

A large, stylized map of the African continent is centered on the page. It is rendered in a light grey color with a thick, irregular border. The map is slightly tilted and has a soft, painterly appearance. The text of the title is overlaid on the central part of the map.

**Towards a theory of
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Towards a theory of local governance and public goods' provision in sub-Saharan Africa

David Booth*

Under-provision of essential public goods is a key source of the malaise of development in sub-Saharan Africa. It is widely accepted that this is largely a governance problem, but current approaches to improving governance are not working. This paper provides a mid-term report on a multi-country research effort to shed light on the institutional sources of variation in public goods' provision at the sub-national level, with a particular focus on key bottlenecks to improvement in maternal mortality, water and sanitation, facilitation of markets and enterprise, and public order and security. Drawing on fieldwork evidence and secondary literature, it identifies three clusters of issues and associated explanatory variables which seem to account for much of the variation in intermediate outcomes. The paper identifies questions to be settled in the final phase of research and discusses emerging policy implications, including several relating to the current form and scale of external development assistance.

1 Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is now making economic and social progress in ways that were not dreamed of 20 years ago. But, for all the mining ventures, shopping centres, suburban construction and other visible signs of increased prosperity, the region's development remains stunted and precarious. The benefits from enhanced national income flows are not widely shared, structural changes in the economy are generally absent, and several indices of extreme deprivation remain stubbornly resistant to change. The better-off find acceptable private solutions, at home or abroad, for most of their problems. In contrast, the poor majority, along with investors in the economic sectors with the highest poverty-reducing potential, depend on under-provided public goods. Especially in rural areas, some of the most elementary public goods – open-access education, preventative and curative public health measures, fair and accessible justice and well regulated communications infrastructure among others –¹ continue to be provided badly or not at all. This is the case despite substantial infusions of external funding, much of it targeted at precisely these shortcomings.

In the final analysis, most observers agree, the under-provision of key public goods, and thus the core of today's African development malaise, is largely a governance problem. The geography

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¹ Throughout this paper, 'public goods' refers not just to goods and services characterised strictly by 'non-excludability' and 'non-rivalry', but also to the somewhat broader range of goods with strong positive social externalities (or whose absence implies strong negative externalities) which tend to be under-produced by private action because of information imperfections.

and historical legacies of the region are no doubt challenging. In some significant ways the continent is caught in vicious circles in which poverty breeds poverty. However, comparative international experience makes it clear that performance could be much better than it is. Indeed, in some significant respects it has been better in the same countries in the still-remembered past. Thus, all things considered, there is at the very least a large residual problem of available resources being badly utilised, for institutional reasons.

1.1 Questioning 'good governance'

This remains the situation 20 years after international development organisations and local advocacy groups began actively promoting institutional reform and 'good governance'. Over this period, formal institutions have been transformed and political systems have become more open and democratic. Peace has been restored to several previously troubled regions. New aid and investment flows have opened up as a result. However, governance has not become more developmental if we judge this by its ability to address the bottlenecks in public goods provision which are the key to getting onto an inclusive and sustainable development trajectory. In fact, on balance there may have been deterioration. Increasingly, therefore, researchers and progressive policy thinkers are searching for ways of doing things that might work better in the context of Africa, and rural Africa in particular.

This paper comes from a research programme devoted to systematic investigation of forms of governance that work or do not work for development in sub-Saharan Africa. The Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) is committed to discovering institutions that work for poor people – that is, arriving at reform proposals which, rather than being derived from some abstract standard of international good practice, are rooted in the actual experience of Africa. The programme begins from the historical and research evidence that institutions work best when they are grounded in local realities and make use of indigenous resources of institutional creativity. Its initial efforts drew on the metaphorical idea of seeking out institutional alternatives that 'work with the grain' of African societies.

1.2 Focusing on local governance and leadership

A particularly important subset of issues linking insufficient provision of basic public goods with institutional shortcomings is to be found at the level of sub-national or local-area governance. These are the focus of the APPP's research stream on Local Governance and Leadership. Many of the public goods that are essential to economic growth and poverty reduction are provided at local level if they are provided at all. Yet despite the international community's 20-year love affair with democratic decentralisation – still often regarded as the key to better governance at sub-national levels – in most countries this is the level at which public goods provision is least adequate. Understanding of why this is the case remains poor. Generating some policy-relevant theory which does a better job of making sense of the evidence on local governance and public goods provision is therefore a high priority.

Is local governance a field in which there is scope for doing better by 'working with the grain' or otherwise embedding institutional arrangements in local realities? This paper offers an initial set of answers to that question. It is written at the mid-point of the research in the APPP's Local Governance stream. It is intended to serve the dual purpose of getting some issues from

preliminary research into the public domain, and providing a structured reference-point for ongoing work.

The paper builds on a substantial body of preparatory reflection and debate based on secondary literature and previous studies (particularly, Kelsall, 2008b; Olivier de Sardan, 2008b; Booth, 2009; Kelsall, 2009). It also draws on the conclusions of a series of ‘scoping missions’ carried out in 2007-8, in which different members of the research team collected the thoughts of well placed observers in half a dozen countries about researchable issues in public goods’ provision, including changes through time. The paper is, however, primarily based on two additional sources: i) team-based field research carried out in 2009 in four countries – Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda – with additional material from individual researchers in Senegal and Sierra Leone, and ii) a further search for relevant material in the literature.

The 2009 fieldwork was designed mainly as a prelude to further and more extended empirical work, which is now taking place in Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda and two additional countries (Senegal and Tanzania). Nevertheless, it generated enough evidence and insight to support a preliminary analysis of findings. The extended literature search aimed to fill some of the more obvious gaps in empirical coverage and also to seek out more refined conceptual tools for ordering our findings and setting an appropriate agenda for the next phase of fieldwork.

1.3 Research approach

The method of the Local Governance and Leadership research stream is based on in-depth case studies and comparative analysis. Our approach is to discover theoretical propositions by working on the actual variations we are able to observe in the ‘real governance’ (Olivier de Sardan, 2008b) of public goods’ provision, across space and through time. We aim to construct some grounded middle-range theory which can be refined and tested in further research by ourselves and others, and become the basis for more intelligent policy thinking.

The 2009 field research was of moderate intensity. In Malawi, five trained and supervised fieldworkers spent 5-7 weeks in each of three urban sites, undertaking a mixture of informal interviewing and semi-participant observation (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010). In Niger, five researchers with field assistants spent a month in three previously visited field sites (small towns) following a collective practical training exercise (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b). The Rwanda research was the work of a supervised field team of four, who spent four weeks in two villages in one rural district (Golooba-Mutebi et al., 2010). In Uganda, four researchers were divided between two sites in different districts, spending two months in the field and reporting to a supervisory team (Kawooya Ssebunya, 2010). Veronica Gómez-Temesio and Anna Workman contributed preliminary findings from their extended doctoral fieldwork in Senegal and Sierra Leone respectively (Gómez-Temesio, 2010; Workman, 2010).

The research took as its point of departure the institutions and processes involved in the provision of key public goods in four fields:

- safe motherhood;
- water and sanitation;
- facilitation of enterprise and markets; and

- public order and security.

Reducing the still shocking rates of maternal mortality in the poorest countries is a global priority endorsed by the World Health Organisation, one that continues to pose huge challenges, especially in the more isolated rural areas. Drinking water and sanitation are fundamental public-health issues. As with safe motherhood, the technologies are well known and hardly new. Geography and climate make many aspects more difficult, but there is no question that the principal barriers to improvement are institutional. Markets and enterprise are flourishing in most places, but in most places too the breakthrough into longer distance and larger scale transactions has been far slower in Africa than in other comparable parts of the world, and the quality of local governance is at least a part of the problem. Last but not least, the poorest parts of the region are also dangerous places, particularly for the physically, socially or economically disadvantaged. This is at least partly because the public good of protection against physical and sexual violence and extreme forms of oppression, including those associated with witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, is frequently non-existent.

Some of the country exercises covered all these four areas of public goods' provision, while others concentrated on either the first two or the second two. The fieldwork focused particularly on the conditions appearing to favour or inhibit the addressing of the key bottlenecks in provision. Across most field sites, shortcomings in provision were frequent and seemed to be associated with similar immediate constellations of causes. The somewhat less frequent examples of success in addressing the bottlenecks often seemed to be associated with the absence of these same factors. The immediate causes are only the beginning of the matter, however. Despite the obvious differences in country contexts, we have also been able to identify commonalities at the level of wider, enabling or disabling, institutional conditions and the effects of historical changes. The secondary literature search was helpful not just in confirming that our propositions are valid across a somewhat wider range of sectors and countries. We have also drawn on it in making choices about how to conceptualise the emerging findings or hypotheses.

Following a preliminary review of conceptual bearings in Section 2, the paper discusses in turn three clusters of issues which have emerged as significant in these investigations, making reference to similar or contradictory findings by other researchers. It is not entirely clear at this point whether the factors identified are all equally important and whether getting all three of them right is both necessary and sufficient for improving outcomes. However, it does seem clear that each is individually important across a wide range of particular circumstances in different countries and periods, and that together they account for a good part of the variation in the intermediate outcomes that concern us.

It may be helpful to anticipate the conclusions which emerge from the discussion of the three clusters of issues in Sections 3-5, at least as far as the immediate causal factors are concerned. The differences in outcomes across the cases seem to be connected in the first instance with the degree to which:

- the policy-driven components of the institutional framework of public goods' provision reflect *a coherent vision*, so that resources are allocated and incentives are structured in ways that are mutually reinforcing, not mutually undermining;

- ❑ the human-resource components of provision are subject to *effective top-down performance disciplines*, even if in other respects the organisational context is severely lacking in the attributes of a well resourced and well regulated bureaucracy; and
- ❑ there are institutions enabling local collective action which are *locally anchored*, in a double sense – the rules they incorporate are welfare-enhancing (problem-solving) in the context, and they make use of institutional elements inherited from the past which motivate, enable and guide individuals to take particular actions.

In this summary form, our propositions may seem to capture three desiderata of development management which are reflected rather generally in strategies for governance reform, including donor-inspired ‘good governance’ programmes. However, that would be a misunderstanding. As we shall explain, our concept of what needs to change is in some respects modest compared with the good governance orthodoxy, which tends to be wildly over-ambitious (Grindle, 2007). In other respects, it enters territory where international policy thinking has lagged seriously behind research. In both respects, we would claim to be more realistic. The same applies to what we say about the conditions under which the immediate problems are likely to be more adequately addressed. The wider explanatory variables we identify also deal with matters that conventional policy thinking tends to ignore or discount.

2 Conceptual bearings

In Sections 3, 4 and 5, we set out the evidence from the literature and from our own preliminary fieldwork which underpins these propositions; we explain the terminology in which they are expressed; and we identify the questions that need to be settled or further explored in the next round of research. Before proceeding, however, it seems important to make some initial clarifications and *caveats* about the questions the paper is asking and why. We have posed the central issue in a relatively general and abstract form: which institutions favour adequate public-goods’ provision. No reference is made to any specific policy initiative or reform. This is deliberate.

We are not seeking to evaluate the impact of a particular programme or initiative, but to arrive at a better framework for thinking about programmes and initiatives in general. This gives our argument a more generic character than most of the existing literature on sub-national governance, much of which has been concerned specifically with effects of administrative and political decentralisation. At the same time, we have a narrower focus than much of the writing on a number of other topics of relevance to our problem, namely the micro-foundations of local collective action, the nature of African political systems, and the institutional implications of aid dependency. This section establishes some bearings with respect to each.

2.1 *On not studying decentralisation*

Thinking about better approaches to local governance and public goods provision has not been helped by the fact that research has tended to follow policy fashion rather than leading it. Thus, there is a massive literature responding to the policy interest in decentralisation and poverty reduction. Much of this is interesting and insightful, but it has the limitation of being narrowly focused on the single question of whether or not a particular policy initiative is having the expected effects and why or why not. This is a question of some interest, but is also limiting in several respects.

One kind of limitation is a tendency to reduce local governance to local *government*. This becomes a problem where, simply, the state plays an insignificant role in local public goods' provision because its presence in an area is extremely slight, as found by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan in the Central African Republic (2003) and Jones (2009) in eastern Uganda. It is also a problem in Francophone West Africa generally, where up to eight 'modes of local governance' and a host of 'twilight institutions' play a significant part in local public goods' provision (Lund, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 2009; Olivier de Sardan and Tidjani Alou, 2009). Another limitation is setting up discussion in artificial for-and-against terms – that is, for or against decentralisation, or more commonly, for or against a particular form of decentralisation: devolution of powers and resources to elected local councils.

Nothing would be easier than to analyse the material emerging from our case studies in these terms. The evidence from two of our study countries, Uganda and Malawi, is quite compelling about the insufficiencies of democratic decentralisation as a formula for improving public goods' provision. For different reasons, the evidence from Niger and Rwanda suggests a somewhat more sanguine perspective. But this would not be a very interesting or innovative debate in view of what is already established in the literature.

At the end of the first decade of intensive decentralising reforms, Crook and others (Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2003) came to the conclusion that the impacts of democratic decentralisation on outcomes such as the effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts are indeterminate. Democratic decentralisation may and may not appear desirable in principle. But the outcomes depend on factors other than the decision to devolve powers and resources to lower levels of public authority. The context, including notably the political complexion of the central government and the interest that the regime or other forces have in capturing local power for its purposes, makes a very large difference. The burden of the decentralisation literature continues to be overwhelming in this sense. The 'other' factors are crucial.²

The obvious implication is that the focus of research needs to shift to the 'other' factors. Are not the conditions that are necessary to make decentralisation work for better public goods' provision the same conditions that work for better public goods' provision *tout court*? This implication has been followed up in one sense, with studies increasingly starting from what it takes to get better public services and working backwards to evaluate a large range of delivery institutions, as in the 2004 World Development Report, *Making Services Work for Poor People* (World Bank, 2003).³ The small but important literature on state-society synergies in service provision (Evans et al., 1996; White and Robinson, 1998; Robinson and White, 2001; Tripp, 2003; Joshi, 2008; Evans, 2009) was another useful step in this direction.

We, however, want to go a step further, not only encompassing a variety of state and non-state actors, but also digging deeper and trying to uncover some of the more basic principles affecting 'what works' and 'what doesn't work' for better-than-normal public goods' provision in the

² See among others Ahmad et al. (2005), Andersson et al. (2004), Bako-Arifari and Laurent (1998), Bardhan (2005), Blundo (1998), Crawford and Hartmann (2008), Heller (2001), Jütting et al. (2005), Ndegwa and Levy (2004), Olowu (2006), Saito (2008) and Smoke (2003).

³ An approach pioneered at the Bank by the 1997 WDR on the state (World Bank, 1997) and associated work (e.g., Girishankar, 1999).

African context. This means relating to work on three other topics, concerning respectively the micro foundations, and macro or global contexts of public goods' provision.

2.2 Micro foundations and macro contexts

We want to build an explanatory theory about local governance and public goods, not just accumulate observations about outcomes and institutional patterns that seem to be associated in some regular way. This is one of the meanings of 'digging deeper'. It implies being able to say something about the causal processes and social mechanisms in play at the micro level. Therefore, we need to be aware of the possible applications of neo-institutionalist or game-theoretic (Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Leonard, 2000; Ostrom, 2005; Besley and Ghatak, 2007) and social anthropological (Mosse, 2005; Olivier de Sardan, 2005) models which help to illuminate the puzzles which often surround individual and organisational choices, interactions and strategies in relation to the outcomes of interest. The importance of this level of analysis in addressing the questions covered in this paper has been powerfully argued by Kelsall (2009).

At the same time, we are interested in uncovering explanatory factors that have potential policy relevance across a range of particular contexts. This implies exploring the institutional constraints and enabling factors at the meso and macro levels which are causally connected with the relevant micro mechanisms. Ostrom (2005) and Shivakumar (2005) help us to move in this direction with their discussion of the conditions under which successful institutions are crafted, and the harm that can be done when reform initiatives fail to build on existing institutional understandings. An even more fertile field of concepts for taking the analysis beyond decisions, strategies and games and into wider questions concerning context and change is provided by the work of Avner Greif (2006). Greif's precise and historically grounded vocabulary for analysing the conditions which enable institutions to be welfare-enhancing and either durable or open to progressive change serves us well later in the paper in treating the cluster of issues around institutional support for local collective action.

Consideration of the wider enabling or inhibiting conditions also brings us into an engagement with two other important literatures, on systemic tendencies in African politics and on institutional dimensions of aid dependency. On politics, the APPP's starting point is a double one. First, the overarching analysis famously provided by Chabal and Daloz (1999) and Bratton and van de Walle (1997) among others is correct in arguing that most African political systems are pervaded by patrimonial as well as by modern bureaucratic logics of behaviour. The designation 'neopatrimonial' expresses well enough this basic idea. But, second, it is also the case that there is more diversity among and within country systems than is often acknowledged, and this diversity is of great theoretical and practical interest. This applies very much to the Local Governance and Leadership stream of work. One of the meso processes that we argue later needs close analysis is the way different styles of neopatrimonial politics have different implications for the way human resources in public bureaucracies are managed, with important implications for the practical ability to provide public goods at a reasonable level of quality.

On the second topic, the damaging institutional effects of aid dependency, there is also a strong core literature of a generalising sort, of which the highlights include van de Walle (2001), Bräutigam and Knack (2004), Gibson et al. (2005) and Moss et al. (2008). The analysis offered by these writers, especially regarding the incentives for policy-makers, is highly relevant to our subject, as will be clear later on. On the other hand, we are also realistic enough to regard a

sharp break with aid dependence as an unlikely prospect, not least because it has become an internal, structural feature of the societies we are considering. Moreover, not all aid is harmful to the same extent or in the same ways. Our starting position on aid dependency therefore mirrors our position on neopatrimonial politics. While the general story told by the authors cited above is persuasive, our research focus is on the conditions under which aid is *particularly* harmful to the aspects of the institutional fabric that are important to public goods' provision, and the conditions under which the most harmful effects can be avoided. We have things to say in this regard in connection with all of the clusters of issues which are the subject of the next three sections.

3 Policy-driven institutional incoherence: sources and remedies

In several fields of public goods' provision, our preliminary research has uncovered more or less serious problems of what we propose to call policy-driven institutional incoherence. Arrangements reflecting a consistent policy vision were found to be the exception rather than the norm. In most places, efforts to address the key bottlenecks in public goods provision were obstructed not only by irreversible historical legacies but also by one or both of two types of policy-induced incoherence: persistently ill-defined mandates or overlapping jurisdictions among all or some of the organisations concerned; and perverse incentives confronting actors within particular organisations as a result of incomplete implementation of a new policy and/or the simultaneous pursuit of several policies which for practical purposes are in conflict. Our findings converge with each other and with a much wider literature in singling out the same pair of wider institutional factors as responsible for these problems: populist (especially presidential) policy-making, and the incentive effects of a high level of external donor funding.

3.1 Incoherence and its determinants

Under today's conditions of economic and political liberalisation, almost all public goods' provision in sub-Saharan Africa takes the form of co-production by several actors, including both formal organisations and informal collaborations between individuals or groups (Joshi and Moore, 2004; Olivier de Sardan, 2009). Typical delivery configurations cut across the public and private sectors and involve some measure of formal or 'informal' privatisation of what was once public provision (Blundo, 2006; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2006; Blundo and Le Meur, 2008; Olivier de Sardan, 2008a). These arrangements can be more or less effective from the point of view of outcomes.

An important determinant of the quality of the outcome is whether the co-production in question is based on a real coordination of efforts among the actors, and on incentive structures which are consistent. A common pattern is one in which organisational mandates or jurisdictions are so (ill-)defined that they obstruct coordination and weaken the exploitation of complementarities. Staff in organisations face inconsistent incentives and pressures, because of the way these are bound up with institutions (e.g. of chieftaincy), policies or reform initiatives that have passed in and then out of favour without ever being fully implemented, properly wound up or comprehensively replaced.

The details obviously vary. However, behind the particular manifestations we find a remarkably persistent set of wider institutional influences. Two common features appear to account for the vast majority of the particular problems encountered: 1) the superimposition of successive

waves of public sector reform, often under donor influence, without sufficient efforts to resolve the inconsistencies thereby created; and 2) populist policy initiatives, especially by presidents before and during election campaigns, without consultation with the affected sector planners (or donors) and without consideration of the resource implications. Both of these factors have been documented and discussed in the literature.

The ‘piling up’ of donor-inspired institutional reforms is a long-established theme for several sub-regions of Africa (Therkildsen, 2000; Biershenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2003; Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2003; Batley and Larbi, 2005; Olivier de Sardan, 2009: 8). The increasing popularity of populist, on-the-campaign-trail, policy-making, has also been a strong theme in recent work, although appreciations of it vary (Lawson and Rakner, 2005; Cammack et al., 2007; van de Walle, 2007; Fjeldstad and Therkildsen, 2008; Hyden and Mmuya, 2008; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2009). Two things have perhaps not been given enough attention in these previous discussions. One is the degree to which these two elements are linked and mutually reinforcing. The other is whether they form a pattern that is strictly inevitable, as opposed to an option which has been taken by countries and their international partners, and which could be reversed.

Where they both exist, we suggest, the two elements interact and reinforce one another in a particularly perverse way. They each contribute additional layers of incoherence to what is already, for historical reasons, an incoherent institutional framework, undermining functioning arrangements and confusing behavioural incentives. They are also linked in an additional way. It has been argued that the availability of large volumes of donor funding not only gives governments incentives to adopt the latest donor reform idea, but weakens the incentive to confront any challenging collective-action and principal-agent problems created in the process (van de Walle, 2001; Bräutigam and Knack, 2004). The same logic would apply to presidential populism and the feasibility of correcting the harm it has done: donors can be expected to meet any immediate funding shortfall, and then underwrite the costs of not confronting the deeper problems which remain unresolved.

This describes a very widespread and perhaps increasingly institutionalised pattern. However, it is not absolutely universal, even across the relatively small number of countries included in our study. Under both historical regimes and one of the current regimes, problems of this type have been much less striking, meaning that we are entitled to treat policy-induced institutional incoherence as a *variable* influencing the quality of local governance and public goods’ provision, and not as a constant to be accepted as inevitable.

3.2 *Country experiences*

In Malawi, Niger and Uganda today, this type of institutional incoherence, originating largely from the sources mentioned, is not, of course, the only factor impeding the solution of key public goods problems. But it is an important one. This is confirmed both by the general patterns observed, but also by the nature of the partial exceptions to that general pattern.

Thus, in Malawi the boundaries of extension planning areas, agriculture development divisions, health departments and educational zones do not coincide. The jurisdictions and mandates of parastatals, elected politicians, chiefs and city authorities overlap in ways that produce confused responsibilities and contribute to weak coordination. Some of the reasons for this state of affairs lie buried in Malawi’s pre- and post-independence history. However, recent policy has done

remarkably little to correct it. The intention to use decentralisation to rationalise the system by making the districts preeminent in public-sector planning has remained a dead letter, because there has been appetite at the centre for letting it work this way, or indeed for letting it happen at all. The results are gaps in provision and a failure to address key bottlenecks (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 8-9, 36ff).

The exceptions confirm the rule. Where, locally, there is a strong centralising authority (a Chief Executive Officer in Kasungu town, a strong chieftaincy in Rumphi – two of our Malawi fieldwork sites) coordination and better collaborative provision can happen. But in the absence of idiosyncratic conditions such as these, the effectiveness of public goods provision is undermined. In the Malawi case, this ‘horizontal’ incoherence is in part the cumulative result of policy shifts over the years before and after independence. However, it also arises from ‘the persistent and complicated demands of donors’ during the 1990s. These resulted in reforms which eliminated old systems and created new institutions in a haphazard way: ‘in many cases there were not sufficient resources to implement the new systems or to enforce the principles and rules needed to resolve jurisdictional overlaps and disputes that resulted’ (39). These complications are not inevitable. There were fewer during Malawi’s first two or three decades of independent government, because at that stage there were fewer layers of complexity and there was a clearer overall policy vision.

In Niger, under the last civilian regime, HIPC resources were channelled into a Presidential Special Programme, whose infrastructure investments were largely disconnected from other aspects of public provision. For example, the purchase of ambulances – a part of the solution to a key bottleneck in the improvement of maternal mortality rates – was not joined up with other parts of the solution: the fuel, maintenance and staffing of emergency evacuation of mothers to higher health facilities. This forms part of a wider pattern in which populist measures of infrastructure provision are delinked from, if not in direct conflict with, the resource planning of line ministries. Thus, public goods’ provision in Niger is constrained not only by the tendency of donor and NGO projects (responsible for nearly 100% of investment) to act without coordination and independently of local authorities, on a supply-driven basis (‘finding problems for solutions’).⁴ It is also afflicted by the consequences of a similar pattern of behaviour initiated from the highest level of government. Local actors contend more or less creatively with the resulting dislocations, as discussed later in this paper, but a more satisfactory solution would involve preventing their happening in the first place.

At a somewhat more subtle level, primary health provision, including aspects bearing on mother and child health, is currently being undermined by unresolved contradictions between two reforms of health-care financing. In Niger, as in other countries of the region, a policy of offering ‘free’ primary health-care to under-fives was adopted on a populist basis in 2006, without several of the preconditions for its success, including a budget. This was superimposed on a functioning cost-recovery (health insurance) system inspired by the Bamako Initiative. The cost-recovery arrangements have continued to operate in principle for the minority of patients who are adults not covered by other exemptions, but it has been seriously undermined. Health units have lost their only reliable source of non-salary funding. The result has been a significant

⁴ This phrase from the policy studies literature was used by Jean-David Naudet of AFD in connection with 20 years of aid to the Sahel (Naudet, 1999: quoted by Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b).

weakening of provider incentives in the public sector and a considerable expansion of *de facto* privatisation (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010a).

In Uganda, Health Districts do not coincide with administrative districts, and the latter are constantly changed by presidential decisions linked to a highly clientelistic form of neopatrimonial politics. The fact that Health Districts do not map onto administrative districts is not the only factor accounting for the almost non-existent involvement of local administrators and politicians in monitoring and quality control of health centres observed in our sites, but it seems an important contributory factor. Formal responsibilities for coordination around public health issues are not complied with, in part because the structure discourages it (Kawooya Ssebunya, 2010: 9-11, 21).

As in Niger, the health units in Uganda are governed by an incoherent set of incentives created by the piling up of successive management reforms without resolution of the conflicts entailed: market liberalisation, self-financing on the basis of user charges and ‘free care’ policies. In health, as in education, the abolition of fees for state primary provision was decided without reference to sector planners and without due consideration of the resource flows and other preconditions for a new system to work. It appealed to President Museveni as an easy method of winning votes while also gaining credit with equity-oriented donors.

On the face of it, Rwanda seems to be the only current example where, at least in the health field and in some areas, the institutional framework has been rendered reasonably coherent. Our preliminary fieldwork, admittedly limited to one local ‘sector’, suggested the importance of a) a recent reform of boundaries and mandates covering the whole country and all line ministries; b) a health-care reform in which incentives appear consistent (affordable health insurance plus strong pressure to use it); and c) a donor-coordination arrangement promoted by central government that seems to be working down to district level (Golooba-Mutebi et al., 2010: 9-19).

Further analysis of the Rwanda case tends to confirm the view we are advancing about the factors underlying the problems and perverse outcomes in other country contexts. The governing RPF party has set its face against populist policy-making during elections, preferring to rely on its general record. While in the local governance area it is sometimes accused by those charged with implementation of promoting ‘initiatives’ at an excessively hectic pace, the initiatives in question have been in most cases informed by the same basic vision. A significant group of donors in the country have been persuaded of the developmental benefits from leaving the government to implement its vision, even if they harbour serious doubts about some of the policies. While the country remains very aid-dependent from a financial point of view, with many of the difficulties this entails (Hayman, 2009), some of the institutional effects of aid dependence are perhaps becoming progressively weakened.

3.3 Summary and implications

A factor which seems consistently important across our cases, then, is the degree to which a country, and the provision of public goods in particular sub-sectors, is afflicted by policy-driven institutional incoherence which prevents effective co-production and generates inconsistent incentives for providers. Although there are unhelpful historical legacies in all cases, the wider institutional determinants which are in principle malleable seem to centre upon the combined effects of aid dependence and populist policy-making. We have suggested that the relationship

between these two sources of incoherence is not entirely casual. To what extent do they form a single problem or variable?

It does not seem at all plausible that the frequency with which donor agencies change their minds about which reforms to promote is caused by populist policy-making in the aid recipient country. It arises from the politics of aid giving, frustration about the slowness of change and in some cases the frequency of staff turnover in agencies. Nor, on the other hand, can populist policy-making be attributed in any simple way to aid; its prevalence reflects more than anything else the stage of political development reached in the study countries. Van de Walle (2007) may be right in arguing that clientelist politics in Africa is mostly about accommodating and integrating elements of the elite, not about appealing directly to the masses. However, we are clearly now in a phase in which democratic politics calls for the high-profile, mass-appeal gestures of the sort exemplified by the abolition of user fees (or, perhaps, reintroduction of fertiliser subsidies). This is for reasons that do not have to do with aid. Nevertheless, the availability of aid certainly reduces the need for presidents to lose sleep over the costs of what they are promising. It enhances the tendency to irresponsible policy-making that is common to the country systems and the donor community itself, with only a few honourable exceptions. To that extent, it makes sense to treat the two as a single cluster of problems.

Three questions remain. First, if the foregoing is a fair summary of what the research has yielded so far, what needs to be settled in the next phase of fieldwork and analysis? Second, what would it take to disprove our claims about either the significantly negative effects of policy-driven institutional incoherence, or the wider drivers of this phenomenon? Third, what are the likely strategic policy implications?

We evidently need to know more about:

- whether both dimensions of policy-induced incoherence – conflicting jurisdictions and contradictory policy implementation – are significant in all the sectors and countries where public goods’ provision is weak according to our research and other evidence in the literature;
- whether post-2000 Rwanda is the only present-day instance of jurisdictions, policies and aid efforts being subordinated, more or less, to a single vision, whether equivalent efforts can be reported from elsewhere, and why this is;
- what the various experiences tell us about the incentive effects of aid dependence, and the degree to which they vary according to either the other incentives influencing the recipient government (e.g. those generated by genocide and war in Rwanda), or the delivery modality and/or scale of the aid.

Our main proposition about the importance of this cluster of factors would be disproved by one or more examples of public goods’ provision being adequate under otherwise favourable conditions but in the absence of efforts to clear up the jurisdictional conflicts and other effects of policy incoherence. Conversely, it would be effectively refuted if performance in this regard were found to remain bad under favourable conditions including serious efforts to impose a single policy vision. At the next level, we would need to reject our account of the wider explanatory factors if we were to uncover a case of major policy incoherence in which neither populist policy-making nor abundant aid flows via multiple channels were present.

The policy implications of the Local Governance and Leadership research will be affected somewhat by the answers to these questions. But it is already clear that because of its typical effects on the coherence of the institutional framework of public goods' delivery in at least a number of key fields, aid in its current form is part of the problem, and not self-evidently part of the solution. This conclusion may be modified if it is found that this type of problem has been successfully addressed in aid-dependent African countries other than Rwanda. It would be significantly modified if we were to find more instances of development agencies giving their staff the freedom to act as brokers of improved policy coherence at country level, rather than as transmitters of supply-driven aid initiatives.

4 Human-resource performance disciplines: what makes the difference?

In the study countries, difficulties in addressing key bottlenecks in provision are almost always linked to general resource shortages, often of an extreme kind. However, our preliminary research uncovered many instances where these problems were compounded by more or less serious weaknesses in either the allocation or the performance of the available human resources (technical and administrative staff). In many cases, unresolved problems in public provision could be connected directly with an absence of the disciplines expected within any hierarchically ordered organisation: rules not being clearly laid down or enforced, instructions not being followed, vital jobs not being done, and so on. Thus, the issues of horizontal incoherence reviewed in the last section were often compounded by shortcomings in the vertical structures of control and supervision within particular organisations.

4.1 Seeking out variation

That we have found major problems of this sort is not surprising or, in itself, particularly interesting. Something like this has formed the common premise of donor-supported public-sector reform efforts for at least a quarter century. One of the starting points of the APPP is the relatively recent but now quite substantial body of research which, for a number of sub-Saharan African countries, documents in precise detail the ways in which behaviour in public-sector organisations, including service-delivery organisations, fails to correspond to the 'expected' pattern (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2006; 2007). For some countries, this includes a convincing historical narrative of how things came to be the way they are (Anders, 2001; Golooba-Mutebi, 2007; Anders, 2008; Olivier de Sardan, 2008a; Becker, 2009). This research portrays a situation which is more complex than implied by the standard account of public-sector deterioration underlying the 'Washington consensus'. However, in so doing it only deepens the appreciation that outcomes for those who are at the receiving end of public goods' provision are abysmal in most places most of the time, for reasons that have much to do with the breakdown of vertical disciplines.

The APPP aims not just to add to this literature but to explore the previously neglected topic of whether and why there are exceptions and variations within the general pattern. Relevant avenues of research have already been set out in several parts of the programme. Thus, the research stream on State Bureaucracies is exploring whether the 'informal privatisation' of services by public-sector personnel is invariably exploitative and harmful from the point of view of users. It is seeking out examples of 'micro-reforms' in which managers take advantage of the discretion they enjoy *de facto* to reorganise provision. These measures may be contrary to the formal rules but nevertheless 'work', not from the providers' own point of view but also, in

places and to some extent, from the point of view of users. The stream of work on Business and Politics, on the other hand, is documenting differences among political regimes which affect the investment climate, and this includes the way political and civil service corruption is or is not regulated from the centre.

In the same spirit, our concern in this section is with the issue of variations and exceptions. In pursuing this enquiry, we are not very much interested in the possibility that a well-resourced, rule-governed bureaucracy subject to effective democratic controls might be the ideal way of providing many types of public goods as soon as conditions permit. This is appealing in the abstract but almost entirely irrelevant to the reality of sub-Saharan Africa and other very poor world regions in this stage of their development. Instead, our focus is on the possibility that the presence or absence of effective top-down performance disciplines makes a significant difference *even when* in most other respects the circumstances are not conducive to good performance, in particular when the socio-political context and professional norms retain important patrimonial or clientelistic features.

Two kinds of departure from the general pattern may be distinguished in principle. The first is what Leonard (2008; 2010) calls ‘pockets’ of effectiveness within weak-governance states – specific agencies or offices where, because of changes stopping short of outright privatisation, staff disciplines are maintained or enhanced in the face of the prevailing logics of behaviour in the national and local political systems, and within the public service at large. The second is variation which can be observed across a wide range of different public-sector bodies between periods or across countries and relating to the way the prevailing logics of behaviour work themselves out under different types of broadly neopatrimonial political regime.

4.2 *Pockets of effectiveness?*

For Leonard, the pockets of effectiveness that are of interest are those to be found within the government sector, in civil service departments, parastatals or executive agencies. The outcomes from outright privatisations of former public enterprises are of less interest to him. Voluntary-sector organisations that produce public or collective goods are also outside his scope. The APPP’s focus is somewhat broader than Leonard’s. Our research is reporting examples where public goods provision appears to be occurring with relative success under any one of the eight ‘modes of local governance’ identified by Olivier de Sardan (2009).⁵ Not all of these are in the public sector, although most involve some sort of legitimation by government of their role in public goods’ provision.

So far, the most interesting such examples concern the franchising of the management of the transport stations attached to major markets to corporate bodies of a trade-union or business-association type. We have examples of this from Niger and clear suggestions of something similar in early reports from Senegal (Gómez-Temesio, 2010; Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b: 26, 31). In both cases, the management tasks performed involve the provision of public or collective goods relating to time schedules, security and hygiene. In some respects, the arrangements may be best analysed as the solution to a problem of collective action among the immediate participants, drivers or vehicle owners. However, they are also in effect the product

⁵ Namely, the chiefly, state, communal (elected local government), project-based, associational, sponsorship-based, religious and merchant modes of local governance.

of the state's delegating key functions including policing and tax collection⁶ to a non-state body and achieving thereby an institutional arrangement which remains imperfect (still in important respects corrupt and faction-ridden) but nonetheless displays a relatively high degree of discipline and thus effectiveness in much of what it does.

Other examples reported so far, but in less detail, include religious organisations which provide services within the broad framework of the public sector, but in a more disciplined way than other providers (e.g. CHAM in Malawi), and public goods (e.g. bore-holes) provided by private sponsors, such as rich diaspora businessmen. These experiences may be helpful in thinking about the incentive structures whose absence causes vertical disciplines in the public sector proper to be weak. It may also suggest new ways in which public-sector performance disciplines might be improved by hiving off particular state functions in the manner of the New Public Management, but without resort to the usual device of creating an executive agency.

Historically, pockets of effectiveness in parts of the state apparatus were important stepping stones to a more general improvement in public-sector performance in early developers like Britain and Japan, as Leonard points out. However, there are reasons for doubting whether such parallels are relevant to Africa today. Studies of pockets of effectiveness in the government sector in Uganda have placed a large question mark over the sustainability, and particularly the scope for generalising, experiences of this type, given the current pattern of political incentives (Robinson, 2006; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2009). The further research being undertaken within the APPP may help us understand whether this will always be the case. In the meantime, however, we need to pay particular attention to the other and probably more important type of variation.

4.3 Varieties of country experience

Across our cases, we have a predictably abundant crop of examples of highly clientelistic forms of political rule which in practice have the effect of undermining the ability of the public administration to perform as it is 'supposed' to. On the other hand, from one current case (Rwanda), from relatively recent history (Malawi) and from somewhat more distant history (Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, etc.), we know that clientelistic undermining of bureaucratic functioning is a variable and not a fixed given. Furthermore, the secondary literature on Africa and Asia agrees with our own country studies in suggesting that where bureaucracies function relatively well in public-goods provision, this is not necessarily because neopatrimonial logics of behaviour are absent from the national political system (Future State, 2010; Kelsall et al., 2010).

This runs counter to the conventional good-governance perspective, which sees progress at these different levels as necessarily linked. The patterns of difference across countries and time-periods also cast doubt on another widely held assumption: that, under the conditions prevailing in the majority of sub-Saharan African countries today, bringing decisions and resources 'closer to the people' by means of democratic decentralisation is likely to be favourable to bureaucratic performance in public goods' provision.

⁶ In regard to tax collection, the findings are comparable with those of studies of 'associational taxation' in Ghana and elsewhere undertaken by members of the Centre for the Future State (Joshi and Aye, 2008).

Our preliminary research in Niger has generated a particularly rich account of the way clientelistic appointments prevent a rational allocation of human resources in the health sector, and the enforcement of even minimal standards of performance. Throughout the sector, coherent management of staff postings is extremely difficult, with the result that rural health units are frequently understaffed and urban ones overstaffed. Efforts by managers to correct these anomalies are routinely undermined when midwives and medical personnel ‘pull strings’ in the capital to get them overturned. In one site, the level of incompetence and indiscipline among staff who play a key role in the treatment of maternity cases is extreme. This is well understood and regularly complained about by more senior staff and users of the facility. In one notorious case, an especially undisciplined and ill-trained senior midwife is one of a group of ‘untouchables’ maintained in post by the patronage of the local canton chief with the connivance of the sector hierarchy (Diarra, 2009: 7-15; Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b: 20, 25).

A contrasting picture emerges from the preliminary research done by our team in Rwanda. Their findings remain to be fleshed out and validated, but they indicate a situation in at least one locality which contrasts sharply not only with Niger but also with Malawi and Uganda, at least in respect of staff discipline and performance relating to safe motherhood. Whereas in all the study countries the official policy now is to get mothers to give birth with the assistance of trained professionals, only in Rwanda have we found this being rigorously enforced. A combination of fines and active public education ensure that women come to clinics to give birth. In the same field site, which is not in one of the most isolated parts of the country, staff disciplines also seem to be effective. This means rules are more likely to be enforced and education campaigns more likely to be carried out. It also makes these measures easier to implement, because the pattern of abusive treatment in health centres observed nearly everywhere else is less common, so that the relative attractiveness to mothers of home birthing is reduced (Golooba-Mutebi et al., 2010).

Across countries, then, there seem to be patterns that are worth exploring. But additionally, the preliminary findings are highly suggestive of differences between time periods. Some of this evidence rests on informant recall and therefore needs to be treated with caution until triangulation with other sources can be provided. However, it is sufficient along with secondary data to indicate that at various points in the past the position in several countries has been more like what we believe to be the Rwanda situation, and less like the position in Niger. This in turn suggests hypotheses about determinants which we hope to refine and validate in the more extended fieldwork now under way. These hypotheses are counter-conventional in two respects. They question the standard treatment of the politics of bureaucratic improvement in most ‘good governance’ literature. And they conflict with the 20-year conventional wisdom on democratic decentralisation.

4.4 Bureaucratic discipline under different regime types

Because of the relative recentness of one of some of its key transitions, Malawi provides a good source of examples relating to both parts of this argument. The two presidential terms of Bakili Muluzi, which coincided with the advent of multi-party politics, provide a particularly clear country case of the breakdown of vertical disciplines of several kinds under the impact of a new form of clientelistic political competition in a winner-takes-all electoral system. The preceding regime of Kamuzu Banda was a contrasting type of neopatrimonial regime, in a single-party

context. Finally, the current president, Bingu wa Mutharika has been developing a political style in which vertical disciplines are to some extent restored in a context that remains politically competitive and clientelistic. Our Malawi studies in the Local Governance and Business & Politics streams and research by Anders (2001; 2008) document the important direct and indirect ways in which these regime types have affected differently the ability of public-sector organisations to provide public goods.

This contradicts the notion that comprehensive adoption of rational-legal or, in the Weberian sense, bureaucratic principles by governments is essential, as implied by the usual form of good-governance advocacy (e.g., Levy, 2007). Unlike that way of thinking, we start from realistic assumptions, including the assumption that for the foreseeable future governance in sub-Saharan Africa will have more or less significant patrimonial features. However, we argue that there have been and continue to be important differences among neopatrimonial regimes within Africa (Crook, 1989; 1991; Allen, 1995) as well as in other developing regions (Khan, 2006). These differences are important for business-politics relationships and investment climates, as shown by research in the APPP stream on Business and Politics (Kelsall et al., 2010). They are also important for the way the public administration is managed, which in turn is a crucial influence on the adequacy of public goods' provision.

In short, some kinds of neopatrimonial presidential system and their behavioural logics utterly undermine the discipline of the public bureaucracy, including the lower tiers of the hierarchy. Other kinds allocate patronage in ways that do not destroy bureaucratic disciplines. In these examples, it is not necessary for authority to be either finely calibrated or rule-bound, and the bureaucrats do not need to be highly trained, appointed purely on merit, well remunerated or (in the East Africa jargon) well 'facilitated'. In other words, we believe that public goods are more likely to be effectively provided when the direct providers and their managers experience top-down discipline from a political centre, whether or not such discipline conforms to the ideal norms of a legal-rational bureaucracy. Indicators of top-down discipline would include site visits by supervising authorities, particularly senior political leaders or officials; resistance to interference by minor politicians outside the chain of command; a palpable sense of being monitored in terms of inputs, outputs or outcomes; and actual examples of staff or higher officials being rewarded or punished for their performance.

These are features we think have existed in various African public sectors in otherwise quite imperfect settings, with important downstream benefits. We hypothesise that from the point of view of the downstream benefits it is not necessary for the leadership motivation to correspond closely to internationally approved goals (poverty reduction or the Millennium Development Goals, for instance). Nor does the motivation need to be free of considerations about how to stay in power. If a ruler or ruling group has decided for whatever reason to use the bureaucracy as a tool with which to achieve broadly developmental or 'nation building' objectives, rather than just as a means of rewarding followers, punishing opponents and buying votes, the effect on developmentally relevant aspects of performance will most likely be positive.

This part of the argument reflects among other things the increasingly detailed research that is now emerging about the incentives within the public bureaucracies of Vietnam, Cambodia and China. As yet unpublished papers presented to meetings of the Centre for the Future State (www.ids.ac.uk/futurestate) and the Tracking Development Project (TD) (www.trackingdevelopment.net) suggest that in the highly imperfect and remarkably corrupt

local government systems of these Asian countries, top-down performance disciplines focused on economic-growth promotion and raising the local tax take are extremely strong, with notable effects on performance in enterprise facilitation and other fields.

4.5 *The contribution of local democracy and the 'demand side'*

The same examples which point to the possibility of bureaucratic effectiveness under regimes of a neopatrimonial type also raise questions about the possible contributions of 'democracy'. The balance of evidence indicates that the bottom-up control which is generated by actually existing 'democracy' in sub-Saharan Africa is at best a weak source of countervailing disciplines. At worst, it is an additional factor helping to excuse or legitimise rule-breaking by officials and/or non-enforcement of rules by officials. This refers first to the macro-level transition from relatively authoritarian, single-party, regimes to relatively liberal, in principle multi-party, regimes; and then to the second step of making competitive politics the basis of sub-national government as well.

The Uganda field report states: 'For many rural dwellers in Uganda, democratic processes seem to mean freedom from civic obligations. This has detrimental effects on collective action efforts and the enforcement of laws to facilitate them' (Kawooya Ssebunya, 2010: 30). This resonates strongly with the testimony collected by our Malawi team to the effect that since 1994 the country has been suffering from 'too much freedom', which we take to mean a growing climate of impunity affecting both the performance of officials and respect for the law and other socially approved rules (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 12ff).

In contrast, Rwanda today may exemplify the kind of balance between top-down bureaucratic discipline and local participatory processes which avoids the persistent failures in local public goods' provision that are observed in our other present-day country studies. The national political system is generally recognised to contain a mixture of controlled political inclusion and relatively authoritarian democracy, with disagreements centring on whether the mix is right and appropriate in the very particular circumstances of the country today (Pflanz, 2010). The *imihigo* system, to which our study largely attributes some of the relatively impressive outcomes in its first field site, is an unusual form of multi-level performance contract. It depends on both rewards and sanctions, some of them drawing on concepts of honour and shame with historical roots going back to the former kingdom of Rwanda. It is made effective by means of a strong element of top-down pressure, ultimately from President Kagame, with smaller but not insignificant elements of engagement by local populations (Golooba-Mutebi et al., 2010).

We have insisted rather strongly that our research is not about assessing the impact of decentralisation in general or democratic decentralisation in particular. However, our emerging findings do require us to take a position on what is the most prevalent view in donor and NGO circles about the most likely source of countervailing influences on bureaucratic under-performance in the context of low-income Africa. A common belief is that it lies in strengthening the democratic elements in democratic decentralisation, usually through efforts to improve the supply of relevant information as a way of empowering local voters and elected officials.

Administrative decentralisation, particularly in the form of devolution of resources and decisions to democratically elected local governments, has been advocated on various grounds, some of them quite technical and carefully qualified (e.g., World Bank, 1997: Ch 7). It has been implemented by governments for a further set of reasons, most of them highly political (Blundo, 1998; Cammack et al., 2007). However, a common form of argument among bilateral donors and NGOs starts from the assumption that the demand for public goods from service-users and the general population is an important influence on provision. It then asserts that the physical distance separating the provider from the user affects the strength and effectiveness of user 'voice'. Putting the same argument more technically, the provision of public goods involves a principal-agent problem, where the principal is the client or service user, and the local authorities and service providers are their agents. The information asymmetry problems that affect principal-agent relationships in general are, it is then suggested, reduced by proximity.

Both parts of this argument are questionable. First, public goods' provision is only partly about services for which there is 'demand' and about which it is sensible to regard local populations as clients or principals. Second, where the principal-agent concept does apply, the importance of physical distance on its own is highly questionable (World Bank, 2003: Ch 10; Golooba-Mutebi, 2005). In line with what many studies of decentralisation imply but seldom say explicitly, bottom-up accountabilities can be positive when they are helping to shape top-down pressures for performance in public goods' provision, but almost never work well on their own. In an ideal world, they might, but it is only relevant to consider what is likely under the actual socio-economic and political conditions in which democratic decentralisation is being introduced.

For Uganda, we have clear evidence that the introduction of downward accountabilities in the form of local competitive elections is not only a poor substitute for top-down disciplines. It also has considerable power to obstruct the ability of officials to provide the sort of public goods that are about mitigating the negative externalities associated with uncontrolled behaviour by individuals or households – for example, formulating and enforcing rules, or conducting public education campaigns, to prevent outbreaks of disease or environmental disasters. Unlike appointees, elected officials like Uganda's Council (LC5) Chairmen and civil servants who report to elected officials including the Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) in Ugandan districts are typically reluctant to enforce by-laws which are unpopular with the population, because they expect this will lose them votes. Our Uganda study attributes the non-enforcement of rules on domestic latrines in one site and market location in another to this kind of political calculation by leaders (Kawooya Ssebunya, 2010: 15, 16).

The so-called 'demand side' of governance improvement is a weak enforcer of performance disciplines at best. On the other hand, it may be a useful complementary factor where top-down disciplines are strong. There are good reasons for thinking where officials are already highly motivated, an element of bottom-up accountability or local engagement can help public goods' provision to function better. This corresponds to aspects of the emerging Rwanda story. It is also suggested by parts of the secondary literature which document the damage that can be done by the unrestrained exercise of state commandism (Scott, 1998; Prunier, 1999; 2009) and the

gains to be had when a bureaucracy is relatively ‘embedded’ in some significant way in the local social environment.⁷

4.6 *Summary and implications*

This section has suggested that there may be compelling reasons for questioning the received policy wisdom on ‘good governance’ at the local level in Africa. On both empirical and theoretical grounds, there seems to be a good case for thinking that essential public goods’ provision will be better when presidents have reasons to preserve or build up a relatively disciplined bureaucracy and permit it to perform key functions regardless of how they themselves maintain their rule at the centre. The relatively authoritarian approach this may entail will probably be more effective if it is backed with modest doses of local participatory democracy. However, the country evidence points clearly to the need to revisit the vulgar political economy which treats as self-evident that bringing services ‘closer to the people’ and giving the general population a ‘voice’ through local elections is likely to make the provision better. On the contrary, the introduction of competitive politics into local government seems at least as likely to make provision worse, in particular by reducing the willingness of officials to implement measures which are public goods but are not immediately popular.

It remains to address the three questions we posed in relation to policy-induced institutional incoherence in the last section: what issues need to be settled in the next phase of research, what it would take to disprove our claims, and what are the emerging policy implications?

It seems clear that we need:

- additional validation and understanding of the examples of ‘pockets of effectiveness’ in Niger and Senegal, and identification of equivalent experiences in Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda or other countries;
- additional validation and understanding of the instances of relatively effective allocation and performance disciplines in Rwanda today, and in at least some of the more easily documented historical cases (Malawi and perhaps Tanzania);
- further explanatory analysis to permit a better specification of the incentives which lead politicians and other power holders *either* to permit a relatively extensive use of pockets of effectiveness, *or* to impose strong top-down disciplines on public bureaucracies even if comprehensive bureaucratic rationalisation is off the agenda;
- additional documentation and analysis of how and why accountability of officials to locally elected politicians fails to provide an adequate substitute for top-down discipline and – contrary to the conventional wisdom – can actually harm the provision of some public goods.

Our claims would be disproven if few or none of our indicators of top-down discipline were present in a particular case (because responsibility for discipline had been effectively devolved to local politicians, for example) but public goods seem to be satisfactorily provided

⁷ This part of Evans’ (1995) general thesis about developmental bureaucracies may be applicable even though we are in effect questioning other aspects of his argument. Swidler (2009) illustrates the idea, in an interesting if not completely convincing way, with reference differences between the AIDS-prevention approaches of the Uganda and Botswana governments.

nonetheless. It would also be a problem for our proposition if in the presence of indicators of strong top-down discipline, assuming availability of essential resources and technical capacities, public goods' provision remained inadequate.

Again, the policy implications to be drawn will depend on some of the further evidence on these points. Already, however, some of the implications for donor thinking are clear enough. More humility and willingness to understand and respond flexibly and in a non-ideological and undogmatic way to a variety of governance-improvement approaches is clearly required. Unthinking advocacy of democratic decentralisation is clearly to be avoided. Whether it is wise at this juncture to replace unthinking, context-insensitive, advocacy with blanket opposition is doubtful. But, once again, taking time to understand, and not allowing aid disbursement pressure to influence the decisions taken is definitely desirable and seems likely to be the single most important policy message to emerge from our research.

5 Collective action and local self-help: institutional barriers and enabling conditions

The most challenging task we face in moving inductively towards a theory of public goods' provision and local governance is identifying and conceptualising the driving forces behind a third set of issues. These relate to the feasibility of local collective action to address key bottlenecks in public goods' provision, and more exactly to the features of the institutional context that either facilitate or hinder such action.

We shall present evidence suggesting that some of the typical ways in which local self-help is structured in aid-dependent African countries are either unsustainable or accompanied by socially harmful side-effects. The approach to the promotion of local collective action that is currently the norm for donors, NGOs and government agencies is, according to this evidence, often self-defeating. It does not work, and sometimes does real harm by failing to take into account certain key features of the context in which it is being applied. On the other hand, we shall show, this approach does not seem either inevitable or completely universal. In a number of our countries, self-help was markedly more real and effective in the still-remembered past, for reasons that can be identified. And for the present period we think there are examples which point clearly enough in an alternative direction. Thus, we seem to be in the presence of a third variable which helps to explain why the key bottlenecks in public goods' provision are addressed better in some times and places than in others.

5.1 Conceptual framework

What is most challenging is how to specify this variable in a sufficiently clear and consistent way. Much of the reflection and debate within the APPP since 2007 has centred on this problem, with various attempts to conceptualise more precisely the idea expressed metaphorically in the programme's inception documents as 'working with the grain' or 'anchoring public action in local realities'.

It now seems possible to unpack the elements contained in this initial idea in a way that moves us closer to a properly formulated hypothesis about the institutional conditions under which public goods' provision through local collective action is likely to succeed. The empirically

grounded approach to collective-action analysis pioneered by Elinor Ostrom and her school can help us to do this.

To be effective, self-help has to overcome the obstacles to collective action first identified by Olson (1965) and then elaborated by institutional theorists such as Hardin (1982). In other words, arrangements are needed which overcome the natural unwillingness of people to cooperate when cooperating has costs, its outcomes are uncertain and the benefits will have to be shared with many others who have refused to join in or are likely to shirk (the so-called 'free rider problem'). Stated abstractly, collective action theory appears to have rather pessimistic implications. However, according to Ostrom (1990), abstract models of collective-action situations, and metaphors derived from them, are a poor basis for policy making in the absence of empirical research into whether the constraints assumed by the models actually apply in the real world.

In the real world, there are a great variety of ways in which people actually succeed, under specific and sometimes quite localised conditions, in avoiding the disastrous outcomes that such models in their simplest form predict. The ability of groups of individuals to overcome collective action dilemmas varies considerably from situation to situation. Devising solutions without local knowledge and the ability to draw on previous experience in addressing the same or closely matched problems is therefore likely to be unhelpful.

There are two ideas here which are worth distinguishing. One is the simple proposition that successful institutions of collective action are ones that are arrived at locally and which specifically address the obstacles that have arisen locally. This might appear almost tautological but for the fact that it is common, and even normal, that the institutions which are applied to local collective action problems do not solve them because they employ generic formulas that are not sufficiently tailored to the actual context – to the actors in the situation, the extent and nature of the free-rider problem, and the alliances and other resources that are potentially available. Shivakumar (2005) sums up the general view of the Ostrom school on this point in this way:

'Development is always a local phenomenon, where local refers to the relevant problem area. Human development and economic progress are rooted in the enhanced ability of individuals – brought together within specific contexts and in light of some encountered collective-action problem – to adapt by developing the institutional contexts needed to deal with their situation. To be effective, therefore, institutions must refer to a particular context of a collective-action problem and may ramify to other domains' (2005: 105).

Here we have one element for a concept of what it means for an institution to be 'locally anchored': the extent to which it involves behaviours which are, consciously or otherwise, problem-solving *in the context*. The other concerns the aspect of drawing on previous experience or making use of institutional elements that have been employed in the past. Shivakumar alludes to this when he writes:

'[T]he future of effective development through good government does not lie in coaxing particular constitutional models to work in transplanted settings ... [I]t depends instead [on] advancing systems of interaction ... that simultaneously draw strength from and build upon prevailing institutional understandings' (2005: 66).

However, Shivakumar's formulation 'drawing strength from prevailing understandings' remains a little too metaphorical. Can we do better?

In his inaugural contribution to the APPP's discussion of the possible meaning of 'working with the grain', Tim Kelsall (2008b) provided a strong literature-based argument for recognising a limited number of long-term continuities in African social and political life. Drawing on his own fieldwork and other studies (Kelsall, 2004; Kelsall et al., 2005; Kelsall, 2008a; 2009), he argued that development efforts need to pay more serious attention to ways of harnessing the notions of moral obligation and inter-personal accountability that are among these elements of continuity. Since even today these notions tend to be bound up with ethnic or religious social identities, it is likely that self-help efforts which build on shared identities or pre-existing organisational templates are likely to be more successful than those that do not or cannot.

As others have pointed out, however, all this needs careful handling. For the unwary, it can be a short step from Kelsall's carefully formulated and well substantiated reflections to blanket invocations of 'African culture' which assign too much homogeneity to values and norms across and within African societies and organisations. It is also easy to exaggerate the extent of the correspondence between the 'traditions' people espouse formally and their actual behaviour (Olivier de Sardan, 2008b). In other words, we need not to revert to the kind of cultural determinism that was common to the functionalist anthropology and sociological theories of 'modernisation' which were fashionable in the middle decades of the 20th century.

Taking this warning seriously does not involve dismissing the whole idea of cultural commonalities, nor does it dispel the notion that moral drivers may be strongest among people of the same ethnic identity or a single faith. However, it does mean taking full account of the evidence on normative pluralism, and of the variety of ways in which the 'shared understandings' that make up a culture or sub-culture can be relevant to behaviour. Culture should not be reduced to the single dimension of shared values and moral norms. There does seem to be plenty of evidence that collective action for the provision of public goods is easier in communities where ethnic or some other identity is shared (Miguel, 2004; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). At the same time, there seem to be ways of explaining this that do not involve the hypothesis of a strong moral commitment to the group or that individual behaviour is typically value-driven (Habyarimana et al., 2007; 2009; Kelsall, 2009).

In other words, our conceptual framework needs to be based on a wider view of culture and cultural explanation than the one espoused by some of the major figures in 20th century sociology and anthropology. I would say that this is the view defended in Olivier de Sardan's account of the moral economy of corruption in Africa (1999), to take an example close to hand. I also see it in Kelsall's last APPP contribution, which discusses normative and cultural factors in relation to what is left unexplained by applications of game theory and social-mechanism concepts (Kelsall, 2009). For a particularly clear general statement, it is worth turning to a celebrated article by Swidler (1986).

This article makes at some length the argument that the causal role of culture lies 'not in defining ends of action, but in providing cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action'. At least in relatively settled periods of history (periods of rapid change are different, Swidler maintains) 'culture independently influences action, but only by providing

resources from which people can construct diverse lines of action'. 'Thus culture appears to shape action only in that the cultural repertoire limits the available range of strategies of action' (Swidler, 1986: 273, 284).

This view of the role of culture is highly consistent with the demands of empirical rigour. What 'resources' are suitable for adoption from the repertoire inherited from the past depends on what is in that repertoire and the particular action choices that are being made. These are all things that have to be investigated. At the same time, we are interested in elaborating a *theory* of public goods provision, and for this purpose we need a conceptually rigorous way of generalising about our preliminary findings. How far does this concept help us in this respect too? Why is the relationship of an institution to elements of the local culture likely to be important in principle, and to what extent does this provide a complete account of why 'local anchorage' matters?

Swidler helps somewhat in answering the first question with her suggestion that the reason culture constrains action in settled periods is 'because of the high costs of cultural retooling to adopt new patterns of action' (1986: 284). This phrasing suggests an explanation of why cultural borrowings from the past seem not only normal but also to some extent necessary, one which breaks with the rather common tautological approach (culture is important because its elements are passed from generation to generation) and instead takes the matter back to the costs and benefits to actors of behaving in different ways. A much more elaborated argument of the same type is contained in the more recent work of Avner Greif.

Greif's (2006) book is particularly relevant to our problem in that it is the most important contribution to a growing body of work which situates itself self-consciously in the middle ground of theorising about institutions. The major contribution of the book and associated articles (e.g., Greif and Laitin, 2004) is to show how game-theoretic and other 'rational choice' approaches to explaining the persistence of institutions can be adapted to explaining how institutions *change*. This closes what has been seen as a regrettable gap between the concerns of game-theoretic institutional analysis and so-called historical institutionalism.⁸ However, Greif and his collaborators also occupy another middle ground. An important minor theme of the book is about closing the gap with the sociological tradition, including its preoccupation with values and the influence of the past upon the present. In this respect, its argument builds directly on Swidler's idea of culture as a 'toolkit'.

Greif's key claim is that we need to recognise a 'fundamental asymmetry between institutional elements inherited from the past and technologically feasible alternatives':

'In new situations, no institutionalized rules guide behaviour, and forward-looking individuals have a limited ability to deduce how to behave. Individuals seek a cognitive framework, information, normative guidance, and a way to anticipate what others may do to coordinate their behaviour with their responses. In seeking these micro-foundations of behavior, individuals draw on institutional elements from the past ... Alternative institutional elements can also provide these micro-foundations of behaviour – new organizations or behavioural beliefs can coordinate behaviour in new situations, for example – but past institutional elements are the default. Introducing other technologically feasible institutional elements and rendering them effective in new situations requires

⁸ For explanation of these terms, see Hall and Taylor (1996).

action: generating new knowledge, changing commonly known beliefs about what others can and will do, and replacing internalized beliefs and norms. ... [C]reating new institutional elements involves bargaining, coordination, search, and learning costs. ... Often such actions also imply the provision of a public good ... Hence they are plagued with collective action, free-rider problems, and strategic manipulations. These transaction costs of institutional transition contribute to the asymmetry between institutional elements inherited from the past and alternatives' (Greif, 2006: 189-190).

This provides a powerful theoretical rationale for including a second element in our concept of a 'locally anchored' institution. In today's Africa as in other places and times (Greif's main examples are taken from early medieval Venice and Genoa), one of the features of successful institutions is that they incorporate elements inherited from the past – not necessarily from the far distant past and with no particular specification about origins. We are interested in a particular sort of success, namely the solution of key bottlenecks affecting the provision of public goods. We can say, therefore, that this sort of success is unlikely to be achieved by institutional arrangements that fail completely to draw on institutional elements which are inherited from the past, or draw on the toolkit of culture.

The arrangements do still need to be 'welfare-enhancing', in Greif's terms, meaning that they must deliver a cooperative solution to a collective action problem. As we put it above, they must be problem-solving *in the context*. Otherwise, the elements from the past will not be relevant at all. And whether an arrangement has these attributes or not obviously has to be demonstrated empirically on a case-by-case basis.

In the passage where he addresses most directly the implications of his argument for today's developing countries, Greif suggests how these two aspects fit together:

'Reforming institutions ... is difficult. Attempts to reform them by imposing the West's "best practices," its rules and regulations, have accomplished less than was hoped for.

From the perspective developed here, this result is not surprising. ... [I]nstitutions are not rules. They are self-enforcing systems of rules, beliefs, norms, and organizations. ... Reform must first empirically identify, rather than assume, the transactions that are important for improving welfare, as they depend on local conditions and institutions. We need to discover empirically, rather than assert deductively, whether, for example, the abuse of property rights by the police, the army, the rebels, or the government is the source of property rights insecurity. Only then can we consider what institutional reform would be beneficial and feasible.

... Successful reform requires much more than changing rules; it requires creating new systems of interrelated institutional elements that motivate, enable, and guide individuals to take particular actions' (Greif, 2006: 402-403).

Using Greif's arguments in this way to elaborate the findings of Ostrom and Shivakumar, we can justify an initial theoretical proposition: that performance in the provision of some types of public goods is likely to be associated with institutions enabling local collective action which are *locally anchored, in two senses*. They will a) *be problem-solving in the relevant context*, and they will b) *make use of institutional elements inherited from the past*.

The argument we develop in the rest of Section 5 is that a combination of new field evidence and secondary material gives us good reasons to support this hypothesis, as well as to formulate it in slightly more concrete terms referring specifically to sub-Saharan Africa today. In other words, the two-part definition of what it means for collective action institutions to be ‘locally anchored’ seems to capture all or most of what our own studies and the wider literature reveal about the sources of success and failure in those areas of public goods’ provision that call for collective self-help.

We consider two particularly important types of negative experience and a smaller number of exceptions. The first type of negative experience concerns what happens to self-help when it is obliged to comply with the model of association that typically accompanies donor, NGO and, by extension, government financial support. The second concerns the issue we have already discussed in another context, the introduction of political competition into a highly clientelistic polity. The exceptions, which are few and tentative, are offered as food for thought about whether and how an alternative model of public goods’ provision through collective action might be promoted in Africa in the future.

5.2 Associational models in question

The approach we propose to call ‘associational’ has been strongly promoted by official aid donors, where it is seen as the natural counterpart of building or rebuilding the legal-rational foundations of the state. It is central to the concepts of ‘civil society strengthening’ and building the ‘demand side of good governance’ that have informed the work of the World Bank and most OECD bilateral agencies since the 1990s. For rather longer, it has been part of the core ideology of most Northern NGOs. These days, it is also very much part of the way of thinking and working of national and local governments, thoroughly ‘appropriated’ by them, although in a more or less distorted form (Olivier de Sardan, 2009: 16). Its centrepiece is the organisational model of the ‘voluntary association’.

Voluntary associations have members (and thus non-members), formalised rules (and thus formal sanctions), governance arrangements (and thus scope for use and abuse of power) and funding needs (and thus a host of accounting and reporting problems). Even when they take the form of ‘community based organisations’, in which in principle the membership is co-extensive with the local population, these requirements remain. In this respect, CBOs differ from the other end of what may be viewed as a spectrum of types of self-help arrangement, where the ‘community’ is some kind of primary unit based on kinship or affinity. The burden of a large case-study literature is that initiatives based on the associational model tend not to work, or not in the way their promoters intend. They create new forms of inequality, increase materialistic motivations and quite often promote corruption and clientelism among leaders. They are divisive from a social point of view, privileging those who have the education and other skills needed to comply with the funder’s requirements. They tend to get diverted from addressing people’s real problems (pulled instead into the donor business of ‘finding problems for solutions’), and often end up weakening the capacity for collective action, rather than strengthening it.

What Olivier de Sardan (2009: 14-18) calls the ‘associational mode of local governance’ requires the recipients of financial assistance to organise themselves according to definite norms imported from the outside and laid down in some detail by the funding body. These norms are

supposed to ensure sound, accountable and transparent management of the aid and other desiderata such as sustainability. In practice, they permit social advancement by those with sufficient literacy and ability to master donor ways of thinking, while demobilising communities and creating new sources of social exclusion. The literature on this point is substantial and growing.

For example, Swidler and Watkins' (2009) account of NGO-promoted self-help on HIV/AIDS in Malawi is powerfully persuasive on the social downsides of the standard approach. Emphasising the way donor-funded projects become a source of social differentiation and exclusion, it echoes the arguments of Uvin (1998) about the negative social impacts of aid in pre-genocide Rwanda. Gugerty and Kremer (2008) studied external funding for women's community groups in Kenya using a quantitative impact assessment technique. The strongest effect they found was on group membership and leadership, these being skewed towards younger, better educated and better-off women. In this way, the groups gradually lost the characteristics that drew the funders to them in the first place.

Igoe (2003) has given us a detailed account of the effects of donor support to pastoralist land rights movements in East Africa, which involved turning them into NGOs. The energies of leaders were diverted into activities that could be justified in aid funding reports at the expense of the objectives and solidarities with which the movement started out. Several of the same themes recur in Dill's (2009b; 2009a) account of the lack of 'fit' between NGO-promoted CBOs and the local socio-cultural environment in Dar es Salaam and Blundo's (2009) study of NGO sanitation initiatives in a Niger town. Also relevant are Lange's (2008) and Manor's (2007: 21) findings on the destructive institutional side-effects of single-sector user committees or stakeholder committees, and Vajja and White's (2008) conclusions about World Bank Social Funds in Malawi and Zambia as users, not generators, of social capital.

The 2009 APPP research amplified several of these concerns. Our fieldwork has not so far touched upon social division and exclusion as an effect of the framing of self-help in an associational mode, partly because we are not focusing on projects as such. On the other hand, the field reports are littered with instances of NGO- or donor-initiated associations or committees' failing to meet their intended or any other socially useful objective, and eventually collapsing, usually amid accusations of some sort of abuse of office. Often, one of the legacies of these experiences seems to be a further reduction in the willingness of individuals to engage in voluntary efforts or to continue making voluntary contributions for the collective good as they have in the past.

Contemporary urban Malawi is a good source of examples. Using the distinction between 'bonding social capital' and 'bridging social capital', the country report characterises Malawi society as a particularly marked instance of the difficulty of the transition from the one type to the other. There is a relative abundance of small face-to-face cooperative arrangements based on some kind of shared identity, despite the fact that Malawi is rapidly urbanising and in the cities most communities are multi-ethnic and otherwise diverse. Collective action going beyond the confines of these groups is, on the other hand, quite rare, and the kinds of public or collective goods that could be generated by such action are as a result severely under-provided. For example, collective action by residents of the informal settlement of Ndirande to address serious health hazards in the field of sanitation is non-existent, exacerbating the effects of the

jurisdictional disputes among the relevant authorities and non-enforcement of the by-laws by anybody (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 6-7, 24-29).

Donor-inspired efforts to address these kinds of problems have not figured prominently in our Malawi fieldwork so far. However, the Neighbourhood Watch committees set up in Ndirande and Kansungu seem to be examples where the fact or expectation of donor funding attracted a kind of interest from would-be patrol-men which was unlikely to be sustained and had the effect of discouraging genuine volunteerism and willingness to make financial contributions (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 15-16).

In Niger, the ‘committees’ and other associational structures promoted by projects and development partners tend to ‘end up being dissolved or falling asleep’ (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b: 15). With the single exception of the bus stations (discussed as a ‘pocket of effectiveness’ above), sanitation and cleansing matters are seriously neglected, and the collective cleaning of public places which used to occur under the more authoritarian regimes of the past are now rare, the view now being that this is the responsibility of local government. The neighbourhood committees for the management of household waste which were established by the municipal authorities in two of the Niger study sites illustrate the problems with the alternative ‘associational’ approach, recalling the findings of the earlier study by Blundo referenced above. After a promising start, the links between the financial contributions expected from the residents and the payments expected by the garbage collectors broke down in an atmosphere of mistrust and recrimination (Issa, 2009: 24-34).

The Niger report speaks in similar terms about the collapse of the market management committees established by the municipalities in two of the sites. The point is made that although in all cases these were initiatives of the mayors’ offices (in the household waste case, with the support of the Dutch NGO SNV), the ‘institutional engineering’ was of the aid-funded project type, the municipalities having tended to adopt this organisational model and make their own (Oumarou, 2009: 34-36; Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b: 18).

5.3 Strangulation by politics

Our Malawi study deals in some detail with the proneness of ‘associations’ to party-political capture, which is an aspect of why the market committee structures in the Niger towns have proven so difficult to reform. Water users’ committees have been especially hard to sustain, because of a damaging form of politicisation.

Malawian political culture is strongly influenced by the practices established during the long period of single-party rule under Kamuzu Banda. One of the features of Banda’s system was that the ruling party, the MCP, was deeply involved in the lives of the population, including social activities of a self-help type at the grass roots. Emulating this, all governing parties since 1994 ‘have shown a marked tendency to want to initiate and run local activities, rather than leave them to be apolitical; in a multiparty environment this has led to competition and conflict, and often, poorer service delivery’ (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 15).

This is exemplified by the public water outlets (‘kiosks’) and the market committees in the Ndirande neighbourhood of Blantyre. The water taps were mostly installed by NGOs, UN agencies or the Malawi Social Action Fund of the World Bank under the presidency of Muluzi

in the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, they were widely seen as initiatives of Muluzi's UDF, and the management committees elected to run them and collect payments from the residents were UDF-affiliated. After the change of government and the creation of Mutharika's DPP, the UDF committee was replaced by a DPP committee, but the former made off with the accumulated funds, leading the city Water Board to cut off the water supply. The upshot, at the time of the 2009 fieldwork was that few kiosks were still operational. Many residents had reverted to using unsafe water sources (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 30-32).

Meanwhile, in the Ndirande market there is a DPP committee and a UDF committee. Consequently, 'the market master – a city employee – has a fine line to walk between what the city "assembly" perceives to be the legitimate committee and what the vendors feel is representative of their interests ... because it was elected by them' (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 34).

These experiences are illustrations of the harm that can be done to local efforts to provide public goods when the floodgates of competitive party politics are opened within a highly clientelistic polity. Alternatively, as the Malawi team leader likes to put it, they exemplify the persistence of single-party thinking in a multi-party context. At the same time, they add to our concern about associational models of self-help. The relatively exclusive character of these 'committees', the election of individuals to positions of relative privilege under easily subverted rules, and the opportunity to take charge of a pot of money under another set of rules that few people understand, are precisely the qualities that make them attractive to their party-political captors.

5.4 'Local reforms' and collective problem-solving

At the same time as contributing negative examples of the above kinds, our preliminary fieldwork has begun to give us a handle on various departures from the standard associational model of self-help that seem to be working rather better (at least well enough to be worthy of further field research). In this sense, it has put us on track to inferring a definite pattern of variation.

As well as giving us striking examples of the strangling of collective action, our Malawi research gives some pointers to what the alternative might look like. Some of these involve the phenomenon of 'town chiefs', the local leaders who have emerged in many urban neighbourhoods in response to the absence of formal chieftaincies and the weakness of local government. Some town chiefs were appointed during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. Others have emerged spontaneously in the last 15 years in the context of accelerated urbanisation, the non-implementation since 2005 of the Local Government Act and the resulting absence of formally constituted assemblies and councillors. Yet others are hereditary chiefs in charge of rural areas which have been engulfed by the expanding cities.

The expression town chiefs thus seems to cover a number of different sorts of leadership role, showing affinities with 'royal' chieftaincy in some places and with party-political authority in others. Nonetheless, there seem to be commonalities, including some ability to mobilise collective action by town residents of different backgrounds and to claim a legitimacy that is not rooted in any specific ethnicity but in principles which are held to be common to the traditions of several of the Malawian 'tribes' (Cammack et al., 2009). It seems possible that the town

chiefs phenomenon is suggestive of what can happen when, for one reason or another, no 'universal' organisational model is heavily promoted by the government, their donor advisers or NGOs. If so, it may also exemplify the constructive role of 'institutional elements inherited from the past'.

The smaller urban areas covered in the Malawi study also give us some examples of critical public goods' issues apparently being addressed by local cooperative effort in ways that are not observed in Ndirande. The instances of promising collective problem-solving that have been observed so far (which need to be followed up over a longer period) all seem to be associated with acts of initiative and imagination by local leaders occupying official positions, a District Chief Executive Officer in one case and an officially recognised paramount chief in the other (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010: 29-30). As in the Niger experiences discussed below, unusual leadership qualities and even charisma seem to be an element in all the more promising ventures. This leadership is generally being exercised by the occupants of official or semi-official positions, including in the Malawi case members of the 'royal' chieftaincy. The common institutional factors are not reducible simply to an absence of NGOs or aid funding. In fact, some of the promising experiences do involve NGOs as actors, and some involve the use of project funds. However, in no cases are they *primarily* NGO or project initiatives, or *driven* by the supply of ideas and money from the outside, either directly or through the internalisation of standard donor ideas and ways of working by national or local government.

The Niger experiences treated under the general heading of 'local reforms' are also suggestive. A good example of a local reform is the initiative under which a number of mayors have begun collecting 'a few additional centimes' from all users of primary health-care facilities to fund the fuel and staff costs associated with emergency evacuations of pregnant women. The new fund and the contributions it requires are completely outside the national regimes of user charges and free care. It enables a solution to the otherwise difficult problem of addressing emergencies with the ambulances provided under the President's Special Fund (see above) (Diarra, 2009: 18-21; Olivier de Sardan et al., 2010b: 17). Research is continuing to establish more of the details.

As this example illustrates, one of the things that distinguishes a 'local reform' from reforms in general is that it is locally initiated and oriented towards solving specific problems. The particular circumstances that have enabled promising 'local reforms' in the cases we have considered all seem to include the posing of a problem to which national policies and leaders are not offering solutions. They have also relied primarily, although, as mentioned, not always exclusively, on mobilising local resources, and they have most importantly not been driven by the availability of either government or donor funds. For this reason, externally prescribed organisational forms have not needed to be adopted, and it has been possible draw on local views about what is important, proper and acceptable.

Another possibly important common feature of all of the examples mentioned here is that the initiatives have been non-exclusive – directed at whole populations of local people. The country experience of Rwanda may be relevant again here. Once a leading example of the negative effects of donor-inspired and government-enforced social engineering on the 'association' model (Uvin, 1998), Rwanda appears now – as the result of a very country-specific chain of events – as a place where initiatives are routinely geared to whole populations, with strong incentives to local problem-solving transmitted through the state apparatus (Golooba-Mutebi et al., 2010).

The common threads running through all of these examples are hard but not impossible to detect. Unlike the usual project-inspired initiatives, they do not require beneficiaries to sign up to principles of organisation of which they have little experience or understanding. On the contrary, there is an enabling institutional environment for local problem-solving initiatives which involve whole populations, make use of local resources and draw legitimacy and other strength from already existing and widely shared views on what is important and how to get things done – borrowing institutional elements from the past to avoid the high costs of inventing everything from scratch.

5.5 *The enabling/disabling environment*

So far, this section has sought to organise evidence from a variety of sources on the types of institutional framework which, other things being equal, are associated with more effective and less effective local collective action for public goods' provision. The hypothesis which has emerged is that such action will be enabled by institutions that are locally anchored in the double sense of being welfare enhancing/problem-solving in the context and making use of institutional elements inherited from the past. The flip side of this – a prediction generated by the central proposition – is that barriers to local collective action will be erected where the institutional framework either is not problem-solving in context or fails to incorporate elements from the past. These conclusions are obviously inspired by the case studies and other evidence we have been able to report or cite, but they may now be regarded as testable propositions, subject to empirical refutation.

We have also detected some patterning of the wider conditions which influence whether the institutional context will be enabling or inhibiting in this respect. Much of this, obviously, has to do with aid and aid dependency. We have cited eloquent expressions of this in terms of the transplantation of organisational models from other contexts without adequate adaptation (Shivakumar) or the imposition of incomplete institutions – just the 'rules and regulations' – which have come to be considered 'best practice' elsewhere (Greif). Both Greif and Shivakumar lay these failings at the door of aid-supported institutional reforms and what the latter calls the Good Governance 'gap-filling approach' (2005: 60-61). In truth, aid donors have only been one of the important sources of inappropriate institutional technology transfer in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. This trail was blazed by the first post-independence generation of African leaders, with left-tending ideologues like Nyerere and Senghor in the vanguard. However, for recent decades it is a reasonable approximation to regard this as, first and foremost, an aid problem.

What is it about aid that is the problem? We need to answer this if we are to identify an explanatory variable for this cluster of issues. As argued in Section 2, just condemning the aid business in a blanket way is impractical in the sense that removal of the aid factor is not a realistic scenario in most of the countries we are concerned with. We need to get more specific.

In fact, at least three features of the aid business as currently constituted contribute to the problem, going from the least to the most intractable:

- *The ideology supporting inappropriate institutional technology-transfer and the 'gap-filling approach', including the moralistic notion that international standards concerning*

democracy, human rights and social equity are the best and only justifiable starting-point for institution building in the South.

This basic approach, of course, is not restricted to official donors or Northern NGOs, but is widespread and largely ‘internalised’ within African countries. It forms a well entrenched ideology, behind which there are, of course, vested interests as well as casual assumptions. It is nonetheless a *relatively* tractable problem. Ideologies can to some extent be changed by argument, advocacy and evidence, and interests can get redefined.

- *The incentive effects of large and possibly increasing volumes of ‘country programmable’ aid on both development agencies and on individuals and organisations in aid recipient countries.*

The abundance of aggregate aid flows (which does not exclude the underfunding of specific activities, it should be noted) has the effect that neither donor organisations nor recipients have an interest in taking the time, making the effort and taking on the risks associated with genuine institutional adaptation. It is much simpler, as well as more congenial ideologically, to adopt standard institutional formulas. This seems a less tractable problem. It is hard to visualise a situation in which these incentives would not operate without a substantial reduction in aid flows, which would be politically difficult and would pose serious donor-side collective action problems.

- Even if it were possible to reduce the perverse effects of aid pressure, there would remain a set of issues to do with *the accountability requirements which are intrinsic to aid as a transfer funded by Northern taxpayers.*

It is not realistic to expect Northern politicians to be unconcerned about accountability to parliaments and taxpayers. Unfortunately, however, this tends to generate aversion to risk and the multiplication of devices to enable plausible denial of claims that aid monies have been wasted. It has been shown that these affect the quality of aid delivery in various ways (e.g., Glennie, 2008; Williamson and Dom, 2010). In the present context, the particular problem is that funding for community-based organisations and other local initiatives which uses aid money is bound to involve the imposition of ‘rules and regulations’ concerning accounting and monitoring of results which make it impossible for these organisations or initiatives to meet the two criteria for real success that we have identified.

5.6 *Summary and implications*

There appear at this point to be strong enough reasons for framing the problem of collective action for public goods’ provision in terms of a two-stranded concept of locally anchored institutionality, and also for linking this – not exclusively but most relevantly – to the way aid programmes are delivered. This provides us with a set of hypotheses that are in principle subject to refutation which we can take forward to the next phase of the Local Governance and Leadership research. In the absence of experience that refutes the propositions, we should hope to refine them and enrich the body of supporting evidence.

In particular we should be looking for:

- additional and more fully documented examples of local collective action to resolve key bottlenecks in public goods' provision, or the absence or failure of such action;
- further validation and illustration of the proposition that the main missing ingredient is local institutional anchorage displaying both of the two features identified here;
- examples of aid-funded initiatives which have somehow avoided one or more of the three systemic tendencies identified in the last sub-section;
- effective ways of articulating and disseminating the findings which emerge on these points, taking into account the difficult political economy of changing the aid system.

What would it take to disprove our emerging hypotheses? At the level of immediate causes, we would have to reject our two-part specification of the requirements of effective local collective action if we were to find examples of success that do not include both of the specified elements; in other words, if we found welfare-enhancing collective action with no incorporation of institutional elements from the past. At the same time, an institutional framework which meets the two-part specification but nonetheless in some way fails to produce the relevant public good, would be a damaging exception to the theory. As for the wider context, we would have to reject the proposition if deficiencies in the institutional framework for local collective action proved in a particular case to have no linkages whatsoever to the ideological and incentive issues listed above.

The general lines of the policy implications emerging from our analysis in this section are already clear. They pick up several of the themes with which we concluded the previous two sections, notably the unfortunate side effects of disbursement-led aid, and the importance of giving the staff of development organisations the time, incentives and local knowledge that are essential in working with institutions. The importance of these factors is unfortunately not restricted to the field of local governance and public goods' provision. In correcting the more egregious errors, nevertheless, local governance would not be a bad place to start.

6 Conclusions

If all of the foregoing is right, we have the beginnings of a theory of local governance and public goods provision. We have some propositions that appear to have a reasonable level of empirical support about not only what causes what, but also how it does so. Further probing, elaboration and refinement of our claims regarding each of the three clusters of issues is clearly needed. Nearly all of our fieldwork-based examples require further validation and fleshing out, and this will be particularly important for episodes or relationships where we seem to see promising 'local reforms' or arrangements that are working relatively well in alleviating public goods' bottlenecks. Specific areas for further enquiry have been identified in Sections 3, 4 and 5. If we can settle some of these issues, we shall be in a position to state more robustly that our propositions have resisted refutation. We may also hope for some refinement of language and argument, to enable us to be convincing in pleading support for the corresponding policy implications.

Sub-Saharan Africa badly needs better theory and more robust policy guidelines about sub-national governance for development. The field has been dominated for too long by arguments

for and against processes of decentralisation and local democratisation. This paper has made the argument that attention needs to shift to the ‘other’ factors typically highlighted in studies of decentralisation experience. It has strived to build on existing theories of African politics and aid dependency by searching out significant variations within the standard constraints. Drawing on secondary literature and on initial studies from four African countries and more scattered evidence from two others, it has reviewed three clusters of issues surrounding the level and quality of public goods’ provision in the four areas of safe motherhood, water and sanitation, facilitation of enterprise and markets, and public order and security. It has suggested propositions which seem to account for a good deal of the observed variation in the ability of the various actors to address the key bottlenecks in provision of these goods.

Specifically, our initial findings seem to justify the conclusion that three variables are of particular, and under-appreciated, importance in the first-level determination of variations in outcomes:

- The degree to which the policy-driven components of the institutional framework of public goods provision *reflect a coherent vision*, so that resources are allocated and incentives are structured in ways that are mutually reinforcing, not mutually undermining.
- The extent to which the human-resource components of provision are subject to *effective top-down performance disciplines*, even if in other respects the organisational context is severely lacking in the attributes of a well-resourced and well-regulated bureaucracy; and
- The availability of institutions enabling local collective action which are *locally anchored in a double sense* – the rules they incorporate are welfare-enhancing (problem-solving) in the context, and they make use of institutional elements inherited from the past.

We have also identified a wider set of explanatory variables, including the incidence of on-the-campaign-trail, populist policy-making by national politicians, and the degree to which aid generates the negative incentive effects identified in the literature. We have indicated what we think it would take to disprove each of the propositions, treating them as free-standing causal propositions about the necessary conditions, other things being equal, for improving an important set of intermediate development outcomes, namely adequate provision of key public goods.

It may be that it makes best sense to continue to offer our propositions in this simple form. However, particularly if we are confronted with evidence suggesting that one of our variables is *not* a necessary condition for the specified outcome, it would be of obvious interest to break with the language of necessary and sufficient causes, exploring instead the hypothesis that causation in this field is ‘conjunctural’; that is to say, the outcomes of interest are causally associated with particular *combinations* of the identified variables and not others (Ragin, 1987). This would lead us towards constructing a ‘typological theory’ (George and Bennett, 2005) in which the possible combinations of the three basic variables are examined in relation to all of the available evidence and informed conjectures about the types that are not represented in the real world of today or even in history.

In the next period, therefore, the challenge will be to interrogate an expanded body of data, and engage in dialogue with the wider research and policy communities paying particular attention to the three variables identified in the paper. This will involve strengthening the fieldwork-based case-studies and other evidence backing the claims we have put forward. It will also call for consideration of contrary evidence, in the light of which we would expect to refine our propositions while retaining their quality of empirical falsifiability. Although the further step of reconstructing the theory in typological terms may not be required by the evidence and may be unduly challenging, we should retain it as a goal.

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