

The Emergence of Governance: Between Concept, Practices, and Territorialization

Émergence de la gouvernance : Entre concept, pratiques et territorialisation

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence and evolution of the concept of governance, highlighting its semantic diversity and the variety of its uses in economic, political, and territorial contexts. It traces the shift from traditional government to governance as a more horizontal mode of coordination involving public, private, and civil society actors. Particular emphasis is placed on territorial governance as a tool for local development rooted in consultation, cooperation, and the recognition of local specificities. The paper also offers a critical review of the principles of “good governance” participation, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law—while emphasizing the limitations of their measurement and universal application. It concludes by advocating for a contextualized governance approach, shaped through negotiation and interaction among territorial actors.

Keywords: Governance, “Good governance”, Territorial Governance, Principles of “Good Governance”.

Résumé

Cet article retrace l'émergence et l'évolution du concept de gouvernance, en soulignant sa diversité sémantique et ses multiples usages dans les champs économique, politique et territorial. Il met en lumière le glissement du gouvernement traditionnel vers une gouvernance plus horizontale, fondée sur la coordination entre acteurs publics, privés et la société civile. Une attention particulière est portée à la gouvernance territoriale, envisagée comme levier de développement local basé sur la concertation, la coopération et l'ancrage local. L'article examine également les principes de la « bonne gouvernance » (participation, transparence, responsabilité, État de droit), tout en interrogeant leurs limites méthodologiques et leur applicabilité universelle. Il plaide en conclusion pour une gouvernance contextualisée, construite à partir des dynamiques et interactions propres aux territoires.

Mots clés : gouvernance, « bonne gouvernance », gouvernance territoriale, principes de la « bonne gouvernance ».

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the term “*governance*” has established itself in academic, institutional, and political discourse, to the point of becoming an omnipresent notion often described as a buzzword. Its success lies in its conceptual flexibility and its ability to integrate a wide range of disciplines, from economics and political science to public administration, international relations, and territorial management. However, this rapid diffusion has been accompanied by a proliferation of sometimes contradictory definitions, which have contributed to obscuring its analytical scope.

Initially emerging in economic analyses (notably with Williamson’s transaction cost theory, 1979), governance gradually permeated the political sphere, becoming a central paradigm in state reform, territorial management, and development cooperation. In this context, governance is used to describe coordination processes among heterogeneous actors, both public and private, within deliberative, participatory, or partnership-based frameworks.

Governance therefore no longer refers exclusively to the exercise of state authority; it encompasses more flexible, horizontal, and adaptive forms of steering that integrate various levels of action (local, national, global). Its transposition into the territorial sphere, in the form of local or territorial governance, reflects a growing desire to break away from traditional hierarchical models and to promote a collective and inclusive approach to development. This evolution raises a key question: To what extent can governance principles be mobilized to reconfigure territorial governance and support locally driven development dynamics?

To address this question, this article adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, grounded in a critical literature review and a theoretical examination of existing models. It is not an empirical study in the strict sense, but rather a conceptual essay drawing on academic literature, reports from international organizations such as the World Bank, UNDP, and OECD, as well as relevant case studies and institutional reflections on territorial governance.

The objective is to explore the mechanisms through which governance principles influence territorial governance, by identifying key factors that foster this interaction. Based on the analysis of qualitative data from these secondary sources, the study aims to identify trends, models, and analytical frameworks that can enhance understanding of the role governance plays in territorial development.

In the first part, we will examine the main theories and studies that have addressed the concept of governance and its core principles, through which local governments can improve their performance and contribute to territorial development. In the second part, we will propose

recommendations for a form of territorial governance better suited to the contemporary challenges of development.

1. Emergence of governance

1.1. Governance as Fashion and Concept

The notion of governance has emerged as a cross-disciplinary concept, drawing from philosophy, economics, political science, public administration, organizational theory, development studies, and international relations. It encompasses a range of meanings sometimes contradictory depending on whether the focus is on local governance, urban governance, corporate governance, territorial governance, national governance, or global governance (Pierre J., 2000; Rhodes, 1996).

This semantic richness, however, complicates the establishment of a stable conceptual framework. Introduced into development analysis following the first critical assessments of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), governance quickly became a central reference point for international institutions (World Bank, 1992).

According to Hufty (2007), there are three main ways to approach the concept of governance. The first sees governance as synonymous with government. The second considers it as an analytical tool specifically, a framework for observing non-hierarchical coordination systems (such as corporate or global governance). The third views governance as a normative framework, as exemplified by the World Bank approach.

In addition, a wide range of indicators has been developed to measure governance at the international level: over 160 indicators assess various dimensions such as transparency, the rule of law, or government effectiveness (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010; OECD, 2011). However, the use of these indicators faces two major limitations: the subjectivity of interpretations and the difficulty of ensuring reliable longitudinal comparisons.

Ultimately, these three approaches, institutional, analytical, and normative, reflect distinct visions of public action and imply different evaluation methods and policy levers. The institutional approach emphasizes state regulation, the analytical approach focuses on multi-actor interactions and governance beyond government, while the normative approach aims to establish universal standards of good governance.

In the remainder of this article, these conceptual frameworks will be examined in light of the realities of territorial governance, in order to assess their relevance in a localized context. This positioning goes beyond a mere juxtaposition of definitions by adopting a critical and comparative lens, consistent with the requirements of a rigorous theoretical anchoring.

1.2. Governance as a synonym of government

In the 14th century, reflections on the State and the exercise of power led to a distinction between two fundamental notions: government and governance. In the Anglo-American tradition, “*government*” refers to the official institutions of the State and the legitimate coercive power they wield. It is characterized by its ability to make decisions and ensure their implementation through institutional processes aimed at maintaining public order and facilitating action (Stoker, 1998). In contrast, “*governance*” refers to a way of managing public affairs without necessarily relying on formal state authority, instead involving more flexible forms of coordination among actors (Canet, 2004). It embodies a new conception of government, understood as more horizontal process of social regulation (Rhodes, 1996).

According to Rosenau (1992), both governance and government refer to goal-oriented behaviors based on a system of rules. However, government implies reliance on an official authority endowed with coercive means to ensure the implementation of decisions. In contrast, governance encompasses a broader set of activities organized around common objectives, without necessarily relying on formal or binding institutional mechanisms. It is thus based on a combination of explicit norms and interpersonal relationships, without necessarily requiring the use of authority or coercion.

The distinction between these two concepts is therefore clear: government is based on a vertical, centralized, and hierarchical logic of regulation, whereas governance promotes organizational forms in which public and private actors operate on an equal footing. It tends to blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres in the management of collective affairs (Ayegou, 2020).

Government may be defined as an institutional body operating through a top-down logic. Positioned at the apex of the state hierarchy, it enacts rules that apply across the social spectrum. In this framework, governing does not only mean setting and achieving objectives but also establishing a normative framework and overseeing its application. The public interest becomes a norm defined and enforced by the state. State intervention is thus concentrated in two key moments: the formulation of norms (upstream) and their control (downstream), while the space of execution is left to competitive or technical dynamics.

In contrast, governance is not an autonomous entity but a flexible regulatory system without rigid hierarchy. It promotes an integrated, inclusive, and adaptable approach, based on cooperation among public, private, and civil society actors through non-linear modalities (Moreau Defarges, 2015). In this perspective, the public interest is no longer a top-down

normative imposition; it becomes a social construct, continually redefined and temporarily appropriated by those involved in public action.

With the emergence of governance, the public interest becomes fluid, evolving, and negotiated rather than imposed. Governance can thus be understood as network-based public action, founded on flexible, non-predetermined, and continuously renewed cooperative relationships. It breaks with traditional hierarchical models by privileging negotiation mechanisms. Even if central authority and hierarchy recede, coordination remains necessary to ensure coherence in public action. This model is based on continuous interaction between objectives, resources, shared values, and diverse interests, structured through dialogue and negotiation processes (Gaudin, 2002).

Ultimately, this section clarifies the tension between two paradigms of public action: that of a centralized regulatory state, and that of distributed, adaptive governance. This shift from hierarchy to horizontality is one of the foundational pillars of today's territorial approach to governance.

1.3. Between corporate governance and global governance

The concept of governance first emerged in the economic field, as a set of mechanisms aimed at optimizing both internal coordination within the firm and its relationships with external stakeholders. The objective is to promote an efficient organizational structure that enables the achievement of collective goals, particularly in the context of increasing globalization and the growing complexity of economic interactions. In this framework, governance appears as a flexible form of power, based on the coordination of actors, social groups, and institutions around shared goals (Le Galès, 2014).

In the 1970s, the notion of governance became central within the neo-institutionalist school of economics. Williamson (1996), one of its main theorists, emphasized that "*the study of governance concerns the identification, explanation, and mitigation of all forms of risks related to contracting*". He defined governance as a system for regulating economic relationships, aimed at reducing transaction costs in contractual exchanges.

This approach was first applied to corporate governance, based on the management of power between shareholders and executives, in an environment marked by the globalization of capital and the weakening of family or national control over large firms. Thus, corporate governance gradually became a central issue, with companies no longer seen merely as economic units but as regulatory spaces involving a plurality of actor's executives, shareholders, employees, customers, and financial institutions (Ouidade Chatti, 2010). It embodies a model of governance

grounded in internal regulatory mechanisms, contractual relationships, and the pursuit of organizational efficiency.

From this foundation, the concept was gradually expanded beyond the entrepreneurial sphere to encompass broader configurations. Governance came to be used at the national level and even in reference to global governance, in cases where coordination systems extend beyond state borders. Finkelstein (1995) defines global governance as “*the management of relationships transcending national borders, without the reliance on a single sovereign authority.*”

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2002) specifies that “*public governance refers to the manner in which political, economic, and administrative authority is exercised to manage a nation’s affairs.*” In a broader sense, this form of governance refers to a set of processes and tools aimed at ensuring more effective, inclusive public management focused on collective well-being. It also encompasses objectives such as poverty reduction, the promotion of sustainable development, environmental protection, and human development.

Thus, from the microeconomic to the global level, governance has progressively detached itself from its strictly managerial origins to become a cross-cutting analytical framework, used to understand complex configurations of power, regulation, and cooperation. This evolution reflects a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the rise of non-state actors in decision-making processes (NGOs, companies, local governments); on the other hand, a redefinition of the role of the state in a context of growing interdependence and the fragmentation of sovereign powers (Mecherfi, 2004).

This section therefore highlights the conceptual flexibility of governance, whose use has expanded from the corporate world to the international stage, while maintaining a central feature: the rethinking of collective regulation beyond traditional state institutions.

2. Developing an appropriate territorial governance

2.1. Territorial governance

The shift of the concept of governance from the economic sphere to the political realm is justified by their common denominator: the search for partnership-based coordination mechanisms, situated between hierarchy and market on one hand, and between public institutions and civil society on the other. Even when transposed into the political field, governance retains a fundamental economic dimension, as its mechanisms are similar to those of market activities, applied to public goods and externalities. The legitimacy of this transposition lies in the idea that economic optimum is inseparable from decision-making

optimum, particularly in terms of resource allocation and burden-sharing, which are inherently political processes (Casteigts, 2009).

To better understand the real stakes behind the multiplication of territorial governance mechanisms, it is necessary to revisit the historical roots and implications of the concept, beyond the observations already made. In order to grasp the deeper issues associated with the proliferation of territorial governance frameworks, one must return to the origins and evolution of the concept. As early as the 13th century, the term "*governance*" referred to bailiwicks, before being assimilated into the notion of government during the Renaissance, only to disappear thereafter. It was not until 1975 that Williamson offered an economic definition of the concept, through his theory of transaction costs, according to which governance refers to coordination mechanisms either internal to organizations or contractual designed to reduce exchange and uncertainty costs (Williamson, 1979). In the 1980s, British political scientists contrasted the notions of "*urban governance*" and "*local government*," highlighting a transition from an institution-centered model to one emphasizing actor networks, cooperation, and governance without formal government.

Within this context, territorial governance emerges as a response to the rise of new development spaces built by and for local actors. It challenges the vertical structure of administrative political power and integrates the principles of participatory democracy through new forms of consultation and co-decision-making (Casteigts, 2009). This conceptual shift gives rise to a new form of territorial public action, grounded in coordination, cooperation, and the involvement of citizens and local stakeholders. Institutional steering of regional development is at the core of this dynamic. It seeks to establish territorial governance based on multi-level coordination, resource pooling, and the convergence of public policies through a logic of coherence and efficiency (Guerraoui, 2017).

However, this dynamic can only succeed if it is rooted in local values and practices. As Zaoual (2000) points out, "good governance" cannot exist without mobilizing collective beliefs. The effectiveness of governance mechanisms depends largely on their local embeddedness and their capacity to draw from the lived experiences of territorial actors, as opposed to top-down approaches often imposed by international institutions, which remain dominated by linear and technocratic models.

In this spirit, it becomes essential to rethink territorial organization around polycentric models, built on negotiation, partnership, and cooperation. The territory is no longer seen merely as an administrative space but rather as a place for producing norms, wealth, and collective

governance, where public authorities are expected to act as facilitators rather than prescribers (Zaoual, 2000).

Local government must therefore meet several conditions to structure and enhance territorial dynamics. It must establish open partnership frameworks rooted in a shared territorial project. This interdependence-based governance calls for a shift away from competitive logics toward cooperative mechanisms, grounded in solidarity, proximity, and collective intelligence. This paradigm shift is central to supporting the social, economic, and ecological transitions of territories.

Thus, territorial governance stands apart from centralized approaches through its ability to combine autonomy, coordination, and participation, while strategically articulating levels of intervention and local specificities. It offers a contextual and systemic response to the limitations of uniform governance models.

2.2. Governance specific to local authorities: region, commune

Beyond conceptual debates, it is now widely accepted that governance represents one of the most appropriate approaches to support territorial development, especially when accounting for the constraints and complexity of national contexts characterized by significant ethnic, cultural, spatial, social, and economic diversity. It enables territories to leverage their unique characteristics, mobilize their potential, and engage in collective action aimed at fostering solidarity-based development rooted in local realities (A. Mecherfi, 2004).

Several academic definitions enrich this understanding of territorial governance by emphasizing complementary, though sometimes distinct, dimensions. For Bertrand and Moquay (2004), territorial governance refers to new forms of public action that encourage negotiation and partnership among the State, local authorities, economic and civil society actors, interest groups, and citizens. This approach emphasizes intermediation and cooperation across decision-making spheres.

Gilly and Wallet (2005), on the other hand, highlight a different analytical lens: the empowerment of decentralized authorities in a context of complex interrelations, institutional overlaps, and hybrid forms of governance. Their perspective stresses multi-level governance, the reconfiguration of competences, and the evolution of local regulation frameworks.

Leloup, Moyart, and Pecqueur (2005) emphasize actor coordination for the purpose of organizing local development. Meanwhile, Torre and Traversac (2011), followed by Torre (2017), argue that territorial governance cannot be reduced to devolved state services or the actions of local authorities alone. Instead, it relies on the effective participation of inhabitants,

the acknowledgment of territorial conflicts, and the dynamic articulation of decision-making from the local to the global level.

These various definitions do not contradict each other but rather reflect distinct theoretical entry points: one centered on institutional partnerships, another on spatial reconfigurations and normative hybridity, and a third on democratic embeddedness and the co-production of public policies. This plurality reflects the richness of the concept, while also calling for a synthetic analytical effort.

Ultimately, each territory can be seen as carrying a unique form of governance, shaped by the dominant actors involved in territorial coordination—whether public, private, or hybrid. As Gilly and Perrat (2003) state, “governance is not a configuration of strictly economic or strictly socio-political coordination; it is a combination of both, characterized by varying densities of interaction between the three categories of actors.”

Thus, territorial governance appears less as a rigid model and more as a matrix of interactions that must be adapted to the challenges, resources, and cultural contexts of each specific space. This framework will be used in the remainder of the article to examine both the levers and limitations of territorial governance models in decentralized contexts.

3. “Good governance”: concept and principles

3.1. The concept of “good governance”

The concept of “good governance” has become prominent in the discourse of international institutions, especially since the 1990s, as a normative framework aimed at improving public management and state performance, particularly in developing countries. According to the World Bank (1992), good governance refers to a state's ability to formulate and implement effective public policies, ensure transparency in the management of public resources, and guarantee citizen participation in decision-making processes.

This notion is based on a set of principles considered universal: participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness, equity, and the rule of law (World Bank, 2002; Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010). These principles aim to define a standard of quality in public action, believed to foster institutional stability and citizen trust. Good governance is frequently used to justify structural reforms, decentralization processes, and aid conditionalities by emphasizing institutional performance and the legitimacy of public policy.

Additionally, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2002) defines good governance as a participatory and transparent process of managing public affairs, grounded in the responsibility of actors, the primacy of the rule of law, and policy inclusiveness. In contrast

to the World Bank's more technocratic approach, the UNDP emphasizes the democratic and social dimensions of governance.

At the local level, good governance refers to the ability of local and regional authorities to organize dialogue among stakeholders, guarantee access to information, ensure accountability in public affairs, and promote sustainable, equitable, and integrated development (Azouaoui, 2018; Ayegou, 2020). It implies the existence of participatory mechanisms, local regulatory bodies, and territorial engineering tailored to citizens' needs.

These different approaches, while sharing common ground, reflect distinct priorities: the World Bank focuses on institutional performance and stability; the UNDP highlights inclusiveness and accountability; and local scholars such as Azouaoui and Ayegou stress the importance of adapting governance to territorial realities.

Therefore, good governance is not a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it serves as a regulatory ideal that must be adapted to local contexts, institutional capacities, political cultures, and the social dynamics of specific territories. Its relevance lies in this very ability to adjust and contextualize governance frameworks, particularly in territories undergoing transition.

3.2. The universal principles of “good governance”

“*Good governance*” is grounded in a set of fundamental principles that help clarify its multidimensional scope. Beyond administrative performance, it aims to achieve a core objective: the economic, social, and political well-being of citizens (Ayegou, 2020). These principles, widely adopted by international institutions, serve as a reference framework for evaluating the quality of public action at both national and local levels.

From this perspective, the World Bank identifies four major pillars that form the foundation of contemporary institutional reforms. While each principle stands on its own, they are interdependent and contribute to the overall coherence of the governance system:

- Participation and integrity:

This principle is rooted in the logic of equality in civil and political rights. It ensures that every citizen has the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes on an equal footing. Inclusive governance is thus based on the absence of discrimination, the recognition of pluralism of opinion, and the fair protection of fundamental rights for all. The effective participation of citizens is inseparable from the rule of law, which underpins civil liberties, equality before the law, and equitable access to public services (World Bank, 2005).

- **Transparency:**

Transparency is a core pillar of good governance. It entails the free flow of public information, clarity in decision-making processes, and citizen access to data concerning the management of public affairs. According to the OECD (2011), transparency strengthens trust in institutions, reduces the risk of authoritarian drift, and fosters accountability. The UNDP (2011) further emphasizes that transparency is a prerequisite for citizen participation and a critical tool in preventing systemic corruption.

- **Accountability and Answerability :**

Accountability stems from the principle of representation. It requires public decision-makers whether elected or appointed to answer for their actions to the citizens. This obligation to account is supported by both internal mechanisms (administrative or institutional oversight) and external mechanisms (citizen scrutiny, the press, and the judiciary). Accountability is also inseparable from transparency, which is a necessary condition for credible and effective answerability (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010).

- **Rule of Law :**

Respect for the rule of law is a cornerstone of “good governance”. It is based on the supremacy of law, equality before legal norms, the separation of powers, and the independence of the judiciary. A state governed by the rule of law not only ensures the impartial application of rules but also guarantees the protection of individual liberties and legal security for citizens. Without this normative foundation, the other principles become ineffective (UNDP, 2011; World Bank, 2002).

Effective governance, therefore, relies on mechanisms that ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to legal frameworks, while promoting fair participation among stakeholders. These principles are not isolated but form an integrated system, where each reinforces the effectiveness of the others. By guaranteeing access to information, answerability of decision-makers, and impartial enforcement of laws, good governance strengthens institutional legitimacy and contributes to more sustainable and inclusive development.

From a territorial perspective, these principles support coherent management of local spaces by aligning public policies with societal expectations. They serve as a compass for designing governance models that are locally rooted, adaptable, and responsive to contemporary democratic demands.

Conclusion

Governance, as a plural concept, encompasses a complex and dynamic reality that extends beyond traditional frameworks of government. Positioned at the intersection of political, economic, social, and territorial dimensions, it has emerged as an essential paradigm of contemporary public action. However, this conceptual richness comes with a certain semantic ambiguity: the widespread use of the term across various contexts and levels of intervention has diluted its analytical clarity.

One of the major challenges lies in constructing rigorous and shared evaluation tools. The development of composite indicators, the diversity of theoretical approaches, and the lack of consensus on the normative foundations of “good governance” complicate its operationalization for policy diagnosis or steering. These limitations highlight the importance of contextual anchoring—translating principles into practices that are adapted to local realities. Moreover, territorial governance, as the localized expression of the concept, interrogates power relations, intermediation logics, and collective action capacities. It cannot be reduced to a simple administrative efficiency logic or resource optimization. Instead, it should be viewed as a political and social process grounded in co-construction, negotiation, and the recognition of the plurality of actors embedded in differentiated territories.

In short, governance should not be conceived as a fixed or universal model. Rather, it is a process in constant redefinition, shaped by the interactions, values, cultures, and dynamics specific to each territory. It thus embodies a continuous quest for balance between democratic legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, citizen participation, and social justice—far more than a mere public management tool.

Contributions, Limitations, and Perspectives

This paper has clarified the origins, principles, and territorial forms of governance, bringing together diverse theoretical approaches. It emphasizes the importance of a critical, context-sensitive, and comparative reading of the concept, to better understand its practical applications, local reconfigurations, and implications for public action.

However, this contribution remains theoretical. The absence of empirical grounding is a limitation, particularly in understanding the real-world conditions for implementing governance principles at the territorial level. A useful extension would involve mobilizing case studies (e.g., transitioning regions, participatory processes, multi-level policies) to illustrate dynamics, obstacles, and contextual adjustments observed on the ground.

Ultimately, territorial governance should not be approached as a transferable norm, but rather as a strategic lever for transforming public action adaptable, inclusive, and capable of addressing the contemporary challenges of sustainable development, territorial justice, and democratic participation.

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