Operationalizing Governance for Sustainable Development

GORAN HYDEN*

Introduction

Development has always been about breaking barriers and cutting across scales. Whether social or technological, the frontiers of development have been expanded without hesitation, typically with more attention to benefits than costs. It is only now, as we enter the third millennium, that scholars and policy-makers have come to realize that our Promethean urge has left behind a legacy of questionable value. “Sustainable development” (SD) is an articulation of this belated concern. Sustainable development rests on three fundamental premises: (a) that we must live on the planet not as if we are just short-term visitors but as if we are here to stay; (b) that we must take a holistic approach to dealing with our livelihood predicaments; and, (c) that people themselves must have an interest and stake in any effort to improve their livelihoods.

This more comprehensive and inclusive way of defining development calls for new political and institutional arrangements. Not only policy, but also the institutional framework within which people act, must be amended to pave the way for a more sustainable form of development. Whether in economic, social, or political terms, there is need for an enabling environment, in which individuals and groups can participate without fear and realize their developmental ambitions. In recent years, this set of concerns has been addressed under the common label of “governance.” This article will begin by tracing the multiple intellectual origins of governance and then proceed to discuss how it may be operationalized in an SD context.

The Intellectual Origins of Governance

Despite the recent popularity of governance at both the practical and theoretical level, there is little agreement concerning the meaning of the concept. Academics and practitioners tend to talk past each other, as do scholars in different academic fields or disciplines. A review of the literature, however, suggests that these

* University of Florida.
differences tend to crystallize along two different dimensions, one regarding the substantive content of governance, the other regarding its practical character. Thus, along the first dimension, there is a difference between those who view governance as concerned with the rules of how to conduct public affairs and those who see it as steering or controlling public affairs. Along the second dimension, the difference is between governance as an activity and a process. As Figure 1 indicates, these differences tend to coincide with disciplinary or institutional boundaries. Students of public administration share with international development agencies the notion that governance is about steering or control, but differ in that the former regard it as process while the latter treat it as activity. International relations scholars share with students of comparative politics the notion that governance is about the “rules of the game” while they have divergent views on its character, the former treating it as process, the latter as activity.

The literature on governance in the field of public administration has grown in recent years as more and more scholars have recognized that conventional jurisdictional boundaries of administration no longer have the same relevance as in the past in explaining what happens with formulation and implementation of policy. This was first noted by European scholars but it has now also become an integral and increasingly prominent part of American public administration theory. In one of the first and more comprehensive treatments of governance, Kooiman (1993) and his colleagues argue that governance is comprised of purposeful actions to guide, steer or control society. They recognize that this process involves both governmental and nongovernmental actors. Governance is the regularized,