



# Everyday governance in areas of contested power: Insights from Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan

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## Summary

**Motivation:** How do poor and marginalized people solve problems and claim rights and entitlements in places affected by conflict and where state authority is contested? Understanding such processes is important as the numbers of poor people living in difficult settings grows, yet existing research on governance in conflict largely misses a “citizen's eye” view of these processes.

**Purpose:** The article focuses on “everyday governance” from a citizen's perspective. What do engagements with the multiple state and non-state actors that prevail in such settings look like? We present insights from longitudinal research in conflict-affected areas in Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan.

**Methods and approach:** Research was undertaken in two phases over the period 2017–2021. Researchers developed an innovative method, “governance diaries,” in which we interviewed the same set of poor and marginalized households over a period of a year, capturing an unfolding citizen's eye view of governance. We subsequently used the same

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method to include key intermediaries to whom households went with problems.

**Findings:** We find that in most instances poor and marginalized households did not rely on the state or other formal or external authorities to resolve problems. Mostly, they simply “lived with” those problems, or resolved them through “self-provision”—mutual aid and community action. When they did go to authorities, they used “governance intermediaries”—actors that connect people with authorities or mediate between households. These intermediaries played a central role in local governance, using their networks and deploying a range of strategies with a focus on local resolution of problems.

**Policy implications:** These findings challenge some core assumptions of contemporary development practice. First, development programmes tend to focus on improving state-run services, rather than engaging with the diversity of how public goods are governed on the ground. Second, policies assume that people can go directly to authorities with their problems, and do not take into account the role that intermediaries play. Finally, the highly diverse networks of governance actors that matter to specific places challenges the common focus on formal systems rather than informal practices.

#### KEYWORDS

brokers, everyday governance, fragility, intermediaries, poor and marginalized households

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

How do poor and marginalized people resolve governance problems in places affected by conflict, and where state authority is contested? Which authorities do they approach and see as legitimate? How are their interactions with authorities constructed and enabled, and by whom? These are questions of “everyday governance”—the routine encounters people have with others, including public authorities, in the process of resolving the governance problems they face (Blundo & Le Meur, 2008; Cornea et al., 2017; Le Meur & Lund, 2001). Such questions take on greater significance given that the number of poor people living in contexts with ongoing violence and conflict and state institutional weakness looks set to increase (World Bank Group, 2020). In this article we offer insights from grounded longitudinal research on these questions conducted in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan. The research sites within each country not only experienced ongoing conflict of different kinds, but also challenges to state authority in a variety of ways. Despite very different national political contexts, we found many similarities in how poor and marginalized people engage—or avoid—authorities across the three countries. From an academic perspective this

suggests these themes are worth exploring in other contexts, and that similar methods are likely to be required for this. From a policy and practice perspective, such insights are important because who people see as legitimate governance actors and how they interact with them influences how development interventions and public policy play out on the ground.

A diverse body of work addresses the complexities of the encounters between citizens and authorities that make up everyday governance, and the constructions of governance relations that they (re)create (Cornea et al., 2017).<sup>1</sup> This work takes various starting points. In political anthropology there is a long tradition of attempting to understand power and authority from below, mainly focused on the state (Bayart, 2009; Ferguson, 2017; Gupta, 1995; Mamdani, 1996; Scott, 1985, 2008). A strand of the literature uses Foucault's notion of "dispersed practices of government" to unpack the state through its "encounters" with ordinary people, a process labelled as "seeing the state" (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Corbridge, 2005; Gupta, 2012). For these scholars, the view from below shows that the state is often simultaneously the promoter of poverty alleviation and development and the perpetrator of structural violence.

A similar interest is pursued within the broader political science literature. For example the UK-funded research programme the Centre for the Future State argued that taking an "upside-down" view of governance brings into focus the informality of "real" governance relationships, and the ongoing creation of public authority at the level of local institutions (Unsworth, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Multiple scholars have also engaged with how the distributive politics expressed at this local level depends on chains of less formal actors, such as brokers, "fixers," and third-party representation (Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner, 2020; Manor, 2000; von Lieres & Piper, 2014). Less focused on the state, yet another distinct body of literature focuses on how people co-ordinate and co-operate to manage pooled resources or provide highly localized public goods at a neighbourhood level (Ostrom, 1990; Pagdee et al., 2006; Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2018).

More recent work on the construction of public authority argues that "it is possibly misleading to assume that conventional, formalised, legally compliant public authority is always the appropriate starting point for those seeking to understand how people are actually governed in particular places" (Kirk & Allen, 2021, p. 58). Other institutions, including non-state actors and social institutions, shape people's behaviour as they tackle everyday challenges. Particularly in places affected by violent conflict, political scientists have developed a range of insights into how multiple institutions compete for legitimacy to govern. Such work introduces the concepts of governance in areas of "limited statehood" (Draude et al., 2018), governance without government (Raeymaekers et al., 2008), negotiated statehood (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010), hybrid governance (Luckham & Kirk, 2013; Meagher et al., 2014), or in the context of insurgencies and civil war, "rebel rule" (Arjona et al., 2015). The attempt again is to capture what has been called "real" governance in areas where the state is absent, weak, or under pressure from alternative institutions (De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan, 2015). However, most of these studies focus on the governance *behaviours* of non-state or para-state actors—rather than how these are experienced by people.

In this article we focus on everyday governance as it is experienced from the perspective of the governed in places with fragmented public authorities—looking "from below" at how poor and marginalized households navigate the complex governance terrain in which they find themselves. Our findings come from two phases of innovative research over the period 2017–2021, undertaken as part of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme. Using an approach we called *Governance Diaries*, we interviewed the same poor and marginalized households over a period of a year, to understand how they resolved problems that arose in that time, and gradually capturing their "citizen-eye" view of governance. In a second phase we used the same panel interviewing approach with a number of those that households identified as key governance actors—moving one "rung" up the governance

<sup>1</sup>Le Meur and Lund (2001) give the following expanded definition of everyday governance: "the actual practices of how interests are pursued and countered, authority exercised and challenged, and power institutionalised and undermined."

<sup>2</sup>The Centre for the Future State was a Development Research Center funded by the then Department of International Development, UK and based at the Institute of Development Studies that operated from 2000 to 2010. It undertook research into the processes involved in building more effective, accountable and responsive governance in low-income countries.

chain. All of the locations were affected by some level of conflict, and ongoing contestation. The approach allows us to share insights from the ground-up on how sources of authority were seen, avoided, and engaged with to meet everyday governance needs.

In the next section we outline this innovative research approach and our research locations in more depth. The following three sections share three key findings from the research. Section 3 establishes first that in most instances the poor and marginalized households that we interviewed do not rely on the state or other formal or external authorities to resolve problems. In many cases, in fact, they simply “lived with” those problems. Where they sought solutions, these often took the form of self-help or mutual aid, and engaged with informal or semi-formal village or community-level institutions—which we characterize as “self-provision.” This was the case even where formal provisions and routes were (theoretically) available to engage external authorities. In Section 4 we begin to look at what happened when it was necessary to go to such authorities, detailing how contacts of these kinds almost always involved some kind of “governance intermediary”—actors that connect people with authorities or mediate between households. In Section 5 we look at the complex networks of overlapping authorities and institutions that these intermediaries navigated, and some of the strategies and tactics they employed in doing so. In Section 6 we conclude by identifying how these findings challenge some core assumptions and ways of working in contemporary development practice. We argue that a viewpoint and investment that assumes state structures are the dominant sources of public goods or governance overlooks how poor and marginalized people really solve problems, and the complexities of everyday governance in these areas.

## 2 | ADOPTING A VIEW FROM BELOW IN PLACES OF CONTESTED GOVERNANCE

To explore how poor and marginalized people engaged with authorities in their daily lives we developed a qualitative panel survey approach, focused initially at household and then at individual level. We referred to this approach as *Governance Diaries*, taking inspiration methodologically from the *Portfolios of the Poor* (Collins et al., 2009).<sup>3</sup> Here we describe first the research locations, and then how we went about gaining the views and experiences of poor and marginalized people living there.

The research took place in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan, three of the focus countries of the wider A4EA research programme. In all three countries the existence of internal conflict, combined with colonial and authoritarian legacies and poorly consolidated democratic practices, were assumed to make citizen–state relations and engagement particularly complex (Joshi, 2023). Armed groups contested state legitimacy in parts of each country, and in Myanmar and Pakistan the military retained a significant governance role.<sup>4</sup> Economic and development gains of recent years were unevenly distributed, both geographically and socially, in some cases exacerbating ethnic, religious, or other social divisions. By using the same approach in three countries we aimed to explore the similarities and differences in governance experiences in places that shared some of these characteristics, but also had quite different political contexts. The specific dynamics of conflict and contestation were of course different in each country. We selected research sites purposively to represent these country-specific dynamics.

In Mozambique the research locations took account of conflict over land and natural resources, and armed opposition to the ruling Frelimo party. The central province of Tete expressed the former, with conflict over land rights as a result of significant mining operations. We chose two research locations in Moatize District. One was home to people relocated purposefully to allow for mining in their original villages, and one to a longer-term, settled population. Two peri-urban locations were also included. The second set of research locations was in Nampula Province, chosen as a

<sup>3</sup>See Loureiro et al. (2020) for a fuller description of the methodology. Although described as “diaries,” and taking inspiration from diary-based research methods, participants in this study did not keep their own personal records, instead being interviewed regularly by researchers as keeping such records was not deemed safe or feasible on literacy grounds.

<sup>4</sup>Note that the research took place before the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, a period in which the military held retained seats in parliament and control of key ministries.

part of the country where the opposition party, Renamo, maintained a degree of political control. A ceasefire signed in 1992 ended 16 years of civil war between Frelimo and Renamo, but breakaway armed factions of Renamo were active and attacking the government as recently as 2016 in Murrupula District, where two of the research sites were located (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 13). The other two were peri-urban locations close to the provincial capital, Nampula. As part of limited political decentralization in Mozambique these areas were more politically contested, with electoral power struggles between Frelimo and opposition parties.

In Myanmar the research locations focused on the states of Kachin and Kayin (the latter also known as Karen), battlegrounds of the decades-long civil war between the Myanmar military and armed groups associated with ethnic and regional identities that sought either independence from the state or greater autonomy to self-govern within it. In Kachin, often intense armed conflict continued during the research period, mostly conflict between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Research locations included those under control of the Kachin Independence Organization (the administrative institution generally associated with the KIA), and the Myanmar (Union) government. In Kayin state the dominant opposition group, the Karen National Union (KNU), signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar military in 2012. Under the terms of that ceasefire they retained an important governance role, with authority over many issues of public policy in their territories. In reality, the post-ceasefire landscape was complex, with multiple other armed groups or factions still active. Research locations had different balances of power and governance roles across that landscape of actors. In both states locations included villages and neighbourhoods within towns.

In Pakistan research locations were chosen in three distinct parts of the country. One was a small town in the north-west territories which researchers described as “engulfed in the highly complex international war on terror” (Wazir et al., 2022). Here the Pakistan army and allies were engaged in protracted conflict with the Taliban, and tribal leadership was particularly strong. This location was not sufficiently safe to continue work in the second phase. The second set of research locations was in Punjab. In the more rural of these the major conflict dynamic related to land rights, and in particular the long-standing conflict between the Pakistan military and farmers who were tenants on land the army inherited from the British Raj (Akhtar, 2006). The remaining locations were two informal settlements, or *katchi abadis*, in the capital Islamabad. These were areas reclaimed for housing by migrants to the city—largely Christian minorities escaping religious violence in other parts of the country. Although there were significant issues with the lack of legal land rights and public services in both *katchi abadis*, one was settled more recently and therefore conflict with the authorities was more intense.

Thirty-eight research sites were selected within these sub-national areas that exhibited the locally relevant dynamics of conflict and contestation, a mix of urban neighbourhoods and rural villages. We chose to focus on households that were poor and marginalized, on the basis that these households have the greatest need for better governance and the provision of public goods, and in alignment with the overarching goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to “leave no one behind.” Researchers from each country identified measures of relative poverty, taking as a starting point the definition of the chronically poor from Collins et al. (2009, pp. 190, 195), and locally relevant forms of marginalization—for example being of minority religion or ethnicity, low social status, displaced, or having certain household characteristics (for example women-headed households). These factors map on to other operationalizations of poverty and exclusion relevant to achieving the SDGs (see, for example, UNDP, 2018). Researchers identified a number of households meeting their criteria in each research site and invited them to take part in the research.<sup>5</sup> Care was taken to ensure that household members were participating willingly and could do so safely, understood the longitudinal nature of the research process, and that they could withdraw at any time.<sup>6</sup>

More than 160 households were included in this first phase of research between 2017 and 2019. Researchers visited and interviewed the same households approximately monthly over the course of 12 months. Interviews

<sup>5</sup>See Loureiro et al. (2020, p. 10) for further elaboration on these selection processes and definitions.

<sup>6</sup>For more on research protocols and research ethics see Loureiro et al. (2020). Although participating households could withdraw at any time, we saw relatively little attrition in the first phase. See also Mohmand and Anderson (2023) for reflections on the research process, including ethical considerations relating to repeat interviewing of the same households.

explored the kinds of issues that came up for households, who they did or did not engage to help them, how far any action was individual or collective, and how far any issues were resolved. Questions for these interviews were developed iteratively and followed up on specific issues individual households faced—hence “diarizing” their experience—as well as using standard approaches such as institutional mapping across households. Noting that households often solved problems through forms of community self-provision, and only ever really engaged external authorities with the help of others, we adapted the research method to focus on key actors in these processes in a second phase of data collection. Over 2019 and into 2020 we engaged 80 individuals who were identified as important by phase one households in a subset of the original research locations. These individuals were also interviewed regularly over a 12-month period. Researchers explored what kinds of issues these key actors became involved with, what strategies they used to resolve them and why, and how they navigated the wider governance system to do so. The method allowed researchers to track whether issues were or were not resolved in real time, to observe how problem-solving strategies evolved, and to triangulate perspectives from households and others in the same locations.

The research process produced extensive data and allowed identification and analysis of multiple nested “cases”—specific instances of problem resolution or decision-making, household and individual intermediary strategies and practices, and patterns within and across sub-national locations. This analysis was undertaken comparatively based on thematic coding of transcripts and researchers’ observations and in sense-making sessions with the country research teams.<sup>7</sup> The remainder of this article focuses on three themes where our analysis produced findings that were broadly consistent across both countries and locations, although also detailing the nuances and kinds of differences found. While the findings themselves come from this analysis process we cite evidence from country-based working papers and reports produced as part of the research, which each make context-specific arguments (Chaimite et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Myanmar research team, 2021a, 2021b; Posse et al., 2022; Wazir et al., 2022).<sup>8</sup>

### 3 | LOW EXPECTATIONS AND SELF-PROVISION

Looking at governance from “above”—at the issues that come the way of authorities and turn up on the agenda of those tasked with governing or their officials—overlooks just how few of the problems that households experience ever make it this far. Starting with the governance problems that marginalized households experience revealed how rare it was for them to engage with formal authorities—behaviour driven by poor previous experiences, mistrust, and their inaccessibility to those lacking the right social and political capital. It highlighted forms of self-provision and community-based resolution people turned to instead, whether by preference or necessity.

#### 3.1 | Low expectations of authorities

Across our locations, people generally expected little from formal authorities. Historic underprovision of services and limited experience of solutions actually being provided by those authorities often combined with a sense that authorities were implicated in causing the problems in the first place. In many locations the higher-level authorities were parties to conflict or seen as aggressors. Discussing taxation in a community displaced by mining in Mozambique illustrates this point well—researchers found people incredulous at the idea that the state would have any right to tax them, given their sense of abandonment by the authorities. One told a researcher, “who will have the courage to come here and tax us, after what they have done to us?” (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 23). In Myanmar, the research team concluded that “governance problems were generally accepted as being a part of life, with little

<sup>7</sup>The analysis process followed what Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 39) describe as a “codebook” approach, where a common coding framework was applied across research sites, but refined and adapted as analysis evolved, and in iterations between data collection phases and ongoing analysis.

<sup>8</sup>Note that the Myanmar country reports are unpublished and authors anonymized given ongoing security concerns.

expectation of problems being able to be addressed. Respondents expected just to ‘tolerate’ problems, and saw little point in reaching out to formal authorities” (Myanmar research team, 2021b, p. 32). In Pakistan, researchers found that although households felt that the authorities should be helping them, their experiences of how difficult and costly it was to ask for this help often dissuaded them from trying. This was particularly the case for poorer households, with less social capital and lower social status. One household member from the research location in the north west of the country said that “getting access to government is almost impossible” (Wazir et al., 2022).

Social norms were also important. In Myanmar the low expectations of authorities aligned with cultural and religious ideas that prefer not speaking out or creating problems for others, particularly social superiors, and value self-reliance or the ability to take care of one’s own problems (Myanmar research team, 2021b).<sup>9</sup> Across all locations highly patriarchal norms meant that women very often reported that they could not approach authorities directly even if they needed to, but had to be represented by male family members. This dynamic was most extreme in the northern Pakistan location, where purdah practices were prevalent. Two of the households in this location, headed by women, reported how all interactions to claim the scholarships to which their sons were entitled—including receipt of the funds—had to be undertaken by male relatives. Another, who had no male relatives, effectively found herself unable to access social protection funds as a result (Wazir et al., 2022). In Mozambique women were not prohibited from contacting authorities, but research participants explained their different treatment from men, with officials disregarding their requests—one said, “the state is rejecting me. If I had a husband, that would not happen” (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 34).

These low expectations, preferences, and norms combined with other disincentives to approaching authorities outside the immediate locality or to using official channels. Using official channels could be costly—in time, transport, and fees. Charges levied to file complaints, request paperwork, or seek arbitration were common (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 21; Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 34; Myanmar research team, 2021b). Approaching external authorities could also require social capital, language skills, or unfamiliar ways of behaving. In Pakistan, social status and connections to others through kinship networks were crucial in terms of whether and how people could make claims of authorities (Wazir et al., 2022). In Myanmar, households spoke of mistreatment by authorities because of their difficulty in speaking Burmese, and their ethnic identities (Myanmar research team, 2021b). Poor prior experiences fed into a general mistrust of external authorities.

Low expectations of a particular authority were sometimes linked to perceptions of legitimacy. Official Frelimo leaders were not seen as legitimate in one Mozambican location because of their history of underserving the population (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 26). Non-state administrations associated with armed groups were often seen as more legitimate authorities than the Union government in the research sites in Myanmar (Myanmar research team, 2021b). Higher-level authorities and their practices sometimes actively deterred people from escalating their concerns, preferring community-level resolution. In Mozambique, incremental fees were charged for each level of party official that became involved with a complaint or request (Posse et al., 2022). In one location in Myanmar both police and non-state authorities required evidence that local leaders had attempted a resolution before becoming involved (Myanmar research team, 2021b).

### 3.2 | Self-provision and community-based resolution

Against this backdrop of low expectations and disincentives to approaching external authorities “self-provision”—as we termed it—was widespread. We use self-provision as a broad category for situations where solutions are found without the central involvement of external authorities or official duty-bearers, and outside the boundaries of any

<sup>9</sup>McCarthy (2019) traces the history of ideas of community self-reliance in Myanmar, noting how a lack of dependence on external authorities became valued due to conflict and authoritarianism, and was sustained, somewhat paradoxically, through preferential allocation of development funds to villages seen to be meeting these standards.

existing public services.<sup>10</sup> We saw self-provision of different kinds, including those discussed in the literature on forms of informal social protection (Getu & Devereux, 2013; Mumtaz, 2022; Mumtaz & Whiteford, 2021). These included institutions like burial societies and savings groups, but also customs of wealthier people making donations or using their influence to help those who were struggling to access services or support. Unsurprisingly, many households facing problems relied first on their family, kinship, or local social networks when they faced problems; the Pakistan study found that “poor households use a mixture of networking and *majboori* [helplessness and obligation], requesting help from family and friends with humility” (Wazir et al., 2022). Other examples could be described as “institutionalized co-production” of services (Joshi & Moore, 2004). For example, community fundraising was seen to meet part of the costs of paying teachers, repairing roads, or extending the electricity supply to villages in Myanmar (Myanmar research team, 2021a).

Self-provision extended from access to resources or services to include collective action to ensure public safety. These actions were similar to the logics explored more broadly by Ostrom (1990), but also recognized in the literature on community self-policing (Kyed, 2018b). In the more extreme cases, communities or intermediaries established their own local rules, resolutions, and punishments. In Mozambique, the most extreme example explored was in an urban neighbourhood with high crime rates. In this location volunteer “police” were widely reported to try to keep order, including the use of violent vigilantism and lynching of suspected criminals (Posse et al., 2022). This was tolerated or potentially supported by wider authorities, and those involved were linked to political parties. In Myanmar village-specific rules were common—ranging from periodic alcohol bans to night-time curfews to limit contact with armed groups (Myanmar research team, 2021b, p. 34). Breaking these rules incurred fines, or punishments involving public shaming. There were also places where, similar to Mozambique, villages had their own volunteer “security guards” that protected the village overnight (Myanmar research team, 2021a).

Often self-provision and avoidance of external authorities depended on village or settlement-level local governance institutions, either for co-ordination to pool funds or provide goods, or to resolve disputes. Some of these were formalized and others closer to the informal local governance institutions defined by Mohmand (2016), and the commonly seen mechanisms of dispute resolution they provide. In the northern Pakistan location people “often [used] panchayats and other informal committees to settle small disputes—not because they are fairer, but because they are speedier, cheaper, and do not make them feel subservient” (Wazir et al., 2022). In Myanmar, the dominant informal institution was the village leader—a role not formally recognized by the Myanmar government at the time but seen as official by households. In some locations these leaders made independent judgements about disputes. In areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization a highly institutionalized network of “traditional committees” applied rules and set compensation or punishments (Myanmar research team, 2021a). In the rural research locations in Mozambique, village chiefs were often called on when households wanted to engage an authority, and had considerable decision-making power. At times, these powerful individual leaders in both Mozambique and Myanmar were decision-makers themselves—but at other times they worked to engage other authorities. They were part of a wider group we term “governance intermediaries.” In the next section we move on to discuss such intermediaries, exploring their prominent role in those cases where self-provision was not an option.

## 4 | INTERMEDIARIES

When poor and marginalized people did attempt to reach beyond their village or neighbourhood authorities to address governance problems these attempts were almost always mediated by others. In all our research locations the actions of various intermediaries were essential to the functioning of local governance, serving as the “grease” that oiled governance systems. As noted above, our second phase of research focused on these actors. The findings speak to and extend those in a body of work from multiple contexts that argues that citi-

<sup>10</sup>For a similar use of this term as a broad category see Mizrahi (2012).



zanship and access to public goods are highly and variously mediated in the post-colonial state (Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner, 2020; Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2011; Berenschot, 2019; Krishna, 2011; Kruks-Wisner, 2018; von Lieres & Piper, 2014).

The governance intermediaries played their role in at least one of two ways, and often both.<sup>11</sup> First, they mediated relationships between authorities and a constituency or locality—attempting to connect people to higher-level authorities and other decision-makers to get problems solved, either for individuals or on the basis of collective challenges. They sometimes communicated high-level authorities' rules and expectations, and sometimes selected who benefitted from resources allocated by those authorities. Second, they mediated between people in a locality resolving problems between people at that level, co-ordinating collective activities or providing services. The village leaders or chiefs, and some panchayat members, discussed in the previous section, are examples of this horizontal mediation, but other influential figures also played this role, and held a degree of decision-making and enforcement authority themselves.

There are of course many layers of such intermediaries, brokers, and go-betweens within governance systems, including between elites. Our focus, however, was on those immediately connecting to poor and marginalized households; the first points of contact for the household beyond family, friends, or those from whom they could call in favours. Different kinds of intermediaries were of varying importance across our locations, and the countries. In this section we first describe those differences, then explore views of intermediaries' legitimacy, and issues of equity and access in who played intermediary roles.

#### 4.1 | Intermediary characteristics

In Myanmar, the most important intermediaries identified by households were community leaders. The roles had various titles, but in all locations there was an identifiable individual considered by households as holding the community leadership role (Myanmar research team, 2021b). These roles typically moved between individuals periodically, rather than being a customary or inherited role. This is consistent with recent ethnographically informed analyses in other parts of Myanmar (Eloff, 2017; Kempel & Myat Thet Thitsar, 2012; Kempel & Nyien, 2014; Kyed, 2018a). Community leaders were “the primary point of responsibility, negotiation and decision-making regarding dispute resolution, justice, and services issues, and...the necessary intermediary for any registration or documentation processes” (Myanmar research team, 2021b). One household member told researchers that “we rely on the village administrator because he is the chief” while others depicted them as pseudo-parental figures (Myanmar research team, 2021b). In rural areas they sit a level below the Ward and Village Tract Administrator roles officially recognized by the Union government and build on a history of village self-governance in Myanmar, itself a result of conflict, authoritarian military rule, and British colonial administration. In most research locations the roles were reported to be elected in some way. In others the role “rotated” between those deemed eligible. In the towns the role was played by the officially elected “ward administrator,” although they had fewer responsibilities than their village counterparts.

Mozambique locations had hierarchical decision-making systems of formal local governance, managed by political parties and in particular Frelimo. Expressing the blurred party–state lines in Mozambique, these party-affiliated roles included those of neighbourhood secretaries, “block” secretaries, and “third-level” community leaders (Posse et al., 2022). This was supplemented with representatives of other party-affiliated organizations, such as the women's organization of Frelimo, the *Organização da Mulher Moçambicana* (Mozambique Women's Organization). Similar to research sites in Myanmar, the network of village chief roles was found to be particularly influential in rural areas. Unlike Myanmar, these hereditary roles were (re)incorporated into formal governance in these areas as part of decentralization reforms in the 1990s (Alexander, 1997; Buur & Kyed, 2006). Speaking to the overlapping of intermediary

<sup>11</sup>Some uses of intermediation in the literature distinguish between mediation in the sense of arbitration, and other “in-between” roles (von Lieres & Piper, 2014). Others argue that intermediation involves an actor that alters the content or presentation of an issues, rather than simply being a “go-between” (Lindquist, 2015). We prefer here to use the term broadly to encompass a wide set of practices and roles.

roles and the exertion of public authority, one household respondent in Namicopo explained, “the chief and ward secretaries are authorities and watch over our existence. They care about our problems and fight for these problems to be overcome being mediators. They can decide on whatever.” (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 28). While most of those identified by households as key intermediaries were part of the party–state apparatus, in some locations intermediaries linked to opposition parties were important, and in one a community association was identified as a “legitimate interlocutor in solving daily problems” (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 26).

In Pakistan, the range of governance intermediaries was more varied. Households commonly identified some who fit the mould of political brokers—a role well-documented in the political science literature, including across South Asian contexts (Krishna, 2007; Manor, 2000; Mohmand, 2019; Stokes et al., 2013). These use connections within political parties, the state, and service providers, to get citizens' problems solved, and also mobilize these citizens politically at election times. Individuals connected to forms of local governance—both panchayats (local councils), and jirgas (traditional courts)—also stood out as important, although sometimes because of influential status rather than because decisions were necessarily taken by those groups (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 17). This was particularly so in the more remote research location (Wazir et al., 2022). Local members of political groups or parties that claimed to represent people and mobilized them to act collectively were also important—such as a tenant farmers' movement in Punjab. Most of the intermediaries involved in the second phase of research had a political party or movement affiliation (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 14).<sup>12</sup> For example, in Islamabad two intermediaries from a left-wing party working on housing rights for slum residents often dealt with the municipality on behalf of the residents and were called on for help in diverse circumstances. The importance of these intermediaries was supported by widespread particularistic access to public resources in Pakistan—where knowing individuals within the bureaucracy or service providers was seen as the only way to secure access to even formalized entitlements.

## 4.2 | Intermediaries' legitimacy and significance

The intermediary roles we found to be important are often represented quite negatively in the literature. Studies of political brokers often associate them with clientelism and patronage politics that undermine good governance, and sometimes frame them as “rent-seekers” in a political marketplace (e.g. Stokes et al., 2013, Chapter 3). Literature on customary forms of leadership and governance sometimes associate them with elite capture and ingrained inequalities, such as those arising from class and caste (e.g. Murtazashvili, 2016). Other work has focused on the coercive nature of some mediation (see, for example, the work of Wheeler (2014) on neighbourhood militias). Households in our research, however, generally held a less negative view of the governance intermediaries they highlighted as important to them. Intermediaries were presented as being able to deliver and more trustworthy and reliable than formal or more distant higher-level authorities. Many were seen as legitimate sources of authority in their own right. Some of that legitimacy came from holding particular roles—for example, the village leader role in Myanmar, the party officials in Mozambique, and a pastor in one of the urban settlements in Pakistan. Being identified as a successful or legitimate intermediary also depended on personal factors such as social status, networks, and trustworthiness, aspects of ethnic, religious, or political identity, and histories of helping to resolve problems.

A number of those households seen as important were once formal intermediaries who continued to act informally after their retirement or replacement. Others were best seen as local activists, whose role primarily depended on their track records of representing others and community organizing—echoing the findings of Kruks-Wisner (2018) in rural India. Intermediaries' legitimacy is therefore something that is built and needs to be sustained. In Pakistan researchers found that legitimacy “comes from the give-and-take relation intermedi-

<sup>12</sup>Party affiliation does not mean allegiance; often intermediaries switched parties without burning bridges. This strategy allowed intermediaries to have an array of contacts and networks when needed, while allowing political parties access to intermediaries' ability to mobilize vote blocs (see Mohmand, 2019).

aries sustain with people. People expect something from intermediaries; if they do not give them anything, they lose legitimacy” (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 45). In Mozambique, the residents' association identified as a key intermediary in the first phase of work saw its role compromised in the second phase as allegations of corruption surrounded the loss of a community savings fund (Posse et al., 2022). In addition to these transactional elements, the research offered signs that intermediaries' legitimacy in the eyes of households came in part from the very localized accountability they provided (see Anderson, 2023). Many intermediaries identified as important by households could be called on to explain their actions and were subject to some possibility of sanction by households or their constituency.<sup>13</sup>

### 4.3 | Equity and access

Access to intermediaries and the ability to play intermediary roles was not equal across households or individuals. In Pakistan the research found that some intermediaries offered preferential treatment or only helped those of the same caste-like kinship network (*biradari*), and all intermediaries identified were of mid- or higher-ranked *biradari* (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 37). In Mozambique some intermediaries only acted for those aligned to the same political party (Posse et al., 2022). The importance of having networks, connections, and the time to undertake the work of an intermediary meant that those with lower incomes and social status did not play these roles.

Most of the intermediaries identified as important by the households in our research sites were men. Though some women were seen as successful intermediaries or community leaders, their authority or breadth of responsibility was frequently challenged or undermined by men. In Mozambique the ruling Frelimo party has promoted the inclusion of women in governance roles, but we found that, once in these roles, women were often sidelined or not given actual authority to make decisions (Posse et al., 2022). Others successfully navigated patriarchal norms to play intermediary roles—with one woman in Pakistan sending her son to meetings that she was prohibited from attending, participating via his mobile phone (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 21). Many of the women intermediaries identified in the research acted only on issues that were seen as part of imagined and gendered “domains.” These included domestic disputes, sexual violence, access to health services, and child welfare. Such gendered intermediation is not to be downplayed, however. In Myanmar, several women intermediaries had the social status to become involved unofficially in dispute-resolution processes that involved other women. They also reported raising issues such as sexual assaults with village authorities when the women concerned did not feel comfortable approaching them directly.

Intermediaries were key to deciding whether governance problems should be escalated, to which authorities, and how. In the next section we explore the complex landscape of authorities they navigated in doing so, and the varied strategies they deployed.

## 5 | MULTIPLE AUTHORITIES AND GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

In most locations, and particularly where conflict was more active, the households in our research had very little choice in terms of which intermediary they could go to. However, intermediaries themselves generally had more options. First, and as noted above, they made choices about what issues should or could be resolved through self-provision of some kind (or indeed left unresolved). Second, they could often choose which external authorities to approach and how these contacts were navigated.

<sup>13</sup>Auerbach (2016) also found these accountability dynamics among brokers in informal urban settlements in India, but only where there was competition between different brokers.

They had these options because (1) there were multiple authorities present in most places, as a result of public authority being contested in various ways, and (2) these authorities, intermediaries, and others were linked together in governance networks in which problems were moved around, decisions were made, and bargains struck. The picture of authorities and the nature of networks, including their density, differed significantly in each of the locations, including within each country, but behaviours around and within them showed some patterns. The discussion that follows looks first at what authorities mattered, then at how they overlapped in practice. We then discuss the ways these formed networks of authority, and some of the strategies adopted by intermediaries.

## 5.1 | Multiple authorities

The contested nature of governance in the places we were researching meant that there were multiple important sites of authority in addition to, or instead of, the national government or its sub-national structures. It looked different in different places depending on the nature of the contestations at play.

In some locations the contestation involved recent or ongoing armed conflict, and situations of clear “rebel governance” (Arjona et al., 2015). Our Myanmar research sites included those exemplifying the hybrid governance identified by others in contemporary Myanmar (Brenner, 2019; South, 2018; South et al., 2018), and complexity of authorities. In one village tract, intermediaries engaged not only with the Union government and the Myanmar military, but also with both the administrative and armed wings of five other groups that exerted some public authority (Myanmar research team, 2021a). These engagements covered taxation, justice/conflict resolution, security, and service delivery, among others. In Pakistan, the most remote research location was also the site of active and violent contestation between armed groups, including the Taliban, and the Pakistan military. However, instead of the density of governance actors observed in Myanmar this led to periodic vacuums of authority (Wazir et al., 2022, p. 5). Tribal authorities and traditional courts (*jirgas*), filled this vacuum at times, but intermediaries also made claims to armed groups and their own courts (Wazir et al., 2022).

Diverse authorities still mattered even where the state or formal authorities were more visible and conflict less violent. In the community resettled to make way for mining operations in Mozambique, the mining company itself was frequently approached to resolve public goods and public services, seen as owing a debt to the community. In one of the peri-urban locations Frelimo had lost control of the municipal authority to Renamo. However, their established network of party workers in the area “invaded the space” of the Renamo officials—trying to resolve problems through their access to Frelimo-controlled parts of the state (Posse et al., 2022). In one site in rural Pakistan the long-running contestation between farmers, their landlords, and military “allottees” produced a pattern of authority where the military was central, but also involved two rival residents' associations, one of which was state-sponsored (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 21). In the Islamabad *katchi abadi* locations intermediaries cultivated various informal links with the Capital Development Authority (CDA)—the publicly owned company responsible for municipal services (Loureiro et al., 2021). Religious authorities were also more important in these locations than in other parts of Pakistan—possibly because the *katchi abadi* residents were largely Christians in a Muslim-majority context.

## 5.2 | Overlapping responsibilities and forum shopping

The formal mandates or informal ambits of these multiple authorities were sometimes distinct but often overlapped. Authorities both co-operated and competed with one another in the same areas and on the same issues. The cease-fire agreement between the Myanmar military and the KNU recognized the official jurisdiction of the KNU over specified public goods and policies, but their influence significantly exceeded those issues in our research sites

(Myanmar research team, 2021b, 2021a). The popular legitimacy of these parallel administrations also influenced which authorities were approached by intermediaries. But like households, intermediaries' strategies across research sites tended to focus on how to resolve problems quickly, with the least expense, and with the least bad treatment and outcomes. They often had clear pictures of what kinds of issues particular authorities were better at resolving, and prioritized this over formal mandates or responsibilities unless formal documentation was essential (for example in land registration or granting identity cards). For instance, even in a KNU-controlled area of Myanmar, one village leader explained that the Border Guard Force—a local militia working with the Myanmar military—was the easiest authority to approach for many issues (Myanmar research team, 2021a).

We therefore saw a degree of “forum shopping” by intermediaries, taking advantage of the blurred lines of authority. As researchers found in the more remote research location in Pakistan, “if one public authority is unwilling or fails to solve their problem, they [households and intermediaries] just go to the other one” (Wazir et al., 2022). In Mozambique direct appeals to the state-owned electricity company were taken up in the face of inaction by the municipal authorities (Posse et al., 2022). In Myanmar one case was reopened when the accused invoked family connections with the Border Guard Force to overrule a village committee (Myanmar research team, 2021a).

### 5.3 | Networks

Across the towns, villages, and neighbourhoods where we worked, authorities and intermediaries were connected through active networks of communication, bargaining, and allocation of responsibility. These networks were animated and (re)shaped through their interactions to resolve problems for households, though they sometimes relied on deeper or longer-running connections. Connections and status were most often personal in nature, rather than institutionally determined. In Pakistan this included the extended network of the *biradari*, one of many kinds of personalistic networks that underpin Pakistani social and political life, although rarely officially recognized (Loureiro et al., 2021, pp. 36–39). In what the researchers termed *dynastic mediation*, all the intermediaries involved in the research in Punjab reported that they had taken over the role from a parent, “inheriting” networks that “ran in the family” (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 41). In Mualadzi, Mozambique, a residents' association president reported how she had developed a personal friendship with the wife of the previous provincial governor, and could draw on those connections where necessary (Posse et al., 2022).

These networks brought different actors together to resolve particular issues. Just as households and intermediaries might “shop” for a forum that could resolve problems appropriately, networks coalesced around particular issues, or moved them around between different decision-making levels and spaces. In some places and cases in Myanmar this involved a dense set of committees and groups—including the Women's Union, youth representatives, and elders—or fairly large groups of advisors drawn from these (Myanmar research team, 2021a). Networks sometimes involved unlikely actors working together to resolve problems. There was some quiet collaboration between Frelimo and Renamo-linked intermediaries in Mozambique based on long personal relationships or friendships (Posse et al., 2022). In Islamabad the CDA asked intermediaries who they were usually at loggerheads with in *katchi abadis* to help establish who should be eligible for pandemic relief packages (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 40).

### 5.4 | Navigation and strategies

Part of the skill that intermediaries demonstrated and made them valuable was knowing how to navigate these networks and choosing the strategies to apply at different points. Much of the time this involved relatively quiet petitioning or advocating for other authorities to take action, based on knowledge of both official and unofficial rules about who should be contacted, and in what order. In Mozambique intermediaries described dogged campaigns of

letter-writing and passing evidence up the governance chain, and the points at which they might decide to ignore rules and “skip” a non-responsive level or department (Posse et al., 2022). Skipping levels or sidestepping certain officials often brought about negative consequences, but sometimes when tactically applied it resulted in problems being resolved.

However, this quieter form of advocacy and problem resolution was not the only tactic available. Two other strategies stood out—the use of the media and social media networks, and the mobilization of community members in acts of protest.<sup>14</sup> Media exposure raised the profile of problems or struggles with those outside a community. It was also perceived to force the hand of authorities, or shame them into action to save their reputations. As an intermediary from one of the residents' associations in Mualadzi, Mozambique said: “they know that if they don't answer me, I'll put it in the air, I have many sites” (Posse et al., Forthcoming, p. 19). Another, from a rival association, explained how she secured government support for a sick child by posting videos online. In Islamabad intermediaries managed to have *katchi abadi* demolitions stalled by launching a social media campaign that tagged a federal Minister and her children on Twitter (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 50). Acts of protest were rarer, but a Punjab location included a land occupation organized by a female intermediary when a retired army officer allottee tried to take land back from poor tenants (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 47). In Mozambique an intermediary organized for women to block a bridge in protest at the lack of water supply (Posse et al., 2022).

## 6 | POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Governance relationships between people and public authorities consist of and are built from everyday encounters—from tangible attempts to solve real problems using the resources at hand. Adopting the perspective of poor and marginalized households highlighted several important dimensions of these encounters. Such encounters started from people's expectations of those who govern, and norms of how they deal with collective challenges. They were shaped by intermediaries, actors who connected people with authority, or more often, shaped local solutions or self-provision.

Intermediaries engaged with a complexity of often overlapping authorities, connected in dense networks that required various strategies of navigation, petitioning, and confrontation. The commonality of these findings across a diverse set of locations and quite different national political contexts suggests these are themes worth exploring elsewhere, and at the very least in other places characterized by contested authority, conflict, and violence. This citizen-eye view of “real governance” also challenges several assumptions that underlie contemporary development policy and practice, and which we argue are more broadly applicable.

First, many development actors take state-run or initiated services as a starting point and focus solely on improving these, rather than the range of other places from which people might get those services or resolve their governance problems. Norms of neighbourhood and village self-governance and self-provision—such as informal social protection, pooling of resources, and localized negotiation over what rules matter—reflect preferences and practical responses in places with unclear lines of authority. The norms described here may not apply elsewhere, but the findings highlight a need for development actors to engage with and understand such realities. They might, for example, explore how to support mutual aid and co-production of public goods and services.

Second, it seems common to assume that poor and marginalized people can approach and directly connect with public services and officials themselves. If, as in our research locations, these contacts are more often mediated by others—and for women often specifically mediated by men—then more open attention is needed on these intermediary and brokerage roles. Intermediaries' behaviour and choices can amplify or confound other attempts to improve local governance and public services. The informal or unofficial nature of intermediary roles means that they

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, these strategies were not observed in Myanmar, where the research team was of the opinion that they were inhibited by a mix of strong cultural norms and persistent fear of authorities.

are frequently seen only as barriers to service access; problematic individuals to be avoided or circumvented. Our research suggests that many intermediaries can be considered “facilitative” or play roles welcomed by those otherwise excluded from services or their entitlements. This calls for innovation in how at least some intermediary roles can be leveraged in development practice.

Third, the focus on formal governance processes as the way that public goods and collective wellbeing are produced and managed is too simplistic. In our research locations a range of non-state actors were involved in governance and public service provision. This complexity suggests that policy-makers need to engage with the diversity of actors and institutions, both formal and informal, that are taking real decisions that affect people, and the often messy ways in which these can overlap. As is noted in the literature on legal pluralism, focusing on access to formal justice systems does not necessarily, or at least quickly, help the very many people that instead seek justice or arbitration from traditional committees or customary leadership roles. The same probably holds for other governance needs. The findings highlight the importance of development actions starting from a fine-grained understanding of the highly diverse networks of governance actors that matter to specific places, including their involvement in conflict. Without such an understanding there is a risk of focusing on the wrong actors and institutions, and so wasting resources.

These implications come with challenges and trade-offs. The practices that we found do not meet many normative standards of good governance. For example, women had significantly less power and influence than men, and interactions within and across these governance networks relied on people using familial, social, and political capital—privileging local elites and sustaining others' marginalization. Engaging with the reality of everyday governance in development policy and programming cannot ignore these dynamics and power imbalances, and the risks of further bolstering them further; developing institutional structures that can compensate for a lack of social capital by guaranteeing all citizens' rights of access is a worthy goal. But it is a goal that needs to take seriously how slow any progress is likely to be where governance and legitimacy are being contested, and how those efforts are likely to overlay rather than replace the cultural expectations, social norms, and less formal forms of authority that construct everyday governance for poor and marginalized people.

Beyond the potential relevance of our findings for other places and the implications for development action, our final point is a methodological one. In the cases shared here the process of in-depth longitudinal research starting from citizen experiences and their problem-solving strategies has highlighted the complexity of everyday governance encounters. Seeing the contours of this complexity requires such a starting point and paying more attention to how governance relationships unfold over time. The *Governance Diaries* approach is well-suited to this challenge.

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This work is partly based on published sources from the same project, and partly on unpublished sources that are not publicly availability due to confidentiality, anonymity, and safety concerns for participants.

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