

Empowerment and Public Services

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Importance of public services

- Provision of basic services is a basic human right but also an essential ingredient of economic development.
- Provision of health care and schooling increases the quality of human capital, which is an important input in today's knowledge-based economies
- Access to roads and telecommunication systems lowers transaction costs and encourage trade and economic activity
- Access to publicly-provided (or publicly-financed) health and educational services particularly important for the poor, as they do not have the purchasing power to buy these services from private markets.

State of public services

- In many developing countries, provision of essential public services has lagged behind economic growth.
- “Social services fail for the poor”
(World Development Report 2004)

Public services are a timely issue

- In recent years, mass protests and demonstrations in countries as diverse as Brazil, India and Turkey have arisen because of the poor quality of public services.
- As economies grow, and there is a rise of a middle class, the demand for high-quality public services becomes more pronounced.
- In India, the mass demonstrations in 2011 were purportedly against public corruption – but against the kind of petty corruption that reduces the common man's access to public services.

Concept of empowerment

- Concept of empowerment is based on Sen's capabilities approach.
- Empowerment is the ability for individuals to freely choose – and fulfill – their capabilities, thus being effective agents of their own human development.
- Empowerment is "... the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices, and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (World Bank 2001).

Empowerment & Public Services

- Demand-supply framework
- Citizens, communities, and businesses are the “demanders” and users of public services
- Governments and (gov’t-contracted) NGOs are the “suppliers”
- In normal markets, suppliers who are not responsive to consumer needs and demands are vulnerable to sanctions from consumers.
- However, this breaks down in the case of public services, because
 - typically users do not pay directly for these services
 - governments finance these services out of general revenues (not user fees)
- So little incentive for providers to improve the quality of services they offer.

Role of empowerment

- Empowered citizens and communities can hold the state and service providers accountable for the delivery of basic quality services.
- Empowerment can be realized through many means:
 - *rights-based entitlements*, in which the state offers citizens the right to information as well as the right to specific social services and basic necessities (such as food, employment, health, and basic education);
 - *Participatory performance monitoring*, in which citizens and communities monitor and evaluate the implementation and performance of public services, often according to indicators they themselves have selected, and then demand better performance from service providers;

- *community participation and community-driven development*, where groups of users of services or entire communities participate in the delivery of services, thereby controlling directly the quantity and quality of services provided.

Empowerment alone is not enough

- While empowering citizens and communities can put pressure on governments and service providers to be more accountable and transparent, it is not sufficient.
- For public services to actually improve, the state apparatus – including local governments, the bureaucracy and public service providers – has to change the way it does its business and become more “user friendly”.
- In some countries, an administrative transformation has not always occurred despite increased activism by civil society.

- In these countries, the bureaucracy and service-delivery organizations have remained embedded in local patterns of political behavior.
- For the state and service providers to respond and reform, practical issues of institutional redesign and realignment of incentives for service providers have to be addressed.
- This may sometimes require far-reaching civil service reform, such as performance-based pay for civil servants and public service providers and allowing local communities to impose sanctions on civil servants assigned to public service provision in those communities (e.g., government school teachers or government health workers).