The Informal Adaptive Mechanisms among Syrian Refugees and Marginalised Host Communities in Lebanon

9/22/2016

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This paper was presented at a workshop on 'The Long-term Challenges of Forced Migration: Local and Regional Perspectives from Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq' organised by the LSE Middle East Centre in June 2016. It was published as part of a collected papers volume available in English *and* Arabic.

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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

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