

13 Lessons for out-scaling and up-scaling from *Signposts to more effective states: Think and operate politically*

Background

The paper *Signposts to More Effective States*⁴⁰ aims to "inject some realism into thinking about governance". Good governance is seen to be perhaps the most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development. But there are no simple answers as to how good governance comes about.

Researchers often refer to the influence of institutions, usually in terms of inadequacy or 'lack of'. The paper describes ways of delivering public services that have evolved from what is actually on the ground rather than being built on institutional models introduced from elsewhere. After all, in developed countries institutions grew in a piecemeal way as people responded to emerging requirements. So, the authors question the 'governance first' model of economic development. Also, they point out that some developing countries, for example China, are following quite different paths to development than those followed by now-developed countries. This suggests that there could be a great deal of scope for out-scaling and up-scaling research findings starting from what is actually there and that any plans to introduce 'best practice' need to fully consider the local situation.

Key points

- Develop an understanding of the social, political and institutional context, look at what is happening with an open mind and build on that.
- Be aware of the impact of changes on local relationships and incentives.
- Think and operate politically.

Lessons learned

***Signposts to More Effective States* makes some harsh judgements (Box 13.1) on donor expectations of developing countries.** Agricultural research aimed at helping the poor has to cope with both the changing expectations of donors and the often messy and difficult environments in developing countries. The paper has no direct lessons as to how governance and institutions in developing countries might be improved by uptake of research findings from agricultural research. But what seems to be clear is that an open mind, a thorough understanding of the social, political and institutional situation, and an

⁴⁰ The paper presents the main findings of a five-year research programme funded by DFID to address the question of how public authority in developing countries can best be reshaped and reconstituted to meet the challenges of poverty reduction in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Box 13.1

Unrealistic expectations: too many demands on poor countries

"For decades, the development community has intervened in poor countries with little understanding of the political and institutional landscape, and with scant regard for local political relationships and incentives."

"In quick succession, donors have advocated state-led development, the marketisation and the retrenchment of government from core functions, followed by democratisation, decentralisation, the establishment of autonomous agencies, the creation of public-private partnerships, and civil society participation in the delivery of core services. All this has been imposed on poor countries, with weak institutions, many of them still in the process of institution building, and in the context of a rapidly changing global environment."

"Donors have consistently been unrealistic about the capacity required to manage complex processes of change, and have virtually ignored the need to build a social and political consensus for such change."

"They [donors] have expected poor countries to put in place a range of 'best practice' institutions ... and they have assumed that creating those institutions involves little more than the supply of material resources and technical assistance."

appreciation of what is actually happening are good starting points to build on.

Develop an understanding of the social, political and institutional context, look at what is happening with an open mind and build on that. Formal institutions based on western models have limited success when transferred to developing countries and, even if at first they seem to work better, they rarely manage to keep it up. The timescales estimated by development agencies for political and institutional change are seldom realistic. New policies and new ways of doing things are often promoted without considering the capacity of local institutions to implement them.

Signposts to More Effective States suggests that what is needed is a shift from the focus on the content of changes to the political feasibility of changes. This means helping develop local ownership of changes, that is, helping the processes for change. The need for a shift to considering political feasibility has implications, particularly for going about up-scaling research findings. Dealing

with the politics will involve engaging deeply with the various players and facing up to sometimes inconvenient realities.

Researchers and donors are for the most part reluctant to recognise that reality is messy and difficult. They often have preconceived models, rooted in their own experience, of how things should be and find it difficult to imagine or deal with models other than those they are familiar with. The suggested approach is to try to thoroughly understand the social, political and institutional context, look at what is happening with an open mind and build on that (Box 13.2). Unfortunately best practices cannot just be collected and transferred from one setting to another. Institutions and programmes need to be adapted to what is already happening in specific local situations.

Box 13.2

Unconventional ways of tackling problems—taxing the informal sector

The informal sector is very difficult to tax, but ways have been found to overcome this.

In Ghana the Ghana Passenger Road Transport Union collects levies from the large private road transport sector. The government gets the revenue, the Union gets an income from providing the service and the authority to collect levies, and vehicle operators get protection from illegal charges.

The arrangement is by no means perfect but is an unconventional way of taxing the informal sector by creating common interests between state and non-state sectors.

Be aware of the impact of changes on local relationships and incentives. Expectations in countries where weak governments fail to deliver even the most basic services, or even control large sections of their population, need to be realistic. Improving services (such as agricultural extension) is not just about providing resources, skills and technical solutions. It is about politics and incentives for different stakeholders⁴¹.

Incentives for governments—especially in Sub-Saharan Africa—to bargain with organised interest groups are relatively weak. Rulers who have external (aid) or unearned (oil revenues) income do not depend on their citizens for revenue (taxes) or political support. In cases where a powerful ruling executive has direct control over government income, legislatures have very little say and are rarely effective. So, there is little public debate about how government revenues should be spent.

Large amounts of development aid provide governments with a substitute for taxes. But, even in poor countries, people pay taxes although they often see taxes as 'legalised robbery' because they just fill the pockets of tax collectors. Plus, the burden of taxation usually falls on the poor because elites have ways of evading taxes. Decisions about whether and how to provide aid often take

virtually no account of the likely effect on governance and how aid might discourage collective public action.

Development aid disrupts the normal (western model) relationship between governments and (tax-paying) citizens, although that's not to suggest it should just stop. But, there is a need to be aware of the impact of changes on local relationships and incentives, including the risk of dependency.

Think and operate politically. Projects often have ambitious expectations of civil society. They expect civil society to get involved in policy-making, deliver services and monitor progress. They expect poor people to participate in local organisations that will give them a voice through networks of associations linked to policy makers. They hope that representation will be fair. These expectations can be naïve.

Civil society is diverse and we need to be realistic about whose interests are being represented and how (Box 13.3). It is important to look at what is actually happening and not be bound by western ideas of representation. Participatory mechanisms can and do provide access for poorer groups to policy making processes even if representation does not conform to the western ideal. Organisations do connect people who would be otherwise under-represented to politicians, public agencies and government. Poor people regularly approach leaders of organisations and committees who they think can help them to speak on their behalf and represent their interests.

Box 13.3

Giving the poor a voice

Surveys of civil organisations in Sao Paulo show that often organisations with good connections to government and political parties give the poor a voice in policy-making. Informal links between organisations and government or politicians are important.

Research shows that participatory processes often involve collectives rather than individuals. For example, participatory budgets in Sao Paulo were meant for individuals to participate directly in budgets. But, in practice, leaders of the community or neighbourhood associations speak on behalf of their organisations. However the organisations are not based on membership, so there is a question about who these leaders speak for or represent.

Research in Delhi, Bangalore, Mexico City and Sao Paulo shows that most people believe government should provide basic infrastructure and services. They want government and political parties to deal with sanitation, garbage and health problems though they are often also prepared to help themselves. They see political parties as very important for solving their problems.

A survey of civil organisations in Bangalore shows that a vibrant civil society does not necessarily give poor people a

⁴¹ World Development Report 2004.

Box 13.3 *continued...*

voice. The elite neighbourhood organisations involve a small core of upper-middle class. These link with municipal authorities in public-private partnerships and marginalise the poor.

This means that any efforts to make changes—out-scale or up-scale research findings—needs a detailed understanding of the formal and informal relationships among stakeholders plus, most importantly, an ability to think and operate politically. This is a major shift in emphasis from a focus on 'strengthening' civil society to working with the interactions (processes) between state and society (Box 13.4). Informal relationships (shared interests, reputation, professional pride) and local practices influence the way formal institutions and mechanisms work. Skilful negotiation and implementation can make a difference.

Box 13.4

Interactions between state and society: complex factors underpin success or failure

Services are being successfully delivered in many ways that are often overlooked because they do not fit in any existing model.

Informal relationships between different stakeholders are important for accountability, whether or not formalised.

Service delivery is highly political.

Motivation of frontline workers in service delivery can be a key to success. Front-line environmental health officers caught up in patronage politics of public toilets in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana, have totally inadequate resources, no transport, low pay, poor training and poor prospects⁴². But only a fifth of workers were dissatisfied with their job. Most enjoyed good informal working relations with colleagues and managers, shared values, a positive organisational culture and good relations with the public. This suggests considerable potential to harness professional motivation and pride.

This synopsis of lessons learned for up-scaling and out-scaling research into use is drawn from:

'Signposts to More Effective States: Responding to Governance Challenges in Developing Countries'. The Centre for the Future State. 2005. Institute of Development Studies.

See

http://www.research4development.info/pdf/ThematicSummaries/signposts_ids.pdf

⁴² Crook, R. and J. Ayoc. 'Urban Service Partnerships, Street Level Bureaucrats and Environmental Sanitation in Kumasi and Accra: Coping with Organisational Change in the Public Bureaucracy'. Forthcoming.