

Helpdesk Research Report

Direct elections and responsiveness in Indonesia

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31.01.2014

Question

Are directly elected subnational executives more responsive to citizens' needs than indirectly elected¹ subnational executives? If not, what development interventions make directly elected subnational executives more likely to be responsive to citizens?

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1. Overview

This rapid literature review provides an overview of the literature on the effects of direct elections on responsiveness, with particular emphasis on Indonesia. According to Rodden and Wibbels (2012, p. 4), responsiveness refers to a situation where “candidates offer, and then implement, distinctive platforms that reflect constituent preferences or demands.” This is the definition that will be used for the purpose of this report.

It is difficult to establish whether direct elections are the main driver of responsiveness. This is because even if a political actor's level of responsiveness changes as a result of direct elections, this is hard to prove because such changes can be difficult to attribute.

Direct elections in Indonesia were introduced in 2004. As a result the impact of direct elections on responsiveness has not been rigorously assessed to date. The existing literature on direct elections and responsiveness is divided. While some authors find that direct elections have had a significant impact on

¹ “The appointment of district heads by citizens through the election of local parliaments” (Valsecchi, 2013, p.5).

responsiveness, others find that direct elections have had no effect. In some cases direct elections have had a negative impact on responsiveness, reversing improvements in public services.

2. Responsiveness of directly elected subnational executives

Discussing India, Acosta et al (2013, p. 17) note that legislators will be more responsive to citizens' needs in cases where there is weak voter affinity for political parties. As a result legislators in such districts "will be keen to provide clientelistic or particularist benefits that they know may swing the election in their favour." On the other hand, they argue that legislators operating in constituencies that have a history of loyalty to party organisations realise that their own popularity will have very little effect on their chances of being reelected. As a result, elected officials have very little incentive to increase their responsiveness to citizens' needs (Acosta et al, 2013, p. 17).

Specifically in relation to Indonesia, the evidence is mixed. Arguing that direct elections increase responsiveness, Triwibowo (2012, p. 16) states that direct elections in Indonesia will force candidates to be more responsive to citizens' needs. He also notes that direct elections have made public service delivery a more popular issue with candidates, due to the fact that service delivery is important to voters (Ibid, p. 17).

Von Luebke (2009, p. 224) argues that district heads are more responsive² to local citizens' needs than DPRD³ officials, because the former are elected via a first past the post system, which increases electoral competition. As a result citizens are able to vote out poorly performing or corrupt district heads (Ibid). However, von Luebke (2009) finds that the degree to which the introduction of direct elections has had an impact on local government responsiveness varies significantly from district to district.

On the other hand, Skoufias et al (2011, p. 29) state that their analysis is inconclusive with regard to the impact of direct elections on service delivery and human development outcomes.⁴ In the 2013 version of their paper, Skoufias et al find that direct elections have still had no effect on development outcomes. However, their findings suggest that directly elected subnational executives may have become more responsive to citizens' needs in the field of health. This argument is based on an increase in public spending on health at the local level.

Sjahrir and Kis-Katos (2011, p. 14) find that directly elected local government heads are less responsive to local needs with respect to service delivery. They argue that there is a greater decrease in responsiveness⁵ in districts where there is less political competition or where the local head has the support of parliamentary majorities (Ibid). They attribute this to the fact that relatively young local direct democracies are relatively weak. This enables local capture and reduces responsiveness to local needs (2011, p. 4).

² He measures responsiveness by looking at three performance criteria: an evaluation of the quality of administrative regulation, an evaluation of administrative procedures, and an evaluation of administrative corruption (von Luebke, 2009, p. 211).

³ Local legislature.

⁴ They argue that the fact that they were unable to find a connection may be due to their choice of education and health outcomes as indicators. The reasoning behind this is that improvements in education and health outcomes may take longer than two years (this study looks at improvements in the two years after direct elections were introduced) to become apparent (Skoufias et al, 2011, p. 29).

⁵ They measure responsiveness by looking at the extent to which local development expenditures are responsive to local gaps in public service delivery (Sjahrir and Kis-Katos, 2011, p. 11).

In Indonesia, local governments receive up to 70 per cent of their budget through unconditional intergovernmental cash transfers (USAID, 2009, p. 15). This results in poor economic governance (Ibid), and reduces accountability and responsiveness (Chêne, 2009, p. 3).

Speaking at a forum at the United States – Indonesia Society Bowie and Samego (2012, p. 10) stated that directly elected local heads who are reelected do not always implement the policies that they promoted prior to their first election. However, they noted that despite this, investment and infrastructure increased in the four districts that they observed (Jombang, Lamongan, Gowa and Maros) since the introduction of direct elections. They do not however provide clear evidence of causation.

3. Development interventions that can increase responsiveness

The interventions below have been used to try and increase the responsiveness of elected local government officials in a number of countries. However, there is some overlap between interventions aimed at increasing accountability and those aimed at increasing responsiveness.⁶

Conditional Grants Scheme (CGS)

This approach was used in Nigeria (Phillips, 2009) where subnational executives are elected both at the state and the local government level. The CGS is a mechanism for the transfer of funds from the federal government to the state government (Phillips, 2009, p. 6). States need to meet a set of criteria and agree to written guidelines and a Memorandum of Understanding in order to receive funds (Phillips, 2009, pp. 6-7). The performance of CGS projects was found to be better than that of federally implemented projects (Phillips, 2009, p. 9). The fact that state governments were held accountable for project outcomes ensured a high completion rate (Ibid). However, responsiveness to local needs was limited by a lack of implementation capacity at the local government level (Phillips, 2009, p. 10).

Local revenue generation

While they note that this is likely to meet with opposition or reluctance at both the national and the local levels, USAID (2009, p. 32) recommends supporting selected subnational governments in local revenue generation. The ADB Outlook (2013, p. 72) cites a number of authors who argue that increased autonomy with regard to raising taxes and spending revenue at the local level, results in higher spending on health and education infrastructure and better targeted poverty reduction programmes.

Freedom of Information

Gaventa and McGee (2013, p. S14) note that Freedom of Information requests can increase the responsiveness of public officials, but that the success of this approach depends on the status of the person making the request, and on civil society pressure. In India the 2005 Right to Information (RTI) Act enabled grassroots organisations to obtain information about the Public (food) Distribution Scheme and were able to identify instances of fraud and mismanagement of funds. The grassroots organisation then

⁶ For more information about interventions that have been used to increase electoral accountability see: Strachan, A.L. (2014). *Electoral accountability in Indonesia* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1073). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

used social/public audit mechanisms to make the information publicly available. As a result government officials took action against corrupt officials (Pande, 2008 cited in Acosta et al, 2013, p. 15). However according to the ADB (2013, p. 25), there is limited evidence to suggest that the RTI Act has actually transformed governance in India.

Media

The media can play an important role in promoting accountability and responsiveness. In Makassar City in South Sulawesi in Indonesia, a mass media – NGO alliance resulted in improved healthcare services for the poor (Triwibowo, 2012, p. 22). An information campaign highlighted the local government’s failings with regard to service delivery. In response to voter anger, the mayor introduced a number of measures to improve service delivery. He was not reelected by the local parliament (direct elections had not yet been introduced in Makassar at the time) but his successor continued his efforts to improve service delivery and accountability. A number of factors contributed to the alliance’s success: nationwide decentralisation; press freedom; increased political competition as a result of the introduction of direct elections; continual consolidation among local CSOs and the local parliament’s “ineffective” oversight of the local government (Triwibowo, 2012, p. 22).

Increasing citizen participation in the policy process

Increased citizen participation can make it easier to gauge the “collective will,” in turn enabling the local government to be more responsive. However, Rodden and Wibbels note that groups of people do not always have a “meaningful collective will” (Rodden and Wibbels, 2012, p. 7), and that participation can result in the increased involvement of interest groups (p. 6). They argue that increased participation can increase the number of divergent voices rather than resulting in “collectively optimal decisions” (Rodden and Wibbels, 2012, p.7).

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Suggested citation

Strachan, A.L. (2014). *Direct elections and responsiveness in Indonesia* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1074). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

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