

# Governing for resilience

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## ***Governing for resilience: the role of institutional work***

Raoul Beunen<sup>1</sup>, James Patterson<sup>2</sup>, Kristof Van Assche<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Management, Science and Technology, The Open University of the Netherlands, Heerlen, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> The Institute for Environmental Studies (IVM), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

### **Abstract**

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. Achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility is a key challenge. 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 institutional structures. The paper explains the concept of institutional work and shows how it usefully integrates several emerging lines of study regarding agency in governance, which have so far remained separate. 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.

### **Highlights**

- Governing for resilience requires governance systems to be both stable and flexible
- Institutions are central in achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility
- Actors may engage in "institutional work" to maintain, create, or disrupt institutions
- Institutional work plays a key role in producing stability or flexibility in governance systems
- This opens up new avenues to understand change and transformation in institutions

### **1. 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 (Duit et al., 2010). On the one hand, flexibility is important for governance systems to deal with uncertain, unpredictable, and non-linear forms of social and environmental change (Folke et al., 2005, Turner II et al., 2016). 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 (Greif, 2006). 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 (Rootes, 2014). 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 (Chapron et al., 2017). 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 (Fukuyama, 2014).

Institutions are central to the challenge of achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility in governance systems (Garrick and De Stefano, 2016, Milman et al., 2013, Koontz et al., 2015, Nyborg et al., 2016). Institutions are formal and informal rules that guide human and organisational behaviour (Ostrom, 2005, Young et al., 2008). 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 (2016) 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 (Quinlan et al., 2015, Davoudi et al., 2013, Boyd et al., 2015). 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 (Van Buuren et al., 2016, Seto et al., 2016). On the other hand, it is increasingly acknowledged that stability and persistence of institutions should not be taken for granted (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, Greif, 2014, Ostrom, 2014). 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 (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). 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 (Lawrence et al., 2009). This concept has its origins in the field of organizational studies, and is recently beginning to be applied in environmental governance (Brown et al., 2013a, Bettini et al., 2015, Beunen and Patterson, 2016, Binz et al., 2016, Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2016). 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 (Van Assche et al., 2014, Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, Capoccia, 2016). 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 (Duit, 2015, Sjöstedt, 2015).

## **2. 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 (Davoudi et al., 2012) (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 (Béné et al., 2014), 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.

		Resilience outcome	
		Desirable	Undesirable
Property of institutions	Stability	Legitimacy; fairness; democratic accountability; consistent "rules to change the rules" in political systems (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009, Cornell, 2014)	Unsustainable "lock-in" (e.g. carbon-intensive energy systems Seto et al., 2016); poverty traps (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, Maru et al., 2012); democratic decay (Fukuyama, 2014)
	Flexibility	Learning and adaptation to manage pressures on social-ecological systems; innovation in governance (e.g. for climate change Jordan and Huitema, 2014, Jordan et al., 2015, Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011)	Instability or superficiality of environmental policy; land grabbing triggered by institutional reform (Dell'Angelo et al., 2016, Verdery, 2003), wavering government commitment (e.g. climate policy upheaval, withdrawal from international agreements (Nordhaus, 2015)

**Figure 1:** Stability or flexibility of institutions can have desirable or undesirable resilience outcomes.

### 3. The concept of institutional work

Institutional work refers to actions through which actors create, maintain, or disrupt institutional structures (Lawrence et al., 2009, Beunen and Patterson, 2016). 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 (Lawrence et al., 2009, Czarniawska, 2009, Cloutier et al., 2016). 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 (Smink et al., 2015). Studies have, for example, presented insights into the diversity of institutional strategies through which individual and collective actors can enable sustainability transitions (Brown et al., 2013b), or shown the value of institutional work for creating resilient governance systems (Barin Cruz et al., 2016).

Recent institutional work literature reveals diverse behaviours through which institutional structures are created, maintained or disrupted, such as routines, the construction of identities and relations, promoting and demonizing institutions, the interpretation and alternation of institutions, valorising institutions, enforcement, and the development of alternative assumption and beliefs (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, Bettini et al., 2015, Brown et al., 2013b, Smink et al., 2015). This begins to offer intriguing new avenues for studying ways in which stability and flexibility of institutions is produced and potentially transformed. Stability results from actions that affirm and re-affirm the relevance and effectiveness of institutions, reassure adherence to the rules, and reproduce underlying assumptions and beliefs (Barin Cruz et al., 2016, Fredriksson, 2014). Flexibility stems from the fact that institutions can be disrupted and new ones created. It can follow from actions through which core assumptions and beliefs are changed, or actions through which rewards and sanctions become disconnected from norms or rules that they are supposed to uphold. Furthermore, the introduction of new, alternative coordination mechanisms can change the meaning and implications of existing institutions, potentially disrupting them, over time (Bohnsack et al., 2016, Djanibekov et al., 2016). Both stability and flexibility are likely to be inextricably part of every governance system (Van Assche et al., 2014).

Institutional work may involve a series of successive actions, and thus needs to be seen, in Pierson's terms, as a moving picture rather than as a single snapshot (Pierson, 2004). Actions that promote the inclusion of various stakeholders in decision-making processes, might for example not only change existing policies and practices, but also re-inforce norms concerning the inclusion of stakeholders and thus lead to more fundamental changes in the roles of governmental and non-governmental actors (Niedziałkowski et al., 2016, Alexander et al., 2015, Davidson and de Loë, 2016). Order, sequencing and timing create connectivity between different actions, and are crucial to explaining the effects of these actions (Beunen and Patterson, 2016). Furthermore, institutional maintenance is a dynamic process that requires institutions to be enacted and re-enacted on an ongoing basis (Lawrence et al.,

2009). Achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility in governing for resilience is likely to depend on a range of dynamic actions both promoting and resisting change over time.

#### **4. Applications and prospects**

Analysing institutional work can provide novel opportunities for understanding how stability and flexibility of governance systems is produced, and potentially transformed. For example, there has been substantial interest in recent years on policy/institutional entrepreneurship in environmental governance (Brouwer and Huitema, 2017, Alexander et al., 2015). This literature focuses on the active role of particular individuals in seeking to change institutions that are seen to be hindering the capacity to better govern social-ecological relations. However, a key strength of the concept of institutional work is that it brings attention not only to the strategies through which actors aim to change institutions, but also to the efforts needed to sustain new, or indeed existing, institutions. For example, what may be seen as stability at a macro-level may actually take much micro-level effort to produce. For example, scholars have recently observed that governments across the world are undermining their own environmental legislation in recent years through a range of actions that incrementally erode existing protection regimes (Chapron et al., 2017). This demonstrates that "maintenance" of existing institutions (in this case, for biodiversity conservation) often requires active and ongoing effort to uphold and defend existing institutions.

An institutional work lens might also provide insights about how future attempts to revise institutions could affect the overall stability of an institutional setup. For example, a recent evaluation of EU nature conservation directives proved highly contested as several NGOs feared that discussing a possible minor adjustment would open the door to a more extensive disruption of the directives (Trouwborst et al., 2017). This reflects a potentially complex interplay of efforts towards institutional creation, maintenance, and disruption.

Studying institutional work in practice is likely to be challenging. Particular attention needs to be given to the role of cognitive factors (e.g. perspectives, ideologies, beliefs, opinions, values or narratives) that drive institutional work, and how they are produced and reproduced through institutional work behaviours (Bohnsack et al., 2016). For example, the act of enforcing laws reproduces the social norms underpinning these laws, while avoiding enforcement of particular laws might create alternative forms of coordination that not only erode the law itself, but also the underlying norms (Beunen and van Assche, 2013). Conversely, changing societal discourses over long timeframes are likely to put pressure on particular institutions that conflict with new ideas and values (Moisander et al., 2016, Oteman et al., 2017).

An important aspect of institutional work is likely to be the ways in which new narratives promoting a shared perspective of a desired future are produced and promoted. For example, evolving narratives about climate change and its impacts drive evolving institutional responses across global (Jordan et al., 2015) to local (Milman et al., 2013, Boezeman, 2016) levels. Actors can use narratives to convince others about how governance should be organized or changed (Fredriksson et al., 2015). Narratives can trigger self-reinforcing processes that strengthen the reality effects of their own storylines; a process that could either stabilize or disrupt institutional structures (Mosse, 2005, Van Assche et al., 2012). For example, a widely shared narrative that a certain policy or mode of governance is a success, is likely to lead to a continuation along the same path, and positive outcomes will be interpreted as evidence of success (Rap, 2006). Institutional disruption may often strongly depend on narratives in which current perspectives and institutional structures are questioned or criticised.

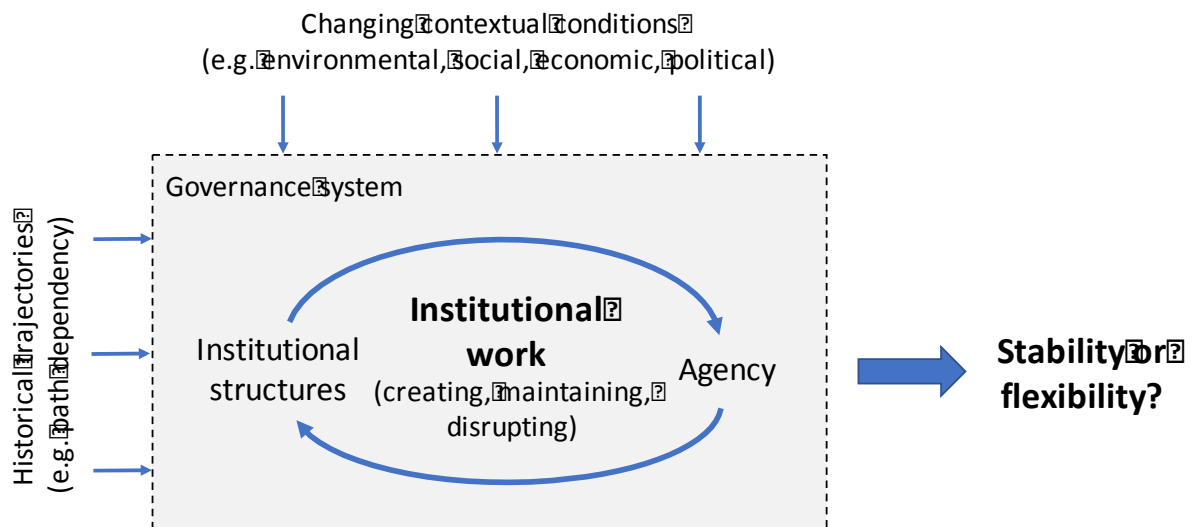
Institutional work strongly leans on sense-making practices and communication between actors. Hence it is important to look beyond the intentions of single actors to fully grasp the effects of institutional work (Fredriksson et al., 2015, Cornelissen et al., 2015, Schmidt, 2008). This raises

questions about the dynamics of social networks in which actors are embedded, their position and role within these networks, but also to the strategies through which they can change their position and role and hence gain more influence in a governance system (Alexander et al., 2015, Davidson and de Loë, 2016). The evolution and performance of institutions emerges out of the interplay between actions from a wide range of individual and collective actors, both public and private. Different actors can use various entrepreneurial strategies for putting issues on the agenda, promoting solutions, building coalitions, and mobilizing support (Brouwer and Huitema, 2017, Alexander et al., 2015); all of which can be seen as efforts to create, disrupt, or maintain institutional structures, and thus as institutional work.

However, even though actors may operate strategically, they can never fully oversee how exactly institutions will change. Institutional changes are not solely the result of a few actors purposively designing or redesigning institutions, but are rather shaped by the co-evolution between a multitude of strategizing (and non-strategizing) actors, embedded within existing institutional and social structures (Czarniawska, 2009). Many of effects are non-linear and unpredictable (Folke, 2016). In the fullest sense, therefore, institutional work implies considering the interplay between a range of actions and strategies taken by different actors, at different levels and times, and their cumulative effect on the evolution of institutional structures (Zhang et al., 2015). This includes attention to the actions and strategies through which institutions are maintained, and those used to block or redirect attempts to change. It is possible that the full potential impact of institutional work can only be grasped as part of larger-scale and long-timeframe social dynamics of which it is part. Nonetheless, it is entirely plausible that many fruitful insights about processes of institutional change, both theoretical and practical, can be gained from studying institutional work behaviours over much shorter timeframes as well. Indeed, the original authors who coined the concept specifically argued that it has substantial practical relevance, because it opens the door to drawing concrete implications for real-world interventions through its focus on actors and their strategies in practice (Lawrence et al., 2009).

## **5. Conclusions**

Governing for resilience depends on achieving a productive balance between stability and flexibility. Institutional structures need to be stable enough to support constructive, democratic decision-making, but also flexible enough to support learning and innovation to adapt to changing problems and contexts. A focus on institutional work can provide insights into a diverse range of actions and their interplay that facilitate governing for resilience (Figure 2). It also helps to gain in-depth insights into the ways in which institutional structures gradually change over time (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, Lawrence et al., 2009, Van Assche et al., 2014). For example, actors with different ideas may enter the arena, people develop alternative narratives to make sense of their environment, and political preferences evolve. All these changes impact the interpretation and application of existing institutions, and fuel debates about alternatives.



**Figure 2:** Analysing the role of institutional work on stability and flexibility in governance.

Institutional work in this dynamic context is the active labour that drives institutional continuity and change. It has a key role in thinking about how to navigate tensions between stability and flexibility. However, much future work is required to better understand its role and impact in evolving governance systems. Future studies could, for example, address: (1) how do different types of institutional work interact across scales and timeframes; (2) how exactly do different forms of institutional work cumulate into macro-scale patterns of stability or flexibility; and (3) how can institutional work be useful in finding an "appropriate" balance between stability and flexibility for different problems in different socio-cultural-political contexts? In the context of governing for resilience, the concept of institutional work furthers our understanding of how the potentially delicate balance between desired and undesired forms of stability and change is continuously produced by the actions through which actors create, disrupt, and maintain institutional structures. It provides a particular opportunity to better understand actions that maintain desired forms of stability, as well in those that create desired forms of flexibility. Finally, it provides a novel avenue for better understanding processes of purposive institutional change in governing for resilience in an uncertain and changing world.

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