October 2012

Politics, state building and service delivery

Event report

A strong understanding of the political context in which services are delivered is increasingly recognised as having a powerful effect on the success of service delivery processes and outcomes. This realisation has been accompanied by a flowering of new thinking and research. Progress has been made in conceptualising and documenting both how to diagnose and treat bottlenecks and blockages to service delivery that are rooted in issues of politics and governance, and in understanding how service delivery can feedback into, and sometimes alter, the wider political culture, institutions and processes that they operate in, particularly in fragile states.

On Friday 19th October, ODI convened a high level workshop to take stock of these issues. It brought together some of the leading researchers and practitioners to examine the impact of political context and institutions on service delivery and the role of service delivery in processes of state building.

The event aimed to take stock of existing knowledge in these fields, identify priorities for future research and to debate the challenges of successfully integrating this understanding into future policy and programming. It did so by bringing together two broad perspectives, those whose principal focus is service provision, but have an interest in the effect of politics, and those whose principal focus is state building, but see service provision as a contributing factor.

This report provides a brief summary of the presentations and discussion on the day.

Session 1: How does politics shape service delivery?

Kunal Sen, Joint Research Director, Effective States & Inclusive Development Research Centre, University of Manchester

Dr Kunal Sen outlined the objectives of the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Research Centre, a six year research programme funded by DFID and housed at the University of Manchester. His presentation noted that, while there has been considerable expansion in the provision of public services over the last decade, there are pervasive problems surrounding the quality of these services and equity of access to them. Understanding why this should be the case and what can be done about it is the major function of the ESID programme.

He argued that technical solutions were useful but that the major barriers to improving quality and equity are rooted in organisational structures, incentives and the behaviour of actors. A focus only on the nature of political regimes, however, is unhelpful. ESID plans to build on the 2004 World Development Report model of the long and short routes of accountability for service delivery. He called for a new focus on the middle layers of government, on how political preferences are transmitted downwards and socially embedded, and on how individual sectors really operate. He explored three areas of research that ESID will be particularly focusing on, namely the influence of the political settlement, the drivers of agency behaviour and the porosity of citizen-state relations. This research will be carried out using a series of comparative case studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Leni Wild, Research Fellow, Politics and Governance, ODI

Claire Mcloughlin, Research Fellow, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham

This joint presentation examined a new ODI flagship programme on the politics of public goods and service delivery. This programme aims to provide policy analysis and guidance to better diagnose and address key bottlenecks to service delivery that are rooted in political and governance features. As a first step, it has sought to better structure evidence and analysis of these issues, by mapping some of the common underlying governance dynamics that affect service delivery and some of the sector specific features that also shape incentives.

Leni Wild began by outlining five common governance dynamics that affect service delivery, based on a multi-country cross-sector review (including education, health, water and sanitation). The five dynamics most commonly identified were:

- particular political logics;
- the existence of policy coherence or incoherence;
- levels of performance monitoring and accountability;
- capacity for collective action; and
- the presence of moral hazard.

These can manifest themselves in terms of particular symptoms and effects for service delivery. They also do not exist in isolation; rather, there may be a combination of these constraints which explain particular blockages, as in Malawi, where particular political logics combine with forms of policy incoherence and poor monitoring to create problems in water/sanitation and in health. However, these underlying governance dynamics only explain so much; greater analysis is needed of the characteristics of sectors themselves, which can help explain politics within sectors and variance in performance across sectors.

Claire Mcloughlin therefore presented a mapping of sector characteristics which can have political and accountability implications. This examines the nature of the service provided, as well as particular features of different tasks. This approach to structuring analysis on the politics of service delivery is now being tested through country based analysis and engagement, in particular to understand how these elements of the context and of sectors themselves interact. Leni and Claire identified several emerging implications of this work, including:

- More systematic assessments of sector and context characteristics and greater tracking of uptake an impact;
- Better calibration of policy options and support to characteristics of sectors and nature of constraints (i.e. accountability support);
- Tracking uptake and impact; and
- Bridging sector and governance expertise and interests, to identify areas for collaboration.

Key points in the discussion

The discussion in this session revolved around five main points:

- The approaches presented by the speakers were widely agreed to be useful ways to think through these issues and there was a recognition that considerable progress had been made in sectoral political and governance analysis in recent years.

- Discussants were keen to emphasise that political and governance factors should be seen as opportunities, as well as explanations for bottlenecks, as they can also create incentives to improve and expand services. Development itself remains a highly political process and this requires broader acknowledgement.

- There was some discussion regarding the need to move away from interventions and policies that seek to create formalised, adversarial relationships around service delivery (i.e. service users making demands of service providers) and instead to promote forms of co-operation and co-production. Several discussants noted instances in which this had proven to be effective as it was more in line with the incentives faced by the actors in question.

- Concern was expressed that more needed to be done to effectively bridge the gap between sector experts and their political/governance counterparts. The challenges of different professional languages, differing incentives and areas of interest were all discussed, with a particular focus on ways in which political economy analysis in this area could be reframed to generate more mutual understanding and interest from sector experts.

- The need to persuade donors of the value of this form of analysis also emerged in the course of the discussion, with a general consensus that some further success stories were needed to secure wider support.

Session 2: State building, legitimacy and service delivery

Derick Brinkerhoff, Distinguished Fellow, RTI International

Dr Derick Brinkerhoff presented recent analysis of water service provision in Iraq. He noted that it is generally accepted as an article of faith that the delivery of services helps in the process of building states and legitimacy, but that the relationship between these remains unclear and that there is a lack of reliable evidence.

He presented two models for state legitimacy. The first is from Levi et al. (2009) and sees a linear progression from general trust in the state leading to cognitive legitimacy and thus to behavioural legitimacy. The second is from Brinkerhoff et al. (2007) and sees state legitimacy as a cyclical process in which the provision of public goods creates trust and so greater security, which then leads to greater accountability and a tendency towards the rule of law. This then feeds back into rising demand for, and provision of, public goods by the state. He then examined these models by drawing on experiences in post-war Iraq. One approach was to look at willingness to pay for water services as a measure of trust and as an indicator of state building. However, he found this to be a problematic measure, as surveys showed that people were very willing to pay for improvements where the level of service provision was considered to be very bad, as well as very good, but not at intermediate points. It was therefore challenging as a reflection of their level of trust in the service provider (as it could also reveal high levels of distrust or dissatisfaction).

Moreover, the rankings of water provision quality were surprisingly high where the survey was conducted in a Shia-majority area, previously excluded from service provision under the pre-war regime. This high ranking, rather than reflecting higher satisfaction, might actually reflect particularly low expectations of the state in terms of service delivery.

Overall he drew four major lessons from this analysis, namely that trust is not an issue at low levels of provision, that quality improvements only improve trust at an established level of service provision that is context specific; that inequity in provision can undermine trust in the provider; and that history is an important factor, as past experiences set current levels of expectation and so satisfaction.

Rachel Slater, Research Director, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, ODI

Dr Rachel Slater laid out the background to the current Sustainable Livelihoods Research Consortium, another 6 year research consortium funded by DFID, which examines the relationships between service delivery, livelihoods and state building.

She argued that while the deductive logic of service delivery's impact on state building is compelling, the empirical basis for it remains severely lacking. There are few studies that have been conducted in this area and those that have been tend to be patchy, of poor quality and pay insufficient attention to whether it is the instrument of service delivery or the process of it that is crucial. She illustrated this with an example from Northern Kenya in which a cash transfer programme was found to have improved state legitimacy and a sense of nationhood. However closer examination found that the provision of state identity cards and the creation of grievance procedures as part of programme administration were in fact the crucial elements for success, as opposed to cash transfers per se.

Rachel argued that there is a clear need to seek evidence that can prove or disprove the nature of the links between service delivery and state building, including determining whether funds should be invested in services for this purpose and, if so, how.

She then outlined the current SLRC approach to data gathering on this issue, including a collection of panel data at the household level in 7 countries over 6 years, which will analyse experiences and perceptions of state legitimacy.

Key points in the discussion

The discussion revolved around six main points:

- The nature of the link between service delivery and state building, with wide recognition of the evidence gaps for this, and the need to be much more concrete about particular mechanisms or entry points through which this relationship can be understood.

- The level at which we should examine state building processes. There was some discussion as to whether analysis so far has been too concentrated on macro, national level processes of state building, rather than looking at the local or intermediate entry points for state building in relation to service delivery, more grounded in local realities.

- The need for a distinction to be made between stabilisation and peace building in the short term

and state building in the longer term; and recognition that the role of service provision might differ between these two aims.

- Whether and how who delivers a service was seen to have an important impact on people's beliefs regarding the function of the state, its legitimacy and their allegiance to it. This was examined particularly in relation to the potential for international NGOs to disrupt state building efforts by creating parallel systems, undermining the incentives for state provision of services and altering people's expectations of the role of the state. Consideration was also given to the experience of powerful non-state actors who engage in service provision and can develop parallel states with "informal" legitimacy such as past experiences of the Tamil Tigers.

- There was reflection that, regardless of current evidence, many national governments perceive links between state building and service delivery, which can provide them with political incentives to expand and improve service delivery.

- Finally, the question of whether and how short term political decisions to provide service delivery and the development of personal legitimacy based on patronage builds or undermines long-term building of impersonal state legitimacy was discussed. This involved consideration of how broken promises from one government could affect long-run state legitimacy.

Conclusions

Marta Foresti, Head of Programme, Politics and Governance, ODI

Marta offered three key areas for conclusions in her summing up:

Consolidation: Marta noted that there has been considerable progress in terms of how these issues are understood, particularly with the development of a more systematic approach to sectoral political and governance analysis as well as greater acknowledgement of sectoral crossovers.

Concretisation: Marta argued that there is a need to find better ways of utilising political and governance factors to contribute to improved development outcomes. She highlighted the need to balance refining the language and key concepts used with ensuring these are accessible and understood outside of governance and politics circles. In some areas, there are also now concrete findings which need to be taken forward – for example, through the recognition that collective action and co-production may be more powerful than supply versus demand approaches to service delivery.

Communities of Practice: Marta outlined how ODI's new flagship programme aims to engage and work with a range of stakeholders to take these issues forward. Communities of Practice can be helpful networks for this, but ODI is also looking to find ways to take forward specific recommendations and actions with particular organisations.

For further information on this event and ODI's new flagship programme, please contact Leni Wild (L.Wild@odi.org.uk).

References

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