

AIPS Fellowships Abstract- Syeda Ijaz

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In my book project, “Aiding Accountability: The Politics of Last Mile Service Delivery”, I introduce a theory of last mile service delivery and foreign aid. Last mile service delivery refers to the final distribution of aid benefits to its intended recipients. In developing democracies, last mile service delivery is riddled with asymmetries of information and administrative hurdles. One such obstacle is biometric verification. During my interviews with local councilors, many mentioned that women have blurred fingerprints because of doing laundry and washing dishes. If they cannot pass biometric verification, they must jump through an additional administrative hurdle of procuring a waiver form. Since these procedures pose difficulties to poor, often illiterate voters, they turn to their local representatives for assistance with obtaining aid. At the same time, politicians who can no longer exercise discretion over program enrollment can still offer access to last mile services, such as preparing and attesting a biometric waiver form. Given that many last mile services – such as the verification of official documents, the provision of public transport, addressing bribe taking by middlemen – are locally non-excludable, their provision is broad-based rather than preferential. It is driven by voters’ demand for these services rather than their pledged electoral support and can therefore contribute to enhancing democratic accountability. Through interviews with local councilors, I find that their key political responsibilities are often marked by competing roles. One of these is that of *khidmat*, an Urdu word that translates to ‘service’, while another is *farz*, an Urdu/Arabic word referring to obligatory rites of Islamic worship. Local councilors, many of whom enter politics because they are better privileged than their community members as teachers, lawyers or grocery store owners, claim to be primarily driven by the desire to impartially serve their constituents. They consider this constituency service a form of worship or giving back to their communities. In the proposed fieldwork funded through AIPS, I want to shadow local politicians to observe their day-to-day activities. This will enable a deeper insight of the competing roles that local politicians perform and their incentive to serve their communities. This book makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of foreign aid in developing countries. It shows that centering voters’ agency can help identify when and how aid can improve democratic outcomes and argues that politics remains critical to efficient aid implementation. Finally, it uses a host of empirical evidence relying on two years of fieldwork in Pakistan to closely evaluate the politics of last mile services and aid in the South Asian context.