The Polycentric Forest Ranger

Public Officials and Informal Polycentricity in South Indian Forest Governance

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Research Problem and Question

• An inductively encountered and slightly unexpected research finding:

• The (co-) existence of informal, meso-level polycentric governance arrangements within a formally monocentric and multi-levelled system.

• How and why does it exist, and why do public officials work to uphold both types of arrangements/system?

• Case study of forest governance in the Western Ghats ecoregion of Kerala.
Theoretical Approach: Polycentricity I

• PC: dispersal of decision-making power and influence among multiple, autonomous authorities with overlapping jurisdictions at different levels of a governance system.

• Novel application of the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework.

• Ideal-types (Weberian, non-normative) of polycentricity and monocentricity.
Theoretical Approach: Polycentricity II

- Ideal-types formulated with help of the action situation of the IAD framework. What do the rules-in-use appear like under ideal conditions?
Research Design and Conduct

• Political ethnography: extended in-depth interviews (87) and immersive participant observation.

• Seven months in the field, November 2013 – March 2015.

• Main focus on the State Forest Department: mid to lower (field) levels of the administration.
Empirical Findings I

• Formal model of governance highly monocentric:
  – Strictly hierarchical, rigid planning and delegation
  – Resistance to power/resource-sharing, working in “silos”
  – Resistance to innovation and reform
  – Little interest in coordination and cooperation beyond formal jurisdictions

• Reflected in a deeply rooted working culture at higher levels of the bureaucracy.

• “…like those old classic Western films say, ‘there’s a new sheriff in town’. Well here there was only one sheriff, the Forest Department. There’s no space for two or more sheriffs. No, no indeed there isn’t” (Chief Conservator of Forests).
Empirical Findings II

• Monocentric throughout, but field-level also significantly characterised by *informal* polycentric arrangements:
  
  – Extensive and intricate networks of informal coordination
  – Linkages between diverse sets of actors, beyond formal jurisdictions: boundaries defined on functional lines
  – Joint collaboration actively sought out both horizontally and vertically, through informal relationships and personal ties

“As much as possible I will try to communicate with colleagues in other departments, sometimes also the community-based organisations working here. We share solutions and discuss what is happening…by discussions I learn things I did not learn in our training” (Forest Ranger)
Why informal polycentric arrangements?

• Belief in alternative policy goals and how to reach them: bottom-up participation and social goals most prioritised.

• Strong socialisation process: officials deeply embedded in a political culture fostering deliberation and collaboration; active citizenship. Unique to Kerala?

• Substantial *de facto* autonomy and discretion held by officials, as long as administrative-bureaucratic procedures are complied with.

• **But**: strong belief in simultaneously maintaining the overall (formal) governance framework: the department/state indirectly supplies the resources, coercive mechanisms and legitimacy needed by officials.
Conclusion(s)

• Theoretical work-in-progress on using ideal-types within the IAD framework: comments appreciated on the paper.

• Parallel coexistence of two diverse governance regimes:
  – The polycentric one highly informal and strongly driven on by the socio-political embeddedness of officials.
  – Institutional reforms and change best targeted at the local field-level? Formalising work already carried out informally? Enhancing the incentives for further endogenous self-innovation and deeper public participation?

• Anomalous case/in comparison to other Indian States?

Thank you!