58. Critical elements for ensuring the success of more inclusive social policies

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Making social policy and implementing social policy are two different things. To be effective and reduce inequality, inclusive social policies must be carefully designed and politically supported. Crucially, they must also be implemented, by the agencies designated to do so. Yet most debates give this issue vastly inadequate attention. This contribution offers two constructive ways in which strategies for enhancing capability for implementation might be enhanced.

An array of social policies have been put in place in different countries with the objective of improving the well-being of all, including the most vulnerable, and reducing inequality, but they have not all been as effective as expected. As a result, identifying the critical elements that could facilitate the success of inclusive social policies is a key question. The success of such policies is not easy to determine when everyone (or a specific target group) is eligible to participate; when there is wide demographic and geographic variation in effectiveness; when the benefits might not materialize for long periods of time; when a given policy is as much a reflection of a society's values as it is of its welfare strategies; and when the truth of any empirical claim regarding a social programme's success or lack of it is filtered through people's ideological preconceptions. For example, there is an abundance of high-quality empirical evidence showing that raising minimum wages and providing universal health care is good for both low-income workers and society in general. But that evidence simply has no policy traction in contexts ideologically opposed to the very possibility of such initiatives.

I argue here that the critical elements ensuring the realization of a social policy are largely to do with implementation. The key questions are: can the agency designated to implement the social policy actually do so? Does it have the necessary funding, staff, local legitimacy and organizational capability to do what is being asked of it?

If it lacks any of these elements, what is its strategy for acquiring them, or optimizing in their absence? This contribution addresses these questions and highlights the salience of implementation issues with two examples, one at an analytical level, from a regional study of the quality of service delivery in the Middle East and North Africa region, and a second at the operational level, from attempts to improve learning outcomes in rural India.

Learning from variation in the quality of service delivery[1]

For historical reasons, most countries in the Middle East and North Africa have highly centralized systems for providing services to their citizens. This means that the same structures and policies guide the actions of teachers, health personnel and mid-level officials across any given country. In Jordan, for example, teachers across the country are trained, hired and promoted on the same criteria, they implement the same curriculum using the same pedagogical techniques, and students are assessed using the same examination methods. Yet when we examine how well these policies are implemented, we find enormous subnational variation in the provision of inputs and attainment of outcomes, even after allowing for obvious factors that might explain these differences, such as a community's wealth or proximity to roads. Some schools and health clinics are exemplary, most perform poorly even by local standards, and many are utterly failing.

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This variation cannot be a function of policy or resources, since the policies and resource provision across the country are essentially identical. In seeking to explain this variation and identify possible entry points for reform and improvement, policy in itself matters but is surely of secondary importance.

An initial implication is that reform efforts should focus on mapping, explaining and learning from this variation as a basis for seeking to move the performance distribution in a positive direction. Moreover, it is highly likely that the underlying sources of performance variation at any given unit of analysis will be a combination of observable and unobservable factors. The first group should be assessed via household surveys and other quantitative approaches, and the second via qualitative methods whose comparative advantage is in engaging with questions of process, context and social relations. Using quantitative methods to map the nature and extent of subnational variation in policy implementation outcomes, and qualitative methods to explain how and why certain places and facilities are so much better or worse than others, enables local practitioners (including political leaders) to have a coherent and usable evidence base on which to convene an informed dialogue on where and how opportunities for improvement might be sought.

For complex social policies which have a strong impact on equality, such as education and health care, successful delivery requires the continuous combining of 'thin' (readily measurable) information and 'thick' (context-specific) knowledge. Because the ways in which this combining occurs are likely to be unique to each context, the most credible ideas for improvement are likely to come from a country's own experience, and not from the adoption of 'best practices' from abroad, verified by global 'experts'. Helping implementation systems themselves to become learning organizations which implement social policies to learn iteratively and adaptively, in real time, on the basis of their existing experience, is a frontier issue for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of social policies.

In Yemen, for example, absenteeism of nurses and doctors from health clinics on any given day ranges from 8 per cent to 93 per cent. Similarly wide variation is seen at all levels, especially in large countries such as Egypt.[2] Interestingly, there is little correlation between different input and outcome factors.

Places where nurse absenteeism is high are not also those places where medical supplies are lacking, or where there are too few beds. There is unlikely to be a singular technical fix to these problems. Each will likely require a customized response.

In the Palestinian Territories, analysis of the performance of schools across the country on a standardized international test enabled our team to identify one school in a rural township (Jenin) whose students attained average scores by global standards, which in the local circumstances was an extraordinary achievement. How was this happening? Subsequent in-depth analysis of this school revealed that beyond generalizations such as 'effective leadership', 'capacity' and 'political will' was a deep commitment on the part of everyone, from mid-level education officials and the school principal to teachers and students themselves, to create an environment focused on learning and problem-solving. One specific innovation was a commitment by the school and the community alike to bring parents into this learning process. Many parents were illiterate, having themselves never attended school, and therefore intimidated merely by being on a school campus, an alien environment to them. Their illiteracy meant they were unable to provide their children with basic assistance on homework, or monitor whether their child was actually learning, for example to read, or to do basic mathematics. Identifying these issues as a 'binding constraint' on student learning, the school initiated a programme focused specifically on parents, inviting them onto campus after school hours to see what their children are doing each day, and giving them simple ideas for how they might be able to assist their children with homework.[3] This innovation was this school's solution to this school's problem; the people there nominated and prioritized it themselves, and thus it had full local legitimacy. Something like it may or may not be a solution elsewhere; the crucial point is that the community had built, in a tense and militarized setting, a high-capability local problem-solving system to implement education policy.[4] The next frontier is to discern whether and how such approaches to problem-solving can be established and routinized not just in Palestine, but elsewhere too.

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Improving education in Bihar, India: Pratham's 'Teaching at the Right Level' programme[5]

The genius of bureaucracies is their capacity to enable routine activities to function at scale. Providing pensions and car insurance, for example, is possible across entire national populations because most of the necessary information is relatively uniform, visible, non-controversial, readily available and independently verifiable. Bureaucracies struggle, however, when the problem to be solved requires qualitatively different kinds of information. Providing education to all is one such problem (and was enshrined as such in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)); ensuring that learning by all actually happens is an even harder one (which is the aspiration of its successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)).

In very large but very poor countries such as India, the challenge of ensuring learning for all is immense. In such settings, the prevailing level of capability for policy implementation is low. It risks falling even lower when designated agencies (in this case ministries of education) are asked to perform tasks at an even larger scale (for instance, to expand enrolments massively). Faced with such mandates but already overwhelmed, implementing agencies need to continue to convey legitimacy externally and secure a continued flow of resources. One way to do this is to monitor and measure progress exclusively on 'thin' information: the number of inputs provided and procedures correctly followed. Pritchett (2014) argues that this description aptly characterizes the situation in India: the District Information System for Education (DISE), which provides annual reports on the state of education, in 2011/12 provided '817 pieces of information [but] not a single one could be construed as a direct measure of learning of any kind'. Similarly, the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (of 2009) identified seven characteristics that would be used to accredit (and thus fund) schools, all of them 'thin'.[6] A school that ticked these seven boxes was deemed to be 'good', irrespective of what its students actually learned, while schools attaining even spectacular learning accomplishments but unable to meet all seven criteria were deemed unacceptable.

Pratham, a large education NGO in India, strives to work within such systems to put the focus back on student learning, especially in the younger grades, on the grounds that if children fail to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills they will forever be behind.

A prevailing feature of these systems was (and the most part remains) that children moved through the school system each year, irrespective of whether they had acquired grade-appropriate skills. They would be asked to solve mathematics problems at Standard Five no matter whether they had demonstrably mastered Standard Two, and so on. For their part, teachers were instructed to teach the textbook, no matter what the students in their classroom actually knew: a good teacher was one who completed the textbook over the course of the year, not one whose students had learned its contents. Over time in the state of Bihar, the poorest state in India, Pratham discovered that daily attendance steadily declined, not because of endemic poverty but because students simply couldn't follow the material being presented to them. Unable to do even the most routine addition problems or read a simple sentence, yet each year being automatically promoted to a higher grade, students increasingly found schooling a frustrating and humiliating experience (especially when order was maintained via physical punishment and verbal abuse). Thus they ceased attending.

Rather than blaming teachers or students for this state of affairs, Pratham's strategy has been to focus on changing one feature of the implementation system: its requirement to promote each student to a higher grade each year, irrespective of their knowledge. With the support of the chief minister and local officials, selected schools have taken an approach which focuses on measuring what students actually know via short, simple, regularly administered tests of reading and arithmetic, and using child-friendly pedagogical strategies tailored to their current state of demonstrated learning, no matter what their age.

The effectiveness of this approach has been assessed via several formal and rigorous evaluations, but is perhaps best captured by the response of a startled official.

> *'Children who never came regularly to school before are coming now. Children who could not do anything earlier, are able to do so much. Look at this child,' he said with shining eyes, 'ten days ago she could not even recognize words and today she wants to write her favourite word! We have achieved more in 10 days than in 5 years! How is all this happening?' … 'There is nothing here,' I [the director of Pratham] said. 'It is you – you have made the children able and now they are learning.'* (Banerji, 2015, pp. 9–10)

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Clearly there are good, bad and indifferent social policies, whether assessed on normative or technical grounds, and policy-makers should surely strive to make good ones. A closely related frontier issue, however, in high and low income countries alike,[7] is whether and how any given policy can actually be implemented, especially when doing do requires deftly combining 'thin' information and 'thick' knowledge for entire populations. Making social policy and implementing social policy are two different things. As more countries become larger and richer in the coming decades, the capabilities of their states to implement social policies beneficial to all will have a major bearing on whether hard-won gains are consolidated, and whether lingering challenges are confidently and competently embraced.

Notes

1. This section briefly summarizes evidence and arguments from Brixi and colleagues (2015).

2. I have heard fascinating presentations on health outcomes in Africa that explore this logic all the way down to individual clinics, documenting and explaining the variation in the cleanliness of birthing rooms, some of which are spotless while others are unspeakably awful, all under the same roof.

3. Even if this was doing seemingly obvious things like ensuring the house was relatively quiet for an hour each afternoon so that homework could be completed.

4. For a more complete discussion of these analytical issues as it pertains to building implementation capability, see Andrews and colleagues (2013).

5. The section draws on Banerji (2015) and Pritchett (2014).

6. The seven characteristics are teacher/enrolment ratio; buildings; working days/instructional hours; minimum working hours; learning equipment; library; play equipment.

7. On the challenges of reforming public schools in a disadvantaged community in the USA, despite a huge injection of targeted funds and technical expertise, see Russakoff (2015).

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