

Institutional change and continuity in an Andean peasant community facing multiple climatic and economic pressures.

Theme 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change

Sub-theme 4.4. Interrelations between societal, cultural, and economic and political values

Summary

In the Colombian Andes, farming communities have co-evolved with their environment for centuries. However, it is uncertain whether traditional institutional and cultural systems are adapting to current unprecedented economic (e.g. modernization and liberalization) and climatic pressures. This study investigated institutional adaptation and the social mechanisms of institutional change or continuity in a smallholding peasant community. The study adopted evolutionary theories of institutional change, and a qualitative approach that included data collected through a focus group, oral histories, key informant interviews and observations. The informal institutions that appear to be changing are reciprocal work exchange and gender-based roles in the household, both due to economic pressures. Most informal institutions, however, persist due to three mechanisms: selective outmigration, intergenerational transmission, and practices of everyday resistance. Peasant informal institutions and cultural models represent a 'social attractor' that controls change and determine a form of endogenous lock-in into a limited range of possible futures.

Extended abstract

Climate change and market liberalization often affect peasants in poor countries simultaneously. While adaptation to such 'double exposure' is needed, it is usually approached as a techno-scientific problem, without a thorough understanding of the social root causes of vulnerability (e.g. social, political, and economic processes), and of the potential for autonomous adaptation and transformation that lies in informal social institutions that co-evolve with the changing environment (Feola 2013). In the Colombian Andes, farming communities have co-evolved with their environment for centuries, and a dynamic system of informal social institutions (e.g. land inheritance rules, reciprocity, labour mobilization, or intergenerational sharecropping) has evolved to insure a simple, but rather stable livelihood (e.g. Fals-Borda 1957). However, it is uncertain whether this institutional system is adapting to current unprecedented pressures of climatic change and the governmental attempt to transform agriculture towards market-based, industrial models in the name of economic development and modernization (e.g. De Los Rios and Almeida 2010; Perez et al 2010).

Against this backdrop, this study set out to investigate institutional adaptation (or lack thereof) and particularly the social mechanisms of institutional change or continuity in a smallholding peasant community named Vereda Las Cañas in the Eastern Cordillera of the Colombian Andes.

Institutions are usually studied from a static perspective, e.g. to assess their functioning and outcome, rather than dynamically, to explain their adaptive aspects, or how they came to exist in the form they do (e.g. Ternström 2012). Furthermore, the research most often addresses formal than informal institutions, which leaves considerable gaps with respect to what role informal institutions play in development outcomes (e.g. Casson et al 2009). Finally, research has mostly focussed on informal institutions whose purpose is environmental governance, but little evidence exists regarding non-environmental institutions, which can often be more significant than environmental ones in influencing the forms of social organization and consequently the human-environment interactions (e.g. Underdal 2008).

The conditions and processes that characterise institutional adaptation to a range of disturbances have recently been examined by a growing body of literature (e.g. Boyd and Folke, 2012). In this study, evolutionary theories from a range of disciplines were adopted to inform the examination of institutional change and persistence (e.g. Douglas 1986; Abel et al. 2006; Gual and Noorgard, 2008; Kingston and Caballero 2008).

Peasant informal institutions that were examined in this study were: egalitarian land inheritance, reciprocal work exchange, intergenerational sharecropping, gender-based division or roles within the household, barter, donations and gifts, and social events. The study also examined characteristic cultural elements related to the above mentioned informal institutions, namely: the regard of the household as the fundamental unit of social organization; distrust, reservation, resignation and conservatism; 'vital energy' metaphors and mental models of regenerative human-environment relations; long-term and circular time perspective; sufficiency and austerity (Fals-Borda 1955; Gudeman 2012).

Data were collected through key informant interviews, farmer oral histories (in interviews and one focus group), and observations, which were used to uncover changes in the informal social institutions that characterise the household economy in the study region. A personal observation diary was also kept to complement the data collection. Data were

analysed through latent content analysis using the software Nvivo.

Initial findings suggest that most peasant informal institutions persist in the face of external pressures. Peasant in Vereda Las Cañas have been pushed out of the market and turned towards subsistence agriculture as a strategy to secure livelihood. Market pressures, compounded by climatic ones, make farming not economically viable and 'modern' lifestyles make farming less attractive to younger generations. Depopulation of the community causes a weakening and thinning social networks, and the legacy of centuries of marginalization and exploitation can be observed in the current lack of support from government organizations.

The informal institutions that appear to be changing are reciprocal work exchange, and gender-based roles in the household. In both cases, the economic pressures appear to be triggering the change mechanisms. In the former case (i.e. reciprocal work exchange), the turn towards subsistence agriculture means that peasants cultivate smaller areas of land, and therefore need significantly less exchange of work with other households. When external work is needed, day workers are increasingly requesting wages rather than in-kind pays, which shows the influence of 'modern' market-based models of exchange that are surrounding the community. In the latter case (i.e. gender-based roles), women appear to take responsibility for tasks that, before the community started to depopulate and household sizes to shrink due to outmigration and reduces fertility rates, used to be carried out by young men in the household.

Most informal institutions, however, appear to be persisting, and the findings suggest that three mechanisms may be at play in this respect. First, selective outmigration appears to be occurring, with people conform with traditional institutions and cultural models more likely to stay in the community, and people with different aspirations and cultural influences more likely to move to urban areas. Secondly, while there is a primary school in the community, a substantial part of children education is delivered informally within the household through intergenerational transmission, which may result in the socialization to and persistence of traditional institutions and cultural models. Thirdly, peasant enact forms of everyday resistance to external influences as a form of defence against exploitation, which is still to be observed in the modes of interactions adopted by local government organizations and the private sector (e.g. mining) in dealing with the community. Thus, clinging to traditional cultural models, and institutions gains a 'political' value that hinders the influx of cultural variation and external influences in the community. Thus, it can be argued that peasant informal institutions and cultural models represent a 'social attractor' that controls change in Vereda Las Cañas and determine a form of endogenous lock-in into a limited range of possible futures.

The findings of this study increase our knowledge and understanding of peasant communities in this particular region, where such fine-grained understanding is lacking (Feola et al. 2014) and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on the mechanisms of institutional adaptation and cultural change to build resilience and sustainability.

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