



SST 47 – Governance and Meta-Governance



A group of farmers share access to a reservoir that supplies water for irrigation. During dry periods, competition for water increases. Each farmer has a strong incentive to take as much water as possible in order to protect their crops.

Initially, the farmers rely upon informal agreements. For a time these arrangements work reasonably well. However, as pressures increase, disagreements emerge. Some farmers believe others are taking more than their fair share. Trust begins to decline and disputes become more frequent.

In response, the farmers establish a water management committee. The committee monitors usage, allocates water during shortages, and resolves disputes. For a period, this improves the situation.

Eventually, however, concerns arise regarding the committee itself. Some members are accused of favouring particular interests. Questions are raised about how decisions are made and whether the rules are being applied fairly.

The farmers therefore introduce additional arrangements governing how the committee operates, how members are selected, and how decisions can be reviewed.

The community has now created not only governance, but governance of governance.



Formal Description

Interventions seek to influence the future behaviour and outcomes of social systems. However, as previous modules have shown, interventions are subject to uncertainty, incomplete knowledge, competing interests, and unintended consequences.

Governance can be understood as the regulation of constraints affecting collective behaviour within a system. Its purpose is to influence how individuals, groups, and organisations interact in ways that support the effective functioning of the wider system.

Governance operates at multiple levels.

At the first level, interventions are directed towards the system itself. Interveners seek to modify constraints in ways expected to influence behaviour and outcomes.

At the second level, governance regulates the intervention process. Scientific review, professional standards, organisational procedures, democratic accountability, consultation processes, and performance monitoring all influence how interventions are designed, selected, implemented, and evaluated.

At the third level, governance itself becomes the object of regulation. Constitutional arrangements, legal systems, ethical principles, institutional checks and balances, and other higher-order constraints influence how governance processes operate. This higher level of regulation is known as meta-governance.

Meta-governance does not govern society directly. Rather, it governs the systems responsible for governance.

Together, intervention, governance, and meta-governance form a hierarchy of increasingly reflexive regulation.

Plain English Explanation

When people first encounter a problem, they often focus on finding a solution. However, experience quickly reveals that deciding what to do is only part of the challenge.

Who decides?

How are decisions evaluated?

How do we know whether interventions are effective?

What happens if decision-makers become ineffective, biased, or unaccountable?

These questions lead naturally to governance.



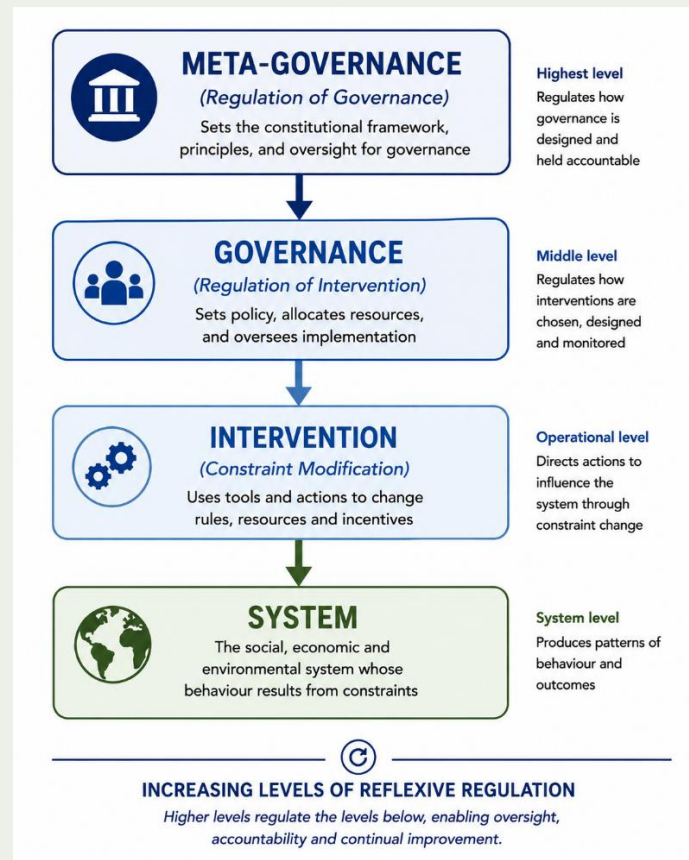
Governance helps societies coordinate behaviour, manage shared resources, resolve conflicts, and pursue collective goals. It establishes the rules, procedures, and institutions through which decisions are made.

However, governance systems are themselves social systems. They may become ineffective, captured by particular interests, resistant to change, or disconnected from the needs of those they serve.

For this reason, societies often develop higher-order arrangements intended to regulate governance itself. Constitutions, courts, ethical frameworks, scientific standards, democratic procedures, and systems of accountability all perform this role.

An important component of governance is trust. People are more likely to cooperate when they believe that rules are fair, decisions are legitimate, and institutions operate in the interests of the wider community. Trust therefore functions as a powerful constraint supporting collective action and social stability.

Governance and meta-governance are not alternatives to intervention. They are mechanisms that help ensure interventions are selected, implemented, and adapted responsibly.





Example 1 – Water Resource Management

A water authority regulates how water is distributed during drought conditions. Governance determines allocation rules, while legal and constitutional arrangements regulate how the authority itself operates.

Example 2 – Scientific Research

Scientific communities establish standards governing research methods, peer review, and publication. Universities, funding bodies, ethical review boards, and professional organisations help govern these governance processes.

Example 3 – Democratic Government

Governments create laws and policies intended to influence society. Constitutions, courts, elections, and systems of accountability regulate how governments exercise those powers.

Provenance and Links

This module builds directly upon:

- Intervention as Constraint Modification
- Constraints on Intervention
- The Enhanced Morphogenetic Cycle
- Social System Diagnostics

Related thinkers include:

- Elinor Ostrom (Governance and Collective Action)
- Stafford Beer (Management Cybernetics and Viability)
- Margaret Archer (Reflexivity and Social Regulation)
- Francis Fukuyama (Trust and Social Cooperation)

Practical Exercise

Think of an organisation, community, or public institution that you know well.

1. Identify an important decision-making process within that system.
2. What forms of governance influence how decisions are made?
3. Who evaluates or oversees those governance processes?
4. Are there any forms of meta-governance present?
5. How important is trust to the effective functioning of the system?

Reflect on whether governance and meta-governance are helping to improve the viability of the system or whether they may themselves require adaptation