Microfoundations of Socially Embedded Bureaucracies

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I: Introduction

There is a disconnect at the heart of the discourse on public sector governance. On the one hand, confidence in the public sector has been declining in country after country. On the other hand, the range of mainstream prescriptions for public sector reform is narrow, and falls short of the existential stakes of the challenge at hand.

The mainstream prescriptions have centered around the puzzle of how to reconcile a variety of seemingly contradictory imperatives. These include: navigating the tension between top-down political control and technical expertise; balancing rule-boundedness and day-to-day autonomy for public officials responsible for implementation; and engaging civil society in a way that strengthens accountability for performance without fueling further disillusion.   A shared challenge underlies each of these tensions: How to find a way forward within the confines of the classic hierarchical logic of how public bureaucracies should be organized? At the least, this is an extraordinary narrow needle to thread.[1]

This paper complements efforts to reconcile the above tensions within the confines of hierarchical governance by exploring the potential and limits of a very different entry point – one centered around a reformulation of the relationship between public bureaucracies and non-governmental stakeholders. In both high-income and developing countries, there is increasing scholarly (and practical) interest in an approach to governance reform centered around a reformulation of the bureaucracy-society interface. One (high-income-country oriented) strand of scholarship explores the potential of collaborative governance in the USA and other high-income countries; another strand focuses on the potential of participatory possibilities as a response to governance weaknesses in developing countries. This paper draws on both of these literatures; it aims to provide a robust conceptual micro-foundation for an ongoing program of research on 'socially-embedded' interactions between bureaucracy and society.

In the mainstream approach,   civil society's role in the governance of public bureaucracies is limited to being part of a broader system of 'demand-side' accountability. By contrast, this paper explores the potential for improving public sector performance through problem-focused relationships of co-operation between staff within public bureaucracies and stakeholders outside of government – 'socially embedded bureaucracies (SEB), as per the paper's title. A companion conceptual paper will explore SEB's potential for broader systemic impact, including vis-a-vis civic perceptions of the legitimacy of the public domain. Companion empirical papers will explore how efforts to graft SEB onto conventional governance arrangements have played out in practice.[2]

The analysis proceeds as follows. Section II elaborates on what is meant by social embeddedness. Section III lays out three distinctive ways in which social embeddedness can add value. Section IV explores how the relevance of SEB varies across political and institutional contexts. Section V explores whether and how SEB-style co-operation can be aligned with the hierarchical chain of relationships that generally comprise the organizing principle for public bureaucracies.

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[1] For an in-depth comparative analysis of the range of possibilities for threading the needle, see Bersch and Fukuyama (2023).

[2]. Heywood and Levy (2023) explore some interactions between state capacity and civil society in South Africa. Levy also is at the early stages of a new research program centered around process tracing analyses of multistakeholder efforts to address Southern California's twin crises of affordable housing and homelessness.

II: Introducing Social Embeddedness

As defined here, a socially-embedded bureaucracy[3] (SEB) is characterized by:
> *"problem-focused relationships of co-operation between staff within public bureaucracies and stakeholders outside of government, including governance arrangements that support such co-operation".*

Figure 1 contrasts SEB and a conventional (autonomous; 'Weberian') characterization of how bureaucracies 'should' work across three dimensions: whether institutional arrangements are hierarchical (and insulated from societal pressures) or horizontal (and thus oriented towards engaging multiple stakeholders); whether modes of interaction (both within the bureaucracy and at the interface with other stakeholders) are legalistic or deliberative; and whether the presumptive entry point for improving performance is systems- focused ('getting the rules right') or whether it is problem-focused, oriented towards fostering initiative. The paragraphs that follow elaborate in turn on each of these contrasts.

Figure 1: Autonomous and socially-embedded bureaucracies
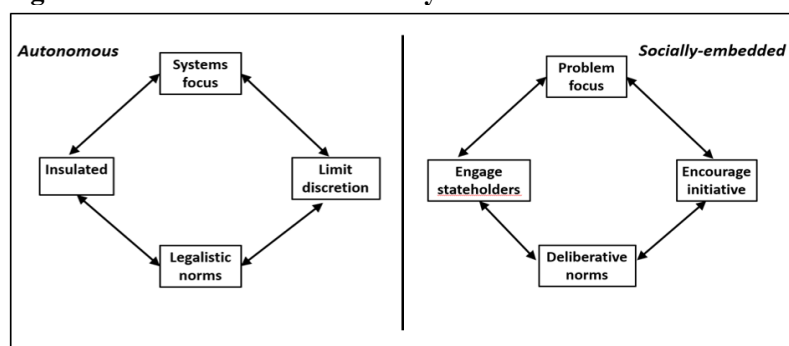
The first set of contrasts concerns the institutional arrangements that govern the relationships between public bureaucracies and society. Nobel-prize-winning economist Douglass North defines institutions colloquially as 'the rules of the game' and, more precisely, as "humanly devised constraints which govern human interactions". In the conventional vision of bureaucracy, a hierarchical chain of principal-agent relationships provides the basis for framing the bureaucracy-society relationship: [4]

- Impartial elections sort among competing political leaders.
- Political leaders and senior, technically-skilled public officials then interact with one another in structured processes to craft coherent policy goals, aligned with the winning political platforms.
- Goals and policy having been set, rule-bound processes insulate public bureaucracy from political pressures, sustaining policy coherence.
- Within the rule-bound framework, hierarchically organized public bureaucracies proceed with implementation.

Accountability for performance also is supported by a variety of horizontal mechanisms – the justice system and other formal institutions of check and balance, plus a variety of less-formal "demand-side" mechanisms for "holding government to account" (e.g. advocacy/protest; championing transparency; investigative journalism).

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[3] Note that insofar as the focus is on relationships between non-governmental stakeholders and public bureaucracies, the emphasis is less on wholly upstream, deliberative-democracy-like participatory processes of priority-setting , and more on downstream challenges of implementation.

[4] The 'long route of accountability' laid out in World Bank (2004) provides a useful summary depiction.

An hierarchical relationship between principals and agents is however, only one of multiple forms that institutions might take; horizontal engagements among multiple principals is another. Nobel prize winner, Elinor Ostrom explored the latter under the rubric of collective action, which she defined as a process whereby:

> "*a group of principals can organize and govern themselves to adopt coordinated strategies to obtain (and maintain) higher joint benefits when all face temptations to free-ride, shirk, or otherwise act opportunistically.*"

SEB, as a distinctive institutional form, grafts horizontal interactions between public officials and non-governmental actors onto bureaucratic hierarchies.[5]

A second set of contrasts between the conventional view of bureaucracy and SEB is the centrality in the latter of deliberative (as distinct from legalistic) norms of interaction. Mangla (2022) defines bureaucratic norms as "*the informal rules that influence how bureaucrats relate to one another and understand an agency's collective purpose*". He argues (and explores in depth in a contrast between prevailing norms in bureaucracies in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Himichal Pradesh) that:

> "*Legalistic bureaucracy urges fidelity to administrative rules and procedures….The ideal-typical Weberian state motivates bureaucrats to set aside their private interests and advance the public good…by insulating bureaucrats from political pressures and instilling a commitment to rational-legal norms….Bureaucrats are judged for following rules and not for the consequences that emanate from their actions….*"

By contrast:

> "*Deliberative bureaucracy promotes flexibility and problem-solving….it induces a participatory dynamic that urges officials to negotiate policy problems through discussion and adjust their outlooks to shifting circumstances…..*"[6]

Put differently, deliberative discourse is necessary for fostering relationships of co-operation.

The above is not intended to imply that horizontal and deliberative approaches to public governance are necessarily superior to hierarchical and legalistic ones. For one thing, whether hierarchical or horizontal governance arrangements are preferred varies according to the task that needs accomplishing. As Wilson (1989) detailed, and Section IV below elaborates, bureaucracies enmeshed in a web of process compliance can effectively implement logistical tasks, but are not well-placed to implement craft-oriented tasks that call for adaptability and creativity. For another, as Box 1 explores the transactions costs of both horizontal and hierarchical governance can be high - and, as Section IV will explore, are influenced by variations in the broader political and institutional context. The exploration of SEB in this paper is thus in the spirit of institutional pluralism; its intent is to broaden the menu of possibilities, not replace one institutional dictum with another.

Box 1: Institutions and their transactions costs

The relationship between institutions and the transactions costs of co-operation was analyzed in careful detail by Nobel-prize winning economist Oliver Williamson (1985; 2000). Williamson's analysis centers around two sets of variables: the information protagonists have about each other's behavior, and the goals and values that protagonists bring to their engagement. In contexts where all protagonists have full information and/or where all protagonists engage altruistically, both hierarchical and horizontal governance can proceed straightforwardly and costlessly. In the real world, neither condition is met. In consequence:

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[5] Along similar lines, Bertelli and Smith (2009) p. i24 suggest that "*one of the primary roles for managers in the new governance is balancing the predominant values of accountability, equity and responsibility inherent in the vertical model, with efficiency and flexibility characterizing the horizontal model.*"

[6] Quoted from Mangla (2022) pp. 52-55

- Even where there are evident joint gains from working together, continuing disagreement among protagonists over what should be the distribution of benefits can undercut almost entirely the prospects for co-operation. (This is the game of 'battle' in game theory parlance.)
- Any agreement on the distribution of benefits might involve ex post redistribution of gains, creating a 'time inconsistency' problem – an increase in value added having been achieved, those who gain the most potentially could renege on their prior agreements to share these benefits. (As per game theory, this problem is lessened in open-ended, repeated games.)
- Credible commitment also can be difficult insofar as agreements made ex ante, may (at least in part) be unobservable to others, or unenforceable by others - the spectre of free-riding or shirking. (This is the classic game theoretic 'prisoners dilemma problem.)

Institutions – 'rules of the game, and their monitoring and enforcement - mitigate these hazards, but establishing and sustaining them brings transactions costs. Workable institutions are ones where the gross benefits that they make possible exceed the transactions costs that they inevitably also generate.

Institutions can be both formal and informal. Strong formal institutions (notably including the justice system) provide credibility that rules of the game will be enforced. Yet, an exclusive focus on formal institutions is too narrow. For one thing, formal contracts are both costly and cannot cover all eventualities; ex post adaptation to unanticipated circumstances will invariably be required. For another, as North, Wallis and Weingast (2007) argue (and as Section IV will explore further), 'impersonal' (formal) institutions generally emerge as an evolution from prior, informal rules of the game; in many contexts formal institutions are weak, and cannot magically be conjured into being.

Third is the contrast between the systems-orientation of Weberian bureaucracies and the problem-orientation of SEB. A focus on systems follows directly from the presumption that bureaucracies should be rule-following, and thus that the priority for bureaucratic improvement is to 'get the rules right'. By contrast, a problem-orientation champions deliberative engagement – not only (as already noted) as a necessary condition for multistakeholder co-operation, but also as key to a practical way of addressing concrete challenges.

Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017)[7] make a far-reaching case for the superiority of a problem-driven approach. They argue that a problem focus fosters coalition-building among stakeholders. *"Problems provide a rallying point for co-ordinating distributed agents who might otherwise clash in the change process…."*. Further, a problem-focus:
- Avoids the 'best practice' trap that all-too-often accompanies efforts to fix systems.. *"It focuses on actually solving specified problems as the goal, rather than introducing a pre-designed solution"*
- Evokes agency. It "*offers a 'true-north' destination of 'problem solved' to guide, motivate and inspire action….. A good problem cannot be ignored, and matters to key change agents; can be broken down into easily-addressed causal elements; allows real, sequenced strategic responses.*"
- Fosters learning about context. "*A problem-driven process forces a reflective shift in collective consciousness about the value of existing mechanisms, which is needed to foster change…..Forces agents to examine their contexts, identify necessary changes and explore alternatives….*"

More on this throughout the paper.

Along with the three contrasts suggested by Figure 1 and explored above, there is a fourth distinguishing feature of SEB. It directs attention to power – specifically to the potential of multistakeholder coalitions to reshape (problem-level) power dynamics in a more coherent and more inclusive direction.   Reformers seeking social gain can be stymied by powerful stakeholders who resist changes to the status quo. SEB

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[7] Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp. 141-2.

brings to center stage the coalitional dynamics that are key to reaching shared understanding of the realities of power, and associated agreement as to what are acceptable distributional outcomes.

Table 1 distinguishes among modes of interaction between the public sector and non-governmental stakeholders across two dimensions.[8] Along one dimension are variations in the extent to which stakeholders engage with the challenges posed by power asymmetries. Along a second dimension are variations in the extent of learning to co-operate – including social learning within bureaucracies, social learning at the interface between the bureaucracy and civil society, and social learning among protagonists as to how to navigate the distribution of power. The lower row of Table 1 identifies two modes of interaction that are part of the conventional model of public governance, and for which co-operation is of only limited relevance - accountability, as discussed earlier, and contractual governance[9] as a synonym for public procurement.   As the top row suggests, combining social learning and power dynamics yields a spectrum of SEB possibilities. While all are learning-oriented, some engage more directly with power than others. The next section of the paper explores this spectrum.

Table 1: The interface between the public sector and civil society – some patterns

Role of Social learning		Socially embedded bureaucracy	
	HIGH	Collaborative	Coalitional
	LOW-MEDIUM	**Contractual**	**Accountable** *"demand-side"*
		LOW-MEDIUM	HIGH
		Extent of opposition by status quo interests	

Source: Elaborated by the author, building on a preliminary version in Aston, Guerzovich, Levy et al

III: How Social Embeddedness Can Add Value

Building on Table 1, this section details a spectrum of ways in which SEB can help improve the performance of public bureaucracies. Three distinct channels are explored:

- At the collaborative end of the spectrum, fostering synergistic gains from co-operation between public bureaucracies and non-governmental actors;
- At an intermediate point along the spectrum, transforming the governance arrangements for monitoring and enforcement from a source of process compliance to a means of fostering pro-social norms; and
- At the coalitional end, championing alliance-building among reform-oriented public officials and civil society actors as a way of bringing greater clarity to the (problem-level) goals to be pursued by public agencies.

The subsections that follow consider each in turn.

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[8] An earlier version of the Table 1 framework was presented in Guerzovich et. al. (2022). See also Aston and Zimmer Santos (2022) for a comparative meta-analysis of the empirical literature as to the relative effectiveness of adversarial and co-operative approaches to the governance of the interface between the bureaucracy and civil society.

[9] Contractual governance can usefully be thought of as the 'public procurement' end point of a continuum of social learning - a routine aspect of public provision, rather than a facet of social embeddedness. Contractors need not, however, simply be passive recipients of the terms laid out by government. Influencing the terms of outsourcing can become a potential target for opportunistic predation by contractors on public resources. Indeed, as Brown (2015) argues, insofar as contracting out becomes a substitute for public provision, its overuse can become a contributor to the broader delegitimization of the public domain.

Social embeddedness and the gains from co-operation. Gains from co-operation – the prospect that (as per the first part of Ostrom's definition of collective action) *"a group of principals can organize and govern themselves to adopt coordinated strategies to obtain (and maintain) higher joint benefits"* – are ubiquitous. The prospect of gains underpins the core economic concept of 'Pareto improvement' – that social value is created through any change in which gainers can compensate losers and still be better off. It can be applied to a wide range of challenges of public sector policymaking and implementation,[10] not only the governance of common pool resources which was the focus of Ostrom's work.

Under the rubric of 'collaborative governance', there has been extensive research on the synergies that arise from combining the distinct, complementary skills and resources of government and non-governmental actors to address concrete problems in a way that enables the production and provision of specific goods and services that each could not provide alone. Collaborative governance has been defined in a variety of ways:
- "….as a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets." (Ansell and Gash, 2008);
- "….as open and dynamic collaborative systems of public governance…that can emerge where issue complexity requires ongoing engagement among interdependent stakeholders… (and thus) where autonomous organizations work together over time to achieved some collective public purpose….." (Emerson and Ahn, 2021);
- "….as carefully structured arrangements that interweave public and private capabilities on terms of shared discretion – production discretion (to create extra value by leveraging private capabilities), payoff discretion (how extra value will be divvied up), and preference discretion." (Donahue and Zeckhauser, 2011).

[Note that, as these definitions suggest and as Tang and Mazmanian (2010) detail, the literature on collaborative governance generally gives inadequate attention to two issues that are central to this paper - power dynamics and the institutional arrangements that govern co-operation.]

Notwithstanding differences in detail, the various definitions of collaborative governance all point to the value added of bringing together stakeholders with disparate capabilities around a shared purpose, and fostering learning among them over time.[11] As per Gitterman and Britto (2021):

"[Collaborative] societal arrangements combine complementary organizational logics, rationalities, roles, values and societal positions. The public, private and nonprofit sectors each generate complementary goods and services, and thereby add value to society. They provide the potential to create new ways to govern and to manage relations in society, and to form new kinds of goal- or purpose-oriented institutional configurations to address societal challenges." (pp 5-6)

While much of the collaborative governance literature has focused on its possibilities in settings where bureaucracies already perform relatively well, its problem-orientation makes it especially relevant to the performance challenges of messier governance contexts. In these contexts, for reasons laid out in Section IV, the potential for improving bureaucratic systems is limited. Gains in bureaucratic performance (and

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[10] These include: participation by stakeholder groups in the governance of front-line service provision facilities (Levy et. al, 2018; Levy, 2022); public budgeting (Tang, Callahan and Pisano, 2014: multi-stakeholder oversight of public sector procurement; collaborative, multi-stakeholder arrangements to govern the operation of formally state-owned entities, and of other arms-length public agencies. For further discussion of this range, see Levy, 2014; Ferguson, 2013, 2020.

[11] But note that, as Tang and Mazmanian (2010) detail, the literature on collaborative governance gives inadequate attention to two central issues that are the focus of the next two sections of this paper - power dynamics and the institutional arrangements that govern co-operation.

perhaps momentum for cumulative change) are more likely to come from problem-focused initiatives within 'pockets of effectiveness' than from focusing on systems.

Problem-focused co-operation evolves through iterative interactions between social learning and institutional development. Especially in diverse societies, protagonists are likely initially to be suspicious of one another[12], so the transactions costs associated with co-operation will be high. The evidence suggests that over time people have a propensity to become 'conditional co-operators – willing to engage in pro-social behavior, as long as those with whom they interact do the same. With continued co-operation, this can perhaps further evolve into a strong version of pro-sociality, where people act 'in the interests of others'.[13]

Box 3 lays out a four phase process through which co-operation can take hold. The transformation suggested by the process is not easily achieved – but, as Emerson and Ahn's (2021) overview of the findings of empirical research summarizes, it is achievable some of the time:

> *"Collaboration dynamics may not develop in a straight line, and there will be setbacks: a key player will leave, a dispute will create an interpersonal rift, new knowledge will challenge prevailing assumptions, and money will run out. Some [initiatives] will not cohere or be sufficiently robust to withstand such [changes]….Others will coalesce early and forge ahead to create a bold agenda and a shared theory of change that is realized in actions and outcomes"[14]*

Note that this summary description applies specifically to the micro level. Whether this more co-operative approach to public governance could become a key part of renewing citizens' perceptions as to the legitimacy of the public domain at a systemic level will be the focus of a companion paper.

Box 3: *Co-operation as social learning*
This box identifies and details four phases in the evolution of co-operation:
- *Phase 1: Activating the co-operation problem space.*

In this phase, a group of stakeholders identify a concrete problem where co-operation offers the prospect of social gains. They initiate contact with others who would need to participate in order for those gains to be realized. All are intrigued, but mutual trust is low. For co-operation to add value, transactions costs need to be lowered. This involves initiating an effort to build (formal or informal) institutions. Thus:

- *Phase 2: Establishing rules of the co-operation game*

In this phase, protagonists embark on a journey of learning how to work together. They begin to specify the roles of the various protagonists, and (as explored further in the next subsection of this paper) the rules of the game to which each will abide.

Phases 1 and 2 progress iteratively, beginning with relatively straightforward concrete problems, building confidence step-by-step, and progressively taking on more complex challenges. The collective process of working to address a concrete problem –clarifying and agreeing on rules, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms - potentially fosters social learning. As a result:
- *Phase 3: There is a mutual increase in 'trustworthiness' as confidence grows among participants that each is engaging on the basis of the agreed-upon rules of the game.*

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[12] Here is how Stanford's Robert Sapolsky summarized the evidence: *"Our brains form us/them distinctions with stunning speed…. The core of us/them-ing is emotional and automatic… Feelings about 'us' center on shared obligations, on willingness and expectation of mutuality… inflating the merits of 'us' concerning core values….. A consistent pattern is to view 'them' as threatening, angry and untrustworthy."*

[13] In an upcoming paper, I will review in depth the literature on the extent to which ongoing co-operation can induce strong pro-sociality, perhaps extending even beyond the protagonists themselves. Key contributions on this topic include: Rand et al (2009); Fehr et al (2002); and DeWall et. al (2011).

[14] Emerson and Ahn 2021, p.66.

This increase in 'trustworthiness' comprises a change in ideas about the 'other'. Peoples propensity to be 'conditional co-operators' increasingly results in a positive outcome. There is a shift from a low-trust, high-transactions-costs context to one where transactions costs of co-operation are lower, and increasingly complex challenges can be addressed.

As participants in a collective endeavor learn to work together, ideas might continue to evolve in a pro-social direction, with participants giving increasing weight not only to their private benefits from co-operation but also to the gains realized by the collective endeavor as a whole, including gratification at the gains achieved by others. Insofar as this happens, there can be a further phase:
- *Phase 4: The emergence of pro-social norms, characterized by 'in the interest of others' pro-sociality.*

A recent special issue of Daedalus (Levi and Farrell, editors; 2023) on "creating a moral political economy" suggests that: *"A new moral political economy….[will be centered around]….some form of sociality and cooperation….It demands attention to the governance arrangements that facilitate, even generate, prosocial behavior". (pp. 7-9)* This box, and the theory on which it builds, outlines a pathway through which pro-social behavior might be cultivated at the level of specific problems, via a more co-operative approach to public governance.

Social embeddedness and the transactions costs of monitoring and enforcement. As Box 1 suggests, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms capable of assuring that all abide by what they have agreed on are integral to the governance of all organizations, public and private. Yet, for reasons explored in Section II, in some contexts these mechanisms can enmesh public organizations in a dense, dispiriting web of process compliance. Citizen involvement creates new opportunities for monitoring and enforcement to proceed in ways that loosen the process compliance straitjacket, via three complementary (and mutually-reinforcing) mechanisms:
- transparency and associated gains in the information available for monitoring and enforcement;
- participatory institutions and an associated shift in the incentive to monitor; and
- changes in the ideas that shape behavior at the bureaucracy-civil society interface.

Transparency is the most extensively studied (and least far-reaching) of the three.[15] From an SEB perspective, transparency centered around engagement of local actors close to the service provision 'front-line' is of particular interest. Local actors can bring to bear knowledge of how service provision works in practice at the local level - knowledge that is not readily available to public officials far from the service provision front-line. Such knowledge can enhance the efficacy of top-down approaches to monitoring, without adding layer upon layer of rules.

The second mechanism - participatory institutions that involve service users and communities directly in the governance of service provision at the front line - potentially has a more far-reaching impact on monitoring and enforcement than transparency.[16] Participation along these lines leverages not only the local knowledge of citizens, but also their high-powered incentives to assure that service quality is high.[17] Elinor Ostrom's 'good practice' principles identify some arrangements that are shared in common by successful participatory institutions. These include:
- Rules governing eligibility – clarifying who are the principals who have standing to set goals, and define the roles of the various participants;
- Operating rules - once goals are agreed upon, institutional arrangements are needed to clarify the obligations and benefits participants should expect. These rules need to be perceived by

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[15] Tsai (2022) provides a detailed review and meta-analysis of the literature on transparency – with a particular focus on the causal channels through which it is hypothesized to have impact, and the evidence of its efficacy.
[16] Examples of embedded governance include: non-governmental members on board of directors of public agencies/enterprises; parent and community participation in school governing bodies.
[17] See, for example, the school-level case studies in Levy et. al. (2018).

participants as fair, thereby helping to nurture trust – hence the emphasis in the good practice principles on inclusion, proportionality and incrementalism.

- Rules governing monitoring – monitors should be the participants themselves, or should be accountable to participants.
- Rules governing enforcement – including rapid, low-cost arenas for resolving conflicts, and graduated sanctions that start low but become stronger for repeated violation.

The third mechanism for streamlining monitoring and enforcement works principally by influencing the ideas that citizens and public officials have about each other. To understand what drives this shift in ideas, a useful point of departure is Robert Putnam's (1993) classic exploration of the role of social capital in facilitating low-transactions-cost co-operation, Putnam explored the long-term persistence of differences between northern and southern Italy in the propensity for citizens to co-operate. Key to co-operation, he argued, was interpersonal trust – with trust built around a combination of shared norms of generalized reciprocity, plus dense networks of social interaction that provide the (reputational) mechanism for fostering adherence to the norms.

Putnam's conclusions are pessimistic as to the potential for achieving change by reshaping norms; he argued that building norms and networks is a task of many decades, if not centuries. By contrast, Judith Tendler offers a more optimistic perspective as to the prospects for problem-focused interactions to have a transformative, near-term impact on the ideas that citizens and public officials have about one another. In *Good Government in the Tropics,* Tendler explored how a high-profile, grass-roots focused initiative led to far-reaching gains in public performance in the Brazilian state of Ceara by reshaping the perceptions public officials and users of public services had of one another:[18]

> *"When workers talked about why they liked their jobs, the subject of respect from clients and 'my community' often dominated their conversation...It was difficult to separate out the story of the community as outside 'monitors' of the health workers from the story of the workers as embedded in that community through close relationships of respect and trust".[19]*

Tendler's analysis aligns well with Mangla's (2022) findings in his comparative analysis of bureaucratic norms in four North Indian states. As he detailed:

> *"Legalistic bureaucracies [can] stimulate social monitoring of public services, but participation will tend to be episodic and fragmented. Citizens learn to communicate problems through official channels and grievance procedures, but they are likely to experience administrative burdens. Over time, these burdens dampen their expectations of what participation can accomplish....."*

By contrast:

> *"In a deliberative bureaucracy the problem-based orientation of officials leads them to draw input from a more diverse set of societal actors....Instead of administrative grievance procedures, state officials tend to manage conflicts by promoting dialogue between contesting parties.....Through their participation, citizens learn how to address service delivery problems jointly with state actors, improving the chances of identifying locally appropriate solutions...Citizens will tend to experience tangible benefits from participation, within in turn would encourage them to continue monitoring services and provide complementary inputs that help achieve higher quality outcomes."[20]*

Changing norms within public bureaucracies (a la Mangla) and increased pro-sociality at the interface between citizens and public officials (a la Tendler) can have potent cumulative consequences. Pro-

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[18] In the health sector, for example, between 1987 and 1992, a new public health program increased vaccination coverage from 25% to 90%, reduced infant deaths from 102 to 65 per thousand, and increased the proportion of counties with public health facilities from under 30 percent to over 95 percent

[19] Judith Tendler, *Good Government in the Tropics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[20] Mangla (2022) pp. 63-65

sociality enhances the motivation of public employees. Better motivated public employees and pro-social citizen engagement make it possible to loosen the straitjacket of process compliance. Public performance improves further, adding to the momentum of pro-sociality and co-operation at the public-citizen interface. Stagnation, disillusion and recrimination diminish; a virtuous spiral of cumulative gains from co-operation takes hold. Going even further: might the inculcation of pro-social norms at the problem-level help to reinvigorate more broadly a society's capacity for co-operation – and thereby help enhance citizens' perceptions as to the legitimacy of the public domain? More on this in a forthcoming companion paper.

Social embeddedness and goal formation. Paralleling its transformative influence on monitoring and enforcement, pro-active, problem-focused engagement between public officials and civil society can also help bring greater coherence to the (problem-level) priorities of public organizations.

As Section IV will explore in detail, a common challenge confronting public managers is the need to navigate among multiple principals, each with distinct goals. Some principals are single-issue champions of any one of a variety of distinct public purposes; others seek to use their influence in pursuit of their (disparate) private goals. One common response by public managers to this multiplicity of goals can be to simply accept the difficult realities, and settle for a low-level equilibrium of process compliance and mediocrity.[21] But a very different response also is possible: Pro-active efforts to build cross-cutting coalitions that link reform-oriented public officials and stakeholders in civil society - and then leveraging these coalitions to bring greater clarity to organizational purpose at the problem/agency level.

In his classic study of the forging of bureaucratic autonomy in the early twentieth century USA, Daniel Carpenter (2001) explored how mission-driven public entrepreneurs won space to pursue the public purpose by building alliances with non-governmental stakeholders. He argued that:

> *"Bureaucratic autonomy requires the development of unique organisational capabilities…the belief by political authorities and citizens that agencies can provide solutions to national problems found nowhere else… It requires political legitimacy, strong organisational reputations embedded in an independent power base…linkages to the numerous power bases of politics…"*

Improvements in internal organizational capability and stronger external alliances feed on each other – enhancing autonomy from top-down control, enabling managers to manage, and enhancing the motivation and morale of public employees.

Key for the process of goal clarification to take hold is a willingness on the part of public officials to be pro-active, within the (ambiguous) constraints and realities of the broader political environment, in shaping the environment in which they work – not only within their bureaucracies, but also by outreach to non-governmental stakeholders. Carpenter identifies the mid-to-upper levels of bureaucracies as the best-placed locus for such public entrepreneurship to emerge. Success, he shows, is driven by a combination of sustained commitment to the public mission, the strategic patience needed to find the right position within the bureaucracy, to use that position to effect change both internally and by building external alliance – and a readiness to resist the temptation to move on to some new problem before the change process has been consolidated.

Paralleling the US research, the role of problem-level coalition-building as a way of fostering inclusive provision of public services has been the focus of sustained work in developing countries, under the rubric of "social accountability". (Grandvoinnet et. al, 2014). Fox (2015) and Fox et. al. (2023) detail, with abundant examples, the evolution of coalitional processes among users of services, reform-oriented public officials, civil society social movements and other developmental stakeholders – how the

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[21] See Levy (1987); Weaver (1994).

processes are set in motion, how coalitions consolidate, and how they (sometimes) lead to the establishment of sustainable, state-society bridging organizations.

One common way in which change has been achieved is via a pincer movement (or, as Fox terms it, a 'sandwich strategy) in which predatory local-level elites (and those within the public sector that support them) find themselves trumped by alliances between reform-minded state- or national-level public officials and civil society organizations.[22] As the case studies show, mission-driven public officials have been able to leverage these processes to both re-orient agency goals in more inclusive directions, and improve performance in realizing these goals.As Fox et. al. put it, "*mutual empowerment of insiders and outsiders can be a weapon of the weak*".

Stepping back from the details, the case studies point to three conditions that need to be met for coalitional governance to succeed:[23]
- There needs to be a critical mass of stakeholders willing to align around a shared public purpose.
- These stakeholders need to be sufficiently influential politically to be able to trump incumbents who might resist changes to the status quo.
- Leadership matters, insofar as spontaneous processes are insufficient to bring coherence around a shared vision, and to sustain engagement over the medium-term. Leaders could come from within the public sector, or could be non-governmental stakeholders who are skilled at building cross-cutting alliances that bridge public sector and civil society actors,

Insofar as these conditions are met, coalitional governance can offer a way for public agencies to move beyond enmeshment in the morass of top-down process compliance and powerful insider interests – and open up space for managers to manage more effectively in pursuit of better-defined and more developmentally-oriented goals.

(Set against coalitional governance's positive potential, there are some obvious objections. For one thing, opening up space for engagement can add further to the multiplicity of principals and goals, worsening rather than easing the challenge of fostering goal coherence. More fundamentally, opening up space for non-governmental stakeholders can also be a way of opening the door to capture of public resources by powerful interests that care little about the broader social purposes. These and other hazards of SEB will be explored further in Section V.

IV: Context and the Value Added of Social Embeddedness.

Recent work on political settlements provides a useful point of departure for exploring how context influences the relevance of each of the three SEB channels laid out in Section III. Kelsall et. al (2022) define a political settlement as

> "... an ongoing agreement (or acquiescence) among a society's most powerful groups over a set of political and economic institutions expected to generate for them a minimally acceptable level of benefits, which thereby ends or prevents generalized civil war and/or political and economic disorder"

Three[24] features of this definition are noteworthy for present purposes:

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[22] A pincer movement along these lines was key to the Ceara successes analyzed by Tendler (1997).

[23] For an early statement and elaboration of these conditions, see Levy (2014) pp. 158-160.

[24] A fourth feature of the definition also is noteworthy - its distributional agnosticism. Stable political settlements can be broadly inclusive, narrowly exclusionary, or somewhere in between. Key for a settlement's stability is that the breadth of the settlement and the distribution of benefits (including public service provision) are aligned with one another. (Over the longer-run, an exclusionary settlement is of course more likely to evoke resistance than an

- First, as the definition underscores, institutional arrangements and power dynamics are interdependent. Institutions are thus not exogenous, and cannot be constructed simply by re-engineering 'best practices'. [25]
- Second, once the institutional arrangements that govern a settlement are established, they can become foundational, in the sense that they persist over the longer-term. provide the ongoing rules for the play of the settlement game.[26]
- Third, getting to agreement can be difficult, so settlements vary in their coherence. As Kelsall et. al. explore in depth,[27] some settlements are highly coherent in the allocation of decision-making procedures and authority. Others lack coherence, with continuing contestation among insider groups, and non-acquiescence by opposition groups to the rules of the game.

(Note also that the definition of a political settlement finesses the traditional distinction between democracies and autocracies; coherence can vary within each category. This paper and the broader research program of which it is part focus exclusively on the potential of SEB to add value within democracies.)

Table 2: Some patterns of political-institutional-bureaucratic alignment

	Politics	**Institutions**	**Bureaucracy**
Context #1: Stable, high-performing	High Coherence	Well-functioning institutions	High-performing bureaucracy
Context #2: Stable, muddling through	Medium Coherence	High transactions costs	Uneven performance
Context #3: Fragmented	Low coherence	Personalized	Dysfunctional

Building on the above, Table 2 distinguishes among three contexts that vary from one another in their settlement's coherence, in the resulting functioning of their institutions and, in turn, in how politics and institutions affect public bureaucratic performance. The top row of Table 2 delineates a context where high political coherence provides a platform for the emergence and consolidation of well-functioning institutions. Note that coherent politics and well-functioning institutions *may* (as per the rightmost cell in the row) – but need not - result in a high-performing bureaucracy. For one thing, even with high coherence, bureaucratic norms might be legalistic rather than deliberative, with all the rigidities and limitations noted earlier, and described in detail by Mangla (2022). Way more hazardous is the risk, explored by James Scott in his 1998 book, *Seeing Like a State,* that unconstrained political power in combination with relentlessly efficient, top-down bureaucracy can result in 'high modernism':

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inclusionary one.) As Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (AJR, 2005, pp. 390-392) put it: *"Whichever group has more political power is likely to secure the set of economic institutions that it prefers".*

[25] As North, Wallis and Weingast (2009) p.32 put it, *"Societies do not jump directly from personal to impersonal relationships; rather, it is a long process ….. Transplanting institutions and policies cannot produce economic development."*

[26] Ferguson (2020) offers a useful explanation for this persistence over the longer-term. As he puts it, : *"Institutional systems are relatively stable configurations of formal institutions, informal institutions and organizations that generate social regularities…..These deeply embedded mechanisms interact with distributions of power…. Shared cognitive and behavioral patterns reproduce and persist via correlated patterns of thought and activity….. These dense interactions generate a punctuated equilibrium dynamic…."* (pp. 28; 35)

[27] This paragraph is a paraphrase of a measure introduced and measured by Kelsall et al (2022) -the extent of "power concentration".

> *"An aspiration to the administrative ordering of nature and society…[based on….] a supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress, the development of scientific and technical knowledge, .the rational design of social order …. It is the ideology par excellence of the bureaucratic intelligentsia, technicians, planners, engineers*"[28]

Insofar as the pitfalls of legalism and high modernism can be avoided, the combination of coherent power and well-functioning institutions can result in a bureaucracy that is deliberative, that encourages initiative, that is flexible internally, and that is open to engagement with stakeholders outside government. *In that (#1) context, SEB has the potential to add value through the 'gains from co-operation' channel laid out in Section III – by bringing to bear to public challenges the distinctive specialized capabilities of private and other non-governmental organizations.*

At the other (context #3) end of the Table 2 spectrum, there are multiple centers of power, with limited capacity for co-operation; rules of the game are de facto personalized. (North, Wallis and Weingast, 2007) The combination of fragmented power and personalized rules of the game result in a public bureaucracy with non-functional formal systems, systems that largely are impervious to efforts at reform. As Levy (2014), Fox (2015), Hickey (2022) and others have explored, in this context (common in developing countries) gains come not from strengthening bureaucratic systems, but from more focused efforts to cultivate 'islands of effectiveness' – with (as per the third channel in Section III) the 'islands' organized around coalitions of developmentally-oriented stakeholders that are strong enough to fend off predatory pressures. (While these islands are thus 'socially embedded', they are less part of an effort to improve the performance of public bureaucracies and more institutional/organizational substitutes.

This brings us to context #2 – a context characterized (as per Table 2) by medium political coherence, high transactions costs institutions, and bureaucracies that are functional but perform unevenly are ubiquitous in middle-income and many high-income countries.   Politically, contestation among powerful groups is only partially resolved. Government may be built around coalitions of political parties; individual parties may continually threaten to break away from the governing coalition; each party may itself be an unwieldy coalition of disparate factions. The result is that public bureaucracies have to juggle multiple goals, each enjoying the support of some powerful faction. Rather than an orderly world of principals and agents, they have 'multiple principals'.[29]   As Figure 2 below illustrates, a variety of consequences are possible.

Figure 2: Bureaucratic discontents and their political origins
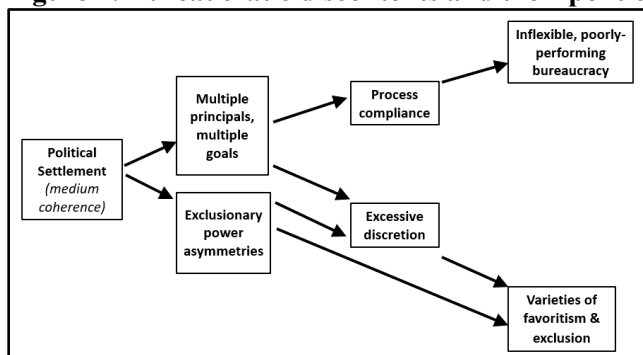
Source: author

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[28] Quoted from Scott (1998), pp. 88-90; 96

[29] Note that being charged to pursue multiple goals is not necessarily inconsistent with clear principal–agent governance; multiple goals can in principle be brought into alignment, as long as each is clearly specified, weighted and costed. However as suggested in the text, this challenge is not just technical.

One possible consequence can be that bureaucracies become trapped in a mire of high-transactions-costs process compliance. In his classic study of the American bureaucracy, James Q. Wilson (1990) argued that political leaders become pre-occupied with formal processes as a way to paper over unresolved conflicts over purpose. In so doing, they enmesh public bureaucracies in a dense web of controls, with little room for discretion. A pre-occupation with process compliance can lead to any or all of the following consequences:

- Mediocre performance and demotivated public officials – rigid formal rules and process compliance undercut the goal-orientation, motivation, and initiative that are key for the effective execution of an important subset of public tasks.
- A lack of access within the public sector to some key skills (both technical and relational) – in part a consequence of overly rigid public sector hiring practices, and in part a consequence of public sector organizations being too bound down by rigid rules to work effectively with private, professional and other non-governmental organizations.
- Organizational stove-piping – a failure to co-operate and co-ordinate across functionally-specialized units within public bureaucracies, in part as a consequence of process compliance and in part a consequence of internal pre-occupations with 'turf' rather than social goals.

These consequences of process compliance matter more for some tasks than others. Wilson (1989) distinguishes between tasks that are "logistical: and those that are more "craft-oriented". Tight, top-down controls can be a useful way of delivering on blueprint-like logistical tasks (a national program of classroom-building for example) – but such controls work less well for more craft-oriented tasks (for example, skillfully engaging with young minds) that call for adaptability and creativity.

Contestation among multiple principals can result in the opposite problem from an excess of process compliance: It can provide running room for ambitious influential politicians and public officials to enhance their discretion by playing principals off against each other - and then use that discretion to champion their preferred goals. All-too-often, the result is the capture of bureaucratic resources for private or political rather than social purposes. Public resources can go disproportionately to insider political and bureaucratic elites. They can be used by politicians and public officials to reward their backers, to build clientelistic networks of support - or simply misdirected corruptly for private purposes. Here, ranging from less to more egregious, are some possible consequences for the functioning of public bureaucracies.

- A non-level playing field in who gets access to public services.
- A non-level playing field in who gets access to public employment or procurement contracts – while qualifications and competency matter, among those who are qualified only politically-favored insiders are considered.
- A sub-variant of a non-level playing field in access to jobs or contracts - not only does patronage favor insiders, it does so in a way that gives limited to zero attention to qualification and competence.
- At the limit, out-and-out corruption – unconstrained abuse of control of public resources (jobs and procurement contracts) for nefarious private ends.

A 'worst of both worlds' outcome also is possible – a combination of a preoccupation with process compliance *and* excess discretion. In this combination, the morass of rules is the everyday experience of those working within a bureaucracy and those who interact with it. But the morass can a tool for those who understand the inner workings and are connected to powerful influence networks, a façade – a cover beneath which they can act with impunity and, indeed, leverage rule compliance (and the offer of ways to bypass it) as a source of power. A central goal of this paper is to explore how, in messy governance settings, SEB might help loosen the grip of process compliance in a way that, without adding to the risks

of capture, creates new opportunities for mission-oriented bureaucrats to use their discretion in pursuit of the public purpose, even in the midst of broader political and institutional messiness.[30]

A central claim of this paper is that, even (…..perhaps especially…..) in the midst of context #2's political and institutional messiness along the lines laid out above, problem-focused SEB is especially well-suited to add value via all three channels laid out in Section III:
- Alliances between reform-minded public officials and civil society organizations enable them to resist predatory elites inside or outside of government – and thereby carve out space to pursue a clear set of developmentally-oriented goals.
- Insofar as developmental alliances help carve out problem-level space, new opportunities arise to achieve gains from co-operation by leveraging the distinctive specialized capabilities of private and other non-governmental organizations.
- Mutual monitoring among developmentally-oriented stakeholders potentially provides an incentive-compatible alternative to the morass of process compliance.

To be sure, in messy governance contexts, the (difficult-to-achieve) first-order challenge may indeed be to strengthen bureaucratic coherence. But the all-too-common corollary - a wholesale dismissal of the value of social-embeddedness – does not follow. Messy politics and messy institutions render bureaucracies especially vulnerable to both of two seemingly contradictory hazards - of process compliance degenerating into a morass of disabling red tape, and of the predatory capture of public resources and effort by powerful interests inside and outside of government. In these messy contexts, SEB is especially well-suited to mitigate each of these hazards. Further, as Section V explores further, it has the potential to do so without adding new hazards (other than a modicum of additional messiness that may be offensive to high modernist sensibilities, but is otherwise harmless).

V: Cultivating Social Embeddedness in a Hierarchical World

This final section explores whether and how SEB's horizontal logic of co-operation can be reconciled with hierarchical governance, and whether and how SEB might go beyond adding value incrementally, and have broader impact.

Viewed from a problem-level perspective, even in the midst of the messiness of context #2, SEB provides a way to:
- Achieve concrete gains within pockets/islands of effectiveness, even in the absence of broader reforms to address systemic dysfunction;
- Build momentum for change through (problem-centered) cross-cutting coalitions among mission-oriented public officials, reform-minded political activists and other non-governmental stakeholders;
- Leverage shared purpose among coalition partners as a way to clarify goals and trade-offs.

Perhaps most important, SEB helps unleash human agency by opening up (problem-level) space for public/civic entrepreneurs to champion change.

Notwithstanding these potential benefits, a problem-level entry point for SEB also raises questions vis-à-vis both credibility and legitimacy. Insofar as problem-level entrepreneurship and coalition-building loosens the constraint of a process-compliant status quo straitjacket, what follows in its wake? How to guard against a new cycle of capture, by a different set of actors? Even in the absence of predation, what

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[30] Note that insofar as the focus is on relationships between non-governmental stakeholders and public bureaucracies, the emphasis is less on wholly upstream processes of priority-setting , and more on downstream challenges of implementation, (including hybrid upstream/downstream efforts).

is the basis of legitimacy of SEB entrepreneurs and their associated coalitions? Key for addressing these questions is to build the answers into the process itself – via openness and transparency, both upstream and downstream.

Upstream initiatives can help build legitimacy not only via coalitions, but also by embracing open problem-focused deliberative processes as a basis for consolidating an authorizing environment that is complementary to, but goes beyond the conventional top-down political-bureaucratic interface.[31] Downstream, monitoring and enforcement challenges can be addressed through transparent (horizontal) processes of shared accountability among participating stakeholders – building confidence in what is being done while also reducing the need for heavy-handed top-down systems of process compliance. Gains in legitimacy and in effectiveness can be mutually reinforcing. Results strengthen reputation. Reputation and results strengthen legitimacy - further enhancing autonomy and potential for problem-level effectiveness.

The literature on private organizations suggests another way to allay the concerns of mainstream public governance researchers and practitioners as to the hazards associated with more open, horizontal, problem-focused SEB. Viewed from the perspective of this literature, the challenge of reconciling SEB with the hierarchical logic of bureaucracies is a familiar one, with a clear answer[32] – it is the challenge of reconciling innovation and mainstream organizational processes . Key to addressing the challenge is to 'shelter' innovation from an organization's mainstream business processes. As Clayton Christensen put it in his classic book *The Innovator's Dilemma*:

> *"Disruptive projects can thrive only within organizationally distinct units…When autonomous team members can work together in a dedicated way, they are free from organizational rhythms, habits and reporting requirements and are free to forge new patterns of interaction and problem solving…."[33]*

Don't directly challenge the status quo; rather innovate alongside it.

Mangla makes a related case for incrementalism:

> *"It may be tempting to [try and] execute reforms rapidly, in a wholesale manner. However [the evidence from] cautions against introducing deliberative reforms with haste. State-building…unfolds over the longue duree…… To sustain a shift in bureaucratic norms, participation from across the administrative hierarchy is needed including from frontline agents…Building deliberative bureaucratic norms is not a one-off intervention but requires incremental and continuous engagement..."[34]*

Contra to the concerns of many mainstream public governance researchers and practitioners, SEB and hierarchy can, then, coexist. But might that be settling for too little? Insofar as SEB is successful at the problem-level, (how) might its influence be broadened?

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[31] For a review of experience worldwide with these processes, see Baiocchi and Ganuza (2017).

[32] In addition to Christensen (1997) quoted below, James Q Wilson (1987) p. 231 draws a similar conclusion: "To implement a proposed change often requires creating a specialized subunit that will take on the new tasks". Along similar lines, Mangla (2022) pp. 265, 276 argues that the success of Mahila Samakhya (MSUP an innovative, deliberative womens' empowerment initiative, introduced by India's central government) was built around *"forging an organizational identity distinct from the education bureaucracy was central to the development of the Mahila Samakhya Women's Empowerment Program (MSUP)…..Autonomy was supported by MSUP's legal status as a semi-autonomous agency."*

[33] Christensen (1997) p. 120

[34] Mangla (2022) pp. 344-5.

One way for SEB to move beyond the problem-level might be for reformers to encourage mainstreaming of deliberation and SEB within bureaucracies by championing seemingly small tweaks in the hierarchical rules themselves. They might propose a minimum necessary set of rules that offers a better balance between constraint and discretion than process-compliant straitjackets. They might seek out tweaks in internal processes that foster interaction among hitherto disconnected intra-bureaucracy stovepipes – in budgeting prioritization perhaps; or joint delivery of services with compelling inter-departmental synergies. While laying out the details of how to proceed with reforms along these lines goes beyond the scope of the present paper, the general direction is clear: The aim is not comprehensive system reform, but to loosen unnecessary rigidities - to improve organizational 'hygiene' so to speak.

Given the likely slowness of intra-bureaucratic change, might there be other pathways through which the influence of SEB could go beyond the incremental? Addressing this question has not been the primary purpose of this paper. As noted at the outset, its principal goal has been to lay out the micro-foundations of a socially-embedded approach to improving public performance as a platform for a subsequent exploration of SEB's broader potential. Even so, it may be useful to end by laying out a few preliminary ideas as to how SEB might support more systemic impact.

Impact might come via bottom-up or top-down channels. A bottom-up channel might work via the accretion of experience and learning. In this scenario, successful problem-level initiatives at the interface between the public sector and non-governmental actors not only transform the ideas of participants as to the value of co-operation, they also have a demonstration effect – inspiring others to initiate similar initiatives. Over time, multiple small initiatives might add up to more than the sum of their parts:– a new set of ideas, offering a new vision of what is possible, takes hold.

Whether lessons of problem-level success diffuse more broadly is likely to depend in part on the magnitude, salience and visibility of the problems addressed via SEB approaches. Successfully addressing big challenges (the crisis of homelessness and affordable housing in Los Angeles for example….) can have big impacts on citizens' perceptions as to what the public domain can achieve. Diffusion will depend also on how civil society responds to SEB's possibilities for engagement. Some civil society activists might respond skeptically to SEB as counter to a perceived mission of holding government to account, but others might embrace a fresh vision.[35]

More indirectly, visible micro-level successes can also make a difference by preparing the ground for new transformational acts of both social and political leadership. Might successful micro-level experimentation with SEB provide raw material for forward looking leaders to champion renewal of the public domain – and embrace an electoral and governance platform centered around a vision of partnership between the public sector and non-governmental actors? And what are the prospects for myriad concrete, deliberative and problem-focused civil society initiatives serving as potential building blocks for a broader social movement?

Political and social mobilization centered around deliberative problem-solving would be a radical departure from contemporary pressure-cooker discourses which thrive on raising rather than reducing the temperature. But, as Putnam (2020) explored, it has happened before, and might happen again. More on the systemic possibilities in a companion paper. For now, keeping in mind the micro-level goals of this paper, hopefully enough has been said to make the case that an SEB approach is worth pursuing.

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[35] For the possibilities of a broader social movement (and a history of such in the early twentieth century American Progressive era) see Putnam (2020). Heywood and Levy (2024) explore the contemporary possibilities in the South African context.

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