**Whom Does the Population See and How?**

**Non-state Health Service Provision, Population Perceptions and State Legitimacy in the DRC**

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**Abstract**

Non-state providers (NSPs) have long played a fundamental role in the delivery of primary social services in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The involvement of Non-state actors has increased in recent decades, as wars have amplified the state’s dependency on external actors to meet the population’s basic needs. This study explored how the population’s perceptions of the state are influenced by the provision of public health services by NSPs in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The research was conducted in the Katana health zone, where community members, civil servants in the health sector, health system managers, state officials and international NGO representatives were interviewed. The realm of service provision, especially health care delivery, serves as a public sphere and an arena for interaction and multi-stakeholder processes. The findings indicate that the population’s perceptions of the state reflect a breach of a social contract, because the state has failed to live up to the population’s needs and expectations. Additionally, the presence of NSPs may have counterintuitive effects on the population’s perception of the state, because NSPs’ performance establishes their benevolent image while calcifying a negative image of the state. However, when NSPs engage with the state on the ground, people also see the state in action, because state officials work with the partners in the public view. People then assign credit not only to the NSPs, but also to the state, and this is important in the processes of state-building and legitimacy.