

## **Governance as Relational Process: An International Symposium**

Although discontent with existing forms of governance has long been with us, recent global crises only exacerbate such concerns. In some countries there is an evident swing toward dictatorship; in others, control is increasingly sustained by a privileged wealthy class. Further symptoms of crisis include political polarization, tribalism, mass civil unrest, police violence, and military intervention. Trust in political leaders, government policymaking processes, along with once revered democratic practices has been eroded. Political parties have stoked the fires of antagonism, and meaningful dialogue has given way to diatribe and antipathy.

Coupled with these issues, developments in digital technology and social media have opened a new terrain of challenges to governance. Grassroots organizations can rapidly spring to life, each with its own values and vision of the world. Impassioned movements can incite and intensify social divisiveness and destabilize governments. Digital media also permit politically motivated misinformation to circulate freely, subverting and undermining national elections. On the global scene, attempts to unite the world's governments have always languished. Recent failures in multilateral collaboration to combat climate and ecological crises and to contain the COVID-19 pandemic are now threatening our collective human future. In terms of pursuing a global "common good," there is an alarming absence of effective governance.

On the positive side, these conditions of ferment and agitation are giving rise to widespread creativity and imagination. At both grassroots and trans-national levels, there have been increasing attempts to explore how governance could be otherwise. The well-being focused economy, the UN 2030 SDGs and other regenerative efforts are such examples. There is not only a renewed interest in existing alternatives, but also emergent innovation and social experimentation. Most fascinating in this case is the family resemblance characterizing a broad array of worldwide movements and innovations. Consider the following: co-governance, collaborative governance, commons-based decision making, the cooperative movement, participatory, direct and deliberative democracy, dialogic policymaking, the New Public Governance, people's parliament/assembly, public value co-creation, relational welfare, the relational state, and more.

Although there are differences among these approaches in focus, scope, and aims, several commonalities are striking. In one form or another, almost all of them place an emphasis on:

- *Inclusive participation.* In the light of a growing sense of frustration among citizens about having no voice in decisions that shape their future, significant means are sought for expanding active participation of people in political processes.
- *Decentralized decision-making.* As top-down decisions increasingly meet with resistance, and their efficacy is undermined, a premium is placed on more localized or context sensitive decision-making.
- *Meaningful and engaging dialogue.* Given the objectives of inclusive participation and decentralizing decision-making, a high priority is placed on processes and forms of meaningful and engaging dialogue to enhance governance.
- *Collaboration.* With consistent recognition of our interconnectedness, and relationships being essential to our personal and collective well-being, collaboration is emerging as pivotal to future governance practices.

With these significant commonalities, one begins to sense the potential for broad transformation in the conception, process and practice of governance. A key question at this point, however, is how to bring coherence and direction to these otherwise disparate movements and experiments. Is there a unifying theme that can invite convergence and offer a common but distinct direction toward a promising future? One propitious possibility is the overwhelming commitment to the value of *relational process*. Participation, decentralization, dialogue and collaboration, all place relational process at the center of concern. This recognition is significant in two ways:

First, most traditional thought on governance tends to be *structural* in orientation. That is, the focus is on developing optimal and durable institutions, ideally protected by laws, and functioning in perpetuity. When an institution confronts problems, the tendency is thus to “fix the system.” In contrast, the emphasis in these emerging innovations is not in establishing a fixed *order*, but on enriching the ongoing *relational processes* of governance. This is not to abandon established traditions or institutions, but to facilitate their evolution toward more inclusive participation in co-creating the future.

Second, traditional deliberations on governance are typically grounded in the assumption of bounded and identifiable units – from individual persons to nation states. We thus speak of *the individual’s* rights, entitlements and welfare, or *the nation’s* sovereign interests, decisions and policies. On this atomized account, relations among the units are secondary, with the result that they are undertheorized and poorly practiced. For example, we continue to rely on the primitive use of force – from arms to economic – to bring about order, and our dialogic alternatives have progressed little further than transactional bargaining. Further, because it is understood that each party is fundamentally invested in its own well-being, the relational process is pervaded by suspicion, manipulation, deceit, surveillance, and exploitation. In the present case, however, the focus shifts from the units to the processes of relating. What forms of dialogue, and other practices of relating can encourage and enrich the movement toward more viable governance.

If relational process is the overarching connection that unites these emergent approaches to governance, thus opening new vistas of theory and practice, further exploration is vital. To this end, we are proposing an online international symposium, inviting a small number of scholars and practitioners whose work centrally bears on these issues, to explore the implications and potentials of relational process in governance. Our hope for this symposium is deepening our understanding through an illuminating sharing of thoughts, experiences, and relevant practices.

The following are among the questions we invite the participants to consider:

- a) What does a relational orientation offer for the future development of governance, from the local, regional, to the national, international and trans-national level?
- b) Bearing on issues in governance, are there significant differences among theories of relational process, with implications for governance?
- c) What particular practices of relating might be recognized as positive contributions to governance? How can we best understand their functioning? How might governance be enriched by practices of relating?
- d) What are the major impediments to effective relational process? How are they overcome?
- e) With relational process as a center-piece, how are we to conceive of leadership? What practices would be invited?

## The Symposium Plan

The proposed dates of the symposium are *6-7 May, 2021*. The symposium is by invitation only, and the group will be limited to *eight* participants. Our hope is to create an event that is not simply a smorgasbord of assorted papers, but a more focused exploration in which we can all learn from each other. To enrich the dialogue, we will include *four* participants whose contributions have been primarily conceptual, and *four* with extensive backgrounds in practices of leadership and governance. Further, the participants will be chosen from different disciplines, backgrounds, and areas of expertise.

The symposium itself will take place online over the two days, with each day comprising primarily of two *90-minute* sessions. Each session would feature two presentations, mixing theory and practice, and with an emphasis on dialogue over monologue. The schedule of timing is proposed as below.

### May 6:

14:00 - 14:30 Welcome and introductions  
14:30 - 16:00 Session I  
16:30 - 18:00 Session 2

### May 7:

14:00 - 15:30 Session 3  
16:00 - 17:30 Session 4  
17:45 - 18:30 Concluding discussion

All times in UK Summer Time

A week prior to the symposium, participants will circulate a *written sketch/outline* of their contributions (e.g. 2-4 pages), to addressing questions posed above, taking into account the emphasis on relational process in governance and relevant issues. Additional writings may also be made available to the participants.

If the symposium dialogue proves fertile, we shall consider editing and publishing a collection of papers emerging from the symposium - either as a standalone volume or special issue of a journal. We also hope that our work together will help to create a transdisciplinary community with a common interest in a relational orientation to fostering new forms of governance.

## Organizers

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