

Guidance Notes in  
Health Policy  
Analysis in low- and  
middle-income  
countries

A series of guidance notes arising from 'Strengthening health policy analysis research and training through a focus on synthesis analyses' – a programme of work funded by the [Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research](#)

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# Street-level Bureaucracy

This guidance note introduces key elements of the theory of street-level bureaucracy – an important theory that illuminates processes of health policy implementation. The theory can be used to:

- explain cases where policy is implemented in unexpected and unintended ways
- give policy-makers and policy implementation managers insight into why the policies they are responsible for are not always implemented as intended.

Key reference: Michael Lipsky's seminal book: *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (Lipsky 1980)

## Who are street-level bureaucrats and why are they important?

Street-level bureaucrats are the frontline workers or policy implementers in government agencies such as the health service, schools or police service. Nurses, doctors, policemen and teachers are typical street-level bureaucrats. As a group, they are characterised by:

- ◆ regular and direct interaction with citizens, or the recipients of government services; and
- ◆ the power to exercise a degree of discretion over the services, benefits and sanctions received by those recipients.

A key contention of street-level bureaucracy theory is that the decisions and actions of street-level bureaucrats, actually 'become', or represent, the policies of the government agencies they work for. This is because a citizen most often and directly experiences policy as the decision that the street-level bureaucrat makes about their particular case. Policy becomes the benefit that the street-level bureaucrat gives them access to, or the sanction that the street-level bureaucrat applies to them. It is not the abstract document that states what should be done or a decision by an unseen high-ranking official.

Street-level bureaucrats can 'make policy' in this way because they can exercise discretion (make a choice about how they will exercise their power). Their discretion comes partly from the fact that they are regarded as professionals and therefore expected to exercise their own judgement in their fields of expertise. However, it also arises from the fact that they are often relatively free from organisational oversight and authority, and perform complex tasks that cannot be completely scripted or reduced to formulae.

Street-level bureaucrats may be in conflict with, or have perspectives that differ from, other groups in the organisation such as their managers. They may be able to resist organisational expectations, for example through going on strike, excessive absenteeism or apathetic attitudes that affect how they do their work.

This combination of discretion and a degree of freedom from organisational authority, can lead to street-level bureaucrats 'making policy' in unwanted or unexpected ways. Their actions and decisions may not always conform to policy directives and so their agencies could end up performing contrary to their stated policies, intentions or goals.



## The nature of street-level bureaucrats' work and the pressures they face

In order to explain the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats, it is important to understand the conditions under which they operate and the nature of their work. Street-level bureaucrats typically face the following key challenges:

*Working under pressure*

- ◆ **Inadequate resources.** The resources at their disposal are chronically inadequate relative to the tasks they are required to perform. This resource inadequacy can take various forms. There can be too few street-level bureaucrats for the number of cases or clients that require attention. A focus on administrative tasks, such as filling out forms, can limit the time they have for clients. Their inexperience or lack of training may mean that they lack the personal resources required for their jobs, including the resources to deal with the often stressful nature of their work.
- ◆ **An ever-growing demand for their services.** The demand for government services tends to increase to match the supply of those services. If more services become available, they will be used. If the agency gets more money, there will be pressure to use it to offer additional services.
- ◆ **Vague or conflicting organisational expectations.** Government agencies often have ambiguous, vague or conflicting goals. For example: is it the role of the education system to teach certain values, certain basic skills or to meet employers' need for workers with specific training? What exactly does it mean to have the goal of good health? Goals may be vague, ambiguous or conflicting for many reasons. For example, a programme may incorporate conflicting perspectives that were never resolved when the programme was designed; or an agency may have accumulated its goals over many years without stopping to critically evaluate and, if necessary, redevelop them.
- ◆ **Challenges of performance measurement.** It is often difficult or impossible to measure the extent to which the performance of a street-level bureaucrat contributes to achieving their agency's goals. For example, if there is a lack of clarity or conflict about goals, how can performance measurements be operationalised?

Performance measurement is also complicated by the fact that street-level bureaucrats engage in complex interactions with other people. In a particular situation it may not be easy to know what is the correct thing to do, especially if there is more than one appropriate course of action. In addition, the information needed to make a proper evaluation may not be available.

For example, if street-level bureaucrats in a particular programme had a 50% success rate, how should that be interpreted? Is it good because they were targeting especially difficult clients or is it poor because they were actually focussing their efforts on an easy-to-reach target population? Despite such difficulties, street-level bureaucracies measure various indicators of performance. Some of these do not reflect whether the goals of the organisation are reached or only indirectly relate to performance and goal achievement. Street-level bureaucrats often change their behaviour to reflect what is being measured.

- ◆ **Services for 'captive' clients.** Their clients, or recipients of services, often do not voluntarily choose the service they are attending and are mostly not a primary reference group for the bureaucracy (who may be more responsive to political directives). Street-level bureaucracies often either provide important services of which they are the only providers or work with people who cannot readily access similar services provided in the private or non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors. Therefore it can be extremely difficult for clients to criticise or discipline street-level bureaucrats or their agencies. Often the agencies have little to lose if they fail to serve their clients well.

*Power dynamics*

However, despite this unequal power balance, clients are not completely powerless in the relationship. Street-level bureaucrats may be dependent on their clients, especially if their performance is evaluated with reference to their clients' actions or behaviour. To some extent, therefore, there is a pressure for street-level

bureaucrats to gain client compliance for their decisions and to exercise some control over clients.

According to the theory of street-level bureaucracy, street-level bureaucrats exercise control over their clients through:

- ◇ distributing benefits and sanctions, including those of a psychological nature, for example health workers may behave with courtesy or rudeness to their patients;
- ◇ structuring the context in which clients interact with them. For example, health workers have control over the lay out and organisation of a health facility, including how patient queues flow; and
- ◇ teaching clients how to behave appropriately in their roles as clients. For example, the organisation of health facilities directs patients where to go to, and where to wait, to be seen by a health worker or to receive prescribed drugs; health workers also have expectations of patients in terms of the information they should provide in, and their behaviour during, a consultation.

*Inexhaustible demand and never enough resources*

In summary, street-level bureaucrats work in situations where there are not enough resources and where demand is likely to simply expand to match any additional services provided or resources acquired by their agency. Within this constrained environment they have a degree of discretion in their work and enjoy some freedom from organisational authority and supervision. In seeking to do their jobs they may experience unclear or conflicting goal expectations and have difficulty measuring their performance and understanding how their performance contributes to the goals of their agency and public policy. In addition, street-level bureaucrats often work with clients who may not voluntarily choose the service they are attending, which may affect their commitment to service quality and client satisfaction.

### The behaviour of street-level bureaucrats

The behaviour of street-level bureaucrats is shaped by the nature of their work and conditions in which they operate. In response to the challenges they face, street-level bureaucrats often develop routines and simplifications in an attempt to reduce complexity, gain greater control over their work and manage stress. It is in these routines and simplifications that street-level bureaucrats can 'make policy', through taking actions and decisions that do not correspond to formal policy directives or organisational expectations.

*Coping strategies result in informal policy making*

Some of the actions of street-level bureaucrats and reasons for them are listed below.

- ◆ **Rationing the services provided.** This action is influenced by the high demand that street-level bureaucrats often experience for their services. Such rationing includes:
  - ◇ imposing financial costs on clients (e.g. through fees for care);
  - ◇ imposing time costs such as providing fast service for some clients and delaying others;
  - ◇ providing information to some clients and not to others;
  - ◇ imposing psychological pressures on clients, such as communicating disrespect, which discourages demand from clients;
  - ◇ employing different queuing techniques, imposing waiting time or other costs;
  - ◇ 'creaming', which involves choosing only those clients who are most likely to be successful in terms of what the government programme tries to achieve; and
  - ◇ acting on street-level bureaucrats' personal biases, for example by regarding some clients as more worthy than others.
- ◆ **Controlling clients so they co-operate with procedures.** This action is a response to street-level bureaucrats' dependency on their clients, as well as to their need to deal effectively with high workloads. This control and co-operation can be

achieved in many ways. The settings in which street-level bureaucrats interact with their clients communicate power and suggest to clients how they should act (for example, the high bench of a judge or a classroom in which all desks face the teacher). Street-level bureaucrats structure their interactions with clients in order to control what will be discussed, the purpose of the interaction, when the interaction will take place and how long clients wait for the interaction. They may also develop procedures to punish clients who do not respect and follow their routines.

- ◆ **Managing and conserving street-level bureaucrats' resources.** Actions through which street-level bureaucrats try to conserve their working time and other resources include:
  - ◇ building 'slack time' into their days, in order to have reserve capacity to respond to unpredictable situations;
  - ◇ shifting the locus of decision making to where clients are absent in order to avoid having to deal with the reactions or demands of clients, especially if they will be negative;
  - ◇ transferring responsibility to others, for example higher-level officials allowing lower-level officials to exercise discretion on their behalf, rubberstamping decisions that others have already made, and referring clients to other workers or agencies.
  
- ◆ **Managing the consequences of routine practice.** If actions taken by street-level bureaucrats to conserve their resources, control clients and secure their co-operation either do not work or generate reactions from clients that cannot be handled through routine procedures, they may resort to other practices. These may include referring cases to more specialised workers in the agency or creating specialised units to deal with problematic cases or the complaints of certain groups of people. Such practices can be innocuous, for example when a case is really too complex for a certain official to deal with. However, they can also serve a variety of other functions, including protecting a street-level bureaucrat from complaints or client hostility, for example by referring the client to a specialised complaints officer. Street-level bureaucrats can also use such 'special' channels to favour certain clients whom they present as cases that deserve sympathy, while doing the opposite for other clients diverted to the same 'special' channel.

*Patterns of practice that unintentionally shape policy*

### Summary

The term street-level bureaucrat refers to a specific group of frontline workers or policy implementers. They are often committed to providing good service and to doing socially useful jobs, but their jobs and the environments in which they work are such that it is not really possible to serve all clients as they ideally should be served. Instead, street-level bureaucrats develop patterns of practice, routines and simplifications that help them to deal with dynamics such as the chronic shortage of resources and the often high demand for their services. These patterns of practice will sometimes be in accordance with the stipulations of public policy and with what street-level bureaucracies seek to achieve. However, the routines and simplifications often create situations that are unintended by the agencies whose policies are being implemented and may even work against the objectives of such agencies and their policies.

### References

Lipsky, M (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation

### Further reading

The following papers highlight some of the pressures and work conditions faced by street-level bureaucrats and show how these can translate into practices that undermine and contradict formal, stated policy intentions.

Crook, R and Ayee, J (2006) Urban Service Partnerships, 'Street-Level Bureaucrats' and Environmental Sanitation in Kumasi and Accra, Ghana: Coping with Organisational Change in the Public Bureaucracy. *Development Policy Review*, 24(1):51–73

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