P77 / Effectiveness and Legitimacy of Street-Level Bureaucracy in the Global South

Topic : Implementation/Street-Level Bureaucracy

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Second Chair : Preeti Raghunath (University of Sheffield)

Third Chair : Deborah David (FLACSO Ecuador)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Panel Objective

Policy implementation in the Global South takes place through complex interactions among different levels of government, frontline public servants, civil society organisations, community institutions, and citizens. Research from these contexts has significantly expanded our understanding of how institutional arrangements, social inequalities, and local power relations shape policy delivery. Yet an important analytical question remains insufficiently explored: why do similar implementation mechanisms generate different forms of frontline agency and, different outcomes for policy effectiveness and legitimacy?

Research Question

This panel brings together scholarship on street-level bureaucracy (SLB) in the Global South to examine how frontline actors interpret, negotiate, adapt, and sometimes depart from formal policy objectives. The panel seeks to understand how bureaucratic practices emerge within specific political, administrative, and social contexts, and how these practices shape citizens' experiences of the state. The panel is organised around the central research question:

"How do frontline actors shape policy effectiveness and legitimacy in Global South contexts?"

Scientific Relevance

Street-level bureaucracy theory establishes that public policies are also shaped through the everyday decisions of frontline implementers. These actors interpret rules, exercise discretion, allocate resources, and interact directly with citizens, thereby influencing how policies operate in practice. As Brodkin (2008: 326) suggests, street-level discretion can become a "wild card of policy delivery." Scholarship has identified distinct patterns of frontline agency, including informal privatization (Blundo, 2006), policy improvisation (Campos and Peeters, 2022), and alienative commitment (Usman et al., 2021). These patterns illustrate how frontline bureaucrats may respond differently to institutional pressures, sometimes facilitating service delivery and sometimes contributing to exclusion, informal appropriation, or withdrawal from policy objectives.

However, much of the SLB scholarship has developed through experiences associated with the Global North. Approaches that assess bureaucratic institutions primarily against assumptions of administrative stability, formalisation, and organisational capacity risk interpreting resource scarcity, fragmented governance, and political volatility as symptoms of institutional underdevelopment (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Koivisto, 2013; Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks, 2017). Such deficit-oriented interpretations may obscure how bureaucratic practices are organised within unequal societies and how they are shaped by local power relations, social identities, and everyday negotiations between citizens and state actors (Lotta and Eiró, 2023).

Recent scholarship from the Global South have examined these assumptions. Peters and Campos (2023) demonstrate that adverse institutional conditions may produce contrasting responses, ranging from policy improvisation to informal privatization and withdrawal from policy objectives. Eiró and Lotta (2024) further caution against relying uncritically on categories such as "weak" or "dysfunctional" institutions, which can conceal variation within states and the significance of historically embedded inequalities and power relations.

Building on these contributions, the panel seeks to emphasize the relationship between bureaucratic discretion, policy effectiveness, and legitimacy.

Effectiveness is understood as how frontline practices influence policy delivery, responsiveness, access, and substantive outcomes. Legitimacy concerns how citizens experience and evaluate public authority, including the fairness, accountability, and credibility of implementation processes.

By examining these dimensions, the panel aims to advance a more context-sensitive understanding of everyday bureaucratic encounters in the Global South.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite theoretically informed empirical contributions examining street-level bureaucracy across policy sectors and regions of the Global South. Comparative studies across countries, regions, policy sectors, or institutional settings are particularly welcome. We encourage papers that connect frontline practices with broader debates on policy implementation, inequality, state capacity, administrative discretion, and citizen-state relations. Contributions may employ qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches.

Potential Research Questions

We welcome research that places frontline actors, citizens, and bureaucratic encounters at the centre of implementation analysis. This can include examining conditions that enable frontline discretion to adapt policies to local needs or compensating for gaps in policy design and administrative capacity. Contributions examining trust, administrative procedures, social identities, local knowledge, community institutions, intermediaries, and power relations are particularly encouraged.

The panel invites engagement with questions such as:

1. In what ways do street-level bureaucrats influence policy outcomes through interpretation, negotiation, and discretionary decision-making?
2. How do frontline interactions shape citizens' perceptions of policy equity, fairness, and legitimacy?
3. Under what conditions does frontline discretion enhance policy effectiveness and responsiveness, and when does it undermine policy objectives or legitimacy?
4. How do frontline implementers negotiate tensions between formal policy requirements and the social, political, and institutional contexts of the communities they serve?
5. Whose knowledge, experiences, and perspectives are recognised when assessing whether a policy is effective or legitimate?
6. How can the experiences and knowledge of frontline implementers and affected communities inform policy design, adaptation, and evaluation?

Expected Outcomes

The panel will provide a forum for comparative dialogue and theoretical exchange among scholars examining frontline policy implementation in the Global South. By bringing together research from different sectors and institutional contexts, it aims to identify common mechanisms, contextual variations, and emerging conceptual insights concerning the relationship between frontline agency, effectiveness, and legitimacy.

The panel chairs would like to produce a publication, potentially through a journal special issue, subject to the contributions received and participants' interest.