# Micro-level institutional crafting in large public organisations: Insights from forest governance in south India

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## Abstract

Public bureaucracies in developing countries are often identified as an impediment to reach the goals of forest conservation and human development. Yet they play an inalienable role in the global south, where the state through its bureaucratic apparatus is an important supplier of both conservation and development policy. A deeper understanding of how such organisations function is warranted and may improve our knowledge of why forest policies succeed or fail. This paper reports a case from south India where local-level officials have overcome structural and cultural limitations often associated with the Indian forest administration by crafting functioning but informal micro-level institutional arrangements that indirectly draw upon collaborative management ideals promoted in current policy paradigms. Simultaneously, the same officials conform to the formal, hierarchical organizational setup, creating a situation in which two contrasting management practices are upheld in integration. To account for these findings the paper employs the

Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework and uses process tracing to study the interacting effects of formal and informal institutions within public organisations, a hitherto understudied topic. It traces a chain of behavioral patterns and micro-level interactions officials engage in under institutional constraints, across governance levels. It finds that a complex mixture of formal and informal institutions, originating within and beyond the organization gives rise to a mutual resource dependency and exchange relationship between officials at different levels. This in turn yields an institutional status quo, wherein officials may pursue goals fitting their own interests, including those diverging from formal rules and regulations. The paper provides important insights on how local foresters may craft institutional arrangements of their accord to circumvent challenges posed by the wider policy environment. These findings may add nuances to on-going debates about the inability of bureaucracies to effectively implement forest policy.

# Introduction

In developing countries in the global south, public bureaucracies are often identified as an impediment in reaching goals of public service delivery, fostering public accountability and managing complex policy problems requiring the cooperation, inclusion and input of multiple different stakeholders (Andrews 2013; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2015; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016).

In the particular setting of tropical forest governance, factors such as corruption, clientelism, elite capture and low institutional capacity have been associated with the inability of public organisations to reach the twin goals of ecological conservation and human development, contributing to both forest degradation and stalled development initiatives (Brockington and Igoe 2007; Lele and Menon 2014; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie 2007). With regards to governance outputs they have been found to; inhibit forest-user participation (Lund 2015), recentralize decision-making power (Ribot et al. 2006), initiate and aggravate corruption (Robbins 2000) and, at a more general level, to lack the capacity to respond flexibly to changes in the external environment and to meet multiple, simultaneous goals (Armitage et al. 2007; Messier et al. 2013).

Yet they play an inalienable role in developing societies, where the state through its bureaucratic apparatus still is an important supplier and enforcer of policies for both forest conservation and human welfare, even if its functions poorly in many settings. At a macro-level good forest governance is essential for meeting at least two of the Sustainable Development Goals (FAO 2016), while at a micro-level forest bureaucracies play a significant role as attempts to change non-forest outcomes (for instance deepened democratization) hinges on the ability and willingness of individual foresters to implement and enforce policies and programs.

In many developing democracies centrally administered bureaucracies were set up during the colonial period following a hierarchical model of organizational uniformity and top-down, command-and-control steering; a model and management doctrine that has survived into the present day (Messier et al. 2013; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie 2007). In India, the empirical focus of this paper, the original Forest Act of 1865 (with sole revisions in 1878 and 1927) still forms the legal framework for forest governance and reaffirms the centrality of the state as the principal guardian of the forests.

Moreover, the socio-political environment where implementation occurs is often less than favorable, with reported cases of programs being distorted by elite capture, in turn building on pre-existing power imbalances and inequalities (Andersson and Agrawal 2011; Lele and Menon 2014). These shortcomings should be set against the backdrop of contemporary policy paradigms promoting models of decentralised governance characterized by joint collaboration between stakeholders, flexibility in management, public participation and deliberation, and a focus on learning-by-doing (Maguire 2013; Messier et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2016); approaches referred to more broadly as collaborative governance (Emerson and Gerlak 2014; Emerson et al. 2012) or adaptive co-management (Armitage et al. 2007; Koontz et al. 2015). In developing countries a human welfare dimension is added, taking into account important principles of poverty alleviation, diversified livelihoods and the inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups, yet reported outcomes are of mixed success at best (Sunderlin et al. 2005; Wunder et al. 2014).

This paper reports on a case from Kerala, South India where frontline forest officials (hereafter foresters) at the policy implementing level, have been partially successful – through cooperation with other local stakeholders – in bypassing both structural (the hierarchical, monolithic organizational setup) and cultural (the colonial-bureaucratic *espirit de corps*) limitations embedded in the Indian forest administration (Fleischman 2016; Kashwan 2017). The focus lies not on the final outcomes – conservation and development – but rather the preceding outputs; the institutional arrangements designed to regulate and steer forest governance in the direction of the two final outcomes. The distinction between output and outcome is commonplace in implementation research (Hill and Hupe 2014) as well as the institutional literature this paper builds on (McGinnis 2011a; Ostrom 2005).

In this case, foresters have managed to craft and maintain institutional arrangements that indirectly draw upon the same collaborative management ideals as those promoted in current policy discourse (Messier et al. 2013) and research (Armitage et al. 2007; Emerson and Gerlak 2014). Continuous interactions between foresters and other local stakeholders are routinized, participation by forest-users is relatively high, deliberation and information-sharing is a key objective, and the boundaries of the arrangements roughly match relevant biophysical boundaries. However, and importantly, the arrangements exist on an informal basis without external guidance, and foresters hold

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considerably more *de facto* discretion and autonomy than is customary in the Indian forest administration.

Simultaneously, the same officials conform strictly to the formal organizational setup and bureaucratic practices in relation to their superiors, much more reminiscent of a top-down, Weberian management ideal (Olsen 2006). In the wider context of India's bureaucratic culture (Aycan et al. 2000; Das 2010) this implies obediently attending meetings and debriefings with superiors, carrying out orders originating far from the field-level, and complying with excessive routine writing, reporting and filing. Ultimately, this yields a situation in which two contrasting *modi operandi*, building on different ideals and logics co-exist in integration.

The paper investigates these inductively encountered findings by building on recent theorizing in the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework literature, which has subjected public organisations and its officials to careful institutional analysis (see Arnold and Fleischman 2013). It provides a deeper and more thorough account of how interlinked and repeated micro-level interactions between individuals give rise to complex mixtures of formal and informal institutions operating within organisations. It aims to show how a diverse set of behavioral patterns occurring at multiple levels of governance, and in different localities, are connected and interact to produce a counterintuitive situation of institutional stability, facilitated by an underlying causal mechanism. Methodologically, it is an exercise in within-case process tracing (Bennett 2010; Collier 2011).

Despite application to a diversity of policy areas (see Ostrom et al. 2014), only recently has the framework been employed to examine the influence of micro-level institutions within public organisations (Arnold and Fleischman 2013), offering an opportunity to contribute empirically to this literature. Doing so from a development context also yields important insights as to which types of institutions are influential in organisations functioning in a socio-political environment different from that much of the extant literature focuses on. This may be particularly instructive in light of a recent meta-analysis of close to 400 published articles on environmental policy and governance, which found that developing countries are severely unrepresented in this literature (Fahey and Pralle 2016). The authors observe that "the heavy focus on Europe and North America could reinforce assumptions about professionalized legislatures

and bureaucracies that may not apply to less developed areas of the world" (2016: 532).

The paper uses the framework to analytically structure the inquiry, but also draws on insights from literature on *informal institutions* (Helmke and Levitsky 2004) to obtain further analytical clarity, and borrows concepts from research on *street-level bureaucracy* (Lipsky 1980) and *managerial blame-avoidance* (Hood 2011; Weaver 1986) to account for observed patterns of behavior.

The findings reported in this paper may be important from a wider development perspective and on-going reform debates about tropical forest governance. We are presented with a case where foresters in a developing context have overcome widely acknowledged structural and cultural barriers that might militate against good forest governance, and crafted arrangements that approximate the intended institutional outputs of forest policies and programs. This adds nuance to discussions on the capacity and ability of foresters to effectively carry out implementation and enforcement tasks, and may illuminate roles they have beyond that of the rent-seeking or corrupt bureaucrat (Niskanen 1975), still the leading image in scholarship on the Indian bureaucracy more broadly (Gupta 2012). Whereas considerable research has focused on the ability of self-governing forest communities (Agrawal 2007; Ostrom 1990), much less attention has been paid to forest officials in the same empirical setting (but see Fleischman 2016), leaving forest bureaucracies as something of a "black-box". By paying particular attention to the micro-level institutions that influence and constrain public officials, we may gain better insights about how these organisations function internally, which may ultimately improve our understanding and knowledge of why forest policies succeed or fail.


## Theory and Prior Research


### The IAD Framework

The IAD framework is employed in this paper as it provides a set of conceptual tools for analyzing iterated micro-level interactions between individuals located across levels of governance, both within and beyond an organization (Ostrom 2005: 55-57). Repeated over time and adjoined by social expectations,

these interactions ultimately lead to the emergence of institutions, defined in the literature as

> …the 'rules of the game'…the pattern of interaction that govern and constrain the relationships of individuals. Institutions include formal rules, written laws, formal social conventions, informal norms of behavior, and shared beliefs about the world, as well as the means of enforcement (North et al. 2009: 15).

When focusing on institutions within organisations, this definition is useful as it provides a distinction from the latter concept (see also Arnold and Fleischman 2013). North et al. state that

> …in contrast to institutions, organizations consist of specific groups of individuals pursuing a mix of common and individual goals to partially coordinated behavior...Because they pursue a common purpose in an organization and because organizations are typically composed of individuals who deal with each other repeatedly, members of most organizations developed shared beliefs about the behavior of other members and about the norms or rules of their organization. As a result most organizations have their own internal institutional structure: the rules, norms, and shared beliefs that influenced the way people behave within the organization (2009: 15).

Consequently, a study of public organisations and officials becomes a study of institutions and the effect they have on individual behavior. This includes the concept of culture, for instance organizational or political culture which often has an influence on individuals. While some researchers (see Helmke and Levitsky 2004) treat culture as a distinct concept from institutions, this paper follows North et al. in seeing culture as a collection of shared values and ideas which shapes patterns of behavior individuals are expected to adhere to, i.e., institutions. Consequently, attributes such as trust and social capital are the products of iterated interactions by individuals under institutional constraints.

The key component of the framework used in this study is the action situation, the tool through which institutionally constrained behavior is observed and analyzed. It puts into perspective the different resources and requirements individuals bring into exchanges and negotiations, and what outcomes result from this. They are not isolated events; the outcomes from one action situation will affect the structure of another, and in empirical settings individuals are part of what McGinnis (2011b: 52) terms "networks of adjacent action situations"

(NAAS), especially in settings involving public organisations and an institutionally complex external environment. In practical terms, identifying and linking simultaneously occurring action situations is a key task of fieldwork. In different situations individuals will have to conform to different sets of rules, dictated by the context at hand. To exemplify, foresters follow one set of rules when engaging with communities and another in relation to their superiors, all while the actions in one situation may have an impact on the other, through the concept of NAAS. Rules are a building block of institutions and are central to the framework. Ostrom defines them as "…shared understandings by participants about how *enforced* prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are *required, prohibited*, or *permitted*…All rules are the result of implicit or explicit efforts to achieve and predictability among humans…" (2005: 18).

We may distinguish between *de jure* rules (rules-on-paper) and *de facto* rules (rules-in-use), with individuals typically following a mix of the two. The common denominator for the endurance of rules is that they carry a shared meaning among actors and are enforceable to some degree, though individuals may well break them (2005: 19-20, 138). In empirical settings *de facto* rules may be more influential in shaping the behavior of individuals and can also occur informally, then creating informal institutions. A suitable definition of these is provided by Helmke and Levitsky who treat them as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels" (2004: 727). However, *de facto* and informal are not synonymous terms; in an ideal Weberian bureaucracy for instance *de facto* and *de jure* rules would be identical. Conversely, studies of the bureaucracy in a country like India have found that *de facto* rules often are more influential, usually to inequitable outcomes for already marginalized groups (Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2012; Harriss-White 2003).


## Informal Institutions and Public Organisations

Focusing on a case of unexpected policy stability in US wetlands regulation, Arnold and Fleischman (2013) develop a fourway typology (see figure 1) to account for the observed outcome. They differentiate "both the formality and the origin of institutions within organizations" (2013: 348) and introduce four novel categories of institutions. *Imposed* institutions are formal and have origins external to the organization. *Adopted*

institutions are also formal but are crafted within the organization. On the informal dimension they find *sly* institutions originating in the external environment, while *tacit* institutions emerge internally but informally. They proceed to document empirically how key policy actors in their wetlands case engaged in repeated interactions and negotiations over time to eventually create an informal institution which enabled policy stability. In their case a *tacit* institution played the decisive role, whereas they did not observe any *sly* ones. Their main contribution lies in focusing on micro-level interactions within organisations, in order to explain macro-level outcomes, especially by looking at the influence of *de facto* rules and informal institutions originating within and outside an organization; an explanation they argue the IAD framework also is in a better position to provide than other frameworks of the policy process (2013: 345-46).

External Direction   Internal Direction

|          | Imposed | Adopted |
|----------|---------|---------|
| **Formal** | | |
| **Informal** | Sly | Tacit |

*Figure 1.* Typology of institutions within organisations (adapted from Arnold and Fleischman: 349).

Studying informal institutions is not a new line of enquiry. In the common pool resource (CPR) literature, they are often interpreted as something positive with respect to outcomes: sustainable use of common resources may be achieved by means of

communication and trust within self-governing communities, without the need for written laws or external interventions (Agrawal 2007; Ostrom 1990; Ostrom et al. 1994). In more recent literature, issues of corruption and elite capture, both informal institutions, have been examined in relation to sustainable resource use (see Persha and Andersson 2014; Sundström 2015). Applying the typology to a recent literature review of Indian forest policy, Fleischman (2016) finds that both formal and informal institutions influence the behavior of officials, noting that *sly* and *tacit* institutions often are associated with corrupt practices and meddling by local elites, though the themes remain severely understudied in India.

In the literature focusing on the wider political economy and administration of developing societies the treatment of informal institutions is varied. In macro-level studies they are frequently equated with matters of corruption, patronage and low state capacity for service delivery (see Andrews 2013; Kohli 2012; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016), while studies at the meso- to micro-level show more mixed results. For example both Tendler (1997) and Tsai (2007) describe how public service delivery in rural Brazil and China, respectively, was carried out successfully through informal institutions (see also Grindle 1997). In the former case high work dedication and ethos, and a sense of mission was instilled among officials, which limited corruption and inertia. In China, local solidary groups (e.g. village temples) awarded officials moral standing and esteem when they provided public goods. Both these examples should be seen against the backdrop of weak formal institutions and limited accountability.

In India, informal institutions (with varying degree of explicit reference) often tend to be associated with corruption, malfeasance and oppression. Corbridge et al. (2005) and Gupta (2012) for instance both describe how poor citizens encounter the local bureaucracy and informal institutions operating within these, finding that mistreatment and arbitrary discrimination constitute everyday experiences for citizens. In a study of post-tsunami recovery in Tamil Nadu, Kruks-Wisner (2011) found that the powerful customary governance institutions excluded women and caste minorities, forcing them to turn to the formal local government for support. In sharp contrast Ananthpur (2007) found that customary village councils in neighboring Karnataka are transforming to become more representative and pluralistic, complementing the functions of the formal government. In Kerala lastly, Singh (2011) finds that high levels of so-

cial capital and a shared subnational identity has overcome divisions along religious and caste lines, enabling a relatively high level of public service delivery (mainly education and health) to citizens.

Evidently, informal institutions have very diverging characteristics and reported impacts in different studies. To provide further clarity I find that a typology developed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) is instructive to employ. They differentiate between the outcomes generated by informal institutions in relation to formal ones, as well as the type of formal institutional setup in which informal ones are presumed to arise (see figure 2). The four types of informal institutions they develop are: *complementary* institutions with converging outcomes in the context of effective formal institutions; *substitutive* institutions also with converging outcomes but created due to ineffective formal ones; *accommodating* institutions which arise under effective formal institutions but lead to diverging outcomes; and *competing* institutions replacing ineffective formal ones with different outcomes.

| Outcomes | Effective formal institutions | Ineffective formal institutions |
|---|---|---|
| **Convergent** | Complementary | Substitutive |
| **Divergent** | Accommodating | Competing |

*Figure 2*. Typology of Informal Institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 728)


I propose that this typology may complement Arnold and Fleischman (2013) well, not least in attempting to document how a variety of different institutions influence each other towards a final outcome. While the more recent typology helps us specify *where* informal institutions arise (externally or internally), Helmke and Levitsky's help us think as to *why* they arise (effective or ineffective formal institutions), and what it *leads to* (convergent or divergent outcomes).

# Study Setting and Methods

## Forest Administration in Kerala

The Kerala Forest Department (KFD) is the organization charged with carrying out forest policy in the state. Similar to all Indian forest departments, the KFD is a close-to-perfectly nested hierarchy with seven tiers locking into each other, much like a Russian doll. Below the headquarters in the capital Trivandrum, there are two largely administrative tiers; regions (2) and circles (5), located in larger cities. Commanding officials at these two levels will usually have several deputies increasing the *de facto* chain of command by several more steps.

Below that, divisions (25), headed by division forest officers (DFO) are the main and critical bridge between the administrative superiors and the field-based implementing ranks below. Ranges (74), led by forest ranger officers (RFO) are the spine of the administration and spend most of their time in the field. Below this, sections (177) and beats (303) lead by SFOs and BFOs are responsible in different degrees for frontline policy activities in fairly small jurisdictions.

While this structure applies to the whole state, only 29 per cent of Kerala is under forest cover (predominantly tropical wet evergreen and tropical moist deciduous forests), the vast majority being concentrated to the interior areas bordering Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (MoEF 2013). This area forms part of the Western Ghats bioregion, a heavily forested, ecologically sensitive and wildlife-rich mountain range running along the west coast of India (Gadgil 2011). Forest departments in India are bound by both national and state-specific laws and policies, in addition to multiple local programs and department guidelines. At the time of fieldwork the studied officials abided to no less than eighteen different documents, focused on both conservation and human development outcomes.

Kerala is sometimes seen as an anomalous state within the context of India's social and political development. Specifically, it is held to have high levels of social cohesiveness and capital, relatively little corruption and patronage, and a history of public participation and social mobilization (for summaries see Heller 2012; Heller et al. 2007; Singh 2011). I suggest that these features (enabled by India's democratic system), together with the federal structure of the 150 year old administration provides a compelling case to study the influence of (informal) institu-

tions in organisations, as they may originate both internally and externally, for a diversity of reasons.


## Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted in Kerala from May to July 2014 and January to February 2015, using interviews and field observations for data collection, and process tracing to reconstruct the larger chain of events and occurrences, and to expose causal mechanisms (Collier 2011). Altogether, 65 interviews were with KFD officials. 19 of these were superiors, defined as above the Division-level. Ten were DFOs and the remaining 36 were foresters, defined as below the Division-level. Nine respondents were retired, having left the KFD in the past few years. Table 1 provides a breakdown. Field-level interviews were conducted in ten divisions in three geographical regions of the state. The names and precise location remain confidential but each was in the Western Ghats where the vast majority of forest cover is found.

Permission to interact with officials on the wider topic of forest governance was sought for the whole fieldwork period and all respondents were informed of the topic of the study. The ten divisions were selected in discussion with local academic informants, on the criteria that they were reflective of a broad range of activities carried out by the KFD, allowing me to obtain a holistic picture of what the department works on. Officials were tracked down and approached through the public KFD telephone directory which lists all staff down to range level. Beyond that I would ask the RFO to introduce me to the relevant subordinates. To ensure their requested anonymity, the paper does not provide details of the respondents or their locations. Moreover, to ensure confidentiality interviews were not recorded but detailed, lengthy notes were taken and respondents were often asked to repeat and clarify statements. Given the strong command of English most government officials in Kerala have, even at low levels, interviews were conducted in that language. Interview schedules were tailored to fit the different ranks officials hold and plentiful follow-up questions were posed, i.e. a semi-structured format. Eight individuals were interviewed twice, at which certain themes could be elaborated on as officials spoke with more openness, owing to slightly stronger rapport.

| Position | N |
|---|---|
| Headquarters, Region or Circle level (superiors) | 19 |
| Division level (DFOs) | 10 |
| Range level (foresters) | 20 |
| Section and Beat level (foresters) | 16 |
| **Total** | **65** |

*Table 1.* Respondents by Position in Administration

Additionally, field observations were carried out in the divisions and to a lesser extent at higher offices. This is the hallmark technique of the ethnographic methods tradition and has a long legacy in development research (Kapiszewski et al. 2015; Schatz 2009). Practically, it implied observing officials throughout their daily work, which involved spending time in their local offices and coming along for tours to the field, a technique known as "shadowing" (Fenno 1986; Wolcott 2003). While the extent of access varied slightly between divisions, depending on how much time an official would allocate me on different dates, I was able to conduct extended observations with ten RFOs (often together with their subordinates) and four DFOs, totaling close to 36 working days altogether. At some higher ranks I was invited to "sit in" in the offices of superiors for parts of their working day, observing their departmental routines and practices. Roughly 40 hours in addition to the superior-level interviews were spent "sitting in". Regardless of setting, fieldnotes were taken on all occasions and summaries of numerous informal conversations were written down. During observations both English and the local *Malayalam* was used among actors. In the latter case I would ask the accompanying official to thoroughly recap the observed events as soon as possible afterwards.

The language barrier as well as my presence as a non-native inescapably has an impact on the insights and perspectives recorded in the fieldnotes. Nonetheless, in triangulation with interviews, discussions both *post*-interview and with other informants (e.g. academics) the overall picture is coherent. The nine retired officials are also judged to have spoken more unrestrained, corroborating the broader patterns. Another trade-off to address is that my point of entry to the field, and access to

data, was obtained through the officials, which has the unavoidable implication that the findings are mediated through them. I do not consider this a major drawback as the study aims to get at the rules-in-use that matter to officials and there were few, if any, other options than to seek access through them. I deem the combination of interviews and observations suitable for the purposes of studying informal rules and practices. Extended immersion at the center of the issue at hand was likely the only way to achieve these aims, and several insights might not have been obtained by a non-immersed researcher. Helmke and Levitsky suggest that "there is probably no substitute for intensive fieldwork in informal institutional analysis" (2004: 733). This may be particularly relevant in the case of an Indian state bureaucracy, a relatively hard-to-access organization in general.

Following fieldwork all transcripts and fieldnotes were revisited multiple times, seeking to find "diagnostic pieces of evidence" (Collier 2011: 824) indicating the existence of formal or informal institutions, and in turn their influence on patterns of behavior. Eventually this led to the full process being recreated (presented in figure 3 in the empirical analysis), and therein the identification of a causal mechanism. In searching for these pieces the NAAS concept of the IAD framework was guiding as it put into perspective both the character of observed micro-level interactions and rules-in-use, and how they relate to each other across levels. To determine what behavior was informal, I drew upon Helmke and Levitsky's notion of actions occurring "outside of officially sanctioned channels" (2004: 727), in other words actions not prescribed in the KFDs written guidelines and working plans.

## Empirical Analysis

In presenting the major findings I place emphasis on providing careful description and explanatory richness in the narrative, two key features of process tracing (Bennett 2010; Collier 2011). The two *modi operandi* are discussed first, and thereafter the larger pattern they fit into. After each quote an *S* denotes superiors, a *D* the DFOs and an *F* the foresters.

## Networks of Informal Collaboration

In a conceptual article Emerson et al. refer to collaborative governance as the processes and structures of public decision making and management which engage multiple actors across boundaries on some joint issue, in formal as well as informal settings (2012: 2-3). In this case these processes and structures revolve around, and are substantiated in, a set of boundary-spanning networks, occurring on an informal yet institutionalized basis. As is practice in process tracing, I follow the chronological sequence of events, focusing first on the origins of the networks (why), thereafter their boundaries and span of inclusion (where and who), then the aim of them (what), and lastly their informal nature (how).

*(a)* Rural areas of many developing countries suffer from limited mobilization and activism at the grassroots, and public institutions of accountability are often weak (Corbridge et al. 2005; Tsai 2007). In such settings officials lack strong incentives for service delivery, interactions between citizens and officials might be few, and the political culture marked by illicit practices. In sharp contrast the local-level political culture in Kerala is one of social mobilization and deliberation, spawning an active and demand-driven citizenry (see Heller 2012; Heller et al. 2007). This influence was frequently observable and referred to throughout fieldwork. Officials regularly highlighted that the collaborative mind-set they have derives not only from iterated interactions with local stakeholders, but from a deeper set of social expectations permeating society, forcing them to seek out cooperation and joint action beyond their organizational confines. While the political culture exists throughout the state, the impact is most noticeable at the grass-roots where officials are more deeply embedded into the local political environment, although several DFOs emphasize that they too feel obliged to take into account popular demands and pressures. Most of the studied officials hail from Kerala and have been socialized into this culture from childhood, for which reason illuminating insights were given by DFOs assigned to the state at the beginning of their careers.

> Yes, without doubt, Kerala is special. Things work in a very different way and that changes the way I have to work…People are very much active in what affects them, they organize and create unions, they strike and they lodge written complaints…They demand a lot from the department and we must respond (D5).

> First thing you need to know about Kerala is that people are restless. Everyone is involved in something and wants to speak up…For officials from this place it is natural, I had to learn…But it is good. If they care and make an effort so will we and this builds good relationships (D2).

Responding to demands from the grassroots is what drives, and in some cases motivates, the policy work foresters carry out. They highlight the fact that if they fail to include forest management institutions in decision-making, or at the very least in deliberation, their work situation can become untenable. This usually takes the form of extended arguments and complaints when revisiting communities (while anecdotes spoke of occasional violence, none was witnessed during fieldwork), but also a stated sentiment of lost trust and reciprocity. Similar to the findings in Tendler (1997) and Tsai (2007), foresters find satisfaction and moral standing in maintaining sound relationships, indicating that the resultant *de facto* mode of operation through collaborative networks is not purely instrumental.

> …we have a strong relationship with the villages…They trust me to arrive twice every month, and I trust them to come to meetings then. [Author: What happens if you don't visit them?] Disappointment and frustration. They will make life hard for me and treat me differently in future (F12).

> It is impossible to do anything without support from the villages. We must support them so that they later support us…The complaining is not so much the problem, rather the shame if I break the friendship (F4).

Whether officials are guided by *logics of consequence* or *appropriateness* (see Fleischman 2014; March and Olsen 2006) in how they respond positively to grass-roots pressures, it appears the consistently logical (rational or appropriate) thing to do given the institutional landscape they are embedded in. The way in which they respond or react is through the formation of what this paper terms collaborative networks. Put differently, local officials are "captured" by society, rather than vice versa, as elites or local strongmen (Persha and Andersson 2014; Poteete and Ribot 2011)

*(b)* Networks typically span multiple boundaries, both vertically across tiers and horizontally across jurisdictions belonging to the KFD (notably divisions and ranges), other line-

departments present in the field (mainly Tribal- and Rural Development Departments), and the lowest three units of the *panchayat raj*-system of decentralised local government; in Kerala the districts, *taluks* (blocks) and *grams* (villages). The formation of the networks and their outer boundaries are commonly defined on a functional or biophysical basis, i.e., the actors define the scope of their actions on the basis of where forests and wildlife *de facto* exist. This practice reflects the complex mosaic pattern of land-use in Kerala, where forests are scattered across a large fragmented landscape, better visualized as a patchwork than one large contiguous area (Gadgil 2011).

> We try to see it as a landscape, rather than one range here and one range there…We need to start thinking in terms of both land *and* forests, and manage both simultaneously, addressing issues straight on…What we need is an expansion of the protected area networks, not in numbers, but in area (D6).

In lieu of a formal boundary encompassing the whole region to be protected, the officials implicitly define the boundaries of their *de facto* work in terms of a landscape approach (Sayer et al. 2013), looking beyond site-specific conservation arrangements such as national parks to take a wider integrated grip, including both ecological and social issues (see Nagendra and Ostrom 2012 for "polycentric" governance of forest landscapes). As the networks span jurisdictions both vertically and horizontally, their composition is diverse and varies between localities. In the meetings observed, the typical span would include public and elected officials from the organisations listed above, and frequently also local NGOs and representatives of forest management institutions. Meetings occur roughly once a week, usually at the compound of one of the departments and are coordinated by the local DFO who also calls the meeting, again determining access (i.e. inviting actors) on a functional basis.

> I have worked for the department since I graduated college, first as RFO and then as DFO, in several locations…It has given me a lot of ideas about what works and what doesn't work in the management system we have. [Author: What is the main challenge?] The way we are organized…we work in our own offices but miss the bigger picture, that forests are one part of something more, a whole ecosystem, and now with threats from every angle…I respect the organization but we have to communicate with others, we cannot wait while things go up one department, move over to another and down again (D1).

While these intra-departmental meetings are a regular occurrence, equally time-consuming practices foresters engage in are frequent and socially expected visits to communities. On the average day spent following an official in the field two or three communities would be visited, a majority with institutions set up under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) or the Participatory Forest Management (PFM) program.

> Having information and knowledge about conditions and status of the villages is a priority. If I know what's going on there and what their grievances and demands are I will have easier time to solve conflicts when one arises (F22).

> …without their support my job would be very difficult. I would be burdened with complaints and people waiting outside my office to complain…But also, it gives meaning to my work. Protecting the forest cannot be done only by me, they have to do it too (F5).

(c) As for the substantial nature and aim of the networks and the iterated interactions they produce, we find a conduct reflecting collaborative management ideals (Emerson et al. 2012). Almost all observed interactions focused on information-sharing, deliberation and coordination, or a combination of the three. They would typically commence with mutual recounts about events, processes and challenges occurring beyond the particular locality, but which might be relevant for the actors present. In the communities it could be news about work and training in the KFD, upcoming auctions for medicinal plants and spices, planned restoration of degraded land or the construction of wildlife trenches; each aspects of forest management that can make a substantial difference for households with marginal livelihoods, not least in tribal communities. With other departments and local government the issues were more project-specific, usually to identify policy-overlaps and synchronize interventions, or aggregate competencies. An observation from a gathering held in a backward *taluk* may serve as an illustrative example of the networks in practice.

At this meeting the target was policy harmonization of a recently initiated project by the Tribal Department. It aimed to provide training to tribal youths in restoring forest areas, in return that they commit to working a certain number of days for the department after the monsoon season. The project had been spawned far up in the tribal department, and though it resonates much closer with what the KFD usually works with, the

concerned RFOs had not been notified at all. The impromptu response devised during the meeting was that a local faith-based NGO, together with some selected foresters would conduct the training (which they have greater competence in), if the tribal department and the *gram panchayats* could arrange for the transportation of tribal youths from a larger catchment area, beyond the particular *taluks* the project aimed at. Finally, the forest department committed to a wider scope in the training program, if the youths also could be hired to work in KFD areas, relieving some of the ordinary staff needed elsewhere. Altogether, deliberations and the solution were devised in less than two hours. This simple example shows how a project may be coordinated and aligned between a diverse set of stakeholders who have no formal input on the issue. It was suggested that this is the optimal way to resolve problems and to facilitate implementation, also developing their own skills while doing it (see Koontz et al. 2015 on "adaptive learning").

> In a best case scenario a lot of expertise and knowledge can be pooled together. We are all trained in different professions and bring something different to the table. It gives more perspective than if we went along ourselves (D2).

> Information-sharing is fundamental for this whole organization to work, to other officers but also to villages…We cannot be organized as pillars where one officer and the villages in his area know only what occurs in that area (F25).

The allusion to organization in pillars was a recurring theme among officials. Most policy activities are formulated high up in the hierarchy of one department, involving only officials within the same organization or at best one further actor. Respondents stated that this bestows them with an encumbering workload as they often lack capacities to carry out tasks spanning policy-sectors, but also that planned activities often mismatch with the local social context and the pressures they feel from communities. The search for joint exchanges and aggregation within the networks, rather than conforming to the Russian doll-structure of the KFD, can be likened to a classic Lipskyan coping mechanism. Lastly, in order to translate pressures from the grassroots into action, and to circumvent the monocentric setup of the department, i.e., by forming collaborative networks, officials need a substantial amount of autonomy (Lipsky 1980) from their administrative superiors. But precisely because

of that setup, and to some extent the bureaucratic culture of the department, officials are forced to keep their practices informal and non-recorded.

(d) A familiar sight in most Indian government buildings are the seemingly endless stacks of paper and folders tied together in bundles with red string. They often bulge out of filing cabinets, occupy most free spaces and are shuffled around by a myriad of clerks. As such, it was initially surprising to find that none of the collaborative activities are written down. The stated reason is that since the networks are "beyond formal and correct procedure" (F21), there is no need to formally record it either.

> If we create a file there will always be several more steps. It must be registered, given a number and stored, more work for me than I already have…Also, it will lead to complications, some official in some place will complain, why did you make this agreement? …The best option is to not file; to just make agreement with the others, I know them well to trust them (F21).

If informal activities are written down there is the chance that someone, likely a superior, will interfere and possibly discipline the subordinate. It is in the self-interest of frontline staff to *not* create a paper trail which may impede or complicate their *de facto* work. The existence of a file, given the venerable status such objects have in the Indian administration (Gupta 2012), will be a record of how something was carried out. In his ethnography of local bureaucracy in north India, Gupta argues that "the file is the critical unit that organizes bureaucratic life…the wheels of government grind to a halt without a file…The importance of the file was impressed upon me by an officer who said, 'If it is not in the file, it does not exist'" (2012: 146). The observed pattern here is the inverse of Gupta's findings; there the file is sacrosanct and nothing materializes without it. Here the very absence of a file or written documentation makes the wheels of the informal networks turn. The non-recording of activities also indicates the amount of trust and reliance on personal connections between foresters and other actors

> We meet when we need to…Sometimes many days straight, sometimes only once a month. If my station needs the support of the Revenue or the Tribal Department we will approach them…To manage we need to work together (F12).

Asking why these issues are not raised through the Forest Development Agency (FDA), the formal forum for coordination between departments and communities at the division level, officials spoke of the frustrations of things happening painstakingly slow in the FDAs as all initiatives have to travel upwards in the hierarchy for approval, ruling out coping with grassroots pressures *and* formal tasks.

> We have to handle our work this way, to be able to manage at all. Many objectives and instructions are there…and many resources as well. But one resource we do not have is time…it is the way we must proceed with work, even if not correct procedure…The FDAs are very good in principle but before something happens there, things change in the field, there is little momentum (F16).

## Conforming with the Hierarchy

The nature of the interactions with superior KFD officials looks markedly different from that occurring horizontally in the field between officials and other local stakeholders. While following foresters as well as "sitting in" with higher ranking officials a frequent (roughly weekly) occurrence was debriefing-meetings between the two actors as the former are required to report and recount the policy activities and projects being carried out in their jurisdictions. Here an important dividing-line runs through the organization. Up to the division level and the DFOs, meetings and debriefings also focus on what *de facto* occurs, i.e., the informal practices recounted above. Beyond that level the situation changes and the role of the DFO as the linking position between the field-level and upper administrative levels becomes evident. On the one hand they coordinate the informal *modus operandus* carried out in practice by their subordinates. On the other hand they fulfill the role of the Weberian civil servant, dutifully reporting upwards in the hierarchy where formal protocol is more revered.

> I report regularly to the CF [circle level], and sometimes he takes me to the CCF [region level]. When reporting to them they demand to know what is occurring in this division, what I am doing, what the RFOs are doing and so on…[Author: Do they go to the field themselves?] Rarely, so they rely on reports from me…They prefer to see activities done strictly by the book, following the working plans. Then I need to know what is occurring in the ranges; if there is some reason for complaints from the public then I know it first…I will tell them

matters are under control and in accordance with the working plans (D1).

Responses from superiors illustrate the value they place on unidirectional reporting. Also, it reveals their reluctance to undertake routine inspection tours to the forests of upland Kerala, even though any route chosen would be no more than six or seven hours by jeep.

> I won't go to the field unless it's absolute necessary, which it usually isn't…There is little in my work that really requires me to go to the field. [Author: When were you last at a Forest Range?] Many, many years back! I don't have the time for travelling like that (S3).

> I miss spending the days going around the villages and discussing the progress and needful things of our work. Now I just read reports someone else has written…My career now is not forestry, it is reading reports and going to Trivandrum to meet my superiors (S18).

The routinized practice among senior officials of not conducting tours to the field (whether by active choice or constrained by other tasks) has generated a departmental working culture all the more reliant on bureaucratic inscription; the practice of writing and filing reports, memorandums and standardized forms mandated in formal guidelines. This practice is not unique to the KFD and has been explored by political anthropologists in similar settings (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012). In fact, most of the time spent following foresters outside the field involved observing them comply with routinized paperwork. To corroborate accounts, an actual file was "shadowed" on one occasion. In the first step an SFO, based at a remote forest section, filled out multiple forms in meticulous handwriting and upon completion handed them to a clerk who assembled them in a thick folder tied up with string. It was then taken by courier to a RFO who glanced at it before formally approving it with a stamped signature and passing it on to the office of the DFO. Again the folder was unpacked, looked at and stamped. This procedure was repeated once more with handwritten copies made by clerks at each level, before the original folder reached the circle level where it was tucked away in a filing cabinet, to remain as far as I can tell, perpetually. Enquiring if the folder ever will be revisited for some purpose the consistent response was a shrug and a "no".

It is important to clarify that the files do not contain lies or made-up numbers. They are typically standardized forms comprising voluminous amounts of detail and statistics on projects the KFD are working on, but consistently technical aspects of forestry lending themself to quantifiable measures and systematized categories; e.g. growth rates in tree plantations (see Fleischman 2014; Fleischman and Briske 2016 for accounts of "scientific bureaucracy" in relation to tree planting), amounts of saplings distributed, or kilometers of fences and forest trails restored. The reporting follows the format and content of the *Division Working Plan*, the formal guiding document for most work officials within a division must do. They are heavyset volumes replete with tables and statistics, written for a ten-year time horizon. The timeframes were often criticized by foresters for lacking relevance to what they actually have to do with regards to community-demands, but also aspects of wildlife management, both requiring more flexibility and shorter timeframes.

> The plans are coarse and difficult to use. They span ten years and include everything that could happen during this period, all the activities are there…How can you plan for ten years? So much could happen in that time. It is useful for tree-planting activities but all the human activities? Events change…and for people living under hard conditions, a ten year plan is useless... (F4).

Clearly, inscription and adherence to formal procedures for reporting is institutionalized in the KFD, and enforced by the superior officials. But seeing that superiors hardly ever do more than sign the reports prior to filing, and that debriefings often are recitations of what the subordinate has filled out in his own record-keeping ledger, why the adherence to these routines?

## A Culture of Transfers

Asking senior-level officials – usually those that would be willing to talk more informally, or were interviewed twice – about the important motivating factors in their work, the near-unanimous response was securing transfers to more desirable postings. In Kerala this usually means one of the coastal cities or Trivandrum, though some mentioned New Delhi and the Ministry of Environment and Forests as their ultimate goal. Transfers of senior officials within the Indian civil service occurs every three or four years though much sub-national varia-

tion exists (Das 2010). There is evidence that the transfer of bu-reaucrats in India is a powerful discretionary mechanism used by politicians in order to control the behavior of officials (see also Fleischman 2016; Iyer and Mani 2012), sometimes leading to bribery and corruption, and ultimately that officials spend considerable time and resources raising money and building political ties to secure a posting. While I only heard anecdotal rumors of such practices in Kerala, most superiors stated that they do their utmost to maintain a clean record of performance and to avoid situations that might stain their future transfer-prospects. This means being cautious in taking initiatives be-yond the absolute minimum, not getting involved in conflicts that might draw media-attention, and keeping flawless report-ing practices in the jurisdictions they are responsible for.

> The priority is doing my duty without making noise or getting unnec-essary inquiries. See, if I can do that for some years I should reach the headquarters…It limits me too, I have to think before everything I do so it does not disrupt my chances of advancing (S4).

> Yes, it [speaking of transfers] is very important to me, in India there is much prestige in place of posting…I cannot allow scandals in divi-sions of my circle but as you have seen [omitted names of DFOs] keep good shop, very fine reports and nothing embarrassing…It reflects on me if something happens, that I fear (S5).

Such statements illuminate a line of reasoning many superiors appear to follow and seek to justify. Again, referring to March and Olsen (2006) it is the consistently logical course of action given the institutional setting (i.e., the bureaucratic culture of transfers) they are embedded within. What these officials need, or seek to obtain, much like the foresters need autonomy, is what the public administration literature terms *blame-avoidance* (Hood 2007, 2011; Weaver 1986). Till now this section has fo-cused on the two different *modi operandi* as they exist inde-pendently of each other at a given point in time, accounted for their origins, as well as the incentive structures or logics the actors follow. The ensuing step is to show how they are con-nected, and reinforce each other through a micro-level process which ultimately leads to an institutional equilibrium both par-ties are content in maintaining. Figure 3 illustrates this process and the next section examines each of the steps.
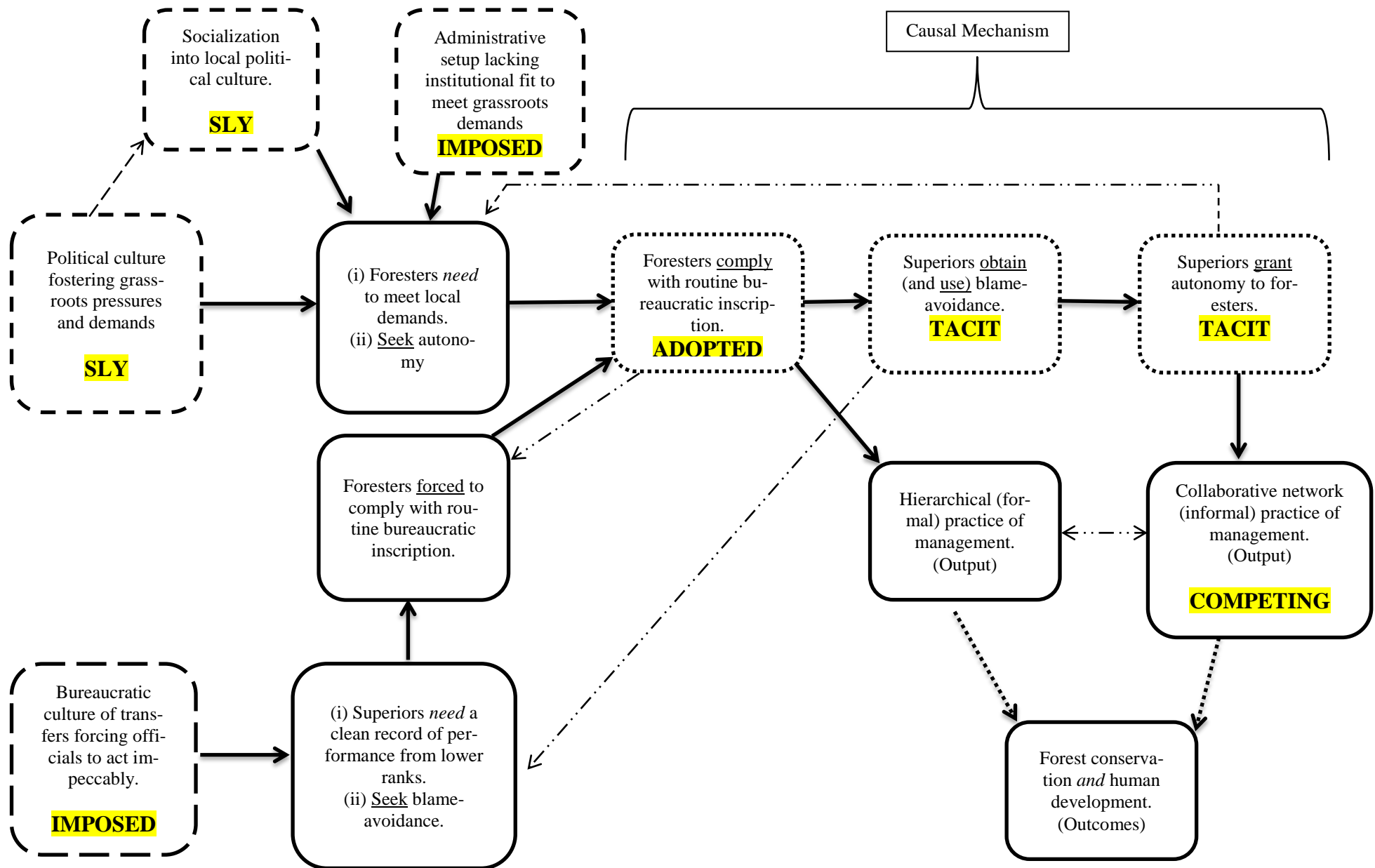
Causal Mechanism

Socialization into local political culture. **SLY**

Administrative setup lacking institutional fit to meet grassroots demands **IMPOSED**

Political culture fostering grassroots pressures and demands **SLY**

(i) Foresters *need* to meet local demands.
(ii) Seek autonomy

Foresters comply with routine bureaucratic inscription. **ADOPTED**

Superiors obtain (and use) blame-avoidance. **TACIT**

Superiors grant autonomy to foresters. **TACIT**

Foresters forced to comply with routine bureaucratic inscription.

Hierarchical (formal) practice of management. (Output)

Collaborative network (informal) practice of management. (Output) **COMPETING**

Bureaucratic culture of transfers forcing officials to act impeccably. **IMPOSED**

(i) Superiors *need* a clean record of performance from lower ranks.
(ii) Seek blame-avoidance.

Forest conservation *and* human development. (Outcomes)

*Figure 3*. The Process Leading to the Dual Practices.

## Mutual Resource Dependency and Exchange

The first component of interest is the *autonomy* sought by foresters. In the literature on street-level bureaucracy a distinction is made between that term and the closely related term *discretion*. Discretionary power is the ability to affect the implementation process (e.g. the policy harmonization meeting recounted above) while autonomy is the freedom, either delegated from superiors or deliberately taken, to do so; in other words a form of precondition (Lipsky 1980). Here, foresters need autonomy, i.e. the freedom of action, to exercise discretionary power.

A second component is the *blame-avoidance* the superiors seek. The concept, sometimes referred to as deniability, was originally formulated by Weaver (1986) and has been extensively theorized by Hood (2007, 2011). They make the argument that negativity bias, "the [cognitive] tendency of negative information to produce more activity and impact than positive information" (2007: 192) is a key driver in bureaucratic behavior. As described, the superiors fear such negativity bias and therefore take precautions to not draw unwanted attention, and sit out their tenure at a posting quietly rather than take excessive initiative and action.

Hood outlines three blame-avoiding strategies typically followed by bureaucrats, whereof one termed agency strategies; attempts by officials to avoid or limit blame by the way that formal responsibility, competency or jurisdiction is allocated among all officials (2007: 199), fits the case at hand. In practice it implies avoiding blame by finding a scapegoat and "hiding behind" the formal allocation of responsibility within an organization. Here, superiors seek the ability to deny (avoid blame) the knowledge or responsibility for an action (in principle also lack of action) taken (or not taken) by a subordinate official as there is no evidence incriminating them in any way. In its theoretical ideal, it allows a superior to distance himself from blame and accountability if an action becomes public, whether controversial or not.

In a setting where the process of inscription is deeply permeated and part of the working culture, written material becomes the critical asset of blame-avoidance. If a yet higher-ranked official enquires about matters, or requests specific reports it will exist and be in good order, giving that official deniability and the chance to avoid blame. To his best knowledge the subordinates have acted on their own accord, sparing the superior from

implication or embarrassment as the action was not mentioned in the report or file. In such cases officials indeed do follow Gupta's (2012: 146) cited quote "If it is not in the file, it does not exist". Statements by all types of officials illuminate this.

> The first thing one looks at is the files and ledgers. If they are up to par the responsible officer at that level can say that the problematic issue did not happen on his watch (S4).

> The reports are important…If there is official inquiry or inspection they will check the reports first so these must be *pukka* [Indian term for top-standards]. Then they will make notations that matters are taken care of; they will have done what they are responsible for…The next officer they report to will be able to do the same, make notations and have then also followed procedure…it goes on upwards (D1).

> If I submit my reports DFO will be satisfied and not question my work. DFO just signs and passes them on…then he allows me to do my job as I see fit in my area (F9).

The routinized practice is thus one where foresters are given *de facto* autonomy to pursue activities in their own preferred way, as long as they comply with their formal reporting-duties. Through their compliance a paper trail fulfilling all the formal requirements is created which both types of actors in some measure may "hide behind". We may construe blame-avoidance and autonomy as two distinct resources, one held by each type of official, which the other seeks to acquire. A mutual resource dependency arises within the department which is turned into an exchange relationship; the foresters offer the superiors deniability through written reports, and the superiors in return offer their subordinates autonomy by not interfering in their daily field-activities.

I suggest that this mutual dependency and exchange constitutes a causal mechanism which brings institutional stability to the department, in which the two *modi operandi* may be upheld in a form of integrated coexistence. The stability derives from the fact that neither foresters nor superiors have any strong incentive – nor any pressure, external or internal – to alter the conduct of operations as it currently stands, or renege on agreements they have entered. As the dotted arrows in figure 3 shows, the exchange is self-reinforcing in the sense that both groups gain the resource they seek, enabling a status quo they are satisfied with maintaining. Ultimately this allows foresters to allocate their time and effort at pursuing goals that are more

in line with their own interests and moreover, principles of contemporary policy discourses; public participation and deliberation, learning-by-doing, and resource-sharing (see Koontz et al. 2015). Importantly, this does not by default guarantee either better forest conservation or enhanced livelihoods. The dotted arrows leading from the two *modi operandi* (the output) to the bottom-right box (the twin goals of forest governance, i.e. the outcomes) represents a process not focused on in this paper; whether the institutional arrangements *de facto* lead to desired ecological and social outcomes.

## Varieties of observed institutions

Returning to Arnold and Fleischman's (2013) typology we find evidence of all four types of institutions. With regards to the long-dashed boxes – essentially the "attributes of the community" of the IAD framework – the political culture and the associated socialization process at the grassroots is an example of a *sly* institution as it occurs informally and externally. Noteworthy is that the sly institution here is *not* associated with corruption or patronage, as Fleischman (2016) found was the general trend in his literature review of Indian forest governance. The culture of transfers is an example of an *imposed* institution; it originates outside the forest department, in the formal rules regulating transfers in India's civil service (Das 2010). Had evidence been found of bribery in relation to transfers, it could instead have been termed a sly institution. The administrative setup of the organization is also an imposed institution, established by rules set beyond the state of Kerala. The short-dashed boxes – in combination the proposed mechanism – are institutions within the organization. The first step is an *adopted* institution; foresters comply with a formal rule (routine reporting and inscription) established within the department. The next two are in contrast *tacit* institutions; the exchange of autonomy for blame-avoidance occurs informally as it deviates from the *de jure* rules of conduct, and occurs between levels inside the organization. Each of these seven observed institutions influences and shape the structure of multiple micro-level action situations occurring simultaneously, essentially what McGinnis (2011b) terms "networks of adjacent action situations".

From the perspective of Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology we may see the existence of the informal networks as a type of *competing* institution: they have arisen due to ineffective formal institutions (the administrative setup being incompatible

with the type of work officials are forced to do to meet demands from the grassroots), and produces an output (the networks themselves) diverging from what would occur if officials only followed the *de jure* rules. On the other hand, if we see the networks as somewhat convergent with the intended outputs of contemporary policy paradigms, they could instead be considered an example of *substitutive* institutions.

## Conclusion and Implications

This paper has reported on a case where public officials in a resource managing bureaucracy have been able – to some degree of success – to overcome commonly identified barriers to good forest governance, defying some expectations about the difficult challenges posed by a hierarchical setup and a colonial-bureaucratic culture in the era of collaborative policy paradigms. In doing so, it has also provided some micro-level evidence on how a large Indian state administration functions internally, and what micro-level institutions influence the behavior of individual officials. The paper may be seen as an empirical contribution to the yet small but important literature on institutions operating within organisations, describing a case where a multiplicity of different institutions simultaneously interact to generate a situation which may be counterintuitive with respect to the external policy environment it is found in. I do not rule out competing accounts or non-process tracing methods, but would argue that the careful micro-level institutional approach followed here illuminates patterns of behavior that might have been overlooked with approaches less focused on interrelated interactions across governance levels. It also reaffirms Arnold and Fleischman's (2013) conclusion that the IAD framework offers an instructive approach for future inquiries into the "black box" that is the internal world of public organisations, not least in developing countries.

From a policy perspective the paper cautiously suggests that institutional barriers may be overcome to craft informal, bottom-up governance arrangements more in line with current policy discourse. In this case foresters did so without formal external support, but yet within the broader confines of deep-rooted institutional structures that may be hard for a smaller set of individuals to change (e.g. the culture of transfers and the practice of routine inscription), possibly constraining the full potential of the informal arrangements. On the other hand, the

paper points to the importance of local political embeddedness and connections between stakeholders (see also Andersson and Ostrom 2008) as a key driver of institutional outputs, in this case more so than the formal organizational setup and culture. As the paper builds on a single case study I refrain from giving substantial policy implications but will emphasize the importance of looking carefully at the deeper motivations and hidden incentive structures officials follow. Externally driven institutional reforms that disproportionately transform extant incentive structures could provoke concerted resistance to change.

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