

Book Notes

MAKING BUREAUCRACY WORK: NORMS, EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN RURAL INDIA

by Akshay Mangla

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In his critically acclaimed work *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Michael Lipsky (1980) describes the complex work done by the eponymous street-level bureaucrats—public service workers who interact directly with citizens. He argues that the discretion, reasoning, and negotiation exercised by these officials shapes the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of public service delivery. Given that Lipsky's arguments and analyses are not specific to the education sector, there has been a pressing need for a deeper dive into how policies and reforms are executed in the provision of education. This has been even more imperative in the case of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where wide gulfs often exist between policy and practice. An astute examination of bureaucratic processes in the unique sociopolitical context of India based on months of ethnographic engagement with local administration, educators, and communities, Akshay Mangla's *Making Bureaucracy Work* is a much-needed addition to scholarship on this topic.

In the recent past, a distinct "global education sector" has emerged through increased international funding, cross-national policy translation, and "soft governance" models that allow nongovernment entities to recommend policies and best practices. Consequently, education reform in LMICs around both the quality and quantity of schooling has become a widely discussed topic in both research and practice. Against this backdrop, Mangla addresses some key questions in his book: How does bureaucracy implement primary education? Why are some bureaucracies more effective than others? What makes bureaucracy work for marginalized populations? Answering any of these questions requires an intricately designed study that closely and comparatively examines the day-to-day workings of education provision across various sociopolitical contexts. This book reflects Mangla's magnificent efforts in doing exactly this, through a multilevel comparative analysis based on almost twenty-eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in four north Indian states. In contrast to long-standing narratives about the failures of education reforms and policies in LMICs,

Mangla demonstrates a wide variation of state performance and explains how the inconsistent gaps between policy and execution are related to the very characteristics of institutions and bureaucracies that provide education.

Making Bureaucracy Work is organized into three parts. The first, comprising chapters 1 to 3, provides readers with an accessible introduction to Mangla's theoretical framework and the empirical context for his study. Chapters 4 to 7, in the second part of the book, outline in rich qualitative detail the key findings from the four states of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Bihar. Each of these chapters provides sufficient social and political background for the respective states, enabling readers to appreciate and make better sense of the findings. The concluding chapters 8 and 9 in the book's third part add a comparative perspective to the findings beyond just the study contexts and illuminate paths for future scholarship and policy.

Large-scale comparative qualitative studies in LMICs are often tedious or are frustrating to design, especially due to immensely diverse contexts and subsequent concerns about generalizability. Mangla's meticulous research design is praiseworthy in this regard, as is the incredible dataset this book draws on—853 interviews, 103 group discussions, and numerous documents and archives. Additionally, this book is far from the simplistic engagements with education in LMICs that offer quick fixes for seemingly technical problems. In actively engaging with how caste and class are intertwined with bureaucratic work in India, Mangla doesn't provide any easy answers for what *will* work for effective education delivery but instead offers visions of what *can* work. His findings, especially from Himachal Pradesh in chapter 5, offer powerful examples of what equitable, localized, and high-quality governance in education delivery can look like.

At the heart of Mangla's thesis is the concept of bureaucratic norms, which he defines as “the informal rules that influence how bureaucrats relate to one another and understand an agency's collective purpose” (48). Mangla causally attributes the variation in the effectiveness of primary education provision in the four north Indian states to the historical differences in bureaucratic norms in each context. In discussing these norms, he identifies two kinds of bureaucracies: *legalistic*, where officials uphold a strict adherence to rules and formal procedures, and *deliberative*, where officials embrace a problem-based orientation and flexibly interpret rules to cater to local needs. He shows an example of the former in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where despite formal pathways for community oversight of schooling, officials' binding commitment to rules and procedures created logistical burdens that made it procedurally cumbersome for marginalized communities to mobilize. Deliberative bureaucracy is exemplified by officials in Himachal Pradesh who, keeping in mind the realities of nomadic communities, worked around formal teacher recruitment to hire contractual teachers from those populations who could travel with them as a “mobile school.” Through examples like these, Mangla argues that deliberative

bureaucracies enable officials to undertake complex tasks, adapt continuously, and thus provide high-quality services.

Potentially a must-read for all interested in comparative and international education, *Making Bureaucracy Work* makes important contributions beyond just its core argument. As Mangla correctly notes, the politics of primary education, especially in LMICs, are surprisingly understudied despite the recent universal agreements about the vital nature of that stage of schooling. Amid a plethora of quantitative and experimental studies examining relationships between inputs and outcomes in education in these contexts, there is a dearth of processual research that examines *how* policy and inputs translate into practice. Not only does this book become a stellar contribution toward filling this gap, it complicates the current “quality” turn in global education as well (Barrett, 2011; Sayed & Moriarty, 2020). Countering increasing beliefs and research that call for a one-dimensional prioritization of educational quality over seemingly solved problems of access in LMICs, Mangla’s work is a timely reminder of how reforms in the basic provision of education still have a long way to go and need to continue in tandem with any focus on quality. Thus, despite being primarily situated in political science perspectives, this book should be of equivalent interest to policy makers, practitioners, economists, sociologists, and anthropologists of education globally.

While readers find deep engagement with the reality of education provision in these four Indian states, they might be left asking for more with respect to the actual quality of learning in schools there. Mangla’s findings tend to consistently highlight the nuances of how bureaucracies in India execute policies of access, resources, and infrastructure, but it is not until chapter 7 that there is any discussion of how they interact with reforms in learning or pedagogy. Perhaps, as Mangla also notes, this is not as indicative of the book’s shortcomings as it is of the overall lack of conversations about learning in LMICs like India (Pritchett, 2013).

At a time when scholarship on education policy and programs in LMICs is saturated with simplistic quantitative models, questionable causal experiments, and a narrow focus on the relationship between inputs and outcomes, *Making Bureaucracy Work* is a thought-provoking addition to the field. Its rich complexities, vivid descriptions, and close readings of the ground realities of bureaucratic processes in Indian education provide nuanced insights for scholars and practitioners alike. As such, this book gives readers a productive starting point for understanding how and why policies and reforms break down or succeed inconsistently during execution in LMICs. And in the current context of India, where the state is increasingly failing to provide equitable opportunities to its most marginalized populations, this book offers both hope and possibilities.

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