informal arrangements can perform the role of enabling long-distance market transactions to take place efficiently – that is, fulfil the function that mainstream institutional economics assigns only to formal economic institutions. This leads to such questions as: is there a ‘developmental neopatrimonialism’? If so, what does it look like? And what are the preconditions for its emergence?

These are all comparative questions. They are not new. There is, in fact, quite a rich literature on comparative institutions and the state in both Northeast and Southeast Asia devoted to exactly these issues. This literature is the source of many of the ideas we now want to pursue in relation to African examples and issues. There are also some sets of Africa-Asia comparisons which explicitly pose questions for Africanists (Nissanke and Aryeetey, 2003; Thompson and Thompson, 2000). A current programme led from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands (www.trackingdevelopment.net) promises to add very significantly to that literature by undertaking carefully paired comparisons between four African and four

Southeast Asian countries with a view to identifying the critical factors explaining the notable divergences in development performance that immediately come into view.

The preliminary research in the Tracking Development programme identifies three policy variables as particularly significant and possibly sufficient on their own to explain different levels of achievement in shared economic growth and poverty reduction: macroeconomic stability; economic freedom for smallholder farmers; and early adoption of a rural/smallholder bias in public investment. After confirming that the relevant differences are adequately conceptualised in this way, the programme will be investigating the underlying political patterns in more detail.

As a rule, however, Asia/Africa comparisons highlight some missing element in the African policy scenario or institutional framework, but shed little light on the question of what might be done about it. Generally, although the differences in historical legacies and cultural contexts between the regions are often exaggerated, particularly in Africa, direct transfer of Asian ways of doing things is not an option. There is therefore an acute need for comparative work that indicates missed opportunities and possible new avenues drawing on Africa's own experience. Our starting point in APPP is that this is an under-utilised research resource. We need to draw more comprehensively and systematically on Africa's own experience in order to think sensibly about the implications of the growing development gap with East Asia.

2.2 Scope of the research

For the APPP, governance encompasses the exercise of power in the management of society's resources at all levels, from the offices of presidents to the back yards of urban neighbourhoods and the killing fields of local conflict zones. Our research does not limit itself to events and processes at the apex of state power, but aims to assemble a body of evidence on the full range of functions performed more or less badly by organs of the central or local state, from the administration of justice to the protection of natural resources or prevention of infantile dysentery.

There are two reasons for this choice. First, we wish to challenge conventional nostrums about good governance that are taken to apply comprehensively and with few reservations to today's development challenges in Africa. We therefore need evidence that is sufficiently cross-cutting in terms of sectors or types of public goods to support a comprehensive response. Second, by including a variety of national and sub-national issue-areas in the scope of the programme we also maximise our chances of discovering relevant empirical variation on which to test our emerging theories. The insufficiency of such variation has been and remains a challenge for the design of the programme.

On this basis, we have agreed to undertake empirical work in six Research Streams, designated as follows:

- Business and politics.
- State bureaucracies.
- Parliamentarians.
- Local governance and leadership.
- Local justice provision.

- Formalising schooling.

In one case, ‘Business and Politics’, work is under way in two distinct sub-streams, one concerned with general issues and one focused on cotton sector reforms in the Sahel, raising the effective number of streams to seven. Others, notably ‘State Bureaucracies’, may well acquire additional components in later stages of the programme, as we gain experience on how to design worthwhile research in this intrinsically difficult area. Further details are available in Booth (2008a).

While in this respect we wish to cast the net wide, we also want to be able to generate some overarching conclusions about governance for development in Africa. ‘Scaling up’ from findings about, say, local administration of justice or politician-business interactions to general propositions about developmental governance is obviously not going to be a matter of simple inference. Nevertheless, we want the relationship between our evidence and our policy-relevant conclusions to be as compelling as possible. We have therefore tried to ensure that the work in each stream gives us real ‘causal leverage’ on our emerging hypotheses. All the streams are going to be looking for variations in the way different governance arrangements affect key intermediate outcomes that are known to be critical to final development outcomes. Across the streams, we are taking the adequacy of provision of essential public goods as a fulcrum for our empirical work and initial theorising.

2.3 A research approach fit for purpose

In thinking about the design of the APPP’s empirical work,⁵ we have been consciously trying to map out a middle course, methodologically speaking, between the two extremes of multivariate statistical analysis requiring large data-sets and intensive studies of single cases. In this we have been assisted by having at our disposal a multi-disciplinary team, including experienced practitioners of several methodological traditions. Within the team, we have strong advocates of the ‘Manchester’ tradition of ethnographic fieldwork and skilled practitioners of large-N multivariate analysis as well as advocates of the middle way represented by a systematic approach to small-N comparative studies.

We have some agreement that so long as our theoretical propositions remain largely undeveloped, we need a relatively inductive, exploratory approach. Statistical testing would therefore be inappropriate even if relevant data-sets were available or could be affordably generated. Additionally, the subject matter of neopatrimonial governance does not lend itself to standardised measurement. Neopatrimonial states are said to be hybrids of formal legal-bureaucratic structures and informal, patrimonial, arrangements, so it is the variations among such hybrids that interest us. There has to be a concern that any standardised indicators of institutional variation that might be devised would, like those currently available, only capture differences in the formal façade of what happens.

We also have a consensus that we want to go beyond the traditional anthropological monograph approach and its modern variants where a single local case-study or a loosely linked set of such studies provides the sole basis for theory development (Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 13-15). Experience suggests that with such an approach it is possible at most to shed

⁵ For a fuller discussion, see Booth (2008c).

doubt on some prevailing theory or picture of reality. Where the case has been deliberately selected as a 'crucial case' in the context of some already fairly advanced theory construction, definite theoretical advances can be made on the basis of single cases (Gerring, 2007: Ch. 5). However, except in this example monographic approaches do not serve well the development of new theories, and this programme is an opportunity to show that it is possible to do better, without compromising on the intensity and quality of the required fieldwork.

An attractive alternative is, therefore, what is provided by the major strand of methodological thinking in comparative politics and historical sociology which has emerged in recent decades in opposition to the mainstream quantitativism. The major figures in this stream, such as David Collier (Collier et al., 2004), Charles Ragin (1987; 2000) and John Gerring (2007), provide a clear and cogent prospectus to which we are generally attracted. The common elements are a systematic approach to the selection of cases for comparative study, making use of small sets of theoretically interesting variables, and employing complementary techniques of within-case comparison and causal 'process tracing' to buttress and inform the cross-case analysis. In several of the Research Streams now undertaking empirical studies in the APPP, these ideas are already being applied.

The doubts that some of us entertain in this regard reflect our personal and disciplinary antecedents. From the quantitivist side, there is concern that the Collier/Ragin/Gerring approach entails signing up *a priori* to a particular view of the types of causal patterns that are typical of the phenomena we are investigating – the institutional sources of better public-goods provision. The mode of analysis is particularly appropriate to what Ragin calls conjunctural causation, where variables are conceived deterministically and are effective in particular combinations of present or absent conditions. In contrast, standard multivariate analysis is suited to testing probabilistic propositions about the role of individual variables when all other variables are held constant. In the jargon, the underlying causal ontologies are different. Some of us are inclined to think that we probably are in a world of conjunctural causation, making the Ragin approach a wise choice from this point of view as well as from that of effective theory generation. Others have doubts, and are uncomfortable with having ontology determined by methodological choices (Lindberg, 2009: 17).

From the ethnographic side there is a comparable concern about the capacity of the Ragin method to handle the true complexity of the determinations that prevail in the real world. This translates into a worry that in practice the lion's share of analytical attention will go to the small number (in practice no more than three)⁶ explanatory variables used as the basis for the case selection. The opportunities for exploring the complex interactions and change processes found in each field site, and for comparing findings on these topics in a relatively unstructured way across some or all the sites, will in practice get sidelined. The important business of translating meanings between actors' ('emic') and the observer's ('etic') conceptions of the local reality will not be taken seriously enough. Others see these concerns as unjustified, citing what the small-N comparativists themselves say about the importance of rich description and of combining several methods of causal inference in any study.

⁶ In the Ragin approach, the use of more than three variables as the basis for case selection generates an unmanageable number of cases for study.

Whether any of these doubts and concerns are valid will be determined as our research proceeds. In practice, our budgets commit us to relatively small-N exercises, whether in the form of surveys or ethnography, and there are several prior steps to be completed before a Ragin-type approach can be implemented in any of the research streams. The most challenging step, in practice, has been to arrive at a sufficiently plausible set of explanatory variables with which to approach case selection. In other words, what specifically is the meaning of the ‘hunch’ expressed metaphorically in terms of the gains from ‘working with the grain’? And what do we conjecture to be the differences between ‘developmental’ forms of patrimonialism and the sort that merely works to undermine and restrain development efforts?

In order to settle these questions, we have had not just to ransack what we think we know about the facts. We have also had to find our way around some sticky conceptual controversies, on many of which different members of the research team appeared for a period to be taking radically opposing positions. Our exciting internal debate on the subject is the subject of the next section. This discussion is of some intrinsic interest. I also believe that it has enhanced the probability of our formulating questions that can be answered empirically and become the basis for new theorising.

3 Conceptual polarisation: a pathway to theoretical innovation?

In articulating its original objectives, the APPP relied rather heavily on metaphors, and one metaphor in particular. This has been a problem. The idea of ‘working with the grain’ is powerfully expressive in English for anyone who has some experience or carpentry or wood-working of some kind. But in French or for anyone whose practical experience of carpentry is limited, it has almost no meaning and is liable to confusion with metaphors other than the one intended.⁷

Two years into the programme, with six or seven streams of empirical work under way, we are now in a position to be less metaphorical. However, moving from metaphor to concept has not been trouble-free. The ‘grain’ metaphor in particular has revealed an unanticipated potential for fission. The process of clarifying what exactly it means has revealed radically different ways of reading the existing empirical evidence and led to apparently quite strong divergences about how far we have to travel before we can claim to have credible and relevant causal propositions. Whereas we started with a consensus around a somewhat woolly set of propositions, we now have two distinct and seemingly divergent strands to our thinking. The disagreements that have revealed themselves centre upon whether or not the ‘grain’ may be translated as prevailing moral codes, African ‘traditions’ or other legacies of history. The two main positions are outlined in Section 3.1 and the differences between them are further explored with particular reference to the treatment of ethnicity in Section 3.2.

As will become apparent, my view is that this debate has provided a useful element of creative tension within the programme. I do not think the different readings of the empirical literature that are being offered are as far apart and irreconcilable as some of the contributions

⁷ Those connected with ‘grain’ as in the seed of cereals like wheat or maize, for example. In French it appears that the closest metaphor in common use is about stroking the cat’s fur in the right direction.

have implied. The positions that have been expressed, formally in the APPP's Discussion Paper series and more informally in internal papers, refer and respond to differences of opinion which have significant influence right across the field of Africanist social science. This is potentially a problem in so far as the temptation to continue to fight old academic battles threatens our ability to work closely together in generating new empirical findings. On the other hand, it may be a source of strength, since it has forced us to think, early on in our process, about some issues, of a general conceptual and methodological nature, which we are almost certainly going to have to contend with when we attempt to move back from our empirical studies to theorising and policy formulation.

At the same time, a central contention of this paper is that the particular polarisation of views that has revealed itself so far fails to represent the range of possibilities that the APPP needs to consider. In Sections 3.3-3.4, I argue that we need to pay attention to a third strand of social science thinking which may well help to illuminate aspects of our research problem – what is variously labelled rational-choice political economy or new institutional economics. This is illustrated first with reference to ethnicity, and then more generally drawing on an older peasant-studies literature.

3.1 Beyond metaphor: divergent conceptualisations of 'working with the grain'

The grain as socio-cultural legacies

One of the two views that have been influential among us is particularly represented by Tim Kelsall's Discussion Paper (2008a) and journal article (2008b) 'Going with the Grain in African Development?' This interprets the grain metaphor in what is probably the most straightforward way, where the grain refers to some of the more widely observed features of the social fabric of sub-Saharan African societies. This reading runs the risk, as several senior members of our research consortium pointed out at the beginning, of exaggerating the commonalities and continuities through time that characterise African social patterns (references to the grain immediately prompted questions like 'which grain?'). Kelsall is, however, no mere cultural determinist. His survey of the relevant literature is careful, erudite and sophisticated, drawing on modern historiography and some of the best social science research on a large spectrum of countries.

Drawing at key points on the work of Vansina (1990), Lonsdale (1986; 1994) and Schatzberg (2002), Kelsall argues that, not far beneath the indications of transformation, diversity and ambiguity, there are important long-term continuities in African social and political life which we neglect at our peril. What is wrong with 'good governance' is that fundamentally and almost on principle it ignores the challenges and opportunities generated by the way Africans actually relate to each other here and now. On Kelsall's view, we should pay particular attention to some significant institutional patterns that are both widespread across the region and relatively persistent through time. The prospects for more dynamic and peaceful development depend upon harnessing the moral drivers associated with these threads of continuity, which are bound up in various ways with kinship, community and ethnicity.

Kelsall's interpretation of the evidence is not dissimilar to that of Patrick Chabal in a series of much discussed works (Chabal, 1992; 2009a; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; 2006). However, he draws on a wider and in some respects different and complementary evidence base. Crucially, whereas Chabal's work has not until recently focused closely on governance reform as a development policy issue, this is Kelsall's main concern. He is interested, as Chabal is in a recent short piece (Chabal, 2009b), in how African governance might be reconfigured in ways that would lead in due course to better development outcomes.

As indicated, there are those in the programme who have doubts about whether there ever were, and more especially whether there are any more, any significant institutional commonalities across the countries and societies of the SSA region. The most forceful and distinguished expression of this alternative viewpoint comes from Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. Olivier de Sardan's Discussion Paper (2008) expresses strong doubts about the reality and relevance of African 'tradition', even in the broad and qualified terms in which Kelsall uses this expression. On this view, the 'working with the grain' metaphor is helpful in so far as it places a question-mark over the false universality of the good-governance agenda and commits the APPP to exploring institutional forms that might have better results by virtue of being better anchored in local social realities. However, it also constitutes a 'trap'. And not only Kelsall but several other members of the APPP team have allowed themselves to fall into it.

Culture: a conceptual trap?

This trap is not just of the APPP's invention. In fact, in Olivier de Sardan's submission it represents a rather widespread, even dominant, temptation to which Africanists of many different stripes are subject: that of premature generalisation from limited evidence and a deep-rooted tendency to see societies as well ordered, coherent wholes with shared moral values at their core. The basic mindset has its classic expression in the writings of Émile Durkheim and his British functionalist successors in anthropology as well as in the system theory of Talcott Parsons. It has generally been left behind by social researchers interested in Europe or North America, whose fieldwork-based conclusions tend to uncover unexpected amounts of ambiguity, diversity and change. But Africanist social science has made less progress in this respect, and the APPP is above all an opportunity to demonstrate that we can do better.

Like Kelsall, Olivier de Sardan is engaged with broader tendencies and debate among Africanist scholars. His position is avowedly that of the 'Manchester' school of anthropological research, which in the 1950s advanced the view that the then dominant functionalism had lost touch with its roots in the fieldwork tradition begun by Malinowski. It was guilty of perpetuating images of African societies as integrated moral communities and as frozen in time, whereas recent field research pointed clearly to the importance of continuous transformation, individual initiative and transactions, conflict and ambiguity. Known at the time primarily for its innovative attention to the complex networking of urban Africans in Zambia and elsewhere, Manchester anthropology is in a longer term perspective the standard-bearer of an interactionist approach to sociological explanation and opposition to all forms of systemic determinism. In terms of mainstream debates in sociology, it is an approximate analogue of the so-called Chicago school (see further Olivier de Sardan, 2005).

Together with another Manchester adherent of a slightly older generation, Norman Long, Olivier de Sardan has consistently upheld the original critical stance of Max Gluckman and his colleagues, applying it successively to schools of thought that in one sense or another are inheritors of the positions of Durkheim. For Long, this meant a telling critique of the sociological ‘modernisation theory’ of the 1960s and then of the neo-Marxist structural determinisms of the 1970s (1977) and planning ideologies of the 1980s (2001). For Olivier de Sardan, it has meant hostility to the generalisations about African societies given prominence in the works of Bayart (1993; 2005), Schatzberg (2002) and Chabal and Daloz (1999; 2006). It has meant considerable circumspection about the use of concepts like neo-patrimonialism, not because the phenomena they refer to are not real, but because they can function in a way that closes off research into the empirical diversity and complexity of African social and political life.

This concern about over-generalisation is not Olivier de Sardan’s alone. As noted earlier, our collective starting point is that the general concept of neo-patrimonialism has become something of an obstacle to asking sufficiently refined research questions. There are those who go further and argue that this concept is overused also in other respects, and that the empirical reality of East African civil services, for example, is not well captured in these terms (e.g. Therkildsen, 2005). My own view is that these critics rely too often on simplification of the opposing point of view, and do too little to engage with its actual arguments. Armchair theorising is a weakness to which many social scientists succumb from time to time. However, it is unfair to accuse others of this failing just because the evidence base to which they appeal is not to one’s particular taste, be that ethnographic fieldwork, regression analysis or historiography. At the same time, Olivier de Sardan’s observations about the complexities of behaviour and belief revealed by fieldwork, and his warnings about the premature invocation of cultural explanations, deserve to be taken seriously.

Towards an alternative vision?

Olivier de Sardan (2008) proposes that the APPP undertakes empirical research that begins with ‘practical norms’ that actually govern people’s behaviour in different settings and organisational spheres, avoiding premature judgements drawn from secondary literature or previous research. This is the best and only reliable basis for beginning to theorise about what it might mean for institutions to be better rooted in local realities. It is hard to disagree with this sound, if somewhat Spartan, reaffirmation of the value of fieldwork. Nevertheless, it leaves some questions about what the substantive alternative to the Kelsall view really is. The critique that is made of the methodological underpinnings of the culturalist tendency in African studies is elaborate and comprehensive. It remains to be seen how well it can be followed up with a body of grounded theory covering the same substantive issues.

How does all of this matter to the prospects of operationalising the APPP’s research questions successfully? Let me begin to answer this with an illustration of a specific question that has proven particularly controversial, the way we handle ethnicity. As well as illustrating the potential of the debate to generate fission, the topic of ethnicity provides an entry point to some wider considerations about the Africanist research literature and the social sciences more broadly which I think are relevant to a resolution.

3.2 *The place of ethnicity in the debate*

One of the central conclusions of Kelsall's literature survey (2008a) and of some of his earlier work (e.g., 2005) is that we need to start taking ethnicity seriously in a positive sense, and stop regarding it as merely a developmental problem to be overcome. Taking his lead from historians of Kenya such as Lonsdale (1994) and Berman (Berman et al., 2004), Kelsall argues that Africa's developmental disappointments are linked to accountability deficits, but not exactly in the way the good governance agenda would have us believe.

Neither vertical nor horizontal, and neither upward nor downward, accountabilities are effective in most places for most of the time. This is why even elementary public goods remain severely underprovided. But, contrary to the governance orthodoxy, the reason for this state of affairs is not that accountability relationships are entirely absent in these societies, such that the only remedy is the importation of ready-made institutional solutions (Westminster-style parliaments, electoral and anti-corruption commissions, etc.). Some quite effective accountabilities do exist, but they are largely informal and internal to groups or networks defined by kinship, affinity or ethnicity. As a consequence, they are able to play no positive role, and may even be a negative factor, in public goods' provision. We need to think more seriously about ways of harnessing these institutions so that they work to promote rather than inhibit the production of the missing public goods.

Ethnicity and accountability

To my mind, the logic is unimpeachable, at least for countries like Kenya where the research evidence as well as recently notorious turns of event clearly supports the proposition that the internal networks of certain of the large groups, the Kikuyu, Luo and Kalenjin, do contain a real potential for creative as well as destructive accountability – and without 'stretching' that concept too far. There is, I think, some danger of over-generalising from the Kenyan case. In any case the practical implications are rather daunting in several ways. On the other hand, the proposition that identity-based groups might be better vehicles for public goods provision than impersonal state bodies is at the very least an interesting proposition to be pursued through the kind of empirical research that the APPP is undertaking.

Moreover, this is not just an African issue. Some recent contributions to the global debate about how to 'fix' fragile states lay a welcome emphasis on the need for an underlying 'political settlement', and thus the insufficiency and possible perils of formal initiatives such as multi-party electoral contests. Others take a step further and insist on the key role of bargains and cooperation between the fundamental identity-based social groups. Successful state-building is a lot about the building blocks that arise from state-society relationships. In the context of state-building, as well as for constructing substantively democratic systems, the way the politics of identity, including religious and ethnic identity, are handled can make the difference between progress and disaster (Kaplan, 2008; Luckham et al., 2003).

The other main strand in our thinking is hostile to the idea of harnessing ethnicity. It is hostile on at least two grounds. One is about the difficulty of investigating ethnic homogeneity when so little is remaining of it. The second concerns the question of what the possible policy implications might be.

The first objection is that in many African countries today ethnically homogeneous communities barely exist even in rural areas, let alone in major urban centres. This is in part the result of the fact that Africa's history has witnessed massive amounts of ethnic mingling and of redefinition of ethnic memberships and the meaning of ethnicity. Globalisation and urbanisation are furthermore bringing with them a kaleidoscope of new identities in which ethnicity as such is an increasingly small role. Therefore to treat intra-ethnic cooperation at the national level or the degree of ethnic homogeneity of a rural community as a potential variable in explaining differences in effective public goods production is unrealistic.

The literature in comparative politics and institutional economics is fairly clear in suggesting a relationship between ethnic diversity measures and various outcome variables (Alesina and Ferrara, 2005). There are, quite rightly, continuing discussions about how exactly this relationship is to be interpreted (e.g. Englebert, 2002); but it cannot be said that the *importance* of ethnic diversity as a variable is in doubt. On the other hand, its practical relevance may be more questionable. It could be argued that it is not appropriate for the APPP to focus closely on ethnicity because there would be little practical value added. In other words, it is not clear that there would be any usable policy implications – the 'obvious' remedy of concentrating populations in ethnically homogeneous areas being, equally obviously, impractical and dangerous.

What sort of issue is this?

Personally, I think there is enough in the points about operationalisation and about the utility of any policy conclusions to make us wary about grasping the ethnic homogeneity variable, as such, with both hands. On the other hand, my reasons for taking that view are not those expressed by Olivier de Sardan. The alternative I would propose in fact retains the core of Kelsall's proposition.

To the extent that we know already that intra-ethnic networks can have useful spinoffs, interest needs to centre on how this works, or why it is the case – what the mechanisms are. If we can understand that, we might be able to formulate propositions about functional equivalents of intra-ethnic relations – in other words, how the same things might be achieved in multi-ethnic or non-ethnic communities. That would be both innovative and potentially of real policy relevance.

This is not my idea, but comes from a part of the Africanist literature that is not strongly drawn upon by either Kelsall or Olivier de Sardan, which leads to my next point. In our efforts to avoid unconstructive polarisation and find ways of expressing our *a priori* disagreements in empirically testable terms we probably need to search a bit outside the fields of research we have concentrated on so far. As I hope I have made clear both the perspectives I have discussed have respectable pedigrees in the Africanist literature. However, it is arguable that while they represent two fairly established poles of conceptual and methodological opinion, the important poles are three, not two. The debate I have described so far represents one side of what ought to be a three-sided argument, the third pole being rational-choice political economy.

3.3 *Enriching the conceptual pool*

What I am about to suggest is not exactly a ‘third way’. I don’t regard the two-way debate between Kelsall and Olivier de Sardan as exhausted, and I think we can and should pick up several key ideas from each camp. On the other hand, our ability to do so is constrained unnecessarily if we do not draw on the full range of analytical techniques that have proven their worth in the relevant literature, and that includes rational-choice.

Two perspectives or three?

In the field of African ethnicity, it is conventional to distinguish ‘primordialist’, ‘instrumentalist’ and ‘social constructionist’ approaches. The meanings of these labels are clear enough at first sight. That is, people’s ethnic identities are conceived respectively as ‘existing from the beginning’, as generated for largely instrumental purposes or as defined through social interaction. However, it is not clear that the categories are watertight, particularly in the case of the second and third. According to one overview of the debate (Campbell, 1997) the instrumentalist and constructionist poles are in effect the same viewpoint using different languages reflecting the intellectual fashions of two phases, roughly before and since the end of the Cold War. If that is so, this is just a bipolar debate, roughly analogous to Kelsall versus Olivier de Sardan.

Even in this bipolar world, however, it is clear that we are not dealing with distinct and self-sufficient positions but only with matters of relative emphasis. A review of the debate suggests that what appear at first sight as fixed positions are hardly tenable on their own. The same authors seem to belong to different categories at different moments and even at the same moment, at least according to their critics. Thus, Ranger, who did so much to reveal African ‘tribalism’ as a product of colonial invention, did not entirely escape accusations of ‘essentialism’ as intellectual fashions changed in the 1990s (Campbell, 1997: Ch. 5). What some reviewers see as the combination of social constructionist arguments with primordialist generalisations about Africa in Bayart (2005) is perhaps another example.

Some exponents may have remained more doggedly consistent than either Ranger or Bayart, but this has been at the cost of begging major questions. The instrumentalist approach, whose roots include the explanations given by ‘Manchester’ anthropologists’ for the persistent importance of ethnicity among urban immigrants in Southern Africa in the 1950s, stand accused of ducking the question of where the appeal of ethnicity as an instrument came from in the first place. The constructionists’ emphasis on the great fluidity of ethnicity provokes the question of why, if definitions are so fluid, cultural diversity does not rapidly disappear. It is hard for them to answer these questions without stepping onto the slippery slope leading back to positions liable to be dubbed ‘primordialist’ (ibid.).

At least, that is the case so long as one continues to work with the above, basically dichotomous, classification of approaches. In fact, from the perspective of 2009, there is one very significant category missing. Some of the most interesting recent work on African ethnicity and politics has deployed an illuminating combination of historical institutionalist and rational-choice analysis or game theory to begin to answer some of the questions that

have been left unresolved by earlier research and the polarised debate between constructionists and alleged primordialists. A major figure here is Daniel Posner.

Posner's book on Zambia (2005) is partly an exercise in historical institutionalism in the tradition of Ranger. It provides a detailed account of how in the colonial period in Zambia ethnic identities were defined and redefined, partly by initiatives of social engineering by the colonial government and partly by the way Africans responded to the opportunities for advancement. At the same time, it applies simple game theory⁸ to account for why after Independence voting tended to follow strongly ethnic lines despite the fact that voters have little faith in the ability of their co-ethnics to bestow post-election favours on them (suggesting, among other things, that intra-ethnic accountabilities are not, after all, very strong). The same analysis shed light on the otherwise puzzling observation that in Zambia one-party and multi-party political regimes seem to produce very different patterns of ethnic voting, with large language groups and smaller 'tribal' identities getting greater prominence respectively.

In another piece of work, using psychological testing and experimental techniques in Kampala, Uganda (Habyarimana et al., 2007), Posner and colleagues have begun to uncover the mechanisms by which relationships among co-ethnics in a city setting can be better for public goods outcomes than other relationships. Without going into details, the authors find that individuals are more prepared to cooperate and less inclined to free-ride when dealing with others (perceived to be) of the same ethnicity, but firmly reject the hypotheses that this is because they have the same tastes regarding public-goods provision, or prefer to be altruistic with co-ethnics (as might be suggested by some notions of culturally transmitted group solidarity). They also find little support for the view that, in some 'technological' sense, co-ethnics find cooperation easier. They conclude instead a) that the norms sanctioning non-cooperation are stronger among co-ethnics, and b) that sanctions are more likely to be invoked. The reason for the latter is that there are ethnicity-related networks in the city which make non-cooperation more visible and make those not cooperating more 'findable'. 'Free riding' is less likely because it is more monitorable, which is better for public goods' provision.

This experimental finding is congruent with what Miguel and Gugerty (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005) report on the basis of survey-based analysis in rural western Kenya. Comparing socio-economically similar areas, they find ethnic diversity associated with lower primary school funding, worse school facilities and probably poor well maintenance. This is interpreted as resulting from the inability of diverse communities to impose sanctions, which results in collective action failures. In other research, Miguel (2004) shows that these striking results are to some degree Kenya-specific. The differences between ethnically diverse and homogeneous communities in terms of public goods provision are much less in western Tanzania as a consequence of Tanzania's strong nation-building policies since Independence.

⁸ The effort to combine historical institutionalism with game theory is increasingly common in the comparative politics field, implying a rejection of the all-or-nothing notions that used to prevail on both sides of this divide. See Munck (2001) for a discussion and Stein and Tommasi (2008) for another example.

In all these examples, understanding the mechanism by which ethnic relations work to improve outcomes gives us raw material with which to think about ways of achieving the same results which do not necessarily involve ethnicity – functional equivalents in the sociological jargon. Habyarimana et al. draw this policy conclusion:

‘... generating higher levels of public goods provision in diverse communities does not require the segregation of ethnic groups, as many preference-based or technology-based explanations might suggest. Indeed, just the opposite may be needed ... Our results suggest that when individuals believe their behavior is observed by others and that their reputation may influence opportunities for cooperation in the future, social cooperation can happen, even in the face of individual incentives to shirk. The challenge of generating effective cooperation in diverse societies is to make such beliefs equally characteristic of cross-group and within-group interactions’ (2007: 724).

Ethnicity in its place

The work of Posner, Miguel and their colleagues exemplifies a strand of thinking that may be relevant to theorising in the APPP well beyond the particular topic of ethnicity. What it shows about ethnicity is that the continuing importance of identity defined in this way can be explained in ways that add to and could largely supplant explanations in terms of cultural transmission. It shows also that while there clearly is something special about Africa in this regard, this is not necessarily due to Africans being culturally inclined to give great importance to ethnicity. With respect to the other pole of opinion, it shows why, in spite of being quite fluid and certainly constructed, African ethnicity is not pure fluidity but follows certain relatively stable pathways. These are not predetermined by previous history, and they are certainly socially constructed, but the raw materials provided by history are essential to the process. What Marx wrote about 19th century France still applies: ‘Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (1962 [1852]: 247).

It has not yet been done, but I suspect that a comparable reanalysis could be done on several other elements of the social ideology that Schatzberg and Kelsall consider to be widely shared right across Middle Africa. The connected tropes ‘father’, ‘family’ and ‘food’ may be as widespread as these authors claim without that necessarily meaning that the reasons for their persistence and reproduction are cultural, in the sense of being passed on by means of learning or moral indoctrination from generation to generation.⁹ ‘Working with the grain’ might therefore continue to mean harnessing the forces currently associated with kinship or ethnicity, including some that are only contingently associated with them, but there would be

⁹ The qualification is important. The understanding of all human action calls for reference to culture in the sense of identifying the relevant shared systems of meaning, as argued by Chabal and Daloz (2006), referencing Weber and Geertz. That is no less true in the light of Olivier de Sardan’s (2008) warnings to the effect that it is not always obvious what the relevant systems of meaning are (one can be deceived by the ‘official norms’ and miss the ‘practical norms’ that are actually governing the behaviour in question). But as Chabal and Daloz insist at various points, the question of whether it is culture or something else that explains or determines the outcomes of the action being studied is an empirical question to be settled by research: ‘A cultural approach ... is not one that privileges a culturalist theory of social agency and change’ (2006: 193; also 22, 186-197).

less of an implication that this implies adhering to any type of 'culturalist-traditional' vision. It would mean finding ways of overcoming the practical log-jams or collective-action problems which characterise existing modalities of governance, but missing no opportunity for learning from the way ethnicity currently fills gaps for people in this regard.

3.4 *On not reinventing the wheel: precursors and parallels*

Some of the above may seem strangely familiar to some readers. If so, this is probably not accidental. In fact, the case for a three cornered and not bipolar approach to these issues has been made repeatedly in the wider social science literature. In the development field perhaps the closest parallels are with the contributions and controversies which emerged from peasant studies between the 1960s and 1990s. I would not want to exaggerate the homology between that debate and the present one. Nonetheless, I think it fair to say that Norman Long (1977) and James C. Scott (1976) occupied a position, as critics of the 'peasant sub-culture' and 'image of limited good' concepts, that parallels the stance Olivier de Sardan is taking in our debate.

Moral economy versus political economy

This casts Kelsall in a role in which he may not be particularly comfortable, but let us accept that for the purposes of argument. What mainly concerns me is what happened next. Quite quickly, the concept of the 'moral economy' of peasant-ness which was central to Scott's version of the argument came under critical scrutiny from writers like Popkin (1979) who made use of analytical tools from rational-choice theory. They pointed out that the moral-economy concept involves at best a partial break with previous peasant-culture theories (in the final analysis, what differentiates a moral economy from a subculture?). More to the point, it fails to answer or even pose the main question of interest: why, the riskiness of their environment notwithstanding, peasants do sometimes act like communities – that is, cooperate – and sometimes do not. By not taking account of the decisions that peasants take as individuals, it closes off enquiry into patterns of difference among peasant groups or at different times.

It is arguable, moreover, that this inability to focus on patterns of difference remained a constant feature of the approach of both Scott and Long when both of them became interested less in the behaviour of peasants *per se*, and more in the interactions between local communities and the macro-structures of the state. In a succession of books (1985; 1990; 1998), Scott explored the unsuspected powers of resistance to top-down control sometimes displayed by poor and disenfranchised people, and the more or less disastrous results of some typical styles of state intervention. In principle, his analysis ought to be directly relevant to the concerns of the APPP. But it is less interesting than it might be because it offers little in the way of comparative generalisations about exactly which types of state-community interactions are wholly unproductive for all concerned and which, on the other hand, might have some potential for good.

As James Manor (2008) reminds us, Scott's book on the state concentrates on examples of state action that involve 'purblind assertiveness' on the part of state agents dealing with local people. The other books have a similarly narrow focus on resistance. They are extremely

good at demonstrating one important truth, that states can be arrogant and stupid, and peasants can be inventive and, within limits, powerful. However, once made, this point is subject to diminishing returns. One begins to want to know how to distinguish between those interactions between the powerful and the powerless that are relatively productive of positive outcomes, and those which are utterly self-defeating.

The need for systematic comparison

Olivier de Sardan himself (2005: 13-15) has expressed equivalent concerns about the output of Norman Long's school of 'actor oriented' rural research. In the work of this group, Long's important initial insights about the way different kinds of actors encounter each other, transact and generate often unexpected outcomes at the rural development 'interface' turned eventually into a 'closed loop'. The series of well-researched monographs generated at Wageningen University and elsewhere somehow failed to find a way of generating new propositions, such as those that might have emerged if a more deliberately comparative framework had been adopted. I would add that the most valuable comparisons would have been those deliberately designed to explore some definite differences in outcomes from different sorts of 'encounter at the interface' (cf. Booth, 2003)

This remains the challenge for the APPP too. For this reason, as well as proposing that we pay attention to the third point of the conceptual triangle discussed in section 3.3, I want to suggest that we look beyond the Scott/Long type of position when it comes to analysing state-society relationships. As I suggest in the next section, we do not need to start from scratch in doing this. There are various parts of the established literature to which it seems useful to revert at this stage in our thinking in APPP. Two seem particularly pertinent. One is the body of comparative work brought together in the 1990s by Peter B. Evans (Evans, 1995; Evans et al., 1996). The other is the pioneering application of new institutional economics to public service delivery options in Africa by David Leonard and associates (Leonard, 2000).

4 Empirical strategies and some examples

In this final section, I refer particularly to two of the seven research streams into which the empirical research of the APPP is currently divided. There are no particular reasons for selecting these two, except that I have been much more involved in them personally than in any of the other streams. They also make a nice contrast. To give them their proper titles, the two streams are known internally as 'Business and Politics: Developmental Patrimonialism?' and 'Local Leadership and Governance'.

Not all of what follows represents the agreed positions of the teams carrying out the research in these streams. In addition to what has been discussed and formally endorsed by the groups, it reflects my own views on where the streams currently are and where they are heading. It is among other things a contribution to the internal debate.

After providing some background on the similarities and differences between the two streams, I explain how each of them connects with and departs from the previous contributions that I wish to bring into the discussion. The paper then concludes.

4.1 *Introducing the two research streams*

The two streams have several common features. They both aspire to the inductive elaboration of robust and well conceptualised hypotheses on the basis of comparative case-study research, done as systematically as appropriate and feasible. The outcomes of interest in both cases are variations in the adequacy of provision of key public goods. Both are in their first phase of fieldwork at present, aiming to arrive at some firm interim conclusions about the causal propositions that they intend to probe empirically and elaborate further by early 2010. In both cases, there is a determination to identify a small number of institutional variables that influence in non-obvious but important ways the quality of provision of relevant public goods.

The Business and Politics stream is somewhat more advanced along this common pathway. For that stream, it is clearer at what level of abstraction the propositions need to be formulated (the determinants of the business or investment climate under a given national regime), and there is directly relevant secondary literature to draw upon, for both Africa and other world regions. Local Leadership's progress has been hampered by a lack of initial clarity about the level at which the most innovative and interesting propositions might be formulated.

The public goods that matter at sub-national level in sub-Saharan Africa tend to include both the products of local (village-level) self-help, and the activities of public authorities at various higher levels of the administrative hierarchy. Moreover, even very local self-help is affected by the presence or absence of an enabling institutional context, wider elements including national policies which can decisively influence the feasibility of particular sorts of collective action. We are therefore dealing with a multi-layered reality and the explanatory variables need to relate to the functioning of this. If we add to this that public goods at sub-national level are typically provided by some combination or other of various modes or nodes of local governance (elected councils, chiefs, local patrons of various kinds), it is clear that the construction of appropriate concepts and definition of indicators of difference is a huge challenge. Moreover, while there are existing studies and analytical work in abundance on the different administrative layers and modes of governance, it is not usual for studies to embrace the way these combine and interact as local systems.

I believe that different parts of Evans' work provide useful starting points in beginning to theorise and refine the research design accordingly in both these streams. This is not to suggest that Evans gives us the answers we need: he does not. He rather points in a particularly apposite way to the *kind* of answers we need to provide. Leonard is relevant in the same way to the local governance issues.

4.2 *Developmental patrimonialism?*

Evans' well known major work (1995) is concerned with state-society relationships in the field of industrial policy. His propositions about the 'embedded autonomy' that characterises industrially successful states are pitched at exactly the right level of abstraction for the purposes of an investigation of interactions between the business climate and politics under different regimes. At the same time, the point at which his work breaks off is where ours

needs to begin. From the point of view of the APPP project of discovering institutions that work in the current conditions of sub-Saharan Africa, Evans' analysis has two limitations:

1. Its spectrum of cases runs from the predatory state of Mobutu's Zaire to the developmental states of East Asia, especially South Korea. India and Brazil are analysed as intermediate cases. But from our point of view there is too little on the variation around the African norm, including, perhaps, some regimes that are more as well as less predatory than Mobutu's.
2. The pivotal concept with which success is explained – a state bureaucracy's attainment of autonomy from particularistic pressures while remaining or becoming embedded in networks of relationships with private business people – begs several further questions as soon as it is applied to cases beyond the original set:
 - a. Under what circumstances does this particular sort of relationship between state bureaucrats and private sector actors arise, and what tends to prevent its arising;
 - b. To what extent are the elements in the successful mix fixed and to what extent are they variable – what is the scope for variants and different combinations of the elements.

I do not want to get into details about what has arisen out of the, largely literature-based research in the Business and Politics stream so far. This is work in progress and fuller explanations are available elsewhere (Kelsall and Booth, 2009). However, I can report that the combined results of surveys of relevant literature on East Asia and SSA have indicated fairly clearly that we need to be paying attention to three areas in particular:

- whether the distribution of patronage and the collection of rents by the political authorities is centralised or decentralised;
- whether politics is managed in such a way that competition for power between parties defined in ethnic, regional or religious terms is excluded;
- the scope, location and durability of the space for technocratic decision making.

The reader will recognise some themes from previous literature here, notably the centralisation of rent collection from Khan and Sundaram (2000) as well as bureaucratic (embedded) autonomy from Evans. However, none of these previous formulations seem sufficient as they stand to pinpoint what distinguishes relatively successful from relatively unsuccessful instances on the African continent. The management of ethnic politics, in particular, seems to pose challenges that are absent in even the more ethnically divided East Asian cases.

Our current task in Business and Politics is to provide a sharper conceptualisation of these terms, eliminating any vagueness or circularity, test out the definition of specific indicators that can be used in choosing and then analysing specific regimes in a comparative context.

4.3 Local governance and leadership

The relevance of Evans' work to the multi-level, multi-mode problematic that concerns us in the Local Leadership stream is clearest in a symposium edited by Evans and published in

World Development in the mid-1990s (Evans et al., 1996).¹⁰ Several of the contributors were using the concept of social capital, which was high fashion in 1995, when the conference took place. But the shared focus of the contributions is, in effect, the conditions under which the interactions between the state and community-level processes end up being productive of developmental outcomes, rather than predatory or inhibiting. And most of this remains relevant even if we do not wish to make use of the social capital concept as such.

Evans ends up with a formula for ‘what works’ that is very similar to the hypothesis advanced in his main book – what you need is a state that both has autonomy from clientelistic pressures *and* is embedded in networks of social relations. However, in this symposium, in contrast with the book, this conclusion is built up from case studies, including some on relations between states and rural communities. This makes it more immediately relevant to our concerns in the Local Leadership stream.

Sources of state-society synergy

The general question asked is: under what conditions do you get *synergy* between government action and effective community self-help (or, in another formulation, ‘synergy across the public/private divide’)? In other words, when does it happen that a) the actions of the state (or of actors within the state) facilitate the ability of local people to cooperate and control barriers to collective action such as free-riding, and b) local communities are able to obtain from the state those public goods, including regulation of private action, that only the state can provide?

The case studies include irrigation in Taiwan (Lam), industrial workers in Kerala (Heller), rural development in Mexico (Fox), marketisation in Russia and China (Burawoy), and urban infrastructure in Brazil and public education in Nigeria (Ostrom). Evans also makes additional reference to Mick Moore on irrigation, Judith Tandler on health services in N.E. Brazil and various others on Nepal and China as well as his own and Robert Wade’s work in East Asian industrialisation. He argues that although the studies were not designed together to develop and still less test a common hypothesis, they nonetheless seem to him to support these propositions:

- ❖ *Synergy*, as defined above, is the product of ‘the intimate entanglement of public agents and engaged citizens’ (Evans et al., 1996: 1036).
- ❖ What makes the difference between entanglements that produce synergy and those that just produce corruption and predatory forms of clientelism is a combination of *complementarity* and *embeddedness*.
 - *Complementarity* is partly a matter of a sensible division of labour, where the state delivers certain kinds of goods (products and material and non-material services), and groups of citizens provide others. But it is more importantly about the state’s limiting itself to providing the rule-governed environment in which private collective action can flourish. That in turn is partly about the autonomy of the bureaucracy vis-à-vis particularistic social pressures which would make

¹⁰ There is, of course, an extensive literature from both before and since which addresses state-society relationships in a relevant but broader and conceptually more eclectic way (Migdal et al., 1994).

them break or not enforce the rules (this is the element of mainstream institutional theory that is retained).

- *Embeddedness* is about the public actors being sufficiently enmeshed in networks of social relations at the local level that they have the knowledge, contacts, respect etc. to operate effectively. Summarising the East Asian work, he sums this up by saying that ‘it is social capital built at the interstices between state and society that keeps [economic] growth on track’ (Evans et al., 1996: 1122). But, as I said above, we can and should express this in other language.

The public actors in question are different in the different case studies: in some cases they are career civil servants in the irrigation administration; in others, they are newly hired health service providers; in Kerala, they are Communist politicians; and in Mexico, they are politically appointed officials who are doing their own thing against the grain of clientelistic officialdom in the country, especially at State level. So the conceptual notion of complementarity-plus-embeddedness is quite adaptable to different circumstances, including, I would suggest, local governance in Africa.

Constructing synergy

Finally, what generates the right combination of complementarity and embeddedness is a combination of favourable *context* (the historical roots of the state, and the typical form of local social or political organisation) and successful *construction* of relationships, building on what has existed previously. The second element is obviously the more interesting one, because it gets us away from pessimistic path-dependency assumptions, and brings us closer to the APPP idea of harnessing whatever institutional resources exist. As Evans puts it at one point, ‘If egalitarian societies with robust public bureaucracies provide the most fertile ground for synergistic state-society relations, most of the Third World offers arid prospects’ (Evans et al., 1996: 1129). Also, Evans is concerned that even where one is able to locate small social units that are engaging in successful self-help because they happen to have plenty of local ‘trust’ etc., scaling up such experiences is usually a problem. The value of the construction concept is to sensitise us to experiences where deliberate scaling up has worked, building on the willingness to cooperate locally that, Evans argues, is *latently* available in many settings.

I think this provides quite an exciting research agenda that we should pick up and run with in the APPP Local Leadership stream. In one sense it is an old agenda. A decade ago, ‘building synergy’ was central to a number of strong contributions to the comparative analysis of social provision in developing countries (Robinson and White, 2001; Tripp, 2003; White and Robinson, 1998). Tandler’s much discussed work (Tandler, 1997; Tandler and Freedheim, 1994) was concerned very similar issues. But it often happens in development studies that a promising line of enquiry is abandoned when the policy fashions that prompted the initial interest are replaced by new ones. I would argue that this is what happened with the synergy theme, which was bound up at the time with interest in Northeast Asian developmental states and with non-governmental service provision as well as with ‘social capital’ – all relatively fresh topics then but now a bit *passé*. It is actually of more enduring interest, and deserves to be rescued from its premature burial.

As with the embeddedness thesis generally, the question that hangs out at the end of this discussion is: under what conditions is such synergy likely to get constructed? How we

should answer this question is not clear at this stage in our research, and I do not propose that we settle the matter in advance of our main fieldwork. However, the Discussion Papers and other contributions reviewed in Section 3 of this paper are going to provide valuable aids to thinking about case selection and how to analyse the resulting data. As argued in Section 3, this will be more the case if we see the analytical options as three and not two, giving scope to insights from rational choice political economy or new institutional economics.

My personal conjecture is that in the Local Governance and Leadership Stream we may well end up focusing our main attention on three dimensions of variation:

- whether the dominant forms of local leadership, at the village level and upwards, derive their authority from shared concepts of what is right and proper, and not (or not just) from legal-bureaucratic or electoral mandates;
- whether the local communities are endowed with mechanisms that permit them to discourage free-riding and incentivise cooperation concerning public goods provision;
- the extent to which the prevailing institutions both permit and incentivise technical specialists to apply their expertise to the provision of important public goods.

There is evidently some similarity between these areas of interest and the set proposed for Business and Politics, which is not accidental. However, there are also some differences corresponding to the specific nature of the issues at the local-government level.

Why these issues?

As a set, the bullet points above correspond to widely shared concerns and experiences among close observers of several of our study countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. The issues overlap to some extent and can be hard to distinguish, but in my mind they cluster as follows.

The first bullet corresponds to the perception that the much-touted local accountability ushered in by democratic decentralisation programmes is much less effective in incentivising the responsible performance of public office than the system it replaced. Being accountable to voters in district-level elections seems to have perverse effects on the willingness of local politicians to take unpopular measures even when these involve essential public goods. It also generates a vicious circle of campaign expenditure and corruption to recoup the costs. Previous forms of leadership in at least some countries in some periods did a better job, in terms of the provision of key public goods, despite owing little or no formal accountability downwards to their people. Whether or not these ‘chiefs’ were in any authentic sense the bearers of a traditional authority, their performance seems to have benefited from the combination of a measure of effective accountability upwards (to kings in several parts of the Great Lakes sub-region, or to the colonial or postcolonial state)¹¹ and a sense of duty¹² underpinned by local norms.

¹¹ Current comparisons between African and East Asian local government systems would lead one to give most emphasis to the effectiveness of the upward accountabilities and sanctions. In China, Vietnam and Cambodia, local leaders, whether politicians or bureaucrats, are apparently under strong top-down pressure to meet performance criteria that are effectively about delivery of key public goods.

¹² Or at least of the immorality of ‘eating alone’ (Kelsall et al., 2005: 103).

The second bullet obviously corresponds to one of the central concerns of the collective choice branch of institutional analysis, whose most accessible text is the book already cited by Shivakumar (2005). Kelsall's study of Arumeru, Tanzania, is representative of a much wider body of literature and experience in documenting a local people's continuously reducing ability to engage in collective action, including action to restrain their leaders from abuses of power. In explaining this, Kelsall places the main emphasis on livelihood diversification and the resulting loss of 'clear, or homogeneous, individual and collective social identities' (2004: 70). His own and other work also points to the deliberate disarticulation of associations based on self-organisation by the post-colonial state. Some see this pattern repeated in the tendency of donor-funded NGOs to displace genuine self-organisation (Tripp, 2003) and/or for advocacy of 'participation' to have perverse effects when applied in social contexts characterised by social jealousy and witchcraft beliefs (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005b). The first set of causes (livelihood diversification and loss of clear identities) may well be an irreversible long-term trend, unlikely to be influenced by any conceivable policy interventions. But those in the second group are conceivably reversible. Variations in the enabling environment for local collective action therefore seem the most promising focus for the APPP research.

We may well need to consider interactions between the two variables just discussed, and whether the 'embeddedness' that can make local leaders and officials behave in socially responsible ways is linked to the factors that enable or undermine local self-organisation. Historically, in East Africa, this issue has been associated with the policy choice between appointing local officials who are locals or deliberately not doing that, and regularly transferring staff between areas, to prevent their developing ties with local populations.

In Tanzania, at least, it is clear that Nyerere's policy of placing officials (party officials and civil servants) out of their home areas and moving them frequently was good for the construction of a supra-ethnic national identity. It may also have been good for limiting the establishment of networks of corruption between officials and their co-ethnics, although this is by no means the automatic effect of a transfer system. Anyway, this only applied for as long as Nyerere himself remained in charge. But there were also some costs, and many observers think these helped to create the ineffectual system we have today. The abolition of the former system of chiefs and sub-chiefs destroyed existing 'synergies' in many places, we know. The institutionalisation of the new TANU/CCM system removed the potential for officials to be seriously 'embedded' in the sense in which Evans uses this term, while in the long run what Evans calls the 'autonomy' of the local bureaucracy could not be maintained either. Both embeddedness and autonomy were compromised.

It is known, however, that these trends went less far in other countries (they went a bit less far and certainly less quickly in postcolonial Uganda, and much less far in Banda's Malawi). It also seems possible that there are places (or sectors) where it has already been reversed, *de jure* or *de facto*, so that there are differences whose consequences we can explore. For the moment, that is more a hope than an established fact. We have not found it easy to locate actual cases displaying the scale of differences that would be ideal from the point of view of the research. But if necessary we shall work with something less than the ideal.

To complete this discussion, the third bullet point above points to an area of interest that would seem to be distinct from and not reducible to the other two. As Golooba-Mutebi (2005a) has made clear for basic health services in Uganda, efforts to improve service quality

by the route of local participation are unlikely to succeed if the state is unable or unwilling to supervise and discipline its technical staff. This is consistent with the broader set of studies of health and veterinary services brought together in the collection by Leonard (2000) mentioned earlier. The concluding paper in that book explores several issues that are highly relevant to the APPP's research questions, drawing in a critical way on concepts from new institutional economics. They include ways of strengthening the demand for public services by taking the extended family or burial societies seriously as units of medical insurance; and innovative but realistic ways of improving the quality of human health and veterinary service provision by changing providers' incentives. This discussion and subsequent work by Leonard (2008) is a rich source of testable propositions with which the Local Leadership stream must be sure to engage.

5 Conclusions

The next phase of the APPP's research may throw up issues which are comparable in importance and relevance to those discussed in the last section of this paper. But personally I would be surprised and disappointed if these issues were not to be central to the programme. Similarly, we have much more to discuss within our programme regarding the analytical perspectives on ethnicity and other aspects of the question of the 'grain' introduced in the middle sections of the paper. None of this is done and dusted. I have taken the liberty of bringing the ideas expressed in the APPP's published and internal discussion papers to a wider audience partly because it seems to me that they are of wider interest, and partly to invite additional contributions from which our venture can benefit. We hope that those who share our view that the African policy debate is hindered by, among other things, a lack of systematic research into 'what works' will wish to join us in bringing the programme's purposes to fruition.

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