Mapping action arenas

Linking results and actions

An institutional analysis for pro-poor institutional change needs to be concerned with the results generated by existing institutions for poor people’s livelihoods and how these results can be improved and made more supportive of poor people. Once these results or impacts on the livelihoods of the poor have been understood, the institutions and institutional processes that have produced these results can be analysed in terms of the specific sets of actions or functions that have generated these results.

This approach has several advantages. Through focusing on actions that have produced results observed in the field, the institutional analysis will be more holistic. Instead of concentrating on one institution and its structures and processes, it will look at how different institutions or actors interact to produce different results that affect poor people. Given the complexity of institutional arrangements, it also allows the analysis to concentrate on those aspects that are responsible for specific impacts on poor people’s livelihoods rather than trying to deal with all aspects of all institutions.

This analysis needs to look at the action arena where the different actions or functions that generate a given result take place. The concept of an action arena helps those carrying out the institutional analysis to look at the activities of all the different institutions and institutional actors that are involved in producing different results. It is also an adaptable concept that can present itself in many different ways and take many forms. A specific result may be clearly linked to one particular action arena or to several. Likewise, a single action arena may produce a wide range of results.

The process of defining the different action arenas that have produced different results may require considerable discussion with those who have experienced the results and with the various actors involved. Where the institutional analysis is being carried out as part of a “trouble-shooting” mission, an evaluation of results can lead to the definition of problem areas, which can then be used to more clearly define action arenas related to those problems. If the institutional analysis is part of a design process, and is being used to identify which institutional arrangements will produce the desired results, the process may be more complex and require repeated discussions with the range of actors concerned in order to define the limits of the action arenas concerned with specific results.

The example in the box below helps to illustrate one situation in which action arenas can produce different results.

Results and action arenas in protected area development

The creation of a protected area in a mangrove swamp has deprived people in one community of two of their principal sources of livelihood – the commercial collection of firewood and the production of charcoal. The direct results of this change on local people have been a decline in incomes and a forced move into new livelihood activities where they are more dependent on others – mainly as labourers in agriculture, fishing and construction. Two action arenas that might be identified as having generated these livelihood outcomes are the process by which the protected area has been set up and how the regulations governing it are determined and the range of factors that determine what economic alternatives are open to people locally.

Delivery results in this case might relate to the way in which benefits from the protected area are distributed (equity) – environmental protection benefits everyone but tourism may benefit only a few operators. The action arenas involved in producing these results might be the process that has determined the priority given to environmental protection (as opposed to the livelihoods of local people) and the process by which the protected area has been set up and how the regulations governing it are determined. Governance results might include the sustainability of the mangrove forest, and therefore the environmental services that it provides (increased), and the levels of participation or consultation with local people during the process of establishment of the protected area (limited), as well as the equity of the new arrangements, which have created improved outcomes for some people (tourists, fishers) but negative impacts for others (wood cutters) without addressing the question of alternatives or compensation. The action arenas which have contributed to these governance results might include the arena which has determined changes in levels of environmental awareness within the forest service and in local government (involving pressure from NGOs and donors and the creation of a new Environmental Protection Agency). Another important arena might be that which determines the attitudes toward local people, and the poor in particular, shown by the agencies, which determines the extent to which those agencies have tried to involve the people in decision-making.
Analysing action arenas: identifying actors and agencies

This analysis first needs to consider the different actors and agencies who are engaged in each action arena. These need to be identified, first of all, in as comprehensive a fashion as possible. In order to do this, it is important to make the analysis of action arenas as specific as possible by identifying a specific result, then the particular action arena that leads to that result, and finally the actors and agencies involved in that action arena.

This analysis should include actors that clearly play a major role, as well as those that are more indirectly concerned or affected. Once the process of identifying these actors has been completed, a simple stakeholder analysis can be carried out to determine whether different actors and agencies represent primary or secondary stakeholders.

Analysing action arenas: defining roles, responsibilities and capacity

Once the actors and agencies involved in a particular action arena have been identified, the different roles and responsibilities of each need to be defined.

As a first step, the actors and agencies identified need to be sorted according to their overall functions in relation to the action arena being analysed. User, service provider and enabling agency are three categories of these roles that are of critical importance, as these categories also define key roles of institutional actors and the relationships among them.

In order to sort out the different actors and agencies according to these categories, the specific set of issues that make up a particular action arena needs to be kept in focus. Actors that perform one function in one action arena – for example user or service provider – may have a completely different function in another action arena – for example as an enabling agency. It may prove difficult to clearly distinguish among these different functions even within a particular action arena. In practice, the separation among these functions is often blurred – enabling agencies not only provide resources and policy to define what sort of services are provided, but they may also "award themselves" the task of providing the services directly; even worse, enabling agencies may determine that services be provided to themselves as "users".

Once an initial attempt has been made to categorize the different actors and agencies in a particular action arena, those carrying out the institutional analysis can look in more detail at the roles of each of these actors and agencies. Several critical aspects of these roles, and the responsibilities they involve, need to be determined:

- The role that different actors or agencies say they perform in relation to a particular action arena;
- Their formal mandate or responsibilities in relation to that action arena (or what they are supposed to do);
- The source of that mandate (who has determined what they should be doing);
- The capacity of different actors and agencies to carry out what they say they do and fulfil their formal mandate, including the resources and skills at their disposal;
- What different actors and agencies actually do, which may be very different from what they say they do and what they are supposed to do.

The process of defining the above for each actor and agency within a particular action arena should provide an effective description of the key features of institutional actors which is of immediate relevance for an institutional analysis.

Analysing action arenas: understanding relationships

Once the various actors in a particular action arena have been described, the relationships among these actors need to be understood, as it is often in these relationships that the critical strengths and weaknesses of an institutional system are to be found. If the preceding step is largely descriptive and allows us to understand the key characteristics of the institutional actors within an action arena, this step begins the process of evaluating how these actors perform.

When assessing these relationships, the extent to which the functions of different actors – as users, service providers or enabling agencies – are kept separate represents one key criterion. The term "cleavage" – which means both to "separate" and to "join" in English – expresses well what should be a basic feature of the relationship among these different
Identifying the actors and agencies in the action arena of increased environmental awareness

A key action arena that has contributed to the decision to establish a protected area in a mangrove forest is the “arena” that has led to an increased awareness of the need for environmental protection and raised the profile of environmental issues among policymakers. Among the actors involved might be civil society organizations that have worked to raise the profile of environmental issues in general and mangrove protection in particular. These might include local agencies, academics and researchers, national NGOs and international environmental agencies and organizations. While these agencies may regard themselves mainly as enabling agencies concerned with influencing the policy agenda, they also serve a service provision function (and therefore have an interest) as they are often engaged to carry out research on, manage and play a role in implementing protected areas.

Other key agencies engaged in this action arena would be those that have a responsibility and mandate to protect the environment and implement eventual changes in environmental regulation – the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Forests and Parks and the Department of Wildlife. There may also be other agencies that have a less direct concern with mangrove forests but are indirectly interested and play a role – the Fisheries Department – which is concerned with aquaculture development around the mangrove area, and the Coastal Protection Department which is promoting mangrove plantations in order to prevent coastal erosion. There may also be key individual actors who are of particular significance in shaping this action arena – a particularly active governor for the local province who has taken the issue of mangrove conservation to heart, a popular film star who has been enrolled by environmental agencies to champion their cause, and a foreign benefactor who is making funds available for environmental protection in the country. Many of these actors and agencies may perform a combination of enabling and service provision functions and have different interests in the process depending on the circumstances.

The users in this arena are those that potentially benefit from higher levels of environmental awareness and protection – society as a whole, tourists and specific groups like fishers who might benefit from improved protection of nursery grounds for fish. Clearly the past direct users of mangrove swamps – wood cutters –, who have lost access to the resource, are also key users who need to be included in the action arena.

functions. The various users, service providers and enabling agencies within an action arena need to be linked and to have features that connect them, but their functions should be kept separate.

The specific criteria that can be used to assess the relationships linking different institutional actors may vary to some extent depending on the circumstances. Often certain features of the institutional context, such as cultural values, politics and tradition, will determine what elements in these relationships are regarded as important. However, the following features need to be assessed in almost any circumstance as they will influence strongly the way in which a particular action arena “performs”:

- **Transparency** is critical for ensuring accountability as it allows people on one side of a relationship to determine whether actors on the other side are performing or not.
- **Accountability** is an essential feature of any of the relationships within an action arena as it allows the actors on one side of a relationship to have recourse if actors on the other side are not performing.
- **Contracts** clarify relationships and establish how they should function, and help to ensure both transparency and accountability.

- **Choice** provides different actors with an essential form of recourse – if the actor on the other side of a relationship does not perform, or does not provide the desired service or does so at a cost that is too high, another can be chosen.
- **Mechanisms that allow feedback** in all these relationships are essential if actors are to be responsive and if actors on one side are to be able to influence actors on the other and, in some cases, monitor and control how they perform.

These criteria are relatively generic, but they should allow those analysing an action arena to identify important failures in the relationships among various actors. For example, if the services that policymakers (enabling agencies) choose to promote, and provide resources for, are not used and prove inappropriate for the poor (users), it may be because there is no feedback from poor people to policymakers that allows them to know what services the poor need. It could also be because policymakers have chosen to promote services which they need for themselves; in other words the functions of enabling agency and user have not been kept separate. On the other hand, if policymakers have listened to poor people and responded through their policy decisions, the failure could lie in the ability of the enabling agency to ensure that service providers do what they are supposed to do.
There could be problems of monitoring and control, accountability and choice.

As a general rule of thumb, before the “delivering” or providing of a service may take place, a number of things must happen, including the commissioning, planning, financing and producing of that service. Again, ideally these five steps should be kept separate and carried out by different actors and agencies within the action area concerned.

**Analysing action arenas: rules and Incentives**

The final step in the process of analysing action arenas is particularly important if the institutional analysis is to generate effective action to change institutional arrangements. For the various actors and agencies involved in the action arena, this step involves understanding the *rules* and *incentives* that govern the relationships maintained with other actors and agencies.

**Rules** may include:
- *Formal rules or regulations* that establish what should happen in these relationships and how they should function;
- *More informal “rules of the game”* that determine what actually happens.

**Incentives** are of critical importance in determining how these relationships actually work. Incentives may not be just material or financial, and they will often be strongly influenced by cultural factors and prevailing value systems. The incentives to which people respond, and the motivations they have, need to be clearly understood if changes are to be introduced and, in particular, attention must be paid to the incentives that people and agencies are likely to have to change.