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### ***Political commitment in India's social policy implementation: Shaping the performance of MGNREGA***

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## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the empirical understanding of the concept of commitment and the role it plays in shaping India's social policy implementation. Taking the case of the landmark policy, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the paper analyses in-depth qualitative information from four states – Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Assam. The paper examines the puzzle of differing outcomes in these four states, despite the same design and implementation mechanisms, through a political economy lens. It presents a nuanced and rich analysis of the characteristics of commitment that can be seen in different states, linking these to how they play out in shaping the implementation dynamics of MGNREGA from a comparative lens. The paper contributes to the existing body of literature on policy implementation and the role that commitment plays at the level of the sub-national state in delivering welfare policy in India.

**Keywords:** Political will, commitment, policy implementation, India, employment guarantee, MGNREGA

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## 1. Introduction

'There is no political will...karna kaun chahata hai? (who **wants** to do?)'

In living room discussions, this is a statement heard countless times when discussing failures, problems or anything related to the obstacles towards changing the current order of things. Academic literature also speaks about the absence of political will as something that explains failure in relation to policy processes (encompassing both policy reform and policy implementation).

The majority of studies of policy implementation study mechanisms and processes, debate whether these are top down or bottom up, and identify barriers, obstacles and learning in these processes (Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980; Hjern and Hull, 1983). This literature has recently started acknowledging the importance of political economy explanations privileging implementing institutions, examining the actors involved in implementation and their interests and values that shape policy implementation and initiate policy reform. In India, too, there has been a spirited discussion documenting the failure of well intentioned policies (Corbridge et al., 2005; Kohli, 1987; Fernandez, 2012). Yet, the 'why' question remains largely understudied – why did certain policies get successfully implemented, while others did not? Why were certain reform agendas more successful than others? Even more interestingly, in the Indian context, there seems to be substantial subnational variation in implementation of the same policy (Bajpai and Sachs, 1999); yet there seems to be relatively little understanding of why this is the case. One plausible answer encompasses implementing actors' 'interests', but how can these be conceptualised, seen and assessed? What are the expressions of these interests and motivations? And how do these interests shape policy implementation and the resultant outcomes of policy in different ways? This paper seeks to throw light on these questions, framing 'interests and motivations' as the commitment or political will that policy actors bring to bear on policy processes, thereby shaping both the implementation and outcomes of policy.

In talking about commitment and the way it shapes policy implementation and outcomes, this paper focuses on tracing and understanding commitment as it is expressed by two sets of actors – administrative elites, or bureaucrats; and political party elites, or politicians. This fills a valuable gap in providing an empirical grounding to literature that continues to remain abstract and theoretical. Further, focusing on commitment as it plays out helps in understanding why and how policies are implemented differently because of different interests and motivations of these actors. Therefore, in examining the way that commitment plays out and is expressed, primacy is accorded to politics in explaining not only failures, but perhaps more importantly, how successes have come about. This is a rare undertaking, as literature has usually focused on problem analysis or technical issues, rather than examining successful cases from a political perspective of commitment.

The case of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is ideal for an examination of the political economy factors behind success and failure, and to understand the supply-side reasons behind variations in implementation. The Act states livelihoods creation as its main objective. It provides for 100 days of employment

to any rural household that demands it and is willing to work on minimum wages. While a focus on the supply-side factors – i.e. implementing actors – might sound counterintuitive for an Act that is demand based, this is actually not the case. MGNREGA has, like most other public policies, remained largely driven by state and local implementing actors, with demand for employment being impossible to capture, both practically, and through the extensive management information system (MIS), in which demand is captured ex-post<sup>1</sup> and therefore meaningless. Therefore, although demand-side variations driving performance may be important in some cases in explaining performance variation, it is supply-side processes that have received most of the attention of implementing actors. Further, while it is centrally sponsored, the Act is implemented by the subnational state governments. The Act prescribes the overall design and critical pathways for implementation, while some smaller details are left to the jurisdiction of the respective state government, thereby ensuring some flexibility within an overall framework of rights-based social policy. Therefore, it becomes critical to examine differences in commitment of state-level elites in explaining state-level variations in the performance of MGNREGA.

It is important to clarify at the outset, that there is considerable variation in performance within states as well. These interesting intra-state variations could be explained by a range of factors, including the commitment of local elites, geographical variations, client-patron relationships and class politics at the local level (Roy, 2015). In this paper, I have chosen to focus on state-level dynamics that explain the variation in MGNREGA's implementation. This is primarily because state-level commitment is critical for setting the vision for implementation, the level of importance accorded to the MGNREGA by local-level bureaucrats, and for setting the overall pace and direction of MGNREGA's implementation in the state. As Kohli (1987 p. 11) said, 'state level governments are often political actors in their own right'. Further, irrespective of local-level variations in performance of the MGNREGA, there has been a consistent pattern of some states being better performers than others – which, along with a tight top-down implementation structure, as designed for the MGNREGA within India's federal structure, implies two things: a) that state-level action influences implementation at sub-state and local levels; and b) there are some factors at the state level that seem to be more important than local-level factors cumulatively in influencing overall implementation outcomes at the state level. In addition, the sheer importance and visibility of the MGNREGA at the central level and state level comparisons of the Act's performance have accorded primacy to state-level actions determining the state's overall performance.

While examining factors that impact on MGNREGA's implementation at the state level, commitment of elites (both political party elites or politicians; and administrative elites or bureaucrats) is critical. This is because, although there are other factors that may impact on the Act's implementation – including centre-state dynamics which may, for example, impact the release of funds from the centre, or the space that state bureaucrats of different states

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<sup>1</sup> Once captured, demand needs to be fulfilled within 15 days, through provision of employment, with unemployment allowance being the penalty to the state for not doing so. This then creates a powerful disincentive for the state to adequately capture demand and report it. Instead, even the high performing states have focused on streamlining processes relating to supply of work, payment of adequate wages and on-time payments – all of which are supply-side factors.

have from central-level bureaucrats for effecting changes – the design of the MGNREGA is such that there is a tight link between intentionality of state-level elites and state-level outcomes in the state. This is because of incredibly complex procedures that each state needs to understand, put into place and continuously improve, so that implementation of the MGNREGA is possible. The unique emphasis of the Act on multiple and complicated processes for capturing demand, opening up works, measuring work done and payment to labourers therefore necessitates a focus on intended actions of state elites, which may not be justified in other areas of policy implementation which do not require this heavy investment of inputs by the state machinery.

This paper posits that commitment of the implementing actors at state level plays a critical role in explaining the variations in implementation outcomes of the MGNREGA across states.

In order to compare how commitment plays out, and to understand if there is any other explanatory variable at play at the state level, I examine qualitative data from four states – two where MGNREGA implementation has been a success (Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh), and two where MGNREGA implementation has not been a success (Bihar and Assam). Success is understood as a high proportion of person days generated in each state out of the number of rural poor. The operationalisation of commitment through a comparative case study approach at sub-national levels has the ability to provide valuable insights into the factors behind success and failure, especially as, despite similarities in design, outcomes are very different. This is useful to understand what role politics has to play in explaining why and how success is achieved.

The paper is structured as follows: after a note on the methodology through which data for the paper was collected and analysed, Section 2 presents a literature review on policy processes, examining whether and how commitment has been conceptualised within this literature. Section 3 then moves on to identifying the cases of success and failure within the MGNREGA, providing a rationale for selection of the four states on which my analysis is based. The theoretical framework set out in Section 2 is operationalised in Section 4, with data from the four states providing a nuanced and rich analysis of the characteristics of commitment. Finally, section 5 concludes with some critical observations on the role that commitment plays at the level of the sub-national state in delivering MGNREGA, as well as other social policy in India and other countries. In making these observations, I operationalise the concept of political will or commitment for understanding policy implementation and outcomes.

## **1.1 Methodology**

This paper is based on fieldwork that I carried out over multiple trips between July 2012 and September 2013 in the four states. Desk-based literature searches and statistical analyses were conducted, in order to gain an overall picture of the state's political economy and performance in MGNREGA. Field visits included trips to state departments of rural development involved in the implementation of MGNREGA, district- and block-level offices, and to some field sites. Primary data was collected primarily through elite interviews with

state-level bureaucrats and other state personnel responsible for the implementation of MGNREGA and interviews with political party leaders at the state level. All respondents were selected purposively, with their role in guiding the implementation of MGNREGA at state level being a focus of all interactions. At the minimum, I met four state-level officials (including bureaucrats, officers and managers) for each of the states. This ensured that data collection was exhaustive for each of the states. These interviews were often unstructured and conducted either over formal meetings or through informal discussions and repeated interactions during the course of the fieldwork. Interviews and meetings were also conducted with at least two district- and/or block-level officials in each of the states, with interactions (work site selection was purposive and close to centre) with frontline staff and workers helping to build up a picture of the overall implementation dynamics in the state. The rural development minister of state for each of the four states was also interviewed, and there were additional interactions with some of them over the course of the project through emails, phone calls and meetings at various events, such as the Rozgar Divas organised by the central ministry in Delhi. Interactions with civil society activists varied from state to state, as did meetings with relevant state institutes providing training to state officials on MGNREGA. I also met senior bureaucrats from the Ministry of Rural Development in Delhi – in some cases these took the form of formal interviews, while in other cases, more general discussions were held with them to discuss progress of the research and any specific findings/questions emerging from the state-level pictures. All interviews and meetings were noted down, some were recorded with permission from the respondents, and these have been subsequently transcribed and anonymised. Analysis took the form of a comparative case study approach, with appropriate coding schemes being developed and used in Atlas.ti to capture various indicators of commitment.

## **2 Implementing policy: the role of commitment**

### **2.1 Implementation of policy**

Starting from the pioneering work on understanding policy implementation processes by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), there have been vast strides made in this conceptual terrain. Application of this literature in the developing world pushed this work further and has highlighted pathways through which implementation successes and failures could be explained (Grindle, 1977). Gradually, a purely technocratic approach to policy implementation has been recognised as insufficient. A political economy perspective has subsequently delineated institutions, actors and incentives that impact implementation processes (Mcloughlin and Batley, 2012) and established the crucial role of politics (Leftwich and Wheeler, 2011). The role of actors and institutions in addressing constraints, choosing allocation and provisioning of resources, and defining relationships of accountability has also been deliberated upon in policy literature (OECD, 2008; Scoones and Keeley, 2000).

This is similar to the policy reform literature, where different configurations of institutions, actors and interests are provided as explanations for policy change (Grindle, 2005). Reform has also been said to happen at specific 'political junctures' or moments that has led to a change in the political settlement and social contract between the state and citizens (Hickey, 2006; Chopra, 2014a). Literature has also highlighted the growing role of citizen pressure or public action in influencing policy change (Coelho et al., 2011; Chopra, 2011a; Chopra,

2011b). Finally, the success of reform is attributed to the type of reform being proposed – piecemeal or cumulative, equity-oriented or efficiency-oriented (Kaufman and Nelson, 2004); or indeed the type of sector that the reform relates to – visible in the public eye or not, narrowly targeted or broad based (Keefer and Khemani, 2003).

These aspects of policy implementation essentially make policy implementation and reform a political undertaking. While actors and their networks and strategies are important, existing structures are also accorded importance in affecting policy implementation (Grindle, 2005; Scoones and Keeley, 2000). Incentives are acknowledged to play a significant role (Collier, 2007), and derive from a range of sources – the power base of the actors, their ideology, knowledge, capacity to implement policies, and perceptions about political feedback (Amsden et al., 2011). These incentives are also determined by questions of motivation and political choices (Booth, 2011).

'Political will' appears in many studies of policy implementation and reform, but is accorded a role primarily through its absence. Most literature explaining failure of policy tends to include 'lack of political commitment' as a stumbling block. For example, Jordan (1999) ascribes gaps in environmental policy implementation to lack of political commitment, despite institutional initiatives being put in place. While this highlights the vital role of commitment in ensuring policy implementation, how this commitment can be identified is not made clear.

This lack of clarity is echoed even in the few places where there is mention of political will or commitment to explain success, for example in the case of Ghana's or Ethiopia's basic education reforms (McLoughlin and Batley, 2012). Instead, literature explaining success of service delivery privileges aspects such as regime type, extent of political competition, specific moments in time, such as elections (Birner and Resnick, 2010), and the incentives at play for political returns (McLoughlin and Batley, 2012).

This near invisibility of the role commitment plays for success weakens the analysis of the factors that lead to such successes in policy implementation, and accords primacy to technical, apolitical factors, relegating this very critical element of understanding the politics of how things work, to the background. Accordingly, solutions for increasing chances of success are also mainly technocratic in nature, missing the critical ingredient of political will or commitment in ensuring success. As Matland (1995) argues, various paradigms of ambiguity and conflict that arise at policy implementation require committed political solutions for smooth implementation.

Successful implementation of policy also depends on the capacity of the state to implement this policy (Levy and Kpundeh, 2004; Stewart et al., 2008; Fukuyama, 2013; Vom Hau, 2012). But capacity cannot be separated from commitment. As Brinkerhoff (2007, pp. 111-112) states:

capacity development is fundamentally an endogenous process that engages not just the abilities and skills, but the motivation, support, and aspirations of people ... in other words, the ownership and political will; Yet ... it is problematic to

accurately identify ownership and political will, and to differentiate these two volitional components from capacity questions.

Based on the above review, it is therefore clear that there is a gap in terms of both understanding what commitment is, and how it can shape success in terms of policy implementation. This paper seeks to fill both these gaps – firstly, it aims to understand what is meant by ‘political commitment’, and to identify the characteristics of commitment as can be seen during the policy implementation process of both administrative and political elites. Secondly, it aims to examine cases of both success and failure, in order to understand what role ‘political commitment’ plays through its presence or absence in shaping implementation of policy.

## **2.2 Understanding ‘political commitment’**

Political will or commitment is a concept that is easy to trace when it is absent, but hard to define or conceptualise. Some perceive the presence of institutional structures that enable practical response to implementation challenges as commitment (Putzel, 2004); while others see commitment in how much governments have invested or allocated budgets to ensure policy outcomes (Nattrass, 2008). In fact, political commitment has been said to be the ‘slipperiest concept in the policy lexicon’ (Hammergren, 1998, p. 12). Hardly any work has been done on conceptualising political commitment and operationalising this term in terms of explaining how commitment can be seen or understood when it is present. A notable exception comes from the work of Brinkerhoff (2000), who traces the role of commitment in the case of policy reform for anti-corruption measures. Lintelo et al. (2012) have operationalised commitment around three themes – legal frameworks; policies and programmes; and government expenditures to construct a Hunger Reduction Commitment Index for 21 developing countries. However, there are no studies that examine the ways in which commitment shapes the implementation processes and outcomes of policies.

Commitment is defined as the willingness and intent of actors to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives, and to sustain these actions overtime (Brinkerhoff, 2000; 1996). Literature speaks about the sources of political commitment, outlining aspects such as political incentives or imperatives, personal interest and international pressure (Holmes, 2011; Booth, 2011). However, what is less known is how commitment can be identified, and what the characteristics of commitment are. Building on Brinkerhoff (2000), commitment has two main elements – action and intention. While action is easier to trace, intention is harder to either identify or measure (Lintelo, et al., 2012). Brinkerhoff (2000) proposes a useful framework for understanding commitment, which has five main characteristics. Applied to the implementation of policy, these are:

- (a) locus of initiative for policy implementation efforts;
- (b) degree of analytical rigour applied to understanding the context and causes of implementation failure;
- (c) mobilisation of constituencies of stakeholders in support of policy implementation;
- (d) application of credible sanctions in support of implementation objectives; and
- (e) continuity of effort in implementing policy.



While some of these characteristics may seem like sensible bureaucratic practices and therefore more symptomatic of commitment of the administrative machinery, in practice these are closely linked, and in many cases dependent on the commitment of political party elites. In the case of a highly visible and rights-based policy like MGNREGA, the vision of political party elites for MGNREGA, and their commitment to it, would critically determine the space and support that state-level bureaucrats would have for expressing commitment through identifiable action for bettering MGNREGA's implementation. At the same time, because of the complex design of MGNREGA – that necessitates a heavy reliance on the bureaucratic machinery but also posits a new form of social contract between the states and their rural citizenry (Chopra 2014a) – administrative commitment and showcasing of good performance outcomes can fuel the commitment of the political elite towards the Act, strengthened specifically through political feedback effects.

Political feedback at the state level can be understood as the perception of electoral gains at local and state levels as a result of policy implementation, and can be traced through both self and others' reporting of things such as re-election or popularity of political party or leader. This aspect is important in understanding commitment, as strong feedback will provide incentives for better implementation, thereby implying increased commitment. Positive feedback will also have an effect of increased legitimacy, which also furthers commitment. The link between political feedback and responsive implementation is nuanced by two aspects. The first is the phase of the electoral cycle when implementation is taking place. So, for example, a politician who has just been elected will face different incentives to respond as compared to someone in their second term. Secondly, the level of political competition also matters – if the margin of victory is very large, there may not be the necessity of responding in the same way as if there were high levels of political competition and small margins of victory.

Through applying and extending Brinkerhoff's (2000) framework to policy implementation, this paper makes a valuable contribution to understanding the politics of policy implementation. By providing evidence about how commitment shapes policy processes and is an important factor in policy failure or success, I operationalise the concept of commitment in a hitherto unexplored field, using primary data from India's largest social welfare programme.

### **3. Identifying success and failure in MGNREGA – selection of states**

Policy implementation involves a range of activities carried out by public and private agencies for achieving the objectives of a policy (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975). For MGNREGA, key objectives include the creation of livelihood security through provision of employment and creation of productive assets. Other non-stated objectives also include strengthening local self-governance institutions (Panchayati Raj Institutions – PRIs), empowering women and Scheduled Castes/Tribes (SC/STs) and mobilising poor people to demand their rights from the state.

Considerable performance variation can be seen across sub-national states, as Figure 1 depicts. I take the variation in the proportion of person days generated in each state out of

the total number of rural poor in the state as an indicator of performance. It is important to note that this is only one of several indicators of how MGNREGA is performing, and taking other indicators may change the ranking of the states slightly.<sup>2</sup> However, the extent of variation across all the states remains, irrespective of the indicator we take. This indicator is important, as the creation of employment is the overriding objective of MGNREGA. This is also a useful indicator, as it controls for those variations that are introduced as a result of variations in demand across different states, assuming that demand for MGNREGA is most likely to come from poor households.<sup>3</sup>

From Figure 1, we divided the 18 states into nine high implementation (or successful) states, and nine low implementation states. Considering geographical variation and a set of basic socio-economic characteristics of these states, we then selected eight states (four high implementation and four low implementation states) in which primary fieldwork was conducted. These eight states were selected also keeping in mind accessibility to state-level officials, which was facilitated partly by ministry officials at the centre, and partly by my previous research in a couple of states, which provided critical contacts for access.<sup>4</sup> I present the results from four of these states – Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Chhattisgarh as high implementation states, and Assam and Bihar as low implementation states.<sup>5</sup> These four states have been chosen for their ability to provide comparison across implementation levels, as well as political regime (AP and Assam as congress states versus the non-congress states of Bihar and Chhattisgarh).

Further, as Table 1 shows, choosing these four states therefore ensures that success in implementation in a concerned state cannot be solely attributed to the political regime in a state – Andhra Pradesh and Assam are both congress-ruled states, yet their performance differs drastically. In addition, the selection of these four states allows an examination of a counterintuitive aspect in relation to the political regime at the centre versus the political regime in the state. One would expect that when the political party in power in the state is a

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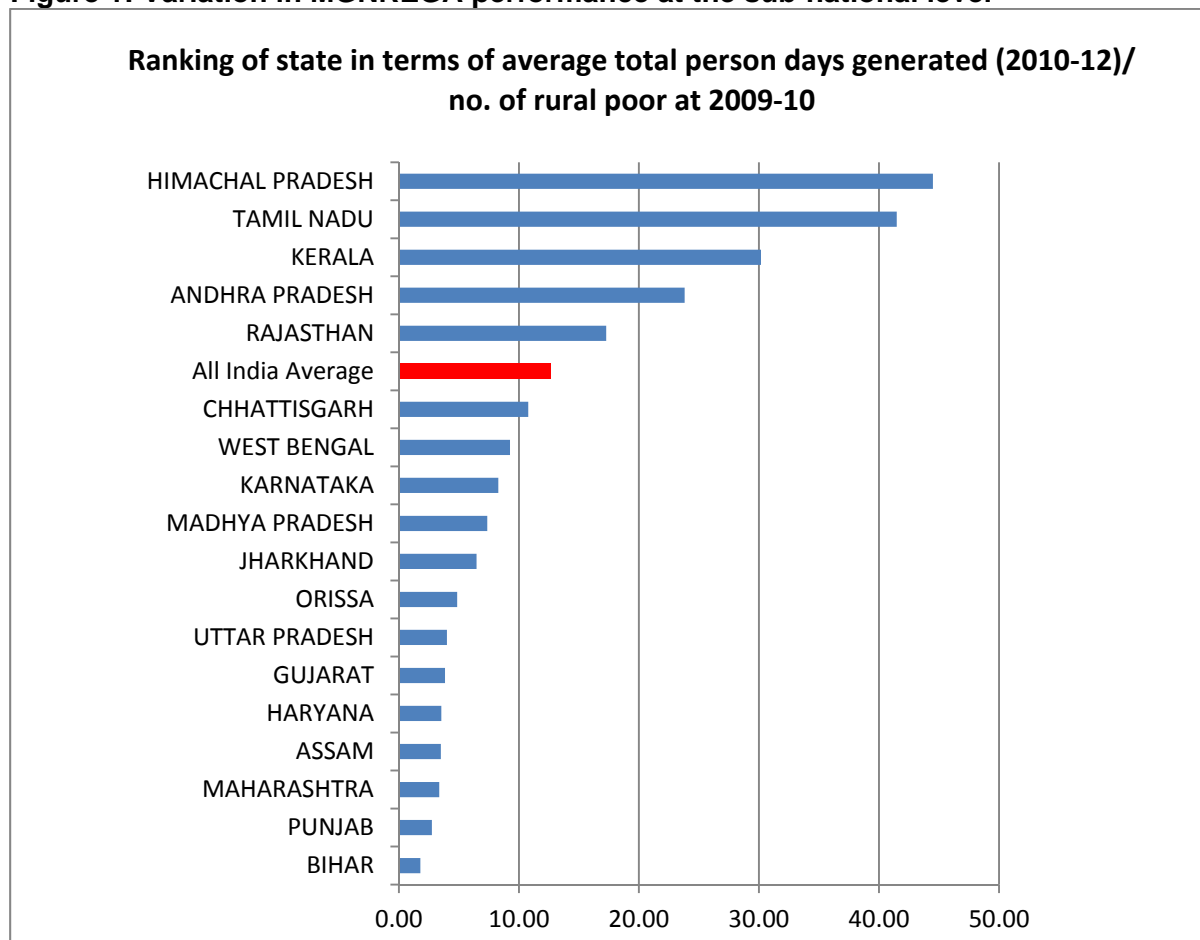
<sup>2</sup> Other popular indicators of 'success' in MGNREGA have included the proportion of households completing 100 days of work; and delays in wage payments. Interestingly, the use of either these two indicators generates similar rankings of states as presented in Figure 1. A possibly good indicator of performance or 'success' of MGNREGA, especially from the perspective of the workers, could be the ease with which demand for employment was being met – however, this indicator is difficult to assess, as demand is not easily captured. All data generated under the comprehensive MIS system of MGNREGA shows very little difference between the amount of work demanded and the amount of work generated – this is primarily because of negative sanctions, such as unemployment allowance, that prevent correct figures from being entered into the MIS.

<sup>3</sup> In this way, the denominator takes into account the 'demand-side' of NREGS work, while the numerator captures the total provision of NREGS work in the state.

<sup>4</sup> These states were: Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh as the high performers; and Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Maharashtra as the low performers.

<sup>5</sup> These rankings are similar to rankings provided by other scholars on these states, thereby also reflecting the accuracy of the indicator of 'success' defined within this paper. Maiorano (2014) posits Andhra Pradesh as a high performing state, while Dutta et al. (2014) show rationing of work and other problems that impede MGNREGA's implementation in Bihar. While Chhattisgarh has been lauded for its good implementation through national awards (<http://www.mgnrega.in/2015/02/chhattisgarh-will-be-awarded-for.html>), Assam is considered to be one of the lowest performing states under the MGNREGA (<http://www.assamtimes.org/node/6624>).

**Figure 1: Variation in MGNREGA performance at the sub-national level**



Source: Author's own calculations, based on official MGNREGA data.

member of the current ruling alliance in India, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), the state would do better – because of MGNREGA being an iconic and flagship programme of the UPA. However, as Table 1 below shows, this is not always true – while the performance of AP and Bihar is as would be expected, the performance of both Chhattisgarh and Assam is counterintuitive to this expectation. Therefore, the comparisons of Assam and AP with each other, on one hand, and with Chhattisgarh and Bihar, on the other hand, would yield interesting insights.

**Table 1: Expected vs actual performance of MGNREGA in the four selected states**

Name of state	Political regime at state level	UPA member	Expected performance if regime mattered	Actual performance
AP	Congress	Yes	High	High
Chhattisgarh	BJP	No	Low	High
Assam	Congress	Yes	High	Low
Bihar	Regional party with NDA (National Democratic Alliance)	No	Low	Low

Finally, the selection of more than just one or two states allows us to negate demand-side factors in seeking explanations for performance variation. The demand for work under MGNREGA may depend on aspects such as alternative job prospects in rural areas and levels of migration. Another element influencing demand may be the lack of awareness about the Act amongst the rural population. Studies have shown that in most of rural India, the level of awareness about the Act is somewhat similar (Charlas and Velmurugan, 2012); as is the level of development and lack of alternative jobs in rural areas (Dutta, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that similarities in demand for MGNREGA work exist across India – and therefore the variation in performance cannot be explained by demand variation across the different states. Instead, it is supply-side factors that need to be examined to answer why performance variations exist at the subnational level.

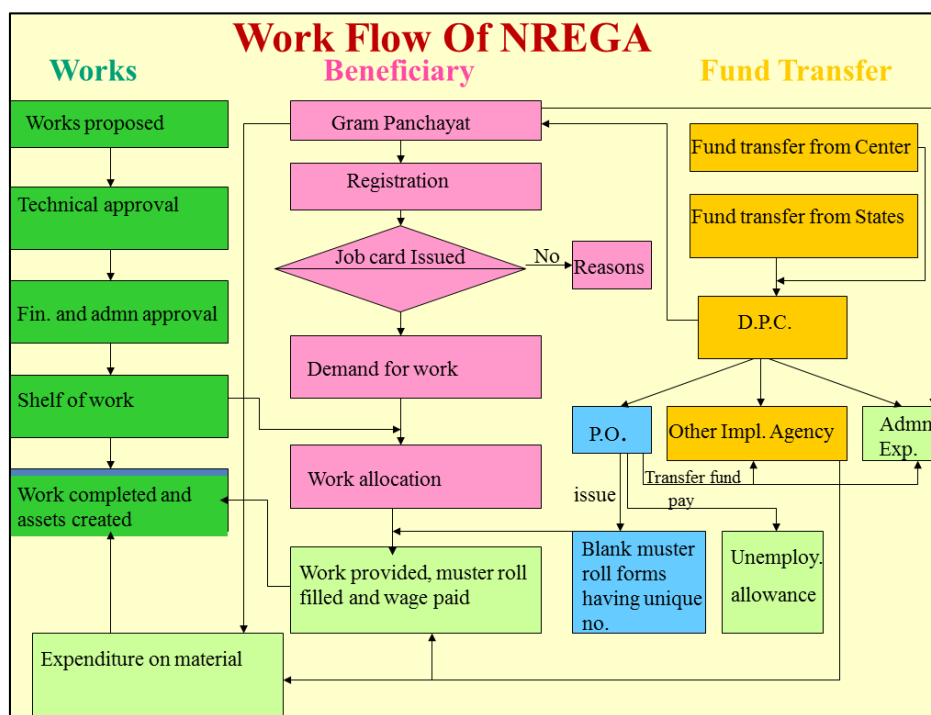
Supply-side factors at the state level include the capacity of state elites to implement MGNREGA. In order to separate out the role of capacity from the role that commitment may play in effecting success, this paper examines the case of states with varying levels of capacity despite similar performance outcomes. AP is a high capacity state implementing MGNREGA very well, while Chhattisgarh has been characterised as a low capacity state and yet has been successful in implementing MGNREGA. Bihar and Assam represent states with lower capacity and low performance outcomes (Pankaj, 2008; Pankaj et al., 2013; Matthew and Moore, 2011).

#### **4. Identifying commitment and its role in shaping implementation**

The MGNREGA combines a range of actors at various levels who are involved in implementation. While fund flow is from the top, as depicted by Figure 2, the Act's lynchpin is the demand for employment by a rural household. This demand is expressed at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level (Sarpanch), and then cascaded up to the block (the programme officer [PO]), district (district programme coordinator [DPC]) and the state (principal secretary). In response to this demand, the DPC allocates work from an existing list of works that has been pre-prepared and submitted by each GP (and has received technical sanction). The worker's output on the worksite is supervised by a 'mate', picked usually from amongst the workers, and measured by technical engineers. This measurement forms the basis of the payment being released to the worker (from the state to district to block to GP to worker's bank/post office account). These three processes – fund flow, planning of worksites and work by beneficiary – need to happen in a synchronised manner. The detail of each of these seemingly simple processes is incredibly complex, involving various staff, departments and processes. How a state addresses this programme design and simplifies it according to its local and sub-state realities and capacities, makes a significant difference in the performance of the scheme.

This section analyses qualitative interview material from four states to understand the different characteristics of commitment, and how these aspects of commitment shape the implementation of MGNREGA in the four states.

Figure 2. Work flow of MGNREGA



Source: MORD, GOI.

#### 4.1 Locus of initiative

Brinkerhoff (2000) posits that the greater the initiative taken by actors spearheading the reform process, the greater the political will for the reform. While applying this to MGNREGA's implementation, it can be said that the extent to which subnational actors take initiative over MGNREGA indicates their willingness to adapt and change systems to make MGNREGA work better. This becomes especially important when both the centre and the state can issue orders for implementation.

One indicator of initiative is to check where rules are being formulated – at the centre or also at the state level. State-level guidelines can reflect responses to the needs and constraints being faced by functionaries at the implementation level. Cross-questioning and clarification of rules, and an openness to respond to such questioning also signifies greater initiative, and therefore greater commitment of subnational actors to implement policy.

Interviews with state-level administrative elites revealed a low level of initiative in Assam, where the Act's implementation was dependent on the central government's orders. It was found that all orders came from the central government and cascaded down to the district level, but without any changes made by the state bureaucrats. In addition, no state-level guidelines and orders that were found to be operational. The locus of initiative in the state was thus coming mainly from the central-level bureaucrats.

A contrasting example was that of AP – where the state government's orders, circulars and memos, primarily from the bureaucrats heading the Department of Rural Development, were

both numerous and responsive to the requirements that arose during MGNREGA's implementation in the state. Interestingly, central government orders were also cascaded down through the state to district and block levels, but they were translated and modified as per the state's field realities before being conveyed. Another unique feature of AP was the decentralisation of initiatives and decision making: 'Programme implementation is in [programme director]'s hand so long as they follow the guidelines' (APKR1, 18 November 2012).

The other two states – Bihar and Chhattisgarh – fell squarely in the middle of the scale, with the number of state orders and initiatives seeing a rapid increase since 2010. This was attributed to particular bureaucrats in the state who were at the helm of the state department of rural development, and were 'very committed to the functioning of the MGNREGA' (DKR1, 22 November 2012). In Chhattisgarh, the state was giving a lot of flexibility to the districts, thereby building ownership of the Act amongst frontline functionaries, countering the problem of 'imported or imposed initiative [that] confronts the perennial problem of needing to build commitment and ownership' (Brinkerhoff, 2000, p.4): 'The feeling of ownership has to be there at ground level ... we give flexibility to districts ...' (CKR1, 3 February 2013). Interestingly, Chhattisgarh officials also spoke about cascading their solutions upwards to the centre: 'We discuss about overcoming shortcomings. If they need any inputs, we provide them' (CKR1, 3 February 2013).

This characteristic of commitment has a significant impact on implementation, as those states that take more initiatives tend to find innovative solutions to the problems that arise during implementation. In the face of the complexity of MGNREGA's implementation processes, initiative by the state-level actors can also reduce delays in finding workable solutions, as well as cascade good practices to the central level. Of course, a prerequisite for taking initiative at the state level is that the central government allows states to work flexibly. In the case of centrally sponsored schemes in India such as the MGNREGA, there seems to be a general move towards centralisation and mandated systems rather than flexibility, despite the states seeking increased autonomy (Mollinga, 2008). Flexibility can increase ownership of the implementation of MGNREGA amongst state-level functionaries, thus also becoming a source of increasing commitment towards the Act.

#### **4.2 Degree of analytical rigour**

The analytical rigour towards implementation of policy can be reflected by understanding the analytical steps taken by the implementing agencies to understand the context of implementation and set into place adequate and appropriate systems that support implementation; and also by understanding the causes of implementation failure and responding to these causes.

In the case of MGNREGA's implementation, three factors are important to identify at the state level – the extent of preparation that was undertaken prior to the implementation of the Act, the changes in administrative systems effected to make them more suited to MGNREGA's implementation, and the degree to which the state routinely undertakes problem identification and solving. Combined, these factors can reflect the extent to which

MGNREGA is taken seriously. Actions that are clearly insufficient to address problems would demonstrate a shallow commitment towards the Act's implementation, and explain low outcomes.

The extent of preparation when the Act was initially launched seemed to be very low in Bihar: 'We had no idea how complex MGNREGA as an Act was ... systems were not there ... somewhere people involved in implementation are finding it difficult to understand all of it' (BKR1, 30 January 2013). This was compounded by the fact that the scale of the scheme had been enhanced by the state government<sup>6</sup> without undertaking adequate preparation.

This was quite the opposite in the case of AP:

'Our team decided that let us not implement without thinking through, without looking at the dynamics and without talking to other stakeholders ... a core team ... was formed to think through the design, issues and problems of the scheme' (APKR2, 20 November 2012).

Similar focus and attention to the Act's implementation was also given by Chhattisgarh, where 'everybody from CM [Chief Minister] and us ... started putting their immediate attention to this from the start' (CKR1, 3 February 2013)

A lack of adequate systems was often referred to by respondents in Bihar, especially in explaining failures and challenges in implementation of MGNREGA. However, this 'systemic' shortcoming was not explained: 'We are still not sure as to what the actual problem is ... we are trying to see what ... works, but as of now we do not have the complete picture' (BKR6, 30 January 2013). The lack of changes in Bihar at a systemic level is in sharp contrast to Chhattisgarh, where systems have been developed, and are regularly adapted so as to cater to the demands being placed upon the state systems by MGNREGA's complex implementation mechanisms.

Interestingly, although the initial preparation was low and systems were not suited to implementation of a rights-based policy in Bihar, a high degree of active problem solving was observed to be present in the state. During visits to the State Secretariat, instances of high-level bureaucrats interacting with district- and block-level functionaries in person and through video conferencing were observed.<sup>7</sup> There were also instances of district-level officials following similar procedures with their lower-level functionaries, through meetings, regular field visits and monitoring their performance with respect to the MGNREGA quite closely. Not surprisingly, these districts were the high-performing districts within Bihar. It therefore seems that although the political will to implement MGNREGA in Bihar was initially quite low, over time and because of the involvement of key individuals, this commitment is growing. The same mechanisms of problem solving – i.e. high-level state bureaucrats interacting with

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<sup>6</sup> With a phased implementation strategy, the central government chose 23 out of 28 districts of Bihar to implement MGNREGA in 2006. However, the Bihar government also launched MGNREGA in the remainder of the five districts with their own funds, until these were covered under central government funds from 2007 onwards.

<sup>7</sup> Author's notes.

lower-level functionaries through regular meetings and video conferences – was also reflected upon in Chhattisgarh and AP. But this is not the case for Assam, where almost no problem solving could be observed or deduced from interviews with a range of functionaries involved in MGNREGA's implementation.

Greater analytical rigour helped MGNREGA's implementation in four ways. Firstly, there was a stocktaking of existing field challenges and systems were put in place to address them. Then, with adequate preparation and changes in administrative structure, the state machinery was better placed to take on the complex implementation of the Act, in order to deliver benefits to the rural poor. Thirdly, potential problems were foreseen and dealt with quickly and more efficiently. Finally, greater analytical rigour gave states a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of implementing the Act, and the ability to answer to the central government regarding their decisions.

#### **4.3 Mobilisation of support**

Reform is bound to attract criticism and resistance, and therefore the mobilisation of support becomes crucial in overcoming this (Brinkerhoff 2000). Higher willingness and ability of actors to identify and mobilise support for policy implementation implies higher commitment. This indicator also encompasses the extent and quality of efforts to garner support – many efforts and effective efforts reflect higher commitment, while few or ineffective efforts are characteristic of lower political will.

In mobilising support, the implementation team needs to develop what Brinkerhoff (2000) calls 'a credible vision of success and a strategy that is participative and incorporates the interests of important stakeholders' (p. 4). Participation of a range of actors is critical for successful implementation by design in MGNREGA. There are both political and administrative actors involved at the central, state, district, block and village level. Examples include Sarpanches (heads of PRIs at village level), project officers (POs), junior engineers, district project co-ordinators (DPCs), the principal secretary and state ministers of rural development.

None of the four states examined had support from all the stakeholders mentioned above. In AP, while the State Minister and state-level bureaucrats were very supportive of the Act, the AP model completely bypasses the PRIs, and has minimal participation or support from the Sarpanches on MGNREGA. There is a bifurcation of the Department of Rural Development (RD) from the Department of Panchayati Raj (PR) in AP, which is creating some problems:

'The PR and RD department are two different teams – there is no connection between them. The money lies with RD department and staff with PR. Principal Secretary RD cannot do anything beyond writing to Principal Secretary PR to tell them about a deviation and request action, but the PR ministry will say that we need to do our own enquiry. Power lies with one, and funds with other' (APKR1, 18 November 2012).

The RD department has set up an intricate computerised MIS, in addition to regular meetings with the PR department staff at all levels. While some coordination problems have



been solved, holding deviant staff to account remains a problem in the state. This shows that AP is taking many actions to counter resistance, even though some of the actions are not very effective.

In Bihar and Chhattisgarh, Panchayats are the main implementing body. The state ministers of both Bihar and Chhattisgarh are largely supportive of the Act; however the implementation of the Act depends to a large extent on the interest taken by senior state bureaucrats in implementing MGNREGA. In addition, these states are also quite open to elite capture, especially with Sarpanches and other stakeholders colluding to divert MGNREGA funds and benefits to suit their own ends.

In Assam, support of critical state actors is lacking. While the State Minister and some officials at the state level were found to be interested in the Act, their interest was not supported by requisite action to elicit support from the various stakeholders of MGNREGA, even from within the government. Senior officials at the state level knew little about the Act, and showed no interest in the details of the Act's implementation.

In addition to state actors, support from civil society actors and local power holders is critical. In Bihar, the use of organisations such as the *Mahadalit Sangha* is a positive effort to mobilise support for MGNREGA. But while these organisations are working closely with the Department of Rural Development to spread awareness about the Act, civil society representatives express reservations about the state taking their concerns into account and the mutual distrust between the state and civil society (BKR4, 30 January 2013). This is also echoed in Assam, where relations between state and civil society are strained. In AP, specific measures have been taken to mobilise labourers through creating federations of labourers, which 'ensures better quality work' (APKR3, 24 December 2013); but there is still a long way to go to ensure civil society support to the Act. While support of civil society actors is being developed, the AP state steers clear of any mobilisation of support from local power holders. On the other hand, support of elected representatives through the PRIs is a hallmark of the Chhattisgarh initiative – 'everything is decided at the gram panchayat level. We have done a lot of work for empowering the PRIs' (CKR2, 4 February 13).

The above discussion has shown the differences in mobilisation of support, not only across states, but also within states amongst different stakeholders, that play out differently in the implementation of MGNREGA. Lack of inter-departmental co-ordination and support could undermine implementation, especially if political leaders did not support the Act. On the other hand, lack of civil society support for state bureaucrats implementing the Act would lower the state government's accountability, promote the possibility of elite capture at the local level, and therefore decrease the legitimacy of the state government to implement the Act in a meaningful manner.

#### **4.4 Application of credible incentives and sanctions**

In garnering support from implementing actors, both positive and negative sanctions can play a role. This also signifies whether the reformer is open to identify incentives and apply sanctions. Committed actors 'recognise the need to restructure principal-agent relationships,

provide positive incentives for compliance with the law, publicize the positive outcomes of reform and rehabilitate compromised individuals and institutions' (Brinkerhoff 2000, p. 5). Political will can be said to be higher if credible sanctions are applied in a consistent and effective manner.

Recognising positive actions, and punishing negative actions (including corrupt practices or non-performance of roles), can send strong signals to motivate actors implementing policy. The MGNREGA has a built-in mechanism of sanctions through the social audit process, which identifies any negative practices and pinpoints the actors engaged in such nefarious behaviour. It is important to examine the ways in which social audits are conducted, who is involved, and the attitude of officials towards social audits. Additional indicators are whether and how actions like fines and prosecution are undertaken and how these effect compliance. Finally, the official motivations for implementation can be either positive (through aspects such as promotion and recognition) or negative (though fines, suspensions and transfers).

There are different models and varying extents of social audits carried out in different states. While in AP, a large number of social audits take place regularly, these are institutionalised through the formation of an independent society, the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT), which is nested under the State Department of Rural Development. There are high levels of support from the political elite for these social audits to take place, and the setting up of SSAAT is reflective of this support. However, follow-up from social audits in delivering on sanctions such as fines, transfers and prosecution is very low (Afridi and Iversen, 2013). Senior officials in AP spoke about the tussle between the bureaucratic elite and the political elite in the application of sanctions – with some incidences of politicians and even the State Minister stepping in to request for leniency, or for specific people to be posted to specific locations in the state. Thus, while the mechanism for sanctions is there, it seems that in AP, this is not being applied credibly or effectively to change principal-agent relationships or to rehabilitate institutions through prosecution, transfers and recovery of pilfered amounts.

In Assam, social audits do not take place with any regularity, and hardly any instances of negative sanctions were found. While there are plans to set up a Directorate of Social Audit (as in all states, through a central order), in Assam any social audits are conducted by Gram Panchayat secretaries, and 'they do not highlight problem areas...it is a mere formality' (AKR2, 3 December 2012).

Interestingly, however, the positions of AP and Assam are reversed in the case of positive sanctions. Officials in Assam recognise the need for positive incentives, but also the problems in implementing these incentives: 'Government system ... do not reward excellent performance ... we have started scheme to incentivise best performers ... but no one has submitted any candidates for this' (AKR2, 3 December 2012). The view that positive incentives are critical is echoed by the political elites in the state as well, who approved the setting up of the incentive scheme for best performers in the state.

On the other hand, AP actors do not feel that positive behaviour needs any incentives – 'it is their job, you don't give rewards for doing your job' (APKR1, 18 November 2012). Similarly,

in Chhattisgarh, negative sanctions seem to be given primacy: 'Government runs by fear and not motivation ... in many Panchayats no works were being undertaken ... but it is not like this now. I monitor ... and stop salaries – if you don't work, you don't get salary' (CKR3, 4 February 2013). This view of strong negative sanctions was sanctioned in the state by the political elite as well, who ascribed a 'lack of corruption' to better implementation (CKR2, 4 February 2013).

Bihar and Chhattisgarh also do not have set systems for social audit at present, but their intensive monitoring is used as a deterrent for inaction: 'We have a strong team that monitors the MIS ... monthly meetings with additional DPCs at the headquarters ... weekly video conference with group of DPCs. DPCs similarly call the POs at their level ...' (BKR5, 30 January 2013)

In terms of the perspectives and motivations of individual actors responsible for implementing MGNREGA, promotion or recognition were not considered to be important. Instead, self-satisfaction and inspiration from the work of senior colleagues was deemed to be highly significant as motivating factors. 'You get satisfaction by helping people. You want people to get benefit. Money is given by Central Government ... you also get motivation from others who are doing a good job' (CKR3, 2 February 2013).

High commitment reflected through application of effective and credible sanctions can motivate implementing actors to do their job properly. However, too many negative sanctions may also have the opposite effect – that of reducing implementation, because of the fear of getting caught. There is an important distinction between sanctions that motivate actors to implement programmes, albeit imperfectly, and sanctions that promote inaction or prevent implementation because of fear. In Rajasthan, Chopra (2014b) argues that social audits and accountability mechanisms have led to a fear of action, and this explains why performance outcomes of the MGNREGA in Rajasthan have dropped significantly.

#### **4.5 Continuity of effort**

Ongoing effort and resources in support of policy reform signify higher levels of political will (Brinkerhoff 2000). This is especially important for policy implementation, which requires adequate monitoring, and appropriate and consistent human and financial resources, to ensure continuity of initiatives and actions.

The centre requires state governments to fulfil certain conditions before MGNREGA money is released. This includes keeping MIS formats up to date, and making labour budgets that are in line with field realities. The Act also provides for 6 percent of the state's MGNREGA budget as administrative costs, which are used to pay salaries to all personnel involved in the Act's implementation, and bear all other costs, such as training and administrative expenses. Central government officials acknowledge that resource flow to all states is irregular, because they had not been able to maintain the MIS as required: 'If...you cannot keep the system up to date, then you face problem in release of funds and that impacts overall implementation' (DKR2, 21 November 2012).

For states such as AP, this resource constraint is less of a problem, as the state is able to tide over short-term resource crunches with its own money. However, for states like Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Assam, this becomes an uphill task, given that completion of MIS requires technical, physical and infrastructural ability that these states are constrained in.

AP was also the only state that was characterised by a building up of stable financial systems which was working towards minimising delays in payments to workers. In Bihar and Chhattisgarh, initial steps had been taken to build regular financial systems, but Assam was found to be lacking in even these initial steps.

In AP, there was high continuity amongst personnel at the state level, but also importantly, adequate hand-overs, so that the learning from their predecessors was retained, resulting in strengthening MGNREGA implementation rather than reinventing the wheel. Bihar and Chhattisgarh were both interesting examples of how continuity was being maintained at the state level through innovative solutions, such as hiring external consultants (from UNDP and the World Bank) to handle certain tasks. Irregularity of personnel was found to be high for Assam, with personnel being transferred quite regularly, even at the level of the state government. This inhibited the development of good systems and gave the impression that the political machinery was not committed to the implementation of MGNREGA.

For both Bihar and Chhattisgarh, an ongoing challenge remained the massive turnover of frontline functionaries who were mainly on short-term contracts, including those involved in updating MIS and financial records, data entry operators and technical staff. This reduces the continuity of staff involved in the MGNREGA's implementation, especially when people leave 'in search of greener pastures'. Conversations with frontline workers revealed the extent of their dissatisfaction with their terms and conditions of service, including being on contracts with no job security, and lower pay.

Even when states were able to maintain continuity of the same staff, the sheer pressure of work on other government programmes sometimes poses a challenge for the continuity of these actors' efforts on implementing MGNREGA. This was especially salient for the district- and block-level officials. In all three states, bar AP, there were no district- or block-level officials exclusively involved in the implementation of MGNREGA. The problem was especially acute in the case of Assam, where 'two departments – PR and RD are under me ... each one is implementing three to four schemes. NREGA is only one of them' (AKR3, 16 December 2012).

Adequate monitoring is critical in ensuring continuity of effort. This also ties in with the idea of sanctions. In AP, for example, intensive monitoring through social audits and a sophisticated MIS system to track progress of MGNREGA across districts, blocks and at the level of each worksite, ensures that the provisions of the MGNREGA are duly upheld. The complexity and usefulness of AP's home-grown IT-based monitoring system for top-level state officials to enhance implementation of the MGNREGA depicts a strong commitment towards MGNREGA's implementation. However, what is monitored also shows what the officials are committed to, and what they do not consider important. In AP, as in the other three states (and even in the central MIS), a significant aspect that is not being monitored is

the number of crèches that have been opened up at the worksite. In field visits in all four states, no adequate crèche facility was seen to be operational. Another aspect that is not monitored is the extent of involvement of PRIs in the process. It is widely known that AP does not involve PRIs in the implementation of MGNREGA. These two examples show that adequate monitoring of certain aspects indicates a continuity of effort towards the operationalisation of these aspects, thereby boosting their implementation.

What is implemented and monitored also depends greatly on what element of the Act the state political and administrative elite are committed to. In AP, the politicians were mainly interested in provision of jobs, while the bureaucracy's main interest was in timely provision of wages – and these two aspects formed the basis for all innovations in the state. In Chhattisgarh, the State Minister expressed a concern for assets as well as provision of jobs. Awareness creation was seen by both the political leadership of the state and the administrative elites as an essential component of the Act's implementation, and this led to a vast awareness creation drive, with wall paintings, road milestones and a range of other IEC material being developed and disseminated in the state.

The MGNREGA is a very process-oriented Act, and its complexity requires a range of frontline and more senior-level personnel to be present for its effective functioning. This becomes especially critical when MGNREGA is becoming more MIS-centred than ever before, thereby requiring technical and support staff to update and maintain the MIS system at all levels. High turnover of staff and blockages in financial resources can hamper implementation by wasting capacity-building efforts and reducing the ability of the implementing agencies to implement the Act. While these aspects may seem entirely dependent on bureaucratic practices and systems, in India political elites at both state level and local levels are critical in ensuring continuity of personnel, and therefore their interference through deciding transfers and postings of officials puts a drag on good administrative practices.

#### **4.6 Perceptions of political feedback and legitimacy**

Another characteristic of commitment is that of the perceptions of political feedback. This includes electoral gains at local and state levels. It can be posited that the higher the political competition, or the lower the margins of victory, the greater the responsiveness of the state – and this responsiveness can be manifested as higher political will to implement a particular programme or policy. Political feedback also affects legitimacy – which can be understood as elites being recognised as valid actors for the implementation of the policy. Perceptions of strong feedback will provide incentives for better implementation, thereby implying higher commitment. However, this also depends on the electoral cycle– looming elections will increase perceptions of political feedback and therefore propel implementation responsiveness.

In the case of MGNREGA, members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) are kept out of the implementation process by design. However, MLAs can determine aspects such as postings and transfers of local bureaucrats, and project a demand for work to their senior political leaders in their respective constituency. In addition, local elected officials such as the

Sarpanches play a critical role. Also, the commitment of the concerned political party in power, manifested both in the leadership of the State Department of Rural Development and the Chief Minister, gains specific importance in determining the tone of MGNREGA's implementation. The extent to which local and state politicians will be responsive to political feedback depends on the margin of victory in the previous elections, as well as the stage of the electoral cycle – both in terms of when elections are, and whether the concerned politicians are able to seek re-election (maximum number of terms, for example, might restrict this ability). In the context of local-level political feedback, maintaining client-patronage relationships also impacts the extent to which perceptions of political feedback affect implementation, although this link is more tenuous at the state level.

Maintaining the focus of this paper on state-level dynamics, perceptions of political feedback can be deduced through: the political elites' understanding of MGNREGA; the views that bureaucratic elites have about the political elites in the state; the public statements from political elites regarding the Act; and the reasons provided to me by political elites for explaining the importance of MGNREGA.

In the case of AP, perceptions about political feedback effects were a critical motivation for strengthening MGNREGA implementation:

'[CM] ... realised the importance of issues like employment ... he said people should be happy with my government ... he wanted justice for poor to enhance his popularity...he would ask about the pulse of people in review meetings – Do people recognise my name?' (APKR1, 18 November 2012).

Similarly, in Chhattisgarh, the political party leaders perceived that MGNREGA provided significant political mileage to their party, if implemented well. This motivation has prompted political elites to formulate a vision for MGNREGA as a 'good' policy:

'Through [MGNREGA], the poor benefit in two ways ... it provides jobs ... and it builds assets in villages ... in the sum total, this is a scheme that is beneficial to the public ... lots of people have gotten work and creation of assets have also taken place ...' (CKR2, 4 May 2013).

In Bihar, although the state-level political leaders seemed to recognise the political mileage from MGNREGA, there were reservations. '... NREGA can provide income for the day that a worker will work but it will not provide skills, it does not increase the earning capacity' (BKR1, 31 January 2013). An added problem in Bihar was the unsatisfactory support at senior levels of the political party: '[CM] viewed it as a programme lining pockets for the *mukhiya*, but it sent out the wrong message ... he pushed for zero tolerance to corruption agenda ... so did not support the MGNREGA ...' (BKR6, 30 January 2013). A similar lack of support of the highest political party leadership was seen in Assam. While the state minister seemed to be very active and interested in MGNREGA, the political party leadership, as well as local political elites, seemed to be disinterested in the Act.

We need to understand better how these different political visions are linked (or not) to bureaucratic sensibilities and good practices. It is easy to see how the strong vision of AP's CM for the MGNREGA to generate jobs for the rural poor so that they remember him in a positive light and vote for his political party, complements the high bureaucratic commitment of senior officials in the state. But what are the links between these, and does one aspect feed back into the other? While the examples given above, for aspects such as locus of initiative, degree of analytical rigour and continuity of effort, primarily indicate high levels of bureaucratic commitment, or even sensible administrative practice, it is critical to note that, from the perspectives of the bureaucrats, these practices are not possible without a good level of commitment from the political elites. In both AP and Chhattisgarh, bureaucrats spoke about the high level of support that the bureaucracy had received from the political elites:

'... [politicians] looked at getting a good mileage out of a good implementation. [Senior bureaucrat] ... explained how this will help the political class. The then CM felt that it will create a positive image for him as people will go door to door to collect information and hence, spread information in the process. So this is a good example of political and bureaucratic collaboration.' (APKR1, 18 November 2012)

In Chhattisgarh, a senior political leader also acknowledged the positive relationship between the political elite and the administrative elite, explaining that 'if the Minister takes interest in the scheme, then the officers also take interest in its proper functioning' (CKR2, 4 February 2013). In addition, implementation and monitoring of specific parts of MGNREGA depend on a combination of support and commitment from the bureaucratic and the political elites towards these specific provisions.

Interestingly, this positive cycle of committed political elites leading to committed bureaucrats did not play out in Assam, where – despite there being committed leadership from the Minister of Rural Development – the bureaucrats showed no initiative in implementing MGNREGA. This could be explained by two factors: firstly, studying the political configuration of Assam revealed that the Department of Rural Development and its Minister were not a powerful force compared to the other departments and ministers; and, secondly, the Chief Minister himself was not interested in the Act at all. This was quite similar to the attitude of the Bihar political elites towards MGNREGA – but an increasing number of state-level initiatives in Bihar also reflected committed and well-meaning bureaucrats, who were trying to overcome this limitation and interact with the state political leaders, to swing them to a favourable perspective towards the Act.

The above discussion shows that while the commitment of bureaucrats, in terms of putting in place sensible practices, is critical, these administrative practices can only be sustained through the commitment of the political elites. And while high levels of commitment from politicians provide the boost to bureaucratic commitment (as in the case of Chhattisgarh and AP), this positive link is realised only if the politicians are well placed within the state politics, or if support comes from the top echelon of political power in the state. However, even in the absence of commitment from the political elite, some sensible bureaucratic practices can be upheld through good levels of administrative commitment.

The extent of political competition, and the corresponding margin of victory in the state, is also important. Interestingly, lack of political competition seemed to characterise both high and low levels of commitment. In Assam, the Congress is complacent because of the lack of political competition from any other party in the state – this may be because they do not fear competition, and therefore loss of regime, in the state. Yet AP, where the margin of victory is very high for the Congress, is also characterised by very high political commitment. Examining the scenario in AP reiterates the importance of perceptions of political feedback – the erstwhile CM emphasises feedback from the rural poor, not simply in terms of numbers of votes, but in terms of his image as a pro-poor leader, and the image of the Congress as a party focusing on the needs of the rural poor.

This discussion underscores the importance of perceptions of political feedback, in terms of both garnering votes and building an image of the ruling political party. Whether this then translates into better implementation depends on the level of political competition in the state, the margin of victory in previous elections, and the stage of the electoral cycle. In addition, while closely linked to each other, electoral feedback for a political party in terms of its image usually dominates in Indian states over individual perceptions of gains of particular politicians in terms of re-elections. Aspects such as pacts between elites and monetary politics can also determine whether political feedback from good/bad implementation of social policy is deemed important by political elites – however, it is outside the scope of this paper to examine further.

Political feedback effects can provide positive incentives for MGNREGA's implementation, especially as political leaders recognise the mileage that they can secure in electoral politics through good implementation efforts. The role of political leaders in MGNREGA is critical, especially in terms of setting the pace of implementation, providing the required direction and autonomy to bureaucrats, and in ensuring that their constituencies benefit from MGNREGA's provisions. In addition, as the discussion above shows, the support and commitment of political leaders, especially if these leaders have political weight in the state, can garner and promote bureaucratic commitment, and strengthen good bureaucratic practices for better implementation.

## **5. Conclusions**

The above discussion has highlighted six characteristics of commitment, providing examples from the four states on how these characteristics can be identified. Based on this analysis, Table 2 below shows how each of the four states do on these different dimensions of commitment, ranking each state on a scale of very low to very high. As can be seen from the table, the two high-performing states have high commitment, and the two low-performing states have low commitment. Further, Assam comes out as the state with very low commitment of state actors, because none of the indicators are positive for the state. Bihar, on the other hand, has overall low commitment, yet there are still some positive aspects. Notable amongst these are the growing degree of analytical rigour in the state, and the commitment of senior officials to put in provisions for intense monitoring. Chhattisgarh is deduced to have very high commitment – this is primarily because, in addition to a lot of aspects that the state scores positively on, the state has managed to turn around a situation



of low capacity (especially financial and organisational capacity) through the commitment of both its administrative and political leadership. While AP also scores well on the commitment indicators, it is clearly a high capacity state as well, and therefore does not have to contend with the same downward pull on its implementation processes as Chhattisgarh does.

**Table 2: Ranking of states on commitment dimensions**

Characteristic of commitment		Chhattisgarh	Assam	Andhra Pradesh	Bihar
Locus of Initiative	Degree of initiative of state bureaucrats	Medium, but increasing since 2010	Very low (only orders from centre followed)	Very high (number and quality of innovations)	Medium (and person-dependent)
	Autonomy to sub state functionaries	High at block and GP levels	Low	Low	Increasing but still low
	Support for initiatives by political elites	High	High from one person, but ineffective	Very high	Medium
	Feedback to centre	Increasing amounts and quality of feedback	Non-existent	Good and useful feedback	Low
Degree of analytical rigour	Initial preparation	Very good	Very minimal	Extensive	Minimal
	Changes in admin structure	Some	None	Extensive	Minimal
	Problem solving	Extensive	Minimal	Extensive	Extensive
	Support from political elites for changes, problem solving etc.	High	High but ineffective	High	Low to medium
Mobilisation of support	Within DoRD staff	High, especially at senior levels	Low	High (mix of forced and voluntary)	Variable
	From other departments	High	High	High	Low
	From state's political elites	High	Low	High	Low
	From civil society	Good	Very low	Very low/negligible	Very low/negative
	From local power holders	Very high/ involved	Low/ignored	Very low/excluded	Low/ignored

Characteristic of commitment		Chhattisgarh	Assam	Andhra Pradesh	Bihar
Application of credible sanctions	Social audits	Some, but not many	Not implemented	Yes, but state-run and weak follow-up/action	Some but not many
	Recognition of positive actions	High, with motivational senior leaders	None at state level	Yes, through promotions	Some being developed
	Negative sanctions	None	None	Low, but being developed	None
Continuity of effort	Personnel at state level	High continuity	Very low continuity	High continuity and hand-overs	Low, but being maintained (externally)
	Personnel at sub-state level	Low, but being improved	Very low	Low, but being improved	Low
	Financial systems	Good continuity, strong systems	Low continuity	Strong systems, good continuity	Systems being developed to improve
Political feedback and legitimacy	Political competition	High – two strong parties	Low – single party dominance	Medium, with Congress dominance	Medium, with stable government
	Perceptions about feedback amongst political elites	Very high	High, but insignificant (one-party system)	Very high	Not much
Overall bureaucratic commitment		Very high	Very Low	High	Medium
Overall commitment from political elites		Very high	Ineffective support - low	High and very effective support	Medium
Assessment of overall commitment		High with administrative commitment and political elite commitment in a virtuous cycle	Low levels of administrative and political commitment lead to ineffective implementation	High with administrative commitment and political elite commitment in a virtuous cycle	Improving administrative commitment, but facing difficulties in generating support from political elites, hence progress is slow

## **5. 1 Operationalising commitment: challenges and learnings**

This paper set out to operationalise the concept of commitment for policy implementation, taking the implementation of MGNREGA in India as a case study. In applying Brinkerhoff's framework of commitment to the area of policy implementation, the paper fills an important gap in this literature. While drawing extensively from Brinkerhoff (2000)'s five criteria of commitment (locus of initiative; analytical rigour; mobilisation of support; sanctions; and continuity of effort), this paper also added a sixth characteristic, which pertains to the perceptions of political feedback to this list. Through applying these six characteristics to the implementation of MGNREGA, the paper shows the characteristics of commitment and how they work to shape implementation in multiple ways. In addition, the paper makes a valuable contribution to Brinkerhoff's framework, by disentangling sensible bureaucratic practices which reflect greater administrative or bureaucratic commitment, from political vision that reflects commitment of the political elite. The paper has shown how any one of them, i.e. either commitment of the political elites, or the commitment of the bureaucratic elites, can boost the other. In cases where there is strong commitment from the political elites, this translates into bureaucratic commitment only when the standing of the politician committed to a policy has enough political clout in the state. Examining the converse, strong bureaucratic commitment can sometimes lead to higher political commitment, but this is tougher to accomplish and requires greater and conscious engagement of the administrative elite with the political elite – in other words, this requires the bureaucratic elite to mobilise support from the political elite.

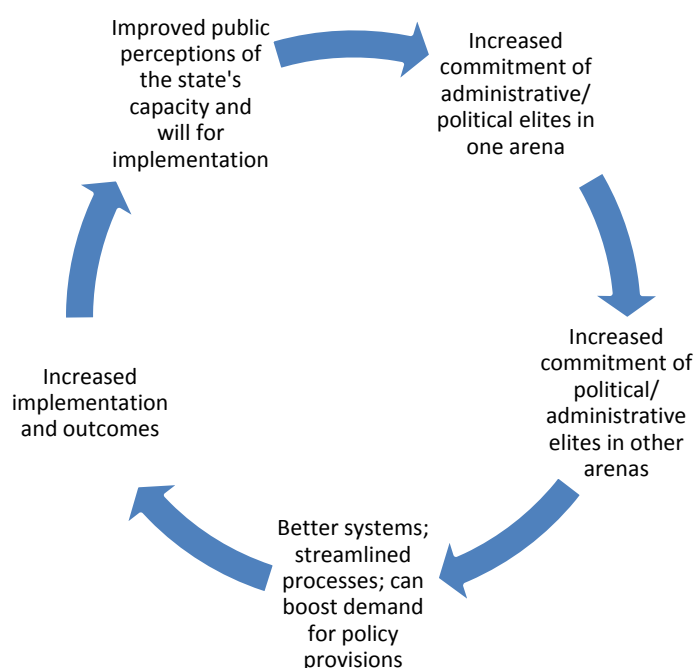
The ways in which bureaucratic commitment translates into administrative practices that are put into place by bureaucrats can be traced through the characteristics of commitment that this paper has exemplified – especially the locus of initiative, the degree of analytical rigour, sanctions and continuity of effort. Talking about interlinkages between the various characteristics of commitment, Brinkerhoff (2000) stresses that low ratings in one or two characteristics do not imply a 'complete absence of political will'. For example, the initiatives taken by Chhattisgarh are negligible compared to AP, yet the state comes out strongly in all the other characteristics. The level of initiative possible with state governments can also depend on the design of the policy, and the central government's stance towards flexibility (or not). Policy suggestions to increase flexibility can provide space for innovation, and therefore boost commitment. Interlinkages within each of the six characteristics are also critical, as each sub-category may play out differently to shape implementation, even within a state. For example, AP has mobilised support from within the government and the rural development department, yet support from civil society actors and PRIs is low.

It is important to delineate the linkages of commitment with the capacity of states to implement policy. It is obvious that states which have greater administrative and organisational capacity and territorial reach, good financial capacity, stable political systems and good relational capacity are better suited to ensuring appropriate implementation of policy. Yet, whether higher capacity translates into reality is often a function of commitment. Actors that have higher capacity along with high levels of political commitment will probably have better implementation outcomes, compared to those that have high capacity yet where the levels of political will remain low. An interesting dynamic between capacity and

commitment plays out when the situation is reversed – in cases where capacity is low, high commitment can help to overcome the constraints faced because of low capacity. Chhattisgarh is a case in point for this positive interaction between high commitment and low capacity.

Another strand of commitment that is important to examine through further research is on the sources of commitment. While not delving into any great detail, this paper discusses some of these sources – electoral feedback, fear of sanctions, self-satisfaction and inspiration of other colleagues have all been mentioned. Still, more research is needed to systematically examine how actors become motivated or demotivated – which has been outside the purview of this paper. A few important lessons have, however, been exemplified in the paper – firstly, that examining how actors can build up and maintain their commitment can help inform capacity-building programmes and provide directions for strengthening implementation. Secondly, exploiting the interlinkages between different strands of commitment, and capitalising on the positive elements of commitment, may hold the key to boosting implementation, especially in low implementation states. For example, in Bihar there is strong support from within the state department of rural development for implementing this Act. This has begun translating into more effective problem-solving initiatives – which will enable the state bureaucrats to implement MGNREGA more effectively. This, in turn, may generate confidence of the Ministry's political leadership towards this Act – thereby setting off a virtuous cycle of increased commitment and better implementation, as depicted in Figure 2. Thirdly, as the above example shows, there are positive feedback loops between the commitment of administrative elites and that of political party leaders – which can be enhanced through the links to perceptions about state capacity and will, and perceptions of political feedback.

**Figure 2: A virtuous cycle of increased commitment and better implementation**



A particular aspect of MGNREGA is its rights-based nature, which implies that it is demand driven. Therefore any improvement in the commitment towards improving implementation processes – such as streamlining the payment system to reduce delays in wage payments (as Andhra Pradesh has done), or involving civil society actors in awareness generation (as exemplified in Chhattisgarh), will boost demand for work. This is the lynchpin that can then kickstart the process of creating demand that the state will be committed to meeting – necessitating an increase in its capacity to implement programme provisions. This is the final and perhaps most important pathway through which greater commitment can lead to increased implementation outcomes for demand-based policies such as MGNREGA.

A challenge that needs to be faced in operationalising commitment for policy implementation, is the dynamic nature of commitment. Brinkerhoff (2000) also recognises that political will is likely to change over time, especially in the face of changing circumstances and events. Another aspect that contributes to the variation in commitment over time is the changing mix of actors involved in policy implementation. This aspect is especially relevant, given the often person-centric nature of institutions and departments involved in implementation. This paper is based on analysis and fieldwork conducted over one year, and hence the analysis and judgement of how the four states perform on various indicators of commitment, as summarised in Table 2, needs to be seen to be valid within a certain time frame. An additional methodological challenge relates to the differences in the extent of recall in interviews, especially when discussing success versus failures.

In conclusion, it can be seen that there are various elements of commitment that combine with aspects such as capacity and external environmental situations to shape the implementation of public policy. This paper has demonstrated that commitment can be measured and seen through a range of indicators, and that its characteristics shape policy implementation processes and resultant outcomes in significant ways. Importantly, commitment and capacity can feed off each other in a virtuous cycle. Tracing the expressions of commitment, and adding the dimension of political feedback into the mix gives primacy to the political factors behind the successes and failures of policy implementation. It is especially critical to see how the commitment of administrative and political elites interact with each other and can lead to better implementation. Further, although a focus on commitment accords importance to understanding the supply-side factors for implementation, I have also shown how commitment can boost demand (although the capturing of this demand is in itself political), and therefore demand is not 'exogenous' to capacity and commitment. This understanding of the workings of commitment for determining the success of policies can be applied to understanding and strengthening the implementation of other policies, not only within India, but also in the international context. This paper has shown lessons for both high- and low- capacity states to enter into a positive cycle of greater commitment, higher capacity, better demand and therefore improved implementation processes and outcomes of rights-based social policies such as MGNREGA.

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