

The Inadequacy of Resources Without Reform: The Case of Partnered Provision NGOs

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Abstract

Partnering with governments has been hailed as a best practice for NGOs, yet public-private partnerships in service provision rarely produce transformative improvements in public bureaucracies. Why do NGO-state partnerships sometimes succeed but often fail to produce widespread changes in state performance? This paper investigates this question in the context of a five-year partnership between an education NGO and a state government in northwest India, which had varying effects over time. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence collected in urban and semi-rural Punjab, the paper finds that the NGO's technocratic intervention yielded narrow effects on its own because of pervasive rent-seeking and shirking among government bureaucrats in the education system. The transformative effects of the program occurred only when the NGO's technocratic intervention was coupled with an accountability initiative implemented by a reform official at the top of the education bureaucracy. Ultimately, the coupling of these initiatives—and their transformative effects—proved politically unsustainable; the accountability reforms were reversed under electoral pressure from politically organized anti-reform teachers' unions in the year prior to state elections, and positive effects were sustained only in schools run by unusually motivated teachers. The case suggests that NGO-state partnerships have transformative potential when they are overseen by genuine reform officials, but this potential is likely to be critically constrained by a “political business cycle” for reform, particularly when electoral politics is captured by special interests who favor the status quo.

I. Introduction

NGOs have increasingly become key actors in basic service provision in developing countries. Since the early 1990s, the size of the global NGO sector has expanded dramatically, both in terms of the money flowing to the sector and the number of organizations operating on the ground.¹ Much of this growth has been concentrated among NGOs that engage in service provision—either by directly providing services independently from the state, or by working in collaborative partnership with governments to improve state service provision. Thus, alongside states, NGOs have become central players in the institutional ecosystem of service provision in developing countries.² More optimistic observers have welcomed this trend, pointing to the promising potential of NGOs as providers of social services like healthcare and education. The conventional wisdom on these organizations suggests a number of virtues that bode well for this approach – in comparison to distant state bureaucracies, they are thought to be more agile and innovative and closer to communities, and therefore positioned to tailor their programs to the specific needs of those they serve (Lewis & Ravichandran 2008).

Yet critics have pointed out that in most countries, the state remains the core provider of basic services for the poor. When NGOs build their own schools and clinics in parallel to the state-run systems, these critics contend, they risk undermining the development of a more effective state system of service provision (see Clough 2015). While it is possible that NGO programs can serve as models for the state to implement and scale, these critics point to a body of evidence that indicates a

¹ The amount of official development aid flowing to domestic and international NGOs has more than doubled, and existing estimates suggest a similar growth pattern in the number of NGOs—both among transnational NGOs and domestic organizations in countries such as India (<http://stats.oecd.org/qwids>; Hulme and Edwards 1997, 4; <http://www.uia.org/yearbook>; National Accounts Division 2012).

² Cammett and MacLean 2014; Smith 2011; Ginsburg 1998; Archer 1994

different pattern. In cases as varied as El Salvador, India, and Uganda, it was found that once NGOs begin shouldering the burden of providing services directly, states rarely take over (Archer 1994; Rose 2007), and when NGOs become especially significant providers, as in Bangladesh, state service provision remains limited in scope (Archer 1994; Smillie 2009).

Consequently, partnering with governments (rather than providing services in parallel with governments) has been hailed as a best practice for NGOs in development circles in recent years. In part, this is because—unlike *parallel* provision approaches—*partnered* provision avoids the potential trade-off between improving service provision and building state capacity that raises concerns about non-state direct service delivery. By partnering with governments, these NGOs avoid competing with or crowding out the development of effective welfare states. Indeed, unlike parallel provision NGOs, the explicit aim of these partnered provision organizations is to build the capacity of states to deliver services effectively. On the surface, the prospects seem good. Partnered provision NGOs provide much-needed technocratic resources (including material inputs, training, and technical assistance) to resource-poor government institutions without duplicating or competing with the state, and are therefore well-positioned to provide technocratic assistance and other resources to improve state performance in service provision.

However, existing empirical analyses paint a less optimistic picture, suggesting heterogeneous effects. Occasional striking success stories punctuate a more common norm of failure to produce lasting, significant change in the performance of state systems (Banerjee et al. 2010; Banerjee, Glennerster, and Duflo 2008; Duflo and Hanna 2005; Glewwe et al. 2004; Glewwe and Kremer 2006; Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin 2009; Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2006). This variation presents a puzzle: why do NGO-state partnerships sometimes succeed but often fail to produce positive changes in state performance?

One obvious possible answer is that the NGOs themselves may be dysfunctional as

organizations. This certainly explains the failure to improve state capacity in the context of some public-private partnerships. Smith and Lipsky (1995: 29) point to the potentially corrupting influences of “fancy offices, inflated salaries, and sweetheart contracts” for NGO workers (page 29). In recent decades, observers have noted that corruption among NGOs is an issue in development (Clark 1995; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012).

But even well-reputed NGOs that are professionally run and well-resourced have had heterogeneous effects on the state’s performance in public service delivery. Some studies find positive effects of NGOs on state service provision, either because they provide missing resources and demonstration models for effective service delivery (Banerjee et al. 2007; Jennifer N. Brass 2012; He, Linden, and MacLeod 2007; Linden, Banerjee, and Duflo 2003), or promote accountability of street-level bureaucrats (Lavy 2002). Other studies find no effect, either because resources failed to transfer successfully (Angrist and Lavy 2002; Glewwe et al. 2004), because communities failed to mobilize (Biekart 1999; Henderson 2002; Kamat 2002, 2003), or because new incentives were insufficient to induce broad improvements in performance of street-level bureaucrats (Glewwe, Ilias, and Kremer 2003).

Yet existing literature fails to offer a theory to systematically explain this heterogeneity. Despite the importance of these dynamics for theories of civil society and the state, as well as for policymakers and philanthropists, the varied effects of these non-state actors on the state are under-theorized by social scientists and inadequately understood by policymakers. As Krishna (2011) puts it, many “euphoric assertions about the promise of civil society lack analytical detail” and “suffer from a serious shortage of systematic analyses of political institutions, actors, and dynamics that are operating in the space between the grassroots and low-to-intermediate levels in the political systems of Asia, Africa, and Latin America” (99). Research on these NGOs, largely comprised of impact evaluations, has tended to take a technocratic rather than a political economy approach, focusing on

immediate outputs and outcomes of the partnership. Indeed, most of the studies cited here are not framed as studies of the impact of NGO-state partnerships with explicit focus on institutional dynamics, but rather as studies of the effects of a specific “intervention” or program. In focusing primarily on the technocratic features of individual programs, these evaluations rarely give systematic attention to the broader political context in which partnership organizations operate. This study broadens its analysis, examining the wider institutional constraints that partnership NGOs face in strengthening the performance of the state. I argue that failures of partnerships that appear puzzling when viewed through a technocratic lens become clear when analyzed through a lens of political economy.

This study investigates the questions, under what conditions do partnership NGOs improve state service delivery? How are these effects likely to be distributed across the government system, and what factors shape whether these effects persist beyond the duration of the partnership? The political economy approach I take contextualizes questions about NGO program efficacy in a broader investigation of the institutional and political environment in which partnership NGOs work. How do institutional incentives constrain the leverage NGOs have to reshape bureaucrats’ capabilities and inclinations to provide quality services? What political conditions shape the efficacy of these partnerships, and why do they produce state-building effects only rarely?

I argue that partnership NGOs can improve state service delivery in developing countries only in the relatively rare cases when states are able to solve the internal problem of bureaucratic rent-seeking, which is possible only when electoral politics allows room for bureaucratic reform. In developing countries, state service delivery is jointly constrained by two problems: resource shortages and corruption. High quality service provision requires the elimination of both problems. Since partnership NGOs take a cooperative rather than a contentious approach to the state, I argue, they are in the position to solve the problem of resources but not, for the most part, the problem of

corruption. Without solving the problem of corruption, I argue that state performance is *inelastic* to resources – additional resources will not improve performance in the absence of reform. Moreover, the state actors with leverage to solve the corruption problem often lack the political will to do so; internal state leaders’ willingness to reform bureaucratic rent-seeking is constrained by electoral incentives which often reward tolerance of internal corruption. This is particularly true in settings where anti-reform special interests have captured electoral politics.

The case presented here thus suggests that service provision bureaucracies that are characterized as having “low capacities” may often be more fundamentally constrained by political will than by capacity, and that in these cases partnership NGOs are in a very weak position to improve state performance. The key lesson is that even when NGOs avoid direct involvement in political advocacy, they cannot sidestep politics. State service provision is unavoidably political, and partnership NGOs must attend to politics if they are to identify rare windows of opportunity for improving state performance. Where politics preclude bureaucratic reform, NGO partnerships with the state are likely to consume substantial resources but produce little transformative change in the performance of the state.

Moreover, I offer suggestive evidence that in the absence of politically-supported bureaucratic reform, partnership programs run by NGOs will tend to have mildly regressive distributive effects. The resources offered by partnership NGOs tend to be absorbed most effectively in parts of the government bureaucracy where rent-seeking is lowest among street-level bureaucrats. These are likely to be the *ex-ante* best-performing parts of the government system, since these bureaucrats out-perform their rent-seeking counterparts at the same level of resources. Consequently, in the absence of effective bureaucratic reform, partnership NGOs fail to reach the most underperforming parts of the “last mile” of the state. By systematically improving only the

best-performing parts of the state, they fail to have progressive distributive effects, effectively amplifying existing inequalities within the state system.

I build this theory by examining a particular case of an NGO-government partnership in education in the Indian state of Punjab. The program has been lauded for its impressive effects on learning outcomes during its heyday; less attention has been paid to the program's slow start or to the reversal of its apparent effects midway through the partnership. Examining this longitudinal variation through post-facto school observations, focus groups, NGO documents, newspaper articles, and interviews with NGO workers, teachers, government officials, front line bureaucrats, and teacher's unions, I identify patterns in the institutional conditions that coincided with and, according to interviewees, produced the initial apparent effects of the partnership, the subsequent reversal of these effects, and the limited lingering effects on the state system. I find that these changes followed from shifts in the state's ability to solve the internal problem of bureaucratic rent-seeking, which in turn depended on changing political conditions that shaped the possibility of reform. Building on these observations, I offer a new political-economic explanation for why NGO-government partnerships occasionally succeed and often fail to produce lasting improvements in state performance.

II. Research Design

To produce new theoretical insights about the conditions under which NGO-state partnerships improve state service delivery, I draw on a case of NGO-state partnership that took place in the Indian state of Punjab between 2008 and 2012. The case provides an ideal opportunity to investigate heterogeneity in the effects of NGO-state partnerships because the outcome of interest – quality of service provision by the state – varied over time, while the NGO's presence remained constant. The NGO-government partnership in Punjab went through phases in which

outcomes improved and declined significantly, but many features of both the NGO and the region were held constant throughout. Analyzing variation over time in a single partnership—as opposed to comparing multiple partnerships—allowed me to eliminate many potential confounders from my analysis. I conducted detailed qualitative work to build an institutional theory explaining why the partnership program was somewhat effective at first, maximally effective in the middle period, and minimally effective in improving education outcomes in the final phase. I then integrated insights from this qualitative evidence with quantitative data on learning outcomes in Punjab. Examining the timing of changes in both institutional variables and outcome measures allows me to adjudicate between competing explanations for variation in the partnership’s effectiveness.

In selecting a case to study, the decision to focus on a partnership that had ended several years before the study was conducted strengthened the clarity of the study’s conclusions. The data for this study were collected two years after the NGO exited the partnership, permitting me to examine variation in state performance outcomes before, during, and after the partnership. Since most partnership programs are not designed to be sustained beyond a handful of years, the case of Punjab’s education partnership arguably constitutes a representative example of the broader set of cases of interest in this analysis. In addition, the post-partnership data provides an opportunity to examine any long-run changes in state performance that endure beyond the partnership. Only when the partnership NGO has exited the provision scenario can we observe whether a sustained *transfer* of capabilities, rather than a temporary *contribution* of capabilities, has taken place. To understand whether an NGO has had a transformative effect on the state system, it is useful to be able to observe whether any improvements in outcomes persist beyond the duration of the partnership.

A key premise of this research design is that NGOs and states ought to be conceived of as distinct actors, even when they are intertwined in a partnership. A potential challenge in identifying the effect of NGOs on the state in a partnership program—particularly when the program is

ongoing—is that it is difficult to disentangle the relative contribution of two actors in explaining changes in observable outcomes. If education outcomes rise under an NGO-government partnership, it is unclear whether to trace that improvement to a transformation in the government system or simply to the addition of a second actor to an unchanged government system. Changes in outcomes during the course of a partnership reflect the net contribution of the activities of both the NGO and the government actors, and thus it is difficult to know whether improved service provision reflects an *additive* story in which the NGO’s efforts are temporarily supplementing the efforts of the state or an *impact* story in which capabilities have transferred from one actor to the other. Prior scholars who have tackled this question have dealt with it by grouping the NGO and government actors together, conceptualizing this hybrid configuration as “the state” in developing countries (e.g. Brass 2010). This runs the risk of tautology: a scenario in which NGOs bring capabilities to a partnership gets coded, *ipso facto*, as a case in which the state system has improved. Recognizing the messiness of the task, in cases where NGOs and state actors are highly entwined in long-term partnerships, I suggest that scholars should as far as possible treat state actors and NGOs as analytically distinct. While state actors and NGO actors may be working together for extended periods of time on what are ostensibly “state functions,” the institutional structures of the actors are usually distinguishable and the incentives they face and resources they have at their disposal are distinct. Maintaining the distinction is necessary in order to sensibly investigate variation in the effects of one actor on the other. In order to distinguish an additive story from an impact story, it is useful to select a case of NGO-state partnership which has ended, in order to observe whether improvements persist.

Post-exit scenarios are complicated to research, however, since the program under examination is no longer operating and cannot be observed in real time. To build a detailed history of the Punjab case, I used snowball sampling to identify and track down a comprehensive set of

interview subjects throughout the state of Punjab who had been involved in or affected by the program to reconstruct a history of the partnership and its effects over time. Building from an initial set of contacts in the NGO's headquarters in Delhi, I identified NGO field staff and government officers who had worked on the program in multiple districts in Punjab and, through interviews, reconstructed a history of the program, noting changes interviewees had observed in the government system during the course of the partnership. Since the program ended, the NGO field staff who had worked on it have largely remained employed by the same NGO and been deployed on other projects in the region, and some who have left are still working in education in the area. Government officers who had worked on the program mostly went back to work as government teachers afterwards. Based in Ludhiana and traveling to five district capitals throughout Punjab, I gathered evidence from actors who had first-hand knowledge of the program and its effects and who remain involved with the local education system. Because of this, these interviewees were able to report not only on how the partnership program had operated and what changes they had observed among state officials and schools throughout the program, but also whether any changes in government performance that had taken place during the program persisted beyond the tenure of the partnership.

To ensure a comprehensive account of the program, I included actors with diverse roles, expertise, and perspectives in the study. I located and interviewed eleven NGO field staff who had worked on the partnership program in different parts of Punjab at the cluster, district, zonal, state, and regional level. In semi-structured interviews, I asked respondents about their role in the program, what kinds of activities had been involved in the program, what problems existed in the education system when they started the program, whether they observed any changes in the officials' or teachers' attitudes, motivation, behavior, teaching, or interactions with each other during the program, and whether they have observed any of those changes persisting after the partnership

ended. I also interviewed eleven government officers who formerly administered the partnership program in five districts throughout Punjab, asking about their observations of the effects of the program during and after the partnership and the political backlash they observed as the partnership evolved. I conducted nine school visits, interviewing teachers about their experiences with the program and observing the school to identify whether curriculum materials from the program are still in use. In three villages where the program had been implemented, I spoke with local political leaders (two *sarpanches* and one *ex-sarpanch*) familiar with the program. I interviewed three government officers who are currently implementing a replacement program run by the Punjab government. I interviewed six district-level education officers from the Department of School Education in Punjab and one state-level education officer who played a critical role in the implementation of the partnership program. I also analyzed newspaper articles and government and NGO documents related to the program.

In addition, to understand the controversial political story behind the dissolution of the partnership program, I interviewed leaders and members of seven teacher's unions, focusing questions on the structure of the union, its agenda and platform, its political allegiances, its advocacy strategies, its involvement in electoral politics, and its views of and lobbying activities surrounding the partnership program.

To verify my respondents' reports of the changes they observed under the program, I triangulated the qualitative evidence gathered during fieldwork with literacy data from the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER)³ that reflect changes in learning outcomes across the state of Punjab throughout the period of my study. These varied sources together provide a rich body of evidence that forms the basis for a detailed timeline of events, and a careful look at the timing of

³ ASER is a nationally representative survey on literacy and numeracy among children in India. It has been conducted annually since 2006. See www.asercentre.org for more information.

these events allows me to adjudicate between competing hypotheses to explain variation in the effects of the partnership on the state's performance.

III. Resource Transfer, Reform, and Reversal: A Story of Partnership in Punjab

The program at the center of this study was launched at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year as a partnership between the government of Punjab and a large Indian NGO that works on education provision programs. The program operated for approximately five years in Punjab's 13,500 primary schools; in its third year it operated in 8100 schools.⁴

Context

The study is set in context of the education system of Punjab in Northwest India. While Punjab is far from being India's poorest states—its income is just above average⁵—the government education system has been largely failing its students in recent decades. Teacher absenteeism in schools is a regular occurrence,⁶ and over a third of Punjab's fifth grade children cannot read a second grade text, while half are unable to solve basic arithmetic problems.⁷ A lack of resources—human, technocratic, and material resources—is part of the problem, and has been a central focus of policy discourse surrounding India's education system. Punjab's government schools have tended to

⁴ The NGO's program reports cite an internal conflict between Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), the education bureaucracy, and the institutions of local government in Punjab, the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), that resulted in the program being removed in the 40% of the state's schools which fell under PRI jurisdiction.

⁵ Author's calculations, based on per capita net state domestic product data on 33 states and union territories from the Central Statistics Office. Calculations made on the basis of 32 observations; West Bengal was not included because of missing data.

⁶ According to ASER 2016, an education survey carried out by independent researchers, 15.2% of Punjab's government teachers were absent during unannounced school visits by independent researchers, slightly higher than the rate in 2010 (<http://www.asercentre.org/>).

⁷ ASER 2016 found that in Punjab, only 69.1% of Standard 5 children could read a Standard 2 text (the number drops to 64.2% in government schools), and only 48% of Standard 5 children could solve division problems (the figure is 42.5% in government schools) (<http://www.asercentre.org/>).

be understaffed, teachers have historically lacked training in effective teaching techniques, and teaching and learning materials (TLM) have been consistently insufficient. Resource shortages were relatively consistent across the education system in Punjab in the early 2000s. However, less visible to the casual observer, but arguably more critical than resource shortages, was another challenge: I observed that the performance of schools was often primarily constrained by patterns of misbehavior among street-level bureaucrats—teachers and principals—at the level of the school.

The extent of shirking and rent-seeking among education bureaucrats is unsurprising given the institutional conditions in the public education bureaucracy of Northwest India, which shape the efforts of those inside the system. Following theoretical work done elsewhere,⁸ I distinguish between the majority of teachers and principals who are extrinsically motivated and thus sensitive to incentives (and whose behavior consequently tends to be shaped by institutional conditions), and the minority of those who are intrinsically motivated and seek quality *despite* institutional incentives. In Punjab’s government education system, institutional incentives to seek quality have traditionally been poor. Career advancement is not tied to performance, and the mechanisms of accountability and oversight of the “last mile” of the state have tended to be dysfunctional due to a layer of corruption in the mid-level of the bureaucracy. As in Kremer and colleagues’ 2005 study of India, teacher dismissal or suspension is rare in Punjab, even in the case of repeated absence. I was told of district- and block-level education officers (DEOs and BEEOs)—mid-level bureaucrats charged with overseeing school performance—who were appointed as a result of political interference or bribes. Because of frequent transferring, turnover in these positions occurred regularly; interviewees estimated that a DEO transfer happening every 5-6 months was typical. The BEEOs transferred frequently, as well: in 8 months, one respondent saw block-level officers change 5 and 6 times in

⁸ Clough 2017

the two blocks he observed. Such dynamics undermine the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms in Punjab's education system. Worsening the problem of poor accountability, teaching effectively under conditions of resource shortages requires substantial effort, yet such efforts go unrewarded by the institutional payoff structure of the education bureaucracy.

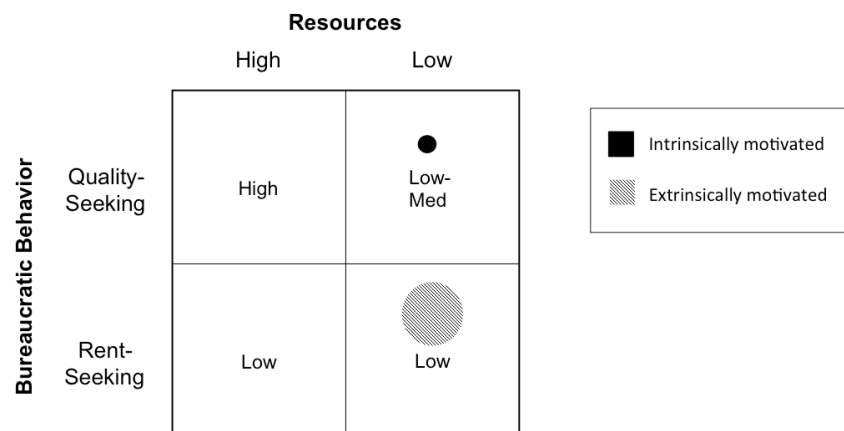
As a result, the majority of teachers who are incentive-sensitive tend toward some form of corruption, or the misuse of office for personal gain. This can take the form of rent-seeking – a harder type of corruption that includes embezzling school money or using a teaching post for political purposes. More commonly, it takes the form of shirking, which I characterize as a softer type of corruption that involves drawing a salary without doing one's job. The latter type of misbehavior was described as having been generally common in Punjab by interviewees, who described these as "time-pass teachers."

By contrast, a minority of unusually motivated teachers and officials were working hard to provide education despite limited resources. Despite a lack of institutional incentives to do so, these intrinsically motivated teachers seek quality, or use their office to advance the purpose of the institution. Such quality-seeking behavior implies that street-level bureaucrats use the resources they have available to them to do their jobs.

To illustrate this scenario, the distribution of teachers in Punjab's education system prior to the partnership is described in a stylized diagram by Figure 1. The outcome of interest represented in each quadrant is the performance of the state. Resources constitute one dimension of the diagram, and the other is the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. The interactions of sufficient resources and bureaucratic quality-seeking alone produces high performance in the education bureaucracy. The black and shaded circles represent the distribution of the population of government teachers in Punjab. The relative size of the circles reflects the premise (drawn from my interviews in Punjab and Rajasthan) that the majority of teachers in the education system were

extrinsically motivated and thus incentive-sensitive, while the minority were intrinsically motivated. The system as a whole lacked resources, so all teachers operated on the right-hand side of the diagram. The institutional system lacked performance-supporting incentives, so the incentive-sensitive teachers were operating in the lower-right-hand quadrant at a low level of performance. A small minority of intrinsically motivated teachers sought quality despite incentives, operating in the upper-right quadrant at a slightly higher level of performance. Yet the state system as a whole was performing poorly.

Figure 1. State performance s a function of resources and bureaucratic behavior



The Beginning of a Reform Initiative in Punjab

In 2007, a reform-oriented official named Krishan Kumar was appointed as the Director General of School Education (DGSE), the highest post in the education bureaucracy in the state of

Punjab. Kumar was known for being incorruptible—he had previously been transferred from a post after he exposed a bribe scandal among several local officials in Jalandhar (Bhatia 2011). In his post as DGSE, Kumar quickly earned a reputation as a motivated official with a genuine reform agenda aimed at increasing the quality of education in Punjab’s government schools. He is described by former program staff as “very good, dedicated [to] his work, very motivated. If the time of the school is 8am he will reach there by 7:30.”

In addition to being hard-working, he reportedly used the full range of his authority to hold officials and teachers accountable for doing their jobs. While the rules of the civil service in India make it difficult for higher-level officials to dismiss teachers for poor performance, a DGSE has other tools available to him to discipline shirkers and rent-seekers. Discretionary transfer is one of the most powerful of these, and Kumar was willing to use discretionary transfer as a tool for accountability. According to one story, the DGSE accompanied a colleague to visit schools unannounced, without telling teachers who he was.

“The teachers did not even stand to greet them...He was not at all insulted about this, but he felt bad that the toilets are in such bad condition, the blackboard is not nice, children are not treated properly, electricity is not there. He felt bad about that, about what they are giving to the children. And then he transferred the teachers from that school.”

However, as DGSE Kumar could not observe the vast majority of teachers in rural schools. His willingness to enforce was stymied by an information asymmetry—he could not observe rent-seeking or shirking at the school level because the layer of mid-level bureaucrats between his office in Chandigarh and the “last mile” of the state failed to provide effective oversight and reporting on teacher and school performance. Moreover, Kumar faced the challenge of resource scarcity in the school system. Many rural schools did not have enough books, classroom equipment, or teaching and learning materials. Rural areas were often short of teachers, and the teachers they did have tended to use outdated, rote pedagogical methods. It was against this background that the partnership program was launched.

Early Partnership: Resources Without Accountable Bureaucrats

Soon after he was appointed DGSE, Kumar learned of an NGO that had been piloting apparently effective literacy programs in a few government schools in two districts in Punjab and had had success in improving learning outcomes in the neighboring state of Haryana. Under the leadership of Kumar and several reform-minded associates, the Government of Punjab entered into a partnership with the NGO in 2008 to implement its literacy program in every primary school in the state of Punjab.

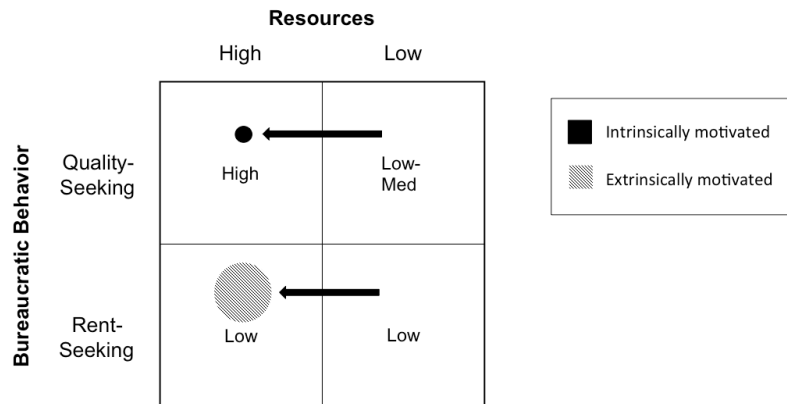
The partnership program was a classic resource intervention. It involved training government teachers to use a new methodology for teaching basic reading that had been developed by the NGO. According to the program, students would be given baseline assessments and formed into groups based on their learning levels. Special teaching and learning materials (TLM) had been developed by the NGO to teach literacy based on interactive, level-specific teaching techniques, and these materials were to be used in every classroom. The school day was to be re-organized so that the NGO's curriculum could be delivered throughout the school day for classes one and two, and for two hours each day in classes three through five. To train teachers and to oversee the implementation of the curriculum at the school level, the NGO hired a large staff to work alongside the government bureaucracy: one state-level program coordinator, three zone coordinators for the state (each of which managed 7 districts), 30 district coordinators, 220 block coordinators, 750 cluster coordinators, and around 10,000 volunteers who worked for the NGO at the level of individual schools.

In the initial months after the partnership program was launched, early results were disappointing. Program officers from that period report that the NGO workers were offering teacher training sessions and distributing curriculum materials and TLM, but most teachers did not seem to be implementing the new teaching methodology effectively in the classroom. Those

teachers who were especially motivated and hard-working were apparently using the new teaching tools and reporting progress on student scores, but these outcomes did not appear broadly in the initial period of the program. Kumar and his leadership team had been attempting to implement the partnership program through the existing structures in the Department of School Education, but after the first year of the program, they reportedly realized that without addressing the problem of widespread shirking on the part of teachers and bureaucrats, problems with accountability would prevent the curriculum program from having a significant effect.

The first year of the partnership showed that the addition of new resources from the NGO alone did little to improve state performance, even in *resource-poor* schools, given the pervasive problem of bureaucratic shirking and rent-seeking. To educate children, resources must be used effectively by those delivering services, but in a context of widespread shirking, voluntary uptake of new resources is unlikely. In stylized terms, Figure 2 describes this early stage of the partnership, in which the entire system is flooded with newly available resources (shifting both types of teachers to the left-hand, high-resource side of the diagram), but this only improved the performance of the small minority of intrinsically motivated teachers who seek quality. The incentive structures in the education bureaucracy have not changed, and so the majority of teachers continue to shirk and seek rents, and the new training and curricular resources do not improve their performance. Thus, the school system as a whole registers weak overall improvement in performance.

Figure 2. State performance as a function of bureaucratic behavior: resource infusion



Kumar and his team realized that reforming the behavior of many bureaucrats would be necessary to improve the uptake and use of the NGO’s resources. Kumar was willing to hold teachers accountable, but far away in Chandigarh, the state capital, he could not observe the behavior of teachers in rural Punjab. To hold teachers directly accountable for the program’s implementation would require better mechanisms for monitoring teacher behavior. The entrenched patronage politics common among the regular education line bureaucrats, and their already overburdened workloads, made them poor candidates for effective monitoring, so Kumar and his colleagues improvised, constructing a new line of government posts reporting directly to the top. They recruited especially motivated government teachers (one interviewee called them “the creamy layer”) to fill the posts in this new cadre of government program officers. To prevent them from becoming influenced by local patronage networks, the new government monitors were posted far from their home areas.

These government officers, along with NGO program workers, took up a rigorous monitoring role in the new partnership program, making unannounced visits to schools to observe whether teachers were implementing the new methodology. They checked to see if teachers were coming to school on time and teaching students the new curriculum properly. They ensured that regular tests were implemented by teachers in each school to gather data on students' learning progress and absence rates, and they ensured that these data were properly recorded. They held regular meetings with education officials at the block, district, and state level to discuss problems and review data on the progress of the program. Through these meetings, NGO and government program workers would ensure that monitoring information was disseminated through every level of the bureaucratic chain up to the DGSE. They would often transmit data directly to the DGSE if problems occurred at other levels of the bureaucracy.

While officers from both the NGO and the government visited schools and both groups report monitoring teacher performance (see Table 1), some respondents suggested that government program officers tended to be the ones to act in a disciplinary role as accountability agents, whereas while NGO workers might pass information about teacher or official misbehavior to program leaders, they were primarily expected to act in a program support role. The reason given for this was that NGO workers were not perceived as having the legitimate authority to act as enforcers on behalf of higher-level state officials. As non-state actors, they were outside the structure of authority to enforce state policies. In order to maintain their collaborative partnership, they were not in the position to alienate state actors by putting pressure on teachers or officials; unlike traditional advocacy groups, their ability to use contentious politics to hold state agents accountable was constrained by their cooperative relationship with the state. Program officers from the government side, on the other hand, could create performance pressure for teachers and officials because they

were part of the state structure of accountability—as one former program officer from the government side said, “the whole team was considered as a shadow of Krishan Kumar.”

Table 1. Number of NGO and Government Program Staff Involved in School Monitoring*

Administrative Level	NGO Staff	Government Officers
Cluster	750	1500
Block/Nodal	216	216
District/Zonal	32	40

*Data from NGO report

To further open up channels of monitoring, Kumar reportedly made himself available to both NGO and government program workers at all levels, giving his phone number to everyone so that “they can complain to him directly.” As one program worker said, “if somebody wants to meet [Kumar], he calls that person in his house...Everybody can go to him with his problem, one by one, and he gives a solution to that problem.” Kumar would visit schools and call officials or teachers to reprimand them whenever wrongdoing was reported. One NGO worker said that if he complained that the DEO is not responding to a problem, Kumar “calls the DEO on the spot. He will call anyone—the DEO, BEEO, anyone down the line. He will even call the teacher.”

The institutional innovation put in place by reformers at this point transformed the dynamic of shirking and rent-seeking that had constrained the program’s effects in the majority of government schools during the initial year of the program. Soon after this new system of transparent accountability was introduced, bureaucratic behavior shifted significantly.

“The Golden Period” of the Partnership: Resources and Accountable Bureaucrats

After the introduction of the bottom-up monitoring reform in Punjab’s education bureaucracy, interviewees reported striking, widespread changes in teacher behavior.

“[At the beginning, the NGO] was not allowed to enter the school. Then they started cooperating. There was a big difference in the behavior with teachers.”

“Earlier there was no pressure on teachers, they are not coming on time, but as these people gave pressure on the teachers it helped them improve a lot. They started working properly, coming on time, they used the [partnership program] method.”

Similarly, education officials in the Department of School Education reportedly responded to pressure from above.

“When [the partnership program] was there, there were monthly meetings and it made the behavior and attitude of the BEEO and DEO improve. If they make any mistakes, [the partnership program] would count that mistake and directly call the DGSE, and there would be consequences. Earlier if they make any mistakes, no one would get to know about it. Because of this, the differences in the DEO and the BEEO happened from the beginning to the end of [the partnership program].”

“The DGSE and ASPD are making pressure on the DEO, and from here pressure is getting everywhere. [DEOs changed their attitude] because [they are] answerable to the state officer.”

Around this time, observers began to notice improvements in resource uptake, program implementation, and educational outcomes at a broader level. Interviewees said that early in the program, teachers did not like the program or the books, they didn’t know the names of their own students, and they did not attend trainings. They missed school and gave excuses. In the second and third years of the partnership program, however, teachers reportedly had more positive attitudes about the NGO’s books and programs. They learned the children’s names. They started attending trainings regularly, and started coming to the schools on time and stopped giving excuses. I asked one of the top state officers involved in implementing the program to give a back-of-the-envelope estimate, simply based on his impressions and experience, of the distribution of teachers who were 1) seeking quality, 2) shirking, and 3) seeking rents⁹ prior to and during the program. He guessed that the distribution of quality seekers-to-shirkers-to-rent seekers was 25%-65%-10% prior to the partnership program, and at its height, it was 70%-25%-5%.

⁹ In interviews, I explained these categories as teachers making an effort, teachers making minimal effort, and teachers actively engaging in corruption. Interviewees immediately recognized the motivational profiles I described, and terms that emerged from interviews for these categories were “bright spot” teachers, the “unmotivated middle,” and “bad apples.”

Mainly, interviewees reported, there was a significant difference in the children’s level of learning. Earlier the alphabet was taught in 6th class, and during the program it began to be taught in 3rd class. Program officers from the NGO and the government report jumps in the level of language learning in both Punjabi and English. Statewide literacy data from ASER confirms this (see Table 2). While all-India reading levels for 3rd class students in government schools declined steadily in this period, in Punjab they increased by 16.4 percentage points (ASER 2014). The confluence of a quality-committed administrative team overseeing an effective bureaucratic monitoring system and an infusion of technocratic resources from an NGO is closely followed by a notable jump in literacy outcomes statewide.

Table 2. Comparative reading levels in government schools in Punjab and in all of India

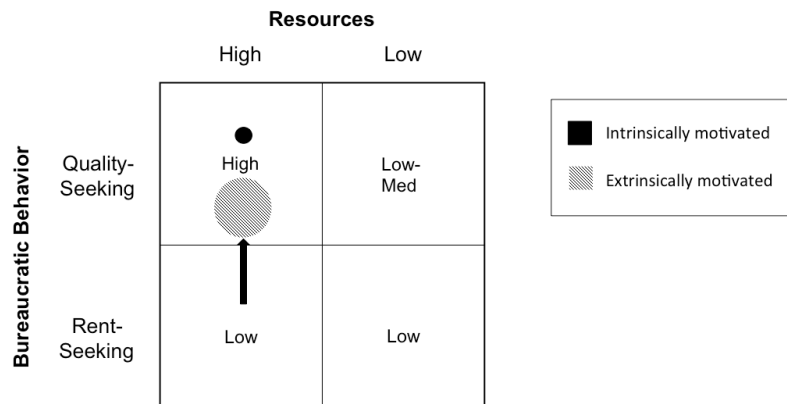
Year	All India: % 3 rd standard students who can read a 1 st standard text	Punjab: % 3 rd standard students who can read a 1 st standard text	All India: % 5 th standard students who can read a 2 nd standard text	Punjab: % 5 th standard students who can read a 2 nd standard text
2006	45.8	38.8	51.4	44.3
2007	46.7	47.8	56.7	65.9
2008	46.9	40.9	53.1	61.3
2009	43.8	44.2	50.3	64.3
2010	42.5	52.4	50.7	68.7
2011	35.2	57.3	43.8	71.9
2012	32.4	51.4	41.7	69.5
2013	32.6	52.3	41.1	66.5
2014	31.8	42.4	42.2	60.9

*Data from ASER 2014.

This period from 2009 until 2011 – called the “Golden Period” of the program by a focus group of program officers – reflected a key shift in the behavior of bureaucrats. By introducing bottom-up monitors, complemented by top-down enforcement, Kumar effectively transformed the incentive structure in the education system, shifting Punjab’s extrinsically motivated teachers’ behavior toward quality-seeking. Figure 3 depicts these shifts in terms of our theoretical framework,

showing that the bureaucratic reforms introduced in this period redistribute teachers such that both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated teachers begin operating in the high-performance quadrant of our diagram. As a result, the effectiveness of the entire government system improved dramatically and learning levels rose rapidly throughout the state.

Figure 3. State performance as a function of resources and bureaucratic behavior: monitoring



End of the Partnership: Political Interference and the Breakdown of Bureaucratic Reform

Unfortunately, this Golden Period did not last long. According to interviewees, in the year leading up to the statewide election, political forces that opposed reform—including a top minister and several of the teachers’ unions in Punjab—mobilized against the NGO-government partnership program and used political influence to have Kumar transferred, at which point the partnership began to fall apart. In February of 2011, Kumar was transferred (to the National Rural Health Mission), as were others on his leadership team. News of his transfer was met with public accusations of politicized interference in the bureaucracy by rent-seeking operatives. The

partnership with the NGO persisted without Kumar and his colleagues, but the program was weakened without a top-level administration willing to enforce the rules. In May 2013, the program was officially dissolved.

The end of Kumar's leadership of the NGO-state partnership is a contested, politically contentious story. One version emphasizes the corruption of the Education Minister. Another, reflected in my interviews, emphasizes the role of teacher's unions. Both versions, however, implicate the capture of electoral politics by powerful special interests favoring a low-accountability status quo and their influence in undermining the reform initiatives led by Krishan Kumar.

Public sources, including several newspaper articles published locally at the time (e.g. Malik 2013) suggest that a power tussle between the Education Minister and Kumar. According to these Kumar refused to allow the Education Minister to interfere in the selection of new teachers for political gain, and this prompted the Education Minister to initiate the transfer of Kumar out of the education system of Punjab.

Interviews conducted with people involved in the education system at the time tell a different version of the story—one that centers on the union interference in the lead-up to the 2012 election. This story holds that politically powerful teacher's unions intervened in electoral politics, pressuring elected politicians to transfer Kumar and shut down the NGO program as elections drew near. In one telling of this version of the story, the teacher's unions—particularly those with an agenda to protect rent-seeking among teachers¹⁰—were increasingly displeased with Kumar and the

¹⁰ My research into Punjab's teacher's unions suggests that there are over 30 unions in Punjab that represent primary school teachers. According to interviews with teachers and union leaders, the majority of these unions pursue goals consistent with their stated purpose – to protect their members' rights and interests as workers. They advocate for better contract terms and higher salaries for their members. However, four large unions – specifically, those that have ties to Punjab's major political parties – function more like patronage machines. These politicized unions pursue policies that protect rent-seeking among teachers, and in exchange they deliver votes to

partnership program because it created performance pressure for teachers who would prefer to pursue leisure or profit. Against this backdrop, not long before the 2012 state election, some partnership program workers allegedly reported several teachers to a BEEO for coming to school drunk. The BEEO followed up, and the teachers were suspended. The teacher's union went to a minister they knew in the health department, saying they wanted the program's district coordinator ousted, and the health minister pressured the program's district coordinator. When the district coordinator refused to step down, the matter was escalated to the Education Minister, whose political party (the Shiromani Akali Dal) was facing a competitive election. The Education Minister responded to the union's pressure and threatened to transfer the district coordinator, but the district coordinator refused to accept the transfer order. The conflict escalated, and, facing electoral threats from the teacher's unions and pressure to curb accountability reforms, the Education Minister transferred Kumar to a post in Delhi and began closing down the partnership program.

Several informants told me some version of this story:

"Teachers complained about Krishan Kumar to political parties. Those persons pressurized Kumar [for being] so strict with the teachers."

"Because of political parties, Krishan Kumar left this post – because... teachers don't like him very much because of his work, because [teachers] are very lazy in their work and there was so much pressure on them that Krishan Kumar created, that's why they don't want that he should be there. So he left this post. When Krishan Kumar left the teachers were very happy; they were having a party."

"The teachers were not doing their work properly, [and] he suspended them and transferred them to somewhere else. So the teachers who had government contacts, who had contacts in politics, they approached them for their suspension and transfer letters...just because the teachers complained to the political parties, that's why the DGSE was changed. They were very frustrated with the DGSE because they have to go to the school for their duty. Earlier they used to do their domestic work in their job [time], but now they were not able to do that. And the DGSE never hears anybody if there's some political parties or teachers who come to him. He does his work with loyalty."

political parties by mobilizing electoral support via their rank and file. Teachers play a pivotal role in electoral politics in India (Kingdon and Muzammil 2013; Bêteille 2007), and my informants told me that some of these larger, politicized unions can deliver a state election.

Leaders from one of Punjab's teacher's unions told me straightforwardly that they had been instrumental in ending the program by putting pressure on politicians.

“From the beginning they were against it. Because it was a program of [NGO]. We organized rallies, we went to the school, we boycotted seminars which were given by NGOs. We got to the schools and oppose the parents. And tell them how the government is going to privatize the schools. Then we took the support of the parents. [We approached the] village person, *panchayat*, [and got] the support of the *panchayat*. Other unions were also against [the program]. We make a common committee. We join friends, to work against [the program]. [We created a] joint front of all the unions to fight against all these forces. We have closed up the NGO – forced the government to withdraw the NGO out of the system. When [NGO] members [came] into the school, we would oppose them and persuade them to go back. In a protest way, we persuade them not to enter in our school. Parents and villagers stand with us.”

The same union leader explained how they generally get their demands met by politicians and bureaucrats because their large membership size means they can mobilize masses to put pressure on politicians.

[Before they are elected, union leaders tell members that] “they will maintain pressure on the political system so they can put pressure on bureaucrat[s]. In [our union] no political person is there. [The union does not have] political link[s]. [This does not hinder our work because] we have masses. We have power in masses, common people. We fight with that, not with links. Sometime if there is a bigger agitation against the government, sometimes [the] Chief Minister calls them for a meeting, [saying] ‘ok, what do you want,’ because he feels pressure.”

Another informant familiar with the program explained why the teacher's unions were able to create this level of pressure:

“When the election comes, the teacher union is there, and the vote of every teacher matters a lot. And teachers were not at all happy with Krishan Kumar...just because of the influence of the teachers they wanted to get their votes. The politicians thought teachers were not satisfied with Krishan Kumar because he is putting pressure to come on time, to do the work...politicians were afraid that if teachers are not happy, there's a union of teachers, if we do not change Krishan Kumar no one will vote for us from the teacher's union. This was the election of the local assembly, state elections in 2012. They transferred him ahead of time to show they had the teacher's interests in mind.”

Other informants told me that “teachers have so much influence on the political parties, they can complain to them directly in meetings,” and “if the DGSE listens to the unions then the DGSE is good [in their book]. If he doesn't listen to them, he's not good [in their book]...this made them change his post.”

Whether Kumar's transfer was primarily the result of a tussle with the Education Minister or of a clash with the unions is difficult to verify, and it is possible that both played a role. However,

both versions of the story point to political interference in bureaucratic efforts at reform in the period leading up to an election due to the political sway of status quo interests.

After Kumar's transfer, the NGO remained in place until 2012, when its Memorandum of Understanding with the Punjab government was not renewed, but respondents consistently report that the efficacy of the program dropped dramatically during this period once Kumar and his team were no longer at the helm. One former program officer lamented, "[the NGO] worked for another one year, but downfall occurred. No work was done, so the project was ended. The work was not up to the mark after Kumar [and his colleagues] left. The project lost its essence." A former government officer who had helped implement the program said, "we worked on the program for one year after Kumar left, but it was a tremendous change under this scenario—the whole system, the nature of teachers, the effectiveness, the evaluation system. In the meetings also, trainings were a poor show." A Memorandum of Understanding was not signed for the 2012-13 school year, and when the remaining program officers were abruptly dismissed in May of 2013, the program officially ended.

My interviewees suggest that the transfer of Kumar and the breakdown of the partnership has had four key impacts: 1) Monitoring has ceased to operate effectively, 2) corruption with impunity has once again become the norm among officials, and consequently, 3) teacher motivation and performance has dramatically fallen among all but the intrinsically motivated teachers as institutional incentives declined. As a result, 4) learning levels have fallen.

Post-Partnership: Reversion and Residual Effects

After the program's eventual closure, the Education Ministry launched a pared-down version of the program (without the NGO), under a new name. They changed the names of the posts and, since the original staff from the original partnership program had been unceremoniously sent home when the program ended, the new program had half the original number of staff, all of them newly

hired. They removed the distance posting policy, and consequently program officers worked in their home area. Several interviewees said that the process of selection for these posts became political again. Serious monitoring was removed as an option for program personnel: One interviewee told me that when the new DGSE was appointed after Kumar's transfer, the new Education Minister told the DGSE that he must work under the Minister's conditions and control, and the DGSE reportedly requested to be transferred to a post where he had more independence. The DGSEs began to be transferred regularly: between when Kumar was transferred in 2011 and when my interviews took place in the summer of 2014, interviewees said there had been six DGSEs in Punjab. According to an informant, some are transferred under political pressure involuntarily, and some of them use political connections with the Chief Minister or a Member of Legislative Assembly to get themselves transferred voluntarily "just because they're afraid of [the job]."

Along with the end of the partnership, learning levels began to drop. Statewide data on reading levels from ASER are consistent with a curtailment in the effect of the program after 2011. As we saw in Table 2, ASER (2015) shows a spike in literacy rates among elementary-age children beginning soon after the partnership program began, and a fall in state-wide literacy rates after 2011, when Kumar was dismissed, despite the persistence of the official partnership program until 2013. While only 38.8% of 3rd-standard children in Punjab government schools could read at least a 1st standard text in 2006, five years later in 2011, at the height of the program, that number had increased to 57.3%. After the program began to disband, literacy numbers in Punjab dropped—by 2014, only 42.4% of 3rd-standard children in Punjab's government schools can read a 1st-standard text.

Without Kumar, the patron-client networks that dominated the functioning of large parts of the bureaucratic system prior to the partnership program reemerged.

"There is no pressure now from upper levels...just in case pressure comes from the upper level, through their links with people from upper posts they just stop the pressure. [The new program officers] don't

have to face it just because they have a link...at the time of Krishan Kumar, [program officer] will not help the [other program officer] because he [himself] can be fired from his post, Krishan Kumar will not leave him [alone]; nobody can save his skin. Nowadays every person has a link with the person above him, and nobody will get fired.”

My interviewees agreed that the political interference that resulted in Kumar’s removal ultimately reversed the bureaucratic reforms he had put in place which had enabled the education system to broadly benefit from the resources provided by the NGO. “When Krishan Kumar went away, the behavior of the DEO and the BEEO changed totally,” said one respondent; another reported, “After Krishan Kumar left, the improvement in politics was undone. Because of the teacher’s union, the politics have taken their place again.” According to one story, the DEOs and BEOs threw a big party when Kumar was transferred to Delhi “because then there was no pressure. If they made any mistake before, Krishan Kumar would call them directly on their mobile, but since he went away there is no pressure on them.” Another lamented, “When Krishan Kumar left, it affected [the partnership program] a lot. It made everything in very bad condition. Everything went very wrong.” I was told stories of DEOs beginning to demand bribes for processing routine paperwork, collecting money from teachers via the union for processing permanent teacher letters, and teachers coming late to school again. One story described people coming from the DEO’s office to a village school committee and demanding a bribe to deliver the funds for the school’s boundary wall. My NGO interviewees told me that type of activity began to flourish unsanctioned, and the functioning of the system settled back into its old equilibrium: “Work is going on, everybody gets their salaries. It does not bother [them] whether improvement is going on or not.”

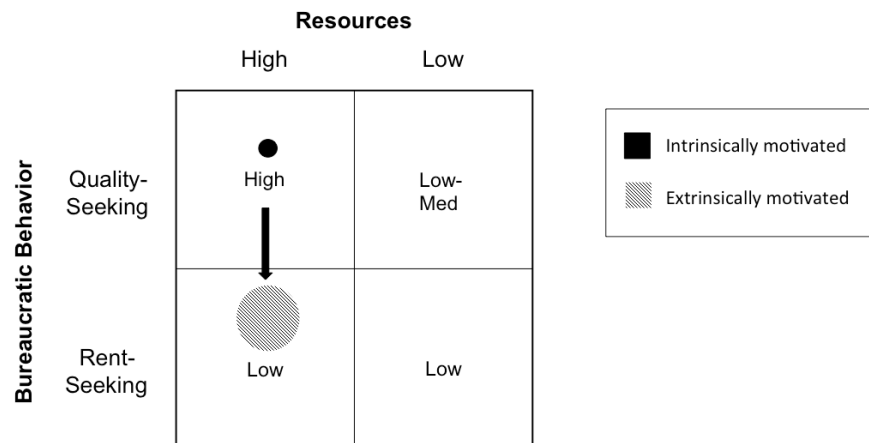
Likewise, the removal of top-down enforcement produced changes in teacher performance as they no longer faced a real source of accountability. In most schools, I was told teachers are not using these teaching methods anymore because these methods, while effective, are demanding and require hard work. Lacking a system of accountability like that put in place by Kumar, the majority

of teachers have found little incentive to continue this hard work, and according to interviewees the result has been a widespread reversion to habits of shirking and rent-seeking.

“Teachers are still doing their work but not seriously because there is no pressure on them. The [newly posted program officers] have been told they can give instructions to teachers but they cannot give pressure. This instruction came from upper parties, state officers. They have told [program workers] they can’t create pressure.”

Once Kumar was transferred, my respondents suggested that continued monitoring visits by NGO workers and the program’s field officers began to lose their effectiveness. These visits continued for over two years after Kumar’s transfer, but my interviewees told me stories about teachers not allowing field officers into schools and ceasing to listen to anything the NGO workers said. It seems that monitoring without a credible source of enforcement was insufficient to maintain behavioral changes among extrinsically motivated teachers. Figure 4 depicts this shift in stylized terms.

Figure 4. State performance as a function of resources and bureaucratic behavior: Kumar’s transfer



Lingering Resource Effects?

Not all effects of the program have disappeared without a trace. School visits and interviews I conducted confirmed that the teaching methodology that was introduced under the partnership program is still being used by some teachers. Evidence from school visits and interviews suggests that the schools where program materials are still used are not random, but tend to be schools run by teachers who had been intrinsically motivated types from the beginning. I asked my informants, who were intimately familiar with the program's history, to bring me to visit schools run by teachers who had tended toward quality-seeking, shirking, and rent-seeking *prior* to the program, to observe differences in how the program had affected schools run by teachers with different behavioral tendencies. In the schools run by *ex-ante* quality-seeking teachers, I was shown beautifully arrayed libraries with books and TLM left over from the partnership program. Many of the books, distributed in 2008 and 2009, were carefully preserved with tape to make them last as long as possible. The teaching methodology at the center of the partnership program is still being deployed in these schools. Although the state stopped providing trainings in the partnership methods once the program ended, these teachers continue to organize students into learning level cohorts and use interactive activities to teach reading, and these teachers report that these methods are highly effective and helpful in boosting students' learning levels. The technocratic resources provided by the NGO have persisted in their effectiveness in the context of these schools.

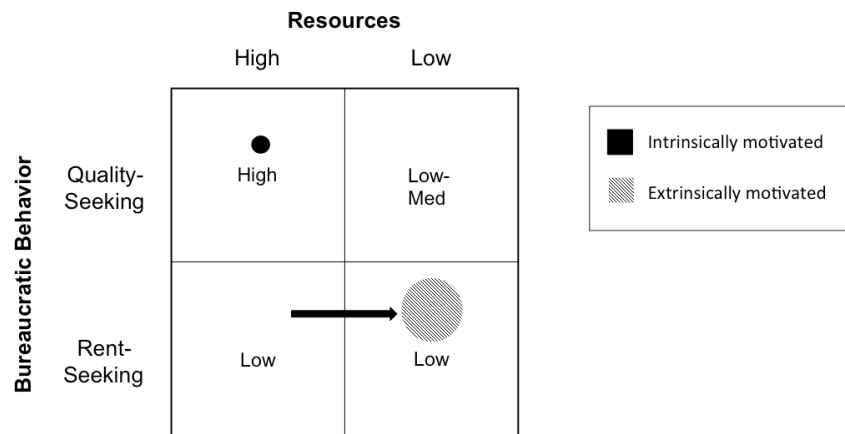
However, at the schools run by teachers who reportedly tended toward shirking and rent-seeking both before and after the program, teachers could not produce any materials related to the partnership program and some claimed they had never heard of the program. An interviewee corroborated the pattern I observed in the school visits:

“For some teachers, [the program came with] pressure so just because of pressure they are doing it, that is why they don't like [the program]. [But] some teachers started and ended with a good attitude. Those

teachers...have shifted according to the [the program's] method, because...they want to work and they're okay with the new way of working."

The resources that had been deployed in schools run by incentive-sensitive teachers had slowly faded away, while resources had "stuck" in schools run by intrinsically motivated teachers. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. State performance as a function of resources and bureaucratic behavior: post-NGO partnership



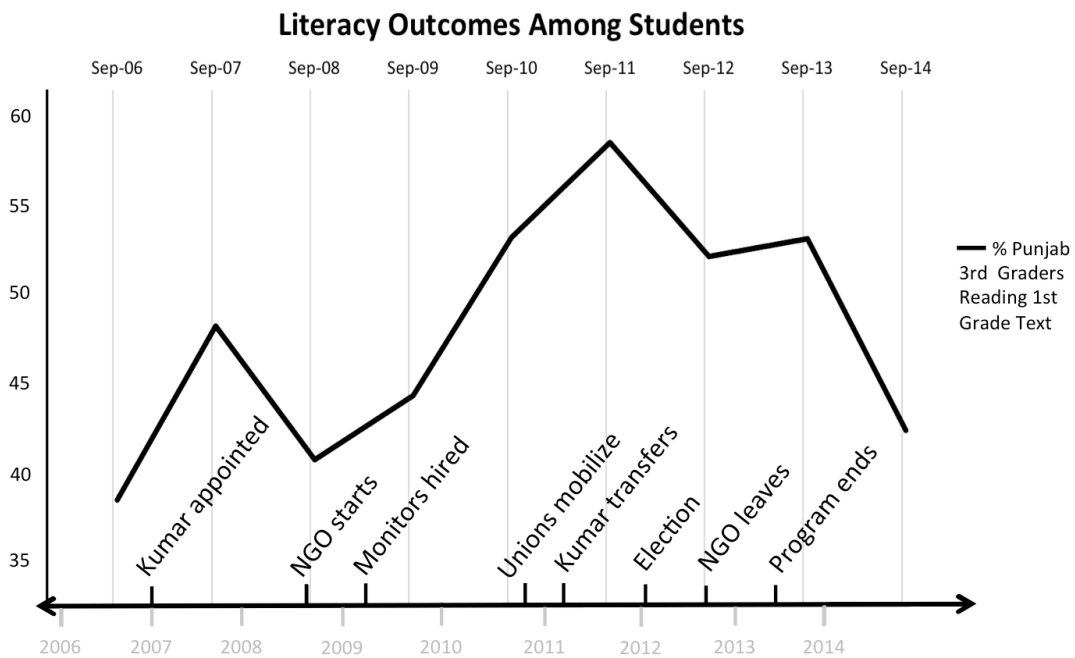
The only evidence that my interviews uncovered of *harm* done by the partnership program was in the disillusionment of some of the motivated teachers who had been involved in the program. Several informants who had been recruited from the government to act as monitors during the partnership told me that the abrupt and politicized end of the program was incredibly disappointing for them. This group had been the top performing teachers who cared deeply about quality education for Punjab's children, and had found the "Golden Period" of the program inspiring and encouraging. The reversal of the program's effectiveness under political pressure, and the program's

abrupt dismantling, was alienating and discouraging for them, they told me, and they returned to the classrooms with cynical views about the possibilities for improving the government system.

IV. Analysis

The qualitative account detailed in the previous section points clearly to the importance of the *interaction* between Kumar’s enforcement, the monitoring of teacher behavior, and the technocratic resources provided by the NGO in explaining variation in the partnership’s effects. AS a robustness check, this section employs a timeline constructed from these events and learning outcome data to address possible alternative explanations. Examining the timing in how changes in outcomes and actors line up enables the skeptical reader to adjudicate between several possible explanations for the variation in the effects of the partnership (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Learning outcomes among government school students (ASER data) in Punjab mapped onto events timeline of partnership program.

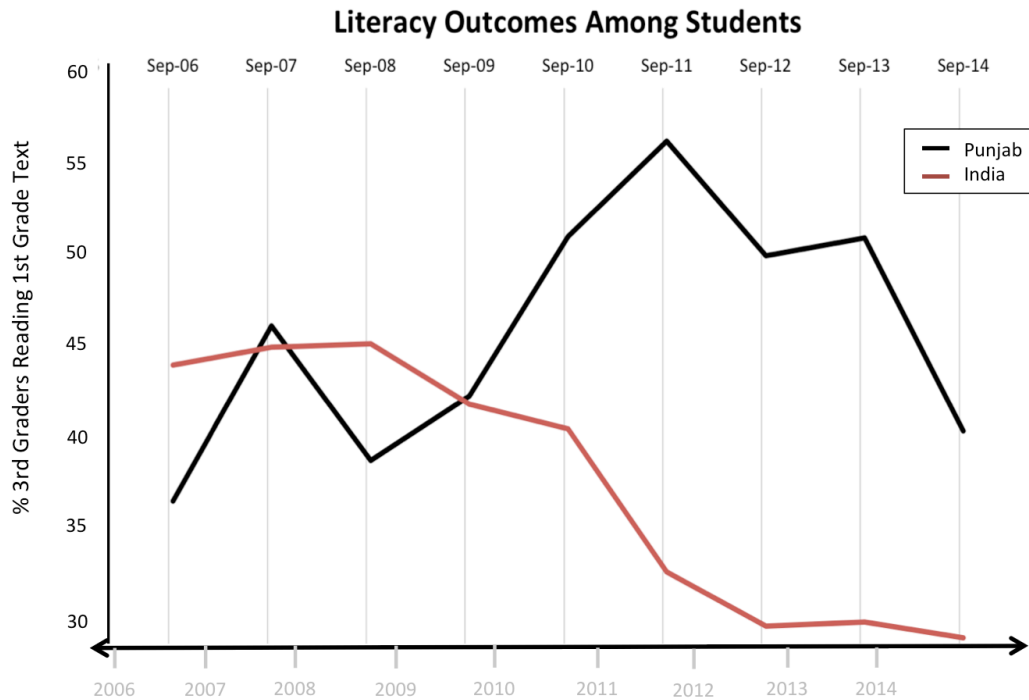


What does a careful examination of the timing of events in this case tell us about what caused the variation in the performance in Punjab's education system in the years before, during, and after the NGO partnership? Several possible explanations can be ruled out based on the timing of the events enumerated in the last section.

H₀: National Education Trends?

First, it is straightforward to rule out a null hypothesis – namely, that the changes in learning outcomes in Punjab between 2008 and 2014 were unrelated to the changes in Punjab's education system and actually reflected broader background trends in the Indian education system as a whole. Figure 7 compares changes in child literacy rates in Punjab with the same figures for all of India. During Punjab's steep climb in learning outcomes, these outcomes fell throughout the rest of the country. The declining trend was clear and steady in all-India outcomes: 3rd standard students in government schools throughout India who could read a 1st grade text fell from 45.8% in 2006 to 31.8% in 2014. Clearly, the bump in learning outcomes in Punjab reflects something distinctive about the state education system.

Figure 7. H_0 : National Education Trends?

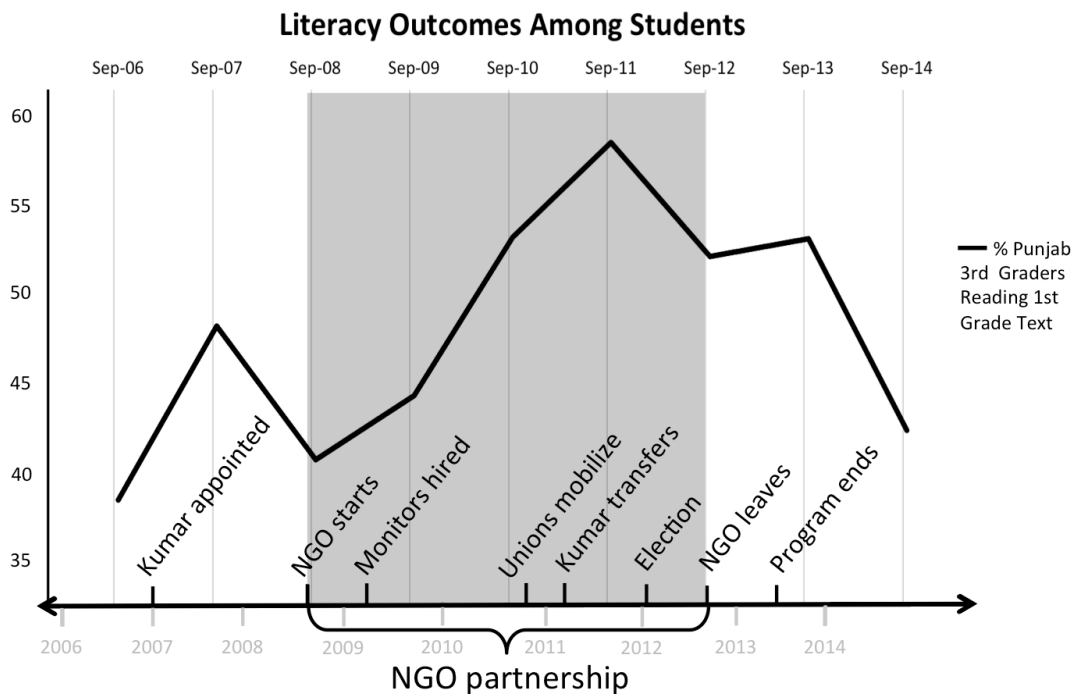


H_1 : *NGO Resources Alone?*

The literature on state capacity highlights the importance of adequate state resources for public service delivery, suggesting the hypothesis that the resource intervention from the NGO alone may explain the observed variation in learning outcomes. Indeed, in the first year of the partnership, the reported improvement in some schools documented in both the qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest that the NGO’s resource intervention had an independent (though weak) effect on the performance of Punjab’s school system. Yet a careful look at the timing of the case shows that the NGO’s resources alone fail to explain most of the variation in state performance over the course of the partnership. Between September 2008 and September 2012, the NGO’s resources were a constant (see Figure 8), while the performance of Punjab’s schools varied significantly, accelerating after the first year of mild improvement and declining two years after that. The reversal in state performance began over a year prior to the exit of the NGO. Once Kumar had

been transferred, the NGO continued providing trainings and school support, and the curricular resources remained in place. Yet learning outcomes declined, suggesting the need for a different explanation for both the acceleration of impact and its reversal.

Figure 8. H₁: NGO Resources Alone?



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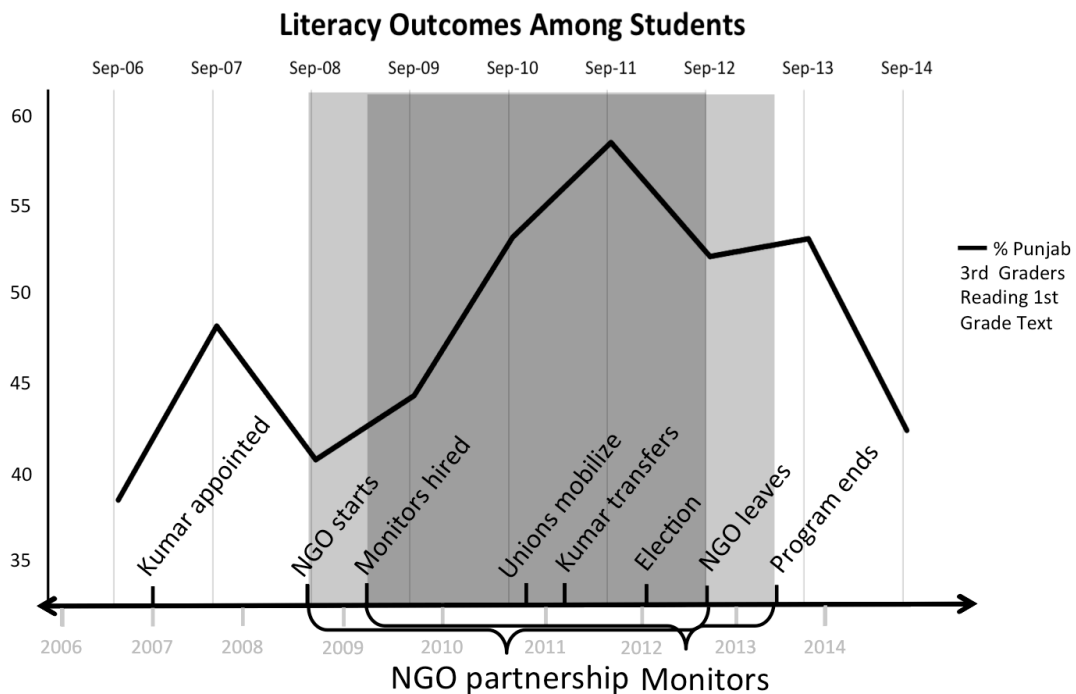
H₂: NGO Resources + [Bottom-Up] Bureaucratic Reform?

The qualitative evidence suggests that at a systemic level, the key shifts in the performance of Punjab’s schools came when NGO-provided resources *interacted* with an improvement in the behavior of bureaucrats in the majority of schools. Thus, another possible explanation lies in the combination of NGO resources and the monitoring intervention introduced in April 2009. Monitoring, a bottom-up approach to bureaucratic reform, has received much attention in recent years in the literature on service delivery. By reducing information asymmetries between upper administration and last-mile bureaucrats, bottom-up monitoring is supposed to increase

accountability and improve outcomes (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987).

The introduction of monitors in this case does coincide with the acceleration in the improvement of Punjab’s schools (the beginning of the “Golden Period”), and the alignment of this timing is corroborated by quantitative measures of literacy outcomes.

Figure 9. H₂: NGO Resources + [Bottom-Up] Bureaucratic Reform?

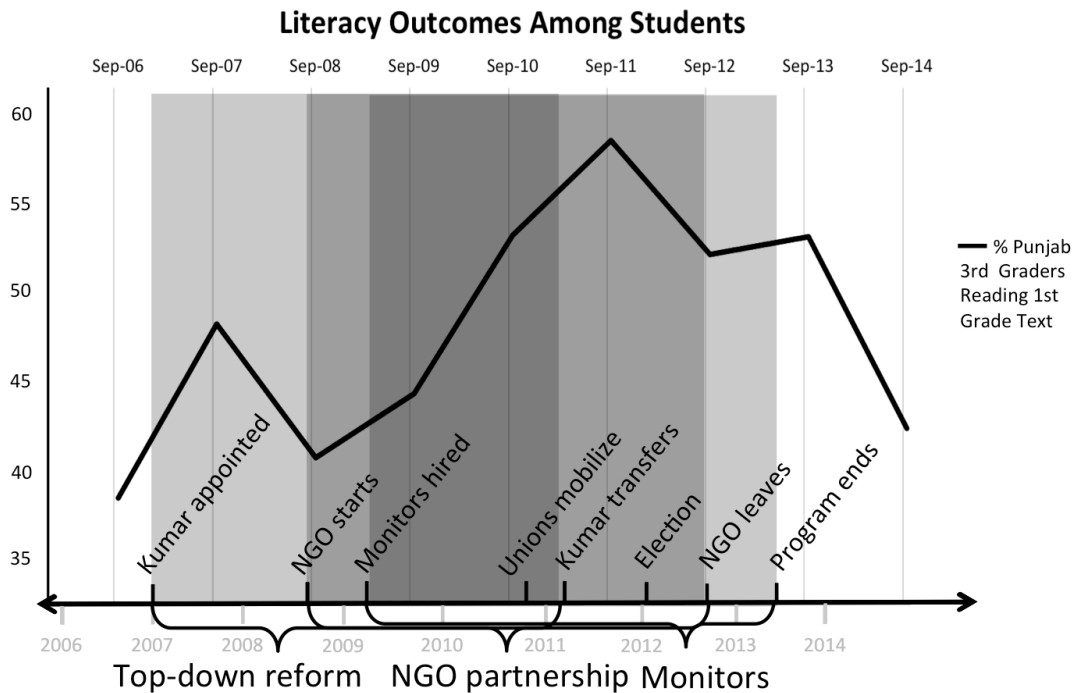


However, the combination of resources and monitoring still fail to explain the key reversal in the improvements in school performance that happened in 2011 (see Figure 9). Monitors continued their work until May 2013, two years after the reversal began. Yet according to individuals involved in the program’s implementation on both the government and the NGO side, the behavior of bureaucrats reverted well before the exit of monitors, as soon as anti-reform political pressure led to Kumar’s transfer and education bureaucrats learned that the top-level administration was no longer willing to enforce the rules.

H₃: NGO Resources + Comprehensive Bureaucratic Reform

A third hypothesis, then, is that variation in state performance is best explained by an interaction between NGO resources and a particular type of bureaucratic reform encompassing *both* bottom-up monitoring and top-down reinforcement. This hypothesis receives strong support from both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Interview data show that it was the combination of bottom-up monitoring and top-down reinforcement that produced institutional conditions of accountability, effectively altering the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. Once teachers began using the program's resources, learning levels improved drastically. The removal of Kumar, however, undermined this effective bureaucratic reform, and resources began to be underutilized as teachers returned to patterns of shirking and rent-seeking. The two-year period in which the state was reported to be performing at its best – the so-called “Golden Period” – lines up precisely with the period of time in which the NGO was providing resources, the monitoring intervention was in place, and Kumar and his administration were enforcing the implementation of the program (see Figure 10). The removal of Kumar's enforcement re-introduced bureaucratic rent-seeking as the binding constraint into the majority of the system, undoing the apparent effects of resources in all but a small number schools run by intrinsically motivated teachers.

Figure 10. H₃: NGO Resources + [Bottom-Up + Top-Down] Bureaucratic Reform

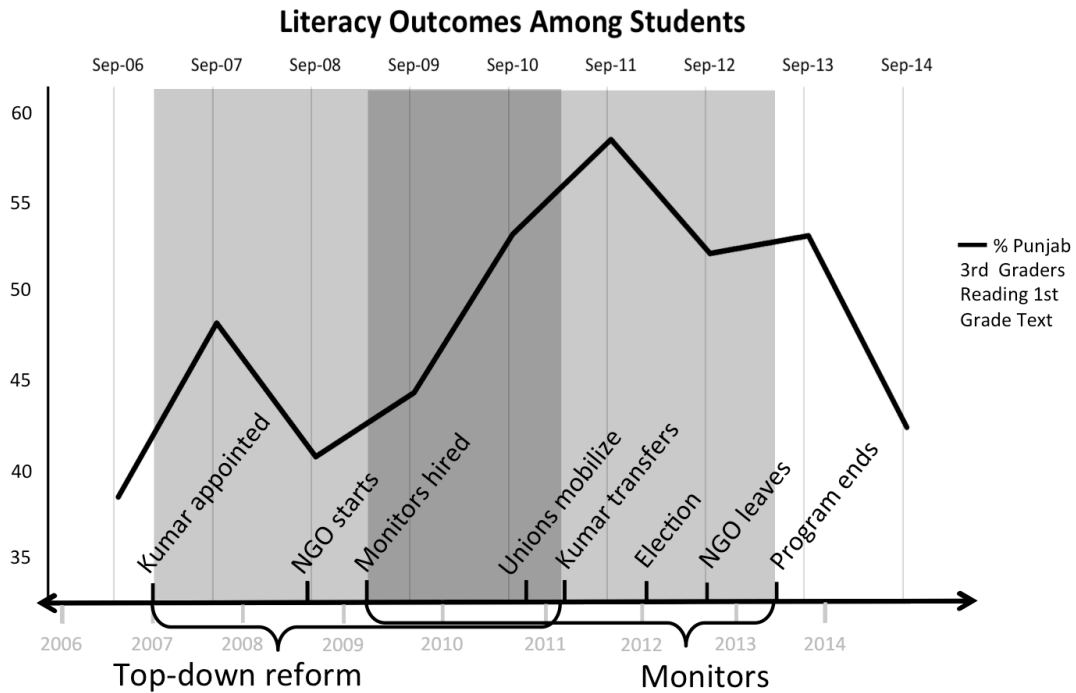


Ruling Out an Alternative Explanation: Reform Alone?

How might we address the objection that the combination of top-down and bottom-up bureaucratic reform would have been enough to produce the observed changes in Punjab’s education system even in the absence of the NGO program? In other words, how do we know the NGO partnership itself (and the resources it offered) had any influence at all on these outcomes?

This alternative hypothesis – that this was a story of reform alone – has at least two observable implications. First, the introduction of NGO resources prior to the introduction of reforms should have corresponded with no changes in education outcomes. Second, we would expect qualitative interviews to indicate that the mechanism through which learning improved in Punjab’s schools was simply teachers beginning to teach with the same methods they had available to them prior to the NGO’s trainings. The problem with this alternative hypothesis is that the observed outcomes in this case conform to neither of these implications.

Figure 11. Alternative Explanation: Bureaucratic Reform Alone?



In the first case, the introduction of the NGO program – which happened when Kumar had already been DGSE for 21 months but before the monitoring intervention had begun – corresponds with an increase in learning outcomes among children attending government schools. The quantitative data register a weak increase in learning levels in state-wide data (see Figure 11); the qualitative evidence gives more nuanced picture in which learning levels reportedly increased substantially *in the schools where teachers began using the program*, and no changes were reported in other schools. Second, while we cannot rule out that bureaucratic reforms improved teacher behavior and effectiveness beyond the implementation of the partnership program, interviewees reported that the accountability interactions between teachers, monitors, and Kumar focused on the implementation of the program itself, which was confined to a particular subset of the school’s normal hours. As one respondent said, “At the time of [the partnership]...for two hours teachers [were] not allowed to go outside their classes to attend phone calls.” The clearest evidence about behavior change among teachers focuses specifically on the shift toward implementation of the NGO’s new

curriculum. Thus, I conclude that the variation in state performance observed over the course of this partnership is best explained by an interaction between the NGO's resources and a combination of bottom-up and top-down accountability reforms in Punjab's education bureaucracy.

V. Conclusion

In this article, I have presented and analyzed a case study of an NGO-state partnership program in Punjab in order to generate new insights about why NGOs in cooperative partnerships with the state sometimes succeed but often fail to produce widespread effects on state performance in developing countries, despite offering resources that are badly needed in the state sector.

By reconstructing a case history using qualitative interviews and by analyzing the timing of events using qualitative and quantitative evidence from the case, I found that the primary channel through which the NGO affected the state education system was to transfer resources into government schools. On the surface, these resources filled an important need in schools throughout the state of Punjab. Critically, however, while most schools were *resource-poor* when the partnership program began, only a small proportion of those were *resource-elastic*. In the majority of Punjab's education system, widespread shirking and rent-seeking meant that bureaucratic behavior was acting as a binding constraint on state performance. Consequently, the infusion of resources initially did relatively little to improve performance in most government schools.

The benefits of the NGO's teaching methodology only became observable in the majority of the system when the bureaucratic behavior constraint was eliminated by a new bottom-up monitoring reform introduced by administrator Krishan Kumar. With systems of institutional accountability suddenly functioning, bureaucratic misbehavior no longer constrained state performance in most schools and the NGO's resources began being used in the majority of classrooms. Under these new conditions, state performance underwent widespread improvement

throughout the state. Ultimately, however, Kumar's solution to the problem of widespread bureaucratic rent-seeking proved politically precarious, undermined by the capture of electoral politics by anti-reform forces at the level of state politics. With Kumar gone and accountability systems once again slack, shirking and rent-seeking again became the norm in government schools. Once bureaucratic behavior again became a binding constraint in most schools, the resources that had temporarily helped produce improvements in state performance throughout the state system were now neglected in most schools. The apparent effect of the NGO's resources waned in all but the small number of schools or classrooms run by highly motivated teachers and principals. What changed over the course of this partnership was not the specific activities of the NGO; indeed, the NGO's resources produced consistent effects during and after the partnership in the schools where they were used. What changed over time, thanks to bureaucratic reforms and their politicized reversal, was the distribution of bureaucratic behavior, which in turn determined whether resources were used to improve school performance.

The case highlights how variation in the behavior of street-level bureaucrats in the underlying government system critically shapes the effects of partnership NGOs on state performance. This study provides evidence suggesting that partnership NGOs have persistent effects only in parts of the government system where bureaucrats seek quality and performance is therefore elastic to resources. The striking, widespread apparent effects of the partnership in the case of Punjab's education system, which have been credited to the NGO, were only possible because bureaucratic behavior was broadly improved by institutional forces exogenous to the NGO, which temporarily transformed the education bureaucracy into one responsive to resources. However, the conditions under which these forces induced reform were highly constrained by a narrow political window of opportunity.

An implication of this case is that we should not expect that an expansion among service provision NGOs throughout the world will have the same state-building effects that civil society theory predicts. In a forthcoming book chapter on service provision in developing countries, Lieberman writes that “poor people particularly in the poorest countries are routinely unable to hold government leaders to account, even in the formal context of democracy” (Lieberman, *forthcoming*: 5). In contexts where bureaucratic shirking and special interest capture are widespread and citizens lack effective mechanisms for producing accountable governments, well-organized civil society organizations like NGOs may be seen as the most promising candidates for producing improvements in the performance of the state. While conventional views of civil society suggest that these organizations can help close the accountability gap in democracies by engaging in contentious politics with the state, partnership NGOs that position themselves as collaborators vis-à-vis the state are constrained from pursuing such pressure politics. As we saw in the Punjab case, workers from the partnered provision NGO alone were not able to put effective pressure on government teachers.

In some cases, partnership NGOs may be able to identify and partner with forces for reform. This could be an opposition government with an electoral mandate for reform and a genuine reform agenda, or it could be a powerful reform bureaucrat capable of transforming rent-seeking inside the state system. Such circumstances would enable a broadly effective partnership program, as was the case for several years in Punjab. But reform bureaucrats like Kumar do not often get appointed to powerful positions in places where political forces are averse to reform in the state’s service system. As one informant explained,

“There is a lot of pressure from political parties. They only hire those persons who will not create problems for teachers and [program workers] at the bottom...political parties were not [familiar with] Krishan Kumar. [He was from somewhere else, maybe]; nobody was aware of what kind of person he was. That’s why he came into this. If the political parties had known he would put pressure on teachers, they would never have allowed him into this post.”

Even when reform bureaucrats like Kumar are appointed in India, where politicized transfer occurs regularly within the civil service, they are often not permitted to stay long. According to one newspaper report, prior to his appointment as DGSE, Kumar was transferred 9 times in 12 months because “his straightforward and honest ways did not suit many” (Bhatia 2011).

Kumar’s critical role as the enforcer of the education reforms takes center stage in many of the stories I was told about the partnership in Punjab. However, shining a spotlight on the importance of Kumar’s leadership risks miring us in a voluntarist account of the story with ambiguous implications for structural explanations of state performance. Comparative politics has often struggled to explain the effects of leaders. This raises a question for our analysis: what is Krishan Kumar a case of?

At the most obvious level, his role highlights the critical importance of top-down (in addition to bottom-up) mechanisms of accountability for producing real changes in everyday patterns of rent-seeking among bureaucrats, which appeared crucial in producing changes in state performance. It suggests that the presence of a top-level administration serious about guiding an institution toward its stated purpose is likely to be an important requisite for improving low-performing bureaucracies. In particular, it indicates the unlikelihood that simply adding a “last mile” monitoring component to an NGO’s program design will bring about the changes observed in Punjab. These findings are consistent with McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987)’s argument that “Extensive monitoring makes detection of noncompliance more likely and sharpens the incentive effects of sanctions by allowing political actors to impose them in more exact proportion to the probability and magnitude of noncompliance...Nevertheless, by themselves, monitoring and sanctions do not comprise a perfect solution to the problem of bureaucratic compliance because they are [politically] costly, inexact, and subject to fundamental limitations” (253). In the case of

Punjab, the reversal of the partnership's initial effects demonstrates the importance of top-down political support for enforcement to effective bureaucratic reform.

At a deeper level, Kumar's central role illuminates an important structural factor that shaped the varying effects of the partnership program in Punjab: his ability to create institutional conditions of accountability was profoundly constrained by the capture of electoral politics by anti-reform special interests. The political power of anti-reform teachers' unions in Punjab's state elections (by some accounts, aided by politically-motivated interference from the Education Minister) interacted with the onset of a competitive election season, producing a constriction in the amount of political space Kumar was accorded to pursue his reform agenda. In the first few years of the program, elections were not yet on the horizon. My informants, including members of teacher's unions, reported that union dissatisfaction with the partnership program and Kumar's accountability initiative began well before his transfer in 2011. Yet Kumar and his colleagues were insulated from these complaints and allowed to do their work for several years. However, in the year prior to the election, the politicized teachers and the unions that represented them mobilized against Kumar against a backdrop of electoral vulnerability, and this mobilization narrowed and eventually eliminated that political space as incumbent political leaders prioritized reelection over reform.

The counterintuitive implication of this finding is that electoral competitiveness may be bad for public service provision under some conditions. Generally, the literature on democracy has suggested that democratic forms of government – and electoral competition more generally – should be good for accountability, state performance, and public goods provision (O'Donnell 1996). But the Punjab case suggests that under conditions of special interest capture, electoral competitiveness can actually *undermine* public goods provision by blocking avenues for sustained reform.

The case thus suggests that anti-reform special interest capture of electoral politics produces a business cycle for effective reform, implying that the effects of even the most successful

partnership programs are likely to face problems of routine political interference and thus have short lifespans. While scholars of NGOs have often raised concerns about *financial* constraints on the sustainability of NGOs' impact on basic service provision, this study highlights the importance of *political* constraints to sustainability for long-term NGO impact.

Moreover, the case contains suggestive evidence that in the absence of politically sustained reform, partnership NGOs are likely to have a mildly regressive distributive effect on the performance of the state. My interviews suggest that on their own, the NGO's resources only improve performance among teachers who seek quality. In Punjab's education system, this described a small number of teachers who were described as having been *ex-ante* the intrinsically motivated, professional type of teachers. Since these teachers were making use of the resources they had and attempting to teach their students, the case suggests that these schools already comprised the better-performing parts of the government system. The lingering effects of the resource intervention remained in the schools where these teachers teach. Put differently, the same factor—a sustained pattern of motivation and quality-seeking among teachers—predicts both an initial performance advantage *and* the absorption of resources, resulting in improved performance. This means that a resource intervention alone is unlikely to have an effect in the schools that need improvement most urgently.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 5 illustrates the logic: once the impact of the bureaucratic reforms faded, the long-run effect of the NGO partnership in Punjab was to improve the performance of the *ex-ante* best-performing schools and to have no effect on the worst-performing schools. This pattern has distributive implications: in the absence of bureaucratic reform, partnership NGOs likely fail to reach the most underperforming parts of the state, and by improving the performance of the *ex-ante* most effective street-level bureaucrats, they effectively

amplify pre-existing inequalities within the state system. Substantively, this means such partnerships will often fail to sustainably improve conditions for the most educationally disadvantaged students.

The case of Punjab shows that improving public services—particularly in the most poorly performing areas—will likely require more than just a technocratic intervention. Rather, it may require a more profound disruption of the political equilibrium that permits bureaucratic corruption. As tempting as it may be for analysts, policymakers, and NGO leaders to focus on apolitical, technocratic solutions for the underperformance of the state, such answers are likely to be of limited use without also addressing the politics of reform. This yields a broader insight with important normative implications: when civil society organizations like NGOs stop short of contentious politics with the state, they will be unlikely to improve the government system in places where those improvements are most urgently needed. Thus, we may need to look to traditional advocacy style organizations for a more promising answer to the question of how civil society can improve the delivery of basic public services that help make communities resilient and improve human welfare. Regardless, the case has clear implications for funders and NGOs who wish to pursue state partnerships: in order to identify the best windows of opportunity for transformative change, such actors must understand the dynamic political landscapes in which they work.

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