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Reconceptualizing the Politics of Pockets of Effectiveness

A Power Domains Approach

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Introduction

If dominant framings of pockets of effectiveness (PoEs) within the existing literature risk obscuring the origins and character of high-performing state agencies, as argued in Chapter 1, what alternative approaches might be required? This chapter establishes a conceptual and methodological framework for exploring the politics of PoEs that aims to address current shortcomings and provide a basis on which to advance this field of enquiry. It begins by introducing perspectives from critical theories of politics and the state, both in general (Jessop 2008, 2016) and in particular relation to Africa (Hagmann and Peclard 2010, Mamdani 1996), which go beyond the limits of neopatrimonial discourses.¹ This offers a ‘relational’ framing that resituates the state within the deeper forms of politics and power that are increasingly emphasized within new thinking around the politics of development, whilst incorporating a stronger focus on transnational- as well as national-level factors. We argue here that one variant of this new thinking—namely political settlements analysis—can offer an insightful framework for understanding the conditions under which elites become committed to developing the state capacity required to deliver development effectively. To further nuance the analysis, we suggest that PoEs are also shaped by the nature of the ‘policy domain’ that they are located within, with different policy domains playing specific political roles within given political settlements and being characterized by different actors, ideas, and governance arrangements. The capacity and commitment to promote PoEs is thus shaped by the interaction between two key domains of power, the political settlement and specific policy domains.²

¹ See Mohan (2019) for a fuller discussion of the relevance of critical political theory to the investigation of PoEs in Africa.

² See Hickey and Sen (2023) for a fuller overview of the power-domains approach, and both Hickey and Hossain (2019) and Nazneen et al. (2019) for its application to the domains of education and women’s interests, respectively.

The chapter then discusses the methodological approach that we used to generate new knowledge on PoEs in Africa. Methodologically, most existing research on PoEs eschews one of the ‘golden rules’ of rigorous political analysis, which urges against selecting on the dependent variable, by choosing case-study organizations on the basis of their performance level. This means that we lack a clear sense of which independent variables (and combination thereof) offer more or less conducive conditions for PoEs to emerge and perform well, including in terms of which different types of political context. This is particularly true in a comparative sense across different contexts but is also often true across time within the same contexts, as the field has relatively few long-term historical studies that trace public-sector performance across different political periods.³ The approach deployed here involved (1) choosing five countries that represent different types of political settlement; (2) undertaking an expert survey to help identify high-performing public-sector organizations in each country; (3) conducting in-depth qualitative investigations of at least three such organizations in each country across a period of three decades (from the early 1990s until the late 2010s); (4) followed by both within-case process tracing and across-case comparative analysis. This chapter now sets out both the conceptual and methodological approach in more detail. This will include a brief summary of our expert survey results, which led us to focus on three particular types of state agency in each country (finance ministries, central banks, and revenue authorities), and of the indicators used to measure performance in each case.

Reframing PoEs within alternative forms of state theory

The association of high-performing state agencies with rational-legal bureaucratic orders was critiqued in Chapter 1 for offering a pathological and teleological interpretation of the state in Africa, and, more specifically, for misreading the origins and character of state effectiveness. In a bid to move studies of African politics away from this kind of ‘history by analogy’ towards ‘history by process’ (Mamdani 1996), alternative approaches to post-colonial state formation interpret African states as a category of practice (Painter 2006), rather than as a category of analysis. This involves a ‘focus on how states are shaped by the practices of various actors and by their interrelationships and interactions’ (Eriksen 2011: 238) and tracing ‘the ways that states have become related to domestic society on the one hand and their relations with the external world on the other’ (Eriksen 2011: 239).

³ Exceptions here include Geddes (1994) and Strauss (1998).

This relational and transnational framing of the state has been articulated most clearly within critical readings of the state both in general and in relation to Africa. For Bob Jessop (2016: 58), the state is:

an ensemble of power centres and capacities that offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside the state ... its powers (plural) are activated by changing sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state, in specific conjunctures. Although these ‘insiders’ are key players in the exercise of state powers, they always act in relation to a wider balance of forces within and beyond a given state.

This depiction of the necessarily uneven nature of state power helps bring ‘bureaucratic outliers’ more sharply into view, and the sense that state power is always asymmetric in character has already been deployed to examine PoEs within Africa to good effect (Porter and Watts 2017). A critical interpretation of the state as representing a particular coming together of statist and social logics, with ‘state managers’ (Block 1981) arriving at bargains through which the projects of both political and economic actors can be realized, establishes PoEs as more of an integral than accidental feature of state power. Whereas some scholarship on the state tends to view the bureaucracy as embodying the fullest expression of modern state-ness, Jessop argues that there will always be a gap between what bureaucracies are capable of offering and what rulers require state power to deliver with regards to their wider projects and the relational demands made upon them:

Although bureaucratic forms are appropriate to the execution of general laws and policies in accordance with the rule of law, they are less suited to ad hoc, discretionary forms of intervention ... Indeed, the bureaucratic preconditions for the formal unity of the state system may limit the substantive efficacy of policies oriented to accumulation, legitimacy and social cohesion. This is reflected in the coexistence of formal bureaucracy governed by clear procedures and more informal, flexible, or ad hoc modes of intervention.

(Jessop 2016: 68)

From this perspective, PoEs may represent less the fullest expression of Weberian bureaucratic orders than discretionary vehicles required for ruling elites to realize their ambitions.

This relational perspective resonates with recent framings of the state in Africa as a ‘negotiated’ and deeply embedded social phenomenon (e.g. Hagmann and Peclard 2010). For Hagmann and Peclard (2010: 552), ‘the state is the product of complex processes of negotiation that occur at the interface between the public and the private, the informal and the formal, the illegal and the legal’. This can only be apprehended through adopting a relational concept of power

(Hagmann and Peclard 2010: 543), one that encompasses ideas as well as interests, the transnational as well the national, and popular as well as elite agency. Critical state theory is particularly alive to how ‘political power in Africa is increasingly “internationalized”’ (Schlichte 2008, cited in Hagmann and Peclard 2010: 556, also Eriksen 2011). For Jessop (2008: 114; citing Gramsci 1971: 182), state theory must look beyond the national frame to explore how ‘international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique, and historically concrete combinations’.

This critical approach, then, insists on viewing the state as a relational form of power that brings together statist and social logics within a transnational context. This resonates strongly with the political settlements approach that we set out below, which we argue can offer a useful framework for capturing the interplay of political power and institutional form that PoEs seem to represent.

Rethinking development politics: Political settlements and the power domains approach

The turn from an institutional to a relational reading of the politics of development has been one of the defining intellectual shifts of the past decade of development theory. Institutionalist scholars now emphasize how politics and elite bargaining shapes which institutions emerge and how conducive they are to political and economic development (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009). Approaching this question from a critical political economy perspective, Mushtaq Khan argues that the decision by ruling coalitions to invest in building and protecting ‘growth-enhancing institutions’ is determined by the underlying balance of power between organized groups, or what he terms the ‘political settlement’ (Khan 2010, 2017). From the mid-2010s, political settlements analysis, which we define in more detail in the next section, has gone beyond the earlier generation of governance research, as informed by new institutionalist economics, to offer compelling insights into the political conditions under which state capacity and elite commitment to deliver development emerge and can be sustained. Political settlement analysis has helped push forward our understanding of the politics of development across several different policy domains, including economic development (Behuria 2020, Gray 2018, Pritchett et al. 2018, Whitfield et al. 2015), natural resource governance (e.g. Bebbington et al. 2018, Macuane et al. 2018), social provisioning (Hickey and Hossain 2019, Hickey et al. 2019), and gender equity (Nazneen et al. 2019).

Some of this work has extended early political settlements analysis in two directions that are relevant here. The first is to move beyond a rational-actor emphasis on the ‘incentives’ that drive ruling coalitions to invest in institution building and development (or not), to include the role of paradigmatic elite ideas that underpin

political settlements and help shape elite commitment to certain goals (Lavers 2018, Lavers and Hickey 2016). The second is to move beyond the realm of the national to incorporate a stronger sense of how politics and governance are shaped by transnational-level actors and processes, which are not simply contextual but which may form a constituent element of a ‘national’ political settlement (e.g. in the form of the rents required to maintain a ruling coalition in power, as per Behuria et al. 2017).

We take these moves further here by exploiting the synergy between political settlements analysis and the forms of critical political theory discussed above and in Chapter 1. Critical political theorists have long adopted a relational perspective on power and politics and viewed the state as a sphere within which broader social struggles take place and become articulated. In Jessop’s strategic-relational approach, ‘state power is an institutionally and discursively mediated condensation (a reflection and a refraction) of a changing balance of forces that seek to influence the forms, purposes, and content of polity, politics, and policy’ (2016: 10). Note that Jessop goes further than standard political settlements analysis in introducing the significance of ideas, whilst also being alert to the transnational features of state power. Building on the observation that ‘the state is an ensemble of power centres that offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside the state to act for different political purposes’ (Jessop 2008: 37), recent work on PoEs has suggested that ‘institutions at all scales, from the global to the local, are best understood as “ensembles of power”, that is as the sites of, and the product of intra-elite and elite-citizen contest’ (Porter and Watts 2016: 2). This approach opens up a more agential view of ‘leadership, networks of connectors and convenors, entrepreneurs and activists’ than standard political settlements analysis, and highlights the ‘intersection of agency and structural conditions to show how “asymmetric capabilities” can emerge to create, constrain, and make possible particular reform options’ (Porter and Watts 2017: 249). In line with Watts’ (2004) earlier work on oil governance, this multi-levelled and transnationalized optic stretches PoE analysis beyond the public bureaucracy, to include the role of international capital and local economic interests in shaping the fields of power relations within which politicians and bureaucrats operate.

There are good reasons to expect that this extended form of political settlements analysis will be relevant to the analysis of PoEs (Mohan 2019). The existing literature on the politics of PoEs reviewed in Chapter 1 tends to emphasize the important role played by the kinds of political factors that form key categories within political settlements analysis—elite cohesion and interests, executive powers, political-bureaucratic relationships, concerns with political survival and legitimacy, the balance between rules and deals. And political settlements analysis has already been deployed to help uncover and explain the critical role played by PoEs in achieving developmental outcomes in Africa, including in relation to industrial policy (Whitfield et al. 2015) and natural resource governance

(e.g. Hickey et al. 2020, Pedersen et al. 2020, Porter and Watts 2017, Salimo et al. 2020, Tyce 2020). This is arguably because it has certain advantages over other conceptual approaches that have been deployed to grasp the politics of public-sector performance. For example, Grindle's (2012) highly insightful study of how civil-service systems emerge blends the structural tendencies of historical institutionalism with an agential focus on how reform champions and policy coalitions drive through change at particular moments in time. However, this approach arguably has a 'missing middle' in that it does not theorize the forms of power and politics that lie between historical institutions and reform actors. A political settlements perspective addresses this missing middle by operating in between these levels of analysis. It aims to reveal how deep-seated institutional endowments (including colonial inheritance, the level of ethnic diversity, etc.) are refracted through shifting configurations of power that operate over mid-range timeframes and which in turn provide the immediate context within which political actors operate. Long-run theories of change are poorly equipped to explain when state capacity endowments are actually *deployed* and states effectively implement desired policies within specific timeframes, whilst the politics of policy reform literature draws attention only to how reformers take advantage of windows of opportunity, rather than theorizing how these windows emerge in relation to shifting configurations of power.

Political settlements analysis, as set out below, offers a mid-range theory that can help grasp the variations that emerge amongst otherwise similar types of state in terms of the broad overall level of development progress and as a means of understanding and explaining what happens *within* periods of relative equilibrium. The distinction between state capacity and state performance is particularly important here (Centeno et al. 2017). Whilst levels of state capacity may well be inherited from long-run processes of institutional development, the willingness of rulers to develop and/or activate these capacities is shaped by ideas and incentives generated by the contemporary political settlement within which they manoeuvre. The remainder of this section sets out how the political settlements approach elaborated here can provide the basis for a more systematic investigation of the politics of PoEs in Africa, particularly when joined by a further level of analysis that can capture the politics of the particular domain within which the relevant state agency operates.

The power domains approach: Linking political settlements to the policy domain

Uneven capabilities ... are not best explained merely as artefacts of "low capacity" or variable commitment by policymakers. Nor are episodes of capability and efficacy merely the product of heroic leaders

or serendipity. Rather, it is more promising to see asymmetries as the product of dynamic interaction between political settlements and the institutional arenas through which economic and political elites combine, contest or make durable agreements. It follows that, even within so-called dysfunctional states, there are pockets of effectiveness amidst state deficits.

(Porter and Watts 2017: 254)

The above quotation reflects the sense that the commitment and capacity of states to deliver development—as represented in the form of PoEs—are directly shaped by the interaction of political settlements and specific institutional arenas, or what we term ‘policy domains’. Whilst the dominant concept here is that of political settlements, it is important not to read off organizational performance from the nature of a political context alone. As discussed in Chapter 1, PoEs may be mainly shaped by political economy factors but other things matter too, particularly organizational-level factors and the nature of the organizational mandate (Roll 2014). Here we capture these factors in the notion of a ‘policy domain’, which refers to the broader policy arena within which specific types of PoE operate and their organisational contexts. This helps recognize that the conditions for PoEs to emerge in relation to, say, economic governance, may differ from those that shape organizational performance in relation to social or infrastructural sectors. These differences flow not only from the different organizational mandates involved but also the involvement of different types of actors, ideas and the relative political importance of different domains in different political contexts (Batley and Mcloughlin 2015). This sub-section defines both political settlements and policy domains in more detail and discusses how they can be brought together within a power domains approach to offer insights into how politics shapes organizational performance in specific ways (Hickey and Sen 2023). It also sets out some hypotheses that flow from this approach in relation to identifying the conditions under which PoEs are most likely to emerge and be sustained.

Political settlements analysis and PoEs

Under what conditions is organizational capacity deployed? What inputs are required for state capacity to translate into a range of outcomes? We highlight here two critical inputs: political coalitions (including leadership, classes, and parties) and the balance of social forces.

(Centeno et al. 2017: 17)

The term ‘political settlement’ refers to: ‘*an ongoing agreement among a society’s most powerful groups over a set of political and economic institutions expected to*

generate for them a minimally acceptable level of benefits, which thereby ends or prevents generalized civil war and/or political and economic disorder' (Kelsall et al. 2022: 21). The achievement of this basic settlement is a pre-requisite for processes of political and economic development to emerge. However, the form that these processes take and the distribution of resources and status that they generate is shaped by the type of political settlement that emerges in terms of 'the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based' (di John and Putzel 2009: 4). In its original form, political settlements analysis focuses on how the configuration of power involving the ruling coalition shapes the incentives of elites to develop growth-enhancing institutions and the capacity to enforce these (Khan 2010, 2017). In particular, Khan argues that if a ruling coalition perceives that the threat to its hold on power is weak, it may feel confident enough to adopt a longer-term horizon towards questions of institution-building and development, with its relative dominance vis-à-vis other elites and organized social groups also enabling enforcement capabilities. Where the level of competition for political power is much higher, the threat of losing power means that the incentives for ruling coalitions to use public office and resources to maintain political loyalty through clientelistic means can be overwhelming. In such contexts, we may expect to see highly personalized forms of governance and elite capture of institutions and resources (Levy 2014). The presence of strong excluded coalitions is likely to reduce the time horizons of the ruling coalition and incentivize short-term moves to retain power. In theory, then, the highest levels of state capacity for development should be found within dominant rather than competitive settlements, a position that aligns closely with general tilt of the PoE literature on this topic, as discussed in Chapter 1. As such, some propositions on PoEs from the point of view of how political power is configured within a political settlement would be:

- **Proposition 1a:** PoEs are more likely to emerge, perform well and be sustained in political settlements where power is *concentrated*, as this can lengthen the time horizons of elites and enable clear principal–agent relationships to develop between rulers and bureaucrats over time.
- **Proposition 1b:** higher levels of power *dispersion* will reduce the possibility of PoEs being formed and undermine the performance of existing PoEs, as this will tend to incentivize rulers to undertake more short-term actions and multiplies the number of principals involved in directing bureaucratic behaviour.

However, history is clear that a concentration of political power around a ruling coalition is insufficient, in and of itself, to secure a long-term commitment to state-building and development, with many dominant leaders instead adopting predatory and personalized forms of rule. Other conditions are necessary for dominance to result in a commitment to either state-building or development, and

we suggest here that these are likely to come from two sources that can also be theorized as endogenous to political settlements: the social foundations of power and paradigmatic ideas.

A key contribution of Tim Kelsall and his collaborators is to insist that the configuration of power within a political settlement extends beyond inter-elite relationships to encompass wider forms of state–society relations (Kelsall 2018, Kelsall et al. 2022). By including the *social foundations* of power as a key dimension of a political settlement, this formulation brings into focus the *type* of social groups that ruling coalitions rely on for support and to which they are likely to respond with regards to distributive demands. Influential groups can include external actors who supply the finance and legitimacy that ruling coalitions rely on to maintain themselves in power (Behuria et al. 2017), including international donors.

This focus on the political sociology of state-building resonates with some wider literature, particularly in terms of recognizing the significance of social groups that possess the resources and capacities to disrupt the coalition or even the settlement itself. Slater (2010) argues that ruling elites will only invest in state-building when they perceive themselves to be vulnerable to overthrow from below, as this perception of ‘systemic vulnerability’ can incentivize them to devise means of distributing public goods to offset this risk. This can involve forming ‘protectionist pacts’ build on strong and durable institutions as opposed to maintaining power through the easier world of ‘provisioning pacts’, whereby rulers distribute public goods in return for political loyalty and stability. Resting on the premise that the power of groups in society is likely to be a good predictor of who will benefit from government policy, ruling coalitions can be deemed to be either ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’ in relation to the broader social composition. Integrating this sociological dimension of political settlements analysis should advance its causal powers, and is suggestive of the following propositions:

- **Proposition 2a:** where power is concentrated *and* elites perceive themselves to be subject to ‘systemic vulnerability’, PoEs may emerge and be sustained as part of a broader state-building strategy.

However, it is plausible that the establishment and maintenance of PoEs may take place within the context of a provisioning rather than a protection pact, and therefore be associated with projects of elite survival and accumulation rather than state-building (as with Sonangol, Soares De Oliveira 2007):

- **Proposition 2b:** where elites are dominant but not subject to ‘systemic vulnerability’, PoEs may emerge and be sustained as part of a strategy of patronage-based regime survival.

Finally, there have been growing calls for political settlements analysis to move beyond the limits of a rational-actor perspective to acknowledging the role that

ideas as well as incentives play in shaping elite behaviour (Behuria et al. 2017, Gray 2019, Hickey et al. 2015). We agree that ideas need to be theorized as constitutive elements of political settlements, being critical to the configuration of power, the perceptions of ruling elites and their commitment to particular forms of state-building and development (Lavers 2018). Here we align with a broader body of work, including critical political theory, that has shown how institutional change is profoundly shaped by ideational factors and that ‘interests’ are perceived constructs and therefore ideational in nature (Hay 2011, Schmidt 2008). Ideas are central to how political settlements function and are maintained, in that these provide ‘a relatively coherent set of assumptions about the functioning of economic, social, and political institutions’ (Béland 2005: 8). These overarching ideas not only shape elite interests, but ‘can also be actively used by actors to achieve their perceived interests, for example, with elites securing the support of lower level factions through appeals to ideas such as nationalism, social justice, or religion’ (Lavers 2018). For some political settlement theorists, ‘political commitments to particular political ideologies are a potentially significant force that structures institutions’ (Gray 2019: 9), including those institutions of the state.

As indicated in Figure 2.1, both domains of power that we deal with here—the political settlement and specific policy domains—are shaped by ideas. Schmidt’s (2008) schema helps show the different but interrelated levels at which ideas operate, with paradigmatic ideas critical to the realm of political settlements, whilst problem definitions and policy solutions operate primarily within the policy domain. In relation to PoEs, the above review suggests that, whilst paradigmatic ideas tend to operate primarily at the level of political rulers, leading bureaucrats may also adhere to wider projects of nation-building and certain forms of development, as well as being experts in the arts of problem-framing and the delivery of policy solutions. These ideas may have their origins in the transnational arena, including via the promotion of various models of governance and development by donors and broader epistemic communities (Stone 2012); what matters here is that they form the dominant frames that powerful members of governing coalitions use to organize and justify their actions. This suggested that our approach would need to track carefully the role that different levels and types of idea play in shaping elite commitment to building PoEs in certain areas of governance and development policy, in shaping bureaucratic commitment to effective performance, and in identifying the ideational basis of particular forms of organizational practice within certain PoEs.

From this ideational version of political settlements analysis, then, we would suggest that:

Proposition 3: PoEs are more likely to emerge where there is an alignment between the paradigmatic ideas of elites and the policy ideas that are central to the policy domain within which the organization operates and the specific functions it discharges.

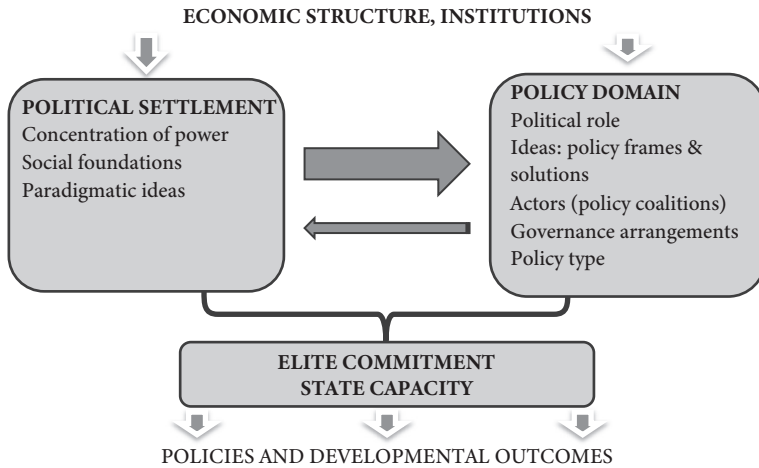


Figure 2.1 The power domains framework

Source: Editor.

The policy domain

A state's effectiveness in a given sector can be judged only in the context of a political decision to make that sector a priority.

(Centeno et al. 2017: 11)

It is increasingly clear that the influence of political settlements on elite commitment to state-building and development is highly uneven across different policy domains and tasks. Adding to the strong sense that state capacity is highly differentiated across different parts of the state (see Chapter 1), comparative studies across different types of policy domain have shown that the ideas and incentives generated by the same political settlement play out differently in different policy domains.⁴ This suggests that we need to understand the specific arena within which a given public-sector organization operates rather than simply reading off its performance from the more general political settlement.

A policy domain can be defined as a meso-level field of power relations associated with specific fields of interest or concern, and as denoting a more politicized realm than that called forth by the term 'sector'. Policy domains are constituted by those actors, ideas, and institutions that directly govern and shape the negotiation of agendas within a specific field, akin to the concept of the 'oil assemblage' that

⁴ See, for example, Bebbington et al. (2018), Gray (2018), Hickey and Hossain (2019), Nazneen et al. (2019), and Pritchett et al. (2018)

Michael Watts (2004) uses to capture the field of natural resource governance. Policy domains are both integral to the broader political settlement and possess their own logics and characteristics. As indicated in Figure 2.1, it is particularly important to grasp the political role that different policy domains play in ensuring the survival of the ruling coalition and the delivery of its ideological projects, through their contribution of either rents and/or legitimacy. This will directly shape the extent of elite interest in the domain, and the degree of politicization and/or protection to which it is subjected. Other key features of policy domains include:

- Ideas: as discussed above, the ideas that predominate within policy domains concern the identification of policy problems and solutions (Schmidt 2008). Such ideas may gain greater traction the more strongly they are aligned with the broader paradigmatic ideas (or ideologies) that underpin the political settlement, and can provide bureaucrats, bureaucratic organizations, and the policy coalitions that underpin them with shared frames of reference around which to cohere.
- Actors: the influential players within a given policy domain in developing countries are likely to include a mixture of politicians and bureaucrats at multiple levels, private sector actors (firms and individual capitalists), civil-society actors (e.g. unions, business associations, advocacy organizations, social movements), international development agencies and transnational epistemic communities (including professional associations), and other 'politically salient stakeholders' (Levy and Walton 2013). The incentives and ideas of these actors, their capacity to form coalitions across different interest groups and around particular ideas (Leftwich 2010), and to exert their demands on government, are likely to shape the possibilities for PoEs to emerge within a given domain. Some of the PoE literature suggests that transnational actors play a particularly important role in shaping the capacity of specific public-sector organizations in Africa to perform effectively (Roll 2014).
- Governance arrangements: these include the processes through which policies are formulated and implemented, the mechanisms in place to ensure accountability and the specific public-sector entities responsible for delivering these functions, namely ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs).
- Organizational factors: how these MDAs are managed, and how they function internally, has already been identified as critical by the PoE literature (e.g. Roll 2014). As discussed in Chapter 1, of particular importance here are issues of organizational leadership and management, processes of recruitment and promotion, and also less formalized norms through which bureaucratic behaviour is governed, including organizational culture (Grindle 1997).

- Policy type: an important distinction to be drawn here is between policy challenges that are primarily ‘logistical’ in nature, whereby the problem is largely one that can be solved through technical means (e.g. employing more staff, delivering more resources, building more infrastructure); and challenges that are ‘transactional’, which may require shifts in behaviour and multiple forms of human interaction and multiple levels before progress can occur (Andrews et al. 2017). This resonates with Roll’s (2014) suggestion that organizational ‘function’ is a defining feature of PoEs, which are more likely to emerge around policy challenges that are logistical rather than transactional in character.

By placing this concept of a policy domain into conversation with the PoE literature on organizational-level factors, the following propositions can be suggested:

- **Proposition 4a:** PoEs are more likely to emerge within policy domains and organizations that are critical to basic state functioning and/or the survival of political rulers.
- **Proposition 4b:** PoEs require the presence of organizational leaders that are both politically and technically capable, and who are able to protect their organization from political pressure and develop organizational cultures geared towards performance.
- **Proposition 4c:** state agencies are more likely to become PoEs when their main policy functions are logistical rather than transactional in nature.

The policy domain element of our framework also responds to Jessop’s argument that the uneven powers of any given state is defined in part by the capacity of social actors to shape the incentives of ruling elites (Jessop 2016). These social actors within a given policy domain may be domestic, such as different types of capitalists that place often competing demands on various parts of the state, but can also be transnational (Eriksen 2011, Hagmann and Peclard 2010, Jessop 2008). This is particularly apparent in the context of the economic policy domain in Africa, from where we draw our organizational case studies. Following Ferguson’s (2006) analysis of how Africa has become inserted into the global economy in a highly selective and often ‘enclaved’ form, it seems logical to assume:

a bifurcated governance model, in which the increasingly unusable formal state structures are ‘hollowed out’ fiscally and in terms of authority and personnel, while the usable enclaves are governed efficiently as private entities in a similar vein to pre-colonial mercantilist entrepôts.

(Mohan 2019: 13)

It is also this economic domain that has been most fully opened up to the logics of international reform agendas (Harrison 2010). With this in mind, and given that governments in low-income-country contexts are unlikely to be able to fully resource the high costs associated with running elite bureaucratic organizations, it seems likely that external actors will also play an important role in shaping the emergence and performance of PoEs in sub-Saharan Africa, hence our final proposition:

Proposition 5: PoEs are more likely to emerge within policy domains and organizations that benefit from external financial support and are aligned to international policy agendas.

Researching PoEs: Methodological issues and approaches

Researching the politics of PoEs involves a number of methodological challenges, particularly in terms of how to select cases at both country and organizational level and how to define and measure organizational performance over time. Having already noted that most existing studies of PoEs have not tended to choose cases in a systematic way, whether through identifying country cases that represent different types of political context or controlling for the type of public-sector organization and policy domain involved, we first discuss how we chose our countries and then our case-study organizations.

Country case-study selection

The fact that so few PoE studies have sought to systematically compare across different types of political context (cf. Hout 2013) has undermined theory-building around PoEs and also reduced the policy relevance of research in this field. Single-shot case studies abound, and even where a comparative approach has been attempted (e.g. Grindle 1997), country cases were not selected in ways that would enable theory testing in relation to the different political economy conditions under which PoEs might emerge and be sustained. A comparative case-study approach arguably offers the most appropriate research design for generating a more systematic body of knowledge which can both advance theory and produce findings that have policy relevance within and across different contexts (George and Bennett 2005). This is the approach adopted here, with country cases having been chosen to reflect the two main forms of political settlement identified in the literature, with two countries where power is relatively ‘concentrated’—namely Rwanda and Uganda—and three cases where power is more ‘dispersed’—namely Ghana, Kenya, and Zambia.

Our cases also offer variation within this continuum, with the configuration of power becoming less concentrated in Uganda and more concentrated in Zambia during the period under study, which stretches from the early 1990s until the late 2010s. The cases also offer variation in terms of the social foundations dimension of the political settlement, particularly in terms of how the ethno-regional calculus of coalition-building plays out in relation to cases where there are clear minority and majority groupings (e.g. Rwanda) and much more multi-ethnic settings (e.g. Uganda) and where ethnic concerns are either dominant in these concerns (e.g. Kenya) as opposed to contexts where political coalitions are also formed around programmatic agendas (e.g. Ghana).

The choice of five (largely Anglophone) countries from sub-Saharan Africa limits our range but has methodological advantages in that it enabled us to hold certain important factors at least somewhat constant across the cases—including colonial histories of state formation and the insertion of these countries into a particular mode of global economic governance (e.g. all countries experienced structural adjustment reforms during the 1980s and early 1990s)—in order to focus on the more specific political factors of interest. However, this does make it difficult to make representative claims that stretch beyond the kinds of countries and time period identified here.

This variation both across and within country cases over time enabled us to test the framework from multiple angles, with the strengths of these two methodological approaches helping us to both build contingent explanations through comparative analysis whilst also reducing the risk of mistaken inferences through within-case analysis (George and Bennett 2005). This typological approach to case selection and comparative analysis also has policy pay-offs, in that it offers the prospect of generating policy implications across different *types* of context (George and Bennett 2005). We hoped this would offer a coherent way of exploring the propositions generated here, and to arrive at a more relevant theory of PoEs in relation to deeper processes of regime survival and state-building in Africa.

Identifying performance patterns and choosing organizational case studies

Studies of PoEs have struggled to overcome the lack of a clear identification strategy. Simply put, how can we know—objectively—that some organizations are systematically performing at a higher level than most other organizations in the same governance context? General indexes of state capacity, such as the World Bank's World Governance Indicators, are of little value here, as they operate at an aggregate country level rather than offering a more disaggregated view of how capacities are distributed across public-sector organizations within specific countries. As Bersch et al. (2017) note, we do not currently have a reliable

means of comparing the capacities of bureaucratic agencies within the same context. Whilst they go on to construct such an index for Brazil, they acknowledge that the data required for this task is simply not available for most countries in the developing world, including sub-Saharan Africa. Although some efforts are under way to achieve a much more fine-grained perspective on within-state levels of bureaucratic capacity,⁵ we are currently left with the challenge of identifying high-performing agencies via alternative means.

Following other research into PoEs (McDonnell 2017), we therefore decided to undertake an expert survey within each country context, whereby key informants were invited to identify what they saw as being the highest-performing public-sector agencies. Given the absence of easily quantifiable and 'objective' metrics on governance, expert surveys have become commonplace within governance research and underpin many leading indexes, including the World Governance Indicators, and indexes produced by the Varieties of Democracy and the Quality of Government projects. Expert surveys are obviously subjective in nature, although given the intangible nature of many dimensions of governance, they may have greater validity than objective measures that are unable to properly reflect the nature of what is being measured. Obvious problems include the nature of the experts consulted and their depth and range of knowledge of the subject area, the difficulties of including the views of end-users of public-sector organizations, and problems of reputational bias, whereby higher-profile organizations (including those with public relations operations) may receive higher rankings than less visible or media-savvy organizations.

Given these potential problems, we identified experts who had either working and/or academic expertise on public-sector organizations. These included public-sector professionals, politicians, officials within international development agencies, researchers and consultants, and representatives of both the private sector and civil society. We sought to interview between twenty and thirty experts per country, in person wherever possible, although a few surveys were completed via email. The survey (see Appendix) included a range of questions, the most important of which required respondents to identify (a) the spread of performance levels across the public sector and (b) particularly high-performing state agencies. The results of each country survey will be discussed in the subsequent chapters on Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia; here we briefly discuss the responses to these key questions in order to identify some broad performance patterns and to show how these findings shaped our choice of which organizations to subject to in-depth case-study investigations. We also discuss how we sought to overcome concerns with the subjective nature of expert surveys by triangulating the findings with more objective sources of performance data.

⁵ See the World Bank's Bureaucracy Lab: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/dime/brief/Bureaucracy-Lab> (accessed 13 December 2021).

To capture the spread of performance across the public sector, we asked our experts to identify the proportion of ministries, departments, or agencies (MDAs) that regularly delivered on their mandate. A comparative analysis of the responses to this question across our countries revealed some patterns of theoretical interest. For Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia, the patterns that emerged were very similar: around three-quarters of respondents judged that ‘Only a few ministries/departments/agencies regularly deliver on their mandate, whilst the majority generally fail to do so’, with only two respondents in total across all countries claiming that most did so. This pattern was still apparent in Ghana, albeit to a lesser extent, with respondents split more evenly across those who suggested that ‘all’, ‘some’, or ‘only a few’ performed well. Most strikingly, a clear majority of our respondents in Rwanda agreed that ‘Most ministries/departments/agencies regularly deliver on their mandate, with only a few failing to do so’. This suggested that it was actually very difficult to identify PoEs at all in this context, and that there instead seemed to have been a more generalized effort to improve state performance across the board, rather than only in selective agencies.

This pattern of public-sector performance largely aligns with figures from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (IIAG 2016; Figure 2.2), which judges that Ghana and Rwanda currently outperform Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia on measures of ‘government effectiveness’. This suggested that the PoE phenomenon was prominent in these three countries, in line with Roll’s (2014) definition of PoEs as ‘high-performing agencies in otherwise dysfunctional governance contexts’. In terms of Ghana and Rwanda, it is notable that the composition of each country’s aggregate score is very different: whereas Rwanda scores highly on ‘public management’, Ghana’s scores have declined in this area whilst remaining strong in terms of participation and human rights, safety, and rule of law. The possibility that these findings are suggestive of two different routes to state-building in contemporary Africa, one in concentrated settlements and the other in more dispersed settlements (Propositions 1 and 2), is taken up in Chapter 8.

In terms of which state agencies were identified as delivering on their mandates most effectively, the most striking finding was that respondents in every country tended to identify organizations that operated within the ‘economic technocracy’ as being amongst the highest performers. This was particularly in terms of ministries of finance (usually the budget department), central banks, and revenue authorities. Other relatively highly ranked organizations included national development boards, investment authorities, passport offices, and the occasional utility company, but none were identified from within the social sector. This tends to support Propositions 4a and 4c, with regards to PoEs being most likely to emerge in relation to core state functions and within organizations charged with delivering largely logistical policy tasks. In addition, the economic policy domain is characterized by both high levels of financial support and disciplinary oversight from international actors (Proposition 5).

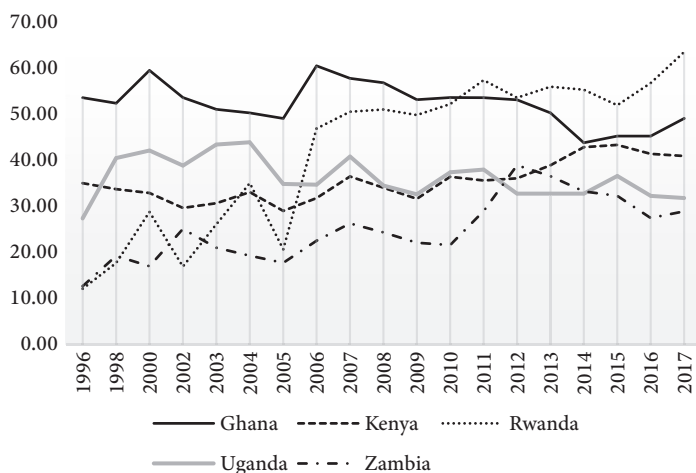


Figure 2.2 Government effectiveness in our five countries

Source: World Governance Indicators.

However, and although this is consistent with other PoE studies that have also found higher levels of performance in the domain of economic governance (Grindle 1997, Johnson 2015), it was not entirely predictable from the outset. As McDonnell (2017: 482), has noted:

Empirical patterns do not support this intuition: finance ministries are regarded as among the most corrupt state agencies in Benin, Ecuador, Madagascar, and Zambia, although their central banks are well regarded. The opposite is true in Burundi, Guinea, Indonesia, and Slovakia, where central banks are among the worst-reputed public agencies; in Thailand, both organizations are poorly regarded (World Bank 1999–2007).

Importantly, our survey results also suggested that these economic agencies had not performed uniformly well over time: for example, some respondents also placed the top-ranked organizations as being amongst those whose performance had deteriorated over the past five years. Choosing organizations whose performance had been deemed to fluctuate over time also offered the possibility of undertaking within-case comparisons, particularly in relation to changing political settlement dynamics over time. Although this focus on the economic technocracy limited our range in terms of the policy domains being covered, it offered a good range of the different *types* of public-sector organization, ranging from standard governmental departments through semi—to fully autonomous agencies (see Table 2.1). It also works well in terms of offering a strong basis for comparing how similar types of organization performed across different political contexts.

Table 2.1 Organizational case-study selection

Organizational type → Type of political settlement ↓	Traditional Department (Finance ministry budget departments)	Semi-autonomous agencies (Revenue authorities)	Autonomous agency /regulatory body (Central banks)
Concentrated: Rwanda	MINECOFIN	RRA	BNR
Concentrated: Uganda	MFPED	URA	BoU
Dispersed: Ghana	MFNEP	GRA	BoG
Dispersed: Kenya	MoF	KRA	CBK
Dispersed: Zambia	MoF	ZRA	BoZ

Our surveys did identify some high-performing agencies that lay beyond the economic technocracy, as with the cases of the National Water and Sewerage Corporation in Uganda and the Seed Control and Certification Institute in Zambia, both of which could be verified as high performers with reference to international performance indexes and awards. The absence of an obvious explanation for these agencies to be such high performers, including with reference to core state functions and regime survival, encouraged us to conduct in-depth studies of these organizations also, although these findings are reported elsewhere (e.g. Bukenya 2020).

Before embarking on the in-depth organizational case studies, we first needed to verify the expert survey responses observations by triangulating our survey findings with more 'objective' forms of performance data. We were also mindful of Michael Roll's (2014) four criteria required for an agency to be considered as a pocket of effectiveness, namely:

1. Relative effectiveness (which we took to mean 'performance against mandate' relative to other organizations in the same political context, rather than by some 'global' standard)
2. Capacity to deliver nationally
3. Delivery in line with human rights and laws, in the sense of not using illegal means or violating human rights, particularly in relation to law enforcement
4. Persists for at least five years.

For example, this meant that we did not look at either the military (given the association with human rights abuses) or municipal authorities (lack of national scope), despite these being ranked highly in some of our surveys. Our focus on specific entities may also have meant that we missed out on high-performing networks or broader governance systems, a challenge that Michael Roll expands on in his closing commentary (Chapter 10).⁶ The trickier task was to identify levels of performance over time, including for the qualifying periods of at least five years, given the absence of objective performance data on most specific MDAs. This process involved choosing the major dimensions of a given organization's mandate and looking for the most credible forms of data on which to track performance over time. This included internal governmental assessments of particular sectors and agencies, international evaluations of particular aspects of performance, and also macro-level data on outcome indicators, where these could be plausibly tied to the performance of specific organizations (e.g. on fiscal and monetary discipline or revenue generation). The ones we used are summarized in Table 2.2, which includes reference to the qualitative as well as the quantitative dimensions of tracking organizational performance over time.

For *finance ministries*, the department most frequently identified as high performing within our expert survey was the budget department. According to Simson and Welham (2014), 'The most well-established international measures of budget credibility are the PFM (public financial management) performance

Table 2.2 Performance indicators for case-study PoEs

Organizational type	Indicators	Data sources	Critical episodes
<i>MoF budget departments</i>	Public expenditure patterns over time (e.g. supplementaries)	Annual budget reports Also PEFA, CPIA	Spikes in public expenditure Reforms (e.g. PFM)
<i>Central banks: price stability</i>	Inflation rates over time	IMF	Spikes in inflation
<i>Central banks: financial stability</i>	Financial stability data (e.g. % of non-performing loans)	IMF financial stability reports	Bank closures
<i>Revenue Authorities</i>	Tax effort	Youhou and Goujon 2017	Trends in data

⁶ For example, some of the most interesting recent work on PoEs has focused on networks or channels of effectiveness, rather than agencies per se. This includes studies of a high-performing strategic team within Edo state in Nigeria (Porter and Watts 2017), which delivered impressive results within infrastructure and revenue generation, through building coalitions, connections, and networks across political/bureaucratic/commercial boundaries and different levels, and the 'channel of effectiveness' identified in Cambodia's health sector by Kelsall and Seha (2014).

measurement framework indicators' used within the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) assessment framework. Within this, key indicators include those on 'Aggregate expenditure outturn compared to original approved budget' and the 'Composition of expenditure outturn compared to original approved budget with two sub-indicators.' The African Development Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) also has relevant indicators on the quality of budgetary and financial management. These provided useful reference points but both are limited in terms of the time periods that they cover, with CPIA running from 2004 and PEFA from 2006, whereas we were interested in a longer time period. Both also tend to focus more on processes than actual outcomes and we were keen to look more at how budgets were actually delivered and less at how they were constructed. To achieve this, we used the budget performance reports produced by national ministries of finance to track patterns of actual versus planned expenditure over longer periods of time. This included a particular focus on periods or moments of fiscal ill-discipline, as indicated (for example) by the number, size, and timing of supplementary budgets and any significant divergence between predicted and actual expenditures that lacked clear explanations.

Central banks in developing countries have been charged with two major mandates in the past few decades: securing price stability through controlling inflation and securing financial stability, largely through banking supervision. Price stability over time can be tracked via data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) data on inflation, although further analysis is required to identify the extent to which changes in inflation rates are due to exogenous factors (e.g. oil price rises, droughts) rather than the failure of central banks to set and implement effective monetary policy. What is more controversial is drawing out a normative judgement that being 'effective' in maintaining inflation at a particular level, usually a low one, is necessarily the 'right' thing from a developmental perspective. Most observers agree that both significant macroeconomic instability and very high rates of inflation are objectively 'bad' in that they damage the prospects for economic growth and undermine the confidence of investors. Achieving macroeconomic stability was seen as critical to the success of developmental states in South East Asia (Gore 2000) before it became a shibboleth of the structural adjustment agenda of the IFIs. However, there are major disagreements with regards to what the ideal level of inflation should be, with some advocating a more expansive approach as compared to the hawkish position of the IMF and whether the role of central banks should be restricted to this particular policy agenda. This is an important debate and one we re-engage with in some of the fieldwork chapters and in Chapter 8. Viewed from the narrower perspective of organizational performance, our immediate job here was to identify whether a given central bank was proving itself capable of delivering on the mandate that it had been tasked with, including the target rate of inflation. The fact that this varied across our countries (e.g. with the East African countries largely bound to single-digit targets as

opposed to the often looser approach adopted in Ghana and, in particular, Zambia) meant that we could not apply a universal standard here but rather tracked performance against national policy targets over time.

On financial stability, the IMF's Financial Stability Index enabled us to get a sense of how committed and capable our central banks were to the effective regulation and supervision of banks, although again this needed to be triangulated with national policy guidance. For example, the non-performing loan to total loan ratio and the liquid asset to deposit ratio are both important indicators of the viability of a private bank and the sector more broadly, and are indicators that central banks monitor closely. However, the rules on these indicators, such as the statutory liquidity requirement, varies between countries; again, and shaped by Roll's definition of the 'relative effectiveness' of PoEs, we judged each central bank against nationally relevant targets and policy contexts. Bank closures also offered us a rich source of data, although not in a straightforward sense. Given that political interference in the banking sector could lead to banks being either closed or maintained, the overall level of bank closures is less significant than either non-closures of 'failing banks' or of the ways in which specific closures were handled by central banks, both in terms of the effectiveness of the action (e.g. were closures undertaken without depositors suffering losses or causing financial instability within the wider sector?) and in terms of whether central banks observed due process whilst closing a given bank.

The central mandate of *revenue authorities* is clear enough; however, measuring how successful a given revenue authority is at generating tax revenues is far from straightforward. First, the most frequently used indicator of performance, namely the ratio of tax to GDP, is limited by the fact that this is strongly shaped by the structure of the economy, with the size and nature of the informal economy a critical determinant of a country's capacity to generate domestic revenue. We instead used the 'tax effort' metric, which accounts for the structure of the economy and offers a ratio of the actual tax collection to the predicted tax revenue. However, the second challenge here is that this metric captures the effect of *tax policy* as well as *tax administration*, whereas revenue authorities are only directly responsible for administration, with tax policy usually set by the parent ministry of finance. This meant that we also needed to track the nature of the tax regime over time, in an effort to identify whether shifts in revenue generation performance could be most plausibly linked to either the policy and/or administrative function respectively.

Importantly, we were also keen to go beyond a purely statistical approach to identifying performance trajectories over time and sought to identify other indicators that could alert us to whether our organizations were being nurtured as PoEs and/or interfered with. This involved in-depth organizational biographies with a particular focus on critical junctures and on how organizations responded to crisis points, particularly where these seemed to be of a political nature (e.g. fiscal indiscipline resulting from electoral pressures).

Organizational biographies and the importance of crises

The next stage was to subject each organizational case to an in-depth qualitative investigation, using literature reviews and documentary analysis, key informant interviews and field visits to gain insider accounts of how organizations functioned in practice. We focused on examining the interface of organizations with their policy domain and political context and on more internal aspects. Drawing on the conceptual framework set out above and the PoE literature discussed in Chapter 1, this guided us towards looking at both the formal and informal aspects of organizational autonomy; the political and technical competence of organizational leaders and of how long they were allowed to remain in office; efforts to generate positive organizational cultures, including through formal (e.g. salary incentives, training budgets) and informal means (e.g. awards, leadership-by-example, inculcation of professional norms); various indicators of staff capacity and organizational strength and also processes of recruitment and promotion (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Organizational-level factors

Indicators	Sub-indicators	Sources
<i>Organizational autonomy</i>	De jure: legal status and governing rules De facto: examples of direct interference with mandate	Indexes for specific agencies (e.g. IMF's Central Bank Legislation Database Institutional Profiles Database A310 Case-study research
<i>Capacity and character of leadership</i>	Educational and professional backgrounds Political connections with incumbents Length of tenure of senior leaders Political management skills	Public record, media, key informant interviews
<i>Organizational culture</i>	Perceptions of staff that they are empowered to perform their role effectively Budgets for training, allowances for travel Recruitment and promotion processes Number/scale of corruption cases directly involving our agencies	Key informant interviews Organizational documentation (e.g. funding levels, training budgets) Media, interviews, public reports on recruitment (e.g. Inspectorate of government, Hansard)

<i>Organizational strength</i>	Number of staff with post-graduate training/criteria for entry Percentage of senior posts filled Organizational structure: how coherent? Does it provide incentives for staff to seek advancement?	Key informant interviews Organizational documentation (e.g. funding levels, training budgets)
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Table 2.4 Within-country analysis via process tracing (key headings)

Performance period	Political settlement dynamics	Organizational leadership	Organizational culture and capacity	Transnational factors	Other factors
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Analysing performance patterns over time

By integrating our reading of objective performance indicators with our in-depth qualitative research we were able to identify the level of performance achieved by each state agency across time. Identifying these ‘performance periods’ enabled us to confirm whether or not the organization could be considered to be a PoE, in accordance with Roll’s five-year time period, and to start tracing performance patterns to their underlying drivers. A process-tracing approach was used to track back from key moments (e.g. particular spikes in inflation, loss of fiscal discipline) to produce detailed narratives of institutional performance over time. These performance trajectories were then mapped onto political settlement dynamics over time within each case, whilst also tracking other potential drivers of performance (e.g. leadership and management, international support). As depicted in Table 2.4, this offered a means of testing whether any of the main variables from our power domains framework could help explain performance levels over time, whilst also tracking the role of factors beyond our framework.

Given our focus on state agencies that perform economic functions, an important challenge here was to control as far as possible for ‘reverse causation’, whereby favourable economic conditions can enable (say) central banks to achieve their mandate relatively easily. We sought to overcome this tricky question of attribution through our choice of performance indicators and process-tracing approach. For example, most of our performance indicators are either not directly susceptible to being influenced by shifting patterns of economic growth (e.g. budgetary performance) or directly account for these factors (e.g. tax effort). In tracing back

particular episodes of both high and low performance over a lengthy period to a wide range of contextual conditions, as, for example, with sudden spikes in inflation, we have tried to identify the relative weight of economic and political factors in explaining particular outcomes, as with the different origins of inflation spikes within countries like Ghana, Uganda, and Rwanda (both over time and between them). After our country-level work was complete, the material was then subjected to comparative analysis across political settlement type, as presented in Chapter 8.

Conclusion

Researching the politics of PoEs presents several conceptual and methodological challenges. This includes overcoming a tendency to see ‘islands’ of effectiveness as divorced from their wider political context and the general lack of comparative research required to start identifying the types of political conditions under which PoEs emerge and become sustained. This chapter has proposed a conceptual and methodological approach that can start to address this challenge. It has argued that an alignment of political settlements analysis with critical theories of state power can help reveal the ways in which PoEs are both shaped by, and help to reproduce, particular institutional forms in developing countries, with particular reference to the competing logics of regime survival, state-building, and democratization within a transnational context. This in turn needs to be explored in relation to the particular policy domains within which specific PoEs are located through a power domains analysis.

Operationalizing this conceptual approach through a comparative case-study research design, involving systematic process of within- and across-case analysis, should produce relevant and verifiable causal stories on the politics of public-sector performance. This in turn should enable theoretical development concerning the conditions under which PoEs emerge and also help inform policy actors keen to understand how to align interventions with different types of political context. Identifying indicators through which the performance of public-sector organizations can be tracked over time remains a challenge, and although we have made at least some progress on this, more remains to be done. However, we would advocate that this cannot be resolved through metrics alone; using qualitative methods to gain insider perspectives on how public-sector organizations actually function and on their relationship with political actors and events is essential. Moments of ‘organizational crisis’ and the critical junctures that organizations go through within their lifecycle can, as with individual biographies, offer important insights into how capable and resilient they are at dealing with ‘external’ pressures. The book now goes on to demonstrate this approach through its five country case studies, each of which looks at the three public-sector organizations, before offering a comparative analysis of the over-arching findings and implications.

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