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Research Roundup

Collaboration in delivering education: relations between governments and NGOs in South Asia

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Abstract

Collaboration between governments and non-state providers of basic services is increasingly a focus of attention by international agencies and national policymakers. The intention of such collaboration is to support common goals for achieving universal provision. Drawing on research in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, the paper shows that collaboration can be successful where NGOs do not depend on limited sources for their funding, and invest time in building an informal relationship with government officials. In such cases, not only can collaboration strengthen NGO service provision directly, but it also provides opportunities for NGOs to engage in broader policy advocacy through insider influence.

Keywords: civil society; governance and public policy; South Asia, social sector (health, education)

Introduction

The post-colonial ideal of universal state provision of basic services embraced in South Asia and elsewhere has not been realized. This has often left the poorest and most vulnerable households under-served by public provision of basic education, health and sanitation. In such circumstances, non-state providers sometimes play an important role. A key question that emerges is whether and how these providers collaborate with the state to support common objectives for achieving universal provision.

This research roundup provides a summary of findings from a two-year research project which aimed to understand how relationships between governments and non-state service providers are organized, strategies that the actors employ to manage the relationship, and what balance of influence emerges between them.[1] Among non-state service providers, it focused on bodies describing themselves as 'not-for-profit', non-governmental, voluntary or community organizations.

While the scale of non-state provision varies between countries and across service sectors, it can be sizeable. Surveys show that, in Bangladesh, 88% of households seeking health care go to non-state providers – mainly traditional village doctors. Outside the core of the larger cities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the population largely depends on sanitation services organized by households, communities and entrepreneurs (WHO and UNICEF, 2008). While non-state provision in education is often not on as large a scale as observed for health and sanitation, it can sometimes be sizeable. In Pakistan, up to one-third of children in school are estimated to attend a private school (Andrabi et al., 2006). Non-governmental organisations

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(NGOs) also play a crucial role in extending education provision to children living in particularly difficult circumstances who are unable to access formal government schooling. In Bangladesh and India, such non-formal education by NGOs caters for around eight to ten percent of overall primary education enrolment (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2002; Chowdury et al., 2004).

Most private sector (commercial) providers operate independently from government, making up for gaps and deficiencies in public services. In some cases, NGOs or voluntary associations have adopted the same go-it-alone strategy, often supported by donor funding: Bangladesh is well known as a country where parallel systems of service delivery have developed since the 1980s. However, many NGOs work in collaboration with government, either to improve public services or to complement them. The case for 'partnership' of this kind is now widely promoted by donors and acknowledged, in principle, by governments and many NGOs. Even where formal partnership arrangements do not exist, there are usually a variety of ways in which NGOs and governments have to - or choose to - collaborate.

While collaboration is widely acknowledged, purists of NGO autonomy would prefer them to maintain a wholly independent stance, advocating policy change and exerting external pressure on government. Politicians and public officials may see threats to their nominal mastery of public policy in the involvement of NGOs in the delivery of public services. How are these relationships handled in practice, and what are their effects on the autonomy of non-governmental public action?

This paper focuses on evidence from the education sector, drawing on analysis of in-depth research of the relationships between government and an established national NGO in each of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The selected cases were complemented by interviews with other key NGOs involved both in education and other basic services within each of the countries. In primary education, the NGOs included in the study were involved in direct provision to 'hard to reach' children (both in urban slums and remote rural areas), or were indirectly involved in provision through support to improve the quality of government schools. Their programmes were not viewed by government or NGOs as permanent arrangements but as ways of filling gaps in government provision, or of bringing new and improved practices into government services.

How relationships are formally organised: Are governments in charge?

The degree to which NGOs maintain a sphere of autonomy in relationships with government depends partly on the explicit assertiveness of government policy, control of finance and setting of the terms of agreements. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, government policies for basic services include some commitment to collaboration with NGOs. In the health sector in Bangladesh, for example, the relationship was governed by a very directive policy supported by coordinated flows of donor funding through government. However, such strong government authority is not apparent for education in any of the three countries.

For the education sector, variation in the visibility of NGOs in national plans is apparent, with weak concern for the formal development of relationships with NGOs. In Bangladesh, where NGOs are most active, their role is not even made explicit within the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDPII). By contrast, in India, the importance of 'alternative and innovate education' to reach those otherwise excluded from school has been a central part of

the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Universalization of Elementary Education Programme) (Government of India, 2002). This includes some government funding for NGO programmes in some states, requiring a formal, contractual relationship. However, as indicated below, NGOs are not necessarily dependent on this funding, with most of their resources often coming from philanthropic and local corporate sources. In Pakistan, formal government recognition of NGOs has occurred more recently as part of a donor-driven policy approach.

Where NGO provision is increasingly recognised in national planning, there are usually expectations that funding of their programmes will rely on international (and other non-government) sources. The inclusion of NGO programmes in education plans in the three countries to a large extent reflects trends internationally. Until very recently, international priorities have focused on NGO provision as being an 'alternative' parallel system to government. It is only over the past decade that such provision is increasingly viewed as complementary to government schooling. This shift is reflected in attempts to ensure that qualifications obtained through NGO provision are recognised by governments and employers in order to provide a route for children back into the public education system and into the labour market (Rose, 2009). The international focus on identifying complementarity between NGO and government provision has occurred in the context of broader trends towards advocacy for partnerships in basic service delivery (Batley and Larbi, 2004).

Despite relatively weak formal recognition of NGO activities by the three governments, strong views were expressed by some NGO stakeholders of a tendency by governments increasingly to favour more formalised relationships in practice. The NGOs anticipate a shift towards donor funding being channelled via governments rather than directly provided to NGOs, as donors seek to fulfil the Paris Declaration pledges of coordination and country ownership. NGOs expect such arrangements to be accompanied by more hierarchical written agreements or contracts, placing governments more firmly in the driving seat. This has intensified NGO awareness and interest in trying to work more closely with government officials to build cooperative relationships.

What strategies do NGOs adopt to achieve influence?

One question that arose from the research was whether NGOs are subordinated to government agendas. The research found that relationships between governments and NGOs were usually not so unbalanced.

Relations with government have usually grown out of a history of informal relationships between government and well-established NGOs. These informal relations are often sustained as an important basis of trust. In most cases NGOs have options about their sources of funding. They are therefore not dependent on government, and so not powerless in their relations with them. Rather, they pursue strategies that balance independence, financial survival and commitment to their own goals. The research identified three patterns of such strategies by NGOs:

1. *Avoiding dependence on government or donors, to collaborate on a voluntaristic and equal basis.*

Certain NGOs are able to build mutual (more or less equal) relationships with government. The ability of the Indian education NGO to exploit funding from independent (philanthropic) sources enabled it then to decide whether and for what purpose to attempt to acquire government resources directly through the government's Alternative and Innovative

Education programme. While not being dependent on government, the NGO's leaders recognised the importance of building a relationship of trust with government. As a result, the NGO was able to influence government policy to support its own activities.

Through negotiations with the municipal corporation the NGO was able to persuade government officials to do away with the mandatory requirement of a birth certificate for admission to municipal schools. The requirement was a key deterrent for children living in the slums who were born at home or had migrated from other states and hence did not possess a valid birth certificate. The NGO was modest in its success, and did not seek to claim exclusive credit for the policy change. In addition, as a result of the NGO's efforts, the municipal corporation conducts examinations in mathematics, Hindi and general knowledge and issues certificates to graduates from the NGO centres. This is important in giving credibility to the programme, as well as offering children the opportunity to continue with their education in the formal school system or to access employment opportunities. In both cases, engagement with government was primarily aimed at ensuring success of the NGO's own provision.

2. *Avoiding dependence on any one funding source, to retain capacity to shape relationships.*

Some NGOs managed their financial situation to ensure that they were not dependent on a single source, by combining donor, government and their own funding. The availability of multiple alternative sources of funding left them relatively free to assert their own priorities and to shape their relationship with government and other funders. In the Pakistan education case, the NGO's Director has successfully established herself in the role of knowledge broker between government and external agencies. Through her contacts with international agencies, she is familiar with the idea and language of 'partnership' and with new approaches to public management. Indeed, unlike the other two education NGOs studied in India and Bangladesh, the Pakistani NGO's mission statement has the explicit aim of influencing public policy.

Thanks to her high level of technical expertise, the Director has been able to explain and 'sell' new approaches to collaboration, not only to support the NGO's own provision. The NGO has even take on the role of drafting for government the framework of agreements between them. While the NGO enters into 'mutual agreements' with government (formally through 'memoranda of understanding' – MOU - outlining the roles and responsibilities of each party), in practice it manages to take control of the relationship. The NGO's leadership takes pride in its ability to draw up the MOU on behalf of government, and that it was the first NGO to initiate the preparation of these. By doing this, it considers that it has helped to build the capacity of district government who did not know how to draw these up.

As with others, the NGO was astute at giving government the impression that it was in control, while actually employing strategies to manage the relationship. Overall, the NGO's approach has been to get its demands met by government through negotiation and skilful manipulation, rather than confrontation which it recognizes as being counterproductive to its aims.

3. *Accepting dependence on one or a few sources of funding, and adapting the NGO to funders' requirements.*

Relying on fewer sources of funding often led NGOs to adapt to the requirements of hierarchic relationships with government. This was most apparent for the NGOs in Bangladesh. Here, the education NGO studied was particularly dependent on one aid donor.

The relationship with the donor had been relatively relaxed, enabling the NGO to operate at a distance from government. However, as greater accountability was being demanded for aid delivery by the aid donor's own government, the conditions under which the NGO could receive funding were being tightened. One of the conditions was that the NGO should work more closely with government, given the ultimate aim of the aid donor was to strengthen government's own programmes. This was challenging for the NGO, in part raising questions within the organisation about whether it saw this as its role, because over the two decades of its existence, it had focused on its own direct service provision.

With the danger of losing funding from its predominant source, the NGO had to diversify to other available options. Paradoxically, the key alternative source available was funding through a government programme which involved direct contracting of NGOs. Without having an already established cooperative relationship with government, this risked compromising the NGO's independence. Given its resource dependence, it did not have much choice. Under the formal contractual relationship with government which did not sufficiently have a basis of trust, the government was able to break terms of the contract, for example related to procurement of teaching materials without any possibility of come-back by the NGO. Moreover, the government was able to assert control when the NGO broke the terms of the agreement by using funds allocated under the budget for renting facilities so as to increase wages of teachers, which it considered to be too low. The government had the power to withhold funding. This situation of resource dominance, in which the government neither desired nor was required to build a cooperative relationship with the NGO, led to antagonism that effectively put service delivery to some of the most vulnerable children in danger. Ultimately, it led to compromise on the part of the NGO for whom confrontation would be counter-productive.

What balance of influence emerges?: NGO service providers as policy advocates on the inside

While the basic strategy of all the NGOs studied was ultimately to avoid confrontation with government, they have often been able to influence policy and its implementation by collaborating with government, sometimes demonstrating new approaches to service delivery that government can adopt. They are outsiders to government but, through contracts, agreements or even unwritten informal processes, become insiders to a relationship whose structure gives them influence. Paradoxically, while playing the 'insider role' may put actors' independence at risk, it also gives them the necessary leverage to assert influence. Insiders have the opportunity to understand the constraints on and opportunities for change, and to develop convincing explanations for why change is necessary.

Examples were found in the research where such insider influence by NGOs was an explicit part of their agenda (in Pakistan, for example), as well as occurring more subtly (for example in India). By contrast, the NGO in Bangladesh concentrated efforts on its own service delivery, and made little attempt to engage in advocacy. For the Pakistani NGO, the aim was to use its own service delivery as an entry point to have an affect on high-level policy directions. Thanks to the determination of the NGO Director and her connections with senior policymakers, this achieved some success. Ultimately, the Indian NGO was less ambitious, limiting advocacy for policy change to ones that supported its activities, and achieved the desired result of enabling disadvantaged children to go to school. In both the India and Pakistani cases, successful management of relationships by NGO service providers with government allowed them to engage in a form of 'soft advocacy' that may be as, if not more,

influential on policy and practice than the 'hard advocacy' that external critics of government have to adopt.

Conclusion

NGO engagement in basic service delivery is often criticized on two somewhat contrary grounds. It is often taken as part of the 'neo-liberal' challenge, displacing the responsibility of government or marginalizing it to a mere oversight role. Or, NGOs' independence is assumed to be threatened by working in collaboration with government – undermining their independent advocacy role. While at the extreme these two threats exist, the research showed that there are more subtle possibilities which are more often the case in reality. Governments can maintain responsibility while benefiting from well-structured support by NGOs in particular to provide education in difficult circumstances. Through this, NGOs can exert influence on both policy and service delivery where they take time to establish a reputation, show clear expertise, invest in building informal relationships with government, and ensure that they are not dependent on any one source of funding. As such, NGOs should not necessarily be seen as having to choose between being providers *or* advocates. Rather, this research finds that, under certain conditions, engagement in advocacy *and* service provision may exist simultaneously.

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