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DOI

[10.1007/s11115-023-00741-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-023-00741-1)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Public Organization Review

License

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Citation for published version (APA):

Bauhr, M., Carlitz, R., & Kovacikova, L. (2024). Beyond Buildings: Social Bargaining and Effective Access to Public Services. *Public Organization Review*, 24, 389-406. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-023-00741-1>

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Beyond Buildings: Social Bargaining and Effective Access to Public Services

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Accepted: 28 July 2023 / Published online: 19 August 2023
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Abstract

Physical access to public services frequently does not guarantee people’s needs will be met — what we term *effective access*. Such discrepancies result in part from *social bargaining*: the extent to which citizens can leverage connections with street-level service providers. Survey data from 34 African countries shows citizens with greater social bargaining capacity enjoy greater effective access, in contrast to citizens who pay bribes. Data from 70,000 households in Tanzania further demonstrates that parents with greater social bargaining capacity have more opportunities to interact with school officials — and that their children are more likely to achieve relevant learning outcomes.

Keywords Public services · Social bargaining · Effective access · Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have dramatically increased investments in public service infrastructure throughout the developing world. The amount of money that OECD donors allocate annually to ‘Social Infrastructure & Services’ doubled between 2000 and 2008 and has been sustained at over 40 billion USD per

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year since then. The education and health sectors have seen particularly dramatic increases, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ At the same time, however, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are not on track to meet a number of SDGs by the 2030 deadline. Studies increasingly point to the fact that physical access to public services far from guarantees that citizens' needs will be met (Cleland et al., 2014). Even if children are enrolled in school, there is increasing evidence that they are not necessarily attaining the "relevant and effective learning outcomes" set by the education SDG targets (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2020; Spaul & Taylor, 2015). Similarly, being able to reach a public health clinic is no guarantee of quality care (O'Donnell, 2007; Peters et al., 2008).

This study investigates the sources of these discrepancies and argues that effective access to public services is in part a function of citizens' abilities to engage in 'social bargaining' with street-level service providers, such as teachers and doctors. Social bargaining — defined as citizens' use of social networks and knowledge to persuade service providers to meet their needs — allows citizens to leverage ethnic and partisan ties, as well as access to information about rights and duties to gain effective access to services. This stands in contrast to economic bargaining, where citizens use short-term economic transactions, informal payments, and bribes to influence service providers. The relative importance of social bargaining can be understood considering the oftentimes extortive nature of street-level bribe paying, with limited pretense of reciprocity (Bauhr, 2017; Justesen & Bjørnskov, 2014). In contrast, social bargaining allows for long-term ties and reciprocity between citizens and service providers.

To investigate how social bargaining relates to effective access to public services, this study turns to sub-Saharan Africa, home to some of the greatest disconnects between physical and effective access to basic public services (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2020). The region has also been the site of major decentralization reforms in recent years (Dickovick & Wunsch, 2014). As a result, an increasing number of public services are subject to the discretion of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs). Using Afrobarometer surveys from 34 countries, the research first shows that physical access does not guarantee effective access. Additionally, citizens that are more highly educated, those with better access to information, and those that express support for the ruling party are more likely to report their needs being met once in contact with service providers, while those that pay a bribe are less likely to report effective access. These findings are interpreted as evidence that social bargaining may facilitate effective access.

To better understand the relationship between social bargaining and effective access, this study turns to a learning assessment covering nearly 70,000 households in Tanzania (the *Uwezo* initiative). The *Uwezo* data includes information on opportunities for parental involvement in school decision-making. The findings show that parents with greater social bargaining capacity are more likely to have opportunities to interact with school officials and are also more likely to take advantage of those opportunities. Moreover, the children of such parents are significantly more likely to score higher on

¹ Data from <https://stats.oecd.org/>.

Math, English, and Swahili learning assessments. These results point to the importance of social bargaining for effective access and the ultimate achievement of development goals.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on distributive politics, democratic representation, and pro-poor service delivery. Despite increased attention to the politics of public service delivery in the developing world, fewer comparative studies have addressed the constraints that citizens face once in contact with service providers. The distributive politics literature has focused on politicians' incentives to target goods and services to particular groups and communities, based on ethnic or other ties, and the extent to which citizens reward such targeting at election time (Golden & Min, 2013; Lieberman, 2018). Electoral demands for accountability or retrospective voting may however be muddled by citizens' interactions with SLBs, who play an important role in determining the ultimate quality of services received, i.e., effective access. Hence, it is important to go beyond studying the physical distribution of government goods and services – the focus of much of the distributive politics literature to date – and directly investigate what determines whether the purported beneficiaries of such goods and services are actually able to take advantage of them.

Second, this paper seeks to distinguish between two sources of preferential treatment in public service delivery. Building on the primarily economic literature that sees bribe paying and corruption as a form of bargaining (Rose-Ackerman, 1975, 1999), the paper distinguishes monetarily corrupt transactions (i.e., economic bargaining) from those that primarily build on social interactions and networks, what we term social bargaining (see i.e., Ledeneva, 2008). Comparing social bargaining with economic bargaining leads to important insights into the sources of preferential treatment in public service provision. Despite a large literature on the role of clientelist ties and corruption, fewer studies seek to explicitly compare the relative importance of these forms of bargaining for access to public services. This study points to the precedence of social interactions over economic transactions in securing effective access. In other words, “network insiders” (Bauhr & Charron, 2018; Chang & Kerr, 2016) who can both gain access to first-hand interactions with service providers and leverage these connections, tend to be more likely to gain effective access than those that must resort to bribe paying. The paper therefore contends that corruption is not only socially inefficient at the aggregate or societal level, but also oftentimes for those individuals that engage in it (Bauhr, 2017). Thus, while a key motivation for paying a bribe to a public service provider is to gain access to public services – effectively at the expense of those that cannot afford such bribes – this study suggests that economic bargaining remains inefficient. Bribes thereby disproportionately tax the poor not only since they are less likely to be able to pay them (Chetwynd et al., 2003; Gupta et al., 2002; Mamdani & Bangser, 2004; Peiffer & Rose, 2018), but also since paying bribes far from guarantees effective access.

Variation in Access to Public Services and Social Bargaining

Comparative literature on the politics of service delivery has focused primarily on physical access – examining outcomes such as school enrollment, road construction, and access to clean water (Burgess et al., 2015; Carlitz, 2017; Harding & Stasavage,

2014). Several studies have also looked at the inputs required to promote physical access – examining education or health spending, and to a more limited extent, the allocation of teachers and provision of other inputs such as latrines or desks (Lieberman, 2018).

Variation in physical access to services within and between countries has been attributed to regime type, decentralization, ethnic heterogeneity (Lieberman, 2018), and geography. Democracies tend to spend more on public goods provision than their autocratic counterparts. Furthermore, the organization of the state, including the degree of decentralization, may matter depending on local officials' capacity to provide public services. Moreover, ethnic heterogeneity can undermine public service delivery, due to the tendency of ethnic groups or parties to target public services to their co-ethnics and supporters (Golden & Min, 2013), and the fact that socially and politically salient ethnic fractionalization may make it more difficult for groups to collaborate around service provision. Finally, a growing literature builds on the urban bias thesis (Bates, 2014; Lipton, 1977; Eastwood & Lipton, 2000) to suggest that basic public services are less accessible in rural areas, where many poor people live (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018; Jones & Corbridge, 2010). Transportation costs and long travel distances can explain limited uptake, especially among the poor (Lohela et al., 2012; Noor et al., 2006; Blanford et al., 2012; Kadobera et al., 2012; Tanser et al., 2006).

Understanding these disparities in physical access to services is important but cannot fully explain disparities in *effective* access. For example, experts have increasingly been sounding the alarm about the growing disconnect between physical access to education (e.g., increased enrollment and school access) and the actual learning that takes place in these buildings (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2020; Spaul & Taylor, 2015).² Similar concerns exist in other sectors. Peters et al. (2008) note that geographic accessibility is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to benefiting from health services in low- and middle-income countries. Meanwhile, Cleland et al. (2014) note that “physical proximity is only one component of access [to contraceptives] and is probably not the most important one” (p. 116). And despite massive investments in water supply infrastructure in Africa, a considerable proportion of the continent's population still does not regularly have clean water readily available (Carlitz, 2019).

Studies seeking to explain discrepancies between physical and effective access to public services point to the important role of street-level service providers. Following decentralization reforms in nearly every country in the world (Faguet, 2014), the bulk of service delivery in many countries is carried out at the street level. The degree to which citizens can effectively access public services is therefore oftentimes a function of their interaction with SLBs, the “health professionals, social workers and police officers... responsible for delivering services through daily interactions with citizens” (Lipsky, 2010).

² Notably, unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are explicit in targeting learning outcomes. However, strategies to achieve these targets have remained focused on increasing access to schooling (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2020), with less attention paid to what actually happens in school buildings.

Normatively, SLBs are expected to act impartially and professionally (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In practice, however, SLBs' conduct is difficult to monitor (Filmer et al., 2002) as they often work in situations characterized by a lack of resources, considerable workload, unpredictability, and a significant degree of ambiguity (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). Thus, they frequently have considerable discretion when it comes to policy implementation and are often considered to "make policy" at the street level on a daily basis (Hupe & Hill, 2007). This ambiguity can create important benefits. SLBs can "differentiate their actions according to the specific needs of each and every case" (Rothstein & Varraich, 2017, 121) and can therefore facilitate need-based targeting. However, discretion also gives local officials leeway to "make policy" in ways that contradict formal policy directives or go against their agencies' stated goals (Lipsky, 2010), resulting in gaps between policy and implementation (Brinkerhoff, 1996; Gofen, 2014; Ridde, 2008). This significance of street-level discretion in public service delivery makes street-level interactions between SLBs and citizens crucial for determining the latter's effective access to public services.

What, then, determines how SLBs respond to different citizens? There are several potential sources of preferential treatment. Corruption studies, and in particular those within the field of economics, have a long tradition of seeing corruption and bribe paying as a form of bargaining between different actors (see, i.e., Rose-Ackerman, 1975, 1999).³ In such transactions, citizens use short-term economic transactions, informal payments, and bribes to influence service providers. Citizens perpetuate corruption, since corruption is expected to lead to access to public services and since opting out of corruption risks inflicting disadvantages on individuals in those contexts where corruption is the expected behavior (Bauhr & Charron, 2018; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Persson et al., 2013). However, economic bargaining and bribe paying in the context of public service delivery may not necessarily lead to effective access to public services, since bribery is oftentimes extortive in nature with very limited pretense of reciprocity. Similarly, bribes may be initiated by citizens with the hope of gaining access to services, while service providers accepting the bribes may not be in a position to provide such services. Thus, bribe paying can be taxing on the poor, since they have more limited exit options (Mamdani & Bangser, 2004; Chetwynd et al., 2003; Gupta et al., 2002; Justesen & Bjørnskov, 2014; Peiffer & Rose, 2018).

In contrast, others suggest that alternative forms of connections, ties, and practices build the kind of networks that are beneficial to gaining preferential treatment (see, i.e., Ledeneva, 2008). This 'social' bargaining entails more indirect ways to influence service providers, whereby citizens leverage their ethnic and partisan ties, as well as their access to information about rights and duties to increase effective access to services.

³ Bargaining theory has a long tradition within the social science and bargaining is often defined as a situation when two players have a common interest to cooperate but have conflicting interests over exactly how to cooperate (see i.e., Vanderschraaf, 2023; Muthoo, 1999).

The idea that citizens may benefit from ethnic or partisan ties reflects the fact that SLBs are often appointed based on patronage (Panizza et al., 2019) and are thus directly or indirectly incentivized to target services to particular constituents — and to withhold them from others. The distributive politics literature discusses “punishment regimes,” in which parties in power punish opposition supporters by withholding state resources from their constituencies (Magaloni, 2006). This paper aims to extend the discussion of punishment regimes to the street level, adding to the growing body of work supporting this hypothesis. Carlitz (2017), for instance, finds that within Tanzanian districts, the distribution of new water infrastructure is skewed to favor localities with higher demonstrated levels of support for the ruling party. Ejdemyr et al. (2018) find that Malawian members of Parliament target more local public goods to co-ethnics in their electoral districts when ethnic groups are sufficiently segregated to make such targeting (electorally) efficient.

Social bargaining also tends to reflect broader skills and assets that are unequally distributed among citizens. Specifically, education and access to information may determine both if citizens can gain access to first-hand interactions with service providers, and once in contact, if they can leverage skills to gain effective access to services. Studies point to persistent information asymmetries that characterize interactions between service providers and service users. Users oftentimes have limited capacity to judge the quality of a given service as a function of government effort (Das & Hammer, 2014; Mani & Mukand, 2007). They may also be less informed about their rights to access given services, or to access them at a reduced fee (Chuma et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2017; Carlitz, 2019). These findings lead us to expect that social bargaining, including partisanship ties, education, and access to information will enhance citizens’ effective access to public services.

Empirical Strategy and Data

To investigate the role of social bargaining on citizens’ effective access to public services, this study analyzes data from two main sources. First is Round 7 of the Afrobarometer, which comprises nationally representative surveys for 34 countries conducted between 2016–2018,⁴ and facilitates examining how individuals’ effective access to health and education varies as a function of social bargaining.⁵

Second is the data from a 2015 assessment of learning outcomes carried out by the East African NGO Twaweza. The *Uwezo* (“capability” in Swahili) initiative⁶ is a ‘citizen movement based’ approach to assessing literacy and numeracy levels in East Africa, inspired by the Annual Status of Education (ASER) initiative in India.⁷ The 2015 *Uwezo* survey assessed children in 68,588 households in 4,750 villages and urban enumeration areas (EA) across all 159 districts in mainland Tanzania. In each village/EA, the *Uwezo* team visited one government primary school, capturing

⁴ For more information, see <https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/merged-data>.

⁵ More details on the data employed in the study is provided in the Online Appendix.

⁶ <https://www.twaweza.org/go/uwezo>.

⁷ <https://www.asercentre.org/>.

information including the number of teachers, number of students, availability of textbooks, etc.⁸ The Uwezo data shines a light on the mechanics of social bargaining in education, demonstrating implications for both effective access and learning outcomes.

Measuring Effective Access

In order to measure respondents' actual ability to obtain the services they need – i.e., *effective access* – responses to the following questions on the Afrobarometer were considered:

1. *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials?*
2. *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the medical care you needed?*

Note that these questions are only asked of those who attempted to access the service in question. Additionally, the questions about access are only asked for *public* services. This means that we do not have measures of effective access for service users who exit the public system by, e.g., sending their children to private schools or seeking care at private clinics. On average, respondents' reported ability to obtain needed services is higher when it comes to education (1.88 on a scale from 0-3), followed by health (1.53). The fact that considerable proportions of respondents reported difficulties obtaining the services they need serves as first-order evidence for the proposition that physical access does not guarantee effective access.

Social Bargaining

To capture characteristics and actions that are important for citizens' social bargaining, this study relies on proxies for citizens' capacity and potential opportunities, rather than studying the actual act of bargaining, which is inherently relational. In order to measure access to information, indicators of how frequently respondents accessed news from radio, television, and newspapers were used. The indicator for partisanship was whether respondents support the opposition or incumbent.

Control Variables

Several control variables were also included to account for issues of possible endogeneity. At the individual level, the analysis accounts for the respondent's bribe paying, gender, poverty, age, and urban-rural residency.

⁸ We also incorporate data from a 2016 poverty mapping exercise, which generated district-level poverty rates for the country. Although the poverty mapping exercise was conducted in 2016, it is based on data from the 2011/12 Tanzania Household Budget Survey and the 2012 Census. Hence, we do not run the risk of post-treatment bias in our estimates.

Bribe paying is the most direct indicator of economic bargaining as experienced by citizens and is more suitable than related indicators, such as perceptions of overall societal corruption levels. In order to measure economic bargaining through bribe paying, this paper uses the question of how often, if ever, the respondent had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor for a teacher or school official in order to get the services the respondent needed from the schools. An analogous question was used for medical care.

The respondents' gender is expected to affect both social bargaining and effective access to public services. Women may on average be more dependent on public service delivery because of their traditionally greater care-taking obligations.

Furthermore, poverty was included as a control variable in the analysis since it is likely to affect citizens' effective access to public services, as well as their social bargaining capacity. Effective access to public services may also be affected by age, as older respondents may face different service needs and ability to access services, as well as distinct possibilities to leverage connections. Finally, the study accounts for urban-rural status since access to both street-level service providers and services may be affected by the urban-rural divide, which remains consequential in most countries throughout the African continent.

Correlates of Effective Access across Africa

How does effective access to health and education vary as a function of social bargaining (proxied by access to information and partisanship)? The expected outcome is that social bargaining would improve effective access to public services, in part because such bargaining would more effectively enforce a reciprocal relationship between service seekers and service providers. Models 1 and 2 in Table 1 show the focal relationships for effective access to education, while Models 3 and 4 present the correlates of effective access to health care services.

Models 1 and 2 show that respondents who have greater access to information, i.e., those that more frequently access news from radio, television, and newspapers, also found it easier to obtain the services they needed once in contact with teachers or school officials. The analysis also shows that citizens supporting opposition parties found it more difficult to obtain the services they needed once in contact with service providers, providing some evidence for local punishment regimes. These results provide support for the contention that access to information may facilitate effective access.

In addition, these findings can be contrasted with evidence on the effectiveness of economic bargaining in the form of bribe paying. Citizens that report having paid a bribe to access educational services also perceived that it was difficult to obtain the services they needed from teachers and school officials. While Model 1 only includes regional fixed effects, Model 2 also includes a range of individual level control variables, including poverty, gender, age, and urban-rural status. The main relationship holds when including these control variables. Women, older respondents, and those living in rural areas are more likely to perceive that their

Table 1 Social bargaining and effective access

	(1) Education	(2) Education	(3) Health	(4) Health
Access to info (std)	0.03 *** (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)	0.02 ** (0.01)
Ruling party supporter (std)	0.04 *** (0.01)	0.03 ** (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)
Bribe for education (std)	-0.21 *** (0.02)	-0.21 *** (0.02)		
Bribe for health (std)			-0.17 *** (0.01)	-0.17 *** (0.01)
Poor (cash lived poverty)		-0.10 *** (0.03)		-0.23 *** (0.02)
Female		0.05 *** (0.02)		0.04 ** (0.02)
Age quintile		0.05 *** (0.01)		0.01 * (0.00)
Rural		0.04 ** (0.02)		0.03 (0.02)
Observations	15825	15772	26823	26736
R2	0.136	0.143	0.130	0.139

Standard errors in parentheses

OLS regression where DV is effective access to indicated service. All models include region fixed effects

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

needs are met once in contact with service providers, while poverty is associated with lower levels of effective access (Table 1).

Models 3 and 4 show the focal relationships for effective access to health services, i.e., how easy or difficult it is for respondents to obtain the medical care they need once in contact with service providers. As with education, citizens who have greater access to information and who support the ruling party are more likely to gain effective access to medical care. In contrast, those that pay a bribe are significantly less likely to gain effective access. This lends additional support for the contention that social bargaining facilitates effective access, while economic bargaining in the form of bribe paying far from guarantees effective access. The models also show, in line with the results for education, that poverty is negatively associated with effective access to medical care, while women, older respondents, and those living in rural areas report better effective access to medical care.

The fact that rural residents report greater levels of effective access stands in contrast to the findings of the urban bias literature discussed earlier. However, this may reflect the fact that the questions examined here consider public services only. In urban areas, there tend to be more private providers, and those who can afford to

do so often exit the public system. As a result, public services often suffer more in urban areas, while in rural areas they may be the only game in town.

In sum, social bargaining is associated with greater effective access to public services. This result may be contrasted with economic bargaining (bribe paying) that is consistently associated with lower effective access. The next section investigates the determinants and outcomes associated with social bargaining for education. The Tanzanian data allows us to go beyond citizens' reports of effective access to study the actual results of effective access to a key public service.

Social Bargaining and Learning Outcomes in Tanzania

The Afrobarometer is limited in its ability to capture information on the interactions between citizens and service providers through which social and economic bargaining occurs and through which unequal access is allowed to persist. Turning to a richer source of data from Tanzania, the Uwezo learning assessment, allows us to draw inferences regarding these interactions in the education sector.

The disconnect between schooling and learning (i.e., between physical and effective access to education) in Tanzania has been well documented. In fact, the Uwezo assessment was initiated largely as a response to concerns that while schooling rates had increased dramatically in Tanzania following the global buy-in to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), there were serious questions about what children were actually learning. Between 2000 and 2010, Tanzania saw gross primary enrollment⁹ increase from 68.8% to 102.8%. In order to determine whether this massive increase in schooling translated into improved learning outcomes, the Uwezo initiative was launched, developing a simple but rigorous methodology to assess children's actual ability to read (in English and Swahili) and to do basic arithmetic at the Standard 2 (2nd grade) level. Uwezo was first piloted to over 40,000 children between the ages of 5-16 in 2010, and subsequently was implemented annually between 2011-2015. The results to date have been sobering; in 2011, only three in 10 Standard 3 students were able to read a basic Swahili story and just one in 10 could read a basic story in English. Even among Standard 7 students (the last year of primary school), the majority were unable to read a basic English story. Basic numeracy skills were also in short supply; in 2011, only 3 in 10 Standard 3 pupils were able to add, subtract, and multiply (Uwezo, TENMET & Hivos/Twaweza, 2011). In subsequent years, overall learning outcomes have seen limited improvement (Uwezo, 2017).

Here, learning outcomes are considered to be a function of effective access to education, and therefore help investigate the role of social bargaining in

⁹ Gross enrollment ratio for primary school is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in primary education regardless of age by the population of the age group which officially corresponds to primary education, and multiplying by.

Data from World Bank World Development Indicators: <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>.

interactions with education service providers, i.e., teachers. Both the “supply side,” namely which parents are given opportunities to interact with their children’s teachers, as well as the “demand side,” or which parents take advantage of those opportunities, are examined. These interactions are then compared to the learning outcomes as assessed by the Uwezo initiative. This study focuses on the following three questions asked of each respondent at the household level:

1. *Did you discuss your child’s progress with the teacher last term?*
2. *Were you invited for a parental meeting at your child’s school this year?*
3. *[If invited], did you attend [the parental meeting]?*

Rather than capture citizens’ perceptions of effective access like the Afrobarometer, this analysis considers student performance on the Math, English, and Swahili assessments that constitute the core of the Uwezo initiative. The scores on the learning assessments are interpreted as a proxy for effective access. That is, if children are receiving quality education, they should demonstrate better learning outcomes.

Social bargaining capacity is operationalized using survey questions on mothers’ level of education and household access to information. Then, social bargaining capacity is analyzed in relation to the parents’ interactions with service providers and linked to their children’s learning outcomes. This illuminates an important determinant of the gap between physical access to education and meaningful attainment of quality education, i.e., effective access.

Table 2 examines the demand for and supply of effective access to education, looking at which parents are most likely to take the initiative to advocate for

Table 2 Social bargaining in education: demand and supply factors

	(1) Discussed Child’s Progress	(2) Invited to Parents Mtg	(3) Attended Parents Mtg
Mother’s education level	1.78 *** (0.02)	1.52 *** (0.02)	1.44 *** (0.02)
Household owns a radio	1.49 *** (0.02)	1.32 *** (0.02)	1.27 *** (0.02)
Avg. HH num. meals per day	1.18 *** (0.01)	1.12 *** (0.01)	1.13 *** (0.02)
Age of mother	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.02 *** (0.00)	1.02 *** (0.00)
Rural EA	0.63 *** (0.01)	0.80 *** (0.02)	0.93 ** (0.03)
Observations	142780	139132	98187

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses Logistic regression where DV is indicated interaction. All models include district fixed effects

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

improvements in their children's education, as well as which parents are more likely to be supplied with relevant opportunities. The table shows that parents who are more educated, and those with more access to information are significantly more likely to demand interactions — by discussing their child's progress and attending parental meetings — and are also more likely to receive invitations to such meetings. In turn, parents from poorer, rural, and less educated households, as well as those with limited access to information are less likely to demand effective access to education and are less likely to be invited to parental meetings. Therefore, while all households examined here have relatively equal physical access to education (since these questions were asked of parents in an enumeration area with a primary school), their effective access varies greatly based on their social bargaining capacity.

Next, Table 3 looks at how social bargaining relates to learning outcomes, which are likely to be better when students have more effective access to education. The results indicate that learning outcomes do indeed appear to respond to parental advocacy. Parents who discuss their child's progress, those who are invited to parental meetings, and those who attend such meetings are significantly more likely to see better learning outcomes from their children. Social bargaining — both in terms of demanding and receiving opportunities for interactions with service providers — pays off. However, as seen above, such bargaining is limited to those parents who are both educated and have better access to information, creating a visible discrepancy in learning outcomes within districts. Thus, parents who both demand and are invited to interact with service providers in turn see benefits in terms of their children's effective access to education. While the data do not allow us to study the currencies and competencies leveraged in those interactions directly, this analysis suggests that even if direct monetary transactions and bribe paying were part of some of these interactions, they are not accessible for citizens that are not well-equipped in terms of social bargaining capacity, including access to information. Thus, even if there may be links between social and economic bargaining, social bargaining capacity is likely a precondition for all forms of effective bargaining.

Discussion and Conclusions

As a consequence of widespread buy-in to the MDGs and their successors the SDGs, the past two decades have seen massive expansions in physical access to public services. School enrollments have increased dramatically, and it has become considerably easier for people to access health services and safe water sources (United Nations, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has halted – and in some cases reversed – progress towards a number of development goals (Sachs et al., 2022). However, even before the pandemic, scholars and practitioners had been drawing attention to the growing disconnect between physical access and what we term *effective* access, or the extent to which people's needs are met once in contact with service providers.

The preceding analysis provides insights into the determinants of effective access. It is crucial to distinguish between social bargaining — where citizens leverage their access to information and partisanship, ethnic, or social ties to gain effective access — and economic bargaining, i.e., the use of short-term economic

Table 3 Learning outcomes and social bargaining

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Math	Math	Math	Swahili	Swahili	Swahili	English	English	English
Discuss performance with teacher	1.11 *** (0.00)			1.12 *** (0.00)			1.11 *** (0.00)		
Invited to attend parents meeting		1.13 *** (0.00)			1.14 *** (0.00)			1.10 *** (0.00)	
Attended parents meeting			1.09 *** (0.00)			1.10 *** (0.00)			1.08 *** (0.00)
Avg. HH num. meals per day	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.04 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.03 *** (0.00)	1.04 *** (0.00)
Age of mother	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.00 *** (0.00)	1.00 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)	1.01 *** (0.00)
Rural EA	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.88 *** (0.00)	0.85 *** (0.00)	0.84 *** (0.00)	0.84 *** (0.00)
Observations	87734	84628	62218	88760	85590	62920	86284	83221	61175
R ²	0.126	0.128	0.104	0.128	0.129	0.105	0.160	0.156	0.138

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses OLS regression where DV is indicated test score. All models include district fixed effects

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

transactions, informal payments, and bribes to influence service providers. The analysis shows that social bargaining capacity is consistently associated with better effective access to public services. Using survey data from 34 African countries, the findings show that both access to information and support for the ruling party improves effective access. These results hold both for education and health care services. On the other hand, effective access to education and health services is lower among citizens that pay a bribe, lending support for the contention that social bargaining is more effective than economic bargaining and direct bribe paying.

In order to more closely investigate the implications of social bargaining for effective access, this study turns to a learning assessment of nearly 70,000 households in Tanzania. Here, both the supply of and demand for street-level interactions with service providers are conditioned by parental education and access to information. Parents who in turn take advantage of opportunities to engage with their children's schools are more likely to see their children score higher on Math, English, and Swahili learning assessments. These findings point to the importance of interactions between service providers and service users when it comes to determining effective access.

This study focuses on social bargaining and effective access to services in Africa; however, this phenomenon has relevance in the Global North as well. For example, studies from the United States have found that minority patients in race/ethnic concordant relationships are more likely to use needed health services, are less likely to postpone or delay seeking care, and report a higher volume of use and satisfaction with health services (LaVeist & Nuru-Jeter, 2002; Saha et al., 2003). In the education sphere, Gershenson et al. (2022) find that Black students randomly assigned to at least one Black teacher in grades K–3 are more likely to graduate from high school and to enroll in college compared to their Black schoolmates who are not. Race and ethnicity play key roles in people's use of social networks and power relations in the United States, and thus we may interpret such results as evidence of the importance of social bargaining in a more 'developed' setting.

Moreover, effective access to public services has important implications for government legitimacy. When citizens lack opportunities to access and benefit from public services, they may be unlikely to see the state as a source of solutions to their everyday concerns. This can undermine citizens' faith in democracy and result in their withdrawing from the state (Bratton & Chang, 2006, 1063; Bauhr & Grimes, 2021). Increasing effective access to public services may therefore not only lead to improved social mobility and poverty reduction, but also more generally to strengthening the social contract between citizens and the state. Distinguishing between physical and effective access to public services, as well as understanding the street-level drivers of effective access to public services, has to date been an understudied dimension of the distributive politics literature. The distinction and comparison of these drivers, and in particular the difference between social and economic bargaining, seeks to contribute towards a closer understanding of why some citizens' needs are met, while others remain at a continuous disadvantage.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-023-00741-1>.

Data Availability Replication files are available upon request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The study relies on secondary data and thus no ethical approval was needed.

Informed Consent The study relies on secondary data and thus no informed consent was needed.

Conflict of Interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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