Unpacking Institutional Change: Implications for P2P Learning

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Observations on institutions from the literature

- Reflect beliefs, rules, norms, values & practices that key social groups agree upon
- Self-enforcing
- “Sticky” equilibrium
- Path dependent
- Slow/resistant to change
Institutional change models

- Lots of change models
  - Mechanistic/structural
  - Historical/evolutionary
  - Life cycles
  - Organizational development/process consultation
  - Political economy/principal-agent/collective action
  - Complex adaptive systems
  - Entrepreneurism

- Models identify dynamics & conditions that make reforms more or less likely—drivers of change
Institutional change drivers: a summary

- Incompatibilities among different institutions and/or institutional levels
- Unresponsiveness to varying needs and demands
- Unresponsiveness to changing circumstances
- Competition due to diverging interests
Historical perspectives: North et al., Acemoglu & Robinson, Fukuyama

Path dependence: prior settlements & elite bargains define reform options, create incentives, influence chances of success

Establish foundations for citizen engagement, accountability, inclusive & sustainable growth

Challenge of illiberal democracy and closing space for civil society

Opportunities: inclusive institutional options
People & institutions

- Paradox of embedded agency
- Drivers of institutional change create conditions for some actors to become change agents
- Personal characteristics of change agents
  - Champions
  - Leaders/elites
  - Entrepreneurs
  - Diaspora
  - Networks
  - Social capital
Current perspectives have long roots in past efforts to promote institutional change.

Problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) is the latest version.

Reformers focus on three action arenas to create space for change:
- Acceptance
- Authority
- Capacity
Challenges & lessons learned

- Key challenges for outsiders supporting internal change agents
  - Identifying shared objectives and commitment
  - Understanding context and incentives (PEA, TWP)
  - Operating within donor administrative structures and procedures

- Lessons
  - Beware of isomorphic mimicry & institutional decoupling
  - Work with distributed networks of reformers
  - Aim for best fit not best practice
  - Practice adaptive management
Implications for peer-to-peer learning

- Aligning external actors with local change agents’ interests & aims
- Matching peers
- Commitment & capacity on both sides
- Mutuality, shared power, trust
- Learning structures & processes
- Timeframes & indicators
Wrap up: so what is new?

- More sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of institutional change
- Increased emphasis on enabling & aligning with local change agents, working through local systems
- More conceptual understanding re PEA & TWP, but limited operational grasp of what to do
- Good news: openness to experimentation, such as P2P
- Less than good news: difficult to document and measure, dueling metrics and evidence criteria
- Call to action: documentation and learning through process analysis of cases
Thank you

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Some additional reading on institutional change & public sector reform: