

GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR A GOOD SOCIETY

By Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu

INTRODUCTION

While governance is the exercise of authority – political, economic and administrative – to manage national resources and affairs, good governance is the art of making the government more receptive and accountable to the needs and aspirations of its populace.

The term “governance”¹ used in economics (as regards corporate governance) and political science (as regards State governance) implies effective political institutions and the responsible use of political power by the State to guarantee sustainable economic and human development. In varied contexts, good governance refers to the rules, the process of decision-making and the ways in which decisions are implemented so that it would reinforce participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence in society as a whole.

Good governance as a concept is applicable to all sections of the society, such as government, legislature, the private sector, the corporate sector, secular and religious communities and non-government organizations (NGOs). In this paper the author confines the discussion to good governance in government in relation to a good society.

NATURE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

While bad governance is regarded as the root cause of all evil within our societies, good governance is considered as the interaction between democracy, social welfare and the rule of law. It is not easy to achieve good governance in its totality. Establishing good governance is to ensure sustainable human development as a reality.

There are several characteristics of good governance, of which the following eight are of key importance: participation, rule of law, consensus-orientation, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, equitability and inclusiveness, and accountability.

Citizen participation is widely encouraged especially in decision-making and freedom of expression, which could be either direct or through representatives.

¹ Governance can be used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. According to Roderick Rhodes, a political scientist, the concept of governance is used in contemporary social sciences with at least six diverse meanings: the minimal State, corporate governance, new public management, good governance, social-cybernetic systems and self-organized networks. For details, see R. Rhodes, “The new governance: governing without government” (1996), in *Political Studies*, Vol. 44, page 652.

Good governance supports an impartial legal system, which can protect human rights of every citizen.

Consensus-orientation requires decision-making based on widespread agreement to meet the different interests of the whole community, which is essential for sustainable human development.

Transparency requires open-mindedness in decision-making process, in accordance with rules and regulations.

Responsiveness is to meet the needs of the citizenry within a reasonable timeframe.

Effectiveness and efficiency are to make sustainable use of natural resources, providing best services that meet the requirements and aspirations of the society, while protecting the environment.

Equitability and inclusiveness guarantee that the sections of the population do not get excluded from the mainstream of the society.

Accountability enforced with transparency and the rule of law should be toward the public and to their institutional stakeholders.

TWO-FOLD PRINCIPLE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

While the absence of good governance is root cause of the crisis, good governance is crucial for sustainable development. Good governance is used as a key for building sustainable development and peace.

Good governance is a precondition for sustainable development. Good governance and sustainable development are interrelated. While good governance can improve development effectiveness, sustainable development enhances a good system of government. In countries where there is poor governance, corruption, abuse of human rights and lack of accountability, the development will not be possible.

With regard to political principles, good governance is a process of establishing an accountable form of government which promotes a pluralist civil society, freedom of expression and association. The basic requirement of good governance is to build good institutions and sets of impartial legal system that effectively govern individuals and organizations, bringing about human well-being and happiness.

In terms of economic principles, good governance requires policies, based on efficient open market, leading to poverty reduction, economic growth and sustainable development. Comparative private sectors are encouraged to develop in order to supply the best and satisfactory services to the society. Effective institutions and corporate governance are needed to support investments that would lead to social and economic advancement in order to improve the welfare of the masses.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

Respect for the rule of law is essential to good governance. Basing the government on rule of law is a must. While governments govern according to the law of the land, the maintenance of law and order, administration of justice, and welfare of society would lead to sustainable human development.

Good governance is not only an aim in itself but a key factor in attaining human development². It should be guided by human rights, democracy, justice and equal political participation for all in order to ensure human welfare, security and peace-building. The central feature of good governance is to ensure government and administrative reforms on the one hand, and to support decentralization, regionalization and the development of local government, on the other. Promoting good governance is not only a co-operation within government institutions but also involves civil society participation.

Good governance is a cornerstone for countries at all stages of development, whether social, economic, moral and spiritual – both nationally and internationally. The significance of good governance is for economic efficiency and growth. Good governance is conducive to macroeconomic stability, external viability and sustainable development. In order to achieve this target, the national authorities should be responsible for governance issues. Their willingness, commitment and involvement would make governance a success. Good governance is principally of two spheres, that is, improving the management of public resources through all kinds of positive reforms and supporting the development and maintenance of a transparent and stable economy.

KEY COMPONENTS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

The best possible investment in supporting good governance is democratic development. The true test of “good” governance is to bring democracy. Contributing to the goal of establishing sustainable democracies is the main concern of Buddhism. Buddhism can take a leading role in promoting and consolidating democracy worldwide. Promoting democracy is a better way to improve individual opportunity for prosperity and happiness, as well as to build a vibrant civil society. Expanding democracy in the society is to encourage pluralism, participation, and peaceful co-existence.

Good governance demands for democratization, political participation and impartial electoral systems. Democracy, either electoral or consultative, requires power be vested in the people through fair elections. It is a system of government respecting plurality of views and opinions, and inviting civil participation in the governance system.

² The United Nations' Millennium Declaration.

The non-reform-minded governments should be encouraged to support the strengthening of governance in terms of democracy programs that are responsive and responsible to the citizens. Democracy programs would entail promoting the rule of law and human rights, fair elections coupled with a competitive political process, citizen participation in government, a free media and a responsive structure of governance. This would make a good impact on the democratic progress around the world.

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Good governance is established when the realization of the value of human rights is made. Good governance would thus conduce to the practice, observance and enjoyment of human rights, and contribute to sustainable human development in a manner which ensures transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, responsiveness to the needs of the people.³ Good governance would also guarantee freedom from abuse and corruption. Promotion of human rights, whether civil, cultural, economic, political, social or spiritual, is the best test of good governance. Satisfying these fundamental rights would effectively guarantee basic needs such as health, housing, food, education, justice, security and peace.

Good governance within each country would create a government conducive to sustainable development at the national and global levels.

Development cooperation is of utmost importance for securing good governance in countries in need of external support. The value of partnership in terms of development cooperation should be recognized.

CONCLUSION

Governance is an art which requires a progressive vision and consistent efforts to be effective. The goal of good governance should be to cater to the needs and aspirations of the citizens. Good governance works toward protecting the citizens' fundamental human rights while endeavoring to build and sustain a society which is progressive— socially, economically, politically and spiritually. It uses the resources at hand skillfully, while encouraging public participation and democratic systems and providing an environment where human beings can lead a peaceful co-existence. The progress of human race and protecting the

³ The Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/64. In *The Millennium Report and Declaration*, the Secretary-General emphasized that "better governance means greater participation, coupled with accountability. Therefore, the international public domain – including the United Nations – must be opened up further to the participation of the many actors whose contributions are essential to managing the path of globalization ... For the United Nations, success in meeting the challenges of globalization ultimately comes down to meeting the needs of peoples. It is in their name that the Charter was written; realizing their aspirations remains our vision for the twenty-first century."

environment, as urged by Buddhism, should be its aim at large. All said and done, eventually, only that governance which aims at working for larger human welfare – both nationally and globally– is a good one.

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Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu currently serves as the Head, Department of Buddhist Philosophy, Vietnam Buddhist University; Deputy secretary, Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute, and Deputy secretary, Central Department of International Buddhist Affairs.

Address: Giac Ngo Temple, 92 Nguyen Chi Thanh,
P.3, Q.10, TP. HCM, Vietnam

Tel: +(84)-8309570; Cell: +(84)-908153160.

Email: thichnhattu@yahoo.com & buddhismtodayinc@yahoo.com

Websites: <http://buddhismtoday.com> & <http://tusachphathoc.com>