

TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

A conceptual framework and insights for improved governance programming

From UNDP Oslo Governance Centre (OGC)¹



Photo: Tobin Jones/UNDP. Washington IDP Camp, Garowe, Puntland. 2020.

Introduction

As evidenced by both political theory and development practice, trust is a key component of the social contract. It is important, therefore, that work in the area of governance and beyond is informed by a solid understanding of the nature of trust as well as an in-depth knowledge of its drivers and consequences. In the literature on this topic, a distinction is typically made between horizontal trust (the trust that the members of a community have in each other) and vertical trust (the trust that the members of a community have in the institutions presiding over that community).

This paper focuses mainly on trust in public institutions, which can be considered a specific form of vertical trust (although the question of how vertical and horizontal trust interact will also be addressed). The twin goal of the present brief is to provide a conceptual framework to inform policy debates on trust and to offer insights that can improve governance programming. After reviewing the importance of trust in public institutions, the following sections examine different meanings of trust as well as ways in which confidence in governance systems may be fostered.

The Importance of Trust in Public Institutions

An extensive body of literature shows that trust in public institutions is a necessary condition for the processes of investment, innovation, and trade that drive economic growth.² But trust in public institutions is needed not only in the economic sphere. It is also inextricably linked to state legitimacy and is indispensable to the functioning of several governance processes, as outlined in Table 1.

1. Chief author Emanuele Sapienza, Policy Advisor, UNDP Regional Hub for Latin America and the Caribbean. OGC would also like to thank colleagues from across UNDP who worked with us and contributed to this brief. This brief was made possible with the generous support of the Government of Norway.

2. Economics Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz poignantly sums up this point, stating that "It is trust, more than money, that makes the world go round". See: Stiglitz, J. E. (2013).

Table 1: The importance of trust in public institutions for governance processes

Policy Making	Trust in public institutions can expand the range of politically viable policy options and the timeframe within which policies are expected to deliver results
Policy Implementation	Trust in public institutions is important for the implementation of policies requiring citizens' cooperation and compliance
Service Delivery	Trust in public institutions is required for people to be willing to use the services of the state, especially when alternative options are available
Regime Stability	Trust in public institutions can tide a political regime over bad times, thus avoiding extreme regime volatility
Democratic Life	Trust in the ability of institutions to protect the losers of an election is indispensable for the peaceful transfer of power

Indeed, it may just not be possible to effectively address many of the greatest challenges of our times without a certain level of trust in public institutions. For instance, in discussing the links between trust and economic inequality, Bo Rothstein (2018) notes:

“One of the most effective ways for decreasing economic inequality ... is via universal or broad-based public services and benefits such as universal health care and pensions, childcare allowances and free higher education. Because all or most segments of the population are included in such programs, they require relatively high taxes. ... The willingness of citizens to pay higher taxes for public services and benefits is conditioned, however, on several leaps of faith. ... One must be confident the tax administration can collect the money in a fair and impartial manner. ... One must trust that the taxes the government collects will not disappear in various forms of corruption. ... Someone is not likely to part with money if the person believes the service or benefit will not be delivered when he or she needs it. And ... when the service is delivered, people want it done in a way that respects their integrity and dignity.

What is Trust?

As illustrated by the examples in Box 1, there exist many definitions of trust (both in a general sense and in the context of governance), reflecting a variety of ideological standpoints and methodological preferences.

Box 2: A working definition of trust

Given a situation of uncertainty regarding the conduct of a certain actor, trust is the belief that this conduct will conform with a certain set of positive expectations.

Box 1: Different approaches to the definition of trust

In a general context...

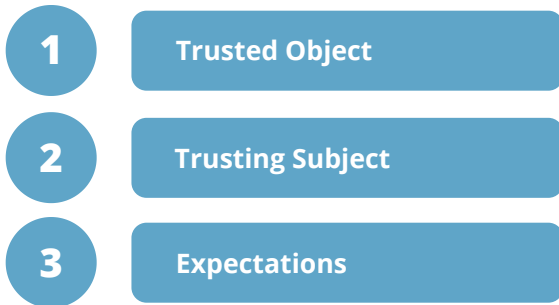
- Assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something
Merriam Webster Dictionary

In a governance context...

- The probability that an actor assigns to other actors of delivering on their commitment, conditional on their past behaviour
2017 World Development Report "Governance and the law"
- A person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with her or his expectations of positive behaviour
"Trust" in Praia Handbook on Governance Statistics, based on OECD (2017) "How's Life: Measuring Well-Being"
- Citizens' support for political institutions in the face of uncertainty about or vulnerability to the actions of these institutions
Tom van der Meer in Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"

The following working definition will be used for the purposes of this paper:

Based on this definition, trust can be understood as a relation involving three components: a trusted object, a trusting subject, and a set of expectations.



The next sections will review each of the three components of trust in turn. However, before proceeding further, it is important to clarify the distinction between trust and trustworthiness. While trust relates to subjectively held beliefs regarding the future actions of a certain actor, trustworthiness refers to the real-life qualities that characterize this actor (and based on which the actor may indeed be deserving of trust). Typically, trustworthiness is conceptualized along two dimensions: intentions (the goals an actor pursues through its actions) and competence (the actor's ability to fulfil a given set of goals). Consistency and predictability are also typically mentioned as important aspects of trustworthiness. Naturally, there is a strong link between trust and trustworthiness. However, as will be discussed further, this link is less straightforward than often assumed.

Unpacking "Trust in Public Institutions"



The term "institution" is used – both in everyday parlance and in policy discussions – with two distinct meanings. An "institution" can be an actor that deploys its normative capacity in order to achieve certain goals. But it can also be an operating space in which a complex of norms structures the interaction of a set of actors. For instance, in relation to the institution of government, people may say: "the government will introduce a new policy to replace the old one".

Or they may say: "the party that is currently *in* government favours this policy compared to alternative options". As a result of this double meaning, the expression "trust in governance institutions" can be understood, depending on the context, as denoting two fairly different things: trust in governance actors, or trust in governance systems.

Do we want trust in government?

In his essay "Do we want trust in government?", Russel Hardin (1999) notes the following with respect to the most appropriate attitude to be adopted by citizens vis-à-vis public institutions:

"The stance of citizens towards government could, in principle, be one of trust, distrust or lack of either. I wish to pursue the plausibility of supposing that the relevant response ..., both rationally and actually, is commonly the lack of either trust or distrust because we typically lack the relevant knowledge for going further than that. It may even be true that the conditions for distrust can be met more readily than the conditions for trust. ... The easy answer to the question of my title ["do we want trust in government?"] therefore is that, insofar as trust is not possible except by mistake, we do not want it."

Hardin's words highlight an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, trust in public institutions is indispensable for the smooth functioning of society. On the other hand, it involves significantly problematic aspects that cannot be ignored. This tension is arguably at the root of much controversy on the role of trust in public life. However, the distinction between trust in actors and trust in systems may help address the conundrum.

Given the whole universe of actors in charge of exercising different aspects of the power of the state, it can be posited that some are trustworthy and some are not. However, in most situations, the citizen simply cannot have the necessary information to make an educated guess as to which is which. In fact, if the notion that "power corrupts" is to be believed, it could be assumed that, in governance, untrustworthiness is more likely than trustworthiness, all else being equal. Given this reality, trust in governance actors may not necessarily be a reasonable (or desirable) position.

On the other hand, it is possible for the citizen to reach informed conclusions about the reliability of the governance system (broadly defined to include not only the institutions of the state but also other spheres of relevance to governance, such as civil society and the media). Or, in other words, the citizen can form evidence-based opinions about the ability of the governance system to promote trustworthy conduct (and prevent breaches of trust) through a mix of incentives and safeguards (which can be formal or informal in nature).³

An important consequence of the above is that trust in governance actors may not be necessary, provided that citizens can reasonably trust the governance system.

Box 3: Actor - and system-based trust in governance institutions

Actor-based trust

- Trust based on an assessment of an actor's inherent qualities – its trustworthiness

System-based trust

- Trust based on an assessment of a system's "directive" capacity – its ability to foster trustworthy conduct

An emphasis on system-based trust as opposed to actor-based trust is a key feature of liberal democracy systems. James Madison famously remarked in The Federalist Papers (no. 10):

"It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust ... clashing interests and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm."

Along similar lines, Patti Lenard (2012) talks about a "paradox of trust" in democracy, noting that (p. 68):

"[In democracy we achieve trust by] implement[ing] institutions that suggest a deep distrust of what our legislators will do when offered an opportunity to control the levers of power."

Indeed, as further elaborated in Box 4, there may be significant risks associated with high levels of actor-based trust combined with low levels of system-based trust.⁴

Box 4: The risks of personalized trust: patronage and polarization

Patronage

Patronage systems (or "patron-client" relationships) essentially rest on individuals holding two beliefs: that the institutions of the state are broken (low levels of system-based trust) and that the patron will honour his or her commitment to the client (high levels of actor-based trust). Political systems based on clientelism can be characterized by fairly high levels of trust in political actors. However, evidence has shown that such systems systematically produce severely sub-optimal policy outcomes.

Polarized trust

Highly divided societies are often characterized by high levels of trust in factional leaders (typically based on shared identity and out-group stereotyping) together with low levels of trust in the ability of the governance system to protect the rights of those who are excluded from political power. This combination – which could be described as "polarized trust" – can lead to a paralysis of democratic life and on many occasions has resulted in the unraveling of electoral processes.

Implications for Improved Programming

- In carrying out analysis, it is critically important to distinguish between trust in governance actors and trust in the governance system
- In setting out programmatic goals, the promotion of trust in governance actors cannot replace the promotion of trust in governance systems

3. These mechanisms have been variously referred to as "structural assurances", "institutional constraints", and "institutional warrants".

4. An important point to note here, which also has significant implications for UNDP programming, is that sometimes actor-based trust will be the only entry point for positive change. This, for instance, could be the situation in conflict contexts. Or it may be the case in the contexts of accelerated political transition, where people rely on transformational leadership to replace wholly discredited institutions. While it is important for UNDP to work within the specific opportunities and challenges of every given context, the case could still be made that personalized trust is not a sustainable foundation for accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance, and that the consolidation of positive transitions will eventually require – among other things – a shift from more personalized to less personalized forms of trust.

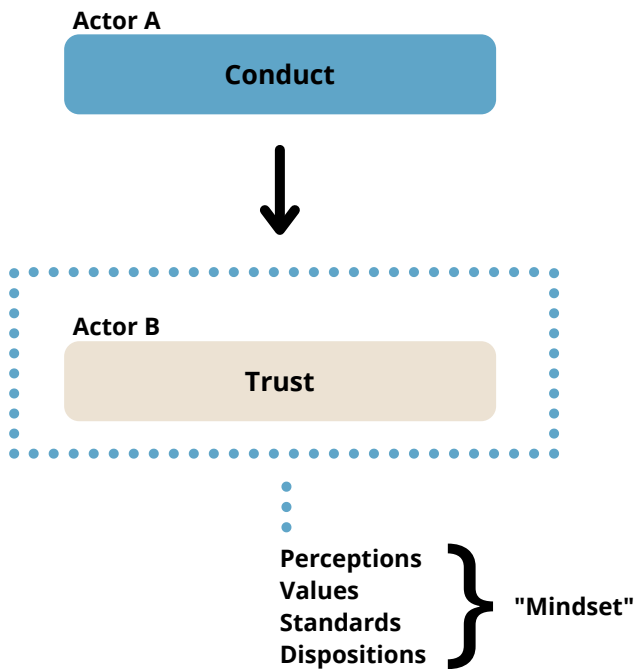
The Subjective Nature of Trust

2

Trusting Subject

As previously mentioned, trust can be understood as a cognitive process. This means that while Actor A's conduct may have an impact on Actor B's trust level, this impact is not direct but rather mediated by a number of subjective factors. It depends, for instance, on perceptions (how accurate A's knowledge of B's conduct is), values (what B considers to be "appropriate" conduct in the given circumstances), standards (what B considers to be "satisfactory" performance), and dispositions (how quick – or reluctant – B is to jump from observed past behaviour to conclusions about future conduct). As a whole, this set of factors can be described as an actor's "mindset".

Figure 2: Trust as a cognitive process



An important implication of understanding trust as a cognitive process is that variations in trust levels (both longitudinal and cross-sectional) may be due not only to variations in conduct but also to variations in mindsets. For instance, a decline over time of trust towards public institutions may result from the rise of a more demanding or perhaps more critically minded and inquiring citizen, rather than major changes in the functioning of these institutions.

Operating within this framework, in his investigation of trust towards public institutions in industrialized countries after World War II, Robert Dalton (2005) reaches the following conclusion:

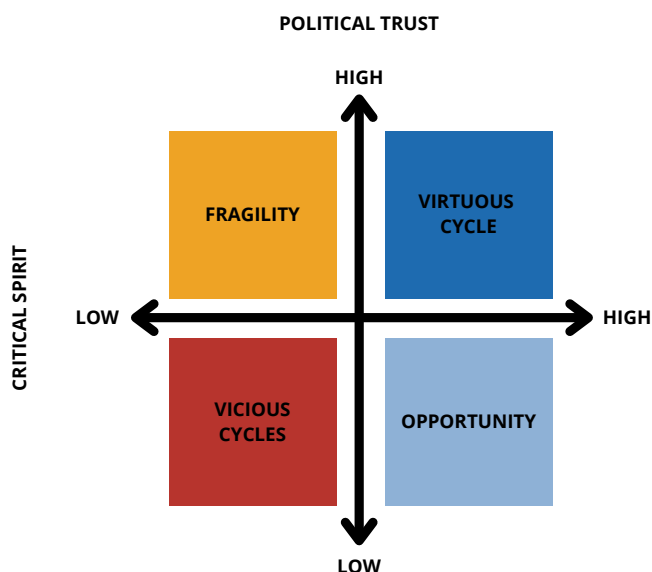
The phenomenon of declining political trust among the American public has been widely discussed, with the explanations often focusing on specific historical events or the unique problems of American political institutions. We first demonstrate that public doubts about politicians and government are spreading across almost all advanced industrial democracies, and we examine the social correlates of the decrease in trust. We find the greatest declines are among the better-educated and upper social status. These results suggest that changing citizen expectations, rather than the failure of governments, are prompting the erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies.

When is a trusting attitude a desirable?

Figure 3 below illustrates a simple framework for context classification obtained by crossing two variables: political trust and critical spirit.⁵ While the top-right and bottom-left quadrants of the diagram represent respectively an obvious desirable and an obvious undesirable, the assessment of the remaining two quadrants is more complicated. Based on historical precedent, the top-left combination (which represents a context of acritical trust) could be regarded as a situation of inherent fragility. In contrast, the bottom-right combination (characterized by an aspiration towards better institutions) could be considered as a place of opportunity. Arguably, these two contexts are the ones where development programming may have the greatest impact, although each of them comes with significant challenges and risks for programming.

5. "Critical spirit" is defined here as the ability to engage in the reasoned questioning of authority. As such, this notion draws from the concept of "critical citizen" developed by Norris and others and is closely related to what Dalton and Welzel refer to as "emancipative values" in *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*. Critical spirit is understood, in this context, as an attitude, not necessarily a type of conduct. The extent to which this attitude may translate into specific kinds of conduct will depend significantly on the governance set-up of the context at hand, including among other things the effectiveness of mechanisms protecting civil and political freedoms.

Figure 3: Political trust and critical spirit



Trust in public institutions and information ecosystems

Given the importance of perceptions in trust-building processes, a good grasp of trust dynamics in a given context will not be possible without a solid analysis of the information ecosystem, including what type of information is available to whom and through what channels. As part of this analysis, it is key to understand the specific configuration of intermediaries that orient a given public in the identification, prioritization, and interpretation of information. Traditional news outlets may play a role in influencing trust in public institutions but, depending on the context, they may or may not be a primary factor.

Increasingly, the process of accessing information and forming opinions takes place within social media, according to modalities which are radically different from the ones that characterize the world of legacy media and which bring about their own, specific set of challenges, such as the significantly heightened impact of echo-chamber effects and potentially greater opportunities for information manipulation.

A significant body of evidence shows that information pollution can have a profoundly negative impact on confidence in governance systems. In particular, the weaponization of both legacy and new media for political purposes can have multiple devastating effects. It can silence dissent and secure acritical trust. Or it can leave people disoriented and simply unable to trust anything in the public sphere. As noted by Hannah Arendt (2010, pp. 295-314):

“The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed.”

Implications for Improved Programming

- In investigating trust dynamics it is important to deploy appropriate analytical strategies to differentiate between objective and subjective effects
- Work on trust in public institutions cannot be delinked from broader issues of political culture, especially the issue of critical spirit in the face of authority
- Work on trust in public institutions should also be closely interlinked with work on the integrity of information ecosystems

Drivers of Confidence in the Governance System

3

Expectations

Clearly, a primary concern from a policy-maker perspective is what factors may contribute to generating confidence in the governance system. Before exploring this question, however, a few distinctions are required.

Segments of the governance system

Research shows that people tend to distinguish between three segments of the governance system:⁶

- **The political system**
Government, parliament, and political parties
- **The civil service system**
The different arms of the public administration
- **The justice and security system**
Courts, police, and armed forces

Public institutions may secure trust by repeatedly delivering on commitments. However, administrative and political institutions find themselves in a very different situation with respect to that possibility. Administrative institutions (both the civil service and the administration of justice) have a double advantage: they benefit from broad agreement within the public on what are the terms of their “commitment”, and they operate over a sustained period of time (which means that they have multiple interactions with many people). On the other hand, when it comes to political institutions, almost by definition there is disagreement among citizens on what should be the exact content of their “commitment”. Furthermore, due to periodic elections, they do not typically operate on a time span that allows for much repetition. It is important to be mindful, therefore, that trust-generating dynamics may differ significantly between these two types of institutions.

The citizen viewpoint

When it comes to views of the governance system, at least two levels can be distinguished:

- **The micro view**
Responding to the question: “How are governance institutions working out in my life?”
- **The macro view**
Responding to the question: “How are governance institutions working out for the country”⁷

The relation between the micro and macro levels of perception is a complex one. The micro level can be assumed to have an impact on the macro level, but it is unlikely to be the only determinant. It is important, therefore, to understand what factors may be mediating this impact. At the same time, it is quite possible for views about the macro level to play a role in structuring the interpretation of micro-level experiences (for instance through a halo effect), and this dynamic should be taken into account as well.

The basis of trust

Finally, the generation of trust can be seen as the result of different processes:

- **Cognitive**
A rational process, based on empirical observation
- **Affective**
An emotional process, rooted in socialization

A cognitive process is based on what happens in the real world (even if mediated by subjective factors, as discussed before). An affective process, instead, is based on what an individual has been raised to believe and can be mixed with stereotyping (positive or negative) based on different forms of identity. The relative weight of cognitive and affective drivers of trust is likely to vary significantly across contexts, but it is important to factor this distinction into relevant analyses.

Drivers of confidence in the governance system: A framework for analysis

When it comes to views of the governance system, at least two levels can be distinguished:

- **Design drivers**
When trust derives from an ex ante evaluation of how the governance system is designed.
- **Performance drivers**
When trust derives from an ex post assessment of how the system performs.

6. See the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust (OECD, 2017a). It should be noted however that this may or may not be the most useful articulation of a governance system in a given context. In particular, the following considerations should be taken into account. The factor analysis carried out by the OECD for the Guidelines actually shows that the civil service is often seen as part of the political system (although a recommendation is made to look at it separately, as its association with more political institutions may vary significantly from country to country). On the other hand, in some cases (especially in presidential systems) the executive and the legislative branches of government are in such an adversarial relation that they should be considered separately. The OECD factor analysis also shows that people tend to distinguish a fourth group of institutions, which the Guidelines refer to as “non-governmental institutions” and include major companies, banks, universities, environmental organizations, and women’s organizations. Depending on the purposes of the analysis, it may be important to consider explicitly this additional cluster (although it would be probably advisable to distinguish at least between profit and not-for-profit institutional spheres). In some cases, there are public bodies (such as electoral management bodies or constitutional courts) which are playing such a major role in public life that they should be considered separately. Another distinction that is likely to be very relevant in many contexts is the distinction between local and national levels of governance (with respect to both the political and the civil service system and in some cases even the justice and security system).

7. Or other macro community to which the citizen belongs.

Tables 2 and 3 provide a non-exhaustive overview of design and performance factors that have been found to be associated with self-reported confidence in the governance system.⁸

Table 2: Design drivers of confidence in the governance system

Majority Rule	The power to govern is attributed based on the wish of a majority expressed in free and fair elections
Minority Rights	While the majority rules, the system is designed to protect the rights of the minority
Rule of Law	The system is designed to ensure that the power of the state is exercised in accordance with the law
Checks and Balances	The system has appropriate in-built checks and balances on the exercise of the power of the state

Table 3: Performance drivers of confidence in the governance system ⁹

Effectiveness	The system’s functioning has an actual impact on issues that matter
Fairness	The system’s outcomes are not systematically biased against one or more groups
Responsiveness	The system is responsive to citizens’ views and aspirations

Figure 4 further elaborates on key components of the process drivers mentioned above.

Figure 4: Key components of major confidence drivers

Effectiveness	Fairness	Responsiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Service delivery. Public service delivery is of good quality• Economic management. Public institutions provide effective economic management• Response to shocks. Public institutions are able to protect citizens from external shocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integrity. Public resources are used for the "common good", not personal enrichment• Equality of treatment. Public institutions are impartial in performing their functions• Distributional justice. Public institutions promote a fair distribution of economic resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Voice. The governance system is genuinely open and receptive to citizen input• Accountability. Public institutions appropriately deal with legitimate grievances• Respect. The functioning of public institutions is informed by respect for the citizen's dignity

8. The "Additional resources" section at the end includes various analyses relevant to the drivers mentioned in this section.
9. Along similar lines, the OECD identifies five policy dimensions influencing trust in public institutions: responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness.

Box 5: Transparency and trust in public institutions

Transparency is often mentioned as a key foundation of trust in public institutions and, indeed, it can signal respect towards citizens, it can play an important role in promoting integrity, and it is often a condition for voice and accountability. However, empirical evidence on the relation between transparency and trust is far from conclusive. In fact, skeptics argue that in some cases increased transparency may hinder trust by opening public institutions to just and unjust blame equally and by creating unsustainable pressure on already overstretched public administrations. There appears to be, therefore, a strong need for a greater understanding of the specific conditions and implementation modalities under which transparency can have a positive effect on trust in public institutions.

Not all the factors mentioned above will matter equally in all places, at all times, and for all parts of the governance system. In fact, their relative weight and salience is likely to vary significantly depending on the terms of the social contract at the basis of a given community's political settlement. For this reason, the framework provided in this paper should not be regarded as a rigid checklist but rather as the starting point for context-specific diagnostics that will need to be adapted based on local interests and circumstances.

Trust, Diversity, and Social Cohesion

Analyses of trust in public institutions often look at the relationship between citizens and the state as a principal-agent problem. In this framing, citizens ("the principal") give public institutions ("the agent") a mandate, and institutions "earn" trust by faithfully and effectively implementing this mandate. The problem with such a view is that "the people", as a conceptual category, is ill-suited to capture the complexity of citizenry. Society is obviously not a homogeneous body but rather a multiplicity of identities and interests, often in conflict with each other. It is critical that analyses of trust in a given context reflect this diversity and that adequate attention is given to the impact of different social cleavages and forms of exclusion.

Rather than an agent acting on a principal's mandate, the state (and its institutions) may be more accurately seen as a mechanism that mediates among competing interests within a society. While, in their functioning, public institutions cannot be equally responsive to everybody's interests, they can retain citizens' trust by performing their mediating function through a process that is justifiable on the basis of shared values. However, as a society becomes increasingly polarized (for instance as a result of identity-based tensions or maybe due to economic inequality), as the values of different groups drift further and further apart and as common ground shrinks, generalized trust towards institutions becomes more and more difficult to achieve. For this reason, the issue of trust in public institutions cannot be delinked from issues of social cohesion.

Implications for Improved Programming

- In investigating trust dynamics it is important to distinguish between different parts of the governance system and identify the different expectations citizens may hold for each of them
- Work on institutional safeguards, such as mechanisms to ensure the integrity of elections and the rule of law, can have a significant impact on trust in public institutions
- Work aimed at advancing the effectiveness, fairness, and responsiveness of the state can also significantly contribute to greater confidence in governance systems
- For both analytical and programmatic purposes, issues of trust in public institutions cannot be delinked from social cohesion issues

Measurement Issues and the State of Trust in Public Institutions

Information on trust in public institutions is typically gathered through household surveys carried out by both official and non-official bodies (see Box 6 for examples of the latter). Already a fair amount of internationally comparable statistics is available today thanks to these efforts, and more may become available in the future as a result of initiatives like the Praia City Group on Governance Statistics.

Box 6: Non-official sources of data on trust in public institutions

World Values Survey
www.worldvaluessurvey.org

Regional Barometer Surveys
www.globalbarometer.net

Pew Research Center – Global Attitudes
www.pewresearch.org/global

Edelman Trust Barometer
www.edelman.co.uk

Gallup World Poll
www.gallup.com

While surveys represent a precious source of data, it is important to note that the formulation of questions in much of the current practice does not necessarily reflect the theoretical complexities outlined in the previous sections and may in some cases produce results of limited validity. In particular, reliance on single-item direct indicators has been found to involve serious methodological issues, including the tension inherent in trying to capture a multidimensional concept with a unidimensional question and the difficulty of isolating incumbent bias effects.¹⁰ Furthermore, surveys (especially international ones) may not be suitable to capturing context-specific divisions that nonetheless are of great relevance to trust dynamics. It is recommended, therefore, that where possible surveys be complemented with additional data collection strategies, including more qualitative assessments.

Box 7: Going beyond single-item questions in surveys on trust in public institutions

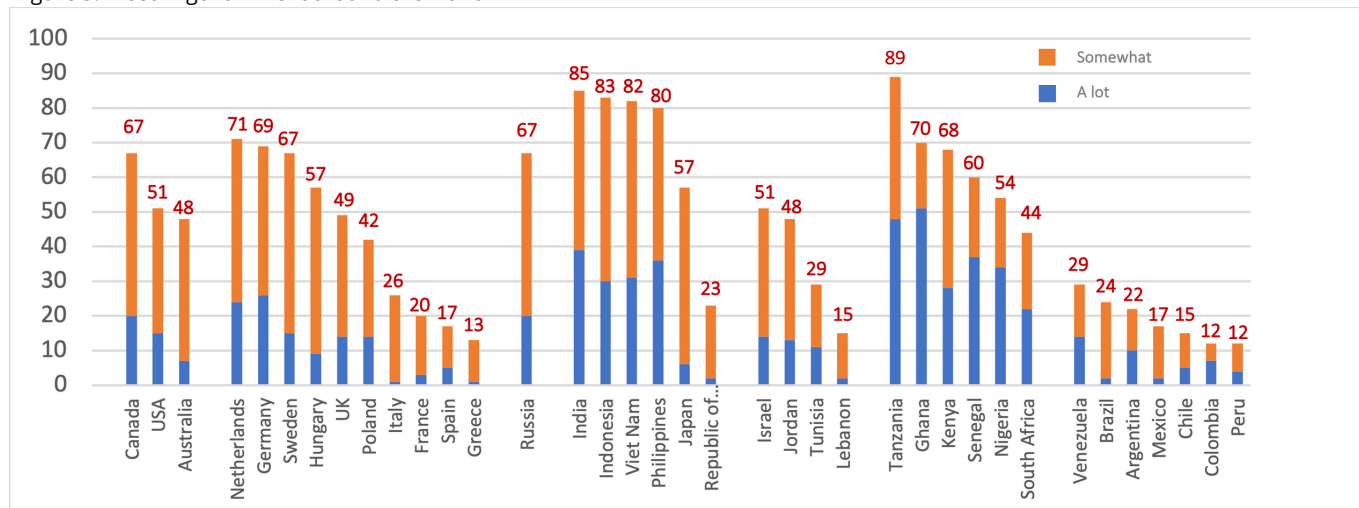
Many surveys ask questions such as: “How much do you trust the government?” This type of question, however, may be tapping incumbent support (trust in a certain actor) much more than general confidence in the governance set-up (trust in the system). To the extent that it is possible to go beyond a single-item approach, it may be preferable to ask questions that clearly distinguish between trust in actors and trust in systems. The first set of questions could focus on specific office holders (e.g. “the President”, the “Leader of the Opposition”) or on the ruling class (political parties, the “elites”). The second set of questions could instead focus more on system safeguards, gauging for instance agreement with statements such as “A great deal of competence is needed to reach positions of responsibility in the public administration” or “If required, the courts would stand up to powerful politicians” and so on. These results could also be usefully compared with measures based on expert assessments such as those provided by institutions like Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM), International IDEA, and the World Bank, among others.

Levels of Trust in Public Institutions Around the World

A lot of political analysis in recent years has revolved around the notion of a deepening “trust deficit” across the world. However, a closer look at the data reveals a more complex picture than some of the overall commentary seems to suggest. For instance, a 2017 Pew Research Center study (Wike et al., 2017) conducted in 38 countries shows great variation in trust towards government, with the percentage of people trusting their government to do “what is right for the country” ranging from 12 to 89 percent.

10. A good overview of the issues can be found in Seyd, B. (2016). Another challenge that has been pointed out is the possible relation between self-censorship and “autocratic trust bias”. V-DEM’s Marcus Tannenberg has an in-depth analysis of this in Tannenberg, M. (2017).

Figure 5: Trust in government around the world



Source: Pew Global Research. 2017. "How much do you trust the national government to do what is right for our country?"

Given the picture emerging from the data illustrated above, it is probably advisable to reframe away from the idea of a global trust deficit and engage instead in systematic comparative analysis across countries to better understand what factors may account for such a significant difference in national and regional trajectories.

Box 8: Two contrasting experiences ¹¹

Latin America

According to Latinobarometro data, satisfaction with the functioning of political life in 18 Latin American countries has been plunging since 2010 and in 2018 (the last year for which data is available) reached its lowest level ever with only 25 percent of survey respondents describing themselves as satisfied with the performance of their country's political system. Analysis carried out by UNDP found that the combined effect of perceived corruption and perceived economic performance accounted for close to 80 percent of the country variation in satisfaction with politics based on the 2018 data. Perceived economic performance was then found to be very closely aligned with perceived fairness in the distribution of income.

People's Republic of China

In a long-term longitudinal survey addressing the question of satisfaction with government performance in the People's Republic of China, the Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation finds that Chinese citizen satisfaction with the performance of public institutions has increased virtually across the board in the period under consideration (2003-2016), reaching by the end of the study its highest level. The authors of the study identify two policy drivers accounting for this upward trend: the expansion of public service provision that specifically targets some of the country's poorest social segments, and the roll-out of a highly visible mass anticorruption campaign with real implications for powerful individuals. The management of environmental issues on the other hand is identified as the primary cause of citizen dissatisfaction.

Implications for Improved Programming

- In developing a narrative on trust in public institutions, it is important to take context into account and move away from the "global trust deficit" framing
- In investigating drivers of trust, there is a need to carry out comparative analysis across regions in order to understand diverging trajectories

Conclusion

Trust in public institutions is a key aspect of governance processes and a necessary condition for just and sustainable development. However, not all kinds of trust are equally valuable. In fact, highly personalized and acritical trust involve significant risks, especially in deeply divided societies and at moments of crisis. It is necessary, therefore, that a nuanced and situation-specific approach be taken when considering programmatic interventions related to the promotion of trust in public institutions. Many of UNDP's areas of work have direct relevance for the strengthening of confidence in governance systems. These include work to ensure the integrity of elections and protect democratic safeguards as well as efforts to strengthen service delivery, stem corruption, and foster participation. But work to address economic inequality and promote resilience are also of critical importance, as are interventions with a focus on information pollution and social cohesion. It is important to leverage country presence to facilitate comparative analysis aimed at deepening the understanding of trust dynamics in order to build on this already solid foundation, and strengthen policy and programme support in contexts where confidence in the governance system is identified as a priority issue.

Additional Resources

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