

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Rude accountability in the unreformed state: informal pressures on frontline bureaucrats in Bangladesh

This paper documents the unorganised, informal pressures that poor citizens exert on frontline officials in Bangladesh, where there is an absence of formal accountability systems and the state remains unreformed in key aspects. 'Rude' accountability is examined, its impact and limitations, in relation to poor people's experience of safety nets, schools and health services.

The author defines 'rude' forms of accountability as those informal mechanisms used by citizens to claim public service and sanction service failures. When and why do citizens resort to 'rude' accountability? What are the advantages in using this approach? What are the implications for reforming accountability systems in social service delivery? The paper is set within the context of a growing body of research on accountability in public services, with an emphasis on the informal and social pressures on frontline officials. This is an aspect that has been overlooked as it is neither easily quantifiable nor predictable.

The author examines the spectrum of 'rudeness' in public service encounters, from the faintly impolite to the abusive to the violent. Rudeness is viewed as 'the weapon of the weak'; to embarrass an official so as to cause them to lose status is a serious business and represents a momentary adjustment of power. Formless and spontaneous verbal or physical attacks on officials may be

counter-productive but often produce some effect, albeit temporary and short-lived. The paper analyses the space that rude accountability fills up when formal accountability procedures fail to deliver.

The author compares the 'culture of accountability' in Bangladesh to the 'social accountability' seen in India and Brazil, where battles have been won to strengthen formal accountability systems. Rude accountability takes place on the frontline, framed by the World Bank as the 'short route' to accountability. Frontline officials are viewed as being embedded in a network of social relations that expose them to multiple claims for and sources of accountability.

The author explores how informal accountability structures develop around formal policies and institutions. The 'Bangladesh paradox' is also addressed, where gains have been made in the expansion of schools, better health provision and better safety nets for the

poorest. However, absence of processes for citizens to claim services or complain, coupled with the discretionary biases of officialdom have offset some of those gains.

In the analysis of School Managing Committees (SMC's), beneficiary selection and the career paths of doctors in rural areas, the paper illustrates rude accountability in action, and how threats to the reputation or political standing of frontline officials can directly influence social service provision. Women are highlighted as the citizens who may gain most from rude accountability, as formal accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh continue to be exclusionary and disempowering.

Key research findings:

- Widespread lobbying by poor citizens to be selected as beneficiaries reflects the embedded, informal pressures exerted on frontline officials.

“Rude' accountability is examined, its impact and limitations, in relation to poor people's experience of safety nets, schools and health services”

“ Accountability relationships are embedded in social relations and political pressures that are unofficial, informal and personalised ”

- Attracting and distributing resources fairly is politically advantageous, and therefore subject to informal pressures from the recipients. Also, the distribution of safety nets is discretionary, and therefore poor (and not so poor) citizens can lobby to their advantage.
- Doctors in rural practices are incentivised by the informal pressures of social standing in their communities, and their capacity to build up lucrative private practices.
- The threat of violence by patients, and media exposure for medical negligence are strong informal motivators for a health official to perform well.
- ‘Politicisation’ in education can create incentives for accountability, in that resources and teachers can be better monitored.
- Teachers are now involved in selecting beneficiaries and distributing resources, making people suspicious, and increasing poor parents’ monitoring of what goes on in schools.

The impact that rude accountability has on frontline officials is not measurable but contributes to the ‘Bangladesh paradox’ of social sector achievements with persistently weak governance. Bangladesh is a hierarchical, unreformed state, where social status is set by education and professional position. Therefore, status and reputation are the key instruments influencing the performance of officials, in the absence of bureaucratic or formal mechanisms. The Bangladesh case highlights prospects for performance-based accountability where citizens are involved in the setting of

standards and indicators of performance. Rude accountability may be just as potent in other under-resourced, unreformed states, as it is the mechanism of the poor. (104 words)

Key policy lessons / implications of research

- Despite civil society organisation and innovative NGO approaches in Bangladesh, social accountability has achieved little in holding officials to account.
- Accountability relationships are embedded in social relations and political pressures that are unofficial, informal and personalised.
- Informal pressures on frontline officials encourage them to pay more attention to claims and complaints. However, the gains are often short term and reversible, and may strengthen resistance to deeper downward accountability.
- However, much can be learned about the power of ‘soft’ social sanctions on public officials who fail in their duties.
- Bridging rude and official accountability mechanisms may strengthen both approaches.

Credits

Naomi Hossain, ‘Rude accountability in the unreformed state: informal pressures on frontline bureaucrats in Bangladesh’, Research Summary of Working Paper 319. March 2009

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