Background

Governance has often been viewed by practitioners and policy-makers through the lens of a developed state model, magnifying the importance of strong structures in the form of state, civil society and formal institutions. The Western and Weberian conceptions of state-centred governance, which view the state as a set of formal arrangements that institutionalise power, is often challenged in explaining how state (and society) operates in the developing world. The shortcoming is largely in failing to recognise informal institutions and their various governance-related functions – such as service delivery, dispute resolution, representation and electoral politics. An alternative approach to thinking about governance acknowledges the role of informal institutions and shifts attention from government-centric processes towards poly-centric processes, encompassing numerous actors, groups and networks, which could be formal or informal.

Formal and informal institutions can be differentiated according to how they were developed, codified, communicated and enforced. Informal Institutions are defined by ‘socially shared rules’ and ‘the unwritten rules of political life’ that are created, communicated and enforced outside of official channels, and usually outside of the public eye. Formal institutions are distinguished from informal institutions for they stem from official and regulated
public or private systems recognised by the state (such as the constitution). Formal institutions are ‘behaviourally prescriptive and normative’, meaning they dictate how actors should or should not act. Thus, formal institutions are enforced through official bodies and mechanisms, such as the police. Informal institutions, on the other hand, are ‘self-enforced’ and ‘socially-sanctioned’, arising from social norms, traditions, attitudes and morals, or in other words, they are widely accepted unwritten rules. Both formal and informal institutions provide predictability and stability to human interactions and thus help to reduce uncertainty. Formal and informal institutions are not mutually exclusive and often exist alongside each other within institutional setups. Therefore, it makes sense to not just focus on one type, but to consider the relation between both.

It is paramount to recognise and even celebrate informal institutions, whether those complementary to the rigid formal institutions or the substitutive ones that aim at achieving the same goals as weak formal institutions.

Informal institutions fulfill three functions: they complete or fill gaps left by formal institutions; they operate in parallel to formal institutions to regulate the same kind of political behaviour; and they help coordinate the operation of intersecting/overlapping institutions. In all three instances, informal and formal institutions exist largely in complementary fashion with each other. Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky approached the relationship between formal and informal institutions by taking into account two dimensions: the effectiveness of formal institutions and the degree to which the outcomes of formal and informal institutions converge (whether they lead to similar outcomes or not).…continue reading

Download the paper in English | Download the paper in Arabic

Nasser Yassin is Director of Research at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, and Professor of Policy and Planning at the Health Management and Policy Department at the American University of Beirut. He tweets at @nasseryassin.

Jana Chammaa is Project Coordinator for the Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World Program, at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut. She tweets at @JanaChammaa.

Other papers in the series

- Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: A Turning Point? Mireille Girard
- Syrian Refugees and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Hayder Mustafa Saaid
- Refugees’ Contentious Politics and the Case of Syrian Activists in Jordan Rana B. Khoury
- Iraqi and Syrian Refugees in Jordan Adjusting to Displacement: Comparing their Expectations towards UNHCR and their Capacities to use their Educational Assets Géraldine Chatelard
- Host State Responsibility and Capacity in Egypt, Morocco and Turkey Kelsey Norman
• Relations Between UNHCR and Arab Governments: Memoranda of Understanding in Lebanon and Jordan
  Ghida Frangieh

• Syrian Refugee or Stateless Refugee: The Challenges of Statelessness in Exile
  Zahra Albarazi

• Gendered Vulnerability and Forced Conscription in the War in Syria
  Rochelle Davis

• The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Understanding Perceptions and Aspirations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey
  Dawn Chatty

• The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Global and Regional Perspective
  François Reybet-Degat

• Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science