

Research Summary #18 - Institutionalised Co-Production: Unorthodox Public Service Delivery in Challenging Environments

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This paper forms part of a five year research programme under the Centre for the Future State, based at the Institute of Development Studies. Below is a summary of principal findings. Further details are available at www.ids.ac.uk/gdr/cfs/index.html

Introduction

This paper seeks to expand the menu of ideas about service delivery arrangements in poor countries. There is broad agreement that monopolistic provision of services by state agencies is often not feasible. But policymakers thinking about new approaches, including partnerships between the state and different parts of the private sector, may have too limited a view of the options because of the conceptual framework they are employing. This tends to be limited to a small number of organisational types. But in practice services are being delivered in a great variety of ways that do not fit these standard categories, and which blur accepted boundaries between public and private action. They therefore tend to get overlooked, or dismissed as hangovers from traditional practices. The paper introduces the concept of 'institutionalised co-production' to try to capture the diversity of these arrangements. The definition offered is 'the provision of public services (broadly defined, to include regulation) through a regular long-term relationship between state agencies and organised groups of citizens, where both make substantial resource contributions'.

Two Cases

The concept of 'institutionalised co-production' is illustrated by looking at two cases of highly unorthodox arrangements for the delivery of core state services: policing in Karachi, and tax collection in Ghana. In Karachi, a group of 40 wealthy businessmen have come together to form the Citizen-Police Liaison Committee¹. It is directly involved in core policing activities, providing and managing the main crime databases for the city. It brings significant private resources into policing, and works under informal arrangements that protect against the temptation to abuse the power which tends to accrue to providers of services. In Ghana, a private association of owners and employees in the road transport business is collecting income tax from its own members on behalf of the government.² This allows government to tap into an important source of revenue in the informal sector, while giving the main transport union status and privileges, and its members some protection from arbitrary levies and official harassment. In both cases accountability depends on informal relations rather than on formal contracts; and the arrangements are based on strongly shared interests between the main parties involved.

¹ For further details see summary #17 "Co-Producing Citizen Security: the Citizen-Police Liaison Committee in Karachi"

² See summary #14 "Taxing for the State? Politics, Revenue and the Informal Sector in Ghana"

What is Institutionalised Co-Production?

The two cases above share features which help to clarify the concept of 'institutionalised co-production'. They involve citizens in the provision of core state services. They represent long-term arrangements, which are still evolving. They need not involve formal contractual arrangements (these are often implied in more conventional thinking about public/private partnerships). They do involve blurring the boundaries between legitimate public authority and private power in highly unorthodox ways. The authors stress that they are not advocating such arrangements as necessarily desirable, and they carry some clear risks. But they may offer the best workable alternative in difficult circumstances and therefore, merit further consideration.

The authors suggest that institutionalised co-production arrangements tend to evolve in response to: (1) a decline in governance capacity to fulfil core state functions which creates strong incentives for both states and affected citizens to work together; or (2) a situation where the nature of the service requires co-production because it involves delivering services to large numbers of people to meet a great variety of operational situations. Co-production arrangements in the second category are widespread and have been fairly well-documented - they include irrigation services, joint forest management, and arrangements to deliver primary health care, agricultural extension, and urban sewerage. But less is known about the first category, co-production, in response to a failure of governance. In situations of governance crisis, co-production - which allows states to provide services at reduced costs and resources, and gain political support in exchange for loss of power and control - can be politically attractive.

Conclusion

The authors emphasise that unorthodox engagement between public and private actors which runs counter to 'Weberian' norms should not be dismissed as a hangover from the past. Such arrangements are widespread. There is increasing interest in the Chinese experience, where unconventional relationships between the state and the market have played a vital role in nurturing successful capitalist development. Standard ways of thinking about service provision may be obscuring the reality of what is happening in many poor countries. The concept of institutionalised co-production is offered as a way of prompting a more open-minded exploration of the diversity of arrangements actually in place. Whether such arrangements should be encouraged is a more open question: they raise many concerns about accountability. But they may represent the best available alternative to more conventional arrangements where public authority is weak.