



Distribution: LIMITED

E/ECA/DISD/CODI.3/8
18 April 2003

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Original: English

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Third Meeting of the Committee
on Development Information (CODI)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
10 – 17 May 2003

Governance, Information and the Public Sphere

by

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Abstract

This paper introduces the main factors behind the current debate on governance and its relevance to the African continent. It highlights Africa's recent achievements in improving its political governance image and the difficulties the continent is experiencing in improving its economic governance image. Recent Transparency International reports reveal that the African continent as a whole is far less corrupt than some of its transition economies' trade and investment competitors. Such relatively positive reports challenge the norm and lead to the question whether framing the good governance debate on trust building between government and citizens based on better access to information, transparency and accountability rather than divulging an image of a corrupt continent would yield better results.

The paper proceeds to elucidate the role information plays in the governance debate with reference to information in general and ITC in particular. Four perspectives have informed the tenets of the role of information in 1) public financial management, 2) private sector governance, 3) decentralization, and 4) civil society participation and empowerment. Together these perspectives form the bulk of the paper, with a closer look into how information can improve and enforce the quality of governance in the domains specific to each perspective.

A section is devoted to information in the democratic governance. It is premised on the ethos and core values enshrined in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the right to seek and receive information and ideas) and the UNESCO's Declaration on Universal Access to Information. The primacy of the Covenant and the Declaration for political, economic, public policy and administration governance is explained.

The paper is concluded with two sub-sections: the first enumerating the main challenges to information governance in Africa and the second delineates a set of discussion point to identify the types of questions involved the four perspectives described and explain thereof. On the whole, the paper argues that the dynamic relationship between information, governance and the public sphere is complex and can be strengthened only when the overall political context within which they interact is governed by the ethos and core values of democratic governance.

Contents: Abstract (p.1); introduction (pp. 2-4), governance from contestation to consensus (pp. 4-5); why is the growing interest in democratic governance (pp. 5-8); public financial management accountability (pp. 8 –10); private sector governance (10-11); decentralization ((pp. 11-12); community empowerment and participation (12-13); information in the governance debate (pp. 14 – 15); conclusions (pp. 15 – 19); references (18-21).

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INTRODUCTION

The organisers of this workshop invited me to address five substantive issues in the current governance debate: information, decentralisation, participation and empowerment, public financial management accountability and the role of the private sector.² These are very important and broad themes that cannot be covered in their totality with any sense of justice, or treaded in isolation from one another. Within this perspective, it is imperative that I deal with the challenges confronting Africa's struggle for better governance, with the particular vintage point of information and its pervasive role in the governance debate.

Instead of adopting the sequence of the terms of reference given thereof, I commence with introducing the governance scene in Africa and then delve to engage public financial management accountability and the role of the private sector. While empowerment, participation and the role of civil society are directly within the public sphere, information and decentralisation are cross cutting themes that will obtain where relevant.

Therefore, the generic title “Governance, Information and the Public Sphere” adopted for this presentation reflects the complexity of the issues I submit to contend with. Governance and information are obvious candidates for this undertaking, while the public sphere’s candidacy may require some brief explanation.

Public sphere is the space where civil society strives to influence how public goods are controlled, managed and distributed. It is the domain where multiple stakeholders (social forces, interest associations, private sector operators, religious organisations, pressure groups etc) interact to ensure that the governors are responsive to the concerns and legitimate demands of the governed. Understandably, an empowered civil society has the responsibility for holding both the public sector and the private sector accountable for their actions and the potential consequences these actions may entail for society. A vibrant public sphere therefore is at the heart of any prudent multi-stakeholder democratic governance regime.

What I hope to achieve is an explanation and an understanding. An explanation of the significant role information plays in fomenting democratic governance and an understanding why in the search for adequate, efficient and effective governance, information is too important to be allowed to degenerate into the void of a missing link. However, I hasten to add that I only scratch the surface of this important debate and leave the in-depth analysis for those entrusted with elaborating the subject matter of this workshop. The task before me, therefore, is to provide sufficient grounds to highlight information’s promising role as a major contributor to the improvement of the quality of African governance.

Let me commence on a positive tone. The current debate on better governance for African could have never been possible without the democratic and associational revolution that swept through the last two decades of the 20th century. Despite bleak and sometimes disheartening reports on the health of African governance, it is my conviction that Africans have gone along way in the effort towards creating better governance and governing institutional frameworks than ever before. This note is not based on wishful thinking or unfounded optimism.

During the last two decades, the majority of African countries have successfully managed the transition from military rule, military socialism and ethno-nationalist dictatorship to competitive multi-party democracies. The transition has occurred not without difficulties and setbacks, including a few democratic reversals, military coups and insurgencies, but these

² The Terms of Reference for this paper are concerned with a) Information and decentralisation of governance; b) community empowerment and participation, including the role of civil society; c) public financial management and accountability; and d) the role of the private sector.

were in the minority and most of them were contained and shortly embarked on the path of democratisation. Many leaders long considered immovable from the seats of power have disappeared from the political scene, while others have managed the transition to democracy and lived to see their nationalist and revolutionary parties ousted by new political parties.³

During the last 50 African elections, only five external election observation missions were commissioned to verify whether the elections were free and fair compared with 45 election observation missions in the previous 50 elections. This a pleasant and comforting statistics which illustrates that even by Africa's short time-scale of experimenting with the fourth wave of democratisation, Africans are putting their faith in democratic governance as a preferred system of government.

With democratic governance being instituted and broadly accepted as a norm and not an exception, the consequences of democratic transition are becoming visible in many African countries. Here again one can recall a few positive developments. The number of peoples prosecuted for seeking to create associations, express divergent views from those of the ruling party or government, or poised to contest elections or seek political offices against the preferred candidates of the "state party" is a dismal fraction of that of the closing decade of the 20th century.

Despite human rights reports and genuine concerns with restrictions on civil rights and political activities, silencing critics and opponents, intimidation of human rights defenders, in some African countries, the overall picture is positive compared with two decade ago.⁴ Today, there are more engaged civic associations and NGOs coupled with an increasing governmental recognition of the need to do better in the field of human rights. During the last five years, fewer Africans were detained for political activity and the United Nations Human Rights Commission condemned only a handful of African governments for human rights violations.

This note should not be mistaken for a call for complacency, because there are still stark cases of human rights abuse in some countries. This is particularly so in the cases of recently democratising countries, virtual democracies, democracies without democrats or collapsed and war-stricken states. In some countries, the situation is worse in relation to civil, cultural and political rights of ethnic and religious minorities, women and children. However despite these holes in the heart of the continent's conscience, Africa has created its own Human Rights Commission, with wide powers, even though it is yet to take more proactive role similar to those played by other regional human rights commissions.

To be sure, whether for good or worse, I'm not aware of any African country that has not attempted some form of economic, fiscal, public sector and civil service reforms. Nor am I aware of any African government that has not reformed subsidised public service programmes or created new frameworks for private sector participation, including enhancing budgetary discipline- among others.

My own research and observations, supplemented with a large array of literature, surveys, documents and materials published in internationally recognised journals and other forms of publications, convinced me that Africans have done considerably better than expected in promoting reasonable modicum of governance structures and practices.

Are African democratic governance and institutions perfect? Of course not. Political crises and turmoil are the testing ground for the ability of any democracy to survive the wrath of power-hungry politicians and their capacity to exploit political frictions over severe ethnic,

³ See Mohamed Salih (2001) *African Democracies and African Politics* and Mohamed Salih (2003) *African Political Parties: Evolution, Institutionalisation and Governance*.

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2001) Annual Report.

regional, economic and social divisions and make them even harder to crack. Africa is not an exception.

Contrary to Africa's achievements in the field of political governance, it has done far less in promoting economic development and improving the quality of life of its citizens. However, this should not blind us from acknowledging some achievements in empowering the private sector and successful privatisation of public enterprises until recently considered lost cases.⁵ The mismatch between improved political governance and worsening socio-economic conditions for the majority of the African peoples is cause for fear and concern. It is a cause for fear because poverty produces its own vices. It is a cause for concern because consolidating the ethos of good governance is more difficult when survival predominates over the possibilities of peaceful, accommodating and tolerant coexistence.

GOVERNANCE: FROM CONTESTATION TO CONSENSUS

From the inception, the governance debate was polarised and hugely contested within the policy and the academic domains and as such operated in isolation from each other, although for different reasons. It is common secret that the debate was even met with strong resistance from the more radical elements in both academic and policy domain. Sensitivities emanating from the fear of losing sovereignty over decision-making on important national issues such as the economy were matters of concern for state operators and public policy makers. A number of rebellious African academics questioned the sincerity of the external forces that flagged the debate and voiced their apprehension of the gross underestimation of the complexity of what was at stake if "good governance" is externally imposed.

Considering Africa's modest achievements in this field, resistance to the quest for better governance has mellowed down considerably. The most compelling factor behind this receptivity cannot be explained merely against the backdrop of external demand in isolation from internal pressure for democratic governance. It is the transformation of the ideals of good governance from state and donor agency-driven to popular demands voiced by the governed that has begun to reshape the quality of African governance. Africans perceived and acted upon good governance as a positive value and a cherished ideal that they require of their governments and other stakeholders - private and civil society-centred associations and networks.

In seeking some points of convergence, within this reconciliatory tendency, governance is increasingly broadly defined as a condition and a practice. As a desirable condition it denotes that those who exercise political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a nation's affairs should be held accountable to the governed through institutionalised legal and administrative instruments and regulatory frameworks. In the language of global economic governance, "governance is the way power is exercised in managing a country's economic and social resources for development".⁶

As a practice, the determinants of governance are by now common knowledge.⁷ There is no precise order as to a matter of priority because all of these determinants are important and

⁵ Cases such as Kenya Airways, Ecobank of West Africa, a handful of successful Stock Exchange cases, increased private sector involvement in infrastructure and service delivery, among a multitude of other examples.

⁶ World Bank 1992.

⁷ In the dominant discourse, the determinants of governance include freedom of information, ensuring citizen voice in decision making processes, enforcing a regulatory framework and institutions of market economy, rule of law – systems that secure property rights and enforce contracts, effective and independent judicial, financial and auditing processes and accounting standards; transparency, accountability, maintenance of civil peace and order, curbing corruption; providing competent civil service; ensuring citizen voice/participation in decision-making processes; regulatory framework

inclusively reinforcing. However, I highlight information as matter of urgency and priority for its role in consolidating and ensuring the sustainability of the gains attained so far is indisputable. It is obvious that freedom of information, enforcing a regulatory framework and institutions of market economy, rule of law, financial and auditing processes and accounting standards; transparency, accountability, are within the scope of the reference points for this speech.

Democratic governance denotes that for any government to be legitimate, its authority (the legitimate exercise of power) should derive from periodic and regular free, fair contested elections through an inclusive participatory process. Popular sovereignty is exercised and expressed in daily practices of political and human rights guaranteed under constitutional and legal arrangements restrain the holders of power and protect those who could be subjected to their whim. Not only that the holders of political power are held accountable to parliament and the state's regulatory institutions, executives are also held accountable by law through an independent judiciary and other legal and regulatory frameworks.

In an institutional perspective, governance involves creating capable political actors who understand how political institutions work and are able to deal effectively with them (Anderson 1990: pp. 196-97). According to March and Olsen (Ibid. 28), institutional governance involves building and supporting cultures of rights and rules that make possible the agreements represented in coalition understandings. It involves building and supporting identities, preferences, and resources that can make a polity possible. It involves building and supporting systems of meaning and an understanding of history.

Essentially, the consensus on governance includes what regional and global governance institutions and organisations have prescribed in lieu of democratic governance content and practice.⁸ Although no debate on governance is theoretically or ideologically neutral or produces identical policy prescriptions, the main thrust of the academic debate is premised on interrogating rather than affirming or confirming the status quo. To that end a constructive engagement in the governance debate should commence with the question what are the main factors that have determined the emergence of this debate in the first place.

WHY IS THE GROWING INTEREST IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE?

Although, the governance debate is broad and all encompassing, in Africa it is narrowly conceptualised to mean, in large measure, the strengthening of anti-corruption campaigns by introducing legal and regulatory reforms. I should not be mistaken for harbouring a lesser prudent anti-corruption stand. Campaigns to combat anti-corruption derive constitute important interventions on their own right.

However, at a larger synthesis, the need for improving the quality of governance in any society goes far beyond this narrow objective, although without stifling it. In the literature, the developments that militated the shift from government to "governance" during the last three decades of the 20th century were global. Pierre and Peters (2000: pp. 50 – 69) summary of these factors reveal that these factors are much broader than the anti-corruption discourse:

and institutions of market economy. (Adapted from World Bank: *Governance and Development*. Washington, D.C. 1992, p. 58).

⁸ Governance in the academic debate: Behavioural compliance with the rules governing social, economic and political life (public policy, psychology), ordered democratic rule (law, jurisprudence, security); Social life (re)structuring through markets, hierarchies and networks (economics, institutions, markets and the state); consultation and bargaining between major actors (conflict negotiation and conflict management); political system(s) in which the state is governed (theory of the state); self-organising and self-steering networks (civil actors, interest associations; socio-cybernetic system (ICT, education); mechanisms governing the exercise of power (democratic political theory, public administration); ethics of governing (humanities/philosophy).

1. ***The financial crisis of the state***: During the last two decades of the 20th century, the governance debate has been propelled by the decline in the state capabilities, particularly its financial resources. Some states were rapidly accumulating budget deficits, and debts beyond political control. Economic growth was sluggish if not negative and the debt burden assumed unmanageable proportions, exceeding in some cases budgets of whole social programmes such as health and education.
2. ***The ideological shift towards the market***: The ideological shift towards economic liberalisation, the market and individualism posed a major challenge to the state. This shift meant that the state has to redefine its role in society if it were to maintain an effective role. As the only institution entrusted with the collective public good its steering function entails concerted public-private action instead of perceiving of the private sector as adversary.
3. ***Globalisation***: Globalisation has had a wide range of direct and indirect consequences on the state traditional ability to steer society and the economy. Concomitantly, globalisation has created new preconditions for domestic policy choice, which the state can no longer make without due considerations to global economic and environmental governance. In short, globalisation has encouraged the development of global institutions for new forms of governance to which the state has to respond adequately and from which it cannot escape or else risk isolation. In an increasingly interdependent world.⁹
4. ***State failure***: The literature on state failure, even state collapse in Africa is abundant and I do not wish to delve on it here. However, it is safe to argue that peoples disappointment and frustration with the state failure to live up to its promises as an engine of development, an arbiter of diverse claim, the maintenance of peace and order and the guardian of the public good has manifested itself in public frustration and distrust of the state institutions.¹⁰
5. ***Emergence of the New Public Management***: The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm enters the debate on governance from two perspectives: 1) It accords less role to the state and more to market forces, whereby instead of intervening in service production and delivery, politicians are left primarily with policy and agenda-setting. Self-organising service production and providing institutions should be conducted in a market-like fashion and by doing so according larger states to the private sector. 2) NPM advocates less input control and more emphasis on evaluation and performance, with the criteria used in the evaluation largely driven from the private sector more than from bureaucratic theory (Pierre and Peters 2000: pp. 64-65).¹¹
6. ***Social change and increasing complexity***: Social change in the realms of gender relations, increasing environmental consciousness as a result of mounting environmental problems, expansion of education and with it new demands for better public amenities.
7. ***New sources of governance***: The end of the Cold War created an atmosphere where the dichotomy between state governance and societal governance has narrowed. Instead, a new opportunity for the emergence of a continuum between state-centred and society-centred governance became possible. On the other hand there is the growing significance of regional (ECA, AU, SADC, ESCWA among others) and global organisations (WTO, World Bank and the IMF), particularly in advancing the debate on governance, with a strong on expanding the perspective on public financial management accountability.
8. ***Legacy of conventional political accountability***: Governance invites actors who are not necessarily part of the government to exercise a role in accountability through civil society, promotional and protective interest groups such as labour unions and none-governmental organisations.

⁹ Kennedy, Messer and Tandon (2002) *Global Trends and Global Governance*.

¹⁰ An excellent account on the failure of the decentralised state in Africa, refer to Wunsch and Olowu (1990) *The Failure of the Centralised African State* and Hyden, Hasting, Okoth-Ogendo and Olowu (2000) *African Perspectives on Governance*.

¹¹ Also see Barzelay (2001) *The New Public Policy Management*.

However, when corruption is added to the above list of factors, it could be seen as the major factor propelling the debate on African governance as a matter of urgency perceived by global economic governance. Although however, there is no denying that substantial improvements have occurred in the political governance environment. These improvements have also contributed to economic gains through economic policy reforms and improved legal and political instruments and frameworks to combat corruption. For instance, African Development Report (2001: 121) purports that, "although the degree of corruption in Africa must not be underplayed, Transparency International comparisons with other Asian, Eastern European and Latin American Countries supports the argument that the extent of corruption in Africa is often overstated. In this respect, it might be remarked that the average score for Africa fares better in comparison with scores of individual countries that are highly regarded by international investors - for instance, Mexico (3.3), Thailand (3.2), China (3.1), Romania (2.9), India (2.8), Russia (2.1) and Indonesia (2.8)".¹² Transparency International findings speak for a continent where imagery rather than reality have shaped the current perceptions about the political health of its governance. This does not mean that corruption has disappeared, but it means that a political governance environment conducive to the freedom of the press and freedom of expression avail the political space necessary for speaking out against corrupt practices. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Tanzania have developed specialised investigation agencies to combat corruption.

In short, beside corruption, there are equally other compelling reasons for propelling the debate on governance such as those outlined above. Therefore while we cannot deny corruption's negative role in undermining all other dividend expected to accrue to society by concentrating all our efforts on combating corruption we miss out in other important issues too. The question is whether the emphasis on corruption has delayed progress on issues such as how to shape globalisation, how to develop administrative innovations to tackle the financial crisis of the state, how best to use information to bolster a positive about the continent etc.¹³

Although I do not believe in conspiracy theory from the outset, I have more than often being tempted to feel that "the corrupt African's" discourse must have been coined by African global and regional competitors. These competitors surely seek to bolster their image as honest "good economic governance", while tarnishing that of Africa by portraying it as a "corrupt continent". The "corrupt Africans" discourse has as a matter of fact produced a very serious backlash in undermining 1) inter and intra-African communal and exchange trust norms and 2) external aid/investment confidence and trust in doing business with Africans. This has been the case despite the fact that the majority of Africans apply high levels of business ethics and self-regulating corporate social responsibility. If this is not true, the next question is who are those African men and women who do business with the rest of the world and deliver on promises. These must surely be trusted individuals and groups who conduct business globally with all what it entails, including trust, good governance practices and commitments.

Undermining trust in a continent is a serious matter, which if left unguarded will continue to undermine the continent's ability to attract investors, jobs and employment opportunities, factors that are important for Africa's development. In Braithwaite's (1998:69) contention, undermining trust is undermining "the dynamic qualities that characterise a well-functioning society and both types of trust (communal and exchange) need to be strong to check the weaknesses of the other.

Democratic governance provides the institutional mechanisms that allows citizens to make judgements not only about political platforms but also about the trustworthiness of leaders

¹² Transparency International <http://www.transparency.de>

¹³ For popular accounts see Gerald, Dwivedi and Jabbra (2001) *Where Corruption Lives*.

and to signal the type of trust that they believe is necessary for good governance at any moment in a nation's political history”.

Two important contingents to a trustworthy government are democratic governance and information. Let me begin with democratic governance. Levi (1998: pp. 94-6) suggests that democracy influences the behaviour of citizens in five ways:

- i. *Protection* of civil liberties, free speech, free assembly, and free press expedite access to information that enable citizens to assess the actions of government officials and of other citizens;
- ii. Democratic protections facilitate the *ability of citizens to act on stable preferences*;
- iii. Democracy can actually *change preferences*. By delimiting behavioural choices, institutions reveal what actions the collectivity believes are acceptable;
- iv. Democracy fundamentally *changes the behaviour of governmental actors*;
- v. Democracy *increases the probability of contingent consent*. To that extent, democracy ensures impartial institutions, policy making processes that take into adequate considerations the concerns of all those with stake in the outcome, and respect for recipients of government services, it increases the trustworthiness of government.

The second aspect of contingent trust is information. Trust cannot be generated when information about the performance of governance and degree of compliance with commitments is absent, controlled or shrouded with secrecy and suspicion. Projecting Africa as a corrupt continent has, in my view, produced negative consequences even on those honest and trustworthy governance institutions. The “corrupt Africans” discourse has in effect contributed to apathy and undermined the authority of those Africans who live by positive ethics and value systems that the global governance regime refuses to acknowledge.

Turning the argument around, Africa could do better by building trustworthy relations between citizens and the state and impacting on the factors that contribute to distrust - and corruption is surely one of them. A trustworthy government is not one that has been labelled corrupt and therefore expected to redeem itself of corruption by applying technical and legal regulatory measures alone. Trustworthy government is one that has "procedures for making and implementing policy that meet prevailing standards of fairness, and it is a government that is capable of credible commitments" (Levi: Ibid: p. 88).

Public financial management and private sector accountability are amongst the domains where government could be seen acting as a trustworthy institutional mechanism for managing public affairs. The first belongs to the domain of the state and societal governance and the other to the domain of market and private sector governance. Because they should operate transparently and under the watchful eye of a public sphere of civil society, NGOs and interest associations, I introduce them simultaneously in the following sections.

PUBLIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Public financial management in its broadest sense links a community's aspirations with its resources, and the present with the future. It therefore lies at the very heart of the fiscal policy of government.¹⁴ In essence, it deals with managing, directing, administering or controlling the financial activities of government, including accounting, risk management and internal control procedures and audit, planning and budgeting, revenue and expenditure, asset and liability and reporting. At a larger synthesis, the government performance in managing public

¹⁴ Permchand (1999), p. 47.

finance is controlled by a large array of governance institutions ranging from the central bank and the auditor general to be legitimate.¹⁵

The main objective of public financial management governance is to ensure transparency, accountability and sound management of the revenue, expenditure, assets and liabilities of central and local government institutions. In the field of public financial management, accountability does not only refer to control of abuse, corruption and public power, it also includes the assurance that public resources are used for the public good and not for private gains and interests. In this regard, accountability is used as the benchmark against which governance performance is judged.¹⁶

In the realm of public financial management, accountable governance is deemed to be good government and carries with it connotations of advanced democratic governance. Governments described as unaccountable or not properly accountable, are likely to prove fertile ground for the cultivation of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, corruption and every type of abuse of power (Pyper 1995: p. 1). Generally, public sector accountability, particularly public financial accountability was conventionally narrowly defined as financial administration. Accountability was ensured within a legal framework that provided details on the management of public finance procedures, files, documents and any records relating to the accounts of government departments, including local and municipal government. Such a legal framework also purports that an Auditor General is empowered by law to require and receive from members of the public services such information, reports and explanation as deemed necessary for the proper performance of his/her functions.¹⁷

However, in the current debate on governance, the creation of accountability relationships seeks to satisfy a range of aims in order to safeguard public finance and ensure that it is used to achieve the public goals government promised to deliver. Accountability, in this important sector of government functions consists of four elements:

- i. *Control* of abuse, corruption and misuse of public power;
- ii. *Assurance* that public resources are being used in accordance with publicly stated aims and that public service values (impartiality, equality etc.) are being adhered to;
- iii. *Improvement* of the efficiency and effectiveness of public policies;
- iv. *Legitimacy* enhancement of government (Flinders (2001: 9).

The thesis model (Flinders Ibid.) rests on the role parliamentary, judicial and managerial accountability to ensure the practicability of the determinants of governance (cf. footnote 6).

In Africa, several institutional arrangements and instruments for ensuring financial accountability have been devised (regulatory, public account committees, national audit offices, parliamentary committees and parliament oversight) to deal with the actual process of public financial management accountability.

However, in recent years the responsibility for ensuring public financial management accountability has recently come under the scrutiny of at least two non-governmental sources: First, global and regional donor agencies and financial governance. Second, the increasing role played by civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Because African countries are generally aid dependent, their public financial management performance is

¹⁵ Ibid. describes seven paradigms informing the changing nature of public financial management: a) control through budget line-item, b) performance budgeting, c) planning, d) macro-economic policy, e) fiscal consolidation, f) corporate practice and g) governance. The governance paradigm deals with transparency of government transactions, accountability and ethical practices. The latter is related to issues of government trustworthiness as discussed on p. 7 of this paper.

¹⁶ Michael and Hupe (2002) *Implementing Public Policy: Governance in Theory and Practice*.

¹⁷ Premchand (2000) *Control of Public Money: The Fiscal Machinery in Developing Countries*.

under the scrutiny of global (World Bank, International Monetary Fund), regional donor agencies (European Union Policy against Corruption),¹⁸ regional Banks (African Development Bank) and NGOs (Transparency International), among others.

The question that begs for an answer is to what extent are citizens aware of these developments, including their right to information that could empower them to hold their governments subject to civic scrutiny as well as regulatory oversight. Admittedly, the dependence of the anti-corruption derive on technical approaches might have limited the scope and possibility of civil society agitation for a more far-reaching societal demands that goes far beyond the concerns of donors and international money lenders with debt recovery.

PRIVATE SECTOR GOVERNANCE

As the private sector began to play more robust role in African development, in some countries, the public sector no longer holds the monopoly over development or still behaves as if it is still the only institution entrusted with the production, supply and distribution of goods and services.¹⁹ Since the early 1990s, many African countries have embarked on implementing a large-scale privatisation (i.e. the legal transfer of property rights from the state to private agents, including marketisation or corporatisation of state-owned enterprises) initiative. As a result and in most countries state-owned economic enterprises, except public utilities, are by now own by the private sector. The dispute over the efficacy of privatisation is still raging and I do not wish to rehash or rehearse it. However, corruption, financial mismanagement and inefficiency, under capacity utilisation were often among the factors cited to justify privatisation. A more prominent factor though is that the economic policy reforms in which Africa and the rest of the world have embarked are squarely premised on the ethos of free market in which the private sector is destined to play a pivotal role.

If the private sector is to assume greater role in the economy, shaping its governance is hugely important not least because of its proximity to community and locality, the private sector has the potential of inflecting serious harm in areas critical for societal well being. Such areas include employment conditions wage structure, environmental protection, child labour, human rights at work, tax evasion, discrimination, product safety and quality etc. As the ethos of the current free market arrangements intensify and the state direct role in the economy recedes, the more significant it is to develop parallel good governance principles and practices to regulate and control private sector activities, without rendering it ineffective.

Ideally, private sector governance should operate at two distinct levels: first, self-regulating and self-steering governance embodying governance-as-networks and governance-as-communities.²⁰ Governance as-networks implies that the private sector is an inseparable part of a wide variety of actors and policy sectors, while governance-as-communities indicates that communities of interests, including the private sector and civil society institutions should be able to solve some of their problems with minimum state intervention. Second, regulated public sector governance where the state has the responsibility to ensure that regulatory and legal reforms are implemented. Such reforms should ideally aim at eliminating monopolistic tendencies, removing barriers to private sector development, deregulating private sector activities as well as curbing potential abuse of human rights in the work place and ensuring environmental quality control.

¹⁸ See Bräutigam and Botchwey (1999) *The Institutional Impact of Aid Dependence on Recipients in Africa* and Bräutigam (2000) *Aid Dependence and Governance*.

¹⁹ Not only at the national level, pan-African such as the African Business Round' Table (ABR) for information about investment opportunities in Africa is a testimony to that. There are also emerging sub-regional networks such as the West African Enterprise Network for economic integration at the private sector level and aiming at building capacity for policy dialogue and partnership with the public sector.

²⁰ Pierre and Peters (2000) *Governance, Politics and the State*.

With the accelerating rate of joint ventures between national private sector on the one hand, and global corporate power, on the other, the issues of governance are becoming more multi-layered integrating global and national corporate citizen responsibilities. The governance focus, with particular reference to such arrangements consists of the creation of mutual governance partnerships and networks to address specific problems without obstructing the state's ability to co-ordinate and regulate critical policy sectors (health, education, the rule of law etc.).

DECENTRALISATION

Decentralisation is not new to Africa. The colonial governments started it with administrative reforms such the Indirect Rule that left its marks in many parts of Africa.²¹ National governments attempts to address certain national issues such as regional disparity, to appease disquieting agitations for self-rule etc. have also contributed to the introduction of various types of decentralisation schemes. Without detailing its history, currently, six approaches to decentralisation can be identifies: 1) historical origins, 2) hierarchy and function, 3) problem focus and values investigated, 4) patterns of administrative structures and functions, 5) transfer of power, human and fiscal resources and 6) political, market and administrative objectives.²² These approaches are not exclusive, overlapping and at times confused with one another. However, what is important is that they are in one way or another related to three types of administrative decentralisation:

- i. *Deconcentration* is the transfer of authority over specific decision-making, financial, and management functions by administrative means to different levels under the jurisdictional authority of the central government.
- ii. *Devolution* occurs when authority is transferred by central government to autonomous local-governmental units holding corporate status granted under state legislation.
- iii. *Delegation* refers to the transfer of government decision-making and administrative authority for clearly defined tasks to organisations or firms that are either under its direct control or are independent. In most cases delegation is made by the central government to semi-autonomous organisations not wholly controlled by the accountable to it. Delegation is important because it is not restricted to the private sector. Civil society and non-governmental organisations are increasingly delegated by the state to undertake functions traditionally known as state functions (e.g. health, education and community development programmes). In such situations, by being allowed to serve the public, interest groups and professional associations relieve the government from administrative and financial cost, which should ideally be redirected to more pressing public good activities.²³

Forms and types of decentralisation aim not only at bringing government closer to the people, if properly implemented, it can act as an insurance for political commitment and accountability. Nonetheless, let us remind ourselves that adequate implementation cannot be secured when the public sector is lacking in institutional and financial capacity and when the public is ill informed about the aims, political implications and direct consequences on state-civil society relations. Expanded decentralised functions of the major administrative, political and economic institutions do not come without increased overhead cost. Another important implication for the current governance debate is concerned with efficiency and effectiveness of both the private sector and the public sphere of citizen participation in a coordinated effort to democratise development.²⁴

²¹ Burke (1967) *Public Administration in Africa: The Legacy of Inherited Colonial Institutions*.

²² Cohen and Peterson 1999:pp.20- 24.

²³ Ibid. pp. 24-29.

²⁴ See Korten (1995) *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*.

While the political dividend of decentralisation is obvious in most cases discernable, its fiscal rewards are at times most challenging while in others seriously questionable. Fakasaku and Mello lament,

“Decentralisation is not without pitfalls. It is expected benefits must be properly weighed against the risks involved in the devolution of taxing and spending powers to sub-national governments (SNGs). There is growing recognition that it may aggravate fiscal imbalances by creating a deficit bias in fiscal policy making and consequently endanger overall macroeconomic stability. The key policy challenge to developing countries is to design and develop appropriate systems of public finance to provide local public services effectively and efficiently, while at the same time maintaining macroeconomic stability. The issues related to decentralisation, including intergovernmental fiscal relations, thus have direct relevance for public sector reform” (Fakasaku and Mello (1999: p. 9)

Essentially decentralisation has two overarching dimensions: One dimension is premised on the urge to create democratised governance at the state level. The second dimension is related to the public sphere of autonomous civic life acting as a countervailing force vis-à-vis state power and oppressive market rationalism. Decentralisation, if properly implemented contributes to citizen participation by bringing government closer to the people at the local government, neighbourhood and grassroots organisations is important for more responsive governance. Hence, participation and empowerment could therefore act as the real source of strength for a public sphere well informed of its responsibility to safeguard its interest in establishing a system of accountable and transparent governance.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The proposition that democracy requires accountability of citizens and officials is a universal tenor of democratic theory. Students of accountability in democracy consistently note both the necessity and the difficulty of assuring that citizens know what officials are doing. Governors can be held accountable by the governed only when publicity, transparency, and critical scrutiny provide a basis for an informed citizenry (March and Olsen 1995: p. 162)

State-centred governance in alliance with the market and private corporate interests cannot be trusted to work for the poor and those left without any safety-net. Any political posture driven by pure market and state interests devoid of citizens concern with the public good, would make mockery of global projects aiming at poverty reduction at best and stifle any possibility for achieving civic peace at worst. Therefore, community participation and empowerment are the only grantor for inclusive economic development adhered to by major economic governance actors, including the private sector.²⁵

Participation and empowerment are self-reinforcing and no society can have one without the other. As ancient as it is known to many human societies, the quest for participation in development is recent if measured against human experience. Participation also seems to mean different things for different people. In the realm of development, participation is sought to render unique institutional support that should ideally enhance cost saving, efficiency and self-help. In a free market-driven participation, the overall objective is understood as the public sector's cost-sharing and cost reduction for the. However, it could also be understood as an effective instrument to ensure effective citizen struggle for inclusion, civil, economic and political rights, including democracy. As an effective instrument available to the poor, participation is better understood in terms of "access to decision making and power" (UNDP 1993: p. 21). At a larger synthesis, participation should mean "the organisation of efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situation, on part of groups or movements of these hitherto excluded" (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994: p. 5).

²⁵ Minu (2002) *Multi-Stakeholders Processes for Governance and sustainability*.

In a more recent analysis and in their keen interest to re-position participation, Cornwall and Gaventa developed a model, linking *citizen, social and political participation* tin effective participatory method. This could be summed as follows:

“Where citizens have been able to take up and use the spaces that participatory processes can open up, they have been able to use their agency to demand accountability, transparency and responsiveness from government institutions. An informed (*referring to availability of adequate and reliable information*, emphasis added), mobilised citizenary is clearly in a better position to do so effectively; the capacities built through popular education on rights and responsibilities also extend beyond taking a more active interest in seeking responsiveness and have only listened to but not acted upon citizens concerns...these moves offer new spaces in which the concept of participation, linking participation in the political, community and social spheres” (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001: p. 33).

In the search for democratic governance participation enters the debate with reference to the determinants of good governance alluded to earlier. Participation is one of four dimensions of democracy, the three others being *competitiveness, inclusiveness* and *civil and political liberties* (Dahl 1971). Participation through democratic institutions such as free and fair elections, political parties and parliaments, civil society organisations (trade unions, youth and women organisations, professional associations etc.), lobby and advocacy groups become an effective instrument for influencing policies and overseeing government performance. It is an instrument for civic accountability.

Democratic governance and participation alone cannot guarantee that citizens have been empowered for effective participation. Empowerment (i.e. to invest with legal power, to authorise or to enable), affirms the need to enable people gauge the reality of their political, social, economic and physical environment in order to influence these factors which impact on that reality. Empowerment cannot be realised in abstract terms or without identifying the necessary conditions for its success. While democratic governance, provides the necessary overall conditions within which empowerment is potentially achievable through access to five concrete dimensions: a) Participation, b) knowledge, skills and new capabilities, c) freedom of information; d) regulatory institutions of the state; and e) income, land and other resources.²⁶

Obviously information is the glue that binds the variety of governance concerns discussed thereof. It is one of the most important determinants of governance. Without adequate and reliable information about public financial management, private sector activities and the manner in which they are managed and their potential consequences addressed, there could be a very meagre to no room accountability and there would be complete absence of transparency. It is only in circumstances where democratic governance prevails that freedom of information could be assured and with it citizen participation and empowerment to hold public officials to account could be ensured.

For these compelling reasons and others that I introduce very briefly the role of information in the governance debate, with the reference points put forward by the organisers of this conference in mind. However, in doing so, I leave the more competent and elaborate details to those who took up information and information and communication technology (ICT) as their subject of expertise.

²⁶ Knight, Chigudu and Tandon (2002) *Reviving Democracy: Citizens at the Heart of Governance*.

INFORMATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE DEBATE

Information enters the debate on governance from three perspectives: Democratic freedoms cannot be guaranteed under conditions where three of the basic characteristics of political democracy are stifled. These are: First, the freedom of speech, organisation and freedom of the media. Simply put how can citizens be free if the every channels used for enhancing basic democratic freedoms are denied. In this respect, denying the opposition access to the mass media and the right to seek, receive and impart information gives the government in power huge advantage over its adversaries. Such curtailment of these basic freedoms directly impacts on citizens right to freedom of opinion and expression and information. It is observed in innumerable cases that the state monopoly over the media and the press and other medium for imparting information goes hand in hand with the abuse of the freedom of assembly and association thus eroding some of the main values of a democratic society. Second, the right to seek and receive information is part and parcel of human rights. The freedom of expression, an essential value in any democratic society is enshrined in international law. For example, Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (UDHR),²⁷ binding on all States as a matter of customary international law, guarantees the right to freedom of expression in the following terms:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and its twin Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR),¹ guarantee:

- i. An unfettered right to hold opinions;
- ii. A right to express and disseminate ‘any information or ideas’;
- iii. A right to have access to media;
- iv. A right to seek and receive information and ideas.

To that extent Article 19 prohibits States from interfering with the enjoyment of these rights, requiring them to take practical steps to ensure freedom of expression.²⁸ This includes legislative or other regulatory frameworks, as well as ‘practical’ positive measures, for example through the establishment of public communication centres. What is at issue here is not access to information per se, but also “equitable” access to information, including government-held information. It is obvious that access to government held information is the foundation stone for democracy and public participation as an inseparable agency in ensuring governance accountability. Such access is difficult to obtain where legislative frameworks, review mechanisms for implementation are absent.

The pleas here is not for piecemeal access to information, but for deliberately and systematically integrating information into the debate on fundamental public issues, such as human rights, elections, budget, court reports, parliamentary proceedings, state of the environment to mention but a few, into an accessible source. That source is an information source. Schools, major public and university libraries, the media and other information/education providers could be used more effectively to make information available and accessible to citizens.

²⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution 217A(III), 10 December 1948.

²⁸ Article 2 of the ICCPR, places an obligation on States to “adopt such legislative or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to the rights recognised by the Covenant.” A similar obligation can be found in the preamble of the UDHR.

It is noteworthy that academic freedom to receive and impart information on government performance as well the respect for the freedom of journalists and information providers and granting them the right not to disclose their sources except preach of professional ethics, is a fundamental governance issue.

Capitalising on Africa's political governance gains, UNESCO's "Declaration on the Universal Access to Information", provides a much broader perspective by emphasising the linkages between creating an effective infrastructure and access. In this sense it is inclusive both in elaborating on issues of access as well as creating the technical and managerial possibilities for addressing issues pertaining to universal access. The importance of diversity and multiculturalism also become a focus of contention that has been addressed in a more deliberate manner emphasising the tradeoffs and the problems it may pose. For instance, UNESCO affirms these values by advancing the need for promoting 1) the free flow of ideas; 2) the expression of pluralism, cultural diversity and information network; and access for all to information and communication technologies. This noble endeavour also laments the significance of the relationship between implementing accessible design solutions and compatibility, with low bandwidth, telecommunications development, peering and next generation Internet, e-commerce. The synergy and possible subsidiary between these elements and their relevance to governance is hugely important.

To be sure, information is essential for ensuring better governance practices. Without information it is difficult to conceive how to obtain reliable knowledge on the performance of government, right to protection journalists and sources, the media's access to information and the ability to communicate that information to the public. These aspects are dubbed e-government in the Electronic Discussion on ITC Governance.²⁹

The right to seek, receive and impart information is also important for ensuring individual and community participation in public life. Using the power of information to empower citizens cannot be overstated. How could citizens be able to know about their constitutional rights, laws governing their political duties and obligations, cultural political and civil rights, the right to organise in associations, including the right to association, gender biased policies, personal status laws etc. etc. without access to a vibrant media.

The other dimension of information and governance, I leave for the experts to elaborate its relevance to public financial management, including the exploration of ICT's capacity to create integrated information systems strategies and technology structures for better accounts and accountability. This leaves me with barely sufficient space to conclude and raise some issues for discussion during the rest of the workshop.

CONCLUSIONS

I conclude with two sections: the first enumerating some of the major challenges to information and governance in Africa and the second consists of a number of questions that emanates from these challenges:

²⁹ Communication of the results of the discussion published by UN Economic Commission for Africa entitled Electronic Discussion List on ICT and Governance, received 14 April 2003. According to the documents, the electronic governance forum began on 15 July 2002. The aim of the forum was 1) to provide a space for discussion on e-government in Africa 2) to determine trends and directions 3) to provide realistic strategies for accelerating e-government process in Africa.

Sub-section 1: Challenges to Governance in Africa

Weak infrastructure and institutional capacities in the fields of information acquisition, transformation into usable forms, content, access and delivery/exchange. Long-term information curtailment by past authoritarian regimes have entrenched a “cloud of secrecy” over government decision making procedures and rational. In the past and among a handful of African countries such attitudes still prevail but to a lesser degree. The challenge is to change government towards information from seeing it a tool for policy subversion to a tool for better policy formulation through transparency and open discussion of different problem solving scenarios. This by necessity entails institutional capacity building both vertically and horizontally for effective and poised information management using ICT and other relevant technologies;

Fragmented educational and training efforts. Apart from a few countries (e.g. Botswana, South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, Morocco) ICT education has not yet entered secondary level, let alone primary education. ICT institutes tend to give priority to post-secondary school training, while an information revolution should concentrate on all levels of education in order to create a sustainable information culture. Most of ICT training takes place outside formal education with the growth of a commendable private tertiary education and training sector in every African country. It is only government, with its huge resources can afford a wider coverage by integrating ICT into the education curriculum with the private sector offering the more needed hands-on technical and managerial use of a more practical nature.

Inadequate human resources capabilities. Vertical capacity building cannot be ensured without developing human resources capabilities to manage both the soft and hardware of information technologies and harnessing/adapting them to the African context. The case here is not just for entrepreneurial ingenuity, better management and administrative skills, but technical skills to managing the exchange of information using ICT.

Dismal awareness of ICT potential in improving productivity and efficiency, particularly in the manner described in the sections on the role of ICT in private sector governance and corporate responsibility, public financial management and administrative accountability and transparency. One solution to this problem is the improvement of the infrastructure as well as to embark on a deliberate effort to instil in-service training in order to 1) gauge the interest of policy makers and) to create the necessary human resources capable of using ICT and integrate it into their work.

Language is a problem for the majority of African peoples to access ITC and other forms of audio and/or written information. Few languages dominate national information and communication provision (dominantly, English, French, Arabic, Afrikaans and Portuguese). One important challenge is to avail information content in "major national languages.

Illiteracy: One of the major challenges to information governance is integrate information education" into the educational system at an early stage so that its importance is duly valued and acted upon. Although it is very important to reach out to citizens through various civil society organisations and NGOs, this cannot a substitute for long-term strategic thinking on information considering that it is the most growing global sector, with wide-ranging uses in development, education, commerce, scientific exchange etc.

Internal Digital Divide: While issues pertaining to the digital divide have been the subject of much global debate, there is also a Digital Divide within the African continent. The countries

of the region are at different levels of socio-economic development, and are internally divided into urban centres with better access and remote and severely underdeveloped regions with no access. The quest for the right of access for all is at times much harder to obtain than access across continents and countries. How to enforce access universal access in such situations when the infrastructure needed is either too underdeveloped or does not exist, as mentioned in the case of remote underdeveloped regions. No matter how cost-effective ITC is, poverty alleviation could be seen as one of the major entry points, not by claiming that the poor cannot afford it, but how to use it effectively to alleviate poverty.

Restrictive regulatory frameworks: Most African countries have developed some form of regulatory information frameworks often falling between restrictive and open access countries. In countries where market liberalisation in providing Internet services has not developed, telecommunication and Internet regulations takes the form of state monopoly. The challenge here is how to get the right balance between regulatory to accretion privacy and the abuse of information in illicit practices including international crime, money laundering by criminal gangs, pornography, human trafficking etc. and legitimate freedom of expression, including the right to access information?

Poverty and poor infrastructure: Although ITC's more cost effective than conventional means of communication, poverty and the lack of infrastructure could hamper access to information through this media. The Electronic Discussions on ITC Governance summed this as follows. “The barriers against such initiatives are technological and human. For the technological barriers, the participants indicated the weakness of the ICT infrastructure in Africa and the low rate of ICT penetration in administration” (p. 4).³⁰

Sub-section 2: Discussion points

Before bringing this presentation to a close, I draw the following points in a way of conclusion and at the same time raising some issues related to the points linking the challenges of governance and those of information. Hope these will help bringing about tangible results as part of the deliberations of this workshop:

Africa has made some tangible positive results in the transition towards better governance, and these gains should be consolidated. Complacency could easily erode these gains and degenerate into new forms of authoritarian and corrupt civilian governance using democracy as an instrument of domination and oppression. Democracy is a practice and not just the adherence to periodic elections or an ideal devout of any practical actions by state and civil society. It is about democratic freedoms as well as socio-economic well being of citizens. Uncoupling the two could only make mockery of democracy at best and render it non-sustainable at worst.

Discussion point 1:

How much has Africa achieved in fostering the role of information in the multifaceted debate on governance, public finance accountability, private sector governance and the role of civil society and NGOs empowerment and participation?

³⁰ Could there be a possibility of combining old and new media. For example there is a need for a fresh look at civil society to learn from how alternative media operate. Another possibility is to use its already existing infrastructure. Here I refer to “traditional” media such as wall newspapers, community audio towers, cassettes and magazines, FM broadcasting, participatory video, local TV and street drama could be more effective. The challenge here is to create a receptive civil society that is capable of underscoring the significance of each media as well as the political environment and the governance institutions that avail and enforce access.

- 2) It is near impossible to speak of any workable democratic governance without information, the key media and medium informing the governors and the governed not only of the public preferences, but also of how the state and state resources are managed and distributed. There will be no credible accountability without information and there would be no transparency in government operations if information about these operations were not accessible to the public through reliable and relevant sources.

Discussion point 2:

How to enhance citizens rights to information, knowing that the access to information alone is insufficient condition for democratic consolidation. How can citizens be informed about whether government has acted upon its commitments and demonstrated that its procedures are fair and have a sense of predictability? Are there an information-based instruments that could be used to ensure that the executives comply with the rules and regulations governing their operations?.

- 3) Accesses to information and government trustworthiness are inter-linked. The question how to transform the anti-corruption campaigns into a more positive pursuit aiming at increasing government trustworthiness is crucial. Trust could be built only when the government has the means to implement policies and not when its very image is tarnished or perceived to be corrupt by its citizens and external development aid and trading partners. Levi laments (1998: p. 87), "the trustworthiness of the state influences its capacity to generate inter-personal trust, and the amount of socially and economically productive cooperation in the society in turn affects the states capacity to govern. Trust of the state has additional consequences on governance: It affects both the level of citizens' tolerance of the regime and their degree of compliance with governmental demands and regulations ".

Discussion point 3:

Can information be used beyond the possibility of communicating government policy, priorities, commitments, compliance with rules and regulations to make it more transparent and accountable? How could government be made trustworthy when entering nationally and internationally binding commitments? Or whether access to information could hinder or facilitate trustworthiness?

- 4) Public financial accountability is one of the most tangible indicators of overall government accountability. It presents itself as traditional, managerial, programme and process accountability in which the media and civil society should play their pivotal role of civil society and NGOs. It is often assumed that when accounts and audits are reported to various regulatory institutions (parliament, Auditor General etc.) that accountability is achieved. Without reaching the public, it will be very difficult for citizens to gauge the trustworthiness of government and whether public accounts reflect the commitments that government made to the public. I hope that we allocate some considerable time to discuss how to engage civil society, NGOs and other civic associations to contribute societal-centred oversight responsibilities.

Discussion point 4:

What information form, content, delivery structures and technology could be useful in achieving the most desired results? How to make information accessible to the public in order to empower civil society to participate fully in public life and act upon it?

- 5) As the private sector gains more prominence, the social, economic and environmental consequences of its operations become more pervasive. In the emergent economic structures, the private sector is no longer the adversary to government, but in several instances entered into partnership arrangements or took over some major previously state-

own enterprises as a result of privatisation. Because the private sector's objectives are by nature private, the possibility that these objectives might contradict or undermine public interest (environmental protection, equal pay, human rights at the work place etc. is real. There is also the fear that corporate power could be too strong to be resisted by the state in such situations, the state might not be prudent in protecting public interests and hence give in to the private sector more demands. Corruption and mismanagement of public resources often thrive when the state is too weak to enforce regulations or heed public concerns where the state is perceived to be an instrument for private business and not the public good. It also erodes the public trust of the state and undermines its ability to muster public support for its programmes.

Discussion point 5:

How to advance the use information to promote self-governing, self-regulating private sector governance? And How to create an information regulatory framework that encourages rather than antagonises the private sector whose contribution to development is desperately needed? How to make the private sector accountable to state and public scrutiny based on reliable and relevant information rather than mistrust and suspicion?

- 6) Public financial management and private sector accountability cannot be ensured if the regulatory structures are highly centralisation and if the participation of civil society and NGOs in the political life of a country is restricted. While democracy is the guarantee to people's participation, the actual practice of democratic rights lies with the ability of citizens to be proactive in using these rights. Empowerment or to authorise and invest with legal rights is impossible to obtain without these legal rights being codified into constitutional guarantees, legal instruments and regulatory institutions and frameworks adhered to by government in daily life. In multi-party democracy, the participation of parliament and opposition political parties is ensured through such legal instruments and regulatory and control procedures, a process not obtainable in authoritarian regimes. However, we should not lose sight of the factors hindering financial accountability, including inaccessibility of information, shortage of qualified independent audit agencies, legislatures limited knowledge of complex public policy issues such as macro-economic policy and budget of illiteracy etc. If general accountability cannot be ensured, ensuring fiscal and managerial accountability is more the difficult, particularly in situations where government employee privacy laws and national secret acts are invoked.

Discussion point 6:

How to improve the current accountability structures and transform them from conventional to enhanced accountability arrangements, including citizen participation in oversight and public consultation in developing and implementing accountability programmes? How to strike a balance between transparency and accountability on the one hand and confidentiality of certain types of information considered "state secrets", "private business" prerogative or individual privacy acts, on the other?

In short, the dynamic relationship between information, governance and the public sphere is complex and subject to differing views and interpretations. This relationship can be strengthened only when the overall political context within which they interact is governed by the ethos and core values of democratic governance. However, this relationship is embedded in the political culture that informs the dominant political institutions of a given society. These are old age and far-reaching relations in which education, social capital, integrity, trust, the quest for justice are probably more important than externally driven projects and simplistic technical solutions. Engaging the public sphere in this complex relationship precludes to involving society in its entirety in order to make government worthy of the trust of the very citizens from whom it drives its sovereignty. To this end, I content that the battle is only half won. Thank goodness it is not lost altogether as we have often been made to believe.

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