When does service delivery undermine state legitimacy? Why perceptions of fairness matter

Key points

- Services can matter for state legitimacy where they form part of a social contract.
- Perceived unfairness in service delivery – whether in processes or outcomes – can quickly undermine state legitimacy and exacerbate instability.
- The fairness of service provision sends messages to citizens about the wider fairness of the political system.
- Understanding local perceptions of the fairness of service delivery is key for identifying any (de-)legitimising effects.

Case study findings

To examine when services support or undermine legitimacy, DLP has conducted in-depth, historical case study research on the link between higher education and processes of state (de-)legitimation over three decades in Sri Lanka. The research traces links between higher education and the making and breaking of the social contract between the state and its main legitimacy audience, the Sinhalese.

One strand of the research examined the role of higher education reforms in helping to motivate and create the structural conditions for a dual crisis of state legitimacy in the early 1970s. This dual crisis took the form of an insurrection in the south of the country, and the emergence of armed separatism in the north. The study found that both the insurrection and armed separatism had been partly exacerbated by earlier, highly politicised reforms to the higher education system in the post-colonial period of state transformation. Among the key reasons for this were:

- **Broken promises**: State failure to deliver on its legitimation claim to ‘democratise’ access to education and deliver social justice to the rural masses contributed to the breaking of the social contract between the state and young Sinhalese insurrectionaries in the south.

- **Perceptions of unfairness**: At the same time, a drive to ‘equalise’ access to higher education as part of a wider nationalism-fuelled legitimation claim underpinned a series of reforms that were perceived by Tamils and other groups as unfair. These significantly aggravated the resort to armed separatism in the north.

- **Symbolism and reinforcement of wider grievances**: Perceived unfairness in access to higher education became an emblem of wider discrimination and exclusion. The impacts of education reforms were magnified in the context of wider grievances about the inequitable distribution of resources between different social groups.
Understanding perceptions of fairness in service delivery

These findings are of course based on just one country context, but they suggest that understanding local norms and principles of fairness in relation to service delivery may be significant for understanding any legitimacy effects. They also suggest that:

- **There are no universal criteria of fairness.** Different groups may understand ‘fair’ service delivery differently and, particularly in divided societies, the pursuit of fairness for one group can undermine the state’s legitimacy with other groups.

- **How different groups perceive service delivery may be as important for legitimacy and stability as objectively measured access or quality.** The messages and signals that services convey about the state’s norms and ‘rules of the game’ may matter more than the reality of what’s delivered.

- The fairness of service delivery is likely to be assessed in the context of how fairly resources and power are distributed in society as a whole. Perceptions of unfair services may undermine legitimacy where people already have grievances against the state. Unfair services are more likely to create illegitimacy where the wider political system is already perceived as unfair.

- The fairness of service delivery is also likely to be assessed against the rights or entitlements implicit in the social contract between the state and different social groups. When services are expected as part of a social contract, the state’s political legitimacy may hinge on whether it fulfils the terms of that contract. Where the social contract primarily services the interests of one group, it can simultaneously undermine state legitimacy with another group.

Read more

See details of the Sri Lanka case study findings in:


Further resources


Endnote

1. For an overview of ‘state legitimacy’, see DLP Concept Brief 2 (Mcloughlin, 2014).

Claire Mcloughlin is a senior researcher with DLP and the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) at the University of Birmingham, UK. She has more than a decade of experience working on policy-oriented development research. She has published extensively on the politics of basic services and their effects on state-building, and her current research focuses on access to basic services and state (de-)legitimation in conflict-affected situations.