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ESID Working Paper No. 117

The politics of state capacity and development in Africa: Reframing and researching 'pockets of effectiveness'[1]

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June 2019

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[1] This paper was produced for the ESRC-DFID project, 'Investigating Pockets of Effectiveness in Developing Countries: A New Route to Building State Capacity for Development'.

Abstract

The role of bureaucratic 'pockets of effectiveness' (PoEs) in driving development is generating renewed interest within development studies and, to an extent, development policy. Existing research on PoEs emphasises that politics plays a leading role in shaping the emergence and sustainability of high-performing public sector organisations. However, the field as yet lacks a clear sense of the conditions under which this happens, partly because of a tendency to see PoEs as 'islands' that are divorced from their political context, and partly because there has been no attempt as yet to undertake systematic comparative analysis of PoEs across different types of political context. This paper sets out the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of a new project that seeks to address these problems within the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on an alignment of political settlements analysis with critical theories of state power and African politics, the paper argues that PoEs are both shaped by, and help to reproduce, particular forms of politics and institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. This means that PoEs are not simply interesting objects of enquiry in and of themselves, but also because they can reveal a good deal about how the competing logics of regime survival, state-building and democratisation are playing out in Africa and what implications this has for development. The paper proposes a methodological approach for identifying and exploring PoEs and briefly summarises the results of the expert surveys that we undertook in our four initial countries, namely Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia, which were chosen to represent different types of political settlement.[2] These surveys resulted in our project focusing mainly on the economic technocracy as the key domain within which PoEs have flourished, particularly in terms of ministries of finance, central banks and revenue authorities, along with some other interesting outliers and underlying processes of state-building. Further papers from this project will include in-depth case studies of these specific PoEs and processes in each country, synthesised country analyses and comparative overviews.

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[2] We later added Kenya, with funding from ESID.

1. Introduction

> 'To understand the African bureaucracy is to understand a great deal about African politics' (Abernethy 1971: 93).

The recognition that some parts of the state perform better than others in developing countries has been of longstanding but episodic concern within development studies. In the 1980s and 1990s, the recognition that certain bureaucratic enclaves or 'islands of excellence' were critical to achieving progress formed a key part of the literature on developmental states (Johnson 1982, Evans 1995, Leftwich 1995, also Geddes 1990). However, this focus struggled to gain traction amidst the rise of neoliberal thinking during this period, which made it difficult to argue either that politics was a central feature in explaining development performance, or that the state had a critical role to play as a driver of development (Wade 1996). Interest thereafter was largely sporadic, often coming either from those continuing to make the case that 'politics matters' for development (e.g. Grindle 1997), or in ways that reflected neoliberal ideas from new public management around how the state should operate, with 'islands of excellence' associated with certain organisational forms (e.g. semi-autonomous agencies), including of a non-state variety (Korten 1987; Leonard 1991). The recent flourishing of interest in state-based pockets of effectiveness (PoEs) seems in turn to have been catalysed by the strong turn to politics within international development over the past decade (Leftwich 2005) and the related search to replace the now tattered certainties of the good governance agenda. This new move includes explicit efforts to identify more realistic governance solutions for developing countries (Roll 2014, also Levy 2014), and tentative suggestions that PoEs might form part of the new 'doing-development-differently' vanguard on governance (de Gramont 2014, Porter and Watts 2017). Alongside this, successive research projects into the politics of development in Africa have found, without deliberately setting out to look for them, that PoEs emerge as critical to explaining what works (Booth 2015, Hickey et al. 2015b, Whitfield et al. 2015).[3] This renewed concern comes alongside a growing interest in how state bureaucracies actually work in Africa (e.g. Bierschenk 2010, de Herdt and de Sardan 2015), particularly from an anthropological perspective, and in direct conversation with efforts to rethink the nature of the state and politics in Africa that draw on critical political theory as a necessary counterpoint to the limitations of Weberian approaches to defining and explaining how states and bureaucracies emerge and function (e.g. Hagmann and Peclard 2010, Eriksen 2011).

This paper sets out the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of a new research project that seeks to contribute to this resurgent field by exploring the

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[3] These three references reflect the respective work of three research centres: Developmental Regimes in Africa (run jointly by the Overseas Development Institute and the University of Leiden: http://www.institutions-africa.org/page/about%2Bdra.html), the Elites, Production and Poverty project (based at the Danish Institute for International Studies 2008-2012: http://drp.dfcentre.com/project/elites-production-and-poverty-comparative-study) and the Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID, The University of Manchester, 2011-2020: www.effective-states.org).

politics and of PoEs and their potential to help drive development forward in sub-Saharan Africa. The project hopes to make at least two types of contribution to wider debates on governance within international development and with the nature of the state in Africa. First, our framing of PoEs as a particular form of governance solution that are directly shaped by different types of political settlement, resonates with Merilee Grindle's (2017) identification of the need to fill a 'missing middle' within new thinking on governance. This involves a profound gap between studies of how politics shapes institutional performance over relatively long-run periods of time (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, North et al. 2009) and the more micro concerns with governance reforms and practices at the coalface of development (e.g. Andrews et al. 2017), and is somewhat similar in some ways to the distinction that Centeno et al. (2017) draw between state capacity and state performance. The ambition to breach this gap is directly reflected in our first research question:

RQ1: How do PoEs emerge and how are they sustained within different types of context and sector?

Critical to addressing the 'missing middle' here is our theorisation of these different types of context. This will draw on an adapted notion of 'political settlements', in order to place public sector functioning into direct conversation with deeper explanations of how development unfolds over longer periods. Current research into PoEs tends to frame them as aberrations from the norm, as 'islands' cast adrift within a broader sea of patronage, rather than creatures of their political context. [4] This is problematic, both in terms of its broader reading of the state in Africa and the specific nature of PoEs, and seems to foreclose the possibility that we may learn more about politics in Africa by studying PoEs. A more fruitful approach is to view such 'bureaucratic enclaves' not as some form of *deux et machina* arriving from beyond to save Africa from neopatromonial disaster (Mkandawire 2015), but as both reflecting and reproducing the deeper logics of how politics and state power in particular operate within sub-Saharan Africa.

Our second concern is with what might be usefully done to ensure that the state operates in more developmental ways in Africa:

RQ2: What role has been (and could be) played by domestic and international actors in support of this?

As yet, the growing intellectual interest in PoEs has not been fully matched within policy circles. However, there was an incipient engagement with PoEs in the latest World Development Report on Governance (World Bank 2017), and the focus fits well with concerns over 'effective institutions' within Sustainable Development Goal 16. Given the strong interest amongst development agencies in identifying successful

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[4] We prefer the 'pockets' to the 'islands' metaphor, as the latter implies a disconnection between such agencies and their political context, whereas we are specifically interested in exploring how this context actively shapes the functioning of such agencies.

forms of governance, and the sense that some PoEs fit relatively well with recent trends within new governance thinking on 'adaptive, with-the-grain problem-solving' (Porter and Watts 2017), it seems likely that the marginal role of PoEs within current development policy debates reflects a knowledge gap, rather than an intrinsic aversion, involving a lack of awareness amongst development agencies regarding the contribution that PoEs can make and of how they can support this. This suggests a promising context within which to articulate the potential and pitfalls of supporting PoEs as part of a broader strategy for achieving more developmental forms of governance in Africa.

The purpose of this note is to establish the rationale for researching PoEs from a primarily political perspective and to set out how we intend to go about this in conceptual and methodological terms. It is intended to provoke discussion as well as provide guidance to this specific project, and perhaps beyond. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows:

Section 2 discusses the existing literature on PoEs, to identify what we know and what remains to be discovered. It focuses on the specific types of knowledge gap that our project hopes to address, particularly the lack of comparative studies of PoEs (across either different types of context or sector), an under-specification of the types of politics that shape the emergence, performance and continuity of PoEs, and a bias towards certain forms of agency, whilst noting other gaps that we may only be able to address at the margins.

Section 3 locates PoEs within broader debates around how to understand the nature of state and bureaucratic practices, both historically and at the current moment, with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa. This involves putting PoEs into conversation with critical theories of the state, histories of state formation and bureaucratic development, contested debates around the role of patronage, ethnicity and the colonial heritage, the role of ideas and transnational influences, and the relative affinity of PoEs with different regime types (e.g. democratic, authoritarian). The twofold purpose here is to identify the strands of thinking that can shed light on the phenomenon of PoEs, and to reframe PoEs as windows that can enable us to explore broader questions about the state and politics in Africa.

Section 4 examines how PoEs can be framed in relation to more deliberate efforts to engineer governance and development outcomes in Africa. This involves situating PoEs in relation to successive agendas of governance reform and to the different modes of development strategy that they tend to bring forth. The sense that emerges – that the plasticity of PoEs makes it difficult to categorise them as being in the vanguard of any single form of either governance or development strategy – further underlines the importance of viewing them as the institutionalised creatures of broader political projects that reflect and reproduce multiple and deeper logics of state power and modes of governance.

Section 5 draws on these foregoing sections to elaborate a conceptual framework for exploring the politics of PoEs. Drawing on the first phase of work conducted by ESID (Hickey and Sen 2019, forthcoming), this 'power domains' approach proposes that the capacity and commitment to deliver development (that PoEs represent) needs to be understood as emerging from the interaction of two domains of power, namely the political settlement and the policy domain. Informed by critical thinking around the state and African politics, this section sets out the key building blocks of this approach in terms of definitions and typologies of political settlements, a definition of the policy domain and a sense of the types of proposition that might plausibly flow from this approach. Section 6 discusses our methodological approach, which involves a comparative case-study approach, an expert survey to help identify high-performing public sector organisations and in-depth qualitative investigations of up to four such organisations in each country. We briefly summarise the results of our expert surveys and identify both the organisations and underlying process that our country-level investigations will be exploring. Section 7 briefly concludes.

2.   What do we know about PoEs? Insights and gaps

'(PoEs are)…public organisations that are relatively effective in providing public goods and services that the organisation is officially mandated to provide, despite operating in an environment in which effective public service delivery is not the norm.' (Roll 2014: 24).[5]

Given that what we knew about PoEs up until c.2012 has already been synthesised to great effect in Roll (2014), this section starts by briefly recapping these insights and updating them by weaving in some insights of work published in the last few years since then. This review is structured in accordance with the three factors – political economy (external factors); leadership and management (internal factors); and function (task-related factors) – that Roll distils from the five mega-hypotheses on what shapes pockets of effectiveness outlined by Leonard (2008).[6] After an additional focus on the potential 'spillover' effects' of PoEs, the final sub-section identifies some of the key knowledge gaps that remain.

Political economy factors

According to Roll (2014: 34), 'The underlying political economy in which an organization is placed ultimately will overcome and dominate all other causal factors and thus determine what effectiveness is possible' (from Leonard, 2008: 25), particularly in terms of the logics, incentives and interests that predominate in given political systems. The commitment of political elites to protecting agencies from the worst excesses of political interference is widely acknowledged as a critical condition for success (Geddes 1990). For Whitfield et al. (2015: 20), and in a finding that

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[5] This definition excludes one-off projects or non-governmental organisations, although these may play some role within and/or around the success of PoEs.
[6] Parts of this section draw on the literature review produced by Kate Pruce in 2014 in support of the original research proposal.

resonates with ESID's research on oil technocracies in Ghana and Uganda (Hickey et al. 2015a),

> '…state capabilities are the product of underlying political relationships and not independent from them. State bureaucrats in charge of industrial policy must have political backing from ruling elites and a significant degree of autonomy from political pressures stemming from within the ruling coalition' (Whitfield et al. 2015: 20).

Portes and Smith (2012) argue that high performance often stems from deliberate, concentrated efforts by governments at the highest levels of authority assigning top priority to institutional changes, as with the Chilean internal revenue service. Different types of elite interests seem to be involved in offering protection to certain state agencies, including:

- interests that are integral to concerns with regime survival and legitimacy, including those where critical national resources are involved (Hickey and Izama 2016, Hout 2013, Whitfield et al. 2015, Whitfield and Buur, 2014);
- interests flowing from strategies of economic accumulation that are significant to ruling elites for sectional rather than collective/national reasons (Kjaer et al. 2012),[7] including for predatory purposes (Soares de Oliveira 2007);
- interests of a more personal or ad-hoc character.[8]

Some literature on PoEs has sought to specify the types of political contexts within which PoEs are most likely to be introduced and sustained. Roll (2014) identifies three such conditions, namely: in policy areas reflecting elite commitment; under the rule of strong political leaders facing low-risks; and particularly during early/mid-term in office. There is some evidence that PoEs are more likely to be protected and sustained in 'dominant' settings, where implementation capacities, long-term vision and stability may be at higher levels (e.g. Hertog 2014, Hout 2013, Roll 2014) and that increased levels of competition for political power can make it very difficult to protect and sustain such PoEs (Hickey et al. 2015a, cf. Levy 2014, Whitfield et al. 2015). In Mozambique, for example, the persistence of Frelimo rule and the close

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[7] For example, in Uganda the president and many of the ministers own cattle, so the dairy sector benefits ruling elites and has therefore received more attention than fisheries, even though they have contributed 7-8 percent to GDP in recent years (Kjaer et al. 2012). Studies of PoEs within the realm of industrial policy show that where these units operate in parts of the economy where political elites have direct material interests, this tends to reduce their scope for autonomy and impairs their performance in ways that (mis)shape their approach, including direct efforts to undermine the capacity of the state and potential PoEs to undertake this role. In some instances, state bureaucrats emerge as actors with strong economic interests who are also capable of blocking reform where such reforms would impinge on their strategies of accumulation. This goes beyond Geddes' (1990) emphasis on political survival as the primary driver of political elite behaviour, alerting us to the need to track their economic as well as political interests.

[8] For example, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Other Related Matters was established through the personal interest of the vice-president's wife (Simbine et al. 2014).

relationships (and revolving door) that this has engendered between political and bureaucratic elites has helped offer a sense of continuity and guidance: 'As a result, state bureaucrats in the National Sugar Institute (in Mozambique) could play a mediating role, because they understood Frelimo's and the sugar industry's needs and could reconcile them' (Whitfield et al. 2015: 189).

According to Whitfield et al. (2015: 247), such processes were less likely to unfold in more competitive settings, '…where elite factionalism makes it unlikely that ruling elites will invest sufficient capital and resources in building effective bureaucratic units'. In Ghana, the Cocoa Board has only received protection from the successive ruling coalitions of different political parties because cocoa provides one of the state's key sources of foreign exchange for the state (Whitfield and Buur, 2014), which males it critical 'to the economy and therefore to the political survival strategies of all ruling elites' (Whitfield et al. 2015: 247). These tendencies are borne out by studies of PoEs within the same country over time. Several observers of PoEs in Brazil describe how a number of high-performing agencies (with regards power, oil, statistics, development banking) emerged and found protection under the centralising, developmentalist and technocratic military regime of President Vargas (1937-1946), before then being undermined when civilian rulers and multi-party politics returned (Willis 2014, Geddes 1990, Grindle 2012).[9] The mixed fortunes of the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation under different ruling coalitions also reflect the sense that intense democratic competition can undermine high-performing agencies over time (Hickey et al. 2015a).

A number of historical studies concur that the process of displacing patronage with civil service systems is more protracted in contexts where processes of democratic competition emerge before significant levels of bureaucratic capacity have been developed (Fukuyama 2014, Grindle 2012, Shefter 1994). Similar dynamics are apparent within Africa, where Abernethy (1971: 94) argues that state bureaucrats became more influential under the return to single-party (and often military) rule in many countries from the late 1960s. As Abernethy notes, 'The Weberian attributes of hierarchy, impersonality and discipline are even more strongly emphasized in the military than the bureaucracy' (1971: 94), a comment that resonates with the case of mid-20th century Brazil and also the contemporary return of ostensibly developmental forms of 'bureaucratic/quasi-military authoritarianism' in countries like Ethiopia and Rwanda. This apparent affinity between PoEs and authoritarian forms of governance is problematic, as explained by Mkandawire (2015: 599):

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[9] 'Between 1937 and 1946, a series of semiautonomous state agencies…was set up, initially tied directly to the presidency, with funding insulated from regular budgetary processes' (Grindle 2012: 182). President Vargas appointed those with technical expertise to head these agencies and encouraged them to do the same with regards to their agency's mid- and high-level positions. 'From this time, these agencies began to develop strong reputations for high performance of their functions … In later years, these agencies would be referred to as "pockets of efficiency", set on a path toward technical decision-making and good performance through presidential patronage' (Grindle 2012: 183).

> 'There is a strong antidemocratic and militaristic aspect to some presentations of the rational-legal Weberian framework. As Tom Bottomore (1989) notes, "Democracy as a political idea, and as a social movement inspired by that idea, which is valuable in its own right, finds no place whatsoever in Weber's thought."…Much of this tension is ignored in the current discourse on democracy, for example, with calls to allow greater autonomy for enclaves of rationality in contexts where democratic politics are taking root. This means that the rational-legal order is the ideal and political order is its nemesis.'

However, a closer look at the literature suggests that to focus on how regime type shapes the prospects for PoEs is less useful than to focus on the underlying configuration of elite power. Most studies refer to issues of 'elite fragmentation' or 'cohesion' or 'the ways in which power over decisions was dispersed' (Geddes 1990, Grindle 2012, Hertog 2014, Roll 2014, Willis 2014), rather than to, say, elections or other formal aspects of multi-party democracy. As discussed in Section 5, it might be more useful to frame the politics of PoEs in relation to the underlying configuration of elite power and ideational concerns of rulers rather than regime type.

Leadership and management: Towards deeper organisational sociologies?

Leadership and management have been identified as central to the high performance of bureaucratic agencies, particularly with regards to organisational culture and management practices, recruitment and promotion, resource mobilisation and organisational goals (Roll 2014: 34, Grindle 1997). The professionalism of staff – particularly managers – and a strong sense of mission are most commonly identified as being significant for success (Leonard 1991, Grindle 1997, Tendler 1997, Simbine with Attoh and Oladeji 2014, Strauss 2014, Therkildsen and Tidemand 2007, Therkildsen 2009). In terms of professional organisational practices, Therkildsen and Tidemand (2007) find a clear relationship between the principle of *merit* for hiring, firing and promotions and the performance-based rating of an organisation, although Whitfield and Therkildsen (2011) later qualify this to suggest that merit should be accompanied by *loyalty*, in order to ensure efficiency of policy implementation. Staff motivation within high-performing public agencies has been linked to rewards for good performance and other benefits (training, equipment), but also to non-material aspects, including consultation and participation in decision-making and autonomy in undertaking their duties (Grindle 1997, Roll 2014). Hilderbrand and Grindle (1997) and Grindle (1997) find that a sense of organisational mission is more important for good performance than rules, regulations and even remuneration, something underlined by the strong esprit de corps identified within Uganda's high-performing oil department (Hickey et al. 2015a, Hickey and Izama 2016). Both Grindle (1997) and Roll (2014) stress that a strong organisational culture and high levels of staff motivation are more likely when bureaucrats are given the sense that they are an elite separate from/superior to the rest of the bureaucracy, an issue we return to below in relation to the colonial echoes of such bureaucratic enclaves in the African context.

Importantly, 'management' can be political as well as technical (Roll 2014): leaders of PoEs are often characterised by a capacity to navigate the wider political context, ensuring that they receive just enough of the right kind of political attention and occasionally fighting rearguard actions to avoid becoming vulnerable to political pressure, including through public communications.[10] Some observers have coined the term 'technopols' to describe actors who possess the technical and political resources required to drive forward certain policy and organisational agendas (Domínguez 1996, Joignant 2011). The term captures both politicians with technocratic savvy (e.g. former economists turned leaders) and technocrats with unusually strong capacities to perform politically, as through persuading other actors of the logic of their ideas and navigating difficult political terrain in pursuit of policy objectives.

Organisational function

There is a sense in which PoEs are more likely to emerge in areas of governance associated with particular kinds of function, including the specific technology, workforce and tasks involved. For example, public sector organisations seem more likely to attain the status of PoEs when the tasks required of them are more specific and targeted, rather than broad-based and diffused, as in the mass provision of social services (Roll, 2014: 34). This seems to reflect both the degree of technical excellence required amongst bureaucratic staff (de Gramont 2014) and the nature of the governance task being undertaken, with PoEs perhaps more often associated with the capacity to master tasks that are more 'logistical' than 'transactional' in nature (Andrews et al. 2017). This echoes Pritchett and Woolcock's (2004) argument that different kinds of development problem require different types of institutional response, with logistical challenges more amenable to being solved by a small number of highly trained experts, whereas transactional challenges require more interactive and dispersed forms of governance.[11]

Can PoEs have spillover effects?

Often cast as the 'holy grail' question within studies of PoEs, Roll (2014) finds little evidence from the wider literature that PoEs have positive spill-over effects in terms of helping to drive up public sector performance more broadly. Indeed, there seems to be more evidence to the contrary, with some suggestions that they may undermine rather than improve overall levels of state performance, including by capturing the most qualified staff and a protected share of the budget. Staff within most PoEs are so highly paid in comparison with their counterparts in the mainstream civil service, and also so well connected into global networks of opportunities, that the prospect of

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[10] See Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey (2016) on how the governor of the central bank in Uganda used the international press to help protect the autonomy of the Bank of Uganda in the run-up to the 2016 elections.

[11] Porter and Watts (2017) discuss how a state governor in Nigeria actively considered which policy domains he could make relatively rapid progress in, given the state capacities he had at his disposal, and identified improved infrastructure as a more reachable target than the highly transactional challenge of driving up the quality of public education.

many of them moving into other public sector roles in ways that help improve performance more broadly is increasingly unlikely (Moore 2014). Certain PoEs may perform their immediate function effectively, while forming part of a wider project of predatory elite accumulation, as in the case of the oil technocracy in Angola (e.g. Soares de Oliveira 2007), and it may also be that their inherently discretionary character is more likely to help reproduce patronage systems.[12]

However, this negative finding may be truer of some forms of PoE than others, and perhaps applies in particular to those created by the wave of 'agencification' that recent research suggests has generally led to a decline in government performance (Overman and van Thiel 2016). A contrast might be usefully drawn here between PoEs that perform core state functions and are embedded within broader civil service systems, including ministries of finance, and less central nodes of government. As discussed below, such enclaves may (historically) have played important roles in the process of establishing modern forms of statehood and meritocratic forms of recruitment, and may play a more general role in improving government performance.

Key knowledge gaps on PoEs

The episodic nature of research into PoEs within developing coutries over the past three decades means that we lack an accumulated base of evidence on this feature of developmental governance. Our knowledge of how PoEs emerge and persist remains weak (Roll 2014), and a number of specific gaps can be identified within this general lacunae.

Political drivers

The current literature struggles to identify the specific political factors that shape the emergence, performance and sustainability of PoEs over time. This seems to flow from at least two problems, one conceptual, one methodological. In conceptual terms, the tendency to refer to high-performing agencies as *'islands* of effectiveness' tends to stress their *sui generis* character, suggesting that they are somehow disconnected from their political and institutional context, rather than embedded within it. Methodologically, most of the PoEs literature produced to date has been based on choosing cases on the basis of their performance, rather than through a more systematic process of case-selection, particularly in terms of specific *types* of political context and PoEs. These problems have made it difficult to identify the causal mechanisms and pathways through which PoEs emerge and are sustained, and particularly the extent to which this is shaped by (a) different kinds of political and institutional contexts and (b) the character of particular policy sectors and the governance arrangements that prevail therein. More broadly, this has limited the

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[12] In relation to Latin America, Grindle (2012: 150) notes that: 'There were opportunities to create parallel organizations with special hiring codes and salaries; leeway to staff state-owned enterprises and agencies not subject to regular personnel rules; loopholes for hiring temporary employees, additional employees, and contract employees; the existence of special administrative islands with their own personnel regulation and codes; and the availability of executive and implementing units for special programs'.

possibilities for generating a theory of change concerning how PoEs emerge, perform and are sustained and also the generation of policy-relevant findings beyond the specifics of each case.

Agency type

Most research on PoEs has focused on state agencies that lie primarily within the domain of accumulation, particularly industrial policy and natural resource governance, with much less attention to agencies involved in social services (cf. Pogoson and Roll 2014).

Contextual bias

Little of the existing literature on PoEs has focused on Africa, although there are some signs that this bias is now being corrected (e.g. McDonnell 2017, Pogoson and Roll 2014, Whitfield et al. 2015). This broad trend reflects a wider dearth of research into the bureaucracy in Africa. Shaped by the tendency to characterise the state in Africa as having 'failed' and of being fundamentally 'patrimonial' in character (see next section), the role of bureaucrats and bureaucratic agencies remains a strikingly understudied aspect of post-colonial African politics, with Bierschenk (2010) noting that there has been little published work on the bureaucracy in Africa since the early periods of independence.

Ideas versus interests

This strong focus on how PoEs are tied to elite interests, with regards to accumulation and regime survival, has meant that the current literature on PoEs tends to underplay the role of ideas in shaping elite commitment and bureaucratic performance. This includes paradigmatic ideas around nation-building, patriotism and development, in shaping political commitment to certain aspects of developmental governance, as well as the role of more policy-relevant ideas within bureaucratic agencies and amongst bureaucratic actors (Schmidt 2008).

Organisational sociologies of PoEs

The inner world of how PoEs function has seldom been breached, including the ways in which politics reaches into such agencies and shapes important processes, such as appointments, and the deployment of norms, such as patriotism, to maintain both loyalty and dedication. Anthropological work that has got inside bureaucracies has largely focused on front-line civil servants (Bierschenk 2010, De Herdt and de Sardan 2015), leaving the political sociologies and everyday functioning of national-level agencies a largely closed book (cf. McDonnell 2017).

The conceptual and methodological approach that we plan to adopt within this project (see Sections 5 and 6 below) have been formulated to try and address some if not all of these concerns. Before then, we examine the wider agendas and tendencies within African politics (Section 3) and international development (Section 4) that PoEs may both reflect and be helping to reproduce.

3.   PoEs and development as change: What forms of statehood do PoEs represent?

This section considers how PoEs can be understood in relation to broader debates around the state and state-building, both in general and with specific regards to Africa. It starts by reflecting on what forms of state theory can help us to understand the emergence and functioning of high-performing agencies, drawing on insights from critical political theory and recent debates within African studies. It then situates PoEs within longer-run processes of state-building and bureaucratic development, with particular reference to the apparent struggle between patronage and more rules-based forms of bureaucracy. This discussion suggests that, although PoEs are often characterised as islands of Weberian-style governance afloat within seas of patronage, they often reflect the logic of patronage as well as merit-based civil service systems. PoEs also carry with them echoes of the elitist bifurcation introduced into African bureaucracies by colonial rule, a period that did more to embed the logics of patronage within post-colonial polities than any notion of rational-legal orders. Subsequent reflections locate PoEs in relation to a series of other debates that have shaped how the state in Africa is understood, particularly in terms of the influence of ethnicity, ideas and transnational influences. The key takeaways are as follows:

- PoEs reflect wider patterns of politics and power relations; this becomes particularly clear from the perspective of critical theories of the state and state power, and efforts to see the state in Africa as a relational form of state *practice*.
- Certain types of PoEs have played important roles in establishing modern states and civil service systems. However, both of these processes have been as strongly shaped by the politics of patronage as any overt attempt to establish rational-bureaucratic orders.
- PoEs within Africa bear the imprint of several aspects of post-colonial state formation, including the contested role of ethnicity, colonial heritage and transnational influences.

State theory and PoEs

The sense conveyed in the literature that PoEs represent a form of rational-legal, merit-based form of state functioning, suggests that they reflect a Weberian ideal of bureaucracy within a state-centred conception of the state.[13] This broad tendency is particularly apparent within African studies, whereby portrayals of PoEs existing in a sea of patronage relies on a particular set of assumptions about what the state *should* look like in Africa, often in relation to a wider discourse of state failure. For Hagmann and Peclard (2010: 541),

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[13] See the literature on high-performing public agencies in the Global North (e.g. Pollitt et al. 2004, Talbot 2010).

'Underlying this "pathological" approach to state institutions in Africa are essentialist, teleological and instrumentalist conceptions of state and political authority. State failure proponents tend to reify African states as a-historical "things", as given and fixed sets of institutions rather than as political processes …. most observers implicitly and falsely assume that in the long run all states will converge towards a model of Western liberal democracy.'

Such readings of the state tend to draw attention to the gap between western states and African states, a perspective from which PoEs might be seen as signalling a potential route through which this gap might be closed. In a bid to move studies of African politics away from this kind of 'history by analogy' towards history by process (Mamdani 1996), 'an alternative approach to post-colonial state formation' would be to view African states as a category of practice, rather than simply as a category of analysis, so that '…instead of simply comparing actual states to the state idea that underlies them, we should focus on how states are shaped by the practices of various actors and by their interrelationships and interactions' (Eriksen 2011: 238). This would involve tracing

> 'the ways that states have become related to domestic society on the one hand and their relations with the external world on the other, and on the interrelationship between the idea of the state and actual processes of state formation in each of these domains' (Eriksen 2011: 239).

As reflected in Bierschenk's (2010) application of this approach to examining how state bureaucracies actually work in sub-Saharan Africa, the point is not to reject 'western' state theory that has emerged from the experience of industrialised countries – the idea of the state retains a powerful force within Africa, including amongst bureaucrats working within it (Bierschenk 2010, Eriksen 2011) – but to recognise how political power in Africa is actually practised and the ways that this is shaped by broader relations of power than those operating within the logics of the state alone.

The sense that the state should be understood as a set of processes and practices through which power is exercised, in a relational rather than purely 'statist' sense and as profoundly uneven in the spread of its capacities, is captured in Bob Jessop's (2015: 58) depiction of the state as:

> '…an ensemble of power centres and capacities that offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside the state, the state cannot exercise power…Instead its powers (plural) are activated by changing sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state, in specific conjectures. Although these "insiders" are key players in the exercise of state powers, they always act in relation to a wider balance of forces within and beyond a given state.'

The necessarily uneven nature of state power depicted here helps bring PoEs more sharply into view. This offers a differentiated perspective on state power that seems particularly apt in the African context,[14] whilst drawing attention to the sense that state powers are always asymmetric in character, an observation has directly guided recent studies of PoEs in Africa (Porter and Watts 2017).[15]

The risk of framing the state as a strategic-relational phenomenon (see also the work of Colin Hay, e.g. 2002, 2014) is one of downplaying the extent to which states operate according to their own logics, rather than being the creatures of wider socio-economic interests in a more reductive, Marxian sense (as per Poulantzas' 1978 notion of the state as only ever 'relatively autonomous' of capitalist interests). Early work on PoEs, undertaken when this Marxist interpretation of the state was at its most influential, was at pains to show how PoEs refuted this reading. Exploring PoEs in Brazil, Geddes (1990) was at pains to show that their fortunes directly reflected the influence of political actors (rulers and political parties), rather than external economic interests. To an extent, Whitfield et al. (2015) reinforce Geddes' (1990, 1994) argument that state capacity for development is shaped more by the nature of politics than by the political economy, particularly in terms of the incentives generated by the need for political survival. The sense that bureaucratic agencies and bureaucrats themselves emerge from the literature, both on state formation in general and PoEs in particular, as having developed a degree of political agency over time further reinforces the need to acknowledge the logics of the state *qua* state.

Nonetheless, to accept that the state has its own logics is not to theorise a state that is set apart from society, nor to overlook the fact that economic and social actors also have their own logics and projects for influencing the state: 'Although the state has its own distinctive dynamic and strategic capacities, so that it is resistant to direct external control, other spheres of society also have their own logics and capacities' (Jessop 2015: 89). PoEs are not hermetically sealed from wider social and economic interests; what matters, rather, is the nature of their relationship with wider forces, and perhaps how far they are able to secure a position of 'embedded autonomy' in relation to these (Evans 1995). Research on PoEs in Mozambique (Whitfield and Buur 2014) and Brazil (Geddes 1990) both emphasise the movement of actors between polity, bureaucracy and market, and the relationships between them, as underpinning high levels of bureaucratic performance. The fusion of the political, the bureaucratic and the commercial within a high-performing pocket (or 'network') of state-level governance in Nigeria (Porter and Watts 2017), re-enforces the sense that African societies remain poorly differentiated in terms of the tripartite distinction

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[14] Such that, '…in no way can it be said that African bureaucracies are dominated by a single logic … the characteristic feature of African bureaucracies is their enormous heterogeneity' (Bierschenk 2010: 12).
[15] As discussed in Section 5, Jessop's insistence that we shift attention from the form of the state to the state as a form of power (Jessop 2015: 10) resonates strongly with political settlements analysis.

between state, market and civil society (Chabal and Daloz 1999), and that this can produce developmental synergies as well as less progressive forms of collusion.

PoEs may thus represent a particular coming together of statist and social logics, as set out in earlier work that sought to achieve a balance between these two apparently competing perspectives, by incorporating a stronger sense of the state's own logics within a relational appreciation of the state (Block 1980). Focusing on 'state managers', Block (1980) shows how leading bureaucrats emerge as central players in operating at the interstices of state and capital, arriving at bargains through which the projects of both political and economic actors can be realised. Certain PoEs seem to reflect the compromises and deals between state and capital that Block draws attention to here, whereby state managers and operatives are sufficiently informed about and sympathetic to the needs and interests of capital, and thereby able to assist and improve their functioning.[16]

A final insight from critical political theory further establishes PoEs as an integral feature of state power. Whereas some scholarship on the state tends to view the bureaucracy as embodying the fullest expression of modern stateness, Jessop argues that there will always be a gap between what bureaucracies are capable of offering and what rulers require state power to deliver, with regards to their wider projects and relational demands:

> '… although bureaucratic forms are appropriate to the execution of general laws and policies in accordance with the rule of law, they are less-suited to ad hoc, discretionary forms of intervention … Indeed, the bureaucratic preconditions for the formal unity of the state system may limit the substantive efficacy of policies oriented to accumulation, legitimacy and social cohesion. This is reflected in the coexistence of formal bureaucracy governed by clear procedures and more informal, flexible, or ad hoc modes of intervention … This suggests the need for bureaucratic mechanisms to be controlled by an overarching political executive authority or by cross-cutting networks that can secure the relative unity of state action.' (Jessop 2015: 68).

Flowing from a relational analysis of state power, this suggests that some PoEs may represent less the fullest expression of a Weberian bureaucratic order than the failure of this form of governance to provide an adequate vehicle for the ambitions of ruling elites.

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[16] As through the provision of learning rents, relevant public goods, subsidies, whilst also having the capacity to impose a degree of discipline on them (e.g. reallocation of property rights, removal of subsidies, taxation, regulation etc. (see Evans 1995, Gore 2000: 797, Khan 2005).

State-building and PoEs: Between patronage and meritocracy

> '… contenders for power have at times sought to use patronage to create and maintain both administrative capacity and loyalty. As such, patronage is important in the consolidation of royal power, the creation of modern states, and the construction of competence in government' (Grindle 2012: 6-7).

The rise of bureaucracies that operate according to a largely non-patrimonial logic is often framed as a definitive dimension of modern state formation (Fukuyama 2014, 2016; Mann 1988). This sub-section considers how our understanding of PoEs might be informed by longer-term processes of state building, particularly in terms of how the apparently competing logics of patronage- and civil service systems play out in practice. It suggests that, albeit more by necessity than design, bureaucratic enclaves formed the building blocks of (modern) state formation. Some also played a formative role in the establishment of what would later become fuller civil service systems, although others can be as easily associated with the politics of patronage as with any Weberian notion of rational-legal bureaucratic order.

Historical studies of state formation draw attention to the fact that bureaucracies were developed unevenly in response to the particular challenges facing political leaders at the time and the nature of their political projects. Particular attention is drawn to the functioning of the military (Tilly 1975), revenue generation (Moore 2008), and the treasury and central banks (Grindle 2012). There is a sense that modern state bureaucracies necessarily emerged from and were built on such 'pockets', some of which have continued to maintain a degree of insularity and apartness as a result of their early formation, specific mission and critical role to maintaining a sense of stateness. One example here is the Treasury in Britain, which was '…where Britain's professional civil service was eventually housed, also where it began', in terms of instilling a merit-based system, whereby in the 1830s the Treasury introduced the use of examinations for its officials (Grindle 2012: 83). The Treasury, where 14,000 of Britain's 17,000 public officials worked in the 18th century (ibid: 53), would later play a key role in extending the civil service system more broadly across Whitehall:

> '…the Treasury, through its control over a number of appointments, its role in funding activities of government, and its capacity to manage an incipient pension system, was in a good position to lead the process for institutionalizing a career civil service, and this position was strengthened as it seized the initiative to claim pre-eminence in appointment power' (Grindle 2012: 112).[17]

There is a sense, then, that modern states emerged from the development of bureaucratic enclaves responsible for delivering on core functions of stateness, and

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[17] As discussed below, the predominance of the Treasury in the development of a modern bureaucracy in Britain has in turn had a profound influence on the direction of Britain's economic policy (Jessop 2015).

that in some cases were important in extending this system more broadly. However, the case of Brazil suggests that this trajectory is likely to be more complicated in later developers, with a more iterative and overlapping relationship emerging here between early efforts to establish a civil service system through Administrative Department of Public Service (DASP) and pockets of effectiveness. Grindle (2012: 228-229) reports how 'The Bank of Brazil instituted its own system of meritocratic recruitment even before the DASP began to operate', and that once the initial efforts of DASP were thwarted, it was this resistance that inadvertently helped sow the seeds for the emergence of PoEs, with frustrated DASP staff leaving to work in other agencies that would go on to be recognised as POEs, including the economic data unit and the national development bank (Grindle 2012: 226, also Willis 2014).

This development of civil service systems that operate in accordance with rational-legal principles is generally thought of as marking a binary contrast with the patronage-based systems that they seek to replace, as part of a wider and apparently teleological process of political development.[18] To some extent, this seemed to emerge as part of the process identified above, whereby the widespread deployment of patronage is initially curtailed in only certain key areas of the public service:

> 'Extensive patronage systems sometimes coexist with more merit-based career systems that are specific to particular organizations – foreign services, central banks, and tax and customs agencies are often good examples of these enclave civil service systems' (Grindle 2012: 18-19).[19]

Geddes (1990) also emphasises this point in relation to Brazil, arguing that such PoEs are effectively defined by their capacity to escape patronage politics and to achieve a degree of insulation from political pressures. However, in her study of this

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[18] What distinguishes patronage and civil service systems is 'the nature of the contract between the employee and the employer. In a patronage system, the contract is based on a principal of political or personal reciprocity between the employee and the employer. In contrast, a career civil service system, rule-bound and impersonal, is based on a contract between an individual and an institution, the state as a system of laws, or a set of formal rules of the game. In Max Weber's terms, modern public service is a vocation' (Grindle 2012: 21).

[19] 'In contemporary contexts, because such (patronage) systems tend to be controlled by political executives and to be pyramidal in operation, ministers and other high-level officials have the capacity to use their appointment powers to attract highly qualified staffs to carry out specialised policy initiatives. Within organizations, managers have significant opportunities to create islands of excellence, even in larger systems pervaded by the least desirable consequences of patronage' (Grindle 2012: 261). Also the military: in Prussia, for example, 'This patronage system did not result in a lax regime, although corruption was ongoing. The rules were clear – the army was to be disciplined and efficient, and the purpose of the government administration was to ensure that there was sufficient funding for the army' (Grindle 2012: 43). In the United States: 'yet even as the patronage system expanded and became notorious, some offices, especially those involving comptrollers, auditors, some clerkships, the military, and some employees of specialized technical agencies … Gradually, in some offices and bureaus more than others, competent, professional, and focused administration and administrators emerged' (Grindle 2012: 65).

process within six developed countries, as well as four from Latin America, Grindle (2012) offers a more nuanced appreciation of the role that patronage plays in delivering competent forms of governance. *Jobs for the Boys* shows that patronage has been a highly persistent form of rule over time, not only because it offers rulers a means of maintaining order in fragmented polities, but because it can also help deliver progress in terms of government competence and the wider goal of state-building. Far from being immune from the politics of patronage, many of the agencies that would become known as PoEs in Brazil were not only '…set on a path toward technical decision-making and good performance through presidential patronage' (Grindle 2012: 183), but were also encouraged to employ patronage-based principles with their own internal hiring processes, in order to secure staff with the right mix of technical expertise and political loyalty (also Whitfield and Therkildsen 2011). From this perspective, such enclaves should not be seen as separate from patronage politics, but rather as being directly informed by this in both their establishment and functioning. Indeed, PoEs are in some ways uniquely suited to the logics of patronage, as their distinctive form in relation to the rest of the civil service affords rulers the opportunity to make discretionary appointments, most of which tend to be made at the top end of the civil service and include leaders of key PoE-type agencies. Insider studies of PoEs underline the sense that 'those who are favoured with public positions can be very aware of their responsibilities to serve the policy and political agendas of politicians or parties to whom they owe their positions' (Grindle 2012: 22), rather than embodying Weberian virtues of neutrality and impersonality.

Patronage should therefore be seen as a potentially enabling rather than necessarily constraining feature of how PoEs emerge, with POEs arguably owing more to the flexibility offered by patronage systems than they do the onset of meritocratic forms of civil service.[20] Rather than operating as crucibles of rules-based governance, PoEs seem to operate at the intersection of multiple logics of political rule. Recent studies of PoEs in Africa underline this sense that they are not characterised by their 'insulation' from politics or indeed the broader political economy. In Mozambique, adherence to rules-based systems of governance matters less than the capacity of PoEs to fuse political and technical functions, through a technocratic cadre with strong (embedded) links to both ruling elites (Whitfield and Buur 2014). Porter and Watts (2017) similarly show how a pocket (or network) of effectiveness in Nigeria involves both a fusion of political and technical capabilities, with rulers directly appointing lead agency staff, reaching over/bypassing aspects of the bureaucracy loyal to previous incumbents, and a direct incorporation of commercial interests.[21]

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[20] Grindle (2012: 109) notes that the process of establishing broader civil service systems in the US was hotly contested by high-performing bureaucratic enclaves which wanted to retain control over personnel issues in particular.

[21] Writing about the high-performing Economic and Strategy Team in Edo State, Nigeria, Porter and Watts (2017: 258) show how, 'The EST's political and technical capabilities would provide the administration with an institutional ensemble capable of serving as a "pivot", a fulcrum linking the state capacity to "grasp" (that is, mobilise resources) and "reach" (that is, control over contracting, payments and so on) and therefore deliver specific institutional

To argue that patronage seems to be a constitutive feature of high-performing agencies is not to overlook the dangers inherent in this form of rule. Even if we accept that:

> '…patronage is not necessarily incompatible with competence or the accumulation of expertise in dealing with particular types of issues. It is, above all, a form of recruitment and advancement for public service, not a category of performance or competence' (Grindle 2012: 23),

we need to recognise that '…its weakness is its vulnerability to the caprice of those who manage such systems, not that it necessarily leads to corruption or incompetence' (op cit.). This capriciousness is apparent not merely in relation to the use of patronage to undermine performance across large swathes of the public sector, but also within PoEs themselves. Longitudinal studies of PoEs reveal that their performance over time is shaped by this caprice, with agencies permitted to perform in line with their mandate only until the motivations driving political rulers change. Examples of the waxing and waning of political support for PoEs over time include studies of various agencies in Brazil (Geddes 1990, Willis 2014) and Uganda, including the revenue authority (Robinson 2006), Ministry of Finance (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey 2016), and of the oil agency in Ghana (Hickey et al. 2015a). More subtly, PoEs may in themselves reflect a developmental or regulated form of patronage, whilst helping to reproduce predatory forms of patronage at a broader level, as with the highly effective generation of rents to ruling elites by the oil technocracy in Angola (Soares de Oliveira 2007), a dynamic that may well emerge in Uganda as/when oil actually starts to flow (Hickey and Izama 2016).

These reflections invite a discussion of whether different forms of patronage exist and the conditions under which 'developmental patrimonialism' might emerge (Kelsall et al. 2010). In an effort to fill the middle ground between Evans' (1995) depiction of the 'developmental state', on the one hand, and 'predatory patronage', on the other, Bach (2012) refers to the notion of 'regulated patrimonialism', to reflect the ways in which rulers use patronage to achieve multiple ends. For Bach (2012: 222), this term helps reclaim what the notion of neopatrimonialism was supposed to capture – namely 'the hybrid patterns of interaction between patrimonial and legal bureaucratic decision-making' – before it became extended as a catch-all explanation for all governance problems in Africa. Much of the literature on PoEs reflects the sense that PoEs represent the 'neo' amidst wider patrimonial (dis)order.[22] As Mkandawire (2015: 595) notes in his sustained critique of the overuse of neopatrimonialism in relation to development in Africa:

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outcomes …To play this role, the EST necessarily included not just technical experts, but individuals networked politically into key constituencies, including private sector finance'.
[22] Applying this to oil governance in ex-Soviet states, Hout (2013: 79) shows how 'the establishment of pockets of effectiveness … is rather difficult but not impossible in the case of Russia', then characterised by a form of regulated neopatrimonialism, in contrast to the predatory neopatrimonialism found in Kazakhstan.

'One solution to the troublesome anomaly of neopatrimonial leaders presiding over high economic performance is the recourse to such *deus ex machina* as expatriates, "oases of integrity", or "pockets of reform/islands of alternative systems", that have inexplicably escaped the hold of neopatrimonialism. With the logic of neopatrimonialism enjoying the status of inexorable force, agents of change are either exogenous temporary aberrations condemned to revert to the neopatrimonial equilibrium, or opportunists availing themselves of favorable conditions for ascendance in the neopatrimonial pecking order – one big man replacing another. The possibility of enclaves of rationality in a universe of irrationality and self-serving behavior is then advanced to suggest that there might be such a thing as a "neopatrimonial developmental state" or "regulated neopatrimonialism".'

However, it seems possible to share the concern of Mkandawire (and others) that it is erroneous to a use the concept of neopatrimonialism as a catch-all explanation for Africa's problems, whilst maintaining it for more specific use. In particular, the term 'regulated patrimonialism' helps capture the sense that PoEs reflect hybrid modes of governance, the balance between which should not be assumed, but needs to be explored and identified empirically (Bach 2012).[23] Nor is this to engage in Africanist exceptionalism, as this blend or hybridity characterises all states, to some extent (Bierschenk 2010).

Regulated patrimonialism may offer a useful descriptor, then, of PoEs. However, it tells us little about the conditions under which this form of patrimonialism might emerge, as compared to more predatory forms, and may be useful only insofar as it describes a style of rule, rather than a deeper ordering of power or mode of governance. This leaves open the search for an explanatory, as opposed to descriptive, framework to explain how PoEs emerge and function. Clues to this can be found in arguments that the poor functioning of most African bureaucracies comes to a large extent from the contradictions between the imperatives of *political survival* and the professed aims of *state policy* (e.g. Boone 2003, also Eriksen 2011). From this perspective, PoEs represent what happens when these two imperatives of political survival and the aims of state policy converge (Whitfield et al. 2015). It is this deeper level of causality – along with other aspects of politics that PoEs represent and bring forth – that our adapted political settlements framework seeks to capture (Section 5).

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[23] Along with other recent critics of the (over)use of neopatrimonialism as a catch-all explanation for Africa's problems, Mkandawire (2015: 564) argues that: '… while neopatrimonialism can be used to describe different styles of exercising authority, idiosyncratic mannerisms of certain individual leaders, and social practices within states, the concept offers little analytical content and has no predictive value with respect to economic policy and performance'.

PoE as echoes of colonial rule

A further reason to avoid fully deploying the logic of neopatrimonialism is that the notion seems to suggest that African countries were somehow bequeathed rational-legal bureaucratic orders at independence and then set about patrimonialising them. Such a reading overlooks the strong sense in which the colonial state in Africa, primarily an instrument of political domination that did little to establish a national bureaucracy and operated locally through a network of local big-men, bore closer resemblance to the politics of patrimonial rule than to Weber's rational-bureaucratic ideal type (Eriksen 2011, Mamdani 1996). Only at the very apex of the metropolitan centres of government was any effort made towards establishing a rational-bureaucratic order:

> 'Actual bureaucratic characteristics (specific training of the officials, documentary formality, the legality of administrative practice) were only found at the higher levels of the administration. The people who displayed these characteristics had a privileged world view, however; as expatriates, they expected an all-inclusive package with official residences, personnel and foreign allowances' (Bierschenk 2010: 6).

This depiction has a striking resonance with the literature on PoEs, which emphasises that such agencies thrive on a sense of elite-otherness in relation to the rest of the civil service, a status underwritten by higher rates of remuneration, better conditions of service and parallel processes of hiring and promotion. Contemporary PoEs thus seem to reproduce the notion of an elite bureaucratic caste introduced under colonial rule. In the post-colonial era, this particular form of bifurcation benefited the inheritors of colonial privilege rather than the bureaucracy (or society) as a whole:

> 'Hence, the real winners in the decolonialisation process were the few well-educated Africans. This bureaucratic elite became the real power elite and saw itself as the avant-garde of the state and nation building processes, developing an "arrogant paternalism" (Eckert 2007) vis-à-vis their fellow citizens (Scott 1998). The safe-guarding of the rule of this "political-bureaucratic" class quickly emerged as a matter of priority over the task of development (Bates 2008).' (Bierschenk 2010: 7).

Observers of African bureaucracies during the early years of independence concur that bureaucrats swiftly moved on from the reformist zeal of nation-building to become a powerful interest group in themselves (Abernethy 1971), at least until subsequent programmes of structural adjustment decimated African bureaucracies in the 1990s. The patchy literature on the topic suggests that any sense of patriotic commitment amongst bureaucrats re-appears only in states undergoing later struggles of liberation or post-conflict rebuilding. Such moments in countries like Uganda and Rwanda offered a fresh opportunity for bureaucrats to be imbued with a

new sense of mission under ideological political leaders allegedly keen to fight the politics of corruption and patronage.

Ethnicity, class and gender: Towards a political sociology of the bureaucracy in Africa

The literature on politics in post-colonial African states has often been preoccupied with the role of ethnicity and, to the limited extent that the bureaucracy forms a focus within this literature, the tendency is to bemoan the ways in which ethnic partiality has prevented a sense of commitment to the public interest emerging (Ekeh 1975, Berman 2004). However, some studies alert us to the role that ethnic identity may play in enhancing performance and ensuring the accountability of political leaders. One example here is the state-building role played by a minority ethnic group in Botswana, the Kalangala, whom Werbner (2004) argues have been critical to ensuring the quality of public service in the country, as well as building a wider public sphere in other ways. This commitment to the public sphere seems to flow not from the negation of ethnic identity in favour of the secular identity of career bureaucrats, but rather from a form of 'cosmopolitan ethnicity (Werbner 2004) that carries echoes of John Lonsdale's (e.g. 1994) earlier distinction between 'moral ethnicity' and 'ethnic tribalism'. However, the Kalangala were also informed by an awareness of their weakness relative to the larger Tswana majority within the broader configuration of power in Botswana, something that created strong incentives for them to ensure that the public sphere operated according to universal, rather than particularised, norms.

This politics of ethno-regional balance has long been identified as informing the nature of the state in post-colonial Africa. This seems to flow from the same difficulties that faced early state-builders in the Global North: that of ensuring competence whilst also ensuring loyalty amidst competing claims for state power amongst rival political elites and in conditions of low trust. Grindle (2012: 7-8) shows how patronage appointments are used to secure the stability and reach of the state through appointments from different regions (Prussia), to maintain class rule (the United Kingdom) or to change the basis of class rule and develop party-political support (e.g. the United States of America). Recent scholarship of inclusive coalitions has highlighted the extent to which top positions in the bureaucracy are allocated according to the politics of ethno-regional balance in Uganda and Zambia (Lindemann 2010a, 2010b), and appeared to be so increasingly in contexts where ruling elites felt increasingly vulnerable to (horizontal) political threats from rival elites, whether within or outside the ruling coalition. This dynamic seems to have directly shaped appointments of leaders to PoEs in Africa. For example, our earlier work on oil governance in Ghana and Uganda also suggests that largely symbolic high-level positions and low-ranking roles in the oil-governing institutions and agencies might be allocated to indigenes of oil-producing regions, whilst the leadership and technical cadre were being largely protected from such pressures (Hickey et al. 2015a).

Other dimensions of social composition may also play a role here, as with age (e.g. generational shifts between cohorts of civil servants) and gender. For example, the

case of Uganda suggests that there is a gendered politics to appointments of PoE leaders, with President Museveni frequently looking to female bureaucrats to run key agencies that have been identified as potential PoEs, [24] perhaps because he perceives them as less likely to use their position as a base from which to generate enough financial and political capital to become a political threat. As discussed in Section 5, the sense that there is a political sociology to the ways in which bureaucracies and bureaucratic agencies are constructed and how they perform, helps build the case for incorporating a sense of the social bases of power within political settlements thinking (Kelsall 2018).

The role of ideas: For state, nation and profession?

> 'Modern bureaucracy has not only a technical side but also an ethical one. Hence, when the modern civil service was developed in the 19th century … it was not merely a matter of creating institutional innovations to replace the patrimonial bureaucracy that had dominated up to then with its abuse of privileges, corruption and high dependency on politics. The creation of an "appropriate bureaucratic persona" and the "fashioning of an appropriate administrative subjectivity" were equally important' (Bierschenk 2010: 12).

Whilst research on PoEs focuses on what might incentivise elites to encourage bureaucratic effectiveness, an important strand of the literature on modern bureaucracies focuses on the role of ideas in shaping their emergence and functioning.[25] Bureaucrats were to be trained in character as well as competence and to be motivated for public service, an ethos that went above the notion of obedience to bureaucratic rule and incorporated a broader ethical sense of the purpose of public bureaucracies. Bierschenk (2010) insists that this idea of how the state should function is strongly present amongst bureaucrats in sub-Saharan Africa.[26] However, he also stresses that this is one of multiple norms that permeate the everyday practices of civil servants, who 'In their professional practice … must, however, act in complex normative universes for which this ideal image can only present one direction, among many'. Officials are also informed not only by wider concerns with social identity, but also face highly conflicting messages from within public services

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[24] Michael Roll identifies a similar tendency in Nigeria (personal communication, June 2017).

[25] For Mkandawire (2015: 598): 'Policies are shaped not only by interests and structures but also by ideas. In scholarship on Africa from the latter part of the twentieth century, there is considerable interest in the ideas and ideologues that shaped the continent's policies and state formation. Although some of this work borders on the hagiographic, it nevertheless suggests that ideas matter in African political affairs as much as elsewhere. In fact, neglect of the ideational factor by African elites is status quo, and such behavior obscures learning in African politics. The policy failures of African states are never inadvertent or the byproduct of diffusion; they are ineluctably linked to rent seeking and neopatrimonialism, which leaves no room for learning or the interplay of ideas.'

[26] 'This ideal image of the bureaucrat also exists in Africa and it takes effect there – this should be clearly stressed. It is taught in the teacher training institutes and police schools, its formulations – for example the ethical code of the customs officer or the "ten commandments of the good policeman" – can be read in many state office. This ideal image was repeatedly referred to without prompting by our informants' (Bierschenk 2010: 12).

emanating from successive, overlapping and often contradictory processes of governance and policy reform, often driven by external aid agendas. In such contexts, what de Sardan (2013) terms 'practical norms' may predominate. Reflecting the strong sense that 'A bureaucracy is not a machine but a configuration of social processes' (Bierschenk 2010: 13), such insights draw attention to the role that bureaucratic agencies and bureaucrats themselves play in creating and reproducing norms that shape institutional behaviour. These norms may be universalist rather than particular in nature: even within patronage systems where loyalty is often to persons, families or party factions, it may also be 'to a vision of the future or a set of public policy goals preferred by the patron, to the hegemony of a party machine, to an idea of nationhood, class…' (Grindle 2012: 19).

The transnationalised character of the state, governance and PoEs in Africa

The state theory literature discussed in the opening part of this section is alive to the sense that the state, particularly in Africa, is a transnationalised phenomenon (Jessop 2008, Hagmann and Peclard 2010, Eriksen 2011). This feature is significant for PoEs, not only in terms of the flow of ideas from transnational epistemic communities, but in other ways too. For example, there is a sense that certain parts of the state may receive preferential statement from rulers because certain standards need to be maintained in order to retain legitimacy within the international order of sovereign states, not least as this secures them access to the flow of rents that this status generates (de Waal 2015). Within the contemporary neoliberal global economic order, the economic technocracy is particularly important here, as with the function that central banks play in maintaining macroeconomic stability and sending signals of being both credible and open for business to international investors and credit agencies (Harrison 2010).[27] To this extent, PoEs constitute a form of signalling to global actors that a sufficient degree, or at least the right type, of stateness exists. PoEs may thus form part of what Bayart (2000) has referred to as the politics of 'extraversion', whereby they help political rulers to attract transnational flows of recognition, legitimacy and resources, which in turn enable them to pursue their personal projects of rule and accumulation (Soares de Oliveira 2007). A more developmental example of this practice comes from Nigeria, where state-level rulers and bureaucrats made the right noises to secure donor support for 'best-practice' governance reforms that they had little intention of enacting, and which could be diverted to help secure their broader developmentalist project (Porter and Watts 2017: 258).

4.   PoEs and 'Development as intervention': What forms of governance agenda and development ideology do PoEs represent?

This section briefly locates PoEs within the shifting agendas of governance reform and development ideologies that have predominated within international development in the post-war period.

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[27] The military would be another, particularly where a given country's military prowess is of use to international actors, e.g. in maintaining regional security and reducing the flow of migrants to wealthier countries.

What forms of governance do PoEs represent?

At the risk of simplification, three broad approaches to civil service reform have been promoted by development agencies in the Global South over the post-war period (Turner et al. 2015). Within the modernisation school that predominated c1950-1970, the classic school married scientific principles of administration with Weberian bureaucratic forms (Turner et al. 2015), before coming under attack by the neoliberal sensibilities of 'new public management', as located within a broader agenda of 'good governance'. Since the mid-2000s, the good governance agenda has faced significant challenges, with critics pointing to its failures to recognise the political realities of governance in developing countries and calling for a more realistic, politically informed and problem-solving approach. A case can be made for viewing PoEs as representing the character, and also the potential and pitfalls, of all three of these successive governance agendas. For example, some of the bureaucratic enclaves discussed above can be associated with the broader ambition of establishing ideal-type bureaucratic orders, involved as they have been in enacting the core capacities of modern statehood with an emphasis on bureaucratic values of autonomy. However, the above section has already problematised the extent to which certain PoEs fully reflect Weberian sensibilities, in part because of their affinity with patronage, rather than civil service systems, and the significance of 'embeddedness' as well as autonomy (Evans 1995).

To the extent that PoEs have often been formed as solutions that enable rulers to 'reach around' the mainstream civil service, they seem to represent more clearly the ambitions of 'new public management' (NPM). NPM sought to make a direct attack on the 'failings' of civil service systems, including allegations of being aloof, emphasising process over outcome and being resistant to change (Turner et al. 2015). With their special status, emphasis on private sector norms, performance-driven pay, separate pay-scales and organisational location separate from/in parallel to the mainstream civil service, such agencies figure prominently in the PoE literature, and have been seen as part of an assault on the notion of public sector expertise or ethos. PoEs could therefore be seen as part of NPM's '… fundamentally conservative critique of government' that was aligned with a broader assault on 'big government' (Grindle 2012: 129).

However, the affinity between PoEs and the NPM agenda can be exaggerated. Some of the charges against civil service systems by NPM proponents, includingthose of 'insularity, facelessness and lack of accountability', might be made as easily of PoEs as of the mainstream civil service. This conflation also sits uneasily with the role that PoEs played in enabling developmental state projects to emerge, which also undermines the portrayal of such pockets as handmaidens of neoliberalism. More broadly, the need for rulers to find ways of circumnavigating the limitations of standard state bureaucracy, as we noted via Jessop (2015) in Section 3, has a much longer history and responds to a deeper political need for the discretion and flexibility to achieve certain objectives, neoliberal or otherwise.

More recently, Porter and Watts (2017) have suggested that certain PoEs represent a direct refutation of the best-practice logic of the good governance agenda and are more akin to the problem-solving and politically attuned approach that has been advocated as part of the new governance agenda over the past decade. Not only would their case of Edo State in Nigeria have shown up as a basket-case when viewed in terms of standard measures of good governance (e.g. on indexes of public financial management), World Bank advisors were roundly ignored by a reformist governor which was aware that their best-practice reforms did not 'fit' with local capacities, relations and popular legitimation requirements (Porter and Watts 2017: 258). Instead, government performance and delivery was improved dramatically through building relations and making deals that would be considered collusive within standard readings of good governance.

What type of development do PoEs reflect and represent?

A similar pattern, whereby PoEs can be made to serve multiple agendas, emerges from reflections on the forms of development ideology that they seem to represent. The PoEs discussed here have been put into the service of statist projects of development – including full-blown projects of developmental statism, state-owned enterprises and high-functioning regulatory agencies involved in disciplining capital – as well as the neoliberal projects of economic reform. These efforts have sometimes centred on different aspects of the state apparatus, as between ministries of trade and industry and ministries of finance. In other cases, the importance of the same type of agency performing to a high level has been promoted by advocates of both state- and market-led development. One example here would be the role of central banks in maintaining macroeconomic stability, which has been identified as an integral part of the 'southern consensus' of developmental statism (Gore 2000), just as powerful central banks have been celebrated (and damned) as the institutional handmaidens of financialised neoliberalism.[28]

PoEs operating within the realms of economic development and regulatory governance have clearly made definitive contributions to broader goals of social development, including with regards to employment, creating the conditions for inclusive growth and the generation of revenue to be spent on social services. Notwithstanding this, it is less easy to identify PoEs that have been directly responsible for the promotion of improved social, rather than economic, outcomes. The institutional form that PoEs take, their elitist origins and character, their tendency to be characterised by upwards rather than downwards lines of accountability and the sense that they are better suited to delivering on logistical rather than transactional policy challenges, all suggests that they will tend to be poorly aligned with many aspects of an inclusive development agenda. Research undertaken by ESID suggests that PoEs may be seen as an outcome of particular forms of coalition-

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[28] See Lavoie (2012), Jessop (2013), Gabor and Jessop (2015), Blyth and Matthijs (2017), as well as, for instance, the biography by Sebastian Mallaby (2016), and Greenspan's (2013) own autobiography. Also insightful is Stephen Holmes's (2014) review of the latter: see https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/stephen-holmes/how-the-world-works (accessed 6 June 2019).

building, whereby ruling elites form coalitions with bureaucratic actors and often donors in order to achieve politically significant reforms and goals, particularly those central to the survival or legitimacy of the ruling coalition. In terms of composition and orientation, the types of coalition associated with PoEs tend to be narrower than those coalitions associated with wider projects of inclusive development, as argued in recent work on the role of coalitions in shaping development in Latin America and of the 21st century developmental state more broadly.[29]

The effects of some parts of the state apparatus becoming more powerful than others through the investments that rulers and transnational actors make in building PoEs can also have long-lasting effects on the types of development project that countries can pursue. The asymmetrical powers of different bureaucratic units offer uneven opportunities for social interests to pursue their projects:

> 'The articulation of the branches and departments of the state system helps to structure power relations. The relative dominance of departments or ministries can underwrite the hegemony of specific material or ideal interests. For example, the dominant role of the Treasury-Bank of England nexus in Britain is an important element in the structural determination of the hegemony of national and international commercial and banking capital (Ingham 1984)' (Jessop 2015: 68).

The British Labour governments of 1964-1970 tried to institutionalise their preferred projects of labour-friendly industrial policy by establishing a new planning ministry in the Department of Economic Affairs. However, this ran aground in the face of the long-established dominance of the Treasury and Bank of England, not only within economic policy-making but also at the core of the bureaucratic state itself. This asymmetry of state powers has had profound impacts on the possibilities of economic policy in Britain, up to and beyond the financial crisis of 2007-08. As Jessop (2015: 69) notes, '… a long-term shift in hegemony requires not only a new "hegemonic project", but also the reorganization of the state system towards underwriting a more durable shift in the balance of forces'. This kind of struggle is visible today within African countries where 'new producivists' concerned with structural transformation through national planning do regular battle with stalwarts of fiscal responsibility in the entrenched bastions of the treasury and central banks (Chimhowu et al. 2019). The politics of building state capacity is of profound relevance to the future direction/s of development in Africa.

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[29] On the nature of coalitions and their links to different forms of economic and inclusive development, see Berdegué et al. (2015). Their work echoes the shift within the work of Peter Evans (from Evans 1996 to Evans and Heller 2010) on the kinds of alliances required for the 'productivist' developmental state (based around state–business relations) and the 21st century 'capability-driven' developmental state (involving coalitions between political society and civil society).

What emerges most strongly from the foregoing discussion of governance and development is that PoEs embody a high degree of plasticity that makes it difficult to categorise them *qua* PoEs. This further underlines the significance of viewing them as the institutionalised creatures of broader political projects that reflect and reproduce multiple and deeper logics of state power and modes of governance.

5. Reconceptualising the politics of PoEs: A power domains approach

This section makes the case for conceptualising PoEs through the lens of ESID's 'power domains' approach, which integrates political settlements analysis with a focus on the type of policy domain within which different dimensions of inclusive development are contested and enacted (Hickey and Sen 2019). Current work on PoEs has stressed the overriding significance of the role that politics and political economy factors play in shaping the emergence and functioning of PoEs (Leonard 2008, Roll 2014, Whitfield et al. 2015), without specifying, deploying or testing a political theory of what shapes the emergence and performance of PoEs. The notion of 'regulated patrimonialism' that some have used to understand PoEs (e.g. Hout 2013), is potentially useful as a descriptor that helps capture the role of patronage as well as rational-bureaucratic processes in defining how PoEs operate. However, and as discussed above, the term carries with it a good deal of theoretical baggage and also fails to identify the conditions under which different forms of patrimonialism may emerge and change over time. A more promising approach is that deployed by Grindle (2012), whose approach blends historical institutionalism – to capture the long-run continuities involved and the significance of critical junctures – with a focus on the politics of policy reform that emphasises the role of agency (reform champions, policy coalitions, 'technopols', etc.) in driving through change at particular moments in time.

It could be argued, however, that this approach itself has a 'missing middle', in that it does not directly theorise the specific political conditions within which PoEs emerge or become sustained, in terms of the politics that lies in between long-run institutions and the more immediate actors involved in driving bureaucratic reform and agencies forward. A political settlements perspective sits in between these levels of analysis, as it shows how deep-seated institutional endowments (including colonial inheritance, the level of ethnic diversity, etc.) are refracted through shifting configurations of power that operate over mid-range timeframes. Long-run theories of change are poorly equipped to explain when state capacity endowments are actually *deployed* and states effectively implement desired policies within specific timeframes, whilst the politics of policy reform literature draws attention only to how reformers take advantage of windows of opportunity, rather than theorising about how these emerge in relation to shifting configurations of power. Political settlements analysis offers a mid-range theory that can grasp the variations that emerge amongst otherwise similar types of state in terms of the broad overall level of development progress and as a means of understanding and explaining what happens *within*

periods of relative equilibrium.[30] The distinction between state capacity and state performance is particularly important here (Centeno et al. 2017), whereby levels of state capacity may well be inherited from long-run processes of institutional development, whereas the willingness of rulers to develop and/or activate the capacities that they have to hand is more likely to flow from the more contemporary political settlement. Importantly, the existing literature on the politics of PoEs tends to identify a number of political factors (e.g. elite cohesion and interests, executive powers, political-bureaucratic relationships, concerns with political survival and legitimacy, the balance between rules and deals) that are highly resonant with, and largely captured within, a political settlements perspective. Indeed, recent work on PoEs has adopted a political settlements perspective to good effect (e.g. Porter and Watts 2017, Whitfield et al. 2015); the problem is that this has not been undertaken in a systematic or comparative manner, which has in turn undermined progress at the level of theory-building. This section sets out how an adapted political settlements approach can provide the basis for a more systematic investigation of the politics of PoEs in Africa.

Political settlements, policy domains and PoEs

> 'Uneven capabilities, as we shall see, are not best explained merely as artefacts of "low capacity" or variable commitment by policymakers. Nor are episodes of capability and efficacy merely the product of heroic leaders or serendipity. Rather, it is more promising to see asymmetries as the product of dynamic interaction between political settlements and the institutional arenas through which economic and political elites combine, contest or make durable agreements. It follows that, even within so-called dysfunctional states, there are pockets of effectiveness amidst state deficits. ' (Porter and Watts, 2017: 254)

The above quotation reflects the sense that the commitment and capacity of states to deliver development – as represented in the form of PoEs – are most directly shaped by the interaction of particular political settlements and specific institutional arenas, or what might be termed 'policy domains'. This sub-section sets out how the role of political settlements and policy domains, and their interaction, can be captured within a 'power domains' approach (Hickey and Sen 2019).[31] This starts with a restatement of what a political settlements approach can offer to studies of state capacity in Africa, with a particular focus on how insights from critical political theory and new perspectives on African politics discussed above can help further extend its reach.

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[30] This is echoed in Porter and Watts: 'On the one side, recent "institution reform" policy writing seemingly has little to say about the political and economic conditions of possibility in which crises and institutional disjunctures might authorise, and thereby enable, agents to embark on the reform logics they prefer … The dialectical relations between institutions and the ordering of power explains the emergence of "asymmetric capabilities" even in contexts otherwise condemned by the institutional traps of the resource curse' (2017: 251).

[31] See Hickey and Sen (2019, forthcoming) for a fuller overview of the power domains approach, and both Hickey and Hossain (2019) and Nazneen et al. (2019) for its application to the domains of education and women's interests, respectively.

The paper then argues that the same types of political settlement will have different types of outcome, depending on the type of policy domain through which their logics are being refracted.

In the past five years, political settlements analysis has started to offer clear insights into the political conditions under which state capacity and elite commitment to deliver development emerge and can be sustained. Comparative studies across several different types of policy domain (e.g. Bebbington et al. 2018, Gray 2018, Hickey and Hossain 2019, Nazneen et al. 2019, Pritchett et al. 2018, Whitfield et al. 2015),[32] have shown that going beyond a focus on institutions, to examining the forms of politics and power relations that underpin them, offers deeper and more useful insights than the earlier wave of governance research informed by new institutionalism. Political settlements analysis has proved helpful in revealing both how different configurations of power incentivise elites to approach questions of institution building and development in different ways, and also (in some iterations) of how the paradigmatic elite ideas that underpin political settlements shape elite commitment to certain goals (Hickey et al. 2015a, Lavers 2018, Lavers and Hickey 2016).

The term 'political settlement' refers to 'the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based' (di John and Putzel, 2009: 4), and the term has been associated with a range of intellectual influences, including social contract theory, particular forms of institutionalist analysis, and conflict theory. However, there is also a strong and potentially fruitful synergy to be explored between political settlements analysis and critical political theory, which has long viewed the state as a sphere within which broader social struggles take place and become articulated. In Jessop's strategic-relational approach, '… state power is an institutionally and discursively mediated condensation (a reflection and a refraction) of a changing balance of forces that seek to influence the forms, purposes and content of polity, politics, and policy' (2015: 10). Note that Jessop goes further than standard political settlements analysis in introducing the significance of ideas, whilst also being alert to the transnational features of state power. Building on the observation that 'The state is an ensemble of power centres that offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside the state to act for different political purposes' (Jessop 2008: 37), recent work on PoEs has suggested that 'institutions at all scales, from the global to the local, are best understood as '"ensembles of power", that is as the sites of, and the product of intra-elite and elite-citizen contest' (Porter and Watts 2017). This approach opens up a more agential view of 'leadership, networks of connectors and convenors, entrepreneurs and activists' than standard political settlements analysis, and highlights the 'intersection of agency and structural conditions to show how "asymmetric capabilities" can emerge to create, constrain and make possible particular reform options' (Porter and Watts 2017: 2). In line with Watt's (2004) earlier work on oil governance, this multi-levelled and transnationalised

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[32] For more specific country case studies, see the online special edition of *African Affairs* (2018) and a special edition of the *Journal of International Development* (2017).

optic stretches PoE analysis beyond the public bureaucracy, to include the role of international capital and local economic interests in shaping the fields of power relations within which politicians and bureaucrats operate.

In its standard form, political settlements analysis focuses on how the configuration of power involving the ruling coalition shapes the incentives of elites to develop growth-enhancing institutions and the capacity to enforce these (Khan 2010, 2017). In particular, Khan argues that if a ruling coalition perceives that the threat to its hold on power is weak, it may feel confident enough to adopt a longer-term horizon towards questions of institution-building and development, with its relative dominance vis-à-vis other elites and organised social groups also enabling enforcement capabilities. Where the level of competition for political power is much higher, the threat of losing power means that the incentives for ruling coalitions to use public office and resources to maintain political loyalty through clientelistic means can be overwhelming. In such contexts, we may expect to see highly personalised forms of governance and elite capture of institutions and resources (Levy 2014). The presence of strong excluded coalitions is likely to reduce the time horizons of the ruling coalition and incentivise short-term moves to retain power. In theory, then, the highest levels of state capacity for development should be found within dominant rather than competitive settlements.

Whilst this formulation has helped provide traction on some important questions, and is closely aligned with the finding in the literature discussed above, that PoEs have historically flourished within dominant rather than more competitive settings, a number of limitations remain. In particular, history is clear that political dominance is insufficient, in and of itself, to secure a long-term commitment to state-building and development, with many dominant leaders in countries from Angola to Zaire adopting more predatory and personalised forms of rule. Other conditions are clearly necessary before dominance can become developmental, and we suggest here that these are likely to come from two sources that can also be theorised as largely endogenous to particular political settlements: the social foundations of power; and paradigmatic ideas.

The configuration of power within a political settlement extends beyond inter-elite relationships to encompass wider forms of state–society relations. The sociological basis of political settlements matters here, particularly in terms of the social groups that ruling coalitions rely on to maintain themselves in power and the extent to which social groups possess the resources and capacities to disrupt the coalition or even the settlement itself. Slater (2010) argues that ruling elites will only invest in state-building when they perceive themselves to be vulnerable to overthrow from below, and therefore seek a means of distributing public goods more broadly to offset this risk because of a perception of 'systemic vulnerability'. In work undertaken for ESID, Tim Kelsall (2018) has started to retheorise political settlements analysis to bring into focus the *type* of social groups that ruling coalitions rely on for support and to which they are likely to respond with regards to distributive demands. This is likely to be

particularly important when the focus shifts from concerns with economic development to a focus on social or human development. Resting on the premise that the power of groups in society is likely to be a good predictor of who will benefit from government policy, ruling coalitions can be deemed to be either 'broad' or 'narrow' in relation to the broader social composition. Although more work is required to elaborate how the social foundations of power might be operationalised within a new typology of political settlements, this more sociological approach to the theory constitutes a potentially significant advance with regards to its causal powers.

Ideas are another important driver of elite commitment and can also be theorised as constitutive elements of political settlements. Although original formulations of political settlement analysis tended to invoke a rational choice version of incentive-driven elite behaviour, ESID research has underlined the importance of ideas in shaping the nature of the political settlement, its configuration of power, the perceptions of ruling elites and their commitment to particular forms of state-building and development (Lavers 2018). Here we align with a broader body of work, including critical political theory, that has shown how institutional change is profoundly shaped by ideational factors and that 'interests' are perceived constructs and therefore ideational in nature (Hay 2011, Schmidt 2008). Ideas are central to how political settlements function and are maintained, in that these provide 'a relatively coherent set of assumptions about the functioning of economic, social and political institutions' (Béland 2005: 8). These overarching ideas not only shape elite interests, Lavers (2018) notes, but 'can also be actively used by actors to achieve their perceived interests, for example, with elites securing the support of lower level factions through appeals to ideas such as nationalism, social justice or religion'.

Figure 1: ESID's revised conceptual framework
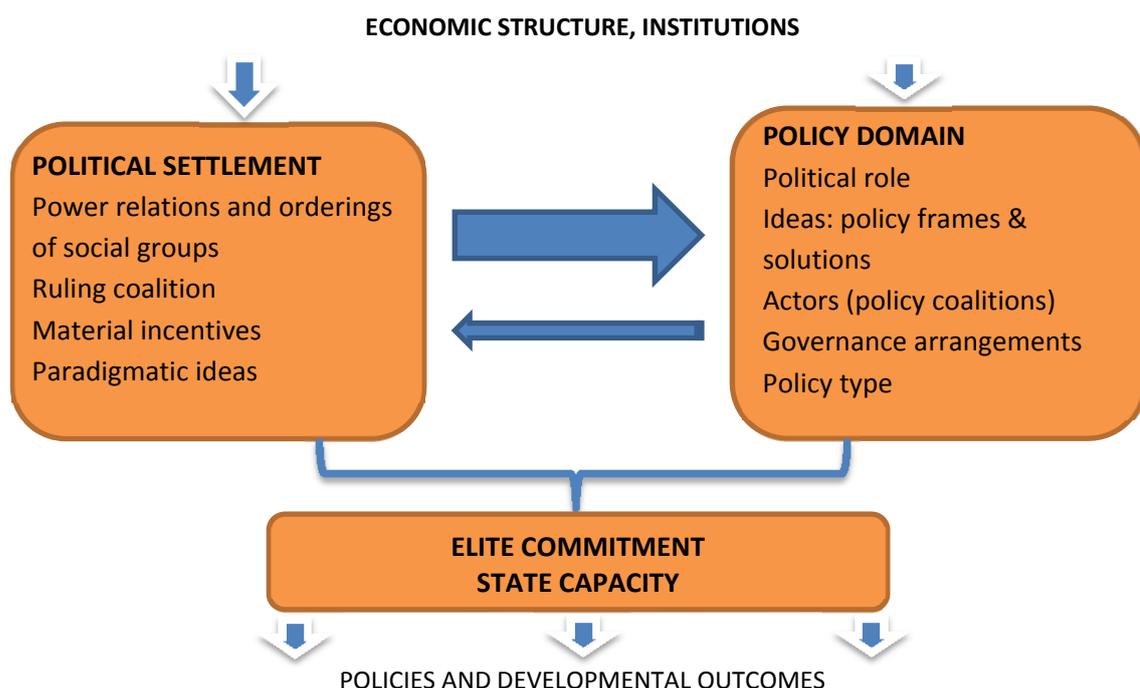
As indicated in Figure 1, both the political settlement and the policy domain (defined below) are shaped by ideas. Schmidt's (2008) discursive institutionalist schema helps show the (interrelated) levels at which ideas operate, with paradigmatic ideas operating primarily within the realm of political settlements, whilst problem definitions and policy solutions operate primarily within the policy domain. In relation to PoEs, the above review suggests that, whilst paradigmatic ideas tend to operate primarily at the level of political rulers, leading bureaucrats may also adhere to wider projects of nation-building and certain forms of development, as well as being experts in the arts of problem-framing and the delivery of policy solutions. This suggests that our approach will need to track carefully the role that different levels and types of idea play in shaping elite commitment to building PoEs in certain areas of governance and development policy, in shaping bureaucratic commitment to effective performance, and in identifying the ideational basis of particular forms of organisational practice within certain PoEs.

The policy domain

A policy domain can be defined as a meso-level field of power relations associated with specific fields of interest or concern, and constitutes a more politicised notion than that of 'sectors'. Policy domains are constituted by those actors, ideas and institutions that directly govern and shape the negotiation of agendas within a specific field. Some critical theorists have already proposed concepts such as the 'oil assemblage' to capture important fields of natural resource governance (Watts 2004) and ESID's work includes the domain of women's interests (Nazneen et al. 2019), education (Hickey and Hossain 2019), and public sector reform (Yanguas 2017). Policy domains are both integral to the broader political settlement and possess their own logics and characteristics. As indicated in Figure 1, it is important to grasp the political role that different policy domains play in ensuring the survival of the ruling coalition and the delivery of its ideological projects, through their contribution of either rents and/or legitimacy. This will directly shape the extent of elite interest in the domain, and the degree of politicisation and/or protection to which it is subjected. Other key features of policy domains include:

- Ideas: as discussed above, the ideas that predominate within policy domains concern the identification of policy problems and solutions. Such ideas may gain more traction the more strongly they are aligned with broader paradigmatic ideas, and can provide bureaucrats, bureaucratic organisations and the policy coalitions that underpin them with shared frames of reference around which to cohere.
- Actors: these are likely to include a mixture of politicians and bureaucrats at multiple levels, private sector actors (firms and individual capitalists), civil society actors (e.g. unions, business associations, advocacy organisations, movements), development agencies, and other 'politically salient stakeholders' (Levy and Walton 2013). The incentives and ideas of these actors, and their capacity to form coalitions across different interest groups

and around particular ideas (Leftwich 2010), will closely shape the possibilities for PoEs to emerge within a given domain. Some of the PoE literature suggests that transnational actors play a particularly important role in shaping the capacity of specific public sector organisations to perform effectively

- Governance arrangements: these include the processes through which policies are formulated and implemented, and the mechanisms in place to ensure accountability. From a PoE perspective, this includes issues of organisational leadership and management, and also less formalised norms through which bureaucratic behavior is governed, including organisational culture (Grindle 1997)

- Policy type: a distinction to be drawn here is between policy challenges that are primarily 'logistical' in nature, whereby the problem is largely one that can be solved through technical means (e.g. employing more staff, delivering more resources, building more infrastructure); and challenges that are 'transactional', which may require shifts in behaviour and multiple forms of human interaction and multiple levels before progress can occur (Andrews et al. 2017). This resonates with Roll's suggestion that organisational 'function' is a defining feature of PoEs, which are more likely to emerge around policy challenges that are logistical rather than transactional in character

The benefits of examining how political settlements shape PoEs through particular policy domains have already been made apparent in Whitfield et al. (2015).[33] The policy domain element of our framework also responds to Jessop's argument that the opportunities and constraints for centres of excellence to emerge are defined in part by the nature of the sector involved, and specifically the capacity of social actors involved therein to shape the incentives of elites (Jessop 2015).

6.   Researching PoEs: Methodological issues and approaches

This section discusses some of the methodological challenges involved in researching the politics of PoEs. The starting point is the current absence of PoE studies that have chosen either country or organisational cases in a systematic way, whether through identifying country cases that represent different types of political context or identifying public sector organisations that are demonstrably 'high-performing'.

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[33] Whitfield et al. (2015) clearly identify the variable nature of elite consensus across and also within different sectors. For example, unlike the elite consensus that emerged in Mozambique around sugar, the fisheries sector was riven by tensions between two factions, one seeking a national route, the others wanting to preserve the status quo that delivered spoils. Their work on the dairy industry in Uganda, which showed that those aspects of the industry that touched on the ethno-territorial basis of ruling elites were better served by the state bureaucracy than those operating within other parts of the country, suggests that the 'social composition' of the ruling coalition is also worth identifying and tracking within our work.

Country case study selection

We have not identified any study of PoEs that seeks to systematically compare this phenomenon across different types of political context. [34] This has arguably undermined the progress of theory-building around PoEs and also reduced the policy relevance of research in this field. A comparative case study approach offers the most appropriate research design for generating a systematic body of knowledge which can both advance theory and produce findings that have policy relevance within and across different contexts (George and Bennett 2005). This is the approach that we adopt here, whereby we have chosen country cases to reflect different types of political settlement. More specifically, the country cases have been chosen to reflect the two main forms of political settlement identified in the literature, with two countries where power is relatively 'concentrated' around 'dominant' ruling coalitions – namely Rwanda and Uganda – and two cases where power is more 'dispersed' within much more 'competitive' contexts – namely Ghana and Zambia.[35]

The adoption of a political settlements perspective helps to suggest some propositions to be explored within and across our case studies. The first concerns the likely location of PoEs within the state apparatus, which from a political settlements perspective is most likely to occur in policy domains that are critical to either regime survival and/or ideological commitments to state-building.

- ***Proposition 1:*** PoEs are likeliest to emerge and be sustained within policy domains that are critical to (a) basic state functioning and/or (b) the survival of political rulers.

In relation to the influence of different *types* of political settlement, and following the work of Khan (2010) and also the PoE literature discussed above, two propositions that seem to emerge would be that:

- ***Proposition 2a:*** PoEs are more likely to emerge, perform well and be sustained in political settlements where power is 'concentrated', as this can lengthen the time horizons of elites and enable clear principle–agent relationships to develop between rulers and bureaucrats over time.
- ***Proposition 2b:*** higher levels of power dispersion will reduce the possibility of PoEs being formed and undermine the performance of existing PoEs, as this would tend to incentivise rulers to undertake more short-term actions and multiply the number of principles involved in directing bureaucratic behaviour.

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[34] One exception might be Hout's (2013) study of how the performance of state-owned oil enterprises differs according to the nature of patrimonialism in two different countries of the ex-Soviet Union. Also see Hout (2014) on the oil agency in Suriname.

[35] The project will primarily deploy Kelsall's (2018) distinction between that are either 'concentrated' or 'dispersed' rather than Khan's distinction between 'dominant' and 'competitive', in order to focus more directly on underlying configurations of political power rather than risk reproducing the distinction between 'authoritarian' and 'democratic' regime types.

More work is required to elaborate how the social foundations of power might be operationalised within a new typology of political settlements, and what kinds of propositions this might lead to (Kelsall 2018). However, the political sociology literature on state-building, from which this move draws much of its inspiration (e.g. Slater 2010), is useful here. A key proposition is that where ruling coalitions perceive either themselves and/or the broader political settlement to be subject to 'systemic vulnerability' (including from the threat of contentious politics from below), they engaged in 'protectionist pacts' that included institution-building; absent such a threat and elites opted for the easier world of 'provisioning pacts', whereby rulers distribute public goods in return for political loyalty. This could lead us to propose that:

- ***Proposition 3a***: where power is concentrated and elites are both dominant and perceive themselves to be subject to 'systemic vulnerability', PoEs may emerge and be sustained as part of a broader state-building strategy.

However, and bearing in mind the argument above that PoEs may form part of a strategy of patronage as well as or instead of one of state-building (Grindle 2012), it is plausible to suggest that the establishment and maintenance of PoEs may form part of a provisioning pact (as with Sonangol, Olivera de Soares 2007).

- ***Proposition 3b***: where elites are dominant but not subject to 'systemic vulnerability', PoEs may emerge and be sustained as part of a strategy of patronage-based regime survival.

It is worth noting that Proposition 2a contrasts with Whitfield et al.'s (2015: 97) finding that:

> 'The degree of vulnerability of the ruling elites shapes whether a pocket of efficiency emerges … A low degree of vulnerability means that ruling elites are better able to absorb social costs and conflict that come from changing the existing distribution of benefits or the allocation of state resources. In this situation, it is easier to create a pocket of efficiency'.

Conversely, where elites feel vulnerable, they will focus on survival and not risk incurring the costs of pursuing institutional changes where resistance is expected. Our comparative analysis will aim to shed further light on these propositions and arrive at a more rigorous theory of PoEs in relation to deeper processes of regime survival and state-building in Africa. Importantly, our comparative analysis of four countries from two different types will focus on both within- and between-type comparisons, and also within and across case comparisons, given the strong possibility that the degree of power concentration has likely varied over time within specific cases. This will enable us to test the framework from multiple angles.

Choice of organisational case studies

Studies of PoEs have struggled to overcome the lack of a clear identification strategy. Simply put, how can we know – objectively – that some organisations are systematically performing at a higher level than most other organisations in the same governance context? General indexes of state capacity, such as the World Bank's World Governance Indicators, are of little value here, as they operate at an aggregate country level rather than offering a more disaggregated view of how capacities are distributed across public sector organisations within specific countries. As Bersch et al. (2017) note, we do not currently have a reliable means of comparing the capacities of bureaucratic agencies within the same context, and whilst they then go on to construct such an index for Brazil, they acknowledge that the data required for this task is simply not available for most countries in the developing world, including sub-Saharan Africa. Although some efforts are under way to achieve a much more fine-grained perspective on within-state levels of bureaucratic capacity,[36] we are currently left with identifying alternative means of identifying high-performing agencies.

Following other research into PoEs (McDonnell 2017), we therefore decided to undertake an expert survey within each country context, whereby key informants were invited to identify what they saw as being the highest-performing public sector agencies. Given the absence of easily quantifiable and 'objective' metrics on governance, expert surveys have become commonplace within governance research, and underpin many leading indexes, including the World Governance Indicators, and indexes produced by the Varieties of Democracy and the Quality of Government projects. Expert surveys are obviously subjective in nature, although given the intangible nature of many dimensions of governance, they may have greater validity than objective measures that are unable to properly reflect the nature of what is being measured.[37] Obvious problems include the nature of the experts consulted and their depth and range of knowledge of the subject area, the difficulties of including the views of end-users of public sector organisations, and problems of reputational bias, whereby higher-profile organisations (including those with public relations operations) may receive higher rankings than less visible or media-savvy organisations.

Given these potential problems, we sought to identify experts who had either working and/or academic expertise of public sector organisations from multiple perspectives. These include public sector professionals, politicians, officials within international development agencies, private sector representatives, researchers and consultants, and civil society representatives, including those working in the media. We sought to interview between 20 and 30 experts per country, in person wherever possible,

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[36] See the World Bank's Bureaucracy Lab:
http://www.worldbank.org/en/research/dime/brief/Bureaucracy-Lab (accessed 6 June 2019).
[37] For example, the level of democracy cannot be simply read off the regularity of elections or levels of voter turnout, but also by how people experience interactions with powerholders and how much political space they have to manoeuvre within.

although a few surveys were completed via email. The survey (Appendix I) included a range of questions, the most important being:

> 'In your experience and knowledge, are there any ministries, departments, or agencies that stand out as examples of highly effective government administration? By highly effective, we refer to the capacity to <u>regularly achieve mandated functions</u> and to <u>perform at a higher level than other ministries/departments/agencies in a similar area of government</u>. Please identify sub-units where appropriate, e.g. specific departments within ministries'.

Responses were then aggregated and analysed, with a view to identifying a ranking of potential PoEs from which we could choose organisations for in-depth case-study analysis. Once we had a list to work with, we sought to offset problems of reputational bias by triangulating our survey findings with more 'objective' forms of performance data through which to corroborate the findings. This included internal governmental assessments of particular sectors and agencies, international evaluations of particular aspects of performance and also macro-level data on outcome indicators, where these could be plausibly tied to the performance of specific organisations (e.g. central banks and the control of inflation).

The results of each country survey and a comparative analysis of these findings will be presented and discussed in subsequent papers. Here we simply record the key findings on high-performing agencies and how they shaped our choice of case-study organisations. The most striking finding was that, in each country, respondents all tended to identify organisations that operated within the 'economic technocracy' as being amongst the highest-performing agencies, particularly in terms of ministries of finance (usually the budget department), central banks (particularly around the control of inflation) and revenue authorities. This tends to support the first proposition indicated above, with regards to PoEs being most likely to emerge in relation to core state functions. This outcome might have been predicted in advance, due to the logistical nature of the tasks performed within this domain and the high levels of capacity-building and oversight from international actors to which they are subjected. However, our survey results also suggested that these agencies had not performed uniformly well over time, which suggested that other drivers might also be at play. Choosing organisations whose performance had been deemed to fluctuate over time also offered the possibility of undertaking within-case comparisons, particularly in relation to changing political settlement dynamics over time. Although this focus on the economic technocracy limited our range, in terms of the policy domains being covered, this did offer a good range of the different *types* of public sector organisation, ranging from standard governmental departments through semi- to fully autonomous agencies (see Table 1 below). It also worked well in terms of offering a strong basis for comparing how similar types of organisation performed across different political contexts.

Table 1: Organisational case study selection

Organisational type ➜ Type of political settlement ⬇	Traditional Department (Finance ministry budget departments)	Semi-autonomous agencies (Revenue authorities)	Autonomous agency /regulatory body (Central banks)	Contextual choices
Concentrated: Rwanda	MINECOFIN	RRA	BRZ	State-building (meritocracy); MININFRA
Concentrated: Uganda	MFPED	URA	BoU	NWSC
Dispersed: Ghana	MFNEP	GRA	BoU	State-building (meritocracy vs. political loyalty)
Dispersed: Zambia	MoF	ZRA	BoZ	SCCI

Our surveys also threw up two other intriguing findings. The first was the identification of high-performing agencies beyond the economic technocracy, as with the cases of the National Water and Sewerage Corporation in Uganda and the Seed Control and Certification Institute in Zambia (we were able to swiftly verify these choices through reference to international standards and awards, and other less subjective sources). The absence of an obvious explanation for these agencies to be such high performers, including with reference to core state functions and regime survival, made them too intriguing to ignore, despite the lack of comparability on offer here.

The second striking finding emerged in relation to a different survey question, namely:

> 'Which of the following statements best describes the distribution of performance amongst different parts of government in (insert country name)?
> a) Most ministries/departments/agencies regularly deliver on their mandate, with only a few failing to do so.
> b) On average, around half of all ministries/departments/agencies regularly deliver on their mandate, whilst the remainder struggle to do so.
> c) Only a few ministries/departments/agencies regularly deliver on their mandate, whilst the majority generally fail to do so'.

For Uganda and Zambia, the patterns that emerged from our respondents were very similar. Around three-quarters of respondents chose 'c', with none choosing 'a'. This suggested that the PoE phenomenon was prominent in these two countries, in line

with Michael Roll's definition of high-performing agencies in otherwise dysfunctional governance contexts. This pattern was still apparent in Ghana, albeit to a lesser extent, with respondents split evenly between those choosing 'a' and those choosing either 'b' or 'c'. Most strikingly, a clear majority of our respondents in Rwanda chose 'a', which suggested that it was actually very difficult to identify PoEs at all in this context, and that there instead seemed to have been a more generalised effort to improve state performance across the board, rather than only in selective agencies. This pattern largely aligns with figures from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (IIAG 2016), which suggests that Ghana and Rwanda currently outperform Uganda and Zambia on measures of 'government effectiveness'. As Figure 1 reveals, however, Ghana's scores have been declining over the past decade, in contrast to Rwanda's rising trajectory. Importantly, the composition of each country's aggregate score is very different. Whereas Rwanda scores highly on indicators related to 'public management', Ghana's recent decline has mainly been driven by falling scores in this area, with its overall higher score driven mainly by good performance in participation and human rights, as well as in safety and rule of law. From a narrow political settlements perspective, this could suggest that competitive pressures might be undermining state performance in Ghana (e.g. through the politicisation of the bureaucracy), whereas the concentration of power around the ruling coalition in Rwanda was enabling a broader process of state-building to take place.

Given that our PoE surveys in Ghana and Rwanda did not identify any obvious other agencies to investigate further, we decided to probe into these findings by examining the more general pattern of state capabilities and performance in each country. This would involve a particular focus on the interplay of meritocracy and political loyalty within civil service appointments and progression, as inspired by Grindle's (2012) study of the movement from patronage to civil-service based systems. This would further ensure that our study of PoEs was embedded in wider processes of state formation and democratisation. In addition, we identified a part of government in Rwanda base (namely the Ministry of Infrastructure) that respondents there identified as having recently been targeted for major reforms and which seemed to be improving its performance from a low base, in order to try and capture this broader process in motion.

Table 1 records the focus of our country-level investigations. It is perhaps worth noting here that certain public sector organisations that survey respondents identified as high-performing were ruled out here, because we adopted Michael Roll's (2014) four criteria required for an agency to be considered as a pocket of effectiveness:

1. Relative effectiveness
2. Capacity to deliver nationally
3. Delivery in line with human rights and laws, in the sense of not using illegal means or violating human rights, particularly in relation to law enforcement
4. Persists for at least five years.

For example, this meant that we did not look at either the military (given the association with human rights abuses) or municipal authorities (lack of national scope), despite these being ranked highly in some of our country surveys. Our focus on specific entities may also have meant that we missed out on high-performing networks or broader governance systems. For example, some of the most interesting recent work on 'PoEs' has focused on networks or channels of effectiveness, rather than agencies per se. This includes studies of a high-performing strategic team within Edo state in Nigeria (Porter and Watts 2017), which delivered impressive results within infrastructure and revenue generation, through building coalitions, connections and networks across political/bureaucratic/commercial boundaries and different levels, and the 'channel of effectiveness' identified in Cambodia's health sector by Kelsall and Seiha (2014).

Fig 1: Ghana's governance profile in comparative perspective, 2000-2015
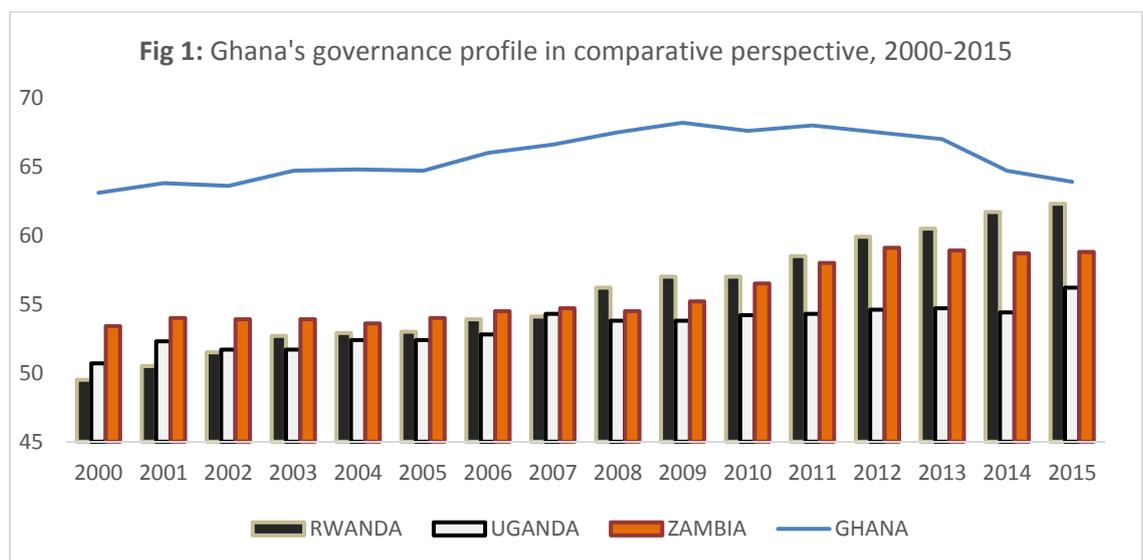
Source: Constructed by Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, based on the IIAG dataset (2016).

The next stage of the project will involve subjecting each case to in-depth qualitative investigation through literature reviews and documentary analysis, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and field visits. This will include undertaking in-depth organisational biographies, with particular focus on identifying how our organisations have responded to moments of 'crisis', whether political, economic or organisational in nature. This will be achieved through a process-tracing approach (George and Bennett 2005) that tracks back from key moments to produce detailed narratives of institutional performance over time. These performance trajectories will then be mapped onto political settlement dynamics over time within each case, whilst also tracking other potential drivers of performance (e.g. leadership and management, international support). Followed by within- and across-case analysis, this will enable the research to produce relevant and verifiable causal stories that can help inform both theory development around the politics of PoEs, and also policy actors interested in exploring the potential and pitfalls of promoting PoEs within certain types of political context.

7. Conclusion

The renewed interest in the role that bureaucratic 'pockets of effectiveness' can play in enabling African countries to progress has emphasised that politics plays a leading role in shaping the emergence and sustainability of high-performing public sector organisations. However, the field currently lacks the kind of systematic and comparative research required to start identifying the types of political conditions under which PoEs emerge and become sustained. This paper has proposed a conceptual and methodological approach that can start to address this challenge. It has argued that an alignment of political settlements analysis with critical theories of state power and African politics can help reveal the ways in which PoEs are both shaped by, and help to reproduce, particular forms of politics and institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular reference to the competing logics of regime survival, state-building and democratisation. This in turn needs to be explored in relation to the particular policy domains within which specific PoEs are located. The paper has also suggested a comparative case-study approach to researching PoEs, and briefly discussed the details and findings of survey work undertaken for a new research project on PoEs and state-building in Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia and also Kenya. Forthcoming papers from this project will include in-depth case studies of specific PoEs in each country, synthesised country analyses and comparative overviews.

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