

CIVIL SERVANT SURVEYS HELP ASSESS GOVERNMENT CAPABILITY IN A PROGRAM-FOR-RESULTS

Prepared by Lida Bteddini, Zahid Hasnain, Kerenssa Kay, and Daniel Rogger, Governance Global Practice

To focus on strengthening the institutional capacity of national systems by linking financing to defined results, the World Bank's Program-for-Results (PforR) requires a deep understanding of behavioral and institutional bottlenecks that may affect the success of a government program. Key to achievements under any public program is the ability, motivation, and productivity of civil servants. They largely determine policy formulation and implementation as well as the government's ability to effectively deliver on programs and services. A rigorous assessment of bureaucratic capability is a priority during the preparation and implementation phases under a PforR.

Assessing the personnel dimensions of government performance has, until now, been elusive because of the lack of good data. Diagnostic tools developed by the World Bank's Bureaucracy Lab¹ are helping generate new, frontier data for a more granular analysis of bureaucratic capability that is measurable and action oriented. This type of data can be useful for task teams working on PforRs. It provides a useful methodology to better assess whether adequate institutional arrangements are in place to support successful program implementation. This issue of *Governance Notes* describes the limitations of data collection methods today and how surveys of public officials can help inform the design of a PforR by generating first-hand data on government capability.

IMPACT OF BUREAUCRATIC CAPABILITY ON PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE

Academic and policy consensus is growing on the importance of civil servants when it comes to public sector performance. In the Russian Federation, if the worst-performing 20 percent of procurement officials could be made as effective as the median officer, the government would save 10 percent of its procurement costs (Best et al. 2017). The main elements of government capability—organizational and human resource management practices and the attitudes and behaviors of civil servants—vary considerably across ministries and departments within countries and underline the need for granular data to better target reform strategies (World Bank 2017).

Measuring and improving government capability is a key focus of the World Bank's PforR financing instrument. As

part of the preparation phase for PforRs, task teams are required to assess the government's organizational ability to plan, design, implement, and monitor program execution. This analysis aims to feed into project design through identifying improvements and measures to mitigate major implementation risks. A thorough analysis of implementation capacity at the program level depends on granular and actionable data that can help shed light on the inner workings of a government organization or implementing agency. Actionable data would include information on staff capacity and skills profiles, management practices, soft and hard resources, and motivational factors that influence performance at the individual and organizational levels.

Despite its importance, data on the characteristics of civil servants and the organizations in which they work are extremely limited both within and across countries, particularly those in the developing world. There is almost no systematic collection of data on the civil service, so little data exist on its numbers, characteristics, and governing norms. Most cross-national sources of information are limited to expert perception-based approaches, such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index or the Worldwide Governance Indicators. They often measure structures specified in regulations rather than realities on the ground. Furthermore, while national-level, average performance data are useful, they are often insufficient in their ability to provide actionable data for reform at the agency or organizational level that would improve organizational capability.

GENERATING ACTION-ORIENTED DATA TO GUIDE REFORM EFFORTS

An empirically granular approach to measuring the core components of bureaucratic capability through a survey of public officials is one methodological tool that can help generate more action-oriented data. During the past three years, the World Bank's [Bureaucracy Lab](#) has focused on compiling the [Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators](#), a cross-national dataset of 115 economies on objective indicators of public employment and wages. It develops civil servant surveys that aim to capture information on human resource management practices, attitudes, and behaviors of public officials and key performance disincentives at the individual

¹The Bureaucracy Lab aims to develop the evidence base for public sector reform by understanding the characteristics of public officials and the systems and organizations in which they work.

level. This work has covered about 20,000 civil servants in seven countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Liberia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

Civil servant surveys have proved useful in providing more information on incentive environments that lead to different types of behavior and, in turn, the determinants of public service delivery. What distinguishes them from other types of surveys is not only their scale and scope, but also their clear shift from a focus on form to one on function. To ensure the survey questionnaire is capturing the right elements for an action-oriented set of data, the Bureaucracy Lab works in close collaboration with governments to design the questionnaire, both by creating new modules or adapting existing ones to country- and sector-specific contexts. Through the creation of improved modules, surveys can build a foundation for the systematic collection of data directly from individuals with first-hand experience.

Civil servant surveys have been used to diagnose state capability at central, local, and agency levels. In Ethiopia, a [civil service survey](#) was conducted at the request of the government to gain a better understanding of staff incentives for entering and leaving the civil service. Focused on measuring staff turnover, the survey targeted a representative set of local government, region, and federal organizations to assess staffing issues and develop a better understanding of why civil servants enter or leave the service. In Indonesia, the government was keen to understand the impacts of a specific reform initiative. A survey was conducted across 14 primary government organizations to assess staff perceptions about work processes. In Liberia, a survey will be rolled out in the forestry agency to assess staffing and broader human resource management bottlenecks to performance in the sector. Findings will help inform the World Bank's ongoing country engagement and identify potential entry points for reform. This survey will also help demonstrate the potential value this diagnostic tool has in difficult contexts, such as fragile and conflict-afflicted situations where the generation of new and reliable first-hand data on public sector performance is particularly valuable.

UTILIZING CIVIL SERVANTS SURVEYS

Initial experience with civil servant surveys indicates they can be a useful diagnostic tool to assess capability at different levels of government. This information can be useful for identifying entry points for reform or for monitoring purposes by helping provide a quantifiable baseline on organizational capability that can be assessed repeatedly over time.

For operational teams faced with the task of conducting a technical assessment under a PforR, face-to-face surveys with civil servants can help provide first-hand knowledge about the inner workings of government. Data can help define a project's implementation arrangements by assessing typical institutional factors. Different modules of the questionnaire

can measure whether the implementing agency has adequate resources to carry out a government program, if a clear decision-making process exists in an agency, or how rules, systems, and incentives shape the behavior of civil servants.

Information gathered can also factor into the monitoring and verification of PforR disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs). Surveys provide a first-hand account of actual implementation that can be a useful complement to other verification methods undertaken through a PforR, such as the use of a ministry's own internal monitoring system. Verification arrangements should be DLI specific and consider the nature of the indicator and what is being assessed. DLI measures can relate to an organization's personnel dimensions or an aspect of a government's "production function," such as the adequacy of performance management systems or to what extent hiring is merit-based. Civil servant surveys can help shed light on how systems and processes are applied in practice.

Embedding surveys in relevant PforR operations would help push the boundaries in public sector research and strengthen the evidence base for reform proposals in client countries. The Bureaucracy Lab team is working to make these surveys more accessible for task teams with regard to cost and replicability. At the same time, it endeavors to maintain the level of flexibility necessary to ensure surveys are tailor-made to a country context, which will help measure personnel dimensions of organizational capability in a granular way.

Moving Forward

Collecting primary data on civil servants and their activities is the first step in a new approach to better understanding the inner workings of the public sector. This strategy is especially important in the developing world, where data on civil service is scarce. The Bureaucracy Lab's surveys of public officials help gather micro-level data on the perceptions and experiences of civil servants as well as the key constraints to performance. Through a continuous improvement of survey methodology, these tools can help build a foundation for the systematic collection of data directly from individuals with first-hand experience to help inform World Bank country engagements and feed into the design of PforR operations. The involvement of government counterparts in instrument development and other approaches, such as using cost-effective ways for rolling out a survey or integrating its tools and results with government systems, will help enhance a survey's potential coverage and impact.

If you are interested in learning more about the Bureaucracy Lab or would like to collaborate, please contact Lida Bteddini, lbteddini@worldbank.org; Zahid Hasnain, zhasnain@worldbank.org; Kerenssa Kay, kkay@worldbank.org; or Daniel Rogger, drogger@worldbank.org.

REFERENCES

Davenport, Best, M., J. Hjort, and D. Sgakonyi. 2017. "Individuals and Organizations as Sources of State Effectiveness, and Consequences for Policy Design." Discussion Paper 11968, Center for Economic Policy Research, London, UK.

World Bank. 2017. *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

GOVERNANCE GLOBAL PRACTICE

Guiding Results through Public Institutions

Governance Notes captures knowledge derived from World Bank engagements and technical and financial assistance requests.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank.

For more information, contact: askgov@worldbank.org