

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.

The idea that public services can be a source of legitimacy for fragile and conflict-affected states has been the topic of lively debate.¹ Previous research suggests the link is not straightforward; it may depend on what citizens expect in the first place, how services are provided, or the history of state-society relations.

Few studies have examined this in depth, or over time (Mcloughlin 2014). Likewise, the reverse idea – that poor public services might undermine a state's legitimacy – is also relatively neglected.

This gap is striking because vicious circles of poor services, contested legitimacy and instability are common in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Understanding when services feed these vicious cycles is important if international development agencies want to avoid doing harm to legitimacy and stability.

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 legitimisation 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 legitimisation 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:

Mcloughlin, C. (2017) [When does service delivery undermine state legitimacy? Evidence from Sri Lanka](#) (DLP Research Paper 44). Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Programme, University of Birmingham. Available at: publications.dlprog.org/mcloughlin2017.pdf

Further resources

Mcloughlin, C. (2015a). [When Does Service Delivery Improve the Legitimacy of a Fragile or Conflict-Affected State?](#) *Governance* 28(3): 341-356

Mcloughlin, C. (2015b). [Researching State Legitimacy: A Political Approach to a Political Problem](#) (DLP Research Paper 36). Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Programme, University of Birmingham

Mcloughlin, C. (2014). [State Legitimacy](#) (DLP Concept Brief 02). Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Programme, University of Birmingham.

Mourad, L. & Piron, L.-H. (2016). [Municipal Service Delivery, Stability, Social Cohesion and Legitimacy in Lebanon: An analytical literature review](#). (Background Paper). Developmental Leadership Program (University of Birmingham) & Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (American University Beirut).

Endnote

1. For an overview of 'state legitimacy', see [DLP Concept Brief 2](#) (Mcloughlin, 2014).

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