Contemporary scholarship on institutional reforms can be classified into two distinct perspectives. The first of these concentrates on the attributes of political context that shape the incentives and imperatives of political leaders, and a second perspective emphasizes institutional design and its effects on development outcomes. Following a simplistic version of the second perspective, international agencies have often promoted a pre-set toolkit of ‘best practices’ or blueprints of institutional reforms. In the book under review, Matt Andrews criticizes the best-practices approach, recognizes that context matters and argues for a pragmatic approach to institutional reforms that relies on broad-based engagement between sub-national, national and international actors.

The fundamental problem that Andrews identifies with contemporary institutional reforms is that ‘many reforms are introduced as short-term signals that ensure developing countries attain and retain external support and legitimacy’ (pp. 3–4). The author shows that irrespective of the context, international agencies often seek to (i) foster market-friendly governments; (ii) create disciplined governments and (iii) modernize and formalize government processes (pp. 9–10). The author’s analysis of the drivers of institutional reforms in Chapters 3–5 suggests that the interests and incentives of domestic elites and international agencies coalesce to produce institutional status quo in development.

Going beyond critiquing institutional reforms commonly promoted by international agencies, Andrews distills and synthesizes lessons from a number of cases of successful reforms (Chapter 7–9). He shows that functional institutions often result from a ‘problem driven iterative adaptation’ (PDIA), an approach that is rooted in a focus on context-specific understanding of problems as entry point for change. The PDIA perspective is a fundamental departure from the pursuit of presumptively superior agendas of privatization and commercialization that donors often pursue in collaboration with domestic economic and political elites. The PDIA requires the donor to give up their reliance on narrow sets of reform champions, to invest in ‘processes of finding and fitting locally relevant solutions to locally felt problems’ by ‘building broad groups of agents to diagnose, define, implement, and diffuse change ideas’ (p. 217).

An especially outstanding contribution of this book is the concluding chapter, which examines whether influential international agencies are likely to effectively bring about the changes that many of them have ‘adopted’ in principle. The author first maps the terrain of actors, institutions and structures that underwrite contemporary institutional reforms, and weighs them against specific drivers of change – severity of disruption, strength of dominant logic, evidence of alternative logics and activity of change agents. The author describes a number of initiatives international agencies have launched to brainstorm ideas for change, and the recent emergence of data-driven critiques of contemporary development interventions. Notwithstanding these
encouraging signs, the analysis points to two major gaps in the recent change initiatives. First, the agents who ‘authorize’ change within development organizations and developing countries are largely missing from initiatives that seek to change the terms of debate. Second, these initiatives have not fundamentally altered target-driven promotion of institutional reforms, which often boils down to maximization of loan disbursements. In other words, Andrews’ circumspect analysis of the situation suggests that there are few signs of fundamental structural changes in the ‘rules of the game’. What remains to be seen is whether such changes can happen without displacing ‘banks’ and ‘funds’ from the helm of the business of international development.

The book is a scathing but soft-toned critique of international development aid and the popular ‘best-practices’ approach that is entrenched in the institutions, incentives and systems of international aid. The author engages with every important idea that is out there in the debates related to international development, and provokes a number of important questions for future research.

The author’s diagnosis suggests that the root cause of the limited success of institutional reforms lies in the deliberate use of ‘reforms as signals’. Political elites have ‘incentive to masquerade as the transformational leader needed to facilitate institutional reforms, even if they are not up to the task’ (p. 104). An underlying question is why international agencies have failed to stop funding such Machiavellian reforms. Andrews posits that international actors either ‘choose to ignore much of the contextual reality or cannot ‘see’ it because they are outside the system (p. 42). He offers empirically informed remedies to the institutional failures that result from the inability of international actors to see through the designs of domestic elites. However, the reader is left gasping for more to address failures that result from the strategic coalition of the interest international agencies have in pushing their favored ‘best practices’, and the interest of national elites in using reform initiatives to ‘further their own financial, political, or administrative goals’.

The important gap identified above is a consequence of the book’s recommendation about concentrating on ‘relevant’ reforms, that is, the reforms that are ‘politically acceptable and within the resources of government’ (p. 178, citing Rose, 2003, emphasis added by this author). An emphasis on political feasibility is arguably one of the reasons why contemporary international reforms help sustain the status quo (Mosse, 2005). Some of the most debated institutional reforms, such as property rights reforms that will benefit the poor, are also considered politically infeasible. Instead of using political feasibility as a filtering device, the nature of the political context must be seen as an important ‘attribute’ of the reform process that warrants careful analysis.

A full understanding of the strategic behavior of important actors in international development demands political economic analyses. The author wonders though whether political economy approaches can reach ‘below-the-waterline’ to shine light on informal institutions and norms (p. 63). The answer certainly has to be an emphatic yes. Scholars of comparative politics have developed empirically sound and theoretically rigorous approaches to examine the complex intersection of institutions, authority relations and political-economic context (Grindle, 2000; Boone, 2003). They have mapped the conditions under which ‘political leadership and structures of political power … are … part of the solution to building more efficient, effective, and responsive states’ (Grindle, 1996, p. i). Institutional reforms that seek to ‘exploit’ the forces inherent to the political process are likely to help create the broad-based coalitions that Andrews recommends. On the other hand, the PDIA approach elaborated in this book will aid in making comparative politics research more policy-relevant.

The book is a must-read for anyone interested in international development. It is already shaping debates related to the post-2015 development agenda, and is bound to trigger important new scholarship on institutional change in international development and beyond.
Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society

David Lewis


After its controversial 5 January election, Bangladesh seems to be drifting politically towards a one-party, authoritarian state. Given its harbinger status as one of the first of the homogenous Muslim countries to adopt formal democracy, a thorough analysis of the distorted development of this paradoxical country is sorely needed. It boasts an economy that (in both GDP and GDP per capita terms) has grown constantly and sustainably for almost two decades, accompanied by a great leap forward in its social indicators. However, this is contradicted by a complete absence of progress towards democratization; in fact, there is an apparent back-slide towards authoritarianism. This seems very counter-intuitive to many who believe that economic/social progress goes hand in glove with modernization of the political/social system.

Unfortunately, David Lewis’ book Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society, published in 2011 by Cambridge University Press, does not respond to this need. Nor, indeed, does it pretend to. Its aim, Lewis writes in the introduction, ‘is to provide a concise, up-to-date overview of the politics, economy, and civil society of Bangladesh ...’. The book does this adequately for the most part, although I have a number of serious reservations about some of the assertions and omissions made, which I outline below.

In reading this book I was looking for insight – something beyond the usual clichés – into the Bangladesh paradox. The closest thing I found is Lewis’ assertion that Bangladesh does not fit neatly into either of the theories of development that most scholars use, or have used in the recent past, to judge the overall development of countries. Neither the modernization theory of development, which (very simplistically) sees overall development as a function of economic growth, nor the now almost defunct framework of the dependency theorists who were influential...