NR47 / Policy Innovation Labs in India: modalities, participation, and the policy process

Topic : Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy innovation labs (PILs) are relatively new policy actors within the global public policy innovation "labification" movement (Lewis 2025; 2021, Wellstead et al. 2025). Also known as policy design labs or public sector innovation labs, PILs are dedicated, public-sector initiated spaces for the development and testing of new and innovative policy solutions. Internationally, they have been described as policy tools (Wellstead & Howlett 2021; Wellstead et al. 2025), as policy entrepreneurs (Blomkamp and Lewis 2023, Lewis 2025), or as specific organizational or procedural policy instruments (Lewis 2022) that governments set up as venues of policy experiments and pilots for a wide range of purposes including impact evaluation and randomized controlled trials, improvement of public service delivery, enhancing participatory governance approaches (Lee and Ma 2020; Olejniczak et al. 2020), and forwarding a 'design for policy' approach. Over time, they have evolved into various forms – including labs at different levels of government (central, sub-national, and local), sectoral labs (such as environment, transportation, food, and sanitation), and cross-sectoral labs (social innovation and data labs).

Questions abound in this area of research but are rarely being systematically investigated (Wellstead et al. 2025). Through this panel, we are interested in examining two broad questions/themes:

(1) How do PILs mobilise public participation and motivations to enable policy co-creation?

(2) What exactly is the role of PILs across the policy process? How do they contribute to policy design, implementation, and evaluation?

Although PILs have proliferated globally, much of the empirical and theoretical knowledge on them continues to be generated in the global north (Olejniczak et al., 2020), with little to no empirical lessons being derived from the global south. In this context, findings from the practical experience in India with such government-led avenues for fostering policy co-creation would address a significant research gap in the policy sciences. Consequently, papers in this panel should aim to contribute towards distilling the state of knowledge on PILs in India – an area that is booming in practice and yet under-researched in terms the contribution it can make to comparative policy studies.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We are primarily seeking empirical papers that offer original data, case studies, or evidence- based analyses of PILs in India. These may draw on quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method approaches. However, we also welcome: (a) theoretical papers that develop or extend conceptual frameworks for understanding the role of PILs in the policy process and/or as agents of policy co-creation; (b) comparative papers that study Indian PILs alongside labs in other countries, particularly in the global south; or (c) practice-oriented reflection papers that provide bottom-up insights on PIL design, functioning, successes and challenges in India.

As stated above, this panel will explore these two broad research themes on PILs:

(1) How do PILs mobilise public participation and motivations to enable policy co-creation?

(2) What exactly is the role of PILs across the policy process? How do they contribute to policy design, implementation, and evaluation?

Guiding questions on these two themes include, but are not limited to, the following:

PILs, public motivation and policy co-creation:

· What models of PILs exist in the context of India in different sectors (e.g. sustainability, water, sanitation,

health, transport etc.)?

· How do these models leverage diverse public motivations – such as intrinsic interest, civic duty, perceived incentives, or experiential knowledge – for participating in the policy process?

· What design choices on the part of government agencies increase or inhibit meaningful engagement in policy co-creation/co-production?

· Are different institutional partnerships for PILs (e.g. Government and NGO, Government and private sector) associated with different capacities to mobilise and sustain public motivations?

PILs in the Policy Process:

· What policy design/formulation function (e.g. articulating policy objectives and aims vs. tweaking policy instruments) are PILs expected to contribute towards?

· How are PILs contributing to policy implementation at state/sub-jurisdictional level?

· How do government partners collaborate with non-state actors in initiating and sustaining PILs?

· What is the role of PILs in policy evaluation? What are the measurable outcomes and impacts of PILs on public service delivery?