



# 'What We are Reading'

By David Jacobstein

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It's been a terrible few months for so many of us working in international development. As someone who left a track to law school 20 years ago because I saw that I could make a greater difference to support peace, equality, and justice supporting development assistance, it has been hard – letting go not only of so many dear friends and colleagues whose lives are upended but being forced to relinquish a dream I've cherished every day. To devote myself in service both to my country and the world, and to be invited to continually find ways to make excellent work even more impactful while learning so much and from so many brilliant people has been all I could have hoped for. As part of my stubborn unwillingness to let it disappear, I'm still going to share thoughts on what is relevant for anyone working on these topics, this quarter and into the future, and hope that we can rebuild it better someday.

If you are someone who is interested to keep conversations going around development topics, please consider both opting into the #adaptdev Google Group and also joining the extended Local Systems Community, where systems thinkers will continue to share reflection and inspiration, and foster community. You can opt into the LSC [here](#).

This quarter has seen some new works that are extremely exciting. The top of the list for me personally is the latest from Dan Honig on [relational state capacity](#), a concept and framing of what it means. It's a powerful critique and update of how mainstream economists and political scientists have understood and worked to strengthen state capacity, seeing it not only as logistical and technical competencies of bureaucratic functions but also the ties between citizens, frontline workers, and larger government entities. While the core concept is straightforward and seems obvious once pointed out, the implications are profound. For example, if officials' ties to constituents are part of what allow states to accomplish public goals over time, efforts to emphasize limiting officials' discretion (for accountability or to reduce opportunities for corruption) entail a trade-off in that they also limit officials' ability to generate public goods and services through engagement, relationships, and exercise of judgment. This echoes both the centrality of relationships in the USAID policy definition of Local Capacity (hoping someone in comments will post a link to a public version of the LCS Policy, saved from the USAID web site) and to streams of work emphasizing the importance of relationships in social accountability work and more broadly in applying political economy analysis to reform efforts. The discussion around social imaginaries and their stickiness over time as a way of defining and understanding parameters for relational state capacity seems to me to directly address notions of democratic resilience and how issues such as polarization affect it – changes in imagined community or shared norms represent changes in the stock of

capacity available to a state and how it responds to specific triggers to accomplish aims. I also think there's a fascinating connection between the importance of relationships to capacity and the increasing shift to a gig economy where many people work for automated "bosses" in the form of apps, with whom no relationship can exist, and ways this implies limits or brittleness to corporate capacity (as well as an essential question around how civic tech is used to improve rather than replace relationships in the public sector). Finally, I have to call out the incredible footnote on page 14 on how "pockets of effectiveness" or positive deviants both often rely on relational capacity to overcome circumstances, and more directly, how calls for "co-creation" or co-production processes diffuse when those become normal ways for things to operate, a shifted state of capacity more broadly. I think this is very useful to frame the value of temporary facilitation support not as introducing specific processes to be replicated, but rather using them to nurture stronger webs of connection that enable and inspire more routine ways of working with and through relational ties across institutions. This agenda reframes much of the work of good governance in ways that bring agency and context to the fore, highlighting both different reasons that things have "worked" or "failed" and a different way to gauge how things are going and whether reform efforts are contributing meaningfully to state capacity.

Linking the framing of relational state capacity to questions of democratic resilience and civic renewal, a great [article](#) from Brian Levy for the TWP Community of Practice looks at the social embeddedness of bureaucrats – their ability to cooperate with stakeholders in pursuit of problem solving. Brian highlights clearly that it is not simply enough to call for key principles of participation or co-creation to transform public governance. Offering a similar call for a different model of how bureaucracies "should" work, Levy identifies three goals that help them work better in socially-embedded ways – cooperation (fostering synergies with non-governmental actors), streamlining monitoring, and clarifying goals. The piece is very clear and well-illustrated with specifics, and I think a nice complement to domestic (US) efforts at improving problem-focused performance of local government units, which often are strong on clarifying a problem focus and streamlining monitoring of progress but, rooted in technological innovations, sometimes place less emphasis on synergy across governmental boundaries or fostering social ties in favor of improving ease and efficiency of public-facing processes. I also think Levy highlights a key dilemma or trade-off in this heightening of importance of local relationships – sometimes, local relationships create a "vetocracy" that is itself a driver larger public failures, such as the infamous inability of California to build high-speed rail despite decades of rhetoric and available funding. In this sense, clarifying goals is

really important, and skipping to process tools for participatory engagement risks real harm if goals themselves are not set around core service to the wider public, not just those with time or relationships to engage.

An interesting echo of this debate shows up in [The Radical How](#), an approach to ways governance is supposed to function that spotlights the importance of public funding decisions being smaller, easier, and more frequent, linked to more regular procurements that can iterate and surface innovations. Their calls for centering on outcomes echo the need to streamline monitoring and have accountability to outcomes over process, and the importance of core digital and data infrastructure also highlights the importance of having those well-defined and structured to empower staff (and the public) rather than hiding decisions around outcomes in the data architecture itself.

Connected to these debates on what matters in governance and how the micro and macro scales synch up, I want to share some interesting discussions around civic renewal (h/t to Democracy Notes, a great resource, for these links). First, [a discussion](#) ostensibly around Putnam's work on declines in social life that for me was most relevant in highlighting Skocpol's work in noting that *"the contraction of interconnected, grassroots membership groups throughout the late 20th century and their replacement with corporatized nonprofits and advocacy organizations. The former have organizing models that prioritize participation, centering members as the source of revenue and governance; the latter emphasize management, privileging professional administrators, centralized decision-making, and distant philanthropic funding. In Skocpol's telling, this shift has left us with a "diminished democracy," where we are treated less as agentic citizens who can co-create our lives in community and more as clients who passively receive services, programs, and products."* This feels so similar to the transformations in global civil society that USAID contributed to, aiming to professionalize NGOs in order to make them more effective (in large part because effectiveness was seen as strong management and delivering policy advocacy, rather than spurring participation or serving members). It is also a topic of great interest in American nonprofit worlds, as seen [here](#). The calls for civic renewal around spurring more participation seem to be relevant both for American democracy as well as international work. An example of such efforts in the US might be this post on [cities](#) and the sense of active engagement to welcome members as work we can all do (something I enjoy in my hometown is an annual walk through one of the more picturesque neighbourhoods where residents invite people into their yards and share the histories of the houses). A cautionary note around this theme is that the same central importance of local

belonging may [limit the ability to offer solidarity](#) across distance (whether geographic or class) as well as the possibility for civic renewal to happen under conditions of economic hardship. The nexus of economic structures with civic engagement seems like the frontier of where tools and technologies for spurring participation in civic life must address – not just generating economic opportunity to enable people to have time and space, but looking hard at present jobs people hold and figuring out how they can be embedded into social relationships with relevant government officials given existing constraints.

This has been a really long post, so I will put some additional links I wanted to highlight here with shorter discussions:

A TWP [webinar](#) on monitoring and evaluation for programming that thinks and works politically – nice structure of peer conversation and lots of provocative and interesting comments, really rich discussion.

- An article from Carnegie on sources of [democratic resilience in Georgia](#), as a historian I always think it's useful to see rich pictures of what has happened to learn lessons for what to do.
- Some ARC briefs on the role of [unions in education reform](#), illustrating well how social embeddedness and relationships mediate broader reform movements and their translation into concrete change.
- A practical [funder's guide to citizen assemblies](#), a useful tool to foster some stronger relationships and civic engagement (subject to all the caveats above!)
- A guide on the paths to (and importance of) [clean up your social media](#) as a tangible step toward healthier citizenship.
- A lovely discussion from Alan Hudson around [reflection on relationships](#) and how this can become an intentional practice to strengthen systemic presence and engagement – reading Alan's work always feels meditative and healing.

I hope wherever you are reading this, you are finding new shoots emerging from fallow ground and reasons to be stubbornly optimistic about the possibilities for humanity to cooperate, support, and uplift one another!

Best,

David

[Connect with David on LinkedIn.](#)

## Disclaimer

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