



Pro-Poor Patrons?

The role of “unusual suspects” in poverty reduction

Sarah Byrne, September 2013

In August 2013, the lower house of the Indian National Assembly approved a controversial Food Security Bill that aims to provide subsidized food to two thirds of the country's 1.2 billion people. Its promoters argue that the Bill will be a major advancement in efforts to eradicate the hunger and malnutrition widespread in India. However, the Bill has attracted criticism on all sides, from its being insufficient to tackle the scale of the problem to the pressure its spending will place on the economy. The Bill has also been critiqued as merely a political ploy in view of next year's national elections, with an opposition politician arguing “*It's not food security, but a vote securing bill*” (1). This begs the question: can it not be both?

Exploitative patron-client relationships are generally considered to be at the root of the unequal socio-economic and political relations that perpetuate poverty and exclusion in India – and elsewhere. However, recent research has suggested a differentiated view on the role played by informal institutions, including relational institutions such as patrimonialism and patronage. Such institutions play an important role in providing a social safety net and can complement (or supplement) formal governmental authorities in the provision of social protection to poor and disadvantaged communities.

Though politics is often given as the reason for the failure of poverty reduction schemes, and with good reason, these findings suggest that politics, and particularly institutional norms of political patronage, can also be important success factors. As researchers Armando Barrientos and Sony Pellissery point out, the relationship between politics and social protection policies is a two way street (2). On the basis of a comparative study “the politics of what works” in the successful promotion of social protection policies in eight countries, Sam Hickey offers the following analysis: “*the key agents involved in promoting policies and programmes for the poorest can be located within political society, such as legislative assemblies, political leaders, parties and elites*” (3). This is the case when the dual imperatives of electoral accountability and a moral obligation to distribute resources to poor people are brought into play. A certain kind of politics, then, can be part of the solution (and not only the problem).

What are the implications of these considerations of how pro-poor measures are mobilised? Patronage, politics and social protection are deeply mutually inter-related, from the key role of political elites in promoting pro-poor policies to their informal function as social safety-net for poor families with whom they are embedded in relations of a patron-client nature. The research highlighted here suggests the rather counter-intuitive approach of working with, rather than in opposition to, local patronage structures, particularly in contexts where forms of accountability and a sense of moral obligation can override more exploitative relations (4). Termed “working with the grain”, this approach suggests building on existing institutional arrangements of different kinds (5). There is a growing awareness within development organizations of the importance of working on political economy and with political parties and parliaments (6), though this approach is not without its challenges. An evaluation by Sue Unsworth indicates that this awareness about the importance of political analysis has not translated into making the changes in how we do things that this analysis would imply, with barriers being both intellectual and institutional (7). The research highlighted here suggests that pro-poor policies and measures may be a promising field for such work. However, this implies attaining a better understanding of the role of informal and relationship based institutions, their interaction with formal institutions, and the interdependent relations between poor people and political elites negotiated and produced therein.

References

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