



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

NJAS - Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/njas

Research paper

‘Producing’ institutions of climate change adaptation and food security in north eastern Ethiopia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Institutions
Diagnostics
Food security
Adaptation
Resource management
Power relations

ABSTRACT

The paper presents institutional diagnostics, which is sensitive to dynamic social and political processes ‘producing’ institutions underlying practices in resource management, climate change adaptation, and food security. The paper is based on a qualitative case study on watershed development interventions conducted in two villages in Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The research showed that resource management, adaptation, and food security institutions in Ethiopia are a result of struggles between containment strategies of the Ethiopian state and counter containment strategies of local communities. While the state’s containment institutions allowed it to mobilize a large number of rural residents for its resource management interventions, the counter containment strategies from local communities limited the potential contribution of the interventions for adaptation and food security endeavors of the state. From an institutional diagnostic perspective two conclusions are made, one empirical and another theoretical. The empirical part of the paper concludes that the Ethiopian state is using institutions to contain its population towards state-driven development pathways, which is essential to understand watershed development and state-led natural resource management interventions. The theoretical portion concludes that although institutions are often portrayed as static elements of social life, in fact they are also dynamic, socially produced, and could be coopted by powerful actors.

1. Introduction

Climate change has put pressure on society through its negative impact on food systems. The fifth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that changes in global temperature and precipitation regimes will affect global food security, impacting all aspects of food security, namely food access, utilization, and price stability (Porter et al., 2014). Hence, climate change adaptation interventions are crucial in areas where food security is threatened either through direct impacts of climate change, such as an increase in temperature and change in precipitation on crops, livestock and fishery systems, or indirect impacts such as flooding on food system infrastructures (Lobell et al., 2008; Porter et al., 2014). It is important to note that in sub-Saharan countries, where livelihoods are dependent on agriculture, climate change adaptation is intimately linked to management of the natural resource basis of rural livelihoods (Niang et al., 2014; Branca et al., 2013; Toulmin, 1991). It is within this intricate relationship of climate change, natural resource management, adaptation, and food security that this paper sets out to diagnose the role of institutions in food security in sub-Sharan Africa in general and in northeastern Ethiopia in particular. This paper attempts to understand how institutions influence food security by

diagnosing the way natural resources, which have a bearing on food security are governed.

The role of institutions in natural resource management, climate change adaptation, and food security is well recognized. They are considered important mechanisms of ensuring collective action in the face of uncertainty (Agrawal, 2010; Mehta et al., 1999; Toulmin, 1991). Taking the common notion of institutions as ‘enablers’ or ‘constraints’, some consider institutions in functional terms such as rules, regulations, and conventions (Ostrom and Basurto, 2011). This often leads to a prescription of institutional design principles, which are assumed to overcome institutional path dependency and inefficiency and allow actors to work together for a common good (Huntjens et al., 2012; Anderies et al., 2004). While such understanding reveals the importance of institutions for food security, it also conceals a lot about it. One important aspect that is concealed is the power dynamics, which influence and are influenced by institutions (Johnson, 2004). In real life situation, power asymmetries explain how actors make use of institutions differently, with powerful actors taking most of the advantage of the production and use of institutions (Jessop, 2005, 2001).

This paper argues for understanding institutions as a product of social and political practices (Mehta et al., 1999). It presents an institutional diagnostic with a special focus on how institutions are

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.njas.2017.10.007>

Received 28 November 2016; Received in revised form 25 October 2017; Accepted 31 October 2017

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produced, selectively used, and resisted in a state-led natural resource management intervention. A case study of a watershed development intervention implemented by the Government of Ethiopia in two villages shows how existing institutions regulate state-society interactions in natural resource management. The paper's major aim is to make a theoretical contribution to institutional diagnostics, which is committed to understanding institutions within the context of asymmetric power relations between state actors and local communities and the implication of this for climate change adaptation and food security.

Institutional diagnosis for food security and climate change adaptation involves identification of various institutional varieties and their functioning in different settings, with the aim of probing opportunities for transformational change (Röling et al., 2012). It involves understanding the critical constraints of the system in a particular setting and experimenting with selected solutions to change the system to a desired state (Jiggins, 2012; Rodrik, 2010). This paper provides an insight into a state-centric institutional variety and explores what this variety is capable of doing and its predicaments in the social and political context of the study areas. Rather than looking at institutions as local rule making toolboxes of fixing free riding problems in collective actions or multi-stakeholder platforms (Faysse, 2006; Warner, 2005), this paper centers on how institutions are used by those who want to contain the action of others. In addition, it explains the different mechanisms that those under control display to resist containment strategies imposed on them (Jessop, 2005). The diagnostic aspects of this paper are limited to institutions that stem from the state. Thus, although this paper presents the role of power asymmetry in influencing the dynamics of institutions, it does not conclude that other forms of institutions that do not stem from the state are immune from power grabs.

This paper makes use of a variant of institutionalism called Strategic Relations Approach (SRA), which offers heuristic tools for state centric institutional diagnostic. SRA strives to understand the duality of agency and structures from a relational perspective (Jessop, 2005). It takes institutions as relational mechanisms that explain the relationship between structure and agency. Such a relational view of structure and agency unveils the role of power and power relations in the functioning of institutions. In SRA, structures are seen as strategically selective of action of agents. This means structures favor some actions while discriminating against others; while they favor the action of those with power, they discriminate the powerless. However, agents are not passive victims of structures. Rather, they make strategic calculations to make use of structures for their benefits. Hence, individual actors approach structural constraints in a way that maximizes their satisfaction (Jessop, 2005, 2001).

Section two of the paper presents the theoretical framework of the study which is grounded in Strategic Relation Approach (SRA), which is complemented by other theories to illuminate containment and counter containment strategies of the state and local communities respectively. Section three presents methodological approaches of the study including sampling procedures, data collection and analysis. Section four presents the findings of the study, including the vulnerability context of the study villages, diagnostics of institutions of containment of the state and counter containment responses of local communities. Section five distills the implications of the study for institutional diagnostics. The paper ends with a conclusion, which calls for a combination of 'politicized' approaches to institutional diagnostics with other forms institutional analysis for a compressive understanding of institutions of climate change adaptation and food security conditions in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical point of departure for the study is that resource management institutions are dynamic and 'produced' through social and political practice of actors (Mehta et al., 1999). It develops an approach, which is sensitive to political, cultural and historical contexts

that produce institutions (Clement, 2013; Johnson, 2004). The processes of 'production of institutions' involve creating and enforcing a particular institutional arrangement, which may range from a bricolage of formal as well as informal, to mutually overlapping and at times contradicting institutions (Cleaver, 2012). Actors involved in production of a new institutional arrangement are often not on equal footing. Rather, collaboration involves actors with asymmetric power relations, such as the state and local communities (Adger, 2003). In such situations, there is a tendency for the actors to compete for dominance over the collaborative process, resulting in an attempt by the dominant group to restrain the actions of the less powerful group in order to take advantage of the collaboration process (Walker and Hurlley, 2004). In so doing, dominant groups in collaborative processes use their power and discursive instruments to make sure that their pre-planned interventions are not hampered by competing actors (Few, 2001). However, those with less power are not simply passive victims. Even in coercive state-society relationships, less powerful groups have some ability to counter the containment imposed on them (Mann, 2009). This interplay between actors of differential power relation influences institutional arrangements of resource management.

As a heuristic institutional diagnostic tool, SRA helps to uncover the following aspects of institutions of food security and natural resource management. First, it treats institutions as 'emergent phenomena whose reproduction is incomplete, provisional, and unstable' (Jessop, 2001:1230). Hence, it opens an opportunity to analyze the processes that produces a particular institutional arrangement in a particular time and place. Second, it looks beyond a particular institutional arrangement to understand the social relations and contexts that produce institutions (Jessop, 2001:1231). This insight is useful to understand the political context behind institutions of resource management and food security. Third, it highlights two inherent nature of institutions. A) They are strategically selective in their constraints as they privilege some at the expense of others. b) Actors make strategic calculations to take advantage of institutional arrangements (Jessop, 2001:1224). These insights are useful to uncover the role of power and power relations in resource management institutional settings. The paper incorporates insights from political ecology into the ways state-society relations are used to understand the political context in Ethiopia that produces institutions of resource management, which is in line with historical and sociological approaches to understanding of institutions (Clement, 2013; Johnson, 2004).

Hence, SRA conceptualizes institutions of collaborative resource management as instruments of state containment strategies. Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Foucault's concept of governmentality add to this perspective an approach explaining how the state could achieve this. Literature on the Gramscian approach to state-nature relations explicate how the state uses its hegemony manifested principally through 'ideology' and 'common sense' and selective use of coercion and consent to a state-dominated resource management plans (Bridge, 2014:4; Mann, 2009). Ideologies of the powerful, which are a result of cemented experiences and experimentations of a narrow group of actors, are portrayed as applying to a wider range of actors. In this way, dominant groups obtain consent and legitimacy for their intervention even when they work against the interests of subordinate groups (Lears, 1985). Such hegemonic processes involve wide array of actors including: business people, teachers, religious leaders, and others who would work to their own subjugation, albeit unconsciously (Lears, 1985:572; Bates, 1975). The implication of this for collaborative resource management is that once the state establishes legitimacy of its political ideologies and gets the consent of its citizens, it gets the upper hand to decide on the goals, standards, and norms of the collaborative intervention.

Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' is used to excavate how state's ideologies penetrate collaborative resource management arrangements by creating governable spaces using power and knowledge (Bridge, 2014). Knowledge production, such as collection of regular

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