PR11 / State Capacity in Practice: Knowledge, Institutions, and Agricultural Transitions in the Global South

Topic : Practice

Chair : Shambu Prasad Chebrolu (Institute of Rural Management Anand)

Second Chair : N C NARAYANAN (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Despite the growing academic interest on declining state capacity in India (Muralidharan, 2024), agriculture and sustainable transitions have not been the subject of much research in public policy. While state capacity is conventionally framed in terms of bureaucratic competence, fiscal ability, and organisational coherence, recent scholarship and field-based research indicate that capacity is equally shaped by knowledge regimes, intermediary actors, and institutionalized practices of interpretation and problem-solving. This panel seeks to bridge the missing gap of state capacity in agriculture by policy scholars and the missing sustainability transitions focus of those looking at agricultural policy.

Recent reports have suggested alternate frames “Beyond Productivity and Populism” (Kumar et. al, 2020) to look at Indian agriculture. There is also traction for newer initiatives and policies on natural farming in particular and sustainability transitions more generally. Governing these transitions are complex not just from a knowledge point of view but also due to institutional complexities of agriculture being a state subject. Often the absence of national or state policies creates opportunities for local innovation with street level bureaucrats and networks playing a key role.

This panel, draws from co-produced knowledge by academics and development practitioners in an ongoing participatory action research project across multiple states of India. The panel posits that state capacity is best understood as a co-produced system that emerges through evolving interactions between state agencies, civil society actors, policy intermediaries, farmers and frontline workers. Those interested in state capacity building also need to explore more fully the encounters and dialogues between different kinds of knowledge forms that include knowledge contestations on naming agroecological transitions as organic, natural or regenerative.

A co-production lens allows us to explain why policy intent often diverges from practice, how innovations succeed or fail, and what shapes institutional coherence across sectors. It also foregrounds the tensions between expert-driven policy design and vernacular knowledge embedded in local ecologies and social worlds. The panel extends the “public policy praxis” theme of the 2026 IPPN conference inviting us to interrogate: the lived, negotiated, and situated nature of policymaking in the Global South that requires mutual learning between academics and development practitioners.

The panel will address the following:

How do different knowledge regimes—scientific, bureaucratic, vernacular—shape state capability in practice?
Building on agroecology debates, we ask how states validate, ignore, or appropriate non-traditional knowledge and what this means for governance legitimacy.

What forms of institutional coordination and misalignment emerge in complex transitions (agricultural, technological, environmental)?
There will be explorations from four states of India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Maharashtra) examining their work on natural farming.

What actor networks (civil society, movements, intermediaries, frontline workers) expand or constrain state capacity?
Drawing from panelists' field studies, we consider how non-state actors (specifically Civil Society Organisations) co-produce public outcomes, sometimes in place of formal state structures and how this varies across states.

What does a praxis-based account of state capacity look like in the Indian context?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Possible Paper Contributions

(Indicative; can be adjusted as team finalizes paper commitments)

State Capacity as Knowledge Infrastructure: Lessons from Agroecological Transitions (Dr. Caroline Fazli, independent researcher with NCNF, Dr Richa Kumar, IIT Delhi)
The paper would look at how knowledge contestations in natural farming and agroecology reflect deeper limitations in India's agricultural scientific and bureaucratic establishment.

Institutional Coherence and the Practice of Capacity: Evidence from State-Level Agricultural Missions (Dr. C. Shambu Prasad, IRMA and Sachin Oza, DSC Foundation)
This contribution examines coordination failures, learning systems, and field-level adaptations.

Intermediaries and the Co-Production of Capacity: Civil Society Networks in Agrarian Transformation (Caroline Fazli, Shambu Prasad, Narendranath and Rashmi Mahajan)
Drawing from ongoing ethnographic work, this paper would highlight how intermediaries stabilize transitions by mediating between farmers, government agencies, and knowledge systems.

Reframing Capacity in Policy Implementation: Actor-Network Approaches Across Sectors (Sachin Oza, M V Ramachandrudu and C. Shambu Prasad)
A synthetic conceptual paper that brings together insights from multiple states and sectors, proposing a relational model of capacity tailored for policy research in the Global South.

Note: The panellists are part of an ongoing project "Participatory Action Research for Strengthening and Scaling Agroecological Transitions", a collaboration between the National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF), Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence Deemed to be University Delhi-NCR , and, WASSAN India (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network), supported by the Agroecology Fund.