

Politics over evidence: questioning the link between service delivery and state legitimacy in Afghanistan

Key messages:

- Relationship-based networks of access regulate who can receive basic services and how they are provided.
- Access to services is heavily mediated by local dynamics and interests.
- Unequal or 'unfair' access to services often undermines perceptions of legitimacy.

This briefing highlights evidence and findings on the linkages between service delivery and state legitimacy. It builds on five years of AREU research (2012 to 2017) on the question of linkages between delivering services and state-building in the case of Afghanistan. The study was part of a [larger global study](#) under Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) led by ODI and funded by DFID and the EC. Additionally, a consultation was held with the Afghan government and civil society representatives and informal bilateral meetings with anonymous donor community representatives to better understand current programmatic and policy concerns with regards to delivery of services under the current government. It begins with an overview of the literature on service delivery and legitimacy debate. It then examines Afghan experiences of service delivery and perceptions of government, and concludes with policy implications.

Service delivery and legitimacy: a questionable paradigm?

The services described in this briefing refer to basic services such as health, education, water and sanitation as well as public goods such as security and justice. In countries affected by protracted conflict, governments are not the sole providers of such services. Often NGOs and UN agencies are contracted to fill gaps in state service provision capacity, hence, in these contexts, the linkages between delivery of services and perceptions of the state comes under question. The inability of fragile states to fulfill core functions leaves, as Ghani, et al. (2005) have argued, a dangerous 'sovereignty gap'.

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Credit: Afghan doctor writing a prescription, Mahajerbad. ResoluteSupportMedia, 2010.

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This gap is a Catch-22: lack of capacity leads to lack of legitimacy, and lack of legitimacy can only be addressed through building the capacity of states to deliver public goods and services (Denney, et al., 2017). In conflict-affected fragile states, insecurity is seen as both a dangerous symptom and a cause of this fragility. The international community has responded with a variety of 'state-building' initiatives that conceive of the roots of insecurity and lack of capacity as fixable, at least in part, through development interventions (Rocha Menocal, 2011; Zoellick, 2009). However, the result of such interventions in practice has often created more confusion than clarity (Nemat, 2014).

Counterinsurgency (COIN) and stabilisation-based theories of change follow a similar line of reasoning. Aid is envisioned as an instrument to protect military forces in potentially hostile areas, through 'winning hearts and minds,' and improve the overall security situation. Both COIN and stabilization frameworks have dominated civilian and military aid programming in Afghanistan, and these ideas have co-mingled with 'sovereignty gap'-type arguments in programme design and execution. The expansion of health and education, along with infrastructure and job creation, had previously been seen as a goal in itself. In post-2001 Afghanistan, as in many fragile states, service provision has been inextricably tied to security and political objectives. A significant example of this in Afghanistan is the provision of such services through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) led by military commanders of international forces in different provinces of the country.

Evidence from Afghanistan, as well as the other seven conflict-affected countries in which SLRC conducted research, directly challenges these assertions. Based on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, SLRC found that 'better access to basic services, social protection, or livelihood assistance' does not necessarily lead to 'more positive perceptions of the government' (Nixon and Mallett, 2017). While service delivery can improve perceptions of the state, it is not the whole answer to the problem of a sovereignty gap.

Such findings should not come as a surprise to those familiar with Afghanistan context. Many aid interventions have not been able to fulfill their stated objectives and instead have created perverse incentives, fueling conflict and undermining state legitimacy. Indeed, a 2011 study from Tufts University on aid to volatile areas of Afghanistan found 'more evidence of the destabilizing rather than the stabilizing effects of aid' (Fishstein and Wilder, 2011). Yet the Afghan government and international community seem unable to learn from the evidence.

Afghan experiences of service delivery and perceptions of government

In Afghanistan, models of how service delivery (and indeed broader development interventions) should work bear little resemblance to how they actually work. Political prerogatives and the imperative to present a narrative of success have undermined accountability and the ability to learn and change

course. State institutions at all levels are fragile and nepotistic, with tenuous links to the population and limited capacity to deliver security, governance or basic services. In the early years after 2001, access to education and healthcare radically expanded but plateaued soon after. Narratives of millions of children enrolling in school after 2001 and of great progress in providing health services have obscured the fact that these gains may not have been as great as originally claimed and that access to the services is often deeply exclusionary. What early gains were made in expanding basic services and improving livelihoods are now threatened and are being eroded by worsening insecurity and an increasingly predatory rentier state. It is important to note that services are part of the solution, but they are not the whole solution. Since 2001, there has been no clear vision of the future of development services delivery models for Afghanistan. There is a need for a big picture vision, which should address the broader aspects of services including security and justice concerns that are most important to Afghans, within which programmes like the Citizens Charter must be situated.

There are three main factors that stand in the way of improving service delivery in Afghanistan:

1) Donor dependency

The first is donor dependency, where most of the basic services delivered such as health and education are bilaterally funded by donors and are not part of the on-budget system for government. According to a World Bank report in 2016, 45 per cent of the GDP in 2013 has been financing growth, service delivery and security and the concludes that 'Afghanistan is unique worldwide in its extraordinary dependence on foreign aid' (World Bank, 2016:3). This not only undermines the sustainability of these services, but it means that most communities largely depend on such support. Realistic exit strategies have been chronically lacking at the programmatic level and a broader long term vision of how the Afghan government can function more sustainably does not exist.

2) Low public sector capacity to manage service delivery

Although there have been successful examples of some institutions being more capable of addressing the capacity issues, such as the Ministry of Rural and Rehabilitation Development (MRRD) and to some extent, Ministry of Irrigation, Agriculture and Livelihoods (MAIL). Low capacity in management, planning, implementation and measurement of achievable goals have resulted in lower scores in the annual budget expenditure every year despite an urgent need for services. Similar to the SLRC's broader findings on capacity building, in Afghanistan the approach towards capacity building has been naive and normative and is seen more as a technical process than a political process in which power relations matter highly.

3) Political instability

Since the formation of National Unity Government (NUG) in 2014, the country has gone through a series of political crises which have affected services delivery especially in insecure and remote areas. On the one hand, lack of political stability

undermined the very nature of legitimacy of the NUG, being established outside the constitutional framework. On the other hand, this has slowed service delivery by various ministries; ministerial appointments took almost a year to be approved in some cases (USAID & DI, 2016). Despite the fact that the government has survived these crises, whether related to deterioration of the security situation or dismissing of major political figures from office, such crises have a direct impact on the way Afghans perceive the government and have a negative effect on the government's ability to ensure equitable and timely delivery of services.

Key findings

Relationship-based networks of access regulate who can receive basic services and how they are provided.

Government services are not open to all. Afghanistan is a government comprised of relationships, rather than that of institutions (Nixon, 2008). Relationship-based networks of access that produce and regulate power through the distribution of resources via state institutions (Jackson and Minoia, 2016). Actors within state institutions generate resources through the provision of 'public' goods and basic services. Services are a resource to be captured, not a public good to be given freely. Official processes are seemingly followed to cultivate the impression that the institution 'works' and support an illusion of reform, but effectively obstruct the creation of working institutions (Jackson, 2016). The real rules are far different than those that have been written down in policy documents.

Because government institutions are used to further the interests of the powerful, they rarely act in the interests of those with little power to wield or according to their stated objectives. Appointments to a civil service position often requires the payment of bribes. Similarly, a Provincial Council member might help resolve a dispute for a fee. The recent Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation (MEC) report (2017) on education illuminates how this works within the state education system. As one example, the report finds that teacher recruitment 'was close to 100 per cent corrupted' with several HR Heads stating that 'literally everyone in their area of responsibility was appointed on the basis of nepotism, regardless of whether the official procedures had been used or not' (2017). Teachers often must pay to get and keep their jobs, leading to poorly qualified teachers. Unsurprisingly, the MEC reports that 31 per cent of grade six students cannot even write a simple word (ibid.).

Access to services is heavily mediated by local dynamics and interests.

Local dynamics and access networks are the key determinants of what services actually get delivered and to whom. A 2015 World Bank assessment of the national healthcare programme, the Basic Package of Health Services, cites

'political interference' as a main risk to the provision of services (World Bank, 2015). A separate World Bank and AREU study of health and education illustrates how local dynamics can skew access to services. In Wardak, provincial council members of the Hazara-dominated Behsud district had several local clinics even though they were not in line with 'official' selection procedures. Out of the eight districts in the province, this single, well-connected district contained 40 per cent of the entire province's health clinics (Echavez, 2016: 42).

The one size fits all programming that characterizes current approaches to service delivery leads to deeply unequal access, even at the local level, as SLRC's work on village-level differentiation within the National Solidarity Programme illustrates (Pain, 2016). In so many interventions in fragile states, the approach to service delivery has been overwhelmingly technocratic and all but politically naive. This has fueled rentier practices and undermined genuine attempts at institution building.

Unequal or 'unfair' access to services often undermines perceptions of legitimacy.

As broader SLRC findings point out, perceptions of *how* services are delivered are critical. Perceptions that access to services are exclusionary or unequal are likely to undermine the state's claim to authority and legitimacy (Dix, et al., 2012). At present, many Afghans see a government that is, at worst, abusive and corrupt, and at best, unresponsive and weak in its delivery of services.

The system of resources and services distribution is not needs-based; rather it depends on the power of a local strongman or influential political leader, who can attract more resources to his or her locality. With the exception of a few of programmes with nationwide coverage, there is a valid concern over unequal distribution of resources.

Afghans, like all people, want to be treated with dignity and a reasonable assurance that their interactions with authorities will be fair and just. Weigand's work in Nangarhar finds that small, routine interactions with the state form Afghan perceptions of legitimacy more than anything else (Weigand, 2017). This is also evident in many other parts of the country where effective roles of district or provincial governors in maintaining frequent contact with local leaders have contributed in a balanced forms of resource distribution in their localities.

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Implications

1. Moving away from technocratic models of how things should work

If Afghan opinions of the government are largely formed by their interactions with it, reform must focus on addressing the exclusionary networks of relationships that govern access to protection, services and the means of survival – and not on abstract and unhelpfully optimistic ideas of how a state *should* work.

The most immediate implications apply to the Citizens Charter (CC). The CC is designed to build new relationships of accountability. The CC aims to change the specific relationship between the state and its citizens as well as between district and village leadership and their constituencies, through building a new compact between the state and its citizens. In contrast to the relationship-based networks found in SLRC's research and the collective social contracts that have historically characterised relations to the Afghan state, the CC envisages a classic social contract between the individual citizen and the state and outlines a technical argument for improving this relationship.

Addressing the issue of elite capture, requires significant investment in adapting national level programmes to local political context. The starting point must be to assume that resources will be captured by elites, at all levels, with the task at hand to engage politically in order to challenge and subvert exclusionary diversion (Pain, 2016).

2. Moving towards more politically informed approaches

The challenge that the CC faces, but does not appear to address, is how one shifts from a logic of these networks of access at the local and national level to the abstract and generalised one between individual and the state. There is a clear assumption in the documentation on the CC that ministries such as MRRD, MoPH and MoE will be in a position to deliver services directly to CDCs on the basis of their demands and can be held accountable by CDCs for this delivery (Pain, 2016). Indeed, the resources such programmes provide risk fueling the very practices and behaviour patterns that they seek to address (Pain, et al., 2017).

Sixteen years of failed experiments in Afghanistan – particularly to 'build state capacity' to deliver services – clearly demonstrate that service delivery cannot alone address the questions of legitimacy, and that there are real issues with how services are accessed. A major issue that is often overlooked is that building functional capacity is often influenced by the power relations, how power is distributed and who among the formal and indeed informal institutions have control over decision-making and regulating behaviours (Denney and Mallett with Benson, 2017:14).

The authors do not disagree with CC's efforts to improve

service delivery; in fact, this is the single most important component of CC. However, it is both dangerous and incorrect to assume that this model will result in greater legitimacy for the Afghan government (McLoughlin, 2014; Gordon, 2012; Mason, 2012; Carpenter, et al., 2012; Hirose, et al. 2017; Nixon and Mallet, 2017; Brinkerhoff, et al., 2012; Rubenstein, 2009). One CC document asserts that the programme will 'break the cycle of fragility and violence, by deepening the legitimacy of the Afghan state.' This is not a realistic objective because there has not been any development programme anywhere that could accomplish this. Vast improvements in security and a viable political settlement are required to achieve this goal.

3. Setting realistic objectives

Afghanistan state building has been plagued by simplistic technocratic theories of change and unrealistic benchmarks. Politically informed approaches based on what we know works drawn from experience and a clear prioritization of what is possible given the prevailing security, political and economic conditions are needed. CC is not likely to deliver a new relationship between the state and its citizens, just as NSP did not achieve its objective of extending the reach of the government (Pain, 2016). Nor will it break the cycle of violence. Given today's dire need for basic services across the country, wouldn't it be enough to simply focus CC's resources on delivering lifesaving and life changing services, and to improve their quality, accessibility and accountability?

4. Addressing the realities of insecurity

In the 40 per cent of the country that lies outside of government control, the service delivery-state legitimacy link is completely implausible (SIGAR, 2017). Nonetheless, seeking to ensure Afghans continue to have access to these services wherever they live, and shoring up gains in education and well-being will be of paramount importance in the coming years. How CC will ensure that they are able to deliver services in these areas, and what adaptations in approach will be required, is not fully articulated. In provinces such as Helmand and Logar, working relationships between government and opposition groups have been integral to ensuring access to basic services; elsewhere, government and non-governmental entities have been less willing to cooperate with one another, which has ultimately had a detrimental impact on Afghans as recipients of services. Ultimately CC implementers need the space and support to negotiate access to services and resources in areas beyond government control.

There have been numerous strategies and benchmarks, that have been drafted and then forgotten, and few politically grounded processes to stabilise the country. Given the deepening insecurity, a brighter future seems impossible to envision for most Afghans. Legitimacy rests on a number of factors, but the one that has been most neglected has been the ability of the state to provide a credible, long-term vision to its citizens.

Conclusion

Service delivery is just one of many factors shaping people's perceptions of government and it is rarely the most important. Power, politics and relationships profoundly shape how services are delivered in Afghanistan. Interventions need to be strongly informed by, and responsive to, context. One-size-fits-all programming, even in service delivery, can only achieve so much and incoherence between technical interventions and political processes continues to thwart equity of access to services and effective institution building. At this stage in Afghanistan's institutional development, the most pressing problems cannot be addressed by technical fixes alone (as has so often been the response). Politically informed incentives and sanctions are required to bring about change. A significant body of evidence exists demonstrating all of this, yet these realities have rarely been adequately taken into account in service delivery and state capacity building in Afghanistan. The question is when the Afghan government and international community will choose to act upon this evidence.

SLRC Phase II: New thematic research

In SLRC Phase II (2017 – 2019) we are continuing to explore the role that services play in the construction of state legitimacy. SLRC I case studies highlighted how the significance of service delivery in the construction of legitimacy is dependent on the history of the founding of the state. However, it remains unclear why services gain significance for legitimacy in some states and not others, or why other sources of legitimacy lose significance. More broadly, we still do not understand the degree to which services matter in the construction of state legitimacy in conflict affected countries. To provide donors and policy makers with a clearer picture of the relationship between service delivery and the construction of state legitimacy, we will carry out case studies in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal.

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