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Reforming the Public Administration for Better Service Provision: A Comparative Study of Five Rural Services in Karnataka, India

MADHUSHREE SEKHER¹, K. G. GAYATHRIDEVI², REGINA BIRNER³, KATHARINA RAABE⁴

¹*Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), India*

²*Institute for Social and Economic Change, Centre for Ecological Economics and Natural Resources, India*

³*University of Hohenheim, Institute of Agricultural Economics and Social Sciences in the Tropics and Subtropics, Germany*

⁴*Leibniz University Hannover, Institute for Environmental Economics and World Trade, Germany*

Abstract

Strategies to reform rural service provision in India have focused on improving people's capacity to demand better services from government agencies, for example, through empowering locally elected councils and strengthening people's Right to Information. However, there have been limited efforts to reform the public sector agencies that provide essential rural services, such as agricultural and livestock services, drinking water and child development services. Moreover, there are major knowledge gaps on how incentive problems and governance challenges vary across the agencies that provide such services, and how they can be addressed. This paper aims to contribute to closing this knowledge gap by (1) developing a conceptual framework for an institutional assessment of rural service providers, and (2) applying this framework for five rural services in the Indian state of Karnataka. The conceptual framework relies on concepts of the New Institutional Economics and on the organisational assessment literature. The empirical analysis is based on a survey of 206 field-level staff members of five government departments that provide rural services: (1) Agriculture, (2) Animal Husbandry, (3) Food and Civil Supplies, (4) Women and Child Development and (5) Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. The paper also draws on a survey of 966 rural households that receive services from these departments. The analysis indicates that there are significant differences across departments regarding the incentives and constraints faced by their frontline service providers. Lack of staff was found to be a major constraint for agricultural and veterinary services, whereas frontline staff in charge of food distribution and civil works experienced political interference as a particularly serious constraint. Availability of funding and administrative procedures were not considered to be major constraints across departments. The findings from the household survey indicate that access and satisfaction with services differ significantly according to caste and gender, even though these effects are not uniform across services. The paper compares the findings of the study with the recent recommendations of the Second Administrative Reform Commission and concludes that some constraints, such as political interference, require more attention to make service delivery responsive to the needs of the poor.

Keywords: India, public sector management reform, rural service provision