Chapter 4

Good Governance and Rural Development in Africa: Finding the Missing Link

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents African indigenous knowledge as the missing link in achieving good governance and rural development in Africa. The failure of rural development projects in Africa has mostly been attributed to weak institutions and bad governance. Consequently, good governance has become the cornerstone of donors’ development cooperation in Africa since the 1990s. While it is true that African public institutions may be weak, the analysis shows that the West contributed to this problem through European colonization of the continent as well as the imposition of Eurocentric one-size-fit-all reforms of the World Bank on indebted African countries. The chapter argues that to improve governance and rural development in Africa, there are well-established and effective cultural indigenous governance systems in the continent from which we can learn.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE CHAPTER

Since the 1990s, good governance has become the prescription of international development partners for all developmental challenges facing African countries. According to the former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, “Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development” (UN, 1998). As rural development also gains its prominence
in international development agendas, good governance has also been considered necessary if the productivity and the living conditions of rural people would be bettered. The argument for good governance has even been stronger for African countries many of which have had long histories of military rule, unfair elections, inadequate service delivery, and popularized corruption. The idea that governance matters for Africa’s development and for rural development, is a viewpoint that actually emerged as a result of the failure of earlier Western development theories and approaches, in improving the conditions of the poor most of who live in rural areas. The challenge however is that, in spite of almost two decades of various donor-supported governance reforms, such as PRSP and liberal democracy in Africa, Africa remains the poorest region. The incidence of poverty continued to be higher in rural areas where most of the population depend on subsistence agriculture, and social infrastructure (IFAD, 2016).

This paper reveals that the current good governance agenda is similar to previous ineffective external development strategies imposed on African countries. The challenge of these Western theories and strategies is that they are based on Western experience and they give little or no regard to local context and African culture. Meanwhile, studies such as Olowu and Erero (1995), Okunmadewa et. al., (2005) and Mengisteab (2009) have also shown that that in many rural communities in Africa, African indigenous institutions have been supporting the poor despite the failure of modern government system and these indigenous institutions are comparatively more transparent, equitable, responsive and accountable. The failure of borrowed good governance strategies in Africa and the comparable effectiveness of many African indigenous institutions are pointers that show what really works to achieve good governance and rural development in Africa.

The position of this paper is that culture matters for policy effectiveness. Therefore any governance restructuring that will improve the welfare of Africans must be rooted in African systems and culture. Consequently the objective of this paper is to show how mainstream development theories have contributed to rural backwardness and bad governance in Africa and to show that indigenous African communities possess well established and effective governance system from which we can learn. The final objective of the paper is to show that African indigenous knowledge, is a major missing link in achieving good governance and rural development in Africa. To achieve these objectives, the methodology adopted is mainly purely secondary sources and empirical data obtained from literature. The paper is divided into five sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section defines rural development and good governance. The third section examines rural development and governance in Africa while the fourth section presents African Indigenous Knowledge as the missing link. The fifth section discusses future trend and conclusion.
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