

Panel 9: Good Governance as Managing Tensions Between Public Values

Chaired by: Cor van Montfort (Tilburg University), Gjalte de Graaf (VU University), Leo Hubers (VU University) and Zeger van der Wal (VU University)

Both in academics and in popular discourse, good governance receives more and more attention. This may come as a surprise, since traditionally the concept was merely associated with developmental issues and countries. In international politics, countries have to abide by good governance principles in order to get aid or a loan from IMF or the World bank. Yet, increasingly, good governance is also applied to the realm of modern nation states, struggling to find new (multi-actor and multi-level) approaches to public governance. It is those shifts in governance that may explain the recent growth of scholarly interest in a wider application of the good governance concept. As the traditional institutions of government no longer define 'what works' and 'what is right,' questions on the quality of governance automatically return to the centre of public and academic attention. These questions touch upon the effectiveness and efficiency of governance, but also upon ethical aspects (integrity), democracy and legitimacy.

This growing interest in good governance issues can be found at all levels of public administration. The EU has recently developed a list of good governance criteria and at the Dutch national level, the Ministry of Home Affairs runs a centre for Good Governance, in order to raise the quality of government. Also in local government, questions of good governance gained urgency, especially since municipalities have received larger administrative responsibilities, due to the decentralization and regionalization of public policy tasks.

As Kettl states (1993, p. 17-20), government's fundamental challenge in serving the public interest is to balance the pursuit of different inevitable contradictory standards. Trade-offs between valued principles are thus an ineluctable fact of any designing process (LeGrand, 2007). For instance, services that are fully responsive to the needs and wants of some individuals may not be very efficient in terms of the interest of the wider community. Besides, ideas of effective operational structures could be in breach of the law. Reflections on the concept of good governance may be helpful to interpret these trade-offs. Following recent studies on the concept, good governance may be defined as the generally valued criteria of what government should bring about (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Van Montfort, 2004). In other words, using recent discourse, good governance is all about managing tensions between potentially conflicting 'public values' (Bozeman, 2007)

The good governance concept is both appealing and annoying. It is appealing because it widens the scope of public performance evaluation. Whereas the new public management school mainly focuses on questions of (output) efficiency, the good governance literature sketches a much richer and more extensive landscape of relevant public values and performance parameters. This, however, is also annoying, for it is not easy to use this multitude of good governance criteria in practical assessments and evaluations. Often, scholars discover that there are many intrinsic tensions between the different values involved, for instance between efficiency and legitimacy.

This panel wanted to explore the fruitfulness of the good governance concept, conceptualized as the management of tensions between public values, by raising the following central question:

Is it possible to identify specific tensions between different public values in order to outline the features of a good governance system in which such tensions are balanced and managed for specific governance contexts? If so, what are the constitutive elements of such (a) system(s) and what helps to establish and/or improve such a system?

Contributions may either have been theoretical/conceptual or empirical. Theoretical papers may have critically discussed the good governance concept, focus on social or political backgrounds, outline the institutional design of good governance systems, raise the issue of coping with good governance conflicts (value-conflicts) and/or reflect on the possibilities for good governance assessment and evaluation.

Empirical papers may have presented (evaluation) studies regarding (empirical) tensions between public values and, subsequently, the design, functioning and effects of good governance systems that enable to balance and manage such tensions, at different levels of public administration. Especially comparative papers (between different public sector domains or between countries and systems) are welcomed.

Papers in English were strongly preferred, because our aim was to have the presented papers as the core for a symposium issue of an international public administration/governance journal on 'good governance as managing tensions between public values'.

The theme of Good Governance falls under the "Citizens and governance" sub-theme of the NIG Conference format and the NIG research program "Governance, citizens and state."

References:

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