First in the Queue?
Mainstreaming the Poor in Service Delivery

by

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It is Saturday afternoon, and many citizens of the small rural town of La Rosa are mixing cement and hauling concrete blocks.[1] Others are carefully applying mortar and aligning the blocks as the community's new health clinic takes shape. They are working under the direction of an NGO, Clinics for the People, which has carried out an extensive needs assessment in the town and engaged in a long and concerted effort to encourage the participation of the community in the planning, building, and management of their new health post. When it is completed, the government has promised to send a practical nurse and a medical probationer to La Rosa. The community and Clinics for the People will manage the new post, much of whose focus is to be on maternal and child health.

Meanwhile, villagers in Bandapur are gathering to pay their monthly fees to Educate All, a private sector network of schools that operates throughout their state in India. Educate All schools are designed to meet the needs of poor people and particularly to bring education services to girls in rural areas—those who are most often underserved by the public school system. In Bandapur, parents have noticed that their children are now more eager to go to school and more diligent in doing their assignments; they are learning skills that will be important as they graduate into the local labor market. Although these parents are very poor, they believe making the sacrifices to pay the school fees is well worth it. They long ago gave up any expectation that the government-provided school would function regularly, be staffed with full-time and well-qualified teachers, or educate their children adequately.

And, in a slum neighborhood on the outskirts of Kumasi, a group of residents is busy digging a large ditch down the middle of the street. A new municipal water system is providing pipes and hookups for potable water when communities provide the work necessary for installation. Children play about the ditch and hawkers have arrived to sell drinks and snacks to workers and onlookers. Although the work is hard, there is a palpable sense of community among those who wield the shovels and pick-axes. The

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entire neighborhood will celebrate the completion of the work this evening with a feast and dancing. Within weeks, the community will have its first potable water supply.

These are celebrated images. They appear on video clips about grassroots development, in government and NGO brochures about the provision of services to the poor, and in the sidebars of publications of donor organizations concerned about poverty reduction. In such materials, the participation of people in their own development is commended, community leaders and politicians profess themselves pleased with the results, and NGOs and donors proclaim that it is possible to attend to the needs of the poor majority, even in the poorest of countries. Most important, the people of the communities express gratification that, at last, they have some benefits for themselves and their children. The positive nature of the engagement of poor people in the provision of basic services is clear to all.

But should it be? Not shown in the video clips, the brochures, and the sidebars is that many others in the same countries receive relatively reliable health, education, and water services with much less effort. Frequently, the better off among the poor and those among the lower middle and middle classes are not asked to contribute their labor in constructing clinics or digging ditches. Gaining such services is not usually subject to elaborate needs assessments or negotiations. User fees are infrequently required of them and their taxes usually remain uncollected. Neither do they have to depend on elaborate partnerships with NGOs, the vagaries of donor funding, or the interest of the private sector in order to send their children to school, take their infants to well-baby clinics, or drink potable water. They do not have to fit meetings and labor contributions into other demands on their time—carrying water, working in fields or factories, collecting fuel, caring for numerous children.

A central problem with service provision in many countries is that the poor are generally at the end of the queue. They are the least likely to benefit from public services and the least likely to be able to make demands on government for improvements in coverage or quality. As a consequence, they are often expected to make commitments and contributions that are not required of others and to depend on non-traditional mechanisms for service delivery. There are, of course, many impediments to achieving more effective service delivery through traditional methods of state provision. Yet, as I suggest, the poor need not be last in the queue, encouraged to forage elsewhere for services when the public sector proves unwilling or incapable of responding to their needs. Mainstreaming poverty reduction would do much to make the provision of services more available to the poor. Doing so, however, means addressing difficult issues of political priorities and public sector management and resisting the temptation simply to maneuver around these difficulties. While it is certainly understandable why many have given up on the public sector, doing so ignores the very conditions required to make both traditional and non-traditional service provision work more effectively.

Getting Past the Government

Non-traditional methods of service delivery have come about because of a wide range of government failures. It is not surprising that many public sector organizations whose task is to deliver basic services are held in very low esteem. Frequently, these organizations are highly centralized and overly bureaucratized. In a wide range of countries, almost everyone has a story about some simple problem that could not be resolved because it had to be referred to ministry headquarters, reviewed by countless officials, and ultimately signed off on by a high level official who had much more important things to do; getting the requisite approvals often meant mobilizing influence networks and paying bribes for routine activities.[2]

Moreover, service providing ministries are often colonized by public sector unions and shut down by strikes during annual negotiations over salaries and benefits. Regularly, reformist ministers and vice-ministers come and go while others maintain control of internal bureaucratic empires. Similarly, accusations of corruption, of payrolls padded with ghost employees, and of contracts let to favored vendors are heard regularly. Public organizations are considered to be hotbeds of clientelism and malfeasance, unresponsive to user needs, and unable to provide coverage for those most in need of services.

For their critics, then, public sectors have proved unable to provide reliable and decent services, particularly to the poor. Public services are held to account for being poorly funded and subject to shifting policies and politics. Indeed, severe disillusion with the public sector has been an important reason for the burgeoning of non-traditional methods of delivering basic social services. Such approaches generally seek ways to bypass traditional bureaucracies and the sloth and corruption imputed to them. These approaches have also gained popularity as many non-traditional initiatives demonstrated the capacity to be innovative and successful in meeting the needs of poor people.

Thus, contracting out, NGO and private sector provision, community-based self-help, co-production, social funds, compensatory programs, and other mechanisms have emerged as hopeful alternatives to faltering line ministries. Indeed, given the evidence of innovative non-traditional approaches and high levels of frustration with publicly provided services, many believe that services can be much more effectively offered if governments would step aside to allow for greater engagement by non-traditional providers. Defenders of these approaches argue that needs are so pressing and line ministries so inefficient that it is impossible for them to respond adequately; it is better to circumvent the bureaucracy and get directly to the actions that respond to the dire problems that beset so many citizens.

Yet this level of despair over the incapacities of government may not be fully warranted. In many countries, even while strong criticisms are leveled against government, relatively reliable public services are available to many citizens. Frequently,

some poor people—although rarely the poorest—as well as those in the lower middle and middle classes, benefit from the public provision of health, education, water, and sanitation services. Usually, such people live in urban areas and may have relatively stable jobs. Some among them qualify for government provided health services and pensions. They often live in neighborhoods with public drains and hook-ups to potable water and electricity. There is usually a neighborhood primary school nearby and a secondary school within reasonable commuting distance. Frequently, the quality of the services they receive is low, but often decent enough that they are not motivated to turn to private sector providers for them. In distinction to their very poor neighbors in urban slums and rural areas, the somewhat better off receive many services as rights of citizenship. And even while many in the middle and upper classes have recourse to private health and education services, they are nevertheless the beneficiaries of decent quality water and sanitation services; moreover, they rarely have to pay much, if anything, to receive them. This suggests that public sectors may be less incapable of providing services than is often thought.

This perspective is bolstered by the history of the expansion of service provision in many countries in earlier decades. In Latin American countries in the 1950s, 1960, and 1970s, for example, public education and public health facilities were rapidly expanded to large numbers of urban and rural citizens who had not had access to these services before.[3] In the period after independence, many African countries also rapidly expanded the availability of schools and health services. Potable water became a normal feature of urban development in many Latin American and Asian countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Rural electrification also expanded rapidly in the 1970s in many countries around the world. In the past, massive vaccination efforts virtually wiped out the incidence of some diseases. These improvements mirrored expanding populations and rapid urbanization, but they also mirrored the expansion of democratic political systems and increased competition among political parties for the votes of previously disenfranchised groups. This history suggests that governments have not always been incapable of providing more and better services to low-income populations.

In addition, although the level of disillusion with government is high, public sectors have not been immune to improvement in more recent decades. During the past two decades, reformers in government, development professionals, academics, and donor organizations focused great attention on improving government performance.[4] The sources of public sector improvement varied from country to country and reform to reform, of course, and countries differed in the alacrity with which they took up such changes and the extent to which they actually put them in place after committing themselves rhetorically to change.[5] Similarly, countries differed in the extent to which they maintained their commitment to public sector reform over time. And clearly, many of the reforms were less effective than their creators imagined. Yet there is some evidence that, in some countries, at least, efforts to improve public sector performance are bearing fruit. Indeed, a survey of expert opinion in 20 countries in 2000/2001 revealed that government performance was thought to have improved a bit over a five-year period (see Table 1).[6]

Table 1

There is also evidence that some public sector organizations have demonstrated the capacity to sponsor innovative improvements in service delivery, even in the midst of public sectors that are very unresponsive. Among the most often cited is the community-based health program studied by Judith Tendler in Northeast Brazil, in which new methods of contracting public employees and effective use of information for residents helped create a virtuous circle of good performance and higher satisfaction among the poor.[7] A number of countries have significantly altered the structures through which education services are delivered and at times, decentralized services have been improved under the administration of reformist politicians.[8] Engaging citizens in budget processes and monitoring public goods provision has also shown positive results.[9] Islands of excellence in the provision of services are not so uncommon as often believed and these examples suggest that government incapacity to reform cannot be fully sustained as reasons for turning away from the public sector in the provision of basic services.

Yet the temptation to do so remains strong. Alternatives to the public sector have demonstrated they can reach the poor when the public sector can't or won't. Moreover, non-traditional approaches to service delivery often show good results and indicate that much can be done relatively rapidly to meet social needs without the problems of inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and unresponsiveness that plague public sector initiatives. These approaches often indicate the benefits that can be gained through consultation and participation. They certainly provide ways of maneuvering around slow moving and politically compromised public sector ministries. And non-traditional service delivery activities can sometimes operate, at least locally, without confronting fractious public sector unions that have often colonized these ministries. Moreover, there is evidence that the poor are, on their own, resorting to alternatives to government services.[10] Indeed, there may be much that government can do (or cease doing) to encourage the emergence of non-traditional service providers.

But caution is warranted if non-traditional service providers are expected to be surrogates for governments that fail. Non-traditional providers face a series of challenges that limit their capacity to fill the gap left by public sector initiatives. For example, NGO and private providers often face constraints in terms of the scale of services they are able to provide and they are rarely under any obligation to consider equity in allocating their scarce resources. Social funds may respond to the better off rather than to the poorest.[11] Privatization of services often results in "cherry-picking" and can be met with extensive political backlash when fees are raised.[12] Nor are non-traditional providers immune to the technical, logistical, and managerial failures that plague traditional methods. Similarly, the principle-agent problems that beset public providers can easily affect alternative providers and concerns about information asymmetries are as relevant for them as for traditional providers. Sustainability may be an even greater problem. Moreover, the poor, who generally have limited capacity to make demands on government, may not be any more successful in organizing to make their interests known to non-traditional providers. Even when they are engaged in managing and monitoring

services at the local level, they are not necessarily able to insist on the quality of what they receive or to provide reliable user payments.

Mainstreaming Poverty Reduction

Why is it so difficult to ensure that the poor benefit from the equitable provision of public services? Answers to this question are legion—and frequently heard. The poor tend to live in rural areas or in slums where the delivery of services is particularly difficult; those who are better off usually live in urban areas and are important to politicians; teachers and health workers do not want to work in poverty-stricken areas; powerful public sector unions focus on salary and benefit issues, not on improving the performance of service providers; the poor will value services more if they contribute to them. In addition, evidence of budget allocations that favor the urban and the better off suggest the political difficulties of altering this situation. And, it is argued, governments burdened with debt (or riddled with corruption) cannot allocate additional resources to expand services.

Do these factors mean that the poor must remain at the back of the public service provision queue? Not necessarily. There are some factors—political as well as developmental—suggesting that poverty reduction has become a more important issue in many countries. At the same time that non-traditional forms of service delivery have become much more commonplace in development practice, and much more likely to be funded by donor agencies, poverty reduction has become a more salient concern of many governments. Through the PRSP process, for example, many have had to redefine their national development strategies in terms of poverty reduction and have had to make commitments to budgetary and institutional changes that focus more on poverty and its alleviation than has been the case in the past. In many countries also, efforts to develop poverty maps and country human development reports have produced information about the location and depth of poverty, information that provides a basis for policy making and for making political claims on the state, particularly by local and provincial governments newly empowered through decentralization.

Governments have also been encouraged to consider painful tradeoffs in funding across sectors—guns or education, for example.[13] Some officials concerned primarily about managing the economy have come to believe that levels of human development must be improved if their countries are to compete in a rapidly expanding global economy. Moreover, as democratic institutions have been more widely introduced, politicians have given at least lip service to issues of widespread poverty among their constituents. Many have campaigned on promises to provide improved services. At times, elites are personally affected by the consequences of poverty and lend support to anti-poverty initiatives.[14] In some cases, decentralization of state services has resulted in increased demands on local and regional governments that they become more efficient, effective, and responsive in providing these services; as indicated, some of these demands are translated into claims on central governments for increased resources. These are some indications that poverty reduction, as a central focus of public policy and national development, has become more important on public agendas.

Moreover, governments continue to have incentives to be concerned with the delivery of many services, however poor their performance currently. These incentives often have to do with political and security interests. For example, governments may have concerns about the religious and ideological content of education and therefore be averse to relinquishing their role in shaping curriculum and forming citizens.[15] They may want to have firm control over setting standards, determining treatments, and overseeing drug provision in the country's primary network of health clinics. They may have a wide range of concerns about disease prevention, not least to protect the health of the better off and politically important groups in the population. They may wish to enhance their legitimacy by delivering health, education, and sanitation services to the poor. Further, they may wish to have control over what is, in many countries, an increasingly scarce resource—water. These are some possible reasons that governments might be encouraged to pay more attention to the effective delivery of basic services to poor populations.

Rather than giving up on public provision of services to the poor as too fraught with difficulties, and recognizing that the expansion of such services through non-traditional means is promising but no less difficult, efforts to mainstream poverty reduction can be encouraged. Mainstreaming means that services are designed and carried out with the central objective of improving the life chances of the poor and reducing inequities in their provision. This imperative has significant implications for the definition of policy objectives, the design of services, and resource allocation decisions. It also has significant implications for the political relevance of the poor.

Mainstreaming poverty reduction requires significant changes from much current practice. Normally, concerns about poverty and equity tend to be appended to national policies for education, health, and water provision. Often, for example, national policies for health are determined and resources allocated on the basis of the budgetary needs of existing hospitals, services, and units. Then, almost as an afterthought, special programs are devised for at-risk mothers and infants, nutrition deficits in remote rural areas, and training for practical nurses who work in poverty-stricken regions. These special programs are often funded by donor agencies and managed by special implementation units within ministries. Unfortunately, such programs tend to be chronically underfunded, administered with considerable variation in quality, and particularly subject to suspension or death when political administrations change or donor funding ends. And, even under ideal conditions of funding and administration, they are usually unable to overcome the biases in more general policy or their administration.

Thus, for example, a special program to provide appropriate learning materials to indigenous children in remote rural areas can easily fail to compensate for a school in disrepair where students of many ages and abilities are grouped in one classroom, where the teacher has only an 8th grade education, and where nutrition levels among children are so low that they are unable to learn effectively. It certainly cannot compensate for lack of employment opportunities, insanitary housing, and family problems of violence or substance abuse. Even when programs attempt to address an interconnected set of issues,

they often do not reach an appreciable proportion of the population in need. With mainstreaming, in contrast, national education policy would recognize the priority of basic education, appreciate the special resource claims of underserved areas and underserved groups from the outset of the resource allocation process, ensure that well-trained professionals served the least advantaged first, and even view schools as centers for meeting a variety of needs for poor children, including nutrition, after-hours programs, and basic health needs.

Making such changes would certainly not be easy. It would require that policy makers have better information on the conditions and location of poor people and that they understand the specific causes of poverty among poor populations. It would mean designing public policies on the basis of this information. It would certainly imply that governments face up to politically difficult decisions about resource allocation. It might easily mean efforts to expand participatory budgeting activities, encourage national debates about the state of public services and their provision, direct more resources to those who have little political voice, and use information effectively to convince politically vocal and better off citizens that their lives are improved when poverty and equity gaps are addressed. These are politically sensitive issues, but ones that are beginning to be addressed in some countries through the PRSP process and through the greater political mobilization of low income constituencies. They have also been forced by public disillusion with many of the "Washington Consensus" policy reforms of the past two decades; many citizens are arguing that the state has a set of irreducible responsibilities, among which are ensuring (although not always delivering) basic public services and increased conditions of equity and access.

Mainstreaming poverty reduction would not only mean reconceptualizing how services are designed but also how they are implemented. This would require that service providers become focused on more difficult tasks and harder-to-achieve objectives. In turn, this would mean a central concern with public sector reform and improving the capacity of government organizations and public sector workers to carry out their assigned functions more effectively. In many ways, then, mainstreaming poverty reduction would mean addressing the very problems that led to the popularity of non-traditional service provision in the first place.

Recapturing the Public Sector

Frustrated reformers can be excused for searching for alternatives to providing services through line ministries that are often inefficient, ineffective, unaccountable, and unresponsive. Yet these public sector organizations are important, despite their many faults. They control budgets, standards, and regulations. They license and deploy critically important personnel such as teachers, nurses, doctors, and civil engineers. They determine salary and benefit packages of service providers and regulate the unions and professional associations that represent them. They own and manage extensive infrastructures of schools, clinics, hospitals, and distribution networks. They determine what paperwork needs to be completed and often have the capacity to block initiatives they do not agree with. And, whether it is setting standards for pharmaceuticals, water,

professional credentialing, textbooks, or other such regulatory activity, government ministries and agencies are at the center of service provision, whether they actually deliver the services or not.

Despite what is often inefficiency and unresponsiveness, the sources of power and the resources controlled by government cannot be ignored. Indeed, for non-traditional service provision to be any more than haphazard and stop-gap, considerable regulation, oversight, and funding by government is required. And it is not at all clear that governments unable to provide basic services to the poor will be any better at providing and implementing satisfactory regulatory regimes for education, health, and water services by other providers or that they can do any more to protect the poor from malfeasance and inequitable provision on the part of alternative providers.

While it is certainly appropriate to open the door to non-traditional service provision, this should not be viewed as a surrogate for the long, hard job of public sector reform. In some countries, as we have seen, progress toward improving the performance of the public sector has been made. A first generation of public sector reforms was widely adopted in the 1980s and 1990s. These reforms focused primarily on downsizing and introducing ways to improve pay and job definitions, to establish career structures, to put in place rules and regulations for more routine and regularized responses to public problems, and to improve capacity among public servants.[16] These changes were not always successful and usually their impact was generally less than anticipated. The reasons for disappointing results are numerous, and certainly include political and bureaucratic environments that resisted these kinds of changes. Nevertheless, in some countries, they set the basis for more structured and rule-oriented public sectors. Some distance has already been traveled, therefore, in introducing efforts to improve the performance of service providing organizations.

Yet these first generation reforms were also flawed in their assumptions about why service providers perform well or ill. Indeed, they can be held to account for attacking only one side of a performance problem. By focusing on structures and rules, through their concern with setting better systems in place, in trying to get at the roots of poor performance, they often overlooked the sources of good performance. They asked: Why do public servants behave badly? Why do public organizations carry out their functions poorly? Why is there corruption and lack of efficiency? In asking such questions, they arrived at reasonable answers: Because public sector personnel are badly paid; because incentives are perverse; because clientelism rather than merit prevails; because structures, rules, and public pressure for accountability are inadequate. With such responses, recommendations for altering the performance of the public sector tended strongly to focus on bringing order to disordered structures, controlling the activities of public sector workers, keeping them from doing harm, and ensuring that organizations do what is expected of them.

At the same time, however, the first generation reforms largely ignored a second important set of questions: Why do public servants sometimes perform well? Why are some committed and energetic in pursuing the public interest, even when poorly

remunerated? Why are public organizations sometimes responsive to powerless constituencies? Why do public servants sometimes resist opportunities for corruption?[17] A considerable literature on private sector organizations, NGOs, and islands of excellence in the public sector suggests that the answers are not the mirror opposites of the responses to questions about poor performance. Instead, reasons why public servants at times perform well have a great deal to do with the organizations within which they work—workers in effective organizations are committed to missions and norms of those organizations; these organizations have mystiques that motivate their workers; public officials in these organizations believe they are involved in finding solutions to important problems, they gain approval for what they do well, and they have opportunities to work in teams with others who share their commitments.[18]

Structures and systems—the focus of the first generation of public sector reforms—are important, of course, and little progress in improving service provision can be sustained without some minimal level of structure, some basic sets of rules about proper behavior and procedures, and some routinized ways of dealing with recurrent problems and tasks. Indeed, while there are examples of islands of excellence in the midst of public sectors that do not have even the rudiments of good structures and systems, their long-term sustainability cannot be assumed unless basic conditions are met. But even wisely developed structures and systems can carry the public sector only so far in terms of good performance. Equally important are meaningful jobs, commitment to missions, positive responses to jobs well done, teamwork, participation in finding solutions to important problems, loyalty, respect, and managers who recognize and reward excellence. These second generation public sector reforms require considerable investment in developing management skills and can only be introduced unit by unit and organization by organization. Nevertheless, they may be the kinds of changes required to move additional steps toward more efficient, effective, and responsive public service provision that reaches the poor.

For progress in better service provision for the poor, transforming public organizations is essential. This means finding ways to make structures, human resources, and organizational cultures congruent with the responsibilities of each organization or organizational unit. It means widespread training of managers in skills to link employees to good job performance. It means understanding how formal rules and informal norms shape the activities of organizations and individuals. And these changes will elicit resistance because they mean the loss of career protection from rigid civil service and seniority systems and more demanding expectations about performance. They unsettle long-existing political relationships between organizations, public service unions, and political parties.[19] Clientelism, having "a friend in city hall," opportunities for rent seeking, and impunity for privileged individuals and groups are difficult to sustain in the face of such changes.

Because they are politically, as well as organizationally, difficult, second generation reforms can be encouraged by interested publics that support them. An important incentive for organizations and officials alike is the capacity of poor citizens and groups to demand fair treatment, to have information about their rights vis-à-vis

government, and to be able to hold officials and governments accountable for their actions. Thus, while the supply of better service provision is important, so too is demand for it—particularly demand from those not currently benefiting from such services. Even when it is possible to move on to second generation public sector reforms, organizations that demonstrate the capacity to improve are likely to remain islands of excellence unless civil societies are also strengthened.[20]

Fortunately, the last twenty years have seen extraordinary growth of civil society organizations and often clear signs that they are increasing their capacity to interact effectively with government, to organize political pressure to gain attention for their demands, to abandon clientelistic relations in favor of negotiation with government, and to bring to light instances of public malfeasance, ineffective services, and lack of responsiveness.[21] Frequently aided by organizations representing international civil society as well as the media, they have been able to join in debates about policy and to raise important criticisms of them. Increasingly, civil society groups have organized to denounce corruption and demand basic honesty from government. Among many interests that have emerged are those representing the concerns of particular groups of poor people. Ultimately, this kind of counterpoint to government is the essential incentive that governments need to make them more accountable for their actions, particularly to the poor. Of course, countries vary in the strength and vitality of their civil societies, and governments differ in the extent to which they encourage, control, or repress citizens and the groups that represent the poor. Nevertheless, over the longer term, the quality of public services in poor countries may well be a function of the quality of their civil societies.

Conclusions: No Magic Bullets

Currently, the poorest members of society are treated as a special case in service delivery initiatives. They are expected to undertake activities and make contributions that are not required of better off citizens. They are often targeted for special attention through non-traditional sources of service provision, but such services do not come free of strings or problems. While this approach provides many happy examples of effective and innovative service delivery, it is not an effective or sustainable surrogate for widely available and equitably provided services. Whether directly provided or effectively monitored and regulated by the public sector, governments need to be involved in basic service provision. It is not helpful simply to give up on the public sector. In this paper, I have suggested that governments need to rethink priorities in service delivery systems, develop skills to perform their responsibilities more effectively, and become subject to more mobilized pressure from poor constituencies.

Many of the obstacles that make these changes difficult are political. But, if improvements are to be made in the performance of social sector ministries and the regulatory capabilities of government, political leaders need to address difficult conflicts. Their tasks include marshalling public opinion in support of change, negotiating improved salaries in exchange for higher performance standards, and promoting the professionalization of public sector employees. Public sector managers will need to

focus efforts on introducing incentives to offset union intransigence. In some cases, it may be necessary to find ways to provide incentives directly to public sector employees who commit to performance-based hiring and promotion schemes. In some cases, the use of team approaches to work, recognition for work well done, and selective allocation of training opportunities can be used to promote change in the face of opposition. Such efforts have had some effect in both health and education ministries in a variety of countries and suggest that the much-vaunted impediment of public sector union opposition to change is not always as strong as expected.

A related set of obstacles concerns human resource and capacity building issues. Downsizing, professionalization of service delivery staff, improved salary scales, incentives for better performance, and increased in-service training are among the initiatives that many governments have taken to deal with these issues. Recent research suggests that the most effective way to increase the commitment and capability of organizations is to create a mystique of service, a mission that encourages responsiveness to beneficiary needs, personnel management focused on performance expectations, and meaningful and professionally rewarding work. In short, the creation of effective organizational cultures is an important way to improve service delivery to benefit the poor. While training in new skills and techniques is important, the issue of poor performance is often not lack of capacity, but lack of meaningful work and incentives to carry it out effectively.

In addition, individuals and organizations respond to external demands for good performance. When beneficiaries are informed of their rights and obligations, aware of the procedures, duties, and schedules for service provision, and are drawn into the decision making and implementation activities of service providers, they have the tools for holding organizations and officials accountable for their performance and behavior. A critically important way to increase external demands for good performance is therefore better provision of information about organizational goals, activities, and procedures and beneficiary rights to service.

There are, then, many steps that can be taken to achieve the important goal of improving routine service provision and mainstreaming the poor in the allocation of resources. Even when pursued actively, however, these steps will result in efficiency gains and increased effectiveness, accountability, and responsiveness over the medium to long term. Despite such sober realities, these are not changes that can be put off or done away with if the goal of improved performance is to be achieved and if policy actions are to be consistent across populations and sustainable over time. For the poor, surrogates for routinized public action are often only a second-best solution, publicly acknowledging their place at the end of the queue and the requirement that they work harder for benefits than others.

Table 1
Perceptions of Government Performance
2000/2001

Governance Principles	Rating of performance "five years ago"	Rating of current performance	Percentage Change
Participation	2.82	3.12	10.06
Fairness	2.71	2.86	5.5
Decency	2.82	3.10	9.9
Accountability	2.52	2.70	7.1
Transparency	2.66	2.87	7.8
Efficiency	2.77	2.93	5.7

Respondents in 20 countries were asked to rate government performance along several dimensions of governance at the current time (2000/2001) and "five years ago." Scores range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). Countries: Argentina, Barbados, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, Jordan, South Korea, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Samoa, Thailand, Togo.
Source: Court and Hyden, 2001:22.

Notes

[1] The following three vignettes are fictitious.

[2] Evans (1995) relates a favorite Brazilian story of a lion that escapes from the zoo and lives prosperously for weeks, roaming the halls of a ministry, eating bureaucrats at will. It is only detected and captured when it eats the person who serves coffee at break time.

[3]And more recently, Brazil has made significant strides in expanding access to education. See *The Economist,* October 5-11, 2002:25.

[4]See Farazmand (2002), Grindle (1997b), Kamarck (2000), Lindauer and Nunberg (1994), Nunberg (2000), World Bank (1995). In addition, major infusions of funds were committed to public sector capacity building. Technical cooperation directed to poor countries from donor agencies, for example, was significant throughout the 1990s, reaching $20 billion in 1995, and totaling over $170 billion by the end of the decade (World Bank 2001:87).

[5] In some cases, changes responded to deep economic crises. At times, they were imposed on reluctant countries through the conditionalities of international financial institutions. In some cases, reformist politicians and their technical teams wished to deepen the institutional bases for market economies or representative democracies. In some cases, they were put in place to shift burdens of service delivery or to increase accountability. See, for example, Grindle (2000).

[6] Court and Hyden (2001: 22). A cross section of 20-55 "well-informed people" from government, business, NGOs, academia, and international organizations was surveyed in each of the countries.

[7] Tendler (1997).

[8] Grindle (forthcoming); Gershberg (2002).

[9] See, for example, Pyle (1997).

[10]The rapid expansion of private schooling in India, even for poor clients, is a recent example of this demand. In addition, recent research has highlighted the extent to which poor people allocate income to purchasing health care and medications.

[11]Tendler (2000).

[12]The example of extensive conflict over the privatization of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia, is a recent example.

[13] The *World Development* Report of 2000/2001, which focused on poverty, strongly urged redistributive policies for poverty reduction. In prior reports, World Bank discussions of such policies were usually hedged by concern about their political feasibility and impact on investment and growth. See also Herrick (2002).

[14] Houssain and Moore (2001); Moore and Putzel (1999); Nelson (2002).

[15] The existence of Madrassa schools in some Islamic countries and in Muslim areas of multicultural countries have recently been seen as threats to national and international stability and security.

[16] Lindauer and Nunberg (1994).

[17] See DiIulio (1994).

[18] DiIulio (1994), Tendler (1997), Grindle (1997a).

[19] Grindle (forthcoming).

[20] Putnam (1993).

[21] See, for example, Fox and Brown (1998); Kalima (1992).

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