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Recontextualizing street-level bureaucracy in the developing world

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Abstract

This Special Issue was driven by the need to better understand the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of the growing mobilization of the street-level bureaucracy (SLB) analytical framework in the study of state action and policy implementation in the developing world. Our curiosity rested on what has been happening to the framework in terms of empirical applications as well as the consequent challenges to the theory when it travels from the Global North to the Global South. We wanted to learn more about the evolution of ideas and theoretical propositions developed on the basis of some important assumptions—such as consolidated liberal states and advanced democracies—when they reach the specific conditions and varying contexts of states and societies in the developing world.

KEYWORDS
comparative analysis, developing countries, policy implementation, street-level bureaucrats

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the literature about street-level bureaucracy (SLB) has advanced considerably (see Hupe, 2019; Hupe & Hill, 2015), demonstrating the ways in which street-level bureaucrats matter in policy implementation. In the course of this development, controversy has occurred about whether Lipsky's original concept can be applied to refer to all contexts in which encounters at the "front line" occur. This account accepts this wide usage and hence in this volume the terms front line and street level are regarded as coterminous. The emergent literature has analyzed the uses of discretion, the factors that influence bureaucrats' discretion and how they affect both policies' outcomes and citizens' access to service. However, current SLB research, although rich and extensive, predominantly focuses on the developed world. More specifically, it is generally derived from single-country case studies that reflect theoretical developments on a particular site-specific relationship between European or American societies and their public policies.

Developing countries—such as state capacity shortages and institutional weakness, as well as different political traditions and cultures—affect frontline work and the ways they impact policies and their publics. It is rather problematic to assume that a particular kind of relationship—involving specific forms of coping, legitimation, and justification identified in advances liberal democracies—are general enough to fit every street-level agency beyond the original context of the theory. As proposed by Møller and Stensöta (2019), different policy regimes produce different responses, since those regimes are based on different conceptions about the state, citizenship, solidarity, and trust.

However, recently, work has developed which begins to apply SLB theory to policy-making at the street level of the state as well as to policy implementation in the developing world. This recent movement brings opportunities for theory refinement with a focus on making it more adherent, relevant, and analytically productive in a variety of empirical terrains and sociopolitical environments. As SLB theory has been extended beyond its original empirical context, a new series of unanswered questions emerge, such as what happens

to frontline workers' agency in a context in which they are obliged to implement universal policies, affecting resources redistribution, in societies characterized by extremely unequal social structures? Are street-level workers able to challenge the moral foundations of unequal social structures? If so, how can they do it without compromising the norms of fairness and deservingness dominating society at large? In societies without strong democratic traditions and equality norms, do SLBs fulfil this double role as state and citizen agent in similar ways as identified in older democracies such as the US and the Scandinavian countries? How do they operate in contexts in which clientelism and corruption is widespread?

The papers in this Special Issue provide novel and original material to approach these questions. They analyze street-level action and policy implementation in different countries that still face major challenges for socioeconomic development, such as Argentina, Bougainville/Papua New Guinea, China, Ghana, India, Mexico, and Peru. They reflect upon the application of SLB theories in these contexts and put to test the mechanisms already found in traditional SLB literature. As a result, they provide invaluable insights and practical signposts for turning original theoretical propositions more adherent, relevant, and capable to explain street-level actions and policy implementation in the developing world.

Based on this material, three main conclusions can be drawn:

a) SLB theory is clearly a useful lens for reflecting about street-level action and policy implementation in the developing world. Fundamental SLB features, such as distance from supervisors and administrative centers, closeness to policy users, the inevitability of discretion, and the development of coping mechanisms, remain key analytical tools to understand policy-making at the street-level and policy implementation in contexts in situations in which state presence is uneven, fragmented, weak, or precarious.

b) However, the roles SLB assume, including their behaviors, practices, and interactions with other relevant actors, as well as the meanings and impacts of their performance to the policies they implement and to the public they serve, are deeply sensitive to the specific contexts observed in the developing world. Differences in the way the states are conceived and organized and varying political cultures and traditions of state-society relations—what we could synthetically call the sociopolitical institutional environment in which SLB work is embedded—demand important theoretical adjustments and reconceptualization.

c) Finally, this exploration contributes to the evidence that more comparative work is needed to validate and reinforce SLB theory.

In what follows, we advance proposals about the uses of SLB theory in the analysis of policy implementation in developing countries. First, findings show how SLB action needs to be recontextualized in social, political, and institutional environments of the developing world, with special attention to wide variations across regions and countries (Section 2). We then consider that such recontextualization can be worked out from a reconceptualization of the state focused on the missing elements (what is lacking in comparison to the administration of societies in the Global North—Section 3) or focused on what is actually there in terms of existing, practical forms of governance (Section 4). Finally, we argue that the effort of recontextualization must also address how existing state forms are interwoven with political cultures, highly unequal social structures, and how these elements interfere with conceptions of justice and the legitimacy of SLB action (Section 5).

2 | CHANGING THE CONTEXT: SLB ACTION AND VARYING SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The first issue emerging from the papers in this Special Issue refers to the institutional environments in which SLB roles, action, and practices are situated. As discussed before, SLB theory was first created and disseminated in the Global North and in this specific institutional context, SLBs tended to be seen as "bureaucrats"—whether public sector employees or subcontracted workers—who use discretion to adapt general rules (i.e., existing legislation and policy directives) to the specific situations they encounter in their interactions with people who demand public services and support. These adaptation processes are far from simple and engender multiple important (positive or negative) repercussions. As this body of knowledge evolved, scholars gained better understanding about these adaptation processes and their repercussions across different agencies, as well as countries. These advances led to the conclusions that different institutional environments have important impacts on the tactics and ways by which street-level bureaucrats use discretion and affect policy and their publics (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Møller & Stensöta, 2019).

But what happens when we radically amplify the differences across social, political, and institutional environments, going way beyond the theory's context of creation? The papers in this Special Issue applied SLB theory not only to developing countries but to widely different realities within this part of the world: from the Americas through Africa into Asia; and from middle-income countries and relatively consolidated states to nascent administrative apparatuses (as in the case of Bougainville) or policy areas or territories with little state presence (as in the case of isolated indigenous populations).

Previous studies that applied SLB theory to the developing world have already indicated that frontline working conditions in these contexts are characterized by greater uncertainty and ambiguity because of the politicized nature of bureaucracy (Amengual, 2016; Pires, 2008; Zarychta et al., 2020), limited formalization of working procedures (Lotta & Marques, 2020; Spink et al., 2021; Stanica et al., 2020), and the extreme scarcity of basic resources (Cerna et al., 2017; Gibson, 2004; Meza et al., 2021; Walker & Gilson, 2004). These immediate working conditions are directly related to larger

historical processes of state construction and social organization in the developing world. On the one hand, state building is often characterized by incomplete institutionalization processes amid great resource scarcity (Peeters & Dussauge Laguna, 2021). On the other hand, developing world societies, especially those bearing colonial legacies, tend to be more unequal, as elites concentrate wealth and significant proportions (sometimes the vast majority) of the population face severe levels of poverty.

Consequently, developing countries' social, political, and institutional contexts stretch the amplitude of variation (beyond the relative homogeneity of the Global North) in the environments within which SLB action is to be exercised and understood. When such levels of contextual variation are introduced, important questions arise in respect to the constitutive relations between institutional contexts and SLB roles, practices, and their repercussions. In other words, taking SLB theory to the developing world requires an additional effort of recontextualization. It demands interpreting observed SLB action as embedded into institutional environments that may radically differ from those seen in North America or Europe.

In the following topics, we address different ways of approaching such recontextualization. We start from conceptualizations of the state and the need to understanding SLB action in weak institutional environments. Then, we move toward states interfaces with social structures and political culture in the developing world, raising issues about social inequalities and moral dilemmas around justice.

3 | WEAK INSTITUTIONS, PUBLIC SERVICE GAPS, AND SEVERE RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

One potential way to conceptualize the state in the developing world is through the lenses of incompleteness and deficiency. This may involve focusing on what it lacks in comparison to their counterparts in the Global North. Currently, the "weak institutions" framework (Brinks et al., 2020) is probably the best expression of this type of perspective. According to this view, developing countries are characterized by weak institutional environments, lacking predictability, stability, and producing low adherence to formal norms, limited regulatory capacity and insufficient mobilization of resources for adequate performance and service delivery (Merkel, 2004).

A radical example of this will be found in this issue in Peake and Forsythe's analysis of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville—a group of islands located on the eastern-most reaches of Papua New Guinea. It is an extreme case of recent state construction process in a post-conflict society. When looked from the prism of a Weberian bureaucracy, the authors conclude that "there is next to no state 'above' the street." Bougainville government's reach stretches not much farther than the outskirts of the administrative capital of Buka Town. The "government is stony broke," human resources are in short, and there is practically little distinction between the street-, middle-, and senior-level management.

In many other cases, the situation is less extreme and it is indeed possible to see the relatively consolidated, but often partial

administrative apparatuses of the state. For example, the literature on Latin-American politics has long identified and conceptualized the states in the region as lacking complete formal institutionalization (Auyero & Sobering, 2019; Holland, 2016; O'Donnell, 1993; among others). States are often described as fragmented and having limited legal and bureaucratic reach, leading to unequal functional and territorial coverage, further contributing to a pattern of ambiguous relations with their own legality. According to this view, these are states that feature "uneven law enforcement, frequent toleration of law infringement, and collusion with illegal actors" (Perelmiter, in the volume). These are also contexts characterized by severe resource scarcity and political-institutional instability, largely associated with long-term poor economic performance, deep economic crises, and the international pressures for widespread adoption of strict austerity measures.

This conceptualization of the state has important consequences to SLB roles, practices, and interactions that have not been sufficiently explored and empirically examined in the literature produced by scholars in the Global North. The notion of "public service gaps," as proposed by Hupe and Buffat (2014), contributes to a perception of how macro political and economic contexts may translate into actual conditions for policy implementation. Public service gaps call attention to situations in which "what is required of street-level bureaucrats exceeds what is provided to them for the fulfilment of their tasks" (Hupe & Buffat, 2014, p. 556). In other words, it is a gap between service demand and resource supply, leading to specific conditions under which frontline workers are supposed to perform, use discretion, and service the public.

In this issue, Mohamed's study of the Ghana School Feeding Program is illustrative of the impacts of austerity programs in amplifying public service gaps in the global south. Through empirical analysis of SLB implementation in two public primary schools in the northern part of the country, the study demonstrates how financial challenges (i.e., the long-term freezing of feeding rates) may turn formal policy implementation virtually impossible and lead to inadequate service delivery with clear negative repercussion for recipients. In this case, in order to cope with structural challenges, frontline staffs adopted a host of discretionary adaptations, such as compromising the quality of meals served, by delivering alternative cheaper-to-prepare diets, and truncating service delivery schedules, by skipping days of the week when schools were left without any food. A salient feature of this case is that policy delivery is delegated to private community-based actors. At the end, "if you have problems with money, it is up to you to do what you can do to keep the program going."

The SLB literature produced in the Global North has always underscored resource constraints as a central challenge for policy implementation, especially in the situations in which demand for public service continually grows (i.e., Lipsky, 2010). However, when we move to the developing world, we are forced to recognize that constraint levels become extreme. The issue acquires a distinct nature when it reaches the point of making formal implementation tasks impossible (e.g., following the program's nutritional

prescriptions). As Mohamed states "with severe financial challenges come severe coping mechanisms… and the gaps between policy prescriptions and the actual service delivered becomes wider." As a result, severe resource constraints demand special attention from SLB scholars who conduct studies in the context of the developing world.

Public service gaps may also emerge as a result of political instability and policy discontinuation. In the article, in this collection based on a study of a conditional cash transfer program in Mexico, Peeters and Campos discuss how frontline workers developed informal policy activities as they were left without proper implementation instructions and capacity, when the Prospera program was abruptly dismantled and terminated. They situate the case as representative of the broader phenomenon of human resource neglect and implementation gaps in Latin-American public administration. According to Peeters and Campos, Prospera frontline workers coped with the termination of the program and the "loss" of their clients by developing various strategies to recover them, such as community outreach, informal talks, and mobilizing their personal connections and resources. They needed to recover these clients in order to reduce task uncertainty and comply with the performance criteria of other dimensions and related services that had not been terminated together with Prospera's conditionality.

Peeters and Campos argue that, in situations like this, in which frontline workers are left to fend for themselves against inconsistent formal policy reform, they do so by resorting to a specific coping mechanism: policy improvisation. Improvisation differs from implementation in this context because frontline workers may be forced to use their agency in a way that goes beyond mere policy divergence or deviation from formal prescriptions to the actual improvisation of a policy of their own accord. In this sense, improvisation represents a maximized version of discretion, which allows for overcoming paralysis and provides the opportunity to avoid the limits of formal decisions. However, it may also lead to undisciplined, wasteful and irresponsible behavior.

In sum, weak institutional environments, public service gaps, and severe resource constraints make SLB work more challenging in the developing world. As compared to the Global North, this may lead to wider divergence between formal prescriptions and actual services, as well as the emergence of informal tactics that exceed the boundaries of discretionary rule application, leading to (positive or negative) improvision. In any case, these are potential paths for recontextualizing SLB action in the developing world, with a focus on the lacking part—the missing elements from the comparison with western states.

4 | VARIETIES OF STATE: RE-CONCEPTUALIZING FROM WHAT IS ACTUALLY THERE

As discussed before, SLB theory was first created and disseminated in countries characterized by democratic political institutions and state organizations modeled according to the ideal of a Weberian

bureaucracy in the modern, constitutional state. This specific combination laid the ground for government based on the rule-of-law, with clear separations between public and private realms and oriented toward the isonomic treatment of citizens. These are clearly important points of distinctions to what is observed in much of the developing world.

Moving away from an emphasis on the lacking parts, another way to re-conceptualize the state and recontextualize SLB action in developing countries is by focusing on what is actually there, rather than on what is missing. This approach implies seeing the potential strengths of weak institutions[1] and seeking to understand their actual roles and forms of action in the context under which they operate.

Peake and Forsythe propose we should complement this vision focused on formal deficiencies with alternative forms of conceptualizing the state in a context like that of Bougainville. They argue that the concept of "relational state" allows us to understand governance on the ground and government in action, providing an additional way for understanding the roles SLBs perform and their implications, in situations in which strong institutions (in the formal sense) are clearly absent. According to them, the relational state "consists of bureaucrats leveraging their relational ties, histories, connections and affiliations. In many ways, SLBs in Bougainville actually construct the state through their wide-flung and deep networks of relationality." They have to do so in response to regular shortages of essentials like paper, transport, communications, and also because they lack oversight and clear direction on the policies and norms they are responsible for administering. However, instead of focusing on these deficits, Peake and Forsythe suggest we can also view "SLBs as public officials (including citizens deputized as de facto public officials) engaged in the process of creating the state through using and relying upon the relational structures and resources of governance and administration that exist all around them, outside the tangible boundaries and trappings of official state bureaucracy."

Initiatives around weaponry collection in Bougainville provide compelling evidence of how a relational state operates. Weapons disposal has been a major issue of the peace process in Bougainville. However, lack of funding, adequate incentives, and interpersonal mistrust have imposed serious hurdles for formal work plans on the matter. Nevertheless, in parallel to formally previewed initiatives, gathering up weapons and putting them beyond use has advanced considerably, due to SLBs social insertion and ties to the community. One of such government agents, for example, was a former fighter, prominent figure in his clan, holding good relationships with ex-combatant groups. As Peake and Forsythe described, he managed to successfully accomplish this task essentially through reaching out

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[1]An allusion to Dobbin and Sutton's (1998) article entitled "The Strength of a Weak State." The authors discussed the passage and implementation of new legislation and federal policy that reformed employment rights in the United Sates between 1960s and 1980s. They argued that adoption of new prescriptions by private organizations was successful because the administratively weak federal state had normative strength over the organizational field.

to his personal connections, sending incalculable numbers of text messages and making many trips to villages throughout Bougainville to speak to former colleagues.

The notion of a relational state may be helpful to analysis in other places where the reach of the formal state is rather limited or when the boundaries between public and private, formal and informal are rather blurred. These are relatively common situations when we study SLBs in the developing world, focusing on policy areas, territories or populations for which the state presence is often precarious (e.g., social programs, rural areas, and native or specific ethnic groups).

In this collection, Isla's study of policy implementation targeted at indigenous populations in the Peruvian Amazon further extends this discussion. She also argues that contexts representing the "margins of the state" require alternative interpretive elements for thinking about the actual roles performed by SLBs. In these situations, SLBs are better understood as brokers rather than gatekeepers since they assume responsibilities to close the gaps (bureaucratic and administrative) between the state as provider of public services and the real capacities of indigenous peoples to engage as policy users.

While gatekeepers have the power to allocate benefits and impose sanctions linked to public services, brokers are actors who intermediate between worlds, allowing actors and groups with poor capital to access the service and benefits provided by public institutions. As pointed out by Isla, "as brokers, [SLBs] get some sort of political local support, building relationships with the indigenous population to gain its trust and facilitate their work. As brokers, [SLBs] claim to be the "hinge" between indigenous peoples and the state as an institution which remains important but illegible for them as public policy users."

Finally, by analyzing the implementation of Targeted Poverty Alleviation Policy in rural China, Cai's study in this volume reinforces the importance of the link between institutional environments and types of SLBs, as well as their roles and functions. Cai proposes that, in the context of weak professional bureaucracies at the forefront of provision, "street-level bureaucracy from higher up" are a functional response to the type of state structure in China and its low governance capacity at the rural grassroots level. Street-level bureaucrats from higher-up are agents sent by governments at a higher-up level to accomplish policy implementation tasks at the more decentralized government units. As defined by Cai, "they operate through campaign style, informal arrangements and directly face citizens to implement policy and provide public services." But, unlike other types of street-level bureaucrats, the street-level bureaucrats from higher-up have a different organizational structure, institutional mechanism, motivation structure, and coping strategies. These differences result from the specific institutional context that characterizes the State in China, involving a complex combination of formal organizational hierarchy with party rule, strong social norms, and informal ties. In this specific context, street-level bureaucrats from higher-up operate as network builders across levels/units of government and rural communities in advocating and getting directly involved in policy

implementation. This is a theme given relatively little attention in the literature on this topic in the North. There is an issue here about the extent to which SLB work is within a different tradition of public administration, a point that may be more widely generalized to suggest that this may not be the only example in the world in which this aspect of divergence is significant.

In sum, these studies call attention to the fact that, even when the specific traits of modern liberal states and advanced democracies are absent, there is still governance and state action playing out on the ground. By reconceptualizing the state along these lines, new ways of recontextualizing and exploring SLB action and its repercussions come up. Understanding these contexts from what they are and not from what they lack provides productive paths for making sense of the roles frontline workers assume, the uses they make of discretion, and the likely implications for policy and their publics.

5 | POLITICAL CULTURE, SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, AND MORAL DILEMMAS AROUND FAIRNESS

Finally, the effort of recontextualization must also address how existing forms of governance are interwoven with political cultures, highly unequal social structures, and how these elements interfere with conceptions of justice about SLB action. After all, SLB action is not only situated in formal institutional environments but also (and fundamentally) in society, being permeated by social representations, values, symbols, and norms that provide parameters for judging social interactions and behaviors.

As discussed before, the severe resource constraints that characterize many developing world societies tend to make the attainment of formally prescribed goals even more challenging, if not impossible. In these situations, the agency of SLBs is likely to be amplified, since rules become only a partial reference for action and they may exercise policy improvisation rather than implementation. As divergence between formal goals and actual provision widens, scholars must be attentive to other references and sources of agency during SLB work. In these situations, a whole parallel world of social rules, norms, informal practices, and personal relations emerge as potentially relevant for making sense of SLB practices. At this point, proposals already present in the traditional SLB literature about the relevance of the informal, unofficial dimension of SLB action become all the more important (see e.g., Harrits & Møller, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Zacka, 2017). As we shall see below, the papers in this Special Issue underscore three important manifestations of such interweaving of institutions and political culture: corruption, moral judgments (and justification), and activism and conflict.

Issues of corruption and other forms of behavior involving abuse of the entrusted power of bureaucrats for private gain at the expense of public interests can be understood as the potential downside of the relational state and similar forms of governance in which the boundaries between the public and private are rather blurred. For

this reason, Gofen et al.'s contribution to this volume argues that understanding SLB in developing countries requires attention to how policy implementation is embedded in environments characterized by systemic corruption. According to them, corruption becomes systemic when it is not only widespread but also socially and politically accepted (see also Persson et al., 2019). The systemic character of corruption reinforces its relevance as the sociopolitical context for street-level implementation. As pointed out by Gofen et al., "informal routines of more experienced colleagues foster more tolerance to rule-infringements among SLBs (Oberfield, 2010) and that SLBs' willingness to bend the rules is higher if their managers are perceived as endorsing rule-bending" (May & Winter, 2009).

In addition to political cultures in which the lines between public and private interests are historically problematic, developing countries' societies are also characterized by extremely unequal social structures, which also raise important questions related to the moral basis and the legitimation of SLB action. The literature on street-level bureaucracies has already theorized about how SLBs exercise pragmatic normative judgments about service users (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, 2012) and about how SLBs' moralities and their ideas of fairness and unfairness are embedded in macro social factors, such as welfare regime type or political culture (Jewell, 2007; Møller & Stensöta, 2019). However, when it comes to applying SLB theory to the developing world, scholars must question whether frontline workers are able to challenge the moral foundations of these unequal social structures and, if so, how they can do it without compromising the norms of fairness and deservingness dominating society at large. In other words, it becomes important to understand not only how SLB cope with these situations but also how they construct a moral justification for their acts.

Perelmiter's contribution to this volume analyzes street-level bureaucrats' moral dilemmas in the implementation of two different policies (welfare benefits and labor inspection) in Argentina. Like many other parts of the developing world, Argentina combines a weak institutional environment (what Perelmiter describes as "fragmented stateness") with pervasive social and economic inequalities, as well as high levels of poverty and informality. Accordingly, this specific combination creates important obstacles, making the exercise of fair judgments in the implementation of policies by SLBs rather elusive. While existing social inequalities demand an ability to differentiate the neediest from the needy, fragmented stateness is a structural condition—not only under which they work, but most importantly of which they are aware—that reinforces bureaucratic encounters as experiences of arbitrariness. SLBs' judgments about what would be a fair decision are deeply embedded in the broader social and institutional context. Therefore, understanding the ethical grounds for SLB action requires not only socially situating them in this specific social environment but also recognizing the influence of institutional limitations.

In this issue, Mangla addresses a context of entrenched social inequality in India, but his analysis is focused on the conflicts between elites and marginalized communities when it comes to implementing reform programs aiming at inclusion and the protection of the disadvantaged. In these situations, weak state capacity often combines with divisive ethnic politics to yield narrow, clientelistic exchanges between citizens and the state, dampening the prospects for programmatic reform. However, by looking deeply at a case that diverts from this more general pattern—a novel government program for women's empowerment in Uttar Pradesh—he describes how SLBs may act as institutional activists who trigger conflicts in other to achieve progressive change.

Mangla narrates how program fieldworkers committed to reform promoted girls' education by mobilizing marginalized citizens in processes of gender-based training and deliberation, which enabled them to challenge the traditional norms and hierarchies of village patriarchy. Empirical research demonstrates that SLBs in this case fostered, supported, and empowered village-based "pressure groups" consisting of lower caste women in their fight against discrimination at the intersections of caste and gender. After establishing ties and connecting to women's actual issues, fieldworkers created literacy centers in each village, which were key for focusing on girls' education and health issues. The centers hold school enrollment campaigns and address barriers to student attendance. Such type of work necessarily involves frictions and tensions with established hierarchies. However, fieldworkers understood this as an integral part of their job.

By adapting rules to address the practical needs of households, fieldworkers effectively integrated disadvantaged girls into the education system. Institutional activists used their official standing to advocate on behalf of marginalized groups, creating tensions within established social groups as well as with the state bureaucracy. The analysis of this cases underscores how street-level bureaucrats in contexts of persistent social inequalities may have a profound impact on how marginalized citizens experience the local state. It also suggests that conflict may even play a constructive part in making social injustices public and facilitating solidaristic ties with marginalized groups.

5.1 | Final considerations

We come out of this process convinced that, after 40 years of SLB research, there are still many important understudied topics and emergent agendas, especially if we take into consideration the encounter between theory and developing countries contexts. There is still a lot of work to be done. Whilst mindful of caution about applying cultural assumptions developed in the North, we note that all the contributions here have found useful, in the case of the exploration of SLB, a theoretical and conceptual approach developed there. When any analysis developed in one place is applied in another comparison is inevitable. Even when not explicit, it takes the form of provoking questions about the validity of explanations developed elsewhere. We speak here of implicit comparison. None of the studies discussed in this volume are products of explicit comparisons between countries. The need for the latter poses an important challenge for future researchers (see chapter 18 in Hupe (ed.), 2019).

In such implicit comparisons there are two opposite pitfalls. One involves focusing too strongly upon differences, the other too much emphasis on similarities. We have stressed differences, as highlighted in the headings we have adopted. But this should not be taken to involve a view which sees the development of administrative institutions in the South as facing problems foreign to those encountered in the North. On the contrary there are in these case studies illustrations of issues that have many echoes in the North. Coping with austerity, in a context in which policy delivery has been devolved (as explored in Section 3) is by no means absent from the lives of SLB's in the North. So too are the issues about effective action in a context of inequality and about new ways of developing collaboration at the local level. And most fundamentally of all there is an issue of increasing concern in the North about the impact of populism on governance (Stoker, 2019), posing the same sorts of questions about SLB behavior as posed by Gofen et al. and Perelmiter in their articles (see Hill & Hupe, 2022, Chapter 6).

Therefore, while this exploration of the application of SLB theory in the South examines situations that are different from those stressed in studies in the North, particularly since the latter operate in a context of assumptions about comparatively stable democratic and formal legal institutions, in the modern world we have much in common in which learning processes need to run both ways, not just from North to South but also the other way round.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

The paper provides evidence for practice about how the characteristics of developing countries—such as state capacity shortages and institutional weakness, different political traditions and cultures—affect frontline work and the ways they impact policies and their publics. These characteristics analyzed here may help the improvement of policy implementation in the developing world.

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