

Rethinking Clientelism for Development

Policy Issue

Conventional wisdom suggests patronage politics undermines development. Policymakers blame patronage and clientelism, or the exchange of benefits for political support, for fueling corruption and bad governance. But how and when do citizens view patronage as a *quid pro quo* agreement, undermining their ability to hold politicians accountable?

The Context

New scholarship by GLD researchers that examines what patronage means to citizens challenges long-standing assumptions about political clientelism. These studies suggest political clientelism may, in fact, provide opportunities for social welfare. However, the extent to which it does depends on the context.

Confronting Low Expectations

A recent [article](#) by Prisca Jöst and Ellen Lust finds that voters' expectations of politicians handing out money depend on how many people know each other in communities, or community social density. Findings from focus group discussions and a survey experiment administered to over 14,000 poor voters in Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia indicate people living in dense communities are not likely to consider those who *do not* practice "vote-buying" as more credible than those who *do*. Conversely, citizens living in less socially dense communities are more apprehensive of these clientelist practices. They expect campaigners who *do not* practice "vote-buying" to be more capable of providing future services than those who *do*.

The difference across these communities comes down to whether people expect public services to be delivered in the future. Citizens' assessments of "vote-buying" depend on how closely connected they are to their neighbors in their local communities.

Demanding Social Recognition

Kathleen Klaus, Jeffrey Paller, and Martha Wilfahrt's [article](#) finds that residents across Africa don't always interpret clientelist practices as bad governance, but rather as necessary pathways toward human dignity. Through interviews with local leaders and ordinary people in rural Senegal, urban Ghana, and coastal Kenya, they outline three dimensions of social recognition: (1) To be seen and heard by leaders, (2) To be respected as agents in the political process, and (3) To be politically included and protected from harm.



People queuing to polling stations, Zambia.

Photo credit: GovernmentZA, flickr.

Activities often described as clientelism are a way for citizens to be recognized as dignified human beings. Citizens demand and value personal visits and assistance as a form of social recognition. Moreover, they continue participating in patron-client relationships, even when promises are not fulfilled.

Beyond Good Governance

Policymakers and practitioners advocating good governance emphasize rooting out clientelism and vote-buying. Development agencies spend millions of dollars on [transparency and anti-corruption initiatives](#) to achieve such goals. But these policies overlook why people engage in clientelist practices—and sometimes even demand them. Clientelism can provide citizens a voice in decision-making, political agency, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, these initiatives are likely to work differently across different contexts. Good governance reforms should consider local contexts and residents' expectations of government.

How to Cite:

Paller, Jeffrey (2023). "Rethinking Clientelism for Development." Eds. Baxter, Megan; Jöst, Prisca; Lust, Ellen; Shaber-Twedt, Rose. *Governance and Local Development Institute*, Policy Brief no. 20, October 2023.

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About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.

