

Merrey, D. 2013. Book review of Cleaver, F., 2012. Development through bricolage: Rethinking institutions for natural resources management. Routledge. Water Alternatives 6(1): 142-144



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Cleaver, F.** 2012. Development through bricolage: Rethinking institutions for natural resources management. Routledge. ISBN 978-1-84407-869-1. 224 pp. paperback \$39.95

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Regular readers of *Water Alternatives* will have noted that several recent articles have made use of the term 'bricolage' in their analysis of water management institutions. Each article defines the term somewhat differently, often using a variety of metaphors to communicate the concept. But all of these articles and many more in other journals are drawing on the work of Frances Cleaver, now Professor of Environment and Development at Kings College, London. *Development through Bricolage* draws together her work over the past 15 years as she developed and applied the concept as a way of understanding the realities of local natural resources management institutions, largely in Africa. The perspective on institutions captured in the term 'bricolage' itself draws on an older tradition of anthropology and sociology that can be seen as an alternative, or at least a corrective, to the theory of institutions dominant in development policy and practice. It is therefore of great interest to development researchers and practitioners dissatisfied with the outcomes of recent decades of work trying to 'design' effective natural resources management institutions.

Professor Cleaver contrasts 'mainstream institutional theory', largely derived from institutional economics as represented by Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues as well as others, with what she refers to as 'critical institutional thinking'. Both perspectives agree on the central importance of institutions. However, mainstream institutional theory is broadly more optimistic about the possibility of identifying basic principles underlying effective institutions, and assisting people to use these principles to 'design' institutional arrangements through a conscious and rational process. Both perspectives emphasise the importance of human agency – the capacity of people to make decisions and solve problems – but mainstream institutional theory is based on the premise that actors consciously pursue goals that they believe will lead to benefits for themselves. These assumptions – that people rationally and consciously pursue their own self-interest and therefore by designing institutions that reward appropriate behaviour and constrain behaviour that is counterproductive, collective action can be encouraged to achieve productive, sustainable and equitable natural resources management – underlay nearly all current development policy. It is the dominant institutional paradigm.

Critical institutional thinking is far more nuanced and subtle, making it difficult to explain and to apply. Human perspectives, motivations and understandings are shaped and constrained by their social and cultural context, nearly always in some combination of unconscious and conscious ways, and nearly always characterised by multiple and often conflicting perspectives and interests, reflecting the many roles most individuals play in real life. The process of institutional change is therefore not a straightforward, linear and rational process; rather it is messy, largely unpredictable, and ultimately a creative process. It is an iterative process between change agents (*bricoleur*) and the institutions

shaping and being shaped by their relationships and behaviour. Specifically, Professor Cleaver defines 'bricolage'

(...) as a process in which people consciously and non-consciously draw on existing social formulae (styles of thinking, models of cause and effect, social norms and sanctioned social roles and relationships) to patch or piece together institutions in response to changing situations. These institutions are neither completely new nor completely traditional but rather a dynamic hybrid combining elements of 'modern', 'traditional', and the 'formal' and 'informal'. (p. 45)

The entire book is dedicated to illustrating, explaining and drawing out the implications of this perspective on institutions. The roots of Professor Cleaver's use of the term 'bricolage' can be traced to two famous anthropologists, Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. Levi-Strauss developed the concept of 'intellectual bricolage' to characterise how people in 'primitive' societies think, especially in myth-making. Mary Douglas applied Levi-Strauss' ideas to 'modern' societies in an early critique of rational choice assumptions about collective action. Cleaver also draws on the work of Anthony Giddens in her discussion of the extent to which individuals act autonomously and purposefully or automatically follow traditional norms. The result is a rich synthetic interpretation of human behaviour. Each chapter addresses the problem of collective action and institutional change from a different angle, drawing on her own field research in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, fieldwork by Swedish social scientists, and – very interesting – her experiences trying to influence the water management policies of a major bilateral donor agency. These cases are highly nuanced, demonstrating how people adapt, transform, and find new solutions, for example local communities responding to the collapse of government institutions in Zimbabwe, to opportunities presented by changing natural resources policies in Sweden, or to attempts to introduce formal water management arrangements in Tanzania. They also demonstrate the complexities and limitations of trying to introduce ideas like gender equity in societies with different views on the subject; and the limitations of 'public participation' when it comes to ensuring the poorest and least empowered benefit from new institutional arrangements.

The critique of mainstream institutional theory is convincing to this reviewer (disclosure: he is the lead author of one of the recent papers using bricolage in this journal). However, at times she seems to be over-drawing the contrast, perhaps as a device to make her point: Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics for her work on collective management of natural resources, has a more nuanced and subtle perspective than comes across in this book. Nevertheless, many of those using this perspective to design interventions seem to consider the very real messy processes that actually characterise human behaviour as 'noise', and therefore not significant. Further, as Cleaver illustrates by her engagement with the bilateral donor agency, it is extremely difficult for people wedded to a specific perspective and set of assumptions to put these aside and take an entirely fresh perspective. In a sense, all of us as well as our institutions are 'path dependent': our past history shapes and constrains the options available for the future.

I recommend this book highly to everyone trying to understand the reality of attempting to encourage institutional change or to introduce new types of water management institutions. The disappointing experience with introducing water users associations over the past few decades is a case in point. But reading this book takes time and patience: because it avoids sweeping easy general conclusions, and instead offers a subtle and nuanced argument, non-social scientists in particular may find it a slow read – but your patience will be rewarded by the insightfulness of each chapter. Fortunately, the chapters stand-alone, though they also build on each other – you can read a chapter and comeback later to read another one. The result is a fairly devastating critique of much current policy and thinking about institutional change.

However, if you are seeking magic bullets or the key bullet points for the next policy on integrated water resources management, this book is not for you. In fact, this most valuable lesson may, ironically, be what will disappoint many practitioners the most: Professor Cleaver offers no easy solutions that can

be packaged into the next five year development project. She offers a corrective to all the easy assumptions characterising 'normal' projects, suggesting that governments, donors and NGOs need to design programmes that facilitate a creative and unpredictable process – institutional bricolage. This is a difficult lesson to apply – but continuing with old assumptions dooms future programmes to continue to disappoint.

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