

Sustaining Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Editor's notes

This edition looks at the idea of local institutions – as both structures and codes of practice within a community – and how they can play an integral role in supporting sustainable livelihoods. A number of SLSA's focus on issues around local institutions, eg SLSA No 18 on Participatory Forest Management; and No 13 on Institutional Support for Sustainable Livelihoods. This edition aims to provide a conceptual framework which can assist us to understand these institutions. The author is Dr Frances Cleaver, a Senior Lecturer at the Bradford Centre for International Development in the UK, who has undertaken considerable work on local institutions and water.

Introduction

Institutions are the channels through which people's livelihoods are mediated, shaping individual and collective behaviour and the patterns of access to resources. All development happens through institutions, whether those of government, business or community and customary institutions. The current focus in development on poverty alleviation, and on ensuring the participation of the marginalised, leads us to question how the workings of institutions promote the interests of the marginalised. What form do institutions take? How exactly do they include or exclude certain individuals or groups of people? How do the rules and norms of the institutions shape the outcomes? And what resources (authority, time, cash, etc) are required for effective institutional functioning?

What are institutions?

Two main definitions are common:

Institutions as organisations

In simple terms, institutions are organisations - often formal - with clear structure and purpose, and with defined roles for individuals within them. Organisations might be political (political parties), economic (firms and businesses) and social (churches and schools). At the community level these could be Village Councils, Residents Committees, Farmer Associations, women's groups, clubs and societies.

Institutions as rules of the game

This definition encompasses social practices, conventions and generally accepted norms of behaviour which are 'institutionalised' in that they have continuity over space and time. These might include, for example, ideas about the proper forms of local decision-making through consensus 'meetings of the people', or consultation with elders, rather than election, representation or committee. They could also include the known and accepted 'proper' ways of accessing and using common resources. For example, studies on the micro-level use of water display a wide variety of locally accepted 'rules-in-use' (relating to whether livestock can be watered at a particular source, what kind of containers can be used, prohibitions on 'unclean' practices at the the waterpoint). Such rules often have no clear origin and are not necessarily written down or formalised, but are generally accepted as the 'right way of doing things'. These are referred to as institutionalised practices.

Why are institutions important?

Institutions are critical in shaping people's livelihoods and the effectiveness with which the poor can influence local development and the delivery of services and projects. Local institutions can both promote the equitable distribution of resources, and access of people to their rights, or act to exclude certain groups of people from such resources and rights (DFID, 2003). Additionally, institutions are the channels through which people are represented, and through which their needs are articulated. The importance of institutions is recognised in Sustainable Livelihoods approaches where 'policies, institutions and processes' interact dynamically to shape people's access to capital, to livelihood strategies, decision-making bodies and influence (Scoones 1998, Ellis 2000). Getting institutions 'right' is therefore an important element of pro-poor development strategies and programmes.

How do institutions operate?

Institutions may operate at different levels, from the family to the level of international agreements, and local institutions may be 'nested' within larger-scale arrangements - for example, a Village Assembly nested within the wider government structures.

An institution may have both formal organisational structure and also operate according to 'rules of the game'. Many social institutional arrangements such as marriage, or rights to land, are shaped both by formal rules and organisation, and by accepted norms and practices. Similarly in organisations, the 'culture' and unwritten way of doing things may be just as important as the formal rules and constitution.

People may 'borrow' institutional arrangements from formalised models (such as a committee structure with a chairman, treasurer and minute book) *and* from customary norms (such as arrangements for proper forms of conflict resolution). In addition, institutions may be shaped by historical factors, by the power relations which prevail in social life, by everyday practices and by world views which incorporate the roles of the human, natural resources and the supernatural.

What form do community-level institutions take?

Much of the thinking and understanding of community-level institutions in development comes from the study of institutions for the management of common property resources (resources collectively used or managed like water, land, and forests). There are numerous such institutions which might include Farmer Associations, Water User Groups and Forest/Land Management Committees. According to Uphoff (1992) they are useful in

- mobilising resources and regulating their use.
- using local knowledge in the management of resources.
- dealing with conflict between resource users.
- conditioning people's behaviour.
- providing a common basis for co-operation.

Such institutions aim to regulate individual behaviour in the collective interest. So, for example they may set rules about when particular lands can be grazed, or how much water can be extracted from a well, or devise a rota for irrigating individual farmers' lands. Such regulation is achieved through a mixture of *incentives* (encouraging people to follow the rules) and *sanctions* (punishments for those who disobey). Cheating on collective arrangements (taking water out of turn, grazing your animals in 'closed' lands etc) is known as '*free-riding*'.

Researchers writing about African natural resource management have questioned 'western' models of institutions, which assume that everyone has the tendency to free-ride, and that the solution is formalised, strongly regulated institutions with a strong focus on sanctions and the public punishment of cheating. Such writers suggest that local institutions in Africa may instead be based on concepts of the desirability of co-operation, conflict avoidance and conflict minimisation. Institutional arrangements may therefore avoid adversarial and public punishments in favour of forging consensus through long-term discussion, bending the rules, and social pressure to conform (Cousins 1996, Maganga 2002, Cleaver 2002).

Can community-level institutions be designed?

A great deal of attention has been paid to the possibilities of designing or strengthening the capacity of institutions to further development goals and ensure more equitable outcomes. This approach looks at their human and financial resources, formalises arrangements, codifies rules and regulations, specifies clear authority structures and strictly exercises sanctions against free-riders.

Overall there is a strong emphasis on transparency, on the principle of representation of users and on devising internally efficient mechanisms for conflict resolution and resource allocation. It is seen as possible both to craft new institutions and to 'make good' the deficiencies of indigenous arrangements through careful design.

Box 1 – Institutional Design Principles

- There should be clearly defined boundaries of jurisdiction over the resource.
- A clearly defined user group or community should manage the resource.
- Locally appropriate rules must be devised.
- There should be clear identification of rights to resources and rules about them.
- Those involved in resource use take part in decision-making about the resources.
- Decision making should take place in public, in arenas to which all resource users have access.
- Accountable monitoring and effective authority structures are required.
- Graduated sanctions should be devised for non-compliance with collective rules. Such sanctions must be applied consistently, rapidly and impersonally.
- Conflict resolution mechanisms should be clear, accessible and rapid.
- The 'nesting' of local institutions with other levels of decision-making and governance allows multi-layered management of resources in large and complex systems.

These principles are summarised from Ostrom's work (1990, 1992, 2000), but similar approaches and overlapping principles have been developed by others (Wade, 1988; Baland and Platteau, 1996). See Agrawal (2001) for a discussion of the literature identifying conditions facilitating institutional robustness.

Others see institutions as complex combinations of formal and informal, traditional and modern, local and global arrangements and they are sceptical of the extent to which institutions can be built in this way (Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Cleaver, 2002; Mehta, Leach and Scoones, 2001). They suggest that local institutions are deeply embedded in social practice and that, whilst it is relatively simple to change the organisational form of an institution, it is much more difficult to change accepted social practices and the ways in which people behave. The nature of social life within communities adds to the complexity which makes institutions difficult to design.

Neither communities nor resources consistently exist with clear boundaries. Natural resources are not simply commodities, but have social and symbolic meaning to people whose decisions about them may differ from external perceptions of efficiency and optimisation. Authority structures and the social norms of resolving competition and conflict over resources are rarely clear and consistent, but diverse and subject to negotiation and messy compromise.

The multiple functions of institutions

Another aspect of complexity is the multi-functional nature of many institutions. Development interventions tend to focus on setting up institutions for a single purpose (irrigation water management, forest management, etc), and people are seen as irrigators, farmers and so on. Case study evidence suggests that many local institutions have multiple purposes and are more or less active over time (for example, the Village Water Committee may only operate in the dry season) and that people's motivations for behaving in particular ways are shaped by complex identities (for example a pastoralist interested in securing water for livestock and routes for cattle to get to grazing lands, may also be an irrigation farmer interested in restricting water use to crop production and keeping animals away from growing crops.)

A case study of borrowing and adaptation – the Usangu Basin in Tanzania (SMUWC 2001)

This example, taken from the Usangu Basin in Tanzania, illustrates how the boundaries between traditional and modern, formal and informal institutions are often blurred and how institutional arrangements emerge from a 'patching together' from the resources available to people in everyday life. (Cleaver, 2002;Lund, 2001). Here local adaptation of a traditional pastoralist institution served multiple purposes.

Traditional Sukuma pastoralist militias of young men have been adapted to replace or supplement official Village Defence Committees. In several villages fear of cattle theft, the need to resolve potential competition over grazing, and the lack of confidence in government institutions, led to the local establishment of a *Sungusungu* or cattle militia, borrowed from Sukuma customary defence organisations. Such institutions have become cross-ethnic, with ethnic Sangu and Maasai, as well as Sukuma, operating as 'Commanders'.

The *Sungusungu* is made responsible by village consensus for cattle security and for keeping order in the seasonal grazing lands. It operates on a basis of demarcation of roles between elders and youth, a practice common to all ethnic groups, with the youth acting as the footsoldiers and the elders acting as advisors on tactics, bestowers of charms and medicines, and dispensers of justice. This unofficial militia is considered by members to be formally accountable to (modern) Village Government, whilst the practices of its operation are largely based on socially embedded principles of reconciliation and conflict minimisation.

The *Sungusungu* is multi-purpose, like many institutions formed through processes of institutional adaptation. Villagers reported how they call on *Sungusungu* when facing problems requiring collective action, such as searching for a lost child, and use *Sungusungu* communication channels to disseminate messages around the village. One of the *Sungusungu* operating amongst seasonal grazing camps, organises into units the disparate camps of young men from widely dispersed villages, the commander collects from them a seasonal subscription of cash and this is used as a common welfare fund to pay for a bus or bicycle to transfer a sick herder to his home area.

The benign nature of the *Sungusungu* found in Usangu is in contrast to more violent *Sungusungu* vigilante groups documented elsewhere in Tanzania. The diversity of institutional forms and purposes all going under the name *Sungusungu* further illustrates the adaptation of 'traditional' arrangements to new purposes.

A case study of inclusion/exclusion in Amei, Tanzania (House 2005, Tukai 2004)

Local institutions are neither necessarily inclusive nor do they represent the poor and the marginalised. They may be 'captured' by the rich and powerful – and operate in their favour to the detriment of the poor. This example illustrates how, even where there is a commitment to securing equality by the development agency, transformation of unequal relations is likely to be a long-term project and cannot be achieved through institutional inclusion alone. The case raises questions about what other interventions could have helped to alleviate the gender inequalities and to support the role of women in village government.

A WaterAid-supported community water project in a pastoralist community in Amei, Tanzania, achieved considerable success in securing the rehabilitation of a borehole and the extension of the distribution system. A locally owned and managed system was established. Considerable efforts were made during implementation of the project, to secure the inclusion of women in decision-making and to overcome the strong patriarchal values which had previously excluded them. Women were elected to take positions in Village Government, including the Water Committee. Women felt that the project had educated them about health and hygiene, raised issues of their position in the village and shifted social norms so that men and women were now able to sit together at meetings.

Despite this apparent success at integrating women into the institutions for decision-making, many of the social practices and daily arrangements around collecting water still disadvantaged women. Women's inability to pay for domestic water meant that their water collection took second place to men's collection of water for livestock (for which they were able to pay). Women commonly had to spend a long time waiting until livestock had finished watering before they could collect water for domestic use and were chided by men for collecting too much water in the dry season. One commentator suggested that in introducing a system of charging for water, vital to operational sustainability, the project had actually disadvantaged women.

Community ownership versus professionalism - Uchira Village, Tanzania (Toner and Cleaver 2005)

A study of the development of a community-based Water User Association established with donor support illustrates both the complexity and also some of the tensions of balancing community ownership of institutions with the need for efficiency and effectiveness.

The Uchira Water User Association (UWUA) was established to rehabilitate and develop the village water supply piped to public standposts and private connections. It received support in institutional formation and capacity building from GTZ and worked in partnership with the Village Council to mobilise villagers for the rehabilitation work, although GTZ specified that UWUA should remain independent of government structures. UWUA has been relatively successful at securing the rehabilitation of the water system and at extending coverage.

UWUA is characterised as a community-owned institution. It was intended that local 'ownership' would be secured through broad membership of the association by those who had contributed either labour or cash, and through the election of the board of management. However, research shows that membership of the association - which confers the right to vote in elections and attend board meetings - is confined to a small proportion of villagers and these tend to be from wealthier households, and individuals already involved in other decision-making institutions in the village.

As the institution has evolved, there has been an increasing trend away from community involvement towards professionalism. Professional staff funded by the water tariffs run day-to-day operations, and both managers and technicians were recruited from outside the village. Such professionalism has facilitated effective operation of the water supplies and revenue collection, but the associated focus on official rules has reduced the scope for flexibility of arrangements at different public standposts and reduced the sense of community 'ownership'. Both the donor and the Water User Association seemed to focus on effective operation and sustainability, to the neglect of equity of access. Additionally, the institution-building of UWUA by the donor may have had the effect of marginalising the democratically elected village government; UWUA had far grander offices and resources at its disposal than did the Village Council. The donor continues to fund 'capacity-building activities and it is doubtful how sustainable the self-financing of the organisation will in the long run be. Whilst many villagers agree that their water supplies have improved, they also perceive that they have been 'privatised' by a small group of 'big potatoes'!

Conclusion

Improved participation of the marginalised in the institutions of democratic government and civil society is thought to be essential to empowering the poor and ensuring that their views are taken into account (Hickey and Bracking 2005). However these case studies illustrate some of the complexities of local institutions and some of the tensions involved in development interventions aimed at building their capacity. They make it clear that there is no simple formula for building effective pro-poor local institutions and that we need better understandings of how such institutions work in practice, and of how they evolve over time. In particular there can be tensions between the objectives of efficiency and effectiveness and those of building institutions which involve, represent and serve the marginalised.

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Useful resources

<http://www.indiana.edu/iascp>

International Association for the Study of Common Property contains access to their huge online library of resources and news of events, etc.

http://www.grc-exchange.org/g_themes/cc_institutionaldevelopment

Mathauer I. (2004) **Institutional analysis toolkit for safety net interventions** In the wake of the economic crisis in the late 1990s, safety nets that mitigate the effects of poverty and other risks on vulnerable households have experienced renewed interest. What are the institutional challenges relating to safety net interventions? How can institutional analysis propose solutions to enable better outcomes? This paper provides a toolkit on the institutional capacity of the major components of formal safety net interventions and provides guidelines on key performance issues.

http://www.grc-exchange.org/info_data/record.cfm?Id=1490&source=bulletin

Dorward A et al. (Nov 2004) **Institution and economic policies for pro-poor agricultural growth**, IFPRI & Imperial College London
<http://www.livelihoods.org/hottopics/Agriculture/AgricultureG&P>.

The role of local institutions in reducing vulnerability to recurrent natural disasters and in sustainable livelihoods development
http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/project_summaries/FAOvulnerability

Upcoming SL-related activities/programmes

Quo Vadis communications empowers NGO and developmental sector with specialised communication course. This is a Basic Communication course specially designed for members of the NGO and developmental communities in South Africa. The course runs for six days on 15/16 February; 8/9 March; and 29/30 March in Johannesburg. For more information call Sello Kau on (011) 487 0026 or 082 347 5141, or fax (011) 487 1994 or sello@quo-vadis.co.za

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