Measuring State Self-Legibility in the Digital Age

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Motivation

- Scott (1998) documents how states use their infrastructural and coercive power to make society more legible
- Yet, in modern states the apparatus of the state itself is large, decentralized, and hard to control
- The primary threat to political elites is often *intra-state* contestation, and the legibility challenge is reflexive
  - If all governments have an incentive to increase self-legibility, where do they achieve it?
  - If not, why does legibility vary across the political terrain?
  - What are the consequences of being rendered legible to the state?

Measures of Self-Legibility

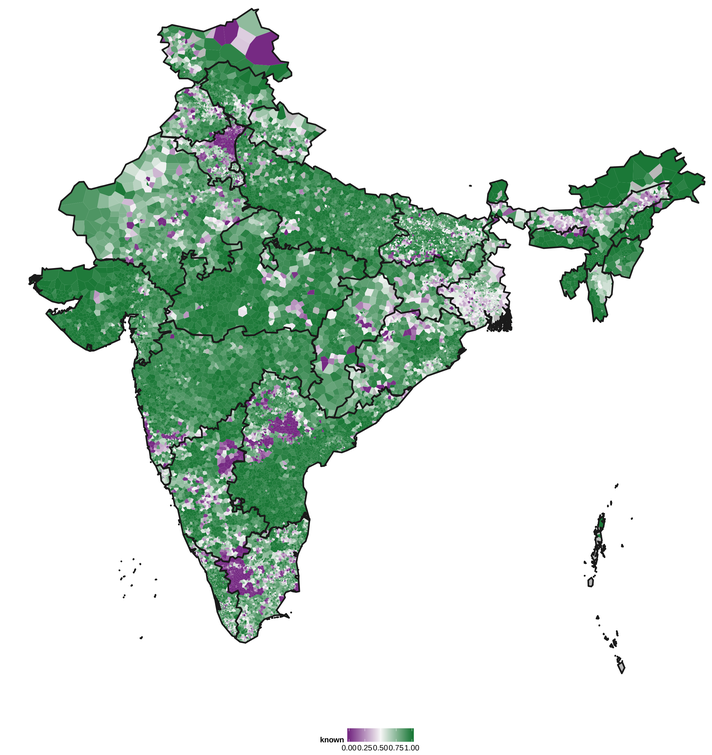
- Central government databases seek to register government assets
- Legibility is high where all government assets are accurately recorded
- Three strategies to measure legibility
  - Comparing when assets enter government databases to when they're produced
  - Measuring the amount of missingness in the data
  - Cross-validation of two sources

When and Where do Assets Become Legible?

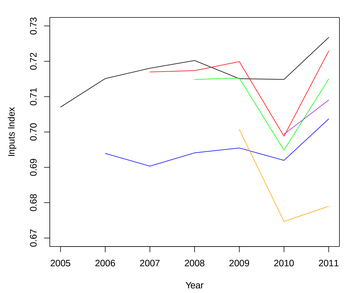
- India's annual DISE census records the year a school is founded
- A school becomes legible where it is founded at least two years before it enters the data for the first time, and then remains in the data until at least 2011.
- Since 2005, 335,402 schools have become legible
- The central government has 'discovered' four times as many schools as have been built

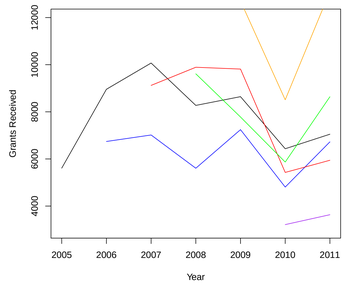
	2005	2007	2009	2011
Total	1,124,499	1,258,285	1,260,179	1,411,892
Continued from previous year		1,128,676	1,156,124	1,306,099
Dropped from previous year		66,554	72,796	50,740
Added Schools		129,609	104,055	105,793
—New-build		36,901	19,550	19,751
—Pre-existing		92,708	84,505	86,042

Legibility: % Of Schools Existing in 2005 and Known in 2011 that were also Known in 2005



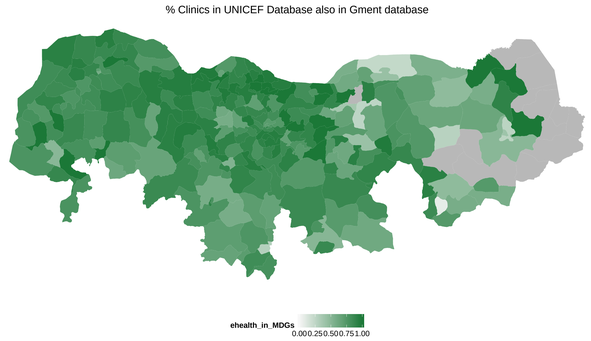
- The areas with the greatest increase in legibility are highly populated but more rugged areas
- The infrastructure of schools that become legible is only marginally weaker than those already 'on the map'
- Government allocations fail to improve upon becoming legible
- But inputs dependent on national government start off weaker and converge faster

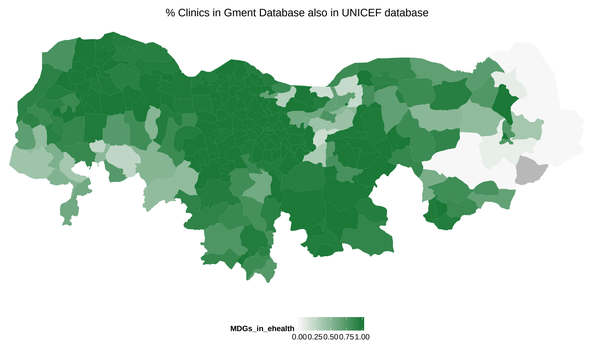




Do Governments know Less than INGOs about their own assets?

- In 2011, the Nigeria Government conducted a census of health facilities in the North. In 2012, UNICEF and the WHO did the same.
- 80% of observations in the UNICEF data appear in the government data,
- 89% of observations in the Government data appear in the UNICEF data,
- But the pattern of spatial overlap reflects local conflicts and governance capacity
- Local partners and capacity are vital for central legibility





Potential Applications

- An objective measure of state capacity/legibility, since knowing about assets is often a requisite for managing and improving them
- An explanatory variable for changes in public service performance and political engagement
- A diagnostic tool for improving databases and measurement

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