Research Statement

Gabriel Granato

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I am a UC Berkeley PhD candidate in development economics and political economy. I research how leaders shape economic development and local governance in weak states. My current focus is on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where I examine how ethnic relationships and religious beliefs affect the influence of local leaders on public-good provision, dispute resolution, and taxation. Throughout my PhD, I built partnerships with state agencies, church networks, and customary authorities that enabled me to design and implement experiments that now form the core of my research agenda.

Local leaders and collective action.

In my job market paper, *Can Religion Bridge Ethnic Divides? A Field Experiment on Leadership and Collective Action*, with Elie Kabue Ngindu, I examine how ethnic fragmentation shapes the ability of leaders to promote collective action for local public good provision. The project grew out of consultations with the Kananga city administration in the DRC on strengthening participation in salongo, an institution through which residents contribute labor, money, or materials to neighborhood public works. We embedded a field experiment in the resulting municipal reform.

The reform allowed us to study collective action at scale. We implemented a daily tracking routine of public good contributions that recorded more than seventy thousand hours of voluntary labor by local residents and the completion of over five hundred small neighborhood improvement projects. As part of the collaboration, we randomized residents into ethnically homogeneous or mixed work teams assigned to include an urban chief, a pastor, or no leader. We also varied the extent to which teammates were able to keep track of contributions from team members. The program was designed to allow us to study both the social reach of the authority of local leaders and how much they depend on contribution monitoring.

We find that ethnic diversity changes which leaders can sustain collective action, even though contributions are similar across homogeneous and mixed teams without a leader. Chiefs increase contributions in homogeneous teams when contributions are observable, while pastors increase contributions in mixed teams when they are not. We interpret these findings through two dimensions of leadership that are rarely discussed in tandem: (i) the scope of authority, which refers to *whom* each leader can mobilize; and (ii) the source of enforcement, which is *how* leaders are able to achieve it. Our evidence suggests that the authority of chiefs operates through social incentives rooted in personal and ethnic ties, while the authority of pastors rests on religiously motivated obligations tied to an internal self-image.

My job market paper therefore reframes ethnic fragmentation from a barrier to collective action into a condition that changes which leaders can sustain cooperation. It introduces two directions in the study of informal institutions centered around two of the most prevalent leader archetypes of the developing world—religious and ethnic authority—which I further develop in ongoing work.

Ethnic authority and dispute resolution.

Beyond the organization of public good provision, ethnic leaders play important roles in shaping justice provision in developing contexts. Often in parallel with formal legal frameworks, customary justice systems operate as alternative paths for dispute resolution in many African countries. Yet, we know little about how these distinct paradigms of justice compare to each other and what considerations state builders should weigh when strengthening either paradigm. Can customary justice offer a more effective path to building legal capacity than formal legal institutions?

In *Formal and Informal Justice in a Fragile State*, with Augustin Bergeron, Eva Davoine, Marina Ngoma, James Robinson, and Jonathan Weigel, I pursue this question within a recently completed large-scale legal-capacity campaign in Kananga overseen by the Provincial Ministry of Justice. We randomly assign previously registered disputes to free arbitration by customary chiefs or state-licensed lawyers, or to a control group, allowing us to compare the two systems without citizens selecting which one handles their case. Cross-randomizations of written documentation and access to higher authorities allow us to examine which features of each system contribute to their effectiveness.

We compare the two systems in their ability to resolve disputes, secure lasting settlements, and restore social relations. A central question is how each system performs in protecting parties from ethnic favoritism. To assess impartiality, independent panels of formal legal experts, customary authorities, and citizens evaluate accounts of disputes recorded before arbitration. Their assessments help identify when arbitrators unjustly favor someone from their own ethnic group, providing a concrete measure of ethnic bias. By examining how ethnic ties shape the impartiality of formal and informal authority, we move from studying their role in sustaining public goods to their potential costs in the provision of justice.

The consequences of ethnic favoritism may extend beyond the outcome of a dispute by weakening citizens' willingness to support the institutions that provide justice. Arbitration allows citizens to learn both whether authorities are competent enough to provide legal services and whether they are willing to promote just outcomes, even when this means ruling against coethnics. We examine how these perceptions shape willingness to finance the state using changes in beliefs and actual property-tax payments. This extends my study of ethnic ties to examine how favoritism in the exercise of authority can weaken citizens' willingness to support the state.

Religious authority and progressive taxation.

Religious authorities also perform many other roles beyond organizing collective action. Perhaps one of the most fundamental is to provide a coherent framework for understanding poverty. In particular, the preaching of the prosperity gospel by Pentecostal churches—a doctrine that has many adherents in the DRC, as well as in the US, Latin America, and much of Sub-Saharan Africa—locates the cause of poverty in individual responsibility. Poverty is understood as a consequence of personal shortcomings in faith or effort, to be addressed through changes in individual behavior. Such a perspective may weaken the case for redistribution by placing the responsibility for improving the lives of the poor on the poor themselves. Yet, we understand very little about how much religious doctrines

shape redistributive preferences.

In *Is Pentecostalism Eroding Support for Redistribution in Africa? Experimental Evidence from a Progressive Tax Reform*, with Clotaire Boyer and Jonathan Weigel, I study how religious leaders shape support for redistributive systems by examining an ongoing sensitization campaign to inform citizens about the new progressive schedule being implemented by the province. In collaboration with the provincial tax authority, we randomly assign pastors to four groups: no materials, an official request to announce the property-tax campaign to congregants, or that request paired with either of two suggested sermons.

Both sermon suggestions justify more taxes on the better-off but draw on different moral arguments. One suggestion emphasizes social justice and the collective responsibility for relieving the disadvantaged—a frame aligned with how redistributive policies are commonly justified, but one that could be rejected under a prosperity-gospel worldview. The other suggestion emphasizes individual stewardship and the responsibility of those who prosper to give back, an appeal we adapted after consulting with local religious leaders to provide a prosperity-gospel-consistent justification for the progressive schedule.

We combine transcripts of recorded sermons with congregant surveys and administrative tax records to examine which arguments pastors adopt and how these appeals shape congregants' beliefs about poverty and prosperity, support for progressive taxation, and tax compliance. Our central question is whether an emphasis on individual responsibility necessarily limits support for redistribution or whether it is a matter of adapting the reform's frame to the relevant cultural background. Through this project, I extend my study of how religious leaders motivate contributions to public goods by examining how they give meaning to fiscal obligations.

Taken together, these projects approach capacity building through the leaders who already organize important dimensions of local governance outside the formal state sphere. I study how their influence determines whether public goods are provided, disputes are resolved in a fair way, and public demands are considered legitimate. My broader ambition is to make informal institutions legible by understanding how leaders work within them. I aim to use that knowledge to inform reforms that build on these institutions' capacity to improve governance while limiting their potential to reinforce exclusion and favoritism.