



State Representation and Public Service Delivery in Sierra Leone

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Theories from public economics and political science suggest that in a democratic context, regions represented in the central government would be better off in terms of public service delivery. But is that always the case? In this seminar, **James Robinson**, Professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, and **Andrew Lavali**, Executive Director at the Institute for Governance Reform in Sierra Leone, explore the impact of political connexions. Based on the case of Sierra Leone, the presenters discuss the non-monotonic relationship found between the number of public appointments a chieftaincy has and the delivery of public services to its population.

James Robinson explained the research project he conducted together with Andrew Lavali in Sierra Leone. The project aims to investigate whether representation in the state acts as a mechanism for promoting differential benefits in public service delivery at the chieftaincy level. Using data from the Afrobarometer, the authors construct a public service score based on whether citizens had close access to the electricity grid, piped water system, sewage system, schools and/or health clinics. In their study, state representation is measured by matching the public information on several public appointments with the appointees chieftaincy of birth.

The data shows a very unequal representation of public appointments in Sierra Leone, with the vast majority being held by citizens from the Western Area, close to Freetown, and more than 81 chieftaincies being not at all represented in the central state. Despite of the widespread belief that having a higher number of appointments would result in a better provision of public services, this positive relation only holds when the representation is sufficiently high. Surprisingly, the authors found that chieftaincies having only one or two public appointments are even worse off than ones with no appointment at all.

Interpreting the mechanisms behind these results, Andrew Lavali argues that the chieftaincies which are not all represented succeed better in independently organizing the provision of services. By the moment that a chieftaincy gets some representation, it becomes more likely to rely on the state for the provision of services, which - in many cases - are not delivered.

Connected to the challenges found in the study, the Institute for Governance Reform, led by Lavali, implemented a program for enabling citizens to track the government provision of public services at the local level. The Citizen's Online Scorecard program, which includes local NGOs and assigned community workers, gathered data on health, agriculture and education to construct a local and reliable database. These data were later displayed as interactive infographs for the communities. The increased awareness and accountability in public services contributed to the creation of a Citizen's Manifesto, which gathered demands for a better provision of public services and a more even distribution of public appointments, including some commitments from the citizens as a counterpart.

In the Q&A, Robinson pointed to the importance of understanding the power dynamics of a country in order to design effective interventions, especially in the case of economies which were strongly affected by war. Even in contexts where building connexions with the government might be seen as a crucial channel of development, the actual outcomes can be surprising, such as the case where having not enough central representation ends up undermining local initiatives. Relating to the recent projects implemented in Sierra Leone, Lavalı reported that the successful work of NGOs has contributed to create a common belief that civil society is able to organize itself and that communities should not rely overly on the central government.

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