Impacts of Judicial Reform in Utilization of Electronic Court Systems on Court Congestion in the Philippines

The Supreme Court of the Philippines has introduced several reforms to address the longstanding issues of high volume of pending cases and severe delays in case disposition, which consequently deny citizens the ability to access swift and fair justice. One of these reforms is an electronic case management (eCourt) system that records case information and allows courts and other judicial stakeholders to monitor case incidents in real time. Researchers assessed the impact of the eCourt reform on court efficiency by looking at the difference in court efficiency between eCourts and regular courts before and after introducing the reform. The study found that the eCourt system had no overall impact during the first year, but by the second year, eCourts saw a decrease in case duration and a reduction in pending cases.

Policy Issue

Efficient, fair, and accessible justice systems are thought to promote peace and security, encourage private investment and growth, and provide fundamental protections to citizens. A handful of recent studies have shown that improvements in judicial efficiency can have strong effects down the line, with attention paid both to case-flow management and procedural reforms, yet there is little rigorous empirical research on the effects of justice system reform in developing countries. The recent introduction of digital case-level data in some contexts, like the Philippines, makes the ability to access data and generate high quality evidence more possible. This research aims to shed light on the types of reforms that can effectively improve efficiencies in judicial systems, without reducing the quality of justice. The findings of the study may inform the wider and long-term efficiency plan that the Supreme Court of the Philippines is executing and may also be relevant for other developing countries that are addressing similar challenges in the functioning of their judicial systems.

Evaluation Context

The Philippine judiciary has long faced the challenge of court congestion, which has led to a high volume of pending cases anddelays in case disposition. In response, the Supreme Court of the Philippines (SC) has implemented several judicial reforms to reduce court congestion and improve judicial efficiency. One of these reforms is an electronic case management (eCourt) system that

RESEARCHERS
Aniceto Orbeta, Vicente Paqueo, Bilal Siddiqi

COUNTRY
Philippines

PARTNERS
International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), Supreme Court of the Philippines

PROGRAM AREA
Governance

TOPIC

TIMELINE
2017-2020

records case information and allows courts and other judicial stakeholders to monitor case incidents in real time. With the use of technology, this system aims to improve operational efficiency and improve transparency and accountability. The eCourt reform began in pilot phase in 2013 and is currently live in more than 300 courts across ten cities. Although initial assessments of simultaneous initiatives of the SC, including the eCourts, indicated promising results, we know little about the impact of the eCourt reform on court efficiency and court congestion. These outcomes are priority areas for both the SC and the current administration, as highlighted in the Philippine Development Plan (2017-2022).

Details of the Intervention

[Note: This study is not a randomized controlled trial.]

Researchers assessed the impact of the eCourt reform on court efficiency by looking at the difference in court efficiency between eCourts and regular courts before and after introducing the reform. They used pre-existing trends in yearly disposition rate as the primary matching indicator to compare outcomes.

Researchers measured court efficiency by case duration[1], proportion of cases completed within 180 and 360 days, annual clearance rates[2], and annual disposition rates[3] by analyzing administrative records from 305 courts across all 13 judicial regions. They also conducted interviews with 58 judicial stakeholders and online surveys with 1,579 judges and clerks of court to gather more insights on their experiences and perceptions of the eCourt system.

Results and Policy Lessons

The study found that in the first year of rollout, the eCourt system had no overall impact on the disposition rate and saw a decline in clearance rate. By the second year, in contrast, eCourts saw a decrease in case duration by 103 days, alongside a reduction in pending cases. Researchers also found mixed evidence on the proportion of cases resolved within 180 and 360 days in the first year, but largely positive effects by the second year. Together, these findings suggest that the primary impact of the eCourt system was on pending cases, and that its overall impact on these cases was small relative to case inflow. They also highlighted the challenges in setting up and adjusting to a new system during the first year after rollout.

Overall, not factoring in costs, researchers stipulate that a fully implemented eCourt system is a worthy investment, as its automation features contributed to better case management through electronic raffling, dashboards, and digital records. The online survey found that these features were valued by judicial staff. However, the courts need ample time to learn and adjust to the new system to improve efficiency, and can see lower throughput in the transition period while they have to maintain dual systems. Recommendations to address implementation issues include court staff training and regularly updating the system, provision of a user manual with troubleshooting, adding manpower support for encoding, availability of on-call IT support, provision of hardware, and connectivity in court

branches.

A rigorous evaluation of the intervention is needed to measure impact on efficiencies in judicial systems.

Sources

[1] number of days from the date of filing to the date of court decision

[2] court's case outflow divided by the total case inflow

[3] court's total case outflow divided by the sum of pending cases and total case inflow

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