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The Polycentric Forest Ranger: Public Officials and Informal Polycentricity in South Indian Forest Governance

This paper departs from two perceived, interrelated limitations in the research literature on multi-level, multi-actor tropical forest governance. The first is a yet inadequate understanding of the role played by public officials of large natural resource managing agencies, which are regularly identified as important policy actors but are on the whole understudied. In comparison to the knowledge we have of community-level actors in forest governance the systematic study of public officials is still in its infancy. The second is a deeper understanding of how informal institutions and governance structures arise and endure within the broader formal frameworks of forest governance. More specifically, the paper focuses on how *informal* polycentric governance arrangements co-exist and thrive within formally monocentric, hierarchical arrangements; the model of forest governance still dominant in many developing countries. It also considers how and why individual public officials are 'members' of both types of governance arrangements and work to uphold both in parallel.

The paper builds on polycentric theory, institutional analysis and the idea of 'networks of adjacent action situations', and suggests that the identification of informal polycentric arrangements and the associated behaviour of officials may be aided by the application of (non-normative) ideal-types in empirical fieldwork.

It proceeds to formulate an ideal-type of polycentricity with the help of the action situation of the IAD-framework before turning to the empirical context of forest governance in Kerala, South India. On the basis of 43 selected in-depth interviews with public (forest) officials and personal field-observations it uses this material to explore and elaborate how informal polycentric-like arrangements exist at the field-level in Kerala and are sustained within a formally monocentric model of forest governance. It finds that many individual officials at the mid- to lower levels of the forest administration struggle to maintain both arrangements, which is partially explained by their belief in alternative policy goals and how to reach them, and partially by a strong socialisation process wherein local socio-cultural norms encouraging public participation and collaboration are instilled on the officials.

Overall, public officials located at the lower levels of the forest administration display a greater willingness and capacity for institutional change and endogenous self-innovation, which may have important implications for the design of policy reform.