

Co-ordination Failure in Policy Networks: West Bengal Panchayats in Action

Abstract:

Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal find themselves in a network environment where it needs to coordinate with other organizations which are not under its control. Achieving coordination in such multi-actor environment where actors are not connected through hierarchical relationship is not an easy task as threat to autonomy, difficulty in arriving at a consensus and conflicting requirements of horizontal and vertical coordination act as coordination barriers.

Network management provides a potential solution to the coordination problem faced by networks. It lays emphasis on using trust, institutions and strategic dependencies for achieving coordination. However, presence of issues such as power, politics, and institutions which have dual influence on network coordination complicates the issue. A history of animosity between bureaucrats and panchayats, and dominance of partisan politics are issues which are likely to make coordination difficult to achieve. At the same time, uninterrupted existence spanning over more than three decades and overwhelming dominance of a single political formation may have given sufficient stability and time for different actors to know each other and arrive at a shared goal of network.

Considering these aspects, we seek to understand why West Bengal Panchayats find it difficult to overcome coordination barriers. This involves finding answers to a number of associated questions related to impact of network stability, power & politics, and institutions on network coordination. Since use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is one of the ways in which coordination is sought to be achieved, we also look at ICT's interaction with existing coordination barriers and its impact on coordination.

Using anthropological methods like interview and observation, we examine implementation of two schemes in three districts of West Bengal. Theoretical sampling is used for district selection as well as for selecting three sites within the districts. Analysis of field data

collected over a period of 18 months and presented in the form of multiple embedded case studies provides insights into how politics, bureaucracy-politician relationship, power, leadership and hidden agenda become barriers to coordination.

The findings show that power, politics and multiple roles of formal and informal institutions do act as barriers to network coordination. The criticality of taking care of core interests and selective activation are also apparent. While power facilitates network coordination in some cases, pursuit of durable source of power leads to weakening institutional safeguards against opportunistic behavior. Bureaucratic leadership's reticence to tackle political challenge leads to core issues remaining unresolved. The findings seem to indicate that political leadership is better placed to handle networks not only because it is able to address hidden agenda but also because of its ability to use discourse as a network management tool. It is also seen that while ICT acts as tool in the hands of the more powerful actor its main utility lies in the fact that it provides a least common denominator solution acceptable to all parties.