



Governing for resilience: the role of institutional work

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Resilience has become a key concept in the sciences and practices of environmental governance. Yet governing for resilience is a major challenge because it requires governance systems to be both stable and flexible at the same time. The concept of 'institutional work' is a promising lens for analysing the dynamic tension between stability and flexibility in governance systems. It refers to actions through which actors create, maintain, or disrupt institutions. The paper explains the concept of institutional work and shows how it usefully integrates several emerging lines of study regarding agency in governance. Overall, the concept of institutional work opens up novel opportunities for analysing the interactions between actors and institutional structures that produce stability and flexibility in governance systems.

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Introduction

Governing for resilience in social-ecological systems is a major challenge because it requires governance systems to be both stable and flexible at the same time [1]. On the one hand, flexibility is important for governance systems to deal with uncertain, unpredictable, and non-linear forms of social and environmental change [2,3]. On the other hand, governance systems require stability to ensure that new policies persist over sufficient timeframes to bring about desired effects, and to stabilise expectations and enhance coordination over time [4]. For example, Australia introduced an internationally-praised

nationwide carbon tax in 2012 only to have it withdrawn 2 years later following a change of government [5]. In the domain of biodiversity conservation, a recent global study finds that many governments around the world are using a diverse range of tactics to undermine their own conservation laws and policies [6^{••}]. Thus policy adoption alone is not enough: new arrangements also need to be maintained, supported, and enforced over time in order to be effective. More broadly, democratic political systems need to provide sufficient stability to uphold legitimate, fair, and accountable sets of rules, while also being flexible in adapting to economic, social, and environmental change over time [7].

Institutions are central to the challenge of achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility in governance systems [8–11]. Institutions are formal and informal rules that guide human and organisational behaviour [12,13]. By definition, they provide stability and predictability to social interactions. Yet in seeking to govern for resilience, it is also necessary to adapt existing institutions to changing circumstances. For example, Folke [14] highlights that resilience involves “the ability of people, communities, societies, and cultures to live and develop with change, with ever-changing environments . . . cultivating the capacity to sustain development in the face of change, . . . [and] navigating complexity, uncertainty, and change across levels and scales”. This raises puzzling questions about how institutions can meet these needs [15–17]. For example, how do existing institutions resist pressures to change, and conversely, how do new institutions become introduced and stabilized over time? How can important enduring institutional functions (e.g. democratic governance, policy-making systems, property rights, accountability mechanisms) be adapted and transformed within changing environmental, social, and political contexts?

Recent insights on stability and flexibility in institutions are somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, various studies elaborate on the difficulties of achieving substantial change due to rigidities, lock-ins and inertia in institutional structures [18,19]. On the other hand, it is increasingly acknowledged that stability and persistence of institutions should not be taken for granted [20^{••},21,22]. For example, institutions can change gradually over time due to ongoing political contestation over their distributional implications, and jockeying over their meaning and interpretation in day-to-day practice [20^{••}]. Changing, but also maintaining, institutions is thus likely to require active effort on the part of actors involved in their enactment.

This paper explores the concept of institutional work as a promising lens for analysing how actors interact with institutional structures, seeking to create, maintain, or disrupt them over time [23^{••}]. This concept has its origins in the field of organizational studies, and is recently beginning to be applied in environmental governance [24[•],25–27,28[•]]. It is part of a growing body of literature that focusses on incremental and evolutionary forms of institutional change, and the active role of individuals and organisations in these processes [20^{••},29,30[•]]. The value of looking at institutional work in the context of governing for resilience is that it provides a way to analyse endogenous agency-related dynamics that underpin stability and flexibility in governance systems. In other words, it focuses on micro-level interactions that ultimately give rise to macro-level patterns. This can provide new ways of thinking about how to navigate tensions between stability and flexibility in governance. It also contributes to understanding and explaining institutional change, which is a key challenge in the literature on governance and resilience [31[•],32[•]].

Stability versus flexibility

Governing for resilience requires achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility in the face of uncertainty, dynamics, and change. Yet this is complicated by the fact that both stability and flexibility can lead to desirable or undesirable resilience outcomes [33^{••}] (Figure 1). Institutions that are stable are desirable when they support legitimate, fair, and accountable political systems in both the short- and long-term. Yet they become undesirable when reinforcing unsustainable

lock-ins, keeping communities stuck in poverty traps [34], or proving incapable of self-correction within changing cultural and political contexts. Institutions that are flexible are desirable when they support learning, innovation and adaptation to intelligently respond to new pressures and risks to social-ecological systems, and when they allow innovation in governance systems to deal with difficult problems (*e.g.* climate change). Yet they are undesirable when they allow hard-won environmental policy to be diluted, increase or harden disparities between social groups, or permit governments to retract from national and international commitments on political whims. Scholarly work on governance for resilience needs to confront these tensions, which are poorly-addressed within current theorizing.

The concept of institutional work

Institutional work refers to actions through which actors create, maintain, or disrupt these institutional structures [23^{••},26]. It brings attention to the strategic, but also day-to-day, ways in which actors seek to influence the institutional structures in which they operate, also acknowledging that actors' actions are shaped and constrained by these structures [23^{••},45,46]. This concept has so far been mainly used in organisation studies to analyse how processes of interpretation, contestation, and learning influence the meaning and impact of institutional structures [47]. Studies have, for example, presented insights into the diversity of institutional strategies through which individual and collective actors can enable sustainability transitions [48], or shown the value of institutional work for creating resilient governance systems [49^{••}].

Figure 1

		Resilience outcome	
		Desirable	Undesirable
Property of institutions	Stability	Legitimacy; fairness; democratic accountability; consistent "rules to change the rules" in political systems [35,36]	Unsustainable "lock-in" (<i>e.g.</i> carbon-intensive energy systems [19]); poverty traps [37,38]; democratic decay [7]
	Flexibility	Learning and adaptation to manage pressures on social-ecological systems; innovation in governance (<i>e.g.</i> for climate change [39–41])	Instability or superficiality of environmental policy; land grabbing triggered by institutional reform [42,43], wavering government commitment (<i>e.g.</i> climate policy upheaval, withdrawal from international agreements [44])

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Stability or flexibility of institutions can have desirable or undesirable resilience outcomes [35,36,19,37,38,7,39–44].

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