E-government in the global South – Machine politics as usual?

The effects of e-government on relations of clientelism and patronage, between poor people and informal intermediaries (a research outline)

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Purpose and background

Local politics and government service delivery in parts of the global South are characterized by patterns of clientelism and patronage, often involving poorer segments of the society as "clients" of informal intermediaries (brokers, fixers, patrons).

E-government through telecenters should provide more avenues for poor people to access government information and services. This should decrease the monopoly that informal intermediaries (brokers, fixers, patrons) hold over government information and services. Hence, the **dependency** of poor people on informal intermediaries should **decrease** as well.

How correct are these expectations about e-government? Theories from clientelism suggest some nuances:

Alternative expectations

Poor people who are entitled to government services will prefer access to government services through informal intermediaries instead of through telecenters only. Reason: poor people need to maintain (cordial) relationships with informal intermediaries in their daily struggle for survival.

Moreover, poor people who are not entitled to government services, will remain dependent on informal intermediaries for access to government services.

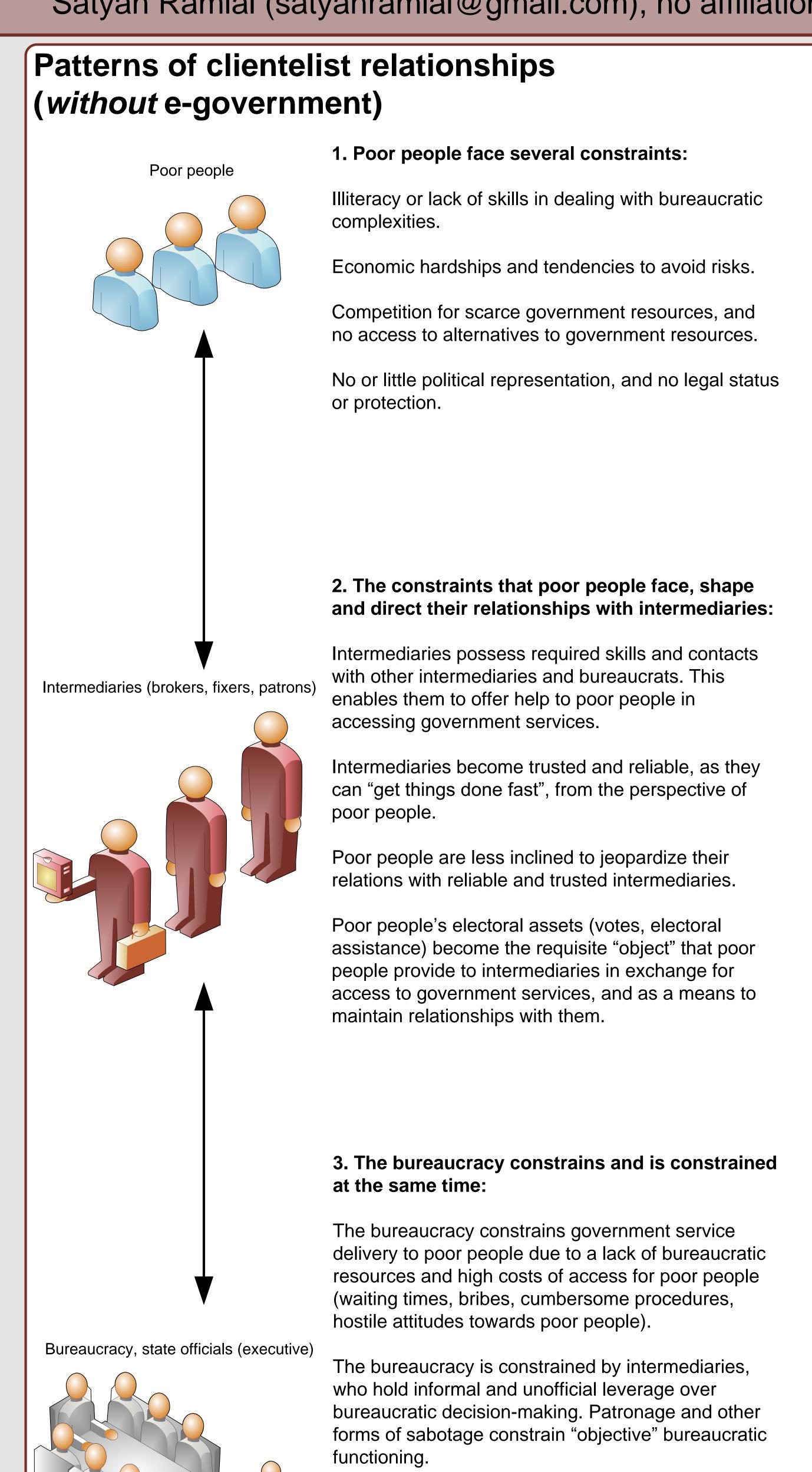
Reason: if e-government leads to a strict enforcement of rules for government service delivery, then informal intermediaries remain the only means of access to government services.

Intermediaries who feel threatened by telecenters will influence telecenters through venue-capture and information hoarding, or through leverage over the back-office (bureaucracy). However, venue-capture also increases the likelihood that poor people who are not entitled to government services, can access telecenters and use e-government services.

The more all-encompassing an e-government service is, the **less scope** there is for intermediaries to maintain monopolies to government service delivery.

Methods

Social network analysis – differences in the **number**, **frequency**, purpose and results of contacts between different actors (clients, brokers, fixers, patrons and bureaucrats), through participant observations and interviews, and surveys.

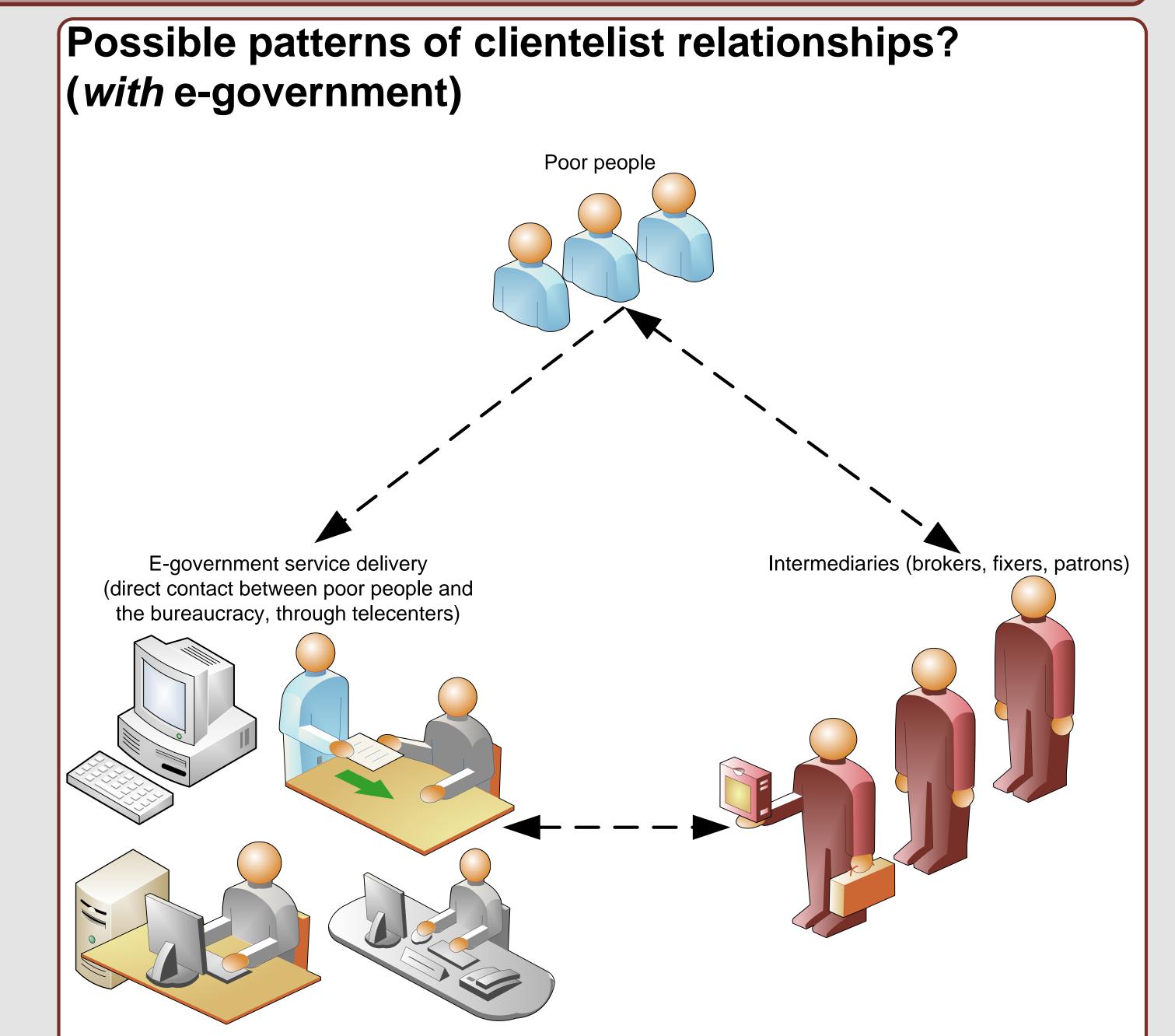


At the same time, this leverage enables

intermediaries to provide better access to

government services to poor people (though only to

those poor who possess required electoral assets).



Possible benefits for poor people of e-government service delivery through telecenters:

Faster response times and fewer costs when accessing bureaucracies. There is a possibility that the monopoly of intermediaries on government information and services decreases.

However, these benefits might not outweigh the need of poor people to maintain relationships with intermediaries for access to help and government services. Therefore, even if poor people (can) use e-government through telecenters, they will maintain contact with intermediaries

Moreover, coping mechanisms of intermediaries need to be taken into account. Intermediaries will try to maintain their monopolies and gatekeeping functions. These coping mechanisms include continued leverage over bureaucracies, and attempts to capture or influence

Open issues

Choice of location and (set of) government service(s).

Choice of technology – include other (shared) technological devices (mobile phones, radios, smartcards, ATMs, etc.)?

Methods: comparison within cases over time, or between cases?

Methods: how to take into account sensitive aspects of clientelist (illicit and illegal) activities?