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RESEARCH BRIEFING

A GRAND CHALLENGE
FOR DEVELOPMENT

The art of 'bureaucraft': Why and how bureaucrats respond to citizen voice

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Contents

Introduction

Despite the recent increase of empirical research and conceptual development in transparency and accountability (Fox 2015; Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha 2015; Joshi 2013), much of this has been on the side of citizen action, looking at why and how citizens mobilise around accountability demands and at what makes their actions successful. Comparatively, there has been much less work exploring the state side of the equation – to explain why and how public officials respond (or not) to citizen demands for accountability. There are a series of reasons why our understanding of responsiveness is limited, namely:

- the difficulty of clarifying which factors, among the multitude that shape bureaucratic behaviour, are likely to dominate in certain contexts

- the lack of resources and accessibility when conducting systematic research into bureaucracies and their responsiveness

- the difficulty of separating capacity and willingness when looking at bureaucrats' responsiveness.

The aim of this research briefing is to highlight some of the more prominent issues related to bureaucratic responsiveness, particularly in relation to a 'willingness to respond'. We review the relevant literature on public sector responsiveness, and use a set of interviews with 'reformists' within government[1] to make three contributions.

First, we present a simple framework for thinking about the conflicting pressures that public officials face in their work which shape how likely they are to respond to citizens' demands.

Second, we argue that the way that public officials see citizens and their claims (in terms of legitimacy, credibility and level of trust) directly influences their willingness to respond to citizen claims.

Finally, we show that if and when public officials are willing to respond to citizens, they make use of their political and social capital to devise a series of strategies to mobilise responsiveness within the state through what we call *bureaucraft*: the art of manoeuvring diplomatically within complex organisational and individual incentives that pervade state bureaucracies – in other words, the bureaucratic equivalent of statecraft.

Key themes

- Government responsiveness and accountability

- Reformist bureaucrats and willingness to respond

- Incentives for government reform

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[1] These were mid- to senior-level public officials from a wide range of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America identified by academics and practitioners as supportive of transparency and accountability reforms, and drawn from a pool who attended the GPSA Global Annual Forum in Washington DC, 2016. For further details, see Joshi and McCluskey (unpublished).

Pressures for bureaucrats to respond: A simple framework

Several scholars have recently attempted to unpack state responsiveness to citizens' demands. Blair (2011) identifies a spectrum of state support for citizen-led accountability, from repression, to passivity, to enthusiastic support. Bryer (2007) categorises responsiveness by the stakeholders to which they feel they should respond, leading to six variants of bureaucratic responsiveness (dictated, constrained, purposive, entrepreneurial, collaborative and negotiated). Loureiro, Cassim, Darko, Katera and Salome (2016), making use of four cases of state responsiveness, distinguish between state hearing (registering voice without responsiveness – a one-way flow), state listening (two-way dialogue, but one-way action) and state concerting (two-way dialogue resulting in joint action). Finally, Lodenstein, Dieleman, Gerretsen and Broerse (2016) offer a simpler schema by categorising responsiveness in three types: receptivity (indicating changes in attitudes of providers towards citizen groups); responsiveness (indicating changes in behaviour by taking concrete action to improve service provision in line with citizen concerns); and relations (indicating changes in accountability relations between communities and service providers). In this brief, we go one step further and focus on an essential actor within the state, namely the bureaucrat or public official.

A key claim of the literature on public officials' responsiveness has been that due to resource constraints, public officials not only have considerable discretion on whether to respond to citizen needs, but also on how to respond (Lipsky 1980). Public officials also determine the legitimacy of demands from various stakeholders which means that they have significant degrees of discretion regarding who they could be responsive to. The question is: what factors determine how public officials use this discretion to be responsive?

Two sets of theories are useful in answering this question: ideas about personal motivations within the public sector; and theories about different pressures within the environment that are likely to affect the behaviour of individual public officials. Within the first set of theories, the key point to bear in mind is that public officials come with a diversity of motivations that can gain traction at various points of time, regardless of whether individual public officials are driven by ideas of public service, by other motivations such as personal profit, or a combination of both. Further, motivations are not static; they can and do change over time and through experience which links motivation, action and outcomes. Within the second set of theories, we highlight several factors that shape behaviour either internal to organisations or related to power exerted by other actors over bureaucrats (see Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha 2015; Lodenstein *et al.* 2016).

In Figure 1 we propose a simple framework to help structure how these different factors might affect the behaviour of public officials. At the centre of the

Figure 1: Four sets of pressures for public officials to respond
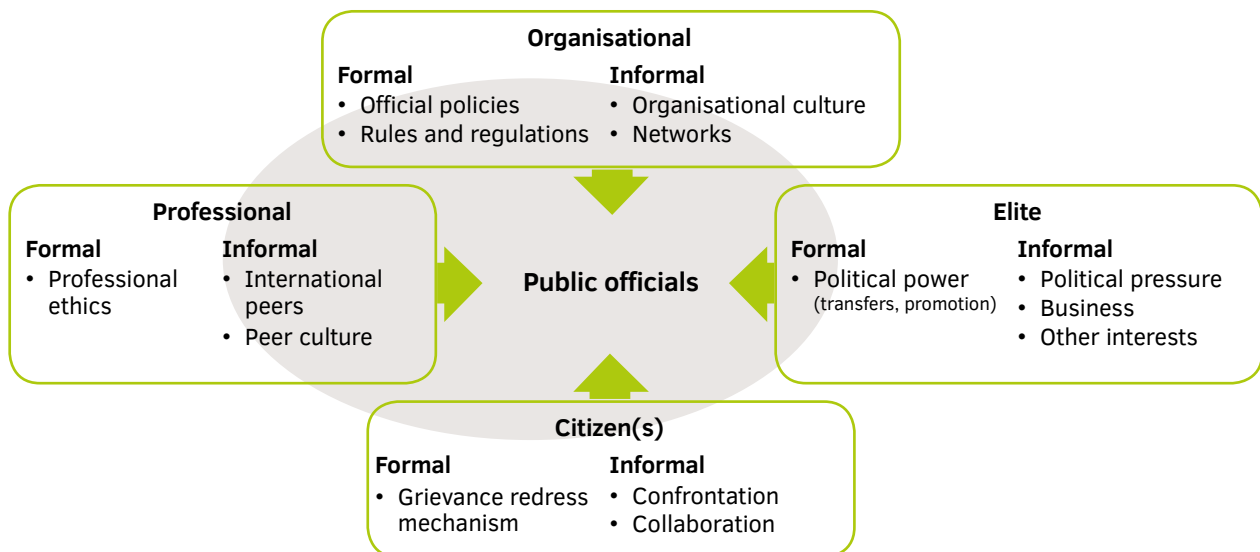
Note: Grey shading indicates possible embeddedness of public officials in the various groups; positions in the diagram suggest possible power over public officials.

The extent to which pressure from citizens is effective depends upon explicit and implicit demands, and formal and informal mechanisms.

figure is the public official, surrounded by four kinds of pressures that pull and push in different directions: from within the bureaucracy (organisational); from peers (professional); from outside the organisation (elites); and from rights-holders affected by policies (citizens). At different points in time, public officials navigate these complex pressures depending on their main objectives, on how much space they have to operate within, on the overall motivations and incentives at play, and on whether these pressures work in similar or different directions.

Four caveats are, in order: first, these groups often can and do overlap; second, pressures from these groups can be both formal and informal and can even be contradictory; third, from the point of view of responsiveness to citizens, these pressures can be either positive or negative; and fourth, public officials are embedded in all these groups to different degrees, through kinship, social, professional, political and / or economic ties.

In *organisational* and bureaucratic pressures, we are mainly emphasising issues internal to the organisation. These pressures can either be formal (the organisational rules and structures which guide public officials' everyday activities, broadly delineating what they can or cannot do), or informal (the values, beliefs and networks that shape how they behave within their organisations). In the case of formal pressures, rules and structures are inherent to public officials' behaviour – through training and socialisation – making them more accountable to bureaucratic hierarchies rather than citizens' demands. Of the informal pressures that guide public officials' behaviour and can promote or prevent downward accountability, the most salient notion is that of positive organisational culture – the social, moral and symbolic incentives that can create an atmosphere where doing the right thing is expected and is the norm.

By *professional pressures* we mean the professional bodies to which public officials belong, as well as communities of practice that go beyond the public

bureaucracy (e.g. doctors, teachers, engineers, managers). These professional bodies are potential sources of reform. However, they often impose unrealistic entry standards and barriers. At the same time, they may also turn a blind eye to enforcing professional ethics. There are exceptions, however, such as when professional associations play a role in advancing progressive and responsive agendas (Dowbor and Houtzager 2014; Joshi 1999), or when public officials absorb international ideas and 'best practices' through their professional fields.

In attempts to retain the status quo, pressures from *elites* often prevent responsiveness to citizens. These include pressures to allocate resources to specific groups (as political patronage), to divert them from pro-poor distribution, or simply not to implement rules and regulations that negatively affect the elite. There are a series of reasons why public officials give in to elite pressures: fear of power that these elites have to influence decisions that are important to public officials such as transfers and promotions (Wade 1985), or not wanting to challenge elites due to political reprisal (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava and Veron 2005), or being risk-averse, or having limited capacities to read local contexts and power relations. At both local and higher levels, public officials are usually part of the prevailing political order and concerned with maintaining their status and position.

The focus of this brief is the final set of pressures emerging from below through *citizen action* that seeks responsiveness from public officials. The extent to which pressure from citizens is effective depends upon explicit and implicit demands and formal and informal mechanisms. Public officials filter pressures from below through different lenses, especially the extent to which the other three sets of pressures are for or against any inclination towards responsiveness. Such claims are also bolstered or undermined by how public officials view the world and how they perceive citizens and civil society organisations. It is this process that we unpack in the following section.

In our interviews with reformist public officials, we noticed that the legitimacy of the demand was less in question when the content of claims was based on existing rights as provided by law or policy.

Seeing the citizen(s): Public officials' perceptions of citizen claims

Worldwide, and particularly in developing countries, it is uncommon for public officials to come from the poorest and most marginalised groups. Public service employment and remnants of Weberian bureaucratic structures reinforce the distinction between officials and the masses; exam-based recruitment policies and the required educational background mean that often public officials come from groups with higher social status. A distance therefore exists between public officials' lived experiences and many of the citizens claiming responsiveness. Key to reducing this distance are the degree to which officials perceive citizens' claims to be legitimate, how credible the claims-makers are, and the trust that exists between public officials and citizens.

Legitimacy of claims

Whether public officials see citizen claims as legitimate or not is a critical dimension for both whether and how public officials respond. Several studies show that when there are laws supporting citizen participation, as well as processes of grievance redress, public officials are more likely to accept accountability claims and respond positively (Lodenstein *et al.* 2016). Such legitimacy has several dimensions that may be connected to whether existing laws and rules support citizen oversight, and to how public officials perceive citizens (possibly as trespassers) in situations where explicit, formally established channels for citizen participation do not exist (Mosquera, Zapata, Lee, Arango and Varela 2001).

In our interviews with reformist public officials, we noticed that the legitimacy of the demand was less in question when the content of claims was based on existing rights as provided by law or policy. Yet, before public officials could respond, they still had to verify whether the demands were valid. Legitimacy, however, became an issue when demands were new and therefore not sanctioned by law. In such cases, perceptions about the legitimacy of the demand tended to be based on widespread social understandings of the social contract, or on the underpinning moral economy. The perception of public officials regarding the claim then takes on greater significance: their challenge was to ensure that they had the right information to make a judgement on whether demands were genuine or were based on vested interests. Over time reformists seem to develop multiple channels of information to help them make such judgements.

Credibility of claim-making civil society organisations

Corroborating the literature on state–civil society relations (Gurza Lavalle, Houtzager and Castello 2005), the reformist public officials we interviewed also highlighted the importance of the representativeness and the credibility of claim-making civil society organisations. Key factors are whether public officials see these organisations as impartial or politically aligned (particularly if aligned with opposition parties); whether they are seen as having a genuine concern; and how broad their membership is (that is, how many citizens they truly represent).

Further, accountability literature tends to treat claim-making groups either as homogeneous or disaggregated across oversimplified class-based lines (for instance, the elite versus the poor). In reality, there are often cleavages within the poor, along religious, ethnic, racial and geographic lines. Caught between competing demands from within these groups, public officials must be constantly aware of these cleavages, as our interviews with reformists revealed. In cases of divided communities, every decision has to be carefully justified, and public officials have the extra challenge of making sure that they are either supporting the 'right' side, or making a decision that cannot be construed as overly partial to one group over another.

Trust between public officials and citizens

The relationships between state officials and citizens also play a role in how public officials perceive social groups. There is now a large body of literature on the importance of trust-building between states and societies for developmental outcomes. Most of the reformists recognised the importance of

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trust-building, through both formal and informal channels, and spent resources and capital to develop these channels to get a sense of what was happening on the ground. Responsiveness was also viewed as a means of generating trust, enabling the public official to work more effectively in the long run. Responsiveness is often the first step in a virtuous cycle in which citizens become more cooperative and then become emboldened to make further demands. Reformists recognised that trust-building is an incremental process involving many small steps.

Using 'bureaucraft' to navigate within the system

If convinced about the need to respond, public officials must then resist the other competing pressures – organisational, professional and elite – that might work against them. Reformists navigate these complex pressures using what we call 'bureaucraft' – the bureaucratic equivalent of statecraft. A key challenge in their everyday work is to convince colleagues and other actors within their bureaucracies to make allies of actors both outside the state and within. Reformists attempt to mobilise and empower colleagues to collectively reform the system and make it more responsive. In fact, creating and maintaining a critical mass of reform-oriented public officials is key to collective action within the bureaucracy.

Many of the challenges public officials face when mobilising colleagues for collective action are similar to those faced by citizens when collectivising for social action. Colleagues might lack capacity or full information about policies that they are expected to implement, or may be risk-averse, or might even lack a moral compass. Reformists use different ways to overcome challenges of insufficient capacity. For instance, at times colleagues might be unwilling to listen to people's complaints or promote citizen engagement either because official standards for public service are too high or there is little capacity to deliver. In these cases, reformists can create a 'minimum' service standard set at 'achievable levels' and communicated to the public, so that they would not have to 'wait until we are ready'. Other times, reformists use intrinsic sources of motivation, such as junior officials pitching innovative ideas for state responsiveness as if they were created by their superiors (who might even be against such ideas) knowing that the superiors will be attracted by the possibility of later taking credit and getting recognition at higher levels of the bureaucracy. Often the key is persuasion, with reformists identifying *the* responsible individual inside the organization, understanding their interests and positioning on a certain issue, in order to develop arguments that will be compelling.

It seems that technology has helped these reformists. As recent research (Peixoto and Fox 2016) has pointed out, ICT-enabled citizen voice leads to government responsiveness only when public officials already care to respond. When citizens email and send text messages directly to reformists, public officials can use them as real-time alerts and supporting evidence to persuade colleagues to respond. In addition, many reformists are not only alert to recognising problems faced by communities, but also to raising them pro-actively in organisational discussions, particularly when citizens are afraid of reprisals for demanding accountability. Finally, being politically aware is also a crucial element of bureaucraft. Reformists need to be mindful of which battles to pick, of whether persuasion is likely to work, and how much political and social capital to invest in each instance.

Conclusions

Whether public officials respond to citizen demands depends on several sources of pressure upon them including organisational, professional, elites and citizens. With respect to citizens, the key to whether demands translate into effective pressure is the way in which public officials perceive citizens and their claims: the legitimacy of their claims; the credibility of who makes the claims; and the level of trust between public officials and citizens. In conversations with reform-minded public officials, we found the following:

- Regarding legitimacy, there is a higher likelihood of eliciting responsiveness from public officials if claims relate to existing entitlements in law or policy, as well as if claims are broad and inclusive, rather than narrow.

- Ensuring that civil society organisations are neutral in respect to political parties might strengthen their credibility. Also, the degree to which they genuinely represent marginalised groups allows for perceptive public officials to take them more seriously.

- Engagement with citizens can transform public officials' perceptions of citizens' claims and their legitimacy. Through repeated interactions that demonstrate integrity, they can earn each other's trust. If this trust exists, public officials will be more willing to 'stick their neck out' for citizens.

When public officials are motivated to be responsive, they must engage in delicate navigation of reluctance and resistance within their own organisations. Over time, they learn better strategies for building willingness to respond among their peers, superiors and subordinates, and for mobilising this into action – mastering the art of 'bureaucraft'.

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