NR51 / The political determinants of local state capacity in the Global South

Topic : Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Local state capacity is usually explained as a combination of technocratic abilities of state agencies to implement policies, deliver services, raise resources and enforce laws. However, in developing countries like India, governance challenges range from quotidian issues of service delivery to situations of "polycrisis", where traditional challenges like limited capital, elite capture, clientelism and caste often entangle with emerging problems of climate change, digital disruption and sustainability. Beyond fixing and patching gaps, local state capacity has to be viewed as a fluid, politically negotiated concept, produced by the dynamic interactions of bureaucrats, political leaders, communities and emerging uncertainties. This panel aims to move beyond the traditional categorizations of local governance as "clientelistic versus programmatic" or "overly centralized versus ineffectively decentralized" towards more grounded explanations, by innovatively reconceptualizing the agency of local actors responding to emerging challenges in local governance.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Accordingly, the panel invites papers that explore

1. Relooking at local politicians not just as brokers seeking rents but also as political innovators who are able to map resources available from policies and schemes with local needs and community demands (Khemani 2019). In the emerging context of digital welfare regimes, research that identifies how such brokers navigate data constraints to effectively act as epistemic bridges between state institutions and local communities can shed insights on how these opportunities also develop local state capacity.

2. Relational state capacity (RSC), that can be activated based on everyday interactions and evolving relationships between local state agents, community leaders and citizens during systemic shocks, based mutual trust, cooperation, and collective action (Honig et al 2025). Contributions here demonstrate how and when the latent social resources within communities might be "activated" when traditional institutional capacities fail to solve public problems.

3. The role of performative governance in building local state capacity. When local bureaucrats cannot meet the expectations of citizens, they often resort to deployment of bureaucratic rituals and symbolism (Ding 2020). Research that explores how leaders from marginalized backgrounds use specific aspects of such "performative governance" to claim legitimacy and exercise authority can contribute to a nuanced understanding of how political opportunity emerging from symbolism can drive improvements in local state capacity.

4. The role of institutional bricolage and adaptation. Communities in India and the Global South are exposed to a variety of local development and welfare institutions (like Gram Panchayats, Cooperative Societies, monitoring committees etc). Institutional bricolage

describes how people exposed to multiple institutional spaces may piece together bits and pieces of rules, norms, and resources from different institutions to form new, hybrid arrangements to solve local problems or respond to uncertainties (Cleaver 2002). Contributions can show how such "bricolage" builds local state capacities in despite institutional constraints.

References

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