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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Intermediaries, isomorphic activism and programming for social accountability in Pakistan

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Abstract

Using ethnographic research from Pakistan, this paper argues that social accountability programmes that overlook the role of intermediaries in clientelistic states risk undermining the wider democratising projects they seek to support. It proposes a theory of 'isomorphic activism' that describes how these public authorities appropriate others' opportunities to participate in politics and, in the process, undermine democratic norms. Isomorphic activism is shown to be more likely when programmes are based on ideals of civil society that render activism a technical exercise, depoliticise it and blind donors to power inequalities. The challenges the paper highlights are important given calls for development programmes to change by whom and how politics is done, whilst granting local ownership to participants and demonstrating value for money. They should also be of interest to those concerned by the spread of reductive views of civil society activism within donor organisations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

I first met Chaudhry Adnan Bhutta on the forecourt of a petrol station on the side of the Grand Trunk (GT) Road as it enters the town of Kharian in Pakistan's Punjab province. As we talked outside a tyre-changing hut, people arrived on foot or by car and hovered patiently nearby. Every so often Adnan would pause our conversation and beckon them over so he could listen as they, sometimes emotionally, petitioned him. When they had finished, Adnan would generally refer them to one of his colleagues, call a number retrieved from his pocketbook or, on several occasions, sign official paperwork they handed him. Adnan described this as his *salah-o-behbud* (social work).

He began at an early age by resolving issues in his village, such as gas and electricity shortages, and helping the poor to obtain national identification cards. Then, in 1986 Adnan founded the GT Road Business Owners' Union. He claimed the Union provides physical security to enterprises along Kharian's portion of the road, helped them to negotiate rental rates with landlords and accompanied owners during engagements with tax authorities. Adnan had enjoyed an uninterrupted 16-year incumbency as the Union's President and his son had recently been made its General Secretary.

Adnan was also a member of the town's voluntary Constituency Relations Group (CRG) set up by a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) as part of the Supporting Transparency Accountability and Electoral Process (STAEP) programme. A self-declared social accountability programme, STAEP was primarily funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) from 2011 to 2014. Roughly a year later, Kharian's CRG was still functioning. Yet, as will be discussed, Adnan was no longer actively participating.

This paper uses research on STAEP to argue that a focus on the quantifiable aspects of social accountability programmes is inadequate for exploring their potentials to contribute to wider democratising projects. To explain this, I propose a theory of 'isomorphic activism' that describes how powerful intermediaries can reduce programmes' democratic potentials. The terms 'isomorphism' and 'isomorphic mimicry' have been

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used in biology since the 19th century to denote when one organism mimics another to gain an evolutionary advantage. Within development literature, isomorphic mimicry has been used to cast doubt on the success of large, donor-funded top-down institutional reform programmes (Andrews, 2012). Here, I use it to describe how powerful intermediaries become programmes' 'experts'; using their connections to ensure they get things done, translating local norms and politics into donors' favoured ways of seeing the world, and appropriating the opportunities programmes promise others to participate in public politics. I argue that this is more likely when implementers and donors overlook how public authority—understood as any kind of authority beyond the immediate family which commands a degree of consent—is claimed and exercised in clientelistic states (Hoffmann & Kirk, 2013; Kirk & Allen, 2022). This risk programmes wasting chances to change by whom and how politics is done and strengthening antidemocratic norms.

My research suggests that isomorphic activism arises from some donors' enthusiasm for rendering political programmes technical. It adds to a body of literature that has been termed 'aidnography' (Gould, 2004). Its writers often frame development as a top-down undertaking done by outsiders unfamiliar with the needs, cultures, and institutions of those they seek to help or change. This limits programmes' impacts and can cause well-intentioned activities to be ignored or appropriated on the ground. I suggest that this occurs in social accountability focussed programmes due to the spread of a view of civil society activism that atomises citizens, washes over their ambitions and avoids challenging the status quo. I also argue that some programmes are incentivised to make intermediaries their experts due to pressure to quantitatively report their results and demonstrate value for money. Yet, this is not necessary and social accountability programmes that engage the micro-politics of clientelistic states can be worthwhile endeavours.

The next two sections ground my research in literature on intermediaries, South Asian civil society, politics and aidnography. I then introduce the idea of social accountability programmes, STAEP and my methodology before two vignettes of intermediaries' involvement in the programme. This is followed by a deeper discussion of isomorphic activism and what it means for similar initiatives.

2 | INTERMEDIARIES AND AIDNOGRAPHY

Literature on South Asia suggests that clientelism is a feature of civic and political life (Akhtar, 2006; Javid, 2012; Piliavsky, 2014). Clientelism can be broadly understood as a process through which citizens of unequal status exchange their allegiance, votes or political rights for protection, material benefits, insurance or access to state services. It often also contains a sense of voluntarism, obligation, duty, tradition, intimacy or even friendship and has been called a 'living moral idiom' which orders society in much of the world (Piliavsky, 2014, p. 4).

Within the literature, there is a distinction between 'old' and 'new' types of clientelism (Hopkin, 2006). The old type, more akin to feudalism, involved face-to-face exchanges between patrons and generations of their clients' families. In return for their services, clients could expect the resources and protection necessary for their basic survival, especially within non-monetised agricultural societies. The new type of clientelism is often a feature of young democracies with diversifying economies. It involves powerful intermediaries—from the heads of kin-based associations, landlords and businessmen to union bosses, political party workers, former civil servants and religious leaders—negotiating with political patrons on behalf of different groups for their vote. In return, targetable, excludable goods or services, such as schools, jobs, the avoidance of fees and fines and access to state services and licences are expected. The new clientelism is often associated with the growth of political parties, capitalism, the welfare state and extensive networks of intermediaries between patrons and clients.

For some, South Asia's intermediaries should be seen as the 'lubricants' or 'enablers' of the region's democracies (Manor, 2000; Reddy & Haragopa, 1985).

Policy recommendations

- Isomorphic activism is a risk when programmes rely on intermediaries to act as interlocutors with communities, and when they have predefined, often quantifiably measurable, templates of what civil society mobilisation, responsive governance, and democratic political participation—in short, 'success'—looks like.
- Those keen not to strengthen antidemocratic norms and processes should pay more attention to how public authority is claimed and exercised in clientelistic states rather than the technical and sanitised portrayals of programmes found in the official documentation.
- A stronger case for how social accountability programmes can contribute to ongoing democratising projects can be made by acknowledging their participants' political identities and ensuring activities occur in the public sphere.

Amongst them, Chatterjee (2004) drew upon fieldwork in Kolkata's slums to argue that the needs and demands of India's citizens are often communicated through and, sometimes illegally, met by vertical relationships between community representatives, and large employers, government officials and politicians. Chatterjee contends that the ‘politics of democratisation’ does not occur in civil society, which he argued consists of a small metropolitan elite (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 282). Rather, it takes place in the ‘much less well-defined, legally ambiguous, contextually and strategically demarcated terrain of political society’ where intermediaries play key roles.

Others have rejected this analysis. For example, Gudavarthy and Vijay (2007) argue that Chatterjee merely described the survival strategies of the poor and marginalised. Through a study of three villagers' associations in a polluted area of Andhra Pradesh, India, they show how over time the limited benefits they can gain via intermediaries become accepted as the ‘politics of the possible’ (Gudavarthy & Vijay, 2007, p. 3052). This gradually causes villagers to abandon hopes of the sorts of structural changes needed to radically alter their condition. Similarly, Berenschot (2014) argues that a lack of alternative ways for accessing state services or raising their voices explains why Dalits in Gujarat often vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) whose caste and religious-based nationalist ideology ultimately works against their interests. More recent research that followed the daily lives of intermediaries in Pakistan concludes that although they undoubtedly get things done that benefit households, the poor and marginalised are forced into individualistic and fleeting ‘accountability bargains’ that do not lead to improved governance and lower people's expectations of authorities (Loureiro et al., 2021).

The literature has also examined how clientelism permeates South Asia's NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). For example, de Wit and Berner (2009) use research from three Indian cities' state welfare programmes to show how intermediaries collect citizens' votes for their political patrons in return for development contracts. They argue that CBOs and NGOs often do not represent the imagined inclusive communities they claim to and are really vehicles for targeting benefits towards narrow kin- or identity-based interest groups. Providing a longer view, Lewis (2010, 2017) has charted the evolution of several of Bangladesh's NGOs over decades. He shows how a mixture of clientelism, poor leadership, state oppression and donor influence has resulted in their gradual depoliticisation, confined their activities to narrowly targeted service provision projects and tamed their appetites to challenge the state.

For these authors, Chatterjee's idea of a democratising ‘political society’ ignores the debilitating norms and practices propagated by many of the intermediaries that connect South Asians to their patrons, the state, and politics. Moreover, the private, market-like exchanges and group loyalties common to clientelistic networks encourage their members to pool their votes, bargain for favours and benefits behind closed doors and to ignore ideas such as the public good or mass participation in deliberative politics. This can obstruct and even reverse the consolidation and deepening of democratising projects. This paper adds to the literature by showing how this can occur within a social accountability programme nominally aimed at supporting democratic norms.

This paper's research and arguments can also be situated in what Gould (2004) labels ‘aidnography’ literature. It critically examines development as practised by donors, international organisations, and their in-country partners. Early aidnographers often portrayed aid and development workers as outsiders, unfamiliar with the needs, cultures and institutions of those they sought to develop (Mair, 1984; Porter et al., 1991). Their research showed how this led to mistakes and blunders that caused their programmes to fail. Many concluded that anthropologists and, sometimes, programmes' intended beneficiaries should be consulted to ensure better outcomes.

Ferguson's (1990) landmark study of a World Bank-funded programme in Lesotho combined fieldwork with discourse analysis to show how development programmes can be akin to ‘anti-politics machines’. This, he argued, is because experts and planners often write the history, culture, politics, and structural location of the places they seek to improve out of their diagnoses of underdevelopment. Such simplifications can lead to and mask programmes' unintended consequences, including the way they may, can unwittingly build the power and influence of the state vis-à-vis their intended beneficiaries. In Ferguson's wake, Li (2007) influential study of multiple development programmes in Indonesia advanced this analysis. Li argued that the programmes' simplifications allowed them to make visible and ‘render technical’ the challenges they faced, whilst ignoring the political causes of and solutions to poverty and marginalisation. Instead, they became increasingly focused ‘upon conducting the conduct of villagers’ or put another way, blaming poor programme outcomes on participants and seeking to control their intimate social relations in response (Li, 2007, p. 267).

Other aidnographers have focussed on the chains of actors—from local to global—involved in monitoring and reporting on development programmes (Mckinnon, 2007; Wilson, 2006). They often combine the ideas of ‘translation’ and ‘networks’ found within Latour's (1996) work on scientific communities with Francophone Africanist literature on development ‘brokerage’ and ‘mediation’ (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Hönke & Müller, 2018). The aim is to show how programmes' continued funding often relies on reporting

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that represents complex social norms and practices and ambiguous results in donors and political patrons preferred frames. Mosse's (2005) ethnography of a DFID-funded rural participatory programme in India was emblematic. He documented how the programme's key ideas such as 'participation' and techniques such as 'new seeds' were understood by participants as 'patronage' and 'credit' (Mosse, 2005, p. 232). In response, the programme increasingly hired a range of 'development brokers', including local and international consultants, to 'translate' recipients' unexpected norms and behaviours into language and rationales that ensured it remained relevant to its donor's changing interests. Mosse argued that the problem is 'that a policy machinery fabricates its separation from political economy and that it becomes isolated from the local or vernacular to which it is nonetheless materially connected through fund flows, information and in other ways' (Mosse, 2005, p. 243).

These strands of the aidnography literature remind us that well-intentioned development programmes are not always received and do not always proceed as their creators hoped, especially when politics is overlooked. This includes both the micro-politics of the places programmes operate in and of the programmes themselves.

3 | STAEP AND THE CRGS

The STAEP programme presented itself as supporting social accountability. The World Bank's *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor* suggested that there are two main routes to accountability (WB, 2003): first, the 'short route' which describes relationships between citizens and state officials working in governance or service providing institutions. Second, the 'long route' which focuses on citizens engaging elected politicians who, ideally, respond with new policies, reforms or by exerting downward pressure on service providers to improve. To activate either, the poor were said to require information on the performance of service providers and politicians with which to hold them to account.

The Bank's report has since become the core text for many development organisations' contemporary interest in engaging civil societies to improve governance and consolidate and deepen democracies (ODI, 2014). In the academic literature social accountability programmes are often portrayed as having the potential to change the way and by whom politics is done (Cornwall & Coelho, 2006; Fung & Wright, 2003; Joshi, 2008). In pursuit of this, NGOs and CBOs have been supported to use and pass on a variety of technical tools that generate information on the performance of authorities. They include petitions, citizens' scorecards, social audits and participatory budgeting. Each gives programmes capabilities to impart to participants and provides evaluators with quantifiable activities to monitor.

STAEP had the broad target of: 'More effective, transparent, and accountable governance that addresses the critical challenges facing Pakistan today' (DFID, 2011, p. 1). Furthermore, it held that: 'Public disillusionment with … systems of patronage' can be countered and 'democracy' can be 'sustained' by 'working with civil society … to increase levels of trust and credibility between citizens and the state' (DFID, 2011, pp. 2–3). To do this, it funded a network of 30 local NGOs across Pakistan, with an international NGO and large NGO acting as the programme's implementers. NGOs within the network recruited volunteers for 200 CRGs. They trained in a variety of social accountability tools and focused on identifying citizens' demands and bringing them to the attention of state officials and politicians. The majority of CRGs had around 25 to 40 members, with the NGOs initially showing a preference for recruiting locally influential people. However, there were required to sign a form declaring that they would not work in the interests of a political party. It was hoped that members would engage frontline service providers, such as teachers or bureaucrats, and, eventually, form working relationships with them and their political masters, such as members of Pakistan's provincial (MPAs) and national assemblies (MNAs).

STAEP's periodic progress reviews provide a window onto how the programme was understood by its donors. They reveal that the CRGs identified 45,974 citizens' demands, of which almost 60% were deemed to have been 'met' (although this was never defined) following the CRG's activities (DFID, 2015). These demands included everything from fixing overflowing sewage pipes and the erection of new school walls, to resolving local cases of land grabbing, improving security in public areas and establishing women's desks in police stations. STAEP's second annual review praised renewed efforts to include members of marginalised groups in the CRGs (DFID, 2013). By its third, the CRGs were portrayed as a 'new type of popular institution' that operate 'quite differently' from other NGO-supported community organisations in Pakistan (DFID, 2014, p. 21). The reviewer argued they enable 'democratic discourse' and that they do 'not merely generate demands for delivery of services but begin a process of democratic engagement'. STAEP's completion report celebrated the programme's value for money, with each of the 45,974 raised demands costing £75 or half of what its architects expected (DFID, 2015).

4 | METHODOLOGY

Research amongst STAEP's CRGs and Pakistan's wider civil society took place in 2014 and 2015, after the programme's formal end. Alongside two skilled

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Pakistani research assistants, Umair and Jamal, I conducted interviews with 89 respondents, sometimes over several sessions. As well as programme staff, we interviewed CRG members, staff from their mentoring NGOs, local MPAs and MNAs, academics and journalists. The research sites were selected through a quantitative methodology that identified particularly active CRGs in socio-economically diverse districts in Punjab province. Our approach to interviewing was to ask how the CRGs were formed and achieved their greatest successes and failures. To code the data, I drew upon Charmaz's formulation of grounded theory as it is suited to the critical stance of social justice research (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz sought to critique and update previous approaches to grounded theory, such as Glaser and Strauss', by including the insights of constructionism and post-modernism. Her goal was to make it better suited to studying issues of power and inequalities, and links between micro-contexts, discourses and structures.

The remainder of the paper focuses on two vignettes from two CRGs in the Gujrat district in northern Punjab: a rural CRG based around Kharian City and an urban GRG in the heart of Gujrat city. The bulk of the two CRGs' activities were conducted before 2013's elections. During this period, two of Gujrat district's four MNAs belonged to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which had a national majority and one to the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), which had a majority in the provincial assembly. However, local politics is really about Jat vs Gujjar and Chaudhry vs anti-Chaudhry rivalries. The rivalry between Jats and Gujjars is roughly describable as between *biraderis* (occupational kin-groups that generally uphold endogamy) with members that own medium to small plots of agricultural land, and those that work on them or own small businesses. The latter rivalry is between old, aristocratic families with large estates, popularly called Chaudhries and newly wealthy large business owners.

My analysis of the CRGs draws upon Loureiro et al.'s (2021, p. 4) argument that Pakistan's 'intermediaries make themselves essential by: (1) being able to speak the language of public authorities; (2) constantly creating and sustaining networks outside their communities; and (3) building collectivising power by maintaining reciprocity relations with their communities'. Following the literature on development brokers and mediators, I also look for how they make themselves 'the spokesperson on behalf of technical scientific knowledge and the mediator between technical–scientific knowledge and popular knowledge' (Bierschenk et al., 2002 p. 169). This focuses my analysis on how the two following vignettes' intermediaries maintained, used, and built upon their advantages within STAEP. Names of all respondents and organisations have been changed to ensure anonymity.

5 | NOMAN RIASANI

Gujrat city's Noman Raisani described himself as a martial arts instructor, a homeopathic doctor, and a 'social worker'. He was also the founder of the district's Voluntary Medics Association, the Chair of the Society for Islamic Youth, and the leader of a local branch of an Islamic political party. Despite these roles, Noman also described himself as a '*lotta*' (a drinking vessel with a rounded base but often used to denote someone without a permanent political home).

In 2011, Noman was invited by the Centre for Capacity Building (CFCB)—STAEP's mentoring NGO for Gujrat – to be amongst the founders of the city's CRG. He attributed this to his connections and local influence. Pressed further, he highlighted two further roles: first, being a founding member of the district's Sports Excellence Society. The Society acts as an umbrella organisation for Gujrat's various specialised sporting associations. Noman explained that honorary positions within each were often filled by locally powerful people, and he had a say in how they were awarded. For example, he had helped to make Gujrat's Executive District Officer (EDO) for the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) the President of a local Badminton Association. The Society also gave Noman a platform from which to invite influential public authorities to events at which they would be the guests of honour and receive publicity. Opportunities that eventually made some of them his friends.

Second, he emphasised his role as the Vice President of the city's Rehmani Association. The Association is one of many large biraderi-based organisations across Pakistan. On the societal level, it engages in what Noman refers to as 'social work'. This includes dispensing money and everyday household items to poor Rehmani families, funding their weddings, sending children abroad for education, and finding good jobs for those returning to Gujrat. When necessary, its members also mobilise *en masse* to address community-wide issues. For example, Gujrat's potters had recently been hampered by a lack of supplies. To resolve this, the Rehmani Association held joint strikes with the Potters' Association that blocked the GT Road. This put pressure on Haji Imran Zafar, a local PML-N MPA, to discuss the problem with Punjab's Chief Minister. The Association's senior members also act as interlocutors between individual Rehmanis, state officials and politicians. For example, Noman recounted how he had recently visited Haji Imran Zafar to get a young Rehami's Rs 25,000 (roughly £180) fine quashed. He declared that 'he saw me and saw the papers, and just signed without asking a question'.

Over the course of our meetings, it gradually become clear that Haji Imran Zafar and his family were the Rehmani Association's political patrons. They are themselves Rehmanis and Zafar's uncle Haji Nasir

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Mehmood was the Association's Chairman. Noman argued that this meant the Association's members always lent them their political support. Although he did not state it, it would be unusual if this did not mean votes. Noman also referred to the MPA as ‘his chief patron’ and suggested that he had built up a good relationship with his family. Indeed, Noman was keen to impress me with his connection to political elites.

The resolution of two issues illustrates how Noman harnessed these relationships in pursuit of the CRG's aims. The first concerns a dangerous accumulation of electricity cables on a pole in a residential area. Attempting to address it, the CRG's members first approached staff within the district's WAPDA office. Following several failed requests to lower-level officials, Noman contacted the EDO he had made the Badminton Association's President secure a quote for the required work. Rather than waiting for WAPDA to complete the work, however, Noman took the quote directly to Haji Imran Zafar who immediately instructed one of his political workers to pay for the pole's modifications from his own pocket. As Noman argued, ‘Our problem was resolved. If we went to the government [WAPDA] it would have been a lengthy thing. If we had done it like that, it may not have gotten done. There may have been arguments’. For Noman, therefore, using his private access to the World Bank's ‘long route’ to accountability was the rational thing to do.

The second concerns the placement and construction of a large public park. The issue was repeatedly highlighted by other CRG members as their most prestigious achievement. They suggested that they had been influential in finding a suitable venue and lobbying the district administration to see the project through. This required members' repeated visits to local authorities within both the military, who own much of the district's land, and the rail department that owned a possible alternative site. The CRG also ensured that the media's attention was directed towards the issue by highlighting it to journalists.

Once again, however, Noman suggested that it was really his relationship with Haji Imran Zafar that got things done. He recounted how the MPA lives near to one of his sports clubs and he would often sit with him to discuss various development projects. It was during one of these occasions that he suggested to him where the park should be placed and persuaded him to find the funds to complete the project. Soon after the site was confirmed in local publications.

It is highly unlikely that Noman, even given his considerable reserves of social and political capital, could solely influence such a decision. Indeed, other Gujratis suggested that a lot more was at stake than the park's placement. For instance, the contract to build it was awarded to a local businessman who had recently defected from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to the incumbent PML-N. The new park was also named after Prime Minister's brother Shahbaz Sharif and was opened by his son. For powerful members of Gujrat's political society, therefore, the park represented a project with high economic and symbolic stakes. Indeed, its construction attached Noman and the CRG to centres of power beyond the city.

It is notable that Noman chose to highlight his own private efforts and connections as the reason for the resolution of this issue. He did not mention the repeated visits to bureaucrats other CRG members had made. Nor did he discuss how they had kept the issue alive through the local media. Yet, most interviewees accepted Noman's role and repeatedly claimed that he did not work in his own interests and that his ability to get things done was due to his notoriety for social work, rather than his wider positioning within local society.

Nonetheless, across research sites, CRG members would complain that their groups' unity and ability to build a local identity suffered because powerful members were able to claim credit for collective efforts and often did things unilaterally, behind closed doors. There were also some suggestions amongst Gujrat's members that Noman's confectionery stall business had, coincidentally, been granted a licence to trade in the new park. In this sense, as before, Noman drew a collective, public struggle into the private and personal realm. In the process he publicly associated himself with the park's construction, prevented the CRG from capitalising upon an opportunity to build a relationship with the politician able to push it through, and may have personally benefited.

Noman eventually fell out with the CFCB and left the CRG in 2012. This followed a by-election that was held when Haji Nasir Mehmood—the Rehmani Association's Chairman—was disqualified from his seat as an MPA for forging his degree. On the day of the by-election, FAFEN mobilised local CRG members to monitor voting booths to ensure proper process. They subsequently reported numerous issues across the district, prompting FAFEN to release a damming preliminary report that suggested all sides were involved in ballot box abuses. Despite winning the election and the accusations of misconduct eventually going away, Haji Imran Zafar gave CFCB staff and Noman a 10-minute dressing down for their involvement in bringing the scandal to light.

FAFEN's wider ambitions to strengthen Pakistan's democracy ultimately ended up placing Noman in an awkward position, forcing him to choose between his various identities. His pre-existing allegiances to his political patron won out, with Noman likely calculating that it was more important than his role within the transient and relatively unknown STAEP programme and its CRG. I asked Noman whether the skills required of a senior Rehmani Association member made him a good choice for the CRG's leader. He replied: ‘I wouldn't say that skills matter, I think it is your relationships that matter’.

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6 | JAHANZAIB DERAWAL (1282)

When I questioned Adnan, who we met in the paper's introduction, about his experiences within the CRG, he made it clear that although he approved of its aims, it got very little done. However, other members consistently associated another name with several successfully resolved issues: Chaudhry Jahanzaib Derawal. Jahanzaib was variously described as a great social worker, as the powerful head of another of Kharian's unions and as the CRG's politically connected leader. When quizzed about this, Adnan denied any knowledge of Jahanzaib's contributions to the CRG and his contemporary leadership of it. Furthermore, he suggested that whatever I had been told must be lies to discredit his own good deeds.

I first met Jahanzaib in one of several of his offices scattered around a market set back from the GT Road where Adnan and his colleagues plied their trade. Jahanzaib attributed his local influence and connections to his leadership of the Market Stallholder's Union and his later creation of a Central Union for Kharian that acted as an organiser for three other local unions. To illustrate this, Jahanzaib boasted of how he had occasionally led their members to strike, arguing that the mere threat of mass mobilisation was enough to resolve most of the issues he tried to tackle as their leader. As with the Gujrat's Rehmani's and potters, one Jahanzaib's tactics was to block the GT Road which was the district's main transport link and a major route up and down Pakistan.

As we spoke further, it also became clear that in less turbulent times Jahanzaib was the primary mediator between his union's members and politicians. He explained that:

> There is an office of PML-N on the road my union is located. The MNA had a meeting there once during which he asked the people to highlight the issues they were facing. The people told him that our President [Jahanzaib] will tell you our issues. The MNA has since invited me to the office to inquire about local problems. He said people told me you had some problems so share them with me.
>
> (Jahanzaib Derawal 29/03/2015)

Despite such admissions, when pressed on the extent of his power Jahanzaib would frequently deny having any. He even declared that he does not really want to be the President of the union but that the membership kept voting for him regardless of his protests. Instead, he would describe his role as helping them to understand the worth of their vote and the rights they had to hold authorities to account. He even used STAEP's programmatic language of voice, votes, and citizenship.

Jahanzaib also shared how he used his political connections to get things done for the CRG. This included the gathering of the type of governance data and information social accountability tools seek to elicit and the literature holds to be the lubricant of healthy society-state relations:

> If the CRG members had to check market rates, I already had the rate lists of the market committee through TMO [Tehsil Municipal Officer] office because I am the President of Trade Union. The rates that were required by the CRG members, I would go to any of the shops and get the rates for them. If they wanted to go to the District Headquarter Hospital, I would call the relevant MS [a qualified health worker] and tell him to provide the information required by the CRG members. If they wanted to meet someone in the police station, I would call the relevant SHO [Station House Officer] and get the CRG members whatever information they required.
>
> (Jahanzaib Derawal 17/06/2015)

He was also often able to persuade district-level state authorities and local politicians to accompany him on visits to run down schools or to inspect faulty electricity transformers. Shortly after they would address the issues. When they would not, Jahanzaib would personally go to Gujrat or Gujranwala cities to track down those he deemed responsible. As another member of the CRG confided, Jahanzaib privately handled the majority of the groups' relationships with authorities:

> He is a well-known person. He is a member of the Chamber as well. Also, he is popular in his village. As far as other members are concerned, they were just like me, they were not really doing anything because Jahanzaib would handle everything. You need members when there was an issue that could not be solved but Jahanzaib was able to solve all the problems very easily. So, the members would just show up on meetings and mark their attendance.
>
> (Ameer Paracha, 28/03/2015)

Mapping revealed that many of the issues Jahanzaib sought to resolve were in his village or the part of town where members of his union have businesses. Furthermore, apart from one issue to do with the local motorway rescue service that his rival, Adnan, claimed to have led, there were no examples of successfully resolved issues that he was not somehow personally involved with. Yet, Jahanzaib confided that he would not involve himself in issues that he was not sure he could

resolve: 'I knew my limits, so I never tried to tackle something that I could not. I would not go and try to break down a mountain by banging my head against it'.

Jahanzaib's grip on the CRG and his significant political capital were confirmed by several other interviewees:

> So, every person wanted to get credit for the CRG's work. But, on the whole, the practice in Kharian was that Jahanzaib Derawal had all the power, and he was like a commander there. This was the reality. Whenever there was any issue, he would call the MNA or MPA and get it sorted. It is even going on right now.
>
> (Arif 16/06/2015)

It was also clear from them that—beyond Adnan and his allies—Jahanzaib had largely built the CRG. Jahanzaib attributed this to CFCB's lack of local knowledge when the programme first began and its failure to thoroughly research who was who in Kharian. This put him in the advantageous position of an interlocutor between its staff and local communities. This was demonstrated in two ways: Firstly, interviewed staff from CFCB confirmed that Jahanzaib was their main point of contact and most works was done through him. Second, it was implied that he had got one of the CRG's members a job within CFCB in return for his continued support of the STAEP's local activities. This included ensuring the CFCB could produce the monitoring data and participation registers demanded by the programme's national-level implementers; referred to by some interviewees as '*kaghaz kaaley karna*' (blackening the paper).

The only real challenge to Jahanzaib's authority came from Adnan. Early on Jahanzaib claimed that he had mobilised his union to march alongside Adnan's under the CRG's banner to raise awareness of Pakistan's Right to Information law. However, this was the only instance of collaboration I found. Moreover, it was denied by Adnan. Instead, he argued that Jahanzaib quickly began making it difficult for him and his allies to attend the CRG's meetings by locating them in his house. Furthermore, shortly after the 2013's elections, Adnan suggested that the CFCB effectively cut him off, whilst Jahanzaib continued to enjoy a relationship with them until STAEP's end.

The rivalry within rural Gujrat's CRG did not so much hamper its work. Rather, it skewed it towards the more powerful Jahanzaib's capabilities and interests. Indeed, he was responsible for its day-to-day functioning and major successes, and he found ways of marginalising potential checks on his power. This limited its members horizons, strengthened his private relationships with political authorities, and defined the CRG's local identity.

7 | TRANSLATING LOCAL POLITICS

The aidnography literature suggests that development programmes depoliticise the problems they face to render them technical. In the process, they also define who are the experts, able to make other cultures visible and intelligible, and who needs their tutelage. My research shows that in STAEP's case, the responsibility for such efforts often shifted from development's cadre of professional, often foreign, experts to the CRGs' intermediaries. They helped the programme to achieve its outputs and to maintain what could be termed an 'official fiction' within its documents and reviews.

From the beginning intermediaries' positions within local politics proved invaluable. The programme often sought to build CRGs in places FAFEN's NGOs had little experience of. Accordingly, the studied groups were in large part the creations of intermediaries. Due to the CRGs' high drop-out rate, they were also often called upon to find new participants which included their relatives, business acquaintances and political allies. By the end of the programme they had, unsurprisingly, occupied the CRGs' leadership positions and, in some cases, dominated them. Nonetheless, STAEP's completion report declared that it had built a 'support base of citizen volunteers numbering more than 10,000' (DFID, 2015, p. 5).

The second-way intermediaries proved useful in rendering the programme technical was through efforts to collect the 'information' deemed necessary for social accountability. Following training, this responsibility was meant to have been shared amongst the CRGs' participants. In practice, the difficulty of doing so often meant connected intermediaries undertook the task. Furthermore, the generated data was mostly used by the programme as a way of monitoring the CRGs and ensuring they were doing something. It rarely featured in the studied groups' efforts to pressure authorities. Yet, within the completion report STAEP was praised for introducing 'the unique idea of research-based advocacy for improved governance' (DFID, 2015, p. 5).

The last way in which intermediaries were useful was in ensuring the CRGs' demands were met. Indeed, they often drew upon their political relationships to access authorities. As I discuss elsewhere, in some cases, this would ensure that other CRG members had a chance to participate in public and private forums, thereby, gaining vital political skills, forming relationships with authorities, and building their own and their groups' local identities (Kirk, 2017). But in others, intermediaries acted unilaterally and in private, conducting advocacy out of sight of the majority of the programme's participants. By STAEP's completion report such processes were collated and represented as value for money, and the authors concluded that:

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> STAEP has enabled citizens through mobilisation and intensive training to develop direct engagements with the state, as opposed to seeking services through social and political intermediaries, which is the traditional model that has inhibited any culture of public accountability.
> (DFID, 2015, p. 5).

Through a combination of ethnographic data and a critical reading of the programme's texts, it is arguable that some of the CRGs' most powerful politically connected members were crucial to DFID's ability to render STAEP's ground realities technical. Their voluntarism was drawn upon to build the CRGs, and to produce reams of data and case studies that were used to monitor them. In these ways, the programme's intermediaries became its 'experts', occupying pivotal positions amongst the chain of actors responsible for both enacting its solutions to poor governance and translating its messy ground realities into its donors' preferred discourses. In the process, however, the aspirations of the majority of those that joined the CRGs, including their political identities, were obscured. This gave intermediaries opportunities to further legitimise their positions within undemocratic networks, to maintain the status quo of by whom and how politics is done, and to undermine the programmes' wider democracy-enhancing aims.

This research also points to a deeper malaise. It concerns the need to maintain an official fiction that substituted attendance for mobilisation, identified and raised issues for voice, and generated governance information for local political insight. This fiction washed away the difficult questions raised by the intermediaries' participation in the CRGs. Furthermore, by STAEP's end, it was used to justify the replication, albeit with 'adaptations', of the programme's 'pioneering and successful model' within other initiatives (DFID, 2015, p. 5).

The danger is that the official fictions found within programme texts become the standard way of understanding and assessing them. Through sanitised, technical documents with impressive figures and depictions of year-on-year progress, donors such as DFID risk institutionalising the idea that holding meetings and getting things done are sufficient proxies for empowerment, accountability, and the consolidation and deepening of democracy. In this sense, the problem may be less about reductive civil society programmes limiting their participants' political horizons and more about entrenching apolitical results-based management logics amongst donors. As Mosse (2005, p. 14) suggests it is often 'donors who are disciplined by their own discourse'.

8 | ISOMORPHIC ACTIVISM

The dynamics described in this paper could simply be understood as a form of elite capture or elite control (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Elite capture occurs when programmes are dominated by elites who appropriate their material benefits and ensure they reach their supporters. Elite control denotes situations where elites' monopolisation of programme's processes does not necessarily make other participants or community members worse off. However, a focus on the material benefits and quantifiable aspects of social accountability programmes is inadequate for exploring their potentials to contribute to wider democratising projects. Instead, 'isomorphic activism' describes how intermediaries reduce programmes' democratic potentials by appropriating the opportunities for other participants to participate in public politics and, in some instances, strengthen antidemocratic norms.

I posit that: *isomorphic activism occurs when elite participants in social accountability programmes use their positions within wider clientelistic networks to publicly adopt the form and shape of activism, whilst privately appropriating the opportunities programmes promise other participants to participate in public politics*. I hypothesize that isomorphic activism is more likely in vastly unequal societies, when programmes rely on a small number of intermediaries to act as interlocutors with communities, and when they have predefined, often quantifiably measurable, templates of what civil society mobilisation, responsive governance and democratic political participation—in short, 'success'—looks like.

Three conditions shape isomorphic activism. The first concerns the ability of intermediaries to build associations within which most members are connected to them. This can hinder the idea of identity formation, mass deliberations, and the public good central to civil society. The second concerns the ability of intermediaries to drive the processes, bargains and decision making that leads to desired changes and the formation of new society-state relationships into the private sphere. This contravenes the requirement of publicness and transparency common to understandings of democratisation. The third condition is the ability of intermediaries to convince others, including programme participants, implementing organisations and donors, that they are not engaged in the previous two activities.

The conditions point to the ability of intermediaries to appropriate the energies of, and opportunities intended for, other programme participants. In contrast to elite capture or control, the emphasis is on the political skills and relationships programme's participants should individually and collectively accrue. They include the confidence to raise their voices, the building of reputations as civic-minded leaders and organisations, and access to authorities with the power to get things done. This focus privileges the idea that challenging clientelism and advancing democratising projects requires the formation of new individual and collective identities, new public networks

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that straddle the society-state divide, and mass participation in public political deliberations (Baiocchi et al., 2011; Tilly, 2007).

9 | CONCLUSION

Not every social accountability programme will fall foul of isomorphic activism. Nor should programmes ignore or seek to circumnavigate intermediaries. Rather, I am focussed on the subset of voluntary programmes implemented in states with clientelistic politics and an absence of strong formal accountability mechanisms. Despite these caveats, I believe this research describes a general disquiet that others have about the way in which social accountability programmes are sometimes implemented and the direction some donors' understandings of civil society are heading. The outstanding task is to offer programmers possible methods of alerting themselves to the problems described here. It is also necessary to make a better case for how social accountability programmes can challenge clientelism and contribute to ongoing democratising projects by acknowledging their participants' political identities and pushing activities into the public sphere.

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