

Theory Brief:

Institutional theory and societal adaptation to rapid climate change

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1. Social Adaptation and Rapid Climate Change

We define adaptive capacity as the potential of a social system to adapt to external stressors. Adaptation refers to material changes in the activity or configuration of a system under which key variables are conserved or enhanced (which distinguishes adaptation from degradation). Adaptation to a particular stressor or collection of stressors (such as rapid climate change) will take place in the context of a social system's wider and ongoing adaptation or degradation in the face of multiple environmental, human and technological change. Rapid climate change is defined from a social perspective, as an unexpected, counter-intuitive and dynamic stressor unfolding over 10-30 years.

Adaptive capacity is contingent upon the purpose of a system. If a farmer's ability to sustain a farming livelihood fails because of rapid climate change, and they switch to a more diversified livelihood strategy (opening a B&B, for example), then this represents a degradation of their livelihood system if judged in terms of farming. However, when judged as a rural livelihood system, the new strategy could be seen as an improvement, and hence a successful adaptation.

2. Institutions

The literature on natural disasters emphasises the importance of social institutions for shaping the way that environmental stress affects communities and individuals. In exploring social institutions we follow New Institutional theory in casting institutions as the formal and informal rules that shape human behaviour. A distinction is usually made between institutions and organisations. Organisations are considered agents (players of the game rather than rules), they comprise constellations of individuals and groups organised in pursuit of particular purposes. Institutions are the 'rules of the game' and can be formal (legislative) or informal (cultural). They shape, and are shaped by, individuals and organisations. Institutions have no agency or indeed membership of their own. They are sometimes treated simply as constraints (felt as corruption or inertia for example), but we are sympathetic to the view that they enable as well as constrain, providing a framework through which co-operation between individuals is possible. Institutions can provide spaces and structures for innovation, flexibility, reflection or resistance.

Although this discussion of institutions treats them in isolation, in practice they are systemically interrelated. That is they have different relevancy to given decisions by given actors, and act to modify one another in particular situations. In particular we note that while formal aspects of institutional regimes are often more visible than the informal, the former often depend on the latter for their interpretation and reproduction in any context. In spite of this, informal institutions are seen as either too abstruse to tackle or worse, a source of corruption, resistance and anti-social behaviour in top-down oriented institutional analyses. Attention is inevitably directed towards formal institutions, because this is where it is thought there is opportunity for conscious design and improvement. We suggest that analysing informal institutions and their relationship to adaptation and change is a key aspect of understanding adaptive capacity, and seek to develop a framework which helps this analysis, drawing on theory from the literature on social capital and organisational learning.

3. Social capital

Social capital provides a language to examine the association between the quality of interpersonal relationships within a social system, the operation and evolution of institutions and subsequent shaping of adaptive capacity to rapid climate change. We are particularly interested in the adaptive capacity of individuals and communities that arises from different forms of social capital, through the development, maintenance and evolution of institutions.

Much work on social capital has been criticised for neglecting the issue of power. Here social capital refers to networked interpersonal relationships. Power is relational, existing within every social interaction. The diversity of theoretical approaches to social capital reflects the context-dependent nature of researching the subject, which means that individual projects have to be careful in the definition, operationalisation and measurement of the concept.

It is supposed that institutional capacity-building and the formation of networks to enhance adaptive capacity depends on a critical thickness of social capital, motivating pressure(s) and a supportive enabling environment that inhibits the emergence of 'negative' social capital (such as that found in networks of corruption). However, where formal institutions hold sway, with participants playing roles with more clearly bounded responsibilities and social interaction and exchange of information or resources, the milieu is quite different from the informality and flexibility that characterises social capital exchanges. We are interested in the extent to which social capital allows one to understand informal institutions and the lessons for policy and practice that a balanced appreciation of informal institutions suggests.

4. Organisational Learning

Organisational learning is an important concept in the management literature. Learning is seen as a core strategic capacity of an organisation in terms of both competitive advantage and survival in a rapidly changing business environment. In the sense that organisational learning is concerned with the social conditioning of capacity to respond to events, it is directly relevant to institutions and adaptation to rapid climate change.

Theories of organisational learning focus on two types of social learning: (i) individual learning as it is socially conditioned, and (ii) collective learning which emerges at the organisational level. Another distinction made about learning in organisations is between single and double loop learning. The former is about efficiency, learning to undertake activities and achieve goals with increased skill. The latter is concerned with changes in the governing values of an organisation, in strategies and assumptions. Double loop learning is seen as harder, frustrated by inhibition and defensive routines and requiring cultural and personal discipline to achieve. We are interested in such distinctions, not only because they reveal qualitatively different kinds of adaptation and say something about the attendant institutional factors, but also because the relationships between them reveals the links between different forms of adaptation. Can some forms of learning result in fostering adaptations that close or advance adaptive capacity elsewhere in the system, or in the future?

As well as the mainstream views of organisational learning, we are investigating two other recent lineages of organisational theory. The first, 'communities of practice' is a development of situated learning theory and focuses on the formation of individual and group identity through mutual engagement in practice. The second draws on complexity theory for insight into processes of learning and change in organisations. Both lineages focus on the informal reality of organisational life – how things get done, and question the extent to which learning and adaptation can be usefully designed or managed. They focus on engagement with the shadow network, the non-canonical set of institutions and interpersonal relationships that enable an organisation to persist. This perspective opens a space for bottom-up/adaptiveness-in-action, in addition or as an alternative to top-down/anticipatory adaptation. The question is the extent to which these can co-exist in practice and be empirically traced.
