



# Niche action and system harmonization for institutional change: Prospects for demand-driven agricultural extension in Vietnam



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon institution, power, and network concepts, this article analyzes how different actors interact with institutions in institutional change processes at niche level. The analysis builds on action research which developed and reflected upon the Farmer Research and Extension Network – an innovative, demand-driven approach to agricultural extension in Vietnam's north-western uplands. The action-researcher identified commune extension workers as strategic actors in the system and, consequently, supported them in exploiting and widening their existing room for maneuver. Throughout the research process, new rules and roles were developed with local stakeholders and carefully introduced into the local extension system. Thereby, the action research process helped institutionalizing demand-oriented approaches to public service delivery, in a manner firmly rooted in everyday action and politics. The findings reveal the critical contribution at niche level that commune extension workers can make to on-going institutional change in a late socialist polity.

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## 1. Introduction

Institutions and institutional change mean many different things, depending on which school of thought one ascribes to. Analyses of institutional change processes fall into two main approaches: economic or cultural and social-constructionist (Schneiberg, 2005). The *economic approach* views institutions as formal rules (laws and regulations) or informal rules (norms, values and beliefs) of the game, i.e. as sets of rules, procedures and norms that structure social interaction by constraining and enabling actors' behavior in economic actions (e.g. North, 1990, 1993; Williamson, 2000). Institutional change is viewed as outcomes of centralized collective-choices and political processes (e.g. Ostrom, 2005; Kaufman, 2007) or decentralized selection processes of many individuals which determine the rules that eventually emerge (e.g. Williamson, 2000). The *cultural and social-constructionist* approach sees institutions as a dominant system of interrelated regulative, normative, cultural and cognitive elements of laws,

rules, norms, values, and shared beliefs, conventions, and meanings from which actors derive orientations that guide their actions and behaviors (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991; Scott, 2001). Institutional change is thereby viewed as the outcome of interactions between actors and institutions that occur when facing external shocks or the development and diffusion of a new set of institutions across fields. Ultimately, transition theory explains the outcomes of institutional change by the ability of networks, the state, and other actors to react to controversies and to theorize alternatives (e.g. Geels and Schot, 2007).

Institutional change has received increasing attention in development, political stability, and social inclusion literatures (e.g. Williams, 2002; Dacin et al., 2002; Seo and Creed, 2002; Aulakh and Kotabe, 2008; Kingston and Caballero, 2009; Leftwich and Sen, 2011). This renewed interest reflects the crucial role of institutions as rules or norms in structuring social life and of the complexity of institutional change, particularly with regard to its interaction with organizational fields. Many studies have attempted to address factors underlying institutional change in development contexts. One strand of literature focuses on how formal and informal institutions and their relations drive change processes. For instance, Roland (2004) highlights their reciprocal nature whereby slow-moving, socially embedded institutions exercise causal pressures on faster-moving formal institutions, while fast-moving

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institutions also can influence the path of the slow-moving ones. Di Tommaso et al. (2007) argue that through economic and political liberalization at the start of transition and with the help of an external anchor, formal institutions can break path dependence that hinders institutional change in transition economies. Another strand of literature focuses on how individual and collective behaviors trigger institutional change. With regard to China, for instance, Tsai (2006) argues that people respond creatively to the formal institutions constraining them, which then functions as a causal mechanism for the creation of adaptive informal institutions. For the case of Mexico and Argentina, Williams (2002) found that rule- and procedure-changing behavior in the form of targeted reform of existing institutions was conducive to gradual yet consistent changes in regulatory frameworks and, more broadly, institutional change. He posits strategizing behavior, whereby actors seek to maximize the efficiency of resource expenditures required to create effective new institutional mechanisms (or to secure procedural changes), as a way for actors to ensure the maximum payoff of institutional change (Williams, 2002).

In developing and transition economies, informal institutions can either shape formal ones or they can emerge as the predominant rules in cases where formal institutions and markets fail (Casson et al., 2010). In Vietnam's transition, the exact role of informal institutions, and their interactions with formal institutions in the process of institutional change, remains unclear (Gainsborough, 2007b; Casson et al., 2010; Fforde, 2011). In this article, we therefore examine two main research questions: How do different actors, particularly local stakeholders, interact with each other and with formal and informal institutions in the process of institutional change? How do institutions influence actors' behavior in legitimizing a new institutional arrangement and institutional change?

We approach these questions by drawing on an action research on the development of a Farmer Research and Extension Network (FREN) in north-western Vietnam. FREN is a new institutional arrangement inspired by an engagement with local problems and problem solving on the one hand, and with key concepts found in the literatures on institutions, power, and networks on the other hand. The site of fieldwork was selected due to three main reasons. First, Vietnam is in a state of transition, yet its formal institutions are dominated by the Party-state. The official presentation of current institutional reforms tends to overemphasize planned change whilst downplaying continuity, most notably the fact that the one-party state is arguably further strengthened by pro-market reforms (Gainsborough, 2010). Second, Vietnam's institutional change often challenges the current systems of state power and governance. For instance, the introduction of 'shared-power' community-based environmental management was being hampered by conflicts between multiple stakeholder structures, dispersed authority arrangements, and diverse policy instruments in local government and formal governance procedures (Ingle and Halimi, 2007). Third, institutional change has proved that local actors have historically used their collective agency and power to shape political change at the national level (Painter, 2005; Fforde, 2011). The decollectivization of agriculture initiated in the 1980s is a case in point: it started locally and was largely initiated by villagers, whereas national policy simply followed, thus providing evidence of bottom-up pressures leading to institutional change at the national level (Kerkvliet, 1995). Moreover, local bureaucrats typically exercise considerable discretion over decision-making, combine formal and informal institutions, and tend to be constrained by personal, and hence arbitrary, power rather than by the rule of law (Painter, 2003). Fourth, the ongoing institutional reform has, in spite of attempts of centralized control, maintained many of the existing 'home grown' local and informal institutions, while new ones were

gradually developed (Steer and Sen, 2010). In effect, this has led to great uncertainty and dissent over the change of direction (Beresford, 2008). The direction of change can, to some extent, be explained by the state bureaucracy's efforts to retain power through moving from administering the centrally planned economy to gate-keeping in the market economy (Gainsborough, 2007a). The articulation of different interests and their negotiation constitute a theoretically important site for research into local institutional change in general and in the context of agricultural innovation and extension in particular. In the next section, we lay out the analytical framework for this analysis.

## 2. Analytical framework

Institutional change is a multi-level phenomenon that requires analysis at various levels: niche, regime, and landscape levels. At each analytical level, different heuristics and concepts help identify likely transition pathways (Geels and Schot, 2007; Avelino and Rotmans, 2009). Because it was local stakeholders' initiatives that prompted our analysis of institutional change, we focus our analysis on the niche level and its interactions with the other two levels. Niches form the micro-level of interacting actor-groups and networks whereby niche innovations are developed on the basis of actors' expectations, visions, existing knowledge, and learning processes (Geels and Schot, 2007). Relationships between niche innovations and the existing regime can result in the replacement of parts of the regime or in competence-enhancing add-ons. As parts of the system, niches can deviate from the system's dominant institutional structures, practices, and actors, and can effect change in the wider system (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009). These niche innovations and change processes, especially in the context of rural development, are influenced by rule-based actions (Smith et al., 2005; Geels and Schot, 2007), the interplay of various actors' exercise of power (Woods, 2008; Avelino and Rotmans, 2009), and the configuration and relative strength of actor networks (Murdoch, 2000; Oreszczyn et al., 2010).

According to Geels and Schot (2007), niche innovations and change processes are influenced by broader regime and landscape development through affecting niche actors' perceptions and support networks' size. These influences can be selection pressures such as economic pressure (competition, taxes, charges, regulations), as well as macro-economics, deep cultural patterns, and macro-political development (Smith et al., 2005) and can be reflected through niche rule-based actions that are framed by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions (Geels and Schot, 2007).

Emphasizing agency's power exercise in the institutional forming and functioning processes, De Koning and Cleaver developed the theory of institutional bricolage (see Cleaver, 2001; De Koning and Cleaver, 2012). Actors consciously and unconsciously reshape or piece together different arrangements at hand; patch together the available social, cultural and political resources based on the logic of dynamic adaptation; inscribe configurations of rules, traditions, norms and relationships with meaning and authority; and modify old arrangements and invent new ones. These ways of exercising power reflect actors' strategies aimed at shaping and altering institutions. These strategies are (1) rule aggregation or the recombination of different types of institutions and socio-cultural elements; (2) rule alteration or institutional adaptation through initiating small changes or complete reinterpretations of certain institutions; and (3) rule articulation or rejection involving the assertion of traditional identities and culture to resist introduced institutional arrangements.

Exercising rule-based action and power in niche-innovations and change processes involve complex *networks* of actors from

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