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Governance for Development in Africa: Solving Collective Action Problems David Booth and Diana Cammack Zed Books London 2013

While the importance of governance for development is now widely recognized, previous certainties about the type of governance that should be promoted in low income countries are increasingly coming under question. The good governance agenda that has held sway in both academic and policy circles for two decades argued that democratic, accountable and transparent governance systems are a requirement for successful performance in terms of economic growth and service delivery. This view has been challenged on the basis of empirical evidence suggesting that the types of governance that are associated with successful development outcomes are actually much more variable than was previously recognized. David Booth and Diana Cammack's book adds to this mounting body of evidence through a detailed examination of the institutional barriers to service delivery in Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda. This is the second major book to emerge out of the five year African Power and Politics Programme (APPP) at the ODI. Together with Kelsall's 'Business Politics and the State in Africa' (Zed; 2013), these books make a significant challenge to the good governance approach and show how far the terms of debate about the role of institutions in African development have shifted in recent years.

Booth and Cammak's main argument is that governance solutions have to 'go with the grain' of African societies in ways that may fall outside the norms of democratic accountability. They espouse the idea that African politics are essentially neo-patrimonial in character but argue that different patterns of patrimonialism, in particular the degree to which neo-patrimonial rent-seeking is fragmented or centralized, lead to different developmental outcomes. While the book draws on a wide range of countries that were researched under the APPP, the primary focus of the book is on their findings on maternal health care, water and sanitation, market regulation and public security in Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda. Chapter Two gives a brief historical overview of each country but does not provide an overview of the key shifts in practices of service delivery, most importantly privatization of public services and the move to co-production that has led to a multiplicity of actors within and outside the state taking on responsibility for service delivery – these factors are taken as given once the evidence from the case studies is discussed. Booth and Cammack's main focus is to identify the major bottlenecks of service delivery within the existing systems. The extent of policy coherence, the discipline of public service providers and the scope of local problem solving are identified as the main reason for the variations in service delivery. Their findings confirm the widely supported view that Rwanda has performed well on service delivery, particularly in maternal health, compared to other countries in their research. This is explained in terms of the degree of centralization of rent-seeking in Rwanda compared to other countries in their field work where 'provider indiscipline' was rooted in fragmented rent seeking and limited time horizons of political elites.

Booth and Cammack make a number of claims about the innovative nature of their research, and it is true that their rejection of democratization as a way of strengthening service delivery in African states represents a significant break with the recommendations of the good governance agenda. Chapter One locates their ideas within a wider academic context, but the book would be stronger if it provided a more nuanced and explicit discussion of the intellectual continuities in their ideas, particularly within the field of new political economy. Booth and Cammack are right to locate the problems of service delivery in developing countries within the context of politics.

Yet, the concept of African politics that they use is problematic for four main reasons. First, while they define neo-patrimonialism as the 'modal' type of African governance, they seek to break with the Weberian definition of patrimonialism. Instead, they build on Khan (2000) and North et al's (2009) arguments about the prevalence of clientelism in developing countries due to the pre-capitalist structure of the economies in question. However, in their approach, this is reduced to a limited engagement with the nature of power in African states. Power is defined in terms of narrow materialist rational choices of elites. While they are correct that the occurrence of clientelism as a form of political organization is the result of particular economic structures and historical experiences, clientelism jostles with other ways of organizing political power within African states. Patterns of power build not only on material interests but also on ideas, experiences of conflict and political organization (not just elite politics), as well as institutional legacies. Second, while they invoke politics as the explanation for successful collective action, their approach does not recognize that collective action can also be part of the problem as well as the solution; collective action can be used to undermine service delivery just as much as to promote it. Third, their argument for hybrid governance as a solution to service delivery underplays the tensions inherent in such arrangements (Meagher et al 2014) and the extent to which forms of hybrid governance can create and reinforce political cleavages. Their call to de-politicize service delivery (p 135) overlooks the fact that effective service delivery is not just an outcome of politics; service delivery also shapes politics itself. Finally, one of their core arguments is that the relationship between service delivery and governance ultimately depends on the level of economic transformation. Yet the extent to which public service provision can itself lead and shape an economic transformation is perhaps a more important research agenda for contemporary development policy (UNRISD 2013). On this question, the book is silent.

References

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