

Every-day public service delivery, the issue of user access at local level in Benin

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The current paper is a draft chapter of a PhD dissertation focused on public service delivery and decentralisation. The paper addresses the issue of user access to public services. It unfolds some of the mechanisms of de facto regulation and the diversity in conditions under what citizens' access public services. Methods include both interviews with users of public services and agents delivering services as well as observation of public service delivery. The research, concentrated on two new municipalities in the Borgou Department, covers three service sectors, respectively civil registration, primary education and drinking water supply. Thus, it includes a diversity of institutional arrangements in public service delivery ranging from direct service delivery by municipal staff, to privatisation and, finally, to execution by a large deconcentrated state apparatus.

The paper shows that access to public services in practice is regulated by various informal, formal, private and public institutions. Conditions, under which services are accessed, are actually very different from one locality to another and even from one user to another. The state is not absent, its institutions engages citizens. Access to public services is facilitated by some new policies and the "masses" gradually get access to public services reserved for a minority so far. However, the process of delivery of services does not only follow official policies and rules. Regulation of public services has been de facto privatised and decentralised in a context of structural adjustment and financial crisis of the state since the 1980s.

The inquiry into practices of service delivery provides a new perspective on the debates around public services and decentralisation. Decentralisation does not only affect issues of effectiveness, equity and accountability in public service delivery. It is a state building process. In many West African countries, decentralisation reform implies the establishment of municipalities with local elected bodies. The period preceding decentralisation reform was characterised by state withdrawal and public services were delivered by a multitude of organisations not necessarily belonging to the formal state apparatus. The process of institutionalisation of municipalities may imply a reinforcement of public authority in service delivery. In practice, however the process of implementing decentralisation reform is interpreted and negotiated by various actors. It intervenes in a dynamic context.

