Journal of Public Policy (2026), page 1 of 18
doi:10.1017/S0143814X26101184

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Creating distance: a localized understanding of decentralization

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(Received 15 July 2025; revised 28 April 2026; accepted 4 May 2026)

Abstract

Decentralization sought to bring effective, people-centric local governance to post-colonial societies that were predominantly centrally planned. Tamil Nadu has been an emblem of effective decentralization, ranking in the top three of India's Panchayat Devolution Index 2024–2025. It thus stands to reason that the state would be useful in telling us the story of how decentralization could manifest in the global South. However, bringing the CAGE (cultural, administrative, geographic, economic) framework into dialogue with interviews conducted with farmers in Tamil Nadu reveals that decentralization has not bridged the gap between governments and farmers and has instead created distance between them. The paper contributes to the rich corpus of scholarship on policy studies by examining the Tamil Nadu example and its implementation of Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (national micro-irrigation policy) as a case study of agricultural decentralization in the Global South. It draws on fieldwork over three years in the districts of Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu, and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Agriculture; decentralization; distance; farmers; local governance; policy

Introduction

The late 20th century saw several postcolonial countries in the global South transition from centrally planned governance structures to decentralized ones. Over the past thirty to forty years, these countries have realized that the best way to improve democracy and efficiency of governance is to move past the highly centralized administrative and governance structures that they inherited from the colonial powers and transition to decentralization or the "devolution of political, administrative and fiscal authority to local units of government" (Alok 2021). The popularity of decentralization theory grew significantly in the 1990s to counter "inefficient and ineffective governance, macroeconomic instability and inadequate growth" that resulted from excessive centralization of governmental control, particularly over the agricultural sector (Rao et al. 2021). Decentralization

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

encouraged state withdrawal and facilitated local governance, especially after a shift in the global development schools of thought that "subnational governments are more efficient and capable" (Bercegol 2017; Mullen 2012). In the process, many countries embarked on decentralization efforts as they attempted to shift power "away from the inefficient, corrupt and rent seeking central states towards more accountable local governments" by encouraging the construction of village communities and inculcating values of democracy (Mullen 2012). Effective implementation of decentralization was also seen as being able to strengthen governance by improving accountability, transparency, and democracy overall. As such, a lot of the literature on decentralization has emphasized the potential power of decentralization, more specifically, democratic decentralization in improving the distribution, access, and quality of public goods (Daftary 2019).

However, the initial optimism surrounding decentralization has been increasingly tempered by a widening disconnect and distance between administrators and beneficiaries, thereby limiting the effectiveness of decentralized policy implementation. This article applies the CAGE framework to highlight the multidimensional nature of distance to analyze how Cultural, Administrative, Geographic, and Economic distances cumulatively shape interactions between state authorities and farmers, and its implications for policy implementation. Drawing on the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) micro-irrigation scheme as a case study, the article demonstrates how the CAGE framework provides a structured approach to understanding the dynamics of decentralization and the policy challenges that arise in practice.

The concept of decentralization in India has historically been geared towards empowering lower levels of bureaucracy and bringing the government closer to the people on the ground (i.e., being more people-centric) to ensure the provision and management of daily local needs (Bercegol 2017; Sarma and Chakravarty 2018). Several scholars have written on this subject and arrived at one of two conclusions: the first is that decentralization has worked to improve participatory democracy, closeness to the ground, local decision-making, accountability, etc. (Faguet 2017; Mullen 2012; Wignaraja 2005). The second conclusion that scholars arrive at shows that decentralization has given way to other issues like patronage or clientelism, thereby causing or worsening inequality in rural spaces (Maiorano et al. 2018; Nandwani 2019).

In India, mirroring the first conclusion above, agricultural decentralization in post-independence India had its origins in the Gandhian ideal of the Panchayati Raj system which created a tiered administrative framework that privileged rural development and local self-governance. This ideal envisioned an Indian social system built around local institutions; one in which the village's power would be realized as a "republic" (Bercegol 2017). India's big experiment to legislate decentralization began with the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments of 1992 that sought for a greater devolution of powers and responsibilities to local-level governance institutions. Shifting from a two-tiered federal structure that oscillated between clearly demarcated roles for the center and the state, these amendments "gave [statutory] recognition to Panchayats and Municipalities in the book of statute as institutions of self-government" as the "third-tier of government" (Alok 2021). Some of the mandatory provisions were for each state to form a local government at the village, block and district level through regular elections, form a finance

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commission to review finances of local governments and include these mandatory provisions into state legislation (Gopinath 2009).

With the constitutional amendments, the legislature was also tasked with assigning roles to the Panchayats and Municipalities under the subjects listed in the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules. These were intended to improve performance at the local level and empower local governments at both the urban and rural levels. Included in the legislation to the Constitution are also Articles 243G and 243W, which seek to empower Panchayats and Municipalities to behave as institutions of self-government in order to put together plans for economic development, "performance of civil functions and schemes" (Alok 2021). All these constitutional amendments, legislations, and separation of powers seek to improve the efficiency of public service delivery and increase the reach of the government to the people. For farmers, the closer proximity to government structures should have meant inclusive growth and more relevant policies that were tailored to their local needs, concerns, and contexts.

However, over the three years (2022–2024) that I conducted field visits in the districts of Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu, and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu, the rhetoric amongst local farmers was that there was little to no relationship between the challenges they were facing and the policies that the government had proposed as ameliorative steps. While the constitutional amendments provide legal guidance on the decentralization process, it still leaves much to be desired in terms of bringing governance closer to the people.

The CAGE framework

The CAGE framework uses cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic distances between countries to unpack how and why these distances serve as barriers to increased trade, competition, business relationships, and capital (Miloloza 2015). The analytical value of the CAGE framework lies in its capacity to not only be used in a business or trade context but to also utilize the factors within the framework to interrogate policy failure or ineffectiveness by conceptualizing "distance" as an explanatory mechanism. Ghemawat (2001) originally employed the framework to explain the losses incurred by a US company, Star TV, when expanding to the Asian market, attributing this outcome to the firm's wrong assumption "that Asian viewers wanted English-language programming." The CAGE framework demonstrates that the greater the distance between two contexts across its four facets (cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic), the higher the risk of policy or strategic challenges. The framework has hitherto been used to understand the differences between countries for businesses looking to expand internationally. This is, however, one of the limitations of the framework: that it operates exclusively at the country level and treats nations as homogenous entities without factoring in the granular differences within societies (Adamoglou and Kyrkilis 2020). This paper thus capitalizes on India's vastly heterogeneous society to contextualize the CAGE framework within a country through a broader public policy lens.

The CAGE framework comprises of cultural distance, which are the unspoken societal norms based on race, ethnicity, religion, and/or language that determine what people believe and how they behave. Administrative distance factors in the

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effectiveness of structures such as bureaucracies, politics, and institutions. Viewed together, it can also shed light on the impact of culture permeating into these structures. Geographic distance assesses the topography of the country, its size, the distance between cities and borders, transport infrastructure, and water bodies. From a business standpoint, this is a significant factor for cost assessments but is different to the economic distance which focuses on the economic circumstances within the country such as income inequalities, purchasing power parity, consumption patterns, gross domestic product (GDP) and more broadly the economic system that the country uses (Miloloza 2015).

Often, when trying to query the ineffectiveness of a policy, a top-down approach is taken to relook the process of administrative decentralization, i.e., the devolution of administrative [policy-implementing] authority to local units of government. However, the CAGE framework enables us to move beyond administrative distance as the sole constraint on effective decentralization. Instead, the framework highlights how cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic distances cumulatively shape policy implementation outcomes. These dimensions intersect with administrative decentralization by conditioning farmers' responses to state interventions. For example, the submission of the subsidy application form is not determined solely by administrative distance but is also shaped by the economic class of the farmer to afford the requirements of the application submission, the proximity of the farmer to the government office, and the social background of the farmer. Viewing these factors in totality, through the CAGE framework, provides a more holistic account of the structural and social constraints that hamper the effectiveness of the decentralization process.

This framework has primarily been used, in the global South context, to study trade flows (Tokas and Deb 2020), foreign students' educational flows (Yousaf et al. 2020), or market expansions and acquisitions (Galdino et al. 2022). While some scholars critique that the framework could be expanded to include institutional distance (Dai 2008) or financial distance (Owusu and Alagidede 2020), these critiques go beyond the scope of this paper and could be more pertinent to economic or business-oriented analyses. This study instead adapts the CAGE framework to a within-country policy context, using it to assess whether the difference between the administrators and beneficiaries across the four types of distance could help explain the ineffective implementation of PMKSY and its limited uptake among the intended beneficiaries. The framework is also useful to analyze the challenges facing policy implementation across the global South. The more granular and nuanced types of cultural distance (castes, tribes, languages, ethnicities, social hierarchies, religions), the structural remains of a colonial past, the exacerbation of physical distance because of poor infrastructure, and disparities in labor categories and costs, skill levels, and natural resources observed in the global South go beyond dictating consumer behavior but also help explain why certain policies fail to translate on the ground. Applying the framework within countries also reveals more than applying it across borders, especially in the global South. In these countries, the internal diversity is frequently so vast that a "one size fits all" policy is often too broad and does not gain traction amongst its intended beneficiaries.

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PMKSY is a centrally sponsored micro irrigation scheme with the motto of "Har Khet Ko Paani" ("Water to every farm"). The scheme aims to reduce the occurrence of drought and flood by popularizing rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation to ensure that there is "Per drop-More crop" (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare n.d.). The idea is to minimize groundwater extraction, enable water recharge, and boost soil quality, especially at a time when monsoons are increasingly unpredictable. The scheme, being a central government policy also enables the understanding of the decentralization process from the center to the state government in Tamil Nadu, to the district, block, village, and down to level of the individual farmer. However, visits to the farms in Tamil Nadu saw drip irrigation pipes from the PMKSY installation strewn to the sides or shelved in sheds. This brings up the question of why policy failed to be received on the ground the same way it was intended during the policy design process.

The within-country analytical focus is especially useful in the case of Tamil Nadu. Although the state ranks third on the Panchayat Devolution Index (a key marker of how effectively a state has decentralized and empowered local governance structures), which might also presuppose the effective decentralization in the implementation of PMKSY, a policy explicitly targeting the reduction of groundwater depletion, it simultaneously records the highest volume (hectare-meter) of groundwater extraction in South India (Dynamic Ground Water Assessment n.d.). This divergence between policy intent and outcomes underscores how micro-level distances identified by the CAGE framework aggregate into broader implementation gaps within decentralized governance structures. Looking at Tamil Nadu's decentralization experience through the CAGE framework thus provides insights into the structural challenges of decentralization, with implications for understanding similar dynamics across the global South.

Methodology

The paper draws on three years of ethnographic research conducted in the state of Tamil Nadu between 2022 and 2024. My research was conducted through a combination of qualitative, conversational, semi-structured interviews, close observations, and analysis of program implementation data in the districts of Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu, and Tiruvallur. The respondents were selected on the basis of the size of their farm, class, caste, gender, and type of farm (organic, natural, or chemical). Interviews were also conducted with policymakers, government officials, and academics who were working on or had published studies on groundwater governance to verify the anecdotal evidence. All three districts fall within the expanded Chennai Metropolitan Area and are envisioned as satellite towns. Together, it is expected that they support regional economic integration, enable more efficient resource management, and drive growth in these "future growth centres" (Narayanan 2022). The focus on regional integration and resource management in these districts make this case study particularly valuable, as it illustrates integration and decentralization at a more granular level through the decentralization of a single policy. The challenges highlighted in this study also point to potential areas for improvement over the course of the expansion.

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Promising ventures into decentralization

It is important to note that this relationship between farmers and the government was not always fraught with distance. As mentioned above, in the immediate post-independence period, the administrative reports revealed attempts to establish closer connections. The administrative report for 1947 indicated that the north-east monsoon "was more or less a complete failure" and many of the standing crops withered due to the lack of rain (Government Press 1948). Despite this, the next sub-section on famine reported that "the seasonal conditions were satisfactory and there was no famine in any of the districts. The need was not felt anywhere for the opening of famine relief works' (Government Press 1948). The failure of the north-east monsoon and the crop failure that resulted while perhaps not to the extreme of a famine, still would have necessitated some relief efforts. The relative autonomy to local-level governance structures that the decentralization process enabled meant that in the Tinnevelly district, the Collector ordered for some road works so as to provide employment to unskilled laborers (Government Press 1948). While this was not replicated across the Madras Presidency, it sheds some light on the power of the Collector at the time and the authority and autonomy of district-level bureaucratic officials. This shows efforts taken towards local governance and the decentralization of power from the government, enabling lower levels of bureaucracy to implement relief efforts quickly. It also highlights the role played by local governance in dealing with problems on the ground regardless of how the state or the center classified weather patterns. It proves the importance and necessity of decentralization in order to provide a level of autonomy for local-level institutions and governance.

Almost a decade later, the decentralization process had strengthened further. Early 1968 saw a drop in rainfall across all districts, and the south-west monsoon saw continued deficiency in rainfall, continuing into the winter period as well. While crop conditions were listed as "generally fair" till December 1968, some districts saw their standing crops affected by drought (Rajaraman 1970). However, "necessary remedial measures were taken [independently by] the agriculture department" (Rajaraman 1970). The district boards reported their monsoon failures and drought-affected conditions to the state government and recommended several relief measures to be undertaken. In response "the government have sanctioned a sum to the order of Rs. 8 crores and above for carrying out various relief measures in all the districts" (Rajaraman 1970). Similarly, the severe drought in Chingleput saw the government designating Rs 1.20 crores to the district for relief measures such as "deepening the drinking water wells, repairs to the major and minor irrigation tanks and takkavi loans for the deepening of the irrigation wells" (Rajaraman 1970). These instances provide clarity on what effective decentralization looks like as they reflect a seamless process of bottom-up governance with a certain level of autonomy and decentralization at the local level as well as clear trickle-down procedures from the top where financial decentralization takes place quickly in times of crisis. The two-way relationship creates a benchmark for effective decentralization and sets the standard for a two-directional exchange that encourages accountability, autonomy, and efficiency. These past examples set the precedent for future efforts at decentralization.

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The report of 1972–73 furthered the process of decentralization by creating clear hierarchical lines of decentralization. The report highlighted that rainfall during the south-west monsoon was below average, north-west monsoon as better than average, before dropping below normal in early 1973 (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). The year also had widespread rain, heavy floods and a cyclone affecting certain districts. There were also drought conditions prevailing in some areas. Overall, while the condition of the standing crops were listed as "normal," there were several issues that cropped up over the course of the year (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). Examples include tanks drying up, well irrigated crops withering due to lack of rains, and declining yield with major repercussions on the Kharif season. The heavy rains also meant that paddy fields were flooded, and agricultural operations were halted (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). To cope, "necessary remedial measures were taken by the concerned agricultural authorities" and a meeting was organized with the Collectors of the affected districts to estimate and assess the extent of damages and implement relief measures (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). At the district level, it was roughly estimated that an average amount of Rs. 3 crores might be needed to fund relief measures and repairs', and this was proposed to the central government for financial assistance (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). The state government also decided to match the center and sanctioned Rs. 4 crores. While governance was mainly decentralized fiscally, three clear levels of governance emerged – center, state, and district. This hierarchical decision-making process that sought for the center's approval was reciprocated where immediate relief was left to the autonomy of agricultural authorities, showing a high level of trust across the various levels of the bureaucracy – establishing the premise of decentralization and helping to define what effective decentralization looked like.

A decade later, just as Tamil Nadu was beginning to recover from the droughts of 1981, 1982, and 1983, the country faced "heavy and widespread rains ... [that were] unabated for a week" in December 1983 (Government of Tamil Nadu 1985). This was extremely detrimental, especially in the coastal areas, and wreaked havoc across the country as "the entire season's rainfall occurred in some places in two or three days" (Government of Tamil Nadu 1985). The intensity with which the rains hit, led to vast plots of farmland and its crops being submerged, heavy damages to infrastructure such as bridges and roads, flooding and breached rivers, tanks, channels, etc, loss of lives, and destruction of huts. Again, relief efforts were stepped up "on a war-footing" with commissioners and ministers even staying in the worst affected areas to supervise relief works, the Chief minister visiting affected areas and the Union Defence Minister taking an aerial survey of the affected areas (Government of Tamil Nadu 1985). The central government was also very pleased with the "immediate and effective relief given by the Districts Administration to the flood affected people" (Government of Tamil Nadu 1985). This once, again tied in with the efficiency of the state bureaucracy in decentralizing disaster relief to the district level and implementing the policy effectively.

These examples reveal the potential that decentralization has to bring governance closer to the people, especially in times of crisis. The effective and streamlined flow of policy implementation with input from below sets the model for what decentralization should look like. While these examples happened under specific circumstances or crises, they are comparable to the seemingly more mundane, everyday

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implementation of the PMKSY due to the urgency and intensity of declining groundwater levels that renders farmers unable to farm for seasons or even years.

Creating distance

It is imperative to view the concept of distance from a localized empirical perspective as "distance is hardly a stable construct, and at times seems to not be quite internally consistent" (Alves et al. 2022). While there have been studies on administrative distance, this study focuses on assessing the intersections between multiple facets of distance (such as cultural, administrative, geographic, economic) through the CAGE framework. Other institutional distance models include North's (1991) institutional economics model which sees institutions as "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" comprising both "informal constraints" such as traditions or taboos and "formal rules" such as laws and rights. Scott's (2014) institutional theory approach which comprises of the regulative pillar for laws and policies, normative pillar on norms and values within a society, and the cultural-cognitive pillar which focuses on individuals' culture, traditions, and inherent qualities. Berry et al. (2010) draws on comparative institutionalism which brings in the element of comparison looking at economic, financial, political, administrative, cultural, demographic, knowledge, connectedness, and geographic dimensions of distance from both a vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (similarity-based) distance perspective (Alves et al. 2022). While these are useful tools to understand business operations and pitfalls, they need to be re-imagined for understanding decentralization and the process by which policy decentralizes.

In terms of governance of PMKSY, the central government has denoted that the "programme architecture of PMKSY will be to adopt a decentralized state level planning and projectized execution structure that will allow states to draw up their own irrigation development plans" (Alves et al. 2022). Immediately, this sets out the roles of the different levels of governments with the center operating more as a source of funding or financing and monitoring. This is further re-iterated in the name of the scheme across all government documents pertaining to PMKSY as a "centrally sponsored scheme on micro irrigation." The role of the state is then carved out to be one of execution and implementation based on the funding received and the needs on the ground. However, the poor reception to PMKSY amongst farmers on the ground suggests roadblocks that occur during the process of decentralization. In this paper, the poor reception is explained through the four types of distance and farmers' experiences with these distances.

Geographic distance

As mentioned, the concept of distance has primarily been used in the context of cross-border trade and business. However, the element of geographic or physical distance is a useful starting point to understand the challenges of decentralization across a spatial distance. The key attributes creating geographic distance are physical remoteness, lack of access, size of country, weak communication links or difference in climates (Ghemawat 2001).

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A key issue that farmers have faced with regard to PMKSY has been their difficulty in accessing the scheme. Many farmers have highlighted that it is easier to access state schemes rather than central schemes due to the issue of physical distance. In order for farmers to approach the government office and find out about new schemes or apply to adopt new schemes, they would need to travel quite a distance. Central schemes such as the PMKSY require farmers to travel 40–60 kilometers to reach at least the district collector's office or the block-level office. Compounded with the issue of distance is also the fact that government office operating hours are not in sync with farmers' work hours. Government offices operate from 10am to 5pm while farmers work on their fields from the early morning till 12 noon or 1pm. By the time the farmers leave their farms and reach the government offices, it is usually past 5pm and the offices will be closed, or they will be told to return the next day. Such logistical challenges prevent farmers from accessing officials or from accessing the schemes that the central government implements.

Moreover, there is also a general lack of communication or awareness about central government schemes even amongst officials in the state government at the village, block, or district level. Historically as well, Tamil Nadu has been a unique environment due to its relative insulation from matters of the center due to its geographical distance from it (Arnold 1979; Baker 1981). This is especially so if these schemes are under the ambit of another department. For instance, an assistant director of agriculture in a particular district mentioned that her primary role was to implement two schemes – one central and one state. However, when asked about other water-related policies such as the central government's Jal Jeevan mission, she shared that she was not aware of what the scheme was about. On PMKSY, while there were state government efforts to raise awareness on the scheme, some of the target villages proved to be so inaccessible that they were impervious to reach, despite them now being a part of the expanded Chennai Metropolitan Area.

In contrast, the Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Department of Tamil Nadu also provides a scheme that subsidizes the pipes that carry water from the source to the field. The subsidy is on "50% cost or Rs. 15000 for water carrying pipes up to 800m and all types of pipes (Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC), High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE), etc.) and all size as per the requirement of the farmer" (Government of Tamil Nadu Scheme n.d.). To access this scheme (and many other state schemes), farmers can put in their applications to the assistant agricultural officer at the village level, to the agricultural officer/deputy agricultural officer at the block level, to the assistant director of agriculture at the block level or the joint director of agriculture at the district level (TNAU Agritech Portal n.d.). Such state schemes are relatively more accessible to farmers at the village level than central schemes like the PMKSY.

Within the Tamil Nadu Agriculture Department, it is the field staff or nodal officers who are the first point of contact between farmers and the government bureaucracy. The nodal officer is a field-level agriculture officer from the agriculture department of Tamil Nadu, and he usually oversees a few village panchayats. Every year, the directors in the department select 8 to 10 village panchayats to implement all the current and past schemes. The next year, a new set of villages will be selected, and the villages from the previous year "cannot

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[be] concentrate[d] on."[1] Therefore, despite being the closest official point of contact for farmers, the nodal officer only has one opportunity to visit these villages in the year. During this time, he will collate all the schemes that the various families are eligible for, compute who the beneficiaries will be, explain to them how they can utilize the schemes, and ensure that the schemes have been disseminated to them.

To avail the micro-irrigation scheme, government officials at the village levels are required to verify the beneficiaries and sign off on the application forms. This makes accessing the scheme near enough. However, the installation of the micro-irrigation system has been delegated to micro-irrigation firms that have been tendered to implement the scheme. While this could be seen as decentralization to improve bureaucratic efficiency by "contracting out services," when it comes to post-installment maintenance, the firms are no longer contractually liable to help the farmers (Hislope and Mughan 2012). Farmers have thus complained that there is no follow up on the scheme after installation – either from the government or the firm. The physical distance between the farmers and the micro-irrigation firms also adds to the frustration of farmers as they have no avenue to turn to.

One of the biggest issues with the sustainability of micro-irrigation schemes is the inherent risk of salinity clogging up the irrigation pipes, and this requires post-installment maintenance and support. According to many farmers, "once they do, they go. Nobody is asking. The government officers are busy in their own work."[2] This prevents farmers from fully comprehending the scheme, learning the technical aspects of maintenance and irrigation scheduling, and appreciating the reasons behind the government policy that has been put in place. Therefore, while the policy might in fact trickle down and be implemented, the poor longevity of schemes leads to the decentralization process being deemed ineffective.

Geographic distance also reflects the class (and caste) of farmers, and this proves consequential to their awareness of and access to the scheme. As will be explained in the section below, wealthier farmers are more likely to live closer to government offices or to have social connections with government officials, making it easier for them to avail the scheme than for smaller or marginal farmers. While caste is indeed a crucial factor in influencing class or geographical contexts of farmers, my interactions with the farmers revealed that caste did not influence their policy decisions, especially since those interviewed from lower castes were closer to the urban areas that were incorporated into the expanded Chennai Metropolitan Area. This perhaps shaped their decisions to be borne more out of class and gender than caste. However, there have been several studies on the challenges faced by lower caste or socially marginalized castes in accessing agricultural extension services due to their exclusion from political processes or networks due to the physical distance to government institutions, differential access to resources such as private irrigation or land ownership or spatial isolation (segregation of their community from other higher castes) (Krishna et al. 2019; Pankaj 2019). These highlight the linkages between geographical distance and cultural distance in hampering effective policy implementation.

[1]Interview by author.
[2]Interview by author.

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Economic distance

The concept of economic distance pertains to "differences across the wealth of individuals and income of consumers" (Tokas and Deb 2020; Ghemawat 2001). While there are debates on whether economic distance helps or hinders trade, the issue of economic distance plays out in this case due to the inequality caused by decentralization.

The idea of bringing "decision-making and service delivery closer to the people, especially those belonging to poor and vulnerable groups," was one of the key advantages of decentralization (Rajasekhar et al. 2018). Even in terms of fiscal decentralization, scholars argued that decentralization would allow for a more equitable distribution of resources as subnational governments have better insight into local communities and will therefore be able to construct policies according to local needs, demands, and preferences (Rao et al. 2021). Bringing the government closer to the people meant that, ideally, inequality – "physical, as well as social, barriers to accessing government" would reduce (Mullen 2012). For farmers, this could mean inclusive growth and more relevant policies tailored to their local needs, concerns, and contexts.

However, there has been a growing economic distance between small/marginal farmers and large/rich farmers who are often viewed as being a political alliance for the state government. Historically, rich farmers have indeed enjoyed political backing from the state in terms of accessing government schemes and opportunities. For instance, after the green revolution, the state was intent on increasing and intensifying the production of foodgrain (Metcalf and Metcalf 2012). To do this, the government prioritized the canal and delta areas and provided farmers in those areas with modern varieties that would yield more foodgrain. Inbuilt into this was the fact that those who wanted to cultivate modern varieties also needed access to irrigation sources, which was concentrated amongst large farmers (Metcalf and Metcalf 2012). Therefore, in order to attain the target of higher foodgrain production, farmers who were wealthy enough to afford a bore well, open well or already had an open well were supported by government officers to create irrigation sources that were more viable. This meant that the policy decentralization process for irrigation were unevenly distributed with more reach amongst the rich.

On the contrary, small and marginal farmers who had limited land were not encouraged or incentivized to invest in wells. Instead, they received government support in the form of community wells in every village and had to slowly accrue enough wealth to hopefully be able to bore a well in the long run. However, as one farmer shared, 30 years later, it is still "those who cultivate on a relatively bigger scale [who] will have a bore well. If my farmland is small, I can't afford it. Even if I afford and buy, the maintenance is wasted on my small land. So, it's better to go to community well or ask neighbours for access to their bore."[3] This highlights that the inequalities that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s continue till today and are further aggravated due to declining landholding sizes and groundwater depletion.

[3]Interview by author.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These help us understand why inequality takes precedence in the mind of the farmer. This also helps to explain the reason behind the lack of enthusiasm for adopting the micro-irrigation scheme. A study done by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University helps to substantiate this by looking at why, despite the large subsidy on micro irrigation for small and marginal farmers, the rate of adoption for the scheme was low (Palanisami et al. 2015). While the main reason was the lack of wells/lack of well water, a secondary reason was cost. In terms of implementation, the guidelines of the scheme estimated a specific cost per hectare for the micro irrigation installation to be successful. This figure is estimated based on the crop that will be planted there. However, as mentioned in the study, if the government budgets 80–90 thousand rupees for a field of a certain size, this amount was seldom adequate (Palanisami et al. 2015). Awareness of the local context would reveal that farmers commonly plant more seeds and plant them closer to each other, thereby needing more laterals, pipes, drips, etc. which cost more. This computes to a 25–35 percent additional spending on the part of the farmer. Given that many farmers will not be able to afford the additional cost, they will not be able to implement the scheme and will face limits on being able to maintain productivity while mitigating climate risks. Whereas large farmers will be able to pay the extra costs, implement the schemes, and maintain agriculture as a livelihood in the long run.

Taken together, the geographical proximity of wealthier farmers and their ability to utilize their "closeness" with the state across both the above facets of distance in order to better utilize or access the scheme, helps explain the contrary for other small and marginal farmers. This also plays into how well they are able to navigate the bureaucratic process and administrative distance involved in being aware of and applying for the scheme – whether it be through higher education levels and therefore better comprehension of what the scheme and application entail, being able to afford the extra costs for the application, or knowing how to maintain the apparatus in the long run.

Administrative distance

According to Ghemawat (2001), the attributes creating administrative distance are "absence of colonial ties, absence of share monetary or political association, political hostility, government policies or institutional weakness" (Ghemawat 2001). These factors were highlighted to identify which industries have a high level of government involvement and would therefore raise barriers to international competition. They also emphasize that a "country's weak institutional infrastructure can serve to dampen cross-border economic activity" through issue such as "corruption or social conflict" (Ghemawat 2001). One of the potential benefits of decentralization included quicker and more efficient completion of development projects by empowering local decisionmakers to "cut through the red tape and the ponderous procedures often associated with overcentralised administrations" (Rondinelli et al. 1983).

Indeed, many smaller farmers reported that they were used to the simplicity of liaising with brokers/middlemen because the transaction was mainly monetary and farmers "don't need to think."[4] On the contrary, when liaising with the government,

[4]Interview by author.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the process is often a lot more arduous. In order to access the government through officials, farmers would need to "show proofs, follow process and need to wait for the entire bureaucratic process to complete."[5]

Formally, the process for accessing the micro irrigation scheme, PMKSY, through the government apparatus is extremely laborious. For instance, in order to apply for the scheme, the farmer would need to submit the application form, letter from the farmer on the micro irrigation company that he/she has chosen to provide materials and install the irrigation system, *chitta* original from the village officer which provides land ownership details, *adangal* original from the village officer which is a land revenue record which serves as a legal document for land administration, field map of the farm, soil and water test report from the requisite laboratories that the farmer should approach to get these reports done, an agreement stating that the farmer will not sell or lend the micro irrigation system to anyone for three years, a certification proving that the farmer or any of his/her family members have not availed any subsidy under this central government drop irrigation scheme previously, a document approving any government official from Tamil Nadu Horticulture Development Agency (TANHODA)/Agricultural Engineering Department/Micro Irrigation Company to come and inspect the micro irrigation system in the farm at any time over the next three years, three photographs of the farmer, a questionnaire for assessing access to water and power, a benchmark survey provided by the micro irrigation company, a rough estimate or quotation of the cost and the amount to be subsidized, a topographical sketch of the farm and a layout of the plan for installation (TNAU Agritech Portal n.d.). The application form is also very detailed and requires information that is not easily available to most farmers. A translation of the form from Tamil to English is presented in Annex 1.

Moreover, while the subsidy is useful and reduces the cost of implementation significantly, the provision of all these documents requires extra costs. For the farmer, soil sample testing encompasses a micronutrient test costing Rs 5 per sample, a macronutrient test costing Rs 5 per sample and a pH test (to measure solubility of micronutrients in the soil), EC test (electrical conductivity to measure the amount of salt in the soil), NPK test (soil testing for nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium levels), with a recommendation letter by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University costing Rs 100 per sample (TNAU Agritech Portal n.d.). Similarly, the water sample testing costs Rs 10 per sample, the pH, EC, and recommendation by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University costing Rs 50 per sample or a more detailed analysis by the University costing Rs 250 per sample (TNAU Agritech Portal n.d.).

There are also a lot of nuances in availing the scheme that many farmers may struggle to comprehend. For instance, those who wish to install the drip irrigation systems need to first decide the type of system they want to install, which then affects the type of pipes they put in place. Those who wish to input a portable sprinkler irrigation system would need coupled High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) pipes or sprinklers. Those who wish to install mini, micro, or semi-permanent sprinkler systems should use HDPE, PVC, PE pipes, or nozzles. In the case of large-volume sprinkler irrigation systems such as rain gun sprinklers, they would need

[5]Interview by author.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HDPE pipes or nozzles. Not knowing the component requirements or necessities also raise issues of not knowing how to maintain the various elements of the new irrigation system.

The range of forms and the component requirements reveal the complexities of understanding, applying, and financing the scheme. Comprehending these schemes are complex to the average educated farmers and even more so for the uneducated. Viewed together with caste-based literacy rates and the abovementioned geographic distance of lower castes, the marginalization of certain demographics in accessing policy becomes clear as well.

As such, many farmers choose to use their own resources, tools, and informal networks rather than rely on the government apparatus. A medium-sized farmer complained that he "ha[d] to put the rain hose to distribute water and we don't get help from the government, so we have to buy the hose from the market, which is not cheap. It was Rs 2000 per hose" – this, despite there actually being help from the government to subsidize these exact costs.[6]

Cultural distance

Ghemawat (2001) characterizes cultural distance as differences in languages spoken, religions practiced, social norms, ethnicities, and the lack of a connective social network (Ghemawat 2001). However, in terms of this micro-irrigation scheme, the cultural distance appears as more of a consequence borne out of the above-mentioned distances. The small and medium farmers' experiences of geographic, economic, and administrative distance often caused them to shift away from relying on the government apparatus and into a sense of resignation. In turn, the farmers chose to rely on what they deemed to be more pre-ordained.

As mentioned above, awareness of schemes is limited in the village, and many farmers have attributed this to an element of luck, where finding out about policies and subsidies "depends on our luck."[7] This idea of luck and fate is common amongst farmers. The frustration of comprehending the complex policies, eligibility criterion, and cost structures has meant that many small farmers have left their availing of government policies to chance. In availing certain schemes, some farmers believe that "the government does support but not everything is reachable. If you know of it at the right time and approach them, you can get it, but not everyone gets everything in life."[8]

The tendency of accepting things as pre-ordained also gives rise to passive efforts at resistance by devising work arounds. Even in terms of accessing groundwater, there is a reliance on superstitions and chance. Those who do not avail the micro irrigation scheme continue in their habits of groundwater extraction through wells or bore-wells. The digging of borewells is a risky endeavor as there are seldom indicators on whether the location chosen for the borewell will have water beneath or not. In order to find out, however, the well would need to be dug, and the cost remains the same regardless of whether there is water beneath. To pre-emptively find out, the government-recommended way is to conduct a soil test to check

[6]Interview by author.
[7]Interview by author.
[8]Interview by author.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381 4X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moisture levels and gauge the potential for groundwater. Instead, many farmers believe in a method that calls for one to "hold a coconut in his hand and walk. Exactly where there's water, the coconut will stand up. If you go and dig in a place where the coconut didn't stand up, there will be no water."[9] There are several such men who go around to farms to check for water, and while some farmers have an inclination that there might be scientific reasons behind this, they continue using the method as it "has been working."[10]

While it does seem counterintuitive to see farmers withdrawing from the state apparatus and relying on luck, these appear to be culturally conditioned responses. During interviews, small and medium farmers emphasized the difficulty of farming as a livelihood repeatedly, and it is this difficulty that they hope to make clear to those outside the profession. However, when it comes to daily livelihood decisions, the outcomes are often left to chance. This sense of resignation to fate and chance are conditioned by cultural realities on the ground and also influence the ways that farmers respond to government policy.

While this pivot to the pre-ordained is symptomatic of the distance caused by decentralization, at its root lies a fundamental disillusionment with the government's capabilities. The CAGE framework and the bureaucratic variations of distance has indeed created an invisible barrier that seals the divide between farmers and government officials. Farmers' inability to access help for their needs, especially in times of difficulty, has led farmers to rely on their own communities, neighbors, friends, families, and an element of chance for help in accessing markets, selling their produce, access irrigation sources, and rebuild post-disaster. The lack of government interaction has also led to small and medium farmers being disillusioned about the amount of help that a government can provide. There is little mixing between farmers on the ground and the bureaucracy, which has been further accentuated by the political conditions that farmers have been met with. Most farmers have realized that government schemes or incentives are intensively marketed just prior to the elections with limited follow-ups thereafter. These have further reduced their trust and reliance on the government and the decentralization process.

As such, the ineffectiveness of the decentralization process counters the alleged benefits that it was set to bring as it has not increased "political responsiveness and participation at the local level . . . [whilst] coincide[ing] with the economic objectives of better decisions about the use of public resources" (Litvack and Seddon 1999). While local farmers are enjoying greater autonomy, their relationship with the government is not one of trust, reliability or accountability.

Conclusion

This research expands on the theoretical use of "distance" as a concept beyond international business and trade to understand decentralization and bureaucratic behavior. It applies the CAGE framework to unpack the distance-based challenges that hamper the decentralization process in a localized setting such as the villages of Tamil Nadu. It begins with the premise that decentralization has been lauded for

[9]Interview by author.
[10]Interview by author.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bringing governance closer to the people but has instead created more of a distance between certain farmers and the government. Contextualizing this through the interactions between geographic, economic, administrative, and cultural distances, this research unpacks the challenges plaguing the decentralized implementation of the PMKSY micro irrigation scheme. It also helps us understand that decentralization has been effective in helping the large, wealthy, educated farmer while leaving the small and marginal farmers with a lack of social connections and resources to help them understand the technical intricacies of the scheme. The contrast between the two demographics helps us see how the process of effective decentralization is hampered by the gap between administrators and beneficiaries caused by a lack of understanding of the local context and demographics.

The consequences of this distance are unhappy and disillusioned farmers (most of whom are small and marginal farmers) who feel that the government is limited in the amount of support it can provide to them. These farmers also lack genuine trust and connection with the government apparatus and turn to belief in the pre-ordained to rationalize their struggles. To cope with this distance, the diversity of farmers' experiences needs to be factored into decentralization efforts. This requires a greater level of embeddedness in the local context than ever before. The context of this research being based on conversations with farmers and observations at the village level provides a localized understanding of the decentralization process. From a governmental point of view, engaging with the locals and understanding their circumstances, contexts, histories, and technical challenges vis-à-vis agriculture and irrigation by spending time on the ground would help to build trust and bridge the distance. This level of nuance and diversity are particularly crucial when understanding policy in the global South, where food or agriculture-related protests have snowballed into broader dissatisfaction with their governments. Across the MENA region, Sub Saharan Africa or Latin America, emerging concerns over land grabbing and food security have evolved into broader social movements. While there has yet to be a systematic enquiry on what the implications of these are, this paper contributes to the scholarship by identifying the causes of farmers' frustrations in a context where there are available policies that could improve their livelihoods.

Like Scott's argument in *Seeing like a State*, imposing standardized applications of decentralization tends to simplify complex realities and undermine practical, local knowledge (Scott 1998). This is especially pertinent across the Global South where policy is received across multiple overlapping demographic categories (class, caste, tribe, clan, language, etc). Theoretically, a useful step forward would be to incorporate Evans' concept on "embedded autonomy" into our understanding of decentralization. Evans argues that the state should understand its limits, operate within a coherent bureaucracy that is well-organized, maintain close links with society and its people, and understand the local context within which it functions (Evans 1995). These encompass what he calls "embedded autonomy" as local-level institutions enjoy a level of autonomy whilst ensuring that the bureaucracy remains embedded and aware of the nuances and peculiarities of the local context. In the Indian context, this would mean having the state and its district/block/village level institutions operate autonomously whilst remaining embedded within the local context.

In this paper, the farmers' anecdotes reveal the distance that has developed between the government and farmers' local experiences due to the lack of such

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014381X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"embedded autonomies." Given the similarity of many of these attributes of distance that have hampered the decentralization process in Tamil Nadu to elsewhere in the global South, this research serves as an important locus to understand the issues that plague the governance of agriculture and agrarian livelihoods at large.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X26101184.

Data availability statement. This study does not employ statistical methods, and no replication materials are available.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank the editorial team and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback in improving this paper.

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Cite this article: Murali VS (2026). Creating distance: a localized understanding of decentralization. *Journal of Public Policy* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X26101184

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X26101184 Published online by Cambridge University Press