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**Local Governance in the provision of
Domestic Water Supply**

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Abstract

This study digs out how access to domestic water supply is undermined by institutional practices, kinship ties, and social relationships. Based on the data collected in an urban locale in the Northern part of Pakistan, the study explores the politics of access, which reflects political influence and its manifestations within different groups and communities. Conceptually, access involves what sort of responses, i.e. social and institutional, are adopted by citizens to convey their complaints when they are dissatisfied and excluded from a system. In a decentralised governance context, the actual experience of access exhibits personal loyalties, misappropriation of resources, intermediation, and extra-legal practices. Access to drinking water supply is, therefore, studied in relation to the concepts and theoretical debates on access.

Introduction

The study was carried out in an urban locale, Nawansher, (which is located in Abbottabad district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan) where data collected on water issues present an arena of disputes, illegal appropriation and extra-legal practices. While debate surrounding water resources mostly concentrates on its rapid scarcity or depletion, access to water supply is seldom engaged with the difficulties faced by people in their everyday state. Water supply in Nawansher has been traditionally the priority of a local institution named "*town committee*"². Both the administrative and financial powers were also delegated to the members of the committee headed by an elected chairman. Moreover, decision-making and local issues were resolved by the chairman and the members. For a long time, water management in the locale was based on the pre-eminence of locally-elected people and their ability to fulfil the expectations of local population, therefore, the local people have had a close association with the town committee since its inception. However, after the establishment of local government system in 2001, the entire management, operation and maintenance of urban services such as water and sanitation was handed over to Tehsil Municipal Administration (TMA)³. After the creation of sub-district tiers, the town committee and its functions were transferred to the TMA. This further led to the absorption of local employees in the TMA. These employees were locals and have family and social relationships within the community. The town committee is now an institution with formal rules and consists of officials, who perform different functions under the overall TMA authority. The direct control of the town committee by the TMA has restructured the authority and managerial functions of the town committee. Though the town committee worked under the TMA, it was headed by a public official with the designation

² The Town Committee was established in 1867-68 by the British, who introduced municipal services and appointed local staff to look after them (former Nazim of Nawansher).

³ In Abbottabad district, there are two tehsils: Abbottabad and Havelian. Furthermore, Abbottabad is a district as well as a tehsil. In Abbottabad district, water is managed and provided by the TMA in the urban areas of the district, while the rural areas of the district manage the water supply through community-based infrastructure projects initiated by the government

of Chief Officer (CO). Other functionaries worked directly under the chief officer. Access to water supply was the responsibility of the town committee and its officials, who dealt with its management and distribution.

Up until 2006, residents of Nawansher apparently had access to sufficient water, or at least did not complain about the issues of access. After the research began in 2009, it was observed that the local residents of old Nawansher faced difficulties to access water, which caused problems for the town committee as well. Owing to migration and a rapid increase in population, the urban locale had expanded with the development of new hamlets on the land, which was once used for agriculture. The expansion of population falls in 'new' Nawansher⁴. Local residents perceived that access is related to the scarcity of water and the town committee manipulates the situation to favour certain segments of the society. Moreover, their concerns and complaints were often not addressed in an impartial way. The local community also blamed the town committee officials for not fulfilling their responsibilities. In contrary, the town committee accused the community of illegal appropriation, besides citing lack of rainfall, financial constraints and increase in population as the major reasons, which widened the gap between demand and supply. There were diverse actors in the provision of water, which contributed to social construction of how and under what circumstances access to water was undermined by institutional practices and personal links.

The loop system of water supply

In the past, Nawansher has been a centre of attraction for donors. A water supply system based on natural spring water was designed, financed and implemented by some international organizations, including Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), a German-owned development bank, to improve access in terms of meeting the community demands. In the urban locale, there are two main sources of water: a natural spring, and tube wells. The natural spring water has an underground source, the precise nature of which is unknown. Another source, which provides water to local residents, is tube wells constructed over boreholes at different locations. They draw water from beneath the ground, and through a network of underground pipes, served the population of around 40,000 in 2009⁵. However, despite the presence of a town committee and the fact that the water supply system was managed locally, the problems of access became aggravated when the residents of some hamlets such as Shoaib Zai, Musa Zai, New Muhala (a new hamlet) and Khalil Zai in old Nawansher did not receive water due to the loop system shown below. Here an attempt is made to describe the way the actual system of distribution benefited certain residents, and the sharp reaction of those, who were not served with.

⁴ A majority of population in 'new' Nawansher comprised non-Jadoon tribes, namely Rajpoots, Syeds and Kashmiris. There is no authentic statistical record available which can indicate the exact population of Jadoons and other tribes in the urban locality. Through informal interviews with local residents, it seemed that between 65% to 70% settlers in 'old' Nawansher were Jadoons.

⁵ According to a survey carried out by a local NGO "Lok Parya" in 2007.

expediently. After meeting the domestic and non-domestic needs of those residents, the water flows towards the rural union council Damtour, and also to those areas, which do not fall within the urban limits of Nawansher. The residents of Damtour and others take advantage of the distribution system before the water is diverted to Shoaib Zai, Musa Zai, New Muhala, and Khalil Zai⁷. An obvious disadvantage faced by the aforementioned hamlets in securing access is that they are situated on a slope. This makes access for certain hamlets⁸ easy, and for others problematic. Access to water supply had been a persistent problem and complaints relating to accessing water by the local residents were in fact happening routinely. In a series of complaints about access, a particularly relevant meeting between residents and the town committee officials provided an opportunity to observe how officials respond to citizens' complaints, and the difficulties encountered in addressing them systemically.

The Politics of Access

The residents of Shoaib Zai, and Musa Zai collectively lodged a complaint with the officials dealing with water distribution. Speaking on behalf of the community, a resident of Shoaib Zai said:

"The locality had been facing water crisis for the past two years, and everyone in the town committee knew how they had spent their last summer in the severe heat⁹."

The real dilemma, however was that these residents were assured by the town committee that they would be provided water despite their peculiar situation. The conflict further escalated when these residents made reference to the repeated complaints. The process of reporting complaints entailed registering a complaint in the "*complaint register*" which was kept in the office of the town committee. The formal process was that each complaint was allocated a number. For example, the people would either call to register their complaints or visit the town committee in person. These complaints were supposed to be addressed by a simple rule, i.e. on a first-come-first-served basis, by a local administrator. The formal system of treating complaints followed a professionally driven system of service provision and does not consider relationships and the structural constraints of bureaucrats when dealing with citizens. In reality, the system was heavily politicised. In treating complaints, the administrator would receive phone calls from the Nazim and other political personalities such as union councillors¹⁰, telling him and the water supply staff, for example, to immediately repair a pipe which was a major concern for their relatives in terms of securing access

⁷ In old Nawansher, people living in different hamlets locally known as khallils have retained their ancestral names.

⁸ Hamlets consist of houses (between 150 to 350) and each hamlet in old Nawansher is named after the sub-castes of Jadoons.

⁹ In summer, domestic consumption of drinking water increases, and people also frequently take showers as most do not have air-conditioning in their homes.

¹⁰ Councillors "*constitute the electoral college for the posts of Nazim and deputy Nazim*" (Khan 2000). Councillors are divided into different categories such as peasants, farmers, etc.

to water. According to an official, influential personalities and those related to the Nazim, were given importance in resolving complaints. The process of handling complaints exemplified everyday politics, characterised by preferential treatment to political personalities and influentials associated with wealth, political standing and who belonged to the same community. Therefore, the professionally devised system of treating complaints was circumvented by local political elites, who attained powerful positions. As a consequence, state officials were unable to perform official functions rationally and impartially. The formal system of monitoring complaints was not workable in practice because political relationships and loyalties had permeated the formal system and official practices. As pointed out by Le Meur and Blundo (2009), personal acquaintances, kinship relationships, informal rules and family ties are above the 'bureaucratic universe' which is based on formal rules and procedures. These relationships and personal loyalties are embedded in the society; however, they were invoked by certain personalities when they expect exceptional treatment. The politics of access also revealed the dissatisfaction of unhappy citizens' and implied seeking remedy through 'voice', a mechanism through which disgruntled citizens attempt to change the "*practices, policies and outputs*" and other services of an organization (Hirschman 1970, p.30), "*Voice*" means an attempt to improve the quality of a service instead of escaping from an objectionable state of affairs, either individually or collectively or through different means such as protests, complaints or through an appeal to higher authorities (Ibid:30). The mechanism of 'voice' was also in-effective because the affected people knew that the system of distribution was crafted to favour certain segments of the population on the basis of relationships and political affiliations discussed below.

Primordial loyalties and associations

According to Schaffer and Wen-hsien (1975), the actual experience of access and distribution exhibits personal loyalties and the sort of tactics to which dissatisfied applicants resort to. In addition, access situations reveal politics translated into how certain citizens are excluded from welfare schemes and why others are included. By focusing on access, Schaffer and Wen-hsien (1975) emphasize:

"Different access can actually produce different politics ... for example the establishment of distribution system can be intended or appear to provide access for some who would otherwise be excluded".

Schaffer and Wen-hsien have developed an original approach to study access but do not pay attention to moral obligations, private interests and kinship ties in traditional societies. The approach adopted in this section is based on two hypotheses. First, infrastructure projects provide opportunities for local political elites to benefit from these projects. Second, these elites extend favours to those who have close association with them viewed in terms of kinship ties and social relationships. Thus, social and political dynamics promote personal as well as other political interests. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, access to water and its distribution is not just a matter of public concern, but also relates to private interests. The construction of loop system

privileged those, who were politically affiliated with the ex-Nazim, i.e. the Nawaz Sharif group (a subdivision of mainstream political party, Pakistan Muslim League), and his primordial ties with the people of Damtour. In Nawansher, primordial loyalties are part and parcel of the community, and people frequently make reference to these loyalties in terms of social expectations and obligations from their leaders, both in the past and the present. Moreover, prior to the introduction of local government system in the country in 2001, the ex-Nazim (hence referred from here onwards as “political leader”) was the chairman of the town committee. Since he enjoyed a considerable support among other committee members, he used to play a key role in the construction of loop system and providing access to allied people of rural areas, who lacked access to water. In doing so, the loop system also stretched the political constituency of the political leader beyond Nawansher and raised his public profile among those who got benefited from the new system. In the locality where this research was conducted, people were integrated in ‘Biradari’¹¹ system, which put the elected figure under moral obligation to meet the demands and interests of his community.

The residents, who were affected by the loop system, held the political leader accountable for their difficulties and accused him of betraying them after coming into power. This is how the people constructed the discourse of citizenship by asserting that political leaders are expected to serve the collective interests of the community, maintaining a clear-cut distinction between public and private interests. Contrary to these assertions, the political leader had to take into consideration extensive networks of relationships. By providing a public good to his close family members, the political leader was able to strengthen his kinship ties, seen in the perspective of moral obligations instead of upholding the collective interests of the community. Here, the element of citizenship is construed differently. Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) argue that participation in community development projects promotes the conception of citizenship which is broadly defined as rights enabling people to act as agents in pursuing collective interests in public arenas (Lister 1998). In Nawansher, and elsewhere in Pakistan, the element of citizenship is deeply rooted in primordial ties, associated with moral obligations and multi-stranded relationships within and across extensive families. Primordial loyalties and familial relationships in traditional and integrated families enforce demands on political leaders by preventing collective assertion to rights and entitlements. Hence, the actual construction of citizenship is expressed by local people in the context of family connections and loyalties. In an ethnographic study conducted in a district of the Punjab, Nadeem (2009, p.1005) argues in a similar context that:

“Beneath the surface, political leaders such as the Nazims largely benefit the members of their own Biradari and people, who would vote for him.”

¹¹ A tribe is organised according to kinship ties and family lineage. Sometimes biradari and tribe do appear to have the same connotation in the Pakistan genealogical perspective. Tribe and biradari share common characteristics for multiple reasons, such as social standing, common culture and language.

The political leader in Nawansher was interested in providing access to own people, and this can be characterised as being situated within a milieu of relationships and social expectations.

Appropriation and intermediation

During the course of research, appropriation and intermediation became apparent in the form of informal practices. The local people were also not getting regular access to water because of its illegal appropriation. Under the rules, no one could get direct access to water from the main pipeline. Instead each household received water from a distribution channel, which is supposed to ensure an even distribution of water to each household. As narrated by an official, informal appropriation means that people want to get direct access to the main pipeline so that they might have more water pressure, without realising that other people would thereby be affected. To appropriate water unlawfully, citizens used social strategies crafted according to social connections. This had become an accepted norm in the community. The informal appropriation of water involved different social strategies. There were people who appropriated water by installing water pumps over the main water supply line. The pump sucks water and lifts it to the overhead tank constructed in a house. When water is released to a particular community, the households below the house which illegally appropriates water either receive less than their due share or do not get water at all, depending on how many people are illegally appropriating water in the street. This particular strategy became apparent during a visit to a hamlet. While passing through many houses, a local resident said:

“We have not been getting water for the past few days, so I am appropriating water informally”.

The town committee officials were usually informed about these incidents, but no formal action was taken. A resident pointed out that someone had informed the chief officer about informal water appropriating by another resident. Instead of taking legal action against the person, the chief officer simply visited the house and requested him to remove the pump. Besides, these incidences were happening and cited frequently, the chief officer could not disconnect the water connection because people would approach Nazim and other influential personalities to get their connections restored. The formal authority of the chief officer was undermined by social relationships and the personalised management system that dominated and often resulted in informal appropriation of water. Moreover, the town committee was well aware of such practices, and when someone in the community reported these incidents, they were usually ignored or dealt with by the Nazim. The chief officer was aware that these people belonged to a community which has links with the Nazim, therefore, these practices were tolerated and dealt with through local community customs and traditions. On the other hand, those who had family and personal ties with the Nazim would use their relationship to avoid sanctions.

The informal appropriation of water was a socially and culturally driven practice dominated by patrimonial and personalised relationships. The appropriation of water using water pumps was not

the only social practice, which caused major problems to the community in getting uninterrupted access to water. There were other social practices, which created problems for the town committee when they visited houses to get meter readings:

“When the residents know that the meter reader is around to record reading, they remove the magnet from the meter, used as a gadget to stop the meter from functioning. Certain people even remove the meter and re-fix it once they know that the meter reader is scheduled to visit their locality”, said a meter reader while talking to this researcher.

The study also highlights intermediation¹² and extra-legal practices in acquiring water connections. During the study, a dispute between an old man and two other persons occurred. One of whom had applied for an additional water connection. During the conflict, two issues became evident. The first was informal appropriation of water (discussed previously), and the second was granting of additional water connections to the residents of Nawansher by the town committee after following official procedure¹³. The additional water connection was facilitated by a local councillor. In the research locale, it is a customary practice that when an elected person accompanies someone, the town committee officials extend preferential treatment to him. The councillor in this case had close contacts with the applicant and told the officer to process the case of the applicant for an additional water connection. In the process of intermediation, the applicant was able to legalise an illegal water connection. The above account could be interpreted as the applicant having a legal water connection because he had brought the water bill. In fact, the applicant had already been granted an additional water connection without proper paperwork. These are the connections which are granted without official approval, usually by bribing a pipe fitter, who would provide a new connection in the night. Since the connection is granted without official approval, no water bill would be paid by the illegal consumer unless he is caught. In this process, if a member of the town committee is involved, he would also demand money in bribe, and the applicant would usually pay high in bribe to legalise the connection. The bribes are in fact negotiated between an applicant and water supply staff. Depending on the context and situation, corrupt or illicit practices are aligned more with *“a negotiated classification of behaviours than [to] an ... inherent quality of behaviour”* (Chibnall and Saunders 1977, p.139). These negotiations inform us as how the existing rules are negotiated between social actors towards a desired end. The aspect of negotiation is important as there are no clear-cut cases, and the negotiations take place at practical level such as the formation

¹² The term ‘intermediation’ is used by Wood (2007) to refer to official norms being sidelined in order to accommodate private interests, that is, that an official takes into consideration social relationships with friends and patrons when acting in an official capacity. Intermediation arises in different institutional contexts. For instance, a political leader is under obligation from family to mediate between the state authorities by neglecting the official rules and laws.

¹³ The official procedure/requirement for getting a water connection involves filing an application form, proof of identity, documents which proves the applicant’s ownership of property, and a connection fee.

of a water distribution system. The logic of negotiating a bribe could not be termed as a simple economic transaction. Rather, negotiation involves the negotiation of stable rules and their acceptance at all levels. They also occur at other levels, for instance when people are accused of having or considered to have legitimised an illegitimate demand. They also feed into the logic of negotiations. Importantly, everyone is involved in negotiations, including the Nazim. This inevitably involves manipulation of official rules, which imply gaining pecuniary benefits.

Conclusion

The study illustrates that the town committee, despite an independent institution with formal rules, was unable to meet the expectations of affected local communities to access water because of primordial loyalties and personal relationships. By engaging with different access situations, social relationships and the intrusion of political personalities compounded the problems of local citizens seeking access to water. The conflict between the old man and the two persons highlighted how state and society operated through intermediation, bribes, and mechanisms through which bribes are negotiated between officials and citizens. The conflict implicitly conveyed the fact that local citizens rely on local politicians for favours. In other cases, public services are acquired through negotiation, illustrating how extra-legal practices become justified. The informal appropriation of water is widely practiced and could not have been stopped, because those involved were part of a community which heavily relied on personal relationships. The informal practices were justified either on the pretext of necessity or of depriving people of their basic rights to get access to water on the assumptions of equity and equality. The case of water supply revealed that the actual practices of state officials are influenced by various forms of social norms, which contribute to everyday governance.

What emerges from this research is that while state and society are usually treated as two distinct spheres, in fact they are interpenetrating. The state sphere consists of official rules and regulations “making up the state” (Willet 2009). The private sphere represents informal social norms. The ensuing difficulty faced by officials and functionaries of the town committee in the provision of water is to maintain a clear separation between public and private realms. The officials were being confronted by situations involving political interests and expectations from political actors, which constituted the “real” functioning of the town committee. Through an analysis of the management and distribution of water supply, what has been demonstrated in this paper is that it is the private sphere, which accurately captures the official provision of water. In the private sphere, there are people and groups, who pursue their independent interest in opposition to the independent functioning of state (Clapham, 1985). How state institutions perform in reality, how official authority is subverted, and how people struggle for their rights and entitlements are embedded in the private sphere. As argued by Gretchen and Steven (2004, p.727), “in contrast to official norms, which are communicated, written and widely accepted as official”, informal social norms enable us to get a better understanding of how they affect the expected official behaviour of the state officials.

Recommendations

- To discourage the politics of inclusion and exclusion and to ensure equitable access to water supply, the starting point is to promote collective community interest and accountability. The collective engagement of local leadership and that of community in development schemes is essential especially in the provision of social and public services.
- Even when formal accountability of state officials and local politicians is problematic due to patron-client forms of behaviour, an informal accountability of political leaders can be considered. Considering handling citizens' complaints pertaining to the provision of water, political preferences and kinship ties must be addressed through the promotion of deeper sense of responsibility amongst political leaders as well as those responsible for the provision of social services.
- It must be noted that institutional change takes time and well performing institutions require managing conflicts and an understanding of local politics and class structures. In the context of Nawansher, the prevailing conditions, which subscribe to stabilise political allegiance and strengthening of kinship ties, the best approach would be to re-introduce local government system with an intention of helping them deliver social services through improvisation, negotiation and change management.
- A good test case can be to analyze the success of water supply schemes in other areas of Abbottabad district. Before replicating, therefore, there is a need to undertake an extensive research or a comprehensive review pertaining to the successful implementation of local services.
- All of the above activities require a policy dialogue with provincial governments as under the 18th constitutional amendment, the provinces would now have to initiate and implement service delivery schemes. What emerges from this research is to encourage local governments and their ability to deliver better local services according to local practices and expectations.

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