

Conceptual and Methodological Questions on the Changing Paradigms of Governance

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Abstract

Globally, governance studies have been an emerging paradigm of research and scholarly debate in social sciences. This paper takes this debate as an entry point and aims to analyze its metaphysical construction in terms of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Data and materials used in the paper are based on the sources of secondary literature. The findings reveal that the political construction of governance is now becoming complex in contemporary societies and it has then adjoined with social, economic, and regional issues in particular. The paper concludes that governance is a contested notion that is moving around different concepts, theories, methodologies, and paradigms. The paper, therefore, is expected to contribute to the governance study in particular along with different disciplines of social science research in general.

Keywords: Governance, ontology, epistemology, methodology, paradigm

Introduction

Governance is becoming a buzzing word, and to some extent, fashionable and ritualistic as well. It is a single word carrying multiple viewpoints, interpretations, and methods. Governance is the way of making or unmaking rules, norms, and actions in society which are based on the different kinds of regimes, often found as structured, sustained, and regulated. The conceptualization of governance is a political agenda (Demetriou & Loizides, 2015), though it has been grabbed by different disciplines of social sciences, including sociology, economics, political science, and development studies. In its generic orientation, governance is a process of being governed and making governed. It needs a certain structure of regime to exercise power over the ruling and ruled elements. The power in governance is exercised in different forms, including the

executive, legislature, and judiciary. Institutional and neo-institutional schools of political science perceive that governance is a political-economic construction that exists in and between formal institutions. Nevertheless, conceptualizing the discourse of governance is problematic, ambiguous, and elastic (Walters, 2004).

At large, governance is the process of making and enforcing decisions and executing those decisions either through the use of coercive power or on the basis of consensus. It is defined under the given jurisdiction or imposed regime of legal exercises. It is a dialogue and interaction within an organization or society through different laws, social norms, power structures, and modes of communication. It, therefore, extends from a small regime of a social system (including family, groups, and organizations) to the larger political structures, including government, market, and state and beyond that. As defined by Marc (2011), it is the process of choosing the right course of action among the actors involved in a collective action which eventually leads to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of acceptable conduct and social order. However, the implication of the term governance is becoming broader in recent years, as being re-minted by economists and political scientists and disseminated as the global agenda of the United Nations and World Bank.

Methods and Materials

Methodologically, the paper is based on the secondary literature and the researcher's own critical pedagogical approach. No specific or empirical field studies have been conducted by the researcher. The paper is based on the philosophical dialectics of the concept and practice of governance which is rooted in the nexus of thesis and anti-thesis.

Discussion and Analysis

The larger root of governance is a society that is politically constructed; though it is also situated at the micro-spheres of politics and society including households, communities, organizations, corporations, and institutions. Governance can be discussed as an event, as a process, and as an institution. However, it needs governing body (ies) which can govern

the subject in the given jurisdiction of power and decision-making. The most formal governing body is the government which acts as the legal representation of the state system. Yet, the cosmopolitan worldview guided by the essentialist perspective of the state is much debated. Critics maintain that the government could not represent the state in its perfection, and it has some limitations too. The debate of market fundamentalism versus state fundamentalism lies amidst this. The application of governance is therefore considered discursive just like an 'empty signifier' (Offe, 2009).

Conceptual and theoretical niche

The idea of governance is being evolved over time along with different practices, debates, and policies. The most addressed thing in the discourse of governance is the conceptualization of governance. What governance is has been discussed in terms of its meaning and characteristics (Baland et al., 2010; Burlacu et al., 2019; Shah, 2006). For example, the World Bank (1991) defines governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development (p.1). The first part of this definition is politically critical while the later part is vague and diluted. Bell (2002) therefore proposed an institutional approach to governance and defined it as the use of institutions, structures of authority, and even collaboration to allocate resources and coordinate or control activity in society or the economy. UNDP defines governance in terms of the governing principles which are capability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and transparency. One of the most cited definitions proposed by UNDP (2004) further adheres to principles of political participation, efficient government, and legal recognition in the governance system. To mention:

Governance has been defined as the rules of the political system to solve conflicts between actors and adopt decisions (legality). It has also been used to describe the "proper functioning of institutions and their acceptance by the public" (legitimacy). And it has been used to invoke the efficacy of government and the achievement of consensus by democratic means (participation).

Different conceptual constructs over the discourse and practice of governance in contemporary academia can be broadly categorized into five dimensions (see also Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; Persson, 2019). Table 1 illustrates these constructs which are based on the systematic review of different literature on governance studies.

Table 1 :Conceptual dimensions and characteristics of governance

Conceptual dimensions	Characteristics and examples
1. <i>Normative approach</i>	Largely conceived as under the domain of public governance which are aimed to the broader sphere of public [e.g. Governance, good governance, fair governance, democratic governance, representative governance, inclusive governance, participatory governance]
2. <i>Geographical/ administrative approach</i>	Concerned with states, markets, inter-governmental actors, citizens, agents, political boundaries, international relations [e.g. Local governance, provincial governance, federal governance, regional governance, global governance]
3. <i>Functional approach</i>	Based on the working modalities, principles and strategies of governance [e.g. Linear/multilinear governance (vertical/ horizontal), meta-governance (integrative strategies, i.e. ‘governance of governance’), collaborative governance, decentralized governance, e-governance, ICT governance, project governance]
4. <i>Sectoral approach</i>	Corporate governance (institutions and organizations), resource governance (access and management of different resources), environmental governance (political ecology, environmental policy and sustainable development), health governance (health policy, system, institutions and health care); land

	governance (land grabbing, tenure, reform, acquisition)
5. <i>New trends</i>	Zero governance (neutral governance), non-governance (not being governed), anarcho-governance (governance as unnecessary evil), minimalist governance (minimum use of governing power), gender responsive governance (gender friendly and non-discriminatory); disaster governance

Source: The author

While analyzing different conceptual issues on governance, it is observed that governance is theoretically complex (Ansell & Torfing, 2022). The theorization of governance involves a deeper theoretical understanding of governance processes, illuminating interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary foundations of the field. It involves perspectives and worldviews of different disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, development studies, management, and law (see also Bevir, 2010; Risse et al., 2018; Scott, 2010). The theories of governance can be broadly categorized into two groups, as presented in Table 2:

Table 2 Theoretical worldviews and characteristics of governance

Worldview	Characteristics	Perspectives, theories and models
Macro perspectives	Largely deductive in analysis; grand narrative of governance taking it from the ‘general and universal’ approach	Marxist, liberal, functionalist, system theory, theories of international relations and diplomacy, legal theories, state theories, public law and regulatory theory, public management theory, planning theory (top-down)
Micro perspectives	Largely inductive in analysis; micro narrative of governance assuming its	Symbolic interactionism, policy network theory, center-periphery theory, meta-governance theory, alternative development theories, post-development approaches,

localized contexts and particular concerns	agency theory, stakeholder theory, organizational theory, resource dependency theory, stewardship theory, collective action theory, planning theory (bottom-up)
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Source: The author

Regime of the indicators

As discussed above, there is a debate about whether governance is measured or not in its exact terms, and the mechanics of measurement are also debated. To some extent, a post-colonial approach to defining the variables and indicators of governance has become dominant since the 1990s. For example, the UNDP has adopted eight principles of governance as the pillars of good governance. They include participation; rule of law; transparency; responsiveness; consensus oriented; equity and inclusiveness; effectiveness and efficiency; and accountability (see also Biermann et al., 2017; Elahi, 2009; Rosenau, 2021).

Similarly, the WB follows the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project which annually reports aggregate and individual governance indicators for over 200 countries and territories since 1996. It has six dimensions of governance indicators, including voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence/terrorism; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption. On the other hand, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adopts three pillars of governance indicators (De Francesco & Guaschino, 2020). They include independence (degree of independence from government and the regulated industry); accountability (accountability to government, parliament, industry and the general population); and scope of action (the range of activities empowered to perform).

All of these indicators have their own operational definitions. However, ontologically, it is less clarified whether these are the indicators, variables, or principles of governance. Moreover, this leveling is complex to measure

because of its abstract nature and comprehensive scope. The most important factor in defining governance, i.e. the power has not been included in the above-mentioned indicators through the indicators have been proposed by powerful agencies of development (see further critiques on Arndt, 2008; Lehtonen et al., 2016; Mügge, 2016).

Metaphysics of ‘governance’

Despite having large constructs of concepts and theories of governance, its philosophical question is less explored and loosely theorized. It seems scattered and politically contested too. The metaphysical issues regarding the concept of governance can be pointed as:

- Does it confine to the government, and to the state affairs alone?
Or, it goes beyond?
- Does everything belong to governance; and what goes beyond it?
- Is it liberal democratic construction or Marxist critique on the existing status quo? And, how does governance confine with neoclassical economics?
- How is the mechanics of governance: construction of new governance, reconstruction of existing governance or, deconstruction of old/ existing system of governance?
- Is it systemic or structural, or provisional/ temporary affair?
- What are the actors and components of governance? Is it hegemonic, or emancipatory?

Indeed, there is a philosophical dilemma about the metaphysical construction of governance. As argued by Stout and Love (2015), the paradigm of global governance is ontologically relational. Political science often claims that governance is statecraft while development studies maintain that governance is a contested choice between development and underdevelopment. While there are different branches of metaphysics, the trinity of ontology, epistemology, and methodology has been used in analyzing the semiotics of governance (Table 3).

Table 3: Metaphysical construction of governance

Ontological question	Epistemological question	Methodological question
<p><i>The science of reality and existence:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is governance real or unreal? Does it exist or not? • Is it fundamental or provisional in society? • How its reality or falsifiability could be analyzed: objectivism, subjectivism or both? • Is there a singular reality in governance or multiple realities? Either it is absolute or relative in nature? 	<p><i>The science of knowledge and knowing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How one can know about the nature of reality of governance: what defines its ‘knowledge of knowing’? • What can be known about it whether it is happening or not, how and why? • And, what paradigmatic position suits to analyze the governance and its system? 	<p><i>The science of method, tools and indicators:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the specific way of knowing that governance is or is not • The way of its cause and effect, and the mechanics of its characterization • What are the methods of operationalization of ontology and epistemology of governance? What tools then are to be specified?

Source: The author

Paradigms in conducting research on governance

A research paradigm is a representation of ontology and epistemology of the researcher’s worldview. It informs a distinct method, model, or pattern for following the methodological approach and conducting research. It is a set of ideas, beliefs, or assumptions within which theories and practices can

dialogue in the research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). The majority of paradigms derive from one of two research methodologies: positivism or anti-positivism (interpretive). In between these two, there is post-positivism which came as a transitional phase of paradigm bridging between natural sciences and social sciences. While positivism believes in objective reality (objects and subjects are independent), anti-positivism stands with subjective reality (objects and subjects are dependent). The anti-positivism can be further categorized as constructivism, post-modernism, pragmatism and critical (see further in the classic works of Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 2019).

Yet, it should be noted that the choice of research paradigms is positioned by the way how the researcher would like to solve or saturate or address the research problem. It means that the setting of the research problem, research questions, research objectives, and the positions of paradigms are quite compatible and correlative. They should not be mutually exclusive or contradictory. Yet, the researcher could take multiple paradigms (more than one) depending upon the nature of realities which is/are embedded in the research questions. This kind of position can be justified in ‘paradigmatic pluralism’. As there are a variety of issues and research gaps in governance studies, a researcher should further think about the specific typologies and contexts while in the process of defining and following paradigms (Jang et al., 2016; Rashid et al., 2016; Stoker, 2019; Torfing et al. 2020). Table 4 presents different kinds of methodological paradigms in governance studies.

Table 4: Methodological paradigms of governance studies

Paradigms	Positions and claims on governance
Positivism	The reality or existence of governance is objective in nature and it can be proven or measured exactly; experimental, deductive and quantitative
Post-positivism	The reality or existence of governance is not purely objective; it is critically real, questionable and imperfectly apprehendable; quasi-experimental and

	largely quantitative
Constructivism	Governance is not objectively given; knowledge/ realities about it are constructed in the given context/ society; subjective realities are dominant; qualitative and inductive
Post modernism	Realities are multiple, plural and no fundamental reality or grand narrative is absolutely true in analyzing governance and its system; qualitative, inductive and narrative
Critical	Governance is politically constructed as a ‘hegemonic tool of oppression’; critiques in favor of the oppressed ‘subjects’ i.e. marginalized groups/ classes of society; largely qualitative; abductive and dialectical
Pragmatism	No distinct position or philosophy of governance; descriptive of the given context in applied and pragmatic way

Source: The author

Methodological variations

The choice of methodological approach in governance studies is based on the choice of the research paradigms. They are inseparable and mutually inclusive. Often, the researcher can select any of the research designs either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed. Again, the choice is not purposive, but conditional and contextual as according to the research questions and ontological positions. If the nature of the governance study is complex (for example leadership, cause-effect analysis, etc.) then the single methodological approach could not work and the researcher needs to follow a multi-methodological approach. This can be justified with methodological pluralism which can be compatible with paradigmatic pluralism. The multiple methodological approaches could then call for the multi-method approach in governance studies. Different kinds of realities (as expressed in quantitative facts or narrations) can be triangulated by adopting this pluralism (Table 5). Yet, research methodologies and tools in governance studies can vary with different contexts, considering the worldview of governance that the researcher has already set (see further in

De Maere & De Haes, 2017; Filatotchev & Wright, 2017; Silva & Trono, 2020; Stewart, 2012).

Table 5 : Research design and methodical variations in governance study

Designs	Methods	Tools
Qualitative	To be specified either of being case study, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, grounded	KII, FGD, PRA, PLA, & observations
Quantitative	Experimental/ quasi-experimental, descriptive survey research	HH survey; institutional survey; exit poll survey; expert survey
Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be specified either the mixed method be qualitative dominant (QUAL-quan) or quantitative dominant (QUAN-qual) To be specified as sequential or concurrent (and the ways of these specifications) 	Any of above tools for a justified strategy of triangulation

Source: The author

Past tradition of research (1950-1990):

Conventionally, the term governance refers essentially to the process of being governed and ruled. During the neoliberal triumph of capitalism, the ‘discourse of governance was initiated (critics maintain that it is rather imposed and hijacked) by the modernization project of Western countries. The post-colonial campaign was injected with modernization during the cold war where democracy, human rights, and good governance became popular slogans. Given that, governance arose as a more empirical and applied agenda than the theory-driven linear approach. Prior to the 1990s, it was methodologically deterministic which was largely attached to state affairs and defined within the parameters of big houses of the market, i.e.

World Bank, UNDP, IMF, and other donor agencies. This kind of discourse is based on the grand narrative analysis. It is rooted in the purest form of governance rather than plural and critical perspectives. Macro-level interventions and mainstream approaches are embraced in conceptualizing and practicing governance.

Recent trends after the 1990s:

While reviewing recent trends in governance research in the last two decades, it is evident that there has been more emphasis on the principles and indicators that are used in the acquisition for maintaining governance. Theoretical and empirical domains of governance became popular after the 1990s. Nevertheless, the hegemonic conceptualization of governance as offered by UNDP and WB still works as the ‘mainstream’ agenda of governance in the world. However, its grand narratives have been breaking down along with different contestations in the political economy. Emphasis is being inclined to the micro-narratives, localized contexts, and multi-realities of governance.

Methodologically, research on governance has moved to the multilinear and polycentric approach. Small narratives and alternative potentials including indigenous knowledge and customary practices are also included in contemporary practices of governance research. Moreover, governance beyond the state and government has been adopted and followed keeping different types of variables and indicators. Policy research on governance is also taking an increasing trend. Though governance has been a cross-cutting agenda of research, it is also moving beyond a single disciplinary agenda of either political science or development studies or any branch of social sciences and applied sciences (including IT). It is thus tending to follow multidisciplinary research (multiple disciplines of governance studies at the same time), interdisciplinary research (integrative perspectives or insights from different perspectives to better understand a complex phenomenon of governance system), and transdisciplinary research (crossing many disciplinary boundaries to create a holistic approach of governance in this complex society and polity).

To sum up, therefore, studies on governance have become methodologically pluralistic, relativist, and post-realist. In this context, Briassoulis, H. (2019) rightly proposes governance as a multiplicity that leads to an assemblage of thinking perspectives. Being pluralistic, yet, there are some debates on contemporary research of governance studies. The first is about the metaphysics of governance itself, referring to what constitutes the governance system and what does not. Second, there is no clarity about the object (ruling body) and subject (ruled body) in governance. Often, it is ruled in the name of law and order on behalf of the elites. It is apparently unsettled question to answer about who governs and who obeys the 'hegemony of governance' (and who disobeys it). Third, theoretical contestation is that being governed is either a social contract (social contract theory) or the materiality-created dialects of history (Marxism). Or, it can be also questioned as to whether governance is just a liberal agenda of this capitalistic system.

Fourth, the discourse of governance has been gendered. It would need an androcentric vs feminist debate along with a subaltern perspective. The major question is why the tools of governance have been often structural and institutional to favor the interests of the male, the governing agents in most governance systems. Fifth, the severe critique of governance is that it has been largely Eurocentric and post-colonial construction for the hegemony. It largely glamorizes the history, democracy, and development of the countries of Global North as against the middle-income and lower-income countries, including the then third-world countries.

Issues of governance studies in Nepal

Nepal remained under a unitary system for over 200 years history. While analyzing it from the state perspective of political science, however, it has adopted different approaches to self-governance practices of community development, in particular the context of Lichhavi (400-700) and Malla regime (1201-1779). The history of governance in modern Nepal began with the unification of Nepal in 1768, though it was not uniform and linear too. The main characteristic feature of governance in the Shaha regime (1768-2008) was political decentralization. It was regionally attributed and

devised as administrative in modality through the state power was largely occupied by the palaces and its allies including the Kings, Ranas, and Panchayats (see also Khanal, 2006; Regmi, 2002; Whelpton, 2005).

Nepal has entered into a federal system as per the new constitution declared on September 18, 2015. The constitution has reaffirmed participatory and inclusive governance. As per Article 56 (Part 4), Nepal has been divided into three tiers of government: federal at the top; provincial at the intermediary level, and local governments at the bottom (Constitution of Nepal). As the federal system is new in Nepal, there have been many issues to be studied from a governance perspective. Only a few studies have been conducted and fewer are theorized too. The critique is increasingly made on the elite-centric structure of governance and service delivery. In this context, the following issues could be better agendas for upcoming scientific research:

- 1) Research on participatory and inclusive governance as committed by Nepal's constitution, different laws and local governments
- 2) Local leadership and people's participation in governance (issues, agendas, practices, perceptions and gaps)
- 3) Case-specific studies on DRR governance, E-governance and digital governance (trend, use, effectiveness and implications)
- 4) Service delivery at local levels (models and practices; perceptions and gaps including participation, taxation, public/ social auditing and right to information)
- 5) Comparative study of three tiers of government (legal and empirical) in terms of power allocation, practices and center-periphery relations in the federal context
- 6) Opportunities and challenges of the federal system (at three tiers of government of Nepal)
- 7) Perception of stakeholders, duty bearers and service recipients on practices and services of local levels
- 8) Development planning (actors, institutions and structures, including the typical case studies of local levels)

Conclusion

The paper concludes that governance is not a singular and universal concept to be theorized in a single parameter. Rather, it is multidimensional, plural and unsettled. The study therefore postulates some critical observations. First, we can reach to the conclusion that governance (as a system and structure) is a dialectical consequence of the political regime at large (institutional and organizational at the micro level). Alternatively, however, it could not be generalized and concluded that if governance is real, and its real manifestation is automatically would be rational. Governance is usually a contested construct that tends to be questioned and critiqued.

Metaphysically, while nothing remains in isolation, so is the case of the governance system. It happens because of the changing paradigm of governance along with the changing nature of society, politics and economy. From a research perspective, governance is an emerging agenda of social science research which is methodologically plural. It needs paradigmatic revision and methodological pluralism for scientific investigation to grab the different narratives and realities (global to local, macro to micro, etic to emic). Yet, there still exists the risk of having both ecological fallacy and exceptional fallacy in the studies of governance.

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