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Introduction: Development practice, power and public authority

Tom Kirk[1,2] | Rose Pinnington[3]

[1]London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

[2]Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

[3]King's College London, London, UK

Correspondence
Tom Kirk, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.
Email: t.kirk@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Drawing upon research across multiple countries, the papers in this special issue explore how public authority dynamics affect development and humanitarian practices and processes. Some focus on places commonly labelled as in crisis or understood to be subject to multiple overlapping crises, where responses to epidemics, persistent conflict and migrations are in progress. Others examine how public authority dynamics affect the everyday governance of development in outwardly more stable contexts. The seven empirical papers are complimented by a conceptual framework for analysing how power permeates the foundations of public authority dynamics. Viewed together, they illuminate why exclusions, coercion and violence are often used by those claiming the legitimacy to govern, and how grasping what this may mean for well-intended interventions or reform efforts remains a challenge for practitioners. However, they also point towards a pressing need for outsiders to recognise their own roles in constructing and legitimising, sometimes harmful, forms of public authority in the places they work. And they suggest the first step is to confront a reluctance to acknowledge public authority dynamics in their official depictions of programmes' progress, learnings and impacts.

Christian Lund developed the idea of 'public authority' in response to the inadequacies of the 'fragile' and 'failed' states discourses on African governance that predominated among academics and policymakers in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lund, 2006). Others took up the concept to further respond to the heuristic limitations and normative biases of ideal-type Weberian state conceptions that dominated mainstream development literature in the 2010s (Hoffmann & Kirk, 2013). Through long-term fieldwork, a mixture of political sociologists and scientists, economists, geographers, anthropologists and development studies scholars revealed the variety of contemporary modes of social and political order and institutionalisation in areas of central and east Africa often written off as crisis-affected, ungoverned, or ungovernable. They used Lund's lens to contribute to an empirically grounded interdisciplinary academic literature on 'actually existing' governance and associated concepts such as 'mediated states', 'negotiated states', 'governance without government' and 'practical norms' (Hagmann & Peclard, 2010; Menkhaus, 2008; Olivier de Sardan, 2008; Raeymaekers et al., 2008). They showed that far from anarchic or isolated peripheries, such places are alive with contests over claims to positions of authority and the provision of public goods.

A core empirical and scholarly contribution of those using a public authority lens has been the identification of multi-scalar linkages between 'actually existing' governance dynamics in specific places and governance structures and institutions as more conventionally understood. This has often focussed on how the responses of public authorities to crises are shaped and can be shaped by national and international political economies (Kirk & Allen, 2022). This includes those presided over by states and their allies, and those driven by the agendas of the development and humanitarian sector. In particular, the lens has been used to show how crises present moments within which public authorities (re)define who is included and excluded from particular identity

groups and public spheres, what this means for their access to public goods and the prospects for different notions of development (De Herdt & Titeca, 2021; Pendle, 2023; Tapscott, 2021). This has led much of the literature to focus on the condition of traditionally marginalised groups, with the broad goal of exploring how public authority dynamics during crises affect them.

An initial focus on locations of armed conflict, population displacement, social reintegration and authoritarianism in Africa has since expanded to pressing issues outside the continent (Allen et al., 2021; Hopwood & O'Byrne, 2022; Macdonald et al., 2023). Researchers have piloted work in Europe and the UK, for example, on issues ranging from COVID-19 and vaccine hesitancy (Storer et al., 2022); to inequalities and identities among Roma (Sarafin, 2023), and on 'twilight institutions' in Lebanon's fragmented polity, and urban policing in places where the state does not have a monopoly of violence (Albrecht & Kyed, 2016; Stel, 2016; Yassin et al., 2016). Authors have even sought to conceptualise the 'networked forms of public authority' that seek to shape policymaking processes and reform efforts in the United Nations (Carayannis & Weiss, 2021). As applications of the concept of public authority have expanded, many have retained its critical edge by deploying their findings to reframe and challenge dominant discourses and policies emanating from states and international organisations.

The papers in this special issue of Global Policy from researchers working across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia advance this broad agenda. Together, they illuminate how governance, power and politics operate in development practices and processes, using different methodological approaches from different disciplines, including ethnography, political science and economics. They focus on places and situations commonly labelled as in crisis or understood to be subject to multiple overlapping crises, where responses to epidemics, persistent conflict and migrations are in progress (Allen & Parker, 2023; Büscher et al., 2024; Storer & Torre, 2023). However, they also examine how public authority dynamics affect everyday governance in outwardly more stable contexts, albeit showing how exclusions, coercion and violence is often used by those contesting others' claims to power (Joshi et al., 2024; te Lintelo & Liptrot, 2023). And they encompass investigations of how outsiders' interventions in such places may be forced to negotiate with hidden forms of public authority even as they seek to change by whom and how development occurs (Kirk, 2023; Pinnington, 2023).

These empirical contributions appear alongside Ferguson's paper that provides a conceptual framework for how power permeates the foundations of public authority dynamics (Ferguson, 2022). It begins by identifying four pivotal and overlapping components of public authority: First, that power serves as the foundation for public authority, acting as its underlying force; an essence that Ferguson suggests is not always explicitly foregrounded in the existing literature. Second, that the realm of public authority involves and fosters institutional bricolage as claimants design, transform and piece together mechanisms for enforcing rules, collective action and resource allocation. Third, that public authorities employ functions, structures, ideas and symbols associated with statehood to signal their intent to govern and to shape the ways they do. Finally, that these authorities actively pursue legitimacy and do not govern by force alone.

Ferguson sets himself the additional task of outlining seven basic formats for how public authorities make their claims to govern by drawing upon material and symbolic resources, including their positions within wider networks and systems. The formats are inspired by a nuanced reading of a wide range of existing empirical literature that has documented how public authority dynamics are always essentially relational, directly or indirectly involving more than two parties. Ferguson shows that a wide variety of actors within and beyond the formal state should be considered public authority actors and can be understood as 'skilled operators' and 'cultural innovators' (Ferguson, 2022). These actors constantly seek opportunities to confirm, augment and legitimise their power to govern by, among other tactics, disrupting others' relationships, mediating contests and disputes, withholding access to public goods or extracting benefits. The challenge for analysts is to discern when their tactics lead to more or less developmental outcomes, and whether it is possible and desirable for others to support them or try to negate their more harmful consequences.

In what follows, we use Ferguson's framework to help pick through the special issue's contributions and highlight trends, commonalities and differences. We then briefly conclude with comments on the implications of this collection for development scholars and practitioners and those wishing to use a public authority lens.

1 | INTERMEDIARIES

Many of the special issue's papers' findings are derived from long periods of ethnographic immersion within the societies under study, from familiarity with or participation in ongoing development programmes and interventions, and from close collaborations between researchers and those being researched. This allows their authors to provide nuanced accounts of public authorities and those they govern within places and institutions that are, in many cases, challenging sites for fieldwork. It also highlights the fluidity of public authority dynamics as claimants to power arise or are

rapidly overthrown as an outcome of reform efforts, crises or the policies designed to address them. Indeed, the contributions confirm that disruptions to prevailing social orders provide opportunities for the creative and entrepreneurial to claim positions of authority, often by deploying one or more of Ferguson's formats for exercising power.

Through such methods, many of the special issue's papers focus on how development programmes and responses to crises often rely on locally embedded or connected intermediaries. In the absence of pre-existing contextual knowledge, they are engaged to navigate and influence change processes by drawing on their local relationships and networks. These relationships are, however, shown to be highly contingent; they are bounded by contextually determined opportunities and existing claims to public authority. In Kirk's (2023) paper, this is reflected in the political space that intermediaries co-opt on behalf of other local activists, creating selective avenues for influence that reduce opportunities for wider participation and democratic movement building in a donor funded programme in Pakistan. In Pinnington's (2023) paper, the ability of intermediaries to support pro-poor outcomes is constrained by the extent to which they are embedded within the local context, Uganda's financial technocracy, which is no longer insulated from the wider politics of regime survival in the country.

Nonetheless, the authority of such intermediaries is revealed to be often dependent on their ability to adopt external legitimacy, while remaining responsive and engaged in local contexts. For example, in Pakistan, the studied intermediaries gained external legitimacy as 'experts' by translating messy local political realities into technical donor discourses, which were used to narrate 'official fictions' that demonstrated impact to funders (Kirk, 2023). This is also seen in Uganda, where the key intermediary's positonality as an 'independent' expert brought the programme the legitimacy to provide technical assistance, while at the same time actively supporting an endogenous process of reform. In a similar vein, Allen and Parker (2023) demonstrate how international public health practitioners have a role in constructing local public authorities by recognising and praising their militarised responses to epidemics. Yet, all three papers also suggest that the legitimacy outsiders bestow on intermediaries can obscure and repackage practices that limit prospects for inclusive development.

2 | NETWORKS

The papers' frequent descriptions of public authorities' positions within trans-local networks reinforces Ferguson's proposition that public authority is a relational property (Ferguson, 2022). For example, Joshi et al. (2024) use their innovative 'governance diaries' methodology to build a picture of how public authority is both a status claimed by individuals and a property of the networks they cultivate to ensure they can resolve people's dilemmas. They show how intermediaries in Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan leverage their networks to bring a measure of order and regularity to the lives of those residing in places where the state can be absent, predatory and violent, and where multiple competing authorities have the power to decide who gets access to vital public goods. Much like the other papers in this special issue, their research makes it clear that intermediaries' capacity to do this is highly contingent, often depending on the nature of the 'primary' authorities in a given locality, as well as local geographies of isolation and histories of exclusion.

Büscher et al. (2024) document how local governance actors build and mobilise 'power networks' to secure their authority by either supporting or disrupting the decentralisation processes in three towns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Their networks include ethnic, customary and state authorities and stretch from the local to national level, even touching upon diaspora communities. The authors show how these networks are formed in 'moments of rupture' caused by decentralisation efforts, yet quickly become entangled within exisiting struggles over issues such as historic and ongoing marginalisations, land ownership and mining revenues. This means that what may look to outsiders like localised contests for positions of authority are often trans-local due to their intimate connections to personalised patronage and political contests emanating from higher levels of governance, centres of power and the international sphere.

By examining such networks, the issue's authors also emphasise the need to study the daily practices and interactions of diverse governance actors within polycentric political systems that straddle the conceptual divide between state and society. They underscore that networks themselves can constitute a type of public authority as they 'gatekeep' access to local services and resources (Ferguson, 2022). For example, Storer and Torre's (2023) analysis of grassroots political movements in the Italian Alpine region demonstrates how 'solidarity networks' provide vital assistance to migrants, while challenging state norms governing citizenship and mobility in the context of public health measures taken in response to COVID-19. Operating at the intersection of humanitarianism, active citizenship and political activism, grassroots actors within these networks govern safehouses that provide vital public goods unavailable from the state that aid those making perilous journeys across Europe. At the same time, however, they limit the options for migrants looking to protect themselves from the virus due to deeply held local attitudes to top-down policies that have been shaped by historical struggles with the state.

3 | CONSEQUENCES

Taken together, the papers demonstrate that the study of public authority can reveal how the well-intentioned plans of those in political and economic centres can be resisted, subverted and co-opted. In this vein, Büscher et al. (2024) show how decentralisation efforts in the DRC, largely supported by the international donor community, have been subsumed within ongoing struggles for control of local material and symbolic resources. They document how the decentralisation scheme introduced new registers and discourses, in this case 'good governance', 'urbanisation' and 'development', to local political arenas where they quickly became part of the repertoires used by competing public authorities to gain legitimacy. Leaders at various levels, from local chiefs and big-men to senators, deploy them alongside older autochthony (nativeness) and 'balkanisation' discourses to resist and disrupt decentralisation plans that they fear will curtail their access to resources and, eventually, their authority. Where this is not enough, they activate connections to armed actors to disrupt others' plans. The authors argue that this continues a history of donors failing to consider how contests for public authority in the country's highly fragmented and militarised polity can take precedence over their favoured initiatives.

Similarly, Allen and Parker's (2023) paper highlights the entanglement of militarised epidemic control measures championed by international actors with processes through which political authority is formed and consolidated in Uganda and Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, military involvement in responses to the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak did not lead to its influence over the country's political processes, including successful elections that directly followed the outbreak. The military also went on to play a relatively minor role in the COVID-19 epidemic. This stands in contrast to Uganda's experience where the military's violent enforcement of lockdown rules and restrictions during the COVID-19 epidemic particularly affected marginalised communities. Their findings suggest the crisis presented the President and his allies with an opportunity to curtail democratic opposition and consolidate his party's autocratic hold on power at various levels of governance.

This speaks to a central dilemma faced by humanitarian and development practitioners, be they within states, civil society or donor organisations. Few would now discount the importance of public authority dynamics within or beyond the state, but grasping what engaging them may mean for well-intended programmes or reform efforts remains a challenge. This is demonstrated in te Lintelo and Liptrot's (2023) paper, which investigates how donor funded programmes for Syrian refugees in Jordanian and Lebanese municipalities understand and account for public authority dynamics. The authors argue that they largely adopt a 'no-contact' policy when it comes to tribal networks in Jordan and sectarian political parties in Lebanon due to concerns that they discriminately govern and that they may be linked to terrorist organisations. Instead, they push the responsibility for engaging these public authorities to implementing partners, whilst writing such activity out of programme documents through omissions, linguistic slights of hand and euphemisms.

In partial response to such issues, Pinnington's (2023) paper explores how some donors have sought to address them by working in 'politically savvy' ways that 'take the politics of aid-receiving contexts seriously'. This has led to efforts to work 'with the grain' of existing dynamics in order to gradually change them. Yet, Pinnington shows that, in an environment of shifting political constraints, this approach limited the success of the studied programme's attempts to secure pro-poor reforms, which relied on challenging the dominant political economy by threatening entrenched clientelist logics. This raises important questions regarding the critical distance needed to effectively engage with public authorities, as well as the trade-offs that must often be made by those looking to align with public authority dynamics. The wider worry, echoed across the issue's papers, is that imposing strictures about what can be said, and who or what can be engaged, continues the sector's history of sidelining the politics of humanitarian crises and developmental processes.

4 | FUTURES

The papers in this special issue lend weight to Ferguson's (2022) argument that public authority, in essence, concerns the exercise of power as actors leverage their material and symbolic resources to contest the direction of and distribution of benefits from change processes. They also accord with his assertion that public authorities' claims to legitimacy often involve the threatened or actual disruption of relationships and exchanges between third parties. In particular, the papers' focus on networks within which public authority is cultivated and exercised suggests that individual public authorities should often be seen as positioned within wider chains of actors and that their actions can rarely be dismissed as 'local' phenomenon.

We would argue that a focus on networks allows analysts to both recognise the agency of individual public authorities to shape local governance processes and how they are shaped by them. Furthermore, it enables investigations of how they are linked to trans-local and international centres of power. This is arguably vital if the lens is to say anything about the likely outcomes of humanitarian and development interventions. Indeed, although programmes often support reforms or seek to aid marginalised groups in specific places, it is not enough to take the power, legitimacy and interests of

local public authorities as sovereign. As the papers show, outsiders' well-intentioned efforts to engage these actors are often subsumed within longer running and wider contests for authority. This is often because the public authorities programmes engage are alive to the transient nature of their activities and the need to retain their networks and remain legitimate after they have ended. Accordingly, they may prefer to act in accordance with the wills and logics of actors beyond the immediate political arenas in which development programmes take place.

The studies also point towards the need for development and humanitarian practitioners to recognise their own roles in constructing and legitimising, sometimes harmful, forms of public authority. This, they suggest, often occurs through discursive processes that allot expertise and 'success' to favoured governance actors or processes. In particular, the papers show that the use of intermediaries to navigate and translate complex political realities that are inaccessible to practitioners often overlooks their inability to transcend the political boundaries of their own contexts. On the contrary, these intermediaries may embody or reproduce them, with the result that programmes' aims are limited or subverted. Nonetheless, methodologies like the governance diaries point towards ethnographic and participatory approaches that can be used by practitioners to contextualise programmes through granular assessments of the daily lives and experiences of marginalised groups. Foregrounding the perspectives of these groups, and their role in knowledge production, will create space for more power-sensitive and responsive development practices and crisis responses.

Whilst attentiveness to localised public authority dynamics, the wider contests they are embedded in and the consequences for programmes that overlook them are undoubtedly part of the puzzle, the issue's papers hint at an arguably greater obstacle. It concerns some donors' reluctance to acknowledge public authority dynamics in their official depictions of programmes' progress, learnings and impacts. Moreover, some even appear keen to push the responsibility for and risks of engaging public authorities to their local partners. Such practices are often discussed among humanitarian and development practitioners that work on the ground in the places explored by this issue, when they can speak freely about the challenges they face. But they do not often feature in the official descriptions of successful and unsuccessful change processes demanded by donors and provided to publics and politicians. This suggests that there exists a need to better understand programmes and donors as public authorities themselves, involved in efforts to legitimise their plans and ways of working by including and excluding different perspectives, actors and processes within their notions of humanitarianism and development. Such a programme of research would further elucidate how power and public authority shapes the sector, from top to bottom.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no known conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Tom Kirk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6283-9755
Rose Pinnington https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8373-5018

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Tom Kirk is a researcher and consultant based at LSE. His research interests include the provision of security and justice in conflict-affected regions, social accountability, civil society, local governance and public authority.

Rose Pinnington is a research associate at King's College London, Department of Political Economy. Her research focuses on the politics of development and humanitarian action. She is interested in donor efforts to 'localise' their practice, address power imbalances and respond to local political realities in operational contexts.