Social Accountability and Public Goods Provision: Testing Informal Mechanisms to Improve Community Welfare in the Slums of Delhi

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Abstract

Efforts to uncover the microfoundations of the negative association between diversity and public goods provision point to the role of social norms in facilitating collective action. Based on a survey experiment in slums in Delhi, we test three forms of social accountability: i) *horizontal accountability* through peers, ii) pressure from local elites or *vertical accountability*, and iii) signaling ingroup underperformance or the *black sheep effect*. Contrary to expectations, we find that none of these forms of social accountability affect willingness to cooperate on aggregate. Levels of ethnic diversity also do not condition the outcomes. However, exploratory analyses show that the effects vary by religion. While Hindus do not respond to the treatments, Muslims express greater intent to participate. Our findings call for research on how *minority status* might shape contributions to local welfare.

1 Introduction

Social norms have been shown to be powerful motivators for various forms of collective action, including voting, public service delivery, and community welfare (Gerber et al., 2008; Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2010; Lust and Rakner, 2018). Such norms can be viewed as a type of accountability mechanism: when people are held accountable for their behaviors to those whose opinions they care about, they behave more in line with those individuals' expectations (Lerner and Tetlock, 2002). But how do such norms function in the context of ethnic and religious diversity? The literature on diversity and public goods provision argues that the greater ability of ingroup members to monitor and sanction each other allows homogeneous areas to enjoy better public services (Habyarimana et al., 2007; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). Should we expect social accountability mechanisms to depend on the ethnic diversity of a location? In this article, we report the findings of a survey experiment assessing whether respondents are willing to participate in a collective initiative to hire a private firm to clean and maintain drains in slum settlements in Delhi, India and whether their responses depend on the ethnic composition of their residential area.

The experiment exposed Hindu and Muslim respondents to a text describing a nearby resident's hypothetical experience with the drain cleaning initiative and randomly varied the extent to which participants would be accountable for their contribution (or lack thereof) through three distinct forms of informal social accountability. The first treatment, *Horizontal Accountability*, entailed accountability through public shaming and gossip by fellow community members (Panagopoulos, 2010; Banerjee et al., 2019). The second, *Vertical Accountability*, enforced social norms through pressure from influential local leaders and elites (Baldwin, 2015; Auerbach and Thachil, 2018). The third treatment, the *Black Sheep Effect*, is based on insights from social psychology about the impact of ingroup underperformance on fellow group members. Individuals are told that other members of their faith (Muslim or Hindu) shirked their contribution, potentially leading to compensatory prosocial behavior to protect the group's reputation or status (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Gino et al., 2009). Participants answered an index measuring favorability toward the program as the outcome.

In contrast to existing findings on informal accountability and public goods provision, we find no overall effect of our treatments on willingness to contribute. We also observe no variation in outcomes based on the ethno-religious diversity of the participant's neighborhood. With this lack of effects based on diversity, we explore three other factors that might cause variation in response to the treatments: caste, regional identity, and Muslim identity. Results from these analyses indicate that Muslims, a minority community that faces discrimination in India (Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2012), express greater intent to contribute to the drainage scheme in response to the treatments. The heterogenous effects of religion hold not only with regard to the black sheep mechanism, as our pre-analysis plan predicted, but also for the other two forms of social accountability, which we did not anticipate in our preregistered hypotheses. In the conclusion, we discuss potential implications of this finding and lay out a research agenda on how minority status might shape pro-social behavior at the local level.

2 Public Goods Provision and Social Accountability in Diverse Settings

A large body of work in the social sciences explores the apparent "diversity deficit," or the finding that socioeconomic outcomes tend to be inferior in ethnically diverse contexts (Alesina and Ferrara, 1999; Banerjee et al., 2005). More diverse cities and regions have been shown to have worse public health and education outcomes, more corruption, and less political and civic participation. The negative relationship between social divisions and development has, in fact, been described as the "most powerful hypotheses in political economy" (Banerjee et al., 2005, p. 639). Recent research aimed at uncovering the causal link between diversity and the alleged diversity development point to the role of social norms and networks in facilitating collective action (Habyarimana et al., 2007; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005).

Social norms, or "standards of behavior based on widely shared beliefs about how individual group members ought to behave in a given situation" (Bernhard et al., 2006, p. 217), have been shown to be powerful motivators of both political behavior, such as voter turnout (Gerber et al.,

2008; Panagopoulos, 2010), as well as social outcomes (Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Lust and Rakner, 2018). An important aspect of social norms is that they are group specific – that is, they emerge through interactions in groups, apply to interactions within groups, and are enforced by group members. Historically, ethnicity, defined in terms of ascriptive group identities, including race, language, religion, tribe, and caste, has been the most important characteristic of distinct social groups in many contexts, and collective norms are intertwined with the cultural traits of the group (Horowitz, 1985). Public goods provision in homogeneous areas is hence believed to be superior for at least two reason. First, shared social networks, which tend to be denser among coethnics, facilitate cooperation and coordination around public goods provision (Habyarimana et al., 2007; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). Second, norms of reciprocity and social sanctioning are more likely to be enforced within a homogeneous community, where community members are better able to identify shirkers and hold them accountable (Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Panagopoulos, 2010; Habyarimana et al., 2007).

Existing literature suggests that social norms – including those that affect contributions to public goods provision – can be enforced through three distinct mechanisms. First, horizontal social networks through actions such as public shaming and gossip among community members, can encourage norm compliance. Public shaming, for example, may motivate improved service delivery, community coordination and, potentially, enhanced social or economic outcomes (Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2010), while gossip among community members can spread information about issues related to public health (Banerjee et al., 2019). We refer to this as *horizontal accountability* since it operates among citizens of relatively equal standing.

Second, community leaders and other local elites may be instrumental in driving collective action around public goods provision at the local level. Such *vertical accountability* mechanisms can improve the supply of public goods in a variety of contexts. Baldwin (2015) finds that hereditary chiefs in Zambia mobilize resources and generate improved service delivery. Elites in influential positions with formal roles, such as elected officials, or informal roles, such as local leaders or *(pradhans)* in Indian slums (Auerbach, 2016; Thachil, 2017) and religious authorities, play a central

role in their communities. For better or for worse, local elites serve as brokers for citizen access to public and private resources, command the respect of citizens, and constitute a focal point for claim-making, among other function.[1]

While the first two mechanisms rely on social networks, group-based beliefs can also shape norms of collective behavior. Research in psychology suggests that ingroup members are more likely to cooperate under conditions of intergroup competition. In general, members of a group view their own group more positively than others, and strive to behave in a way that reinforces the "positive distinctiveness" of one's group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Although not all agree that positive distinctiveness motivates individuals to advance perceptions of ingroup superiority, behavior to protect group status has been observed across many contexts – from the US in the form of white reactions to "racial threat" (Enos, 2016) to the Middle East in response to attempts to humanize an outgroup (Gubler et al., 2015). Social norm may motivate individuals to compensate for ingroup members and contribute to collective goods through a mechanism called the *black sheep effect* (Gino et al., 2009).

Existing research on social accountability and public goods provision hence generates the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses 1–3: Overall Treatments Participants exposed to the treatments – i) Horizontal Accountability, ii) Vertical Accountability, and iii) Black Sheep – are more likely to contribute than those in the Control condition.

Hypothesis 4: Treatments + Diversity Respondents from a diverse neighborhood have higher effect estimates than those in homogeneous neighborhoods.[2]

[1] To be sure, hierarchical social relations are often associated with clientelism and elite capture of public service delivery, resulting in unequal provision and inferior quality public goods (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2012; Khemani, 2015).

[2] Heterogeneous treatments effects by religious diversity were preregistered.

3 Experiment

To test the effects of these distinct types of informal social accountability, we designed and implemented a survey experiment in slum settlements in Delhi. In this section, we briefly describe the case selection and survey design.

3.1 Context, Site Selection, and Survey

The slums of Delhi, like many poverty-ridden areas in the world, are characterized by inferior public goods provision. According to a 2012 survey of Delhi residents, about 60% of households had no specific outlet for drainage from their home, a figure that is even higher for the poorest households (72%). 90% of those with a drain say that it emits bad smells or overflows (Banerjee et al., 2012). Drainage is one of the most strained public goods in the city, with residents often negotiating with municipal workers or pooling private resources to clean out drain gullies (Banerjee et al., 2012; Heller et al., 2015). From a theoretical perspective, storm water drainage approximates a public good and cannot be addressed by individual, uncoordinated solutions. Since drains are interconnected, heavy rainfall and the accumulation of garbage cause drains to clog and, in turn, affect the well-being of the whole community. The case of drainage hence provides a theoretically and empirically relevant arena for examining collective action problems.

Our site selection and survey design were informed by extensive qualitative fieldwork carried out by a team of researchers at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) in New Delhi. The team generated detailed reports on 20 sub-settlements or *bastis*[3] that provided us a wealth of information on the socioeconomic conditions, public services, and political and social life in these communities (see Appendix Section 1). Collected from the Chief Electoral Officer of Delhi, publicly available booth-level electoral lists enabled us to estimate the proportion of Muslim population in each settlement so that we could calculate neighborhood level diversity. Muslims comprise about 13% of Delhi, roughly mirroring that of India as a whole. We then digitized the names in the electoral lists and matched them against a list of common South Asian Muslim names to arrive at an estimate of

[3] *Bastis* refer to smaller organic communities within slum settlements.

the Muslim population in each *basti* (see Appendix Section 2). The preliminary fieldwork and data construction allowed us to select five relatively heterogeneous and homogeneous sites with roughly similar socioeconomic profiles and physical infrastructure. The site selection was designed to test the heterogenous effects of religious diversity. [4]

Participants answered a battery of questions before viewing the experimental manipulations. Pre-treatment questions assessed a variety of topics, including basic demographic characteristics, religion and religiosity,[5] social, civic, and political networks, political participation, and perceptions of local drainage. Random assignment was administered via Qualtrics software. Respondents were then exposed to one of the experimental conditions on distinct accountability mechanisms or to the control group.

To ensure that participants understood the informational aspect of the intervention, we then confirmed their knowledge with two manipulation checks (See Section 7.3 in the Appendix). Five outcome questions, described below, immediately followed the treatment and were measured on a 1-4 scale, with higher levels indicating more positive responses.

Benefit: Would this program be beneficial for your neighborhood?

Interest: Given this scenario, how interested would you be, overall, in the program?

Fee: How likely would you be to pay the monthly fee?

Contract: Would you be willing to sign a six-month contract for this service?

Influence: How likely would you be to try to get your neighbors to sign up for the program?

The survey ended with a battery of questions about education, socioeconomic status, and political leaning and knowledge that were unlikely to be affected by the experimental manipulation.

[4] See Appendix Section 3 for more information on these 5 sites.

[5] At this point, the handful of potential respondents who were neither Muslim nor Hindu were dropped since our research question addresses Hindu-Muslim relations.

3.2 Treatments

The experimental portion of the survey began with an offer by a drain cleaning company to empty out the area's drains and gullies, which frequently become clogged as a result of the pile-up of waste.[6] To avoid deception, especially since the respondents were economically vulnerable, the offer was described as hypothetical throughout the manipulation.[7] Participants were told that the study aimed to gauge whether residents of the local *basti* (specified by name) would be interested in enrolling. In addition, they were reminded twice of two conditions for the drainage scheme to be implemented in the respondent's neighborhood: First, enrollment would entail a monthly subscription fee of Rs. 150 per household (about US $0.70); second, two-thirds of local residents needed to sign up for the service before it could be implemented. The latter condition generated the scenario to overcome potential collective action problems.

At this point, the treatment texts diverged. In the control, the enumerator introduced a hypothetical testimony from a customer. The testimony-giver praised the service but also noted that it was not implemented in his neighborhood (the "underperforming" neighborhood) because some people (whom he names) did not want to contribute. He then noted that the program was implemented in an adjoining neighborhood where enough people contributed (again, a few were named). In the control condition, the names mentioned by the testimony-giver were half Muslim and half Hindu. After reading the testimony, the enumerator stated that all participant information would be kept private if the service was implemented.

Two dimensions of the control text were altered to generate the treatments. The first two treatments focused on the accountability dimension. To cue on *horizontal accountability*, the enumerator stated that community members would discuss who did and did not contribute, potentially identifying non-contributors instead of guaranteeing the participant's privacy. A list of six names was read out. Similarly, the *vertical accountability* treatment altered the final statement to indicate

[6] We pre-registered the design of our experiment with the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) initiative, which has now migrated to the Open Science Framework (OSF) (See Appendix Section 4.4).

[7] For a discussion of ethical issues we considered in our design, see Appendix Section 4.5.

that the local leader or *pradhan*[8] would find out who had not contributed and would follow up with non-contributors.

The second dimension tapped into the *black sheep effect*, which was primed by altering the testimony based on the religious identity of the respondent. If the respondent was Hindu, then the name of the "underperforming" community and residents (and, by implication, the testimony-giver) had an obvious Hindu name, whereas the successful community had Muslim names. If the participant was Muslim, the names were altered accordingly. By depicting the testimony-giver as an ingroup member, the treatment was potentially more credible.[9]

4 Analysis and Results

Our analyses are based on the responses of 2,516 participants in the survey.[10] Simple randomization determined treatment assignment, and respondents are fairly equally distributed across treatment groups.[11] On average, respondents reported a high need for drain cleaning and expressed strong interest in the proposed service. On a 1–5 scale, the quality of drainage was rated at 1.82, and 22% of participants indicated that they needed help from others with drainage in the last year.[12] We combine respondent ratings on the five outcomes – benefit, interest, and willingness to pay a fee, enter a contract, and influence neighbors to sign up – to generate a single outcome measure called *Index of Favorability toward Drainage Program*.[13]

We begin by examining the overall effects of our experiment in a basic analysis, addressing hypotheses 1–3. In contrast to the existing literature (Habyarimana et al., 2007; Miguel and Gugerty,

[8] A *pradhan* is an informal slum leader who acts as an intermediary between the formal government and the urban poor.

[9] Appendix Section 4 provides the full text of the treatments and additional information on the experimental manipulation.

[10] In total, 5,812 people participated in our survey. The analysis presented in this paper excludes some treatment groups (i.e., combined treatments) as well as respondents missing data on covariates essential to our analyses. See Section 3 of the Appendix for information on exclusion criteria. Sections 4.3 and 7.4 provide information on additional treatments and their effects, respectively.

[11] Using an omnibus test of balance (Hansen and Bowers, 2008), we cannot reject the null of a balanced sample (i.e., our sample is balanced). See Appendix Section 7.2 for the balance tests.

[12] See Appendix Section 6 for information on sample demographics.

[13] $\alpha = 0.89$ among all participants. See Sections 5.1 and 7.7 of the Appendix for more information on the outcome measure and its distribution.

2005), none of the informal accountability mechanisms that we tested have an overall effect on respondent favorability toward the proposed drainage program. The first column of Table 1 shows that while all of the treatments have a positive estimate, none are statistically significant. We therefore cannot reject the null hypothesis for each treatment.

Next, we examine variation in treatment effects by ethnic diversity. Since demographic data at the local level in Delhi is not available, we generate a measure of diversity based on respondent geocoordinates collected in our survey. We estimate the proportion of Hindus and Muslims within a 100-meter radius (equivalent of a few streets) of a respondent, based on the geocoordinates of other, nearby survey-takers. We then use this distribution to compute the level of diversity around each individual, using the Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005) polarization index.[14] The index ranges from 0–1; 1 indicating complete polarity (half of each group), and 0 indicating complete homogeneity. The second column of Table 1 presents the heterogeneous treatment effects by a dichotomized version of the diversity measure, where "high diversity" is defined as above the median value (0.25) of the diversity index.

Although this finding was surprising, we are confident in the lack of heterogeneous effects by diversity. Our site selection was done carefully, using electoral lists to estimate the religious diversity of areas, and generated a large sample for our study.[15] We carefully constructed the diversity measure from multiple data sources measuring participants' geocoordinates.[16] Additionally, not only are the coefficients for diversity not significant, they are mostly in the opposite direction of what would be predicted by the literature (Alesina and Ferrara, 1999; Banerjee et al., 2005). Respondents exposed to the *black sheep* treatment in highly diverse areas have the largest effect size, but the point estimate is still not statistically significant. We therefore cannot confirm Hypothesis 4.[17]

[14] $RQ = 4\pi_1\pi_2$, where π_1 and π_2 are the proportion of the respective groups. See Section 5.7 of the Appendix.
[15] See Appendix Sections 2 and 3 for details.
[16] See Appendix Section 5.7 for details.
[17] Our results remain consistent when we consider alternate radii (50 and 150 meters); see Section 7.8 in the Appendix.

Table 1: Regression of Favorability toward Drainage Program on Treatments

	(1)	(2)
Constant	2.73***	2.70***
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Horizontal Accountability	0.04	0.09
	(0.05)	(0.06)
Vertical Accountability	0.04	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.06)
Black Sheep	0.04	−0.02
	(0.05)	(0.07)
High Diversity		0.04
		(0.06)
Horizontal Accountability x High Diversity		−0.11
		(0.09)
Vertical Accountability x High Diversity		0.06
		(0.09)
Black Sheep x High Diversity		0.10
		(0.09)
N	2,516	2,516
R^2	0.0004	0.004
Adjusted R^2	−0.001	0.001
Residual Std. Error	0.81 (df = 2512)	0.80 (df = 2508)
F Statistic	0.33 (df = 3; 2512)	1.36 (df = 7; 2508)

4.1 Heterogenous Treatment Effects

In addition, we examine heterogenous effects by three contextually relevant factors—caste, regional identity, and Muslim identity—in Table 2. Caste-based divisions in India have been shown to be detrimental to public goods provision (Banerjee et al., 2005; Hoff et al., 2011). Though social stratification is more rigid among Hindus, Muslims in South Asia are also divided by caste (Mines, 1972). We measure caste by manually-coding an open-ended question on respondent's caste, with over 800 unique responses. We classify participants as upper or lower caste (for both Hindus and Muslims respondents) based on the caste code protocol developed by the National Election Studies (NES).[18] We find that caste is not a determinant of willingness to cooperate.[19] This finding is consistent with recent studies of urban slums in India that observe considerable cross-caste collective action (Auerbach and Thachil, 2018; Jha et al., 2007). Instead, these studies show that

[18] See Appendix Sections 5.6 and 7.9 for details.

[19] Additional robustness checks are provided in Section 7 of the Appendix

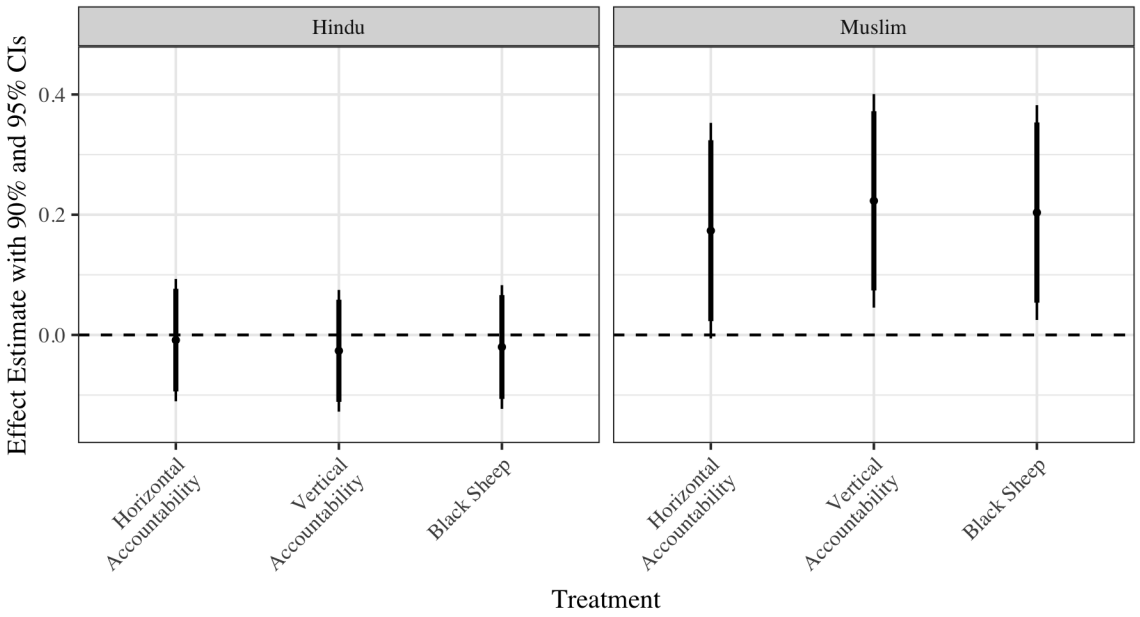

Figure 1: Interaction with Religion

recent migrants rely on regional social networks to navigate the transition to urban life (Auerbach and Thachil, 2018). Since our sites were relatively well-established, where the average years of residence for respondents was more than 20 years, we do not expect regional identity to be particularly relevant.[20] Table 2 shows that the coefficients for our measure of urban citizenship, years of residence in the settlement, is not statistically significant. Finally, we examine heterogeneous effects by religious identification. We find that Muslims have higher estimates than Hindus. The interaction of Muslim identity and all three treatments is positive and statistically significant. Overall, the treatments move Muslims 7.3% on our 1–4 scale while Hindus do not respond to any of the treatments (see Figure 1). This effect size is similar in magnitude to other relevant predictors of support for drain cleaning—e.g., it is similar to the effect of a two-point increase in participant-rated drain quality.

[20]The duration is 19.8 years and 23.3 years for Hindus and Muslims respectively. Further, 93% of the respondents considered themselves a citizen of Delhi.

Table 2: Regression of Index of Favorability on Treatments, with Heterogenous Effect Estimates

	Interaction Variable:		
	Caste	Years of Residence	Religion
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Constant	2.74***	2.70***	2.76***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Horizontal Accountability	−0.01	0.08	−0.01
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Vertical Accountability	−0.03	0.05	−0.03
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Black Sheep	0.02	0.04	−0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Interaction Variable	−0.05	0.05	−0.13*
	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Horizontal Accountability x Interaction	0.13	−0.09	0.18*
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.11)
Vertical Accountability x Interaction	0.21**	−0.02	0.25**
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.10)
Black Sheep x Interaction	0.05	−0.01	0.22**
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.11)
N	2,516	2,516	2,516
R^2	0.003	0.001	0.003
Adjusted R^2	0.001	−0.002	0.001
Residual Std. Error (df = 2508)	0.81	0.81	0.81
F Statistic (df = 7; 2508)	1.22	0.38	1.25

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

5 Discussion

Our largely null results yield potentially important insights for the operation of informal accountability mechanisms in the context of diversity and for issues related to public goods provision. Our treatments exhibited few effects by themselves or when considering the diversity of the local context. In fact, although generally not statistically significant, the effect estimate for our treatments was often more positive in diverse locations. This does not align with established findings, which hold that diversity impedes the very types of social connections posited to underlie the accountability mechanisms we highlight in our treatments (Habyarimana et al., 2007; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005).

Our findings do, however, resonate with studies of minority politics that emphasize the role of insecurity in shaping the political behavior of Indian Muslims (Chhibber et al., 2018; Gaikwad and Nellis, 2017). Muslims have long been subject to discrimination and violence in India and have been particularly vulnerable in recent years after the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power at the center. The minority status of Muslims also affects collective action. Ethnographic accounts from northern India, for example, find that, unlike Hindus, Muslims do not publicly protest against poor service provision out of fear of worsening discrimination and religious tensions. Instead, they engage in community provision of public goods as a coping mechanism (Williams, 2015). Indeed, in the context of urban slums, Auerbach and Thachil (2018) note that residents cooperate across caste boundaries but discriminate against Muslim leaders.

This research potentially contributes to an emerging body of work that challenges the influential diversity deficit thesis (Alesina and Ferrara, 1999; Banerjee et al., 2005) by examining the role of intergroup differences. These studies emphasize that inequality between groups is a better predictor of public goods outcomes than ethnic diversity per se (Baldwin and Huber, 2010; Kustov and Pardelli, 2018). Our research points to a factor that widens the concept of ethnic inequality by highlighting an additional mechanism that may moderate the relationship between diversity and development – *minority status*. While some studies have examined the effects of ascriptive discrimination on political mobilization (Oskooii, 2020; Schildkraut, 2005), the role of minority

status in public goods provision is less explored. Towards this end, future research should isolate and assess a variety of potential mechanisms connecting minority status to the provision of collective goods.

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