Power and processes

The analysis of institutions for pro-poor change needs to start with the more concrete aspects of institutions – the impacts they have on people's livelihoods, the different results they generate, the various service providers and enabling agencies with which poor people interact, and the ways in which these agencies are structured, regulated and supported by policies, laws and resources.

But the relationships between institutional actors and agencies, and the institutional context in which they operate, are not only generated by the various functions, roles and responsibilities looked at so far, or even by the policy and legal frameworks that have established the policies, laws, incentives and sets of resources that allow agencies to operate. These relationships are also a reflection of far broader patterns in society that may determine how different sets of people, or agencies, interact. These interactions are largely about power, and the processes by which it is distributed and exercised.

These are difficult areas. They are closely linked to long-term social, political, economic, and cultural factors and the interplay of history, change, influence, negotiation, resources and precedent that determines who establishes “the rules of the game” in any particular setting. Like the “institutional context”, these areas are often left out of the design of rural development interventions because they are perceived as being “givens” or externalities about which no action can easily be taken, especially in the context of “projects” with a limited duration. However, the all-pervasive influence of these factors is almost universally recognized and the need to understand how development interventions are likely to affect, and be affected by, this broader context has become increasingly clear. This is particularly so when one is attempting to address poverty and initiate institutional change that might be more supportive of poor people and help them (“empower” them) to overcome poverty, because many of the structural factors that contribute to their poverty tend to lie in this domain.

Keeping the poor in focus

This final step in defining the levels of authority and influence among different institutional actors complements the analysis carried out to date and can be thought of as “completing” it, although once the analysis reaches this level of power and processes the potential complexities are such that the analysis can never really be regarded as “complete” in the true sense of the word. In fact, a key issue facing those carrying out an institutional analysis is knowing when to stop. Areas like power and influence can be so complex, dynamic and intimately woven into the fabric of local culture and society that there is a real risk that those carrying out the analysis may find themselves engaged in a wide-ranging sociological and anthropological analysis that has little practical relevance to the issues which were the original focus of their work.

Therefore it is important at this point to look again at the entire process undertaken to date, in order to approach this last level of analysis using a “lens” that will allow the analysis to remain focused on the key issues of concern. This means going back to the original outcomes with which the analysis started – the specific sets of conditions faced by poor people and the changes that they hope to achieve (Understanding poor people and their livelihoods – pamphlet 2) – and linking these again to the delivery results and governance results generated by the different institutions that work with poor people (Focusing on results – pamphlet 3). The linkages between
these results and different “action arenas”, where different actors and agencies engage and interact to produce these results, should be reaffirmed, using new knowledge acquired in the subsequent analysis. Finally the various elements of the “formal” institutional context that contribute to and influence these action arenas should be rechecked.

This recap of the key linkages covered by the analysis should allow those engaged in the process to adjust the focus of their analysis so that, as they move outwards from specific livelihood outcomes to more generic institutional issues and the networks of power and processes that underpin them, they can keep that original focus as clear as possible. This should enable them to define a precise set of issues associated with specific institutional actors and concentrate on aspects of power and processes that directly associate with these actors as they move on to mapping power.

**Mapping power**

Understanding power is about understanding relationships between different individuals and groups and the factors that influence those relationships. In order to understand power, it is better not to think of it as a “thing” that some people have more of than others, but simply as one particularly important way of defining relationships between different actors.

In the mapping of action arenas discussed in pamphlet 4, relationships between different actors were mapped out by focusing on their roles and responsibilities in relation to a particular set of actions. But part of that process consisted of taking note of situations where institutional actors seem to be doing things that are different from their formally defined roles and responsibilities. These differences between the formally defined mandates and roles of actors and what, in actual fact, they seem to be doing can become the starting point for an analysis of power.

A useful approach to this analysis is to lay out the different actors graphically and, taking the relationships among them one by one, describe them in as much detail as possible. As a starting point, the information already generated about roles and relationships as part of the process of mapping action arenas can be used to describe the formal aspects of these relationships. Once this process is completed, comparisons can be made with what actually happens in these relationships; key questions can then be asked to identify those factors that influence the relationship beyond the formally defined roles and responsibilities.

Questions to be asked at this stage will focus on two key features of these relationships, namely the relative authority and influence that characterize the different sides of these relationships.

- **Authority** describes the relative level of subordination existing within a relationship – to what extent the parties involved in the relationship can be placed in some form of hierarchy. In relationships that are not formalized, authority within a relationship may derive from a range of factors such as relative age, social standing, location (i.e. urban-rural), or ethnic or clan affiliation.

- **Influence** describes the extent to which one actor in a relationship can influence the behaviour of other actors. Behaviour may be affected in different ways in opposite directions within a relationship, and this may mean that the directional “flows” of influence have to be analysed separately.

Key questions that might be asked about relationships in this regard are:

- Who has authority or influence over whom in a relationship?
- How is that authority or influence manifested?
- How is that authority or influence exercised?
- How strong is this authority or influence?
- To what specific spheres or areas does this authority or influence extend?
- What is the source of that authority or influence?
- What maintains this authority or influence?
- How dependent is it on specific individuals?
- What benefits derive from it and for whom?

Many of the answers to these questions may not be immediately obvious to outsiders conducting an institutional analysis. Even for “insiders”, the issues at stake in analysing power and processes are often so much a part of everyday life that they may find it
difficult to immediately respond to these questions. Considerable sensitivity to the local culture and customs are required for this part of the institutional analysis in order to generate answers to these questions and to investigate them effectively. These areas of institutional analysis require considerable experience and knowledge of the particular setting in which the analysis is being carried out.

Once the questions noted above have been answered as completely as possible, one should be able to use them to describe some of the following key features of power and processes:

- **The “rules of the game”**
  These are norms of behaviour, or action, that are so widely accepted that they have become “institutionalized” as rules even though they may have no formal basis. A typical, and very widespread, example is the fact that, despite affirmative action, job quotas and formal legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex, women in many societies are often effectively excluded from positions of power and authority. There is an unwritten “rule of the game”, widely criticized but just as widely accepted, that maintains male predominance in decision-making roles. This is linked to a complex set of institutional, cultural, social, economic and historical factors and may not be easily changed. But it certainly has a very important influence on the way efforts to ensure gender-sensitivity in poverty alleviation programmes are viewed within the institutions involved.

- **Politics**
  Politics can be regarded as one important way in which power is managed within society. It may be mediated through democratic political processes that attempt to ensure a degree of transparency, representation, and “checks and balances” in the process. But even within a formally democratic system, political influence will often be closely tied to economic interest, social and cultural standing, status, and the interplay of networks of patrons, clients, peers and other sets of common interests. Understanding how these sets of interests overlap with political formations is essential; the political sphere will often represent a possible channel for influencing change in power and processes which may not otherwise be easy.

- **Culture and tradition**
  Often the patterns that emerge from an analysis of power relations have their roots in historical features of the culture of the country; for example, links between people from a particular area, or belonging to a specific ethnic, clan or caste group that has “traditionally” wielded certain kinds of influence or power. Cultural factors are extremely dynamic and cannot be interpreted as being static; they need to be seen as processes in themselves that are constantly changing. In the current era of electronic communication and globalization the interplay between local cultures and traditions and the influence of outside, “alien” cultural norms is often particularly dynamic.

### Strategies for changing fisheries management policy

A field-based analysis carried out in a typical floodplain fisheries environment might suggest that there is considerable potential for positively affecting the livelihoods of inland fishing communities, and improving the sustainability of fisheries resources, through the development of alternative, community-based modes of management. This is currently obstructed by a set of fisheries policies that gives priority to revenue generation rather than to sustainability of the resource or equitable distribution of the benefits generated from fisheries. This situation might suggest designing an intervention that would combine field-level action to develop, test out and demonstrate the validity of alternative management approaches with an effort to influence policy by looking at existing evidence indicating the advantages of community-based fisheries management approaches. However, a closer analysis of the relations of power surrounding fisheries management and the processes generating those relations might show that the current arrangements for fisheries management are intimately connected with arrangements of patronage and power that link fishing communities, through a network of traditional patrons, with the highest levels of political power in the country. This network serves to channel resources, in both directions, and exert influence over local and national political processes. While this system can be regarded as a failure from the point of view of the equitable distribution of benefits and the overall sustainability of the resource, it is widely regarded by those within it as providing certain guarantees and stability; any new system would only be accepted if it could effectively demonstrate the continuation of these guarantees. In a situation of this type, an alternative strategy might be to concentrate first on establishing as wide a network as possible of “cases” of community-based management and ensuring the widespread dissemination of information about these experiences as part of a long-term effort to change opinions and attitudes, without devoting time and resources to “influencing policy”. In current conditions, such an effort is likely to fail as there are practically no incentives for policy change to which key institutional actors are likely to respond.
Values are likely to be strongly linked to culture and tradition. They will also be dynamic and responsive to changes in the environment, but they will certainly play a key role in determining the kinds of incentives that influence people to change. In particular, broadly accepted value systems will determine priorities for changes and what people regard as important.

Rights
In spite of the increasingly widespread acceptance of the idea of a set of livelihood characteristics that governments should be able to guarantee for their citizens as "rights", the actual perception of what constitutes those "rights" varies considerably across different nations and societies. Identifying those rights that are formally recognized in the country’s legislation and understanding how these are actually put into effect, and also how they are viewed by people both within institutions and from the outside, will often help to understand differences between stated goals and actual performance.

The example in the box on the previous page shows how some of these factors might interact in a real-life situation.

Why analyse power and processes?
Many of the factors relating to power and processes analysed in this section are factors that are difficult to change, at least in the short term. While some of these elements may contribute to generating outcomes that are unfavourable to poor people, they can rarely be addressed directly, especially in the context of a limited project intervention.

However, where power relations and processes strongly condition the way in which institutions function in support of poor people, means have to be found to deal with them. In the short term, this may mean working within existing networks and attempting to find pressure points or spaces within them where new and more supportive institutional forms can be developed. Over the medium and longer term, ways of creating coalitions and strategies in an effort to change power relations and influence the processes around them can also be developed.

It is therefore critical to perform a thorough analysis of how these power relations and processes currently operate, and develop ways to constantly update this analysis in order to keep track of changes.