

Book Reviews

Boyd, Emily, and Carl Folke, eds. 2011. *Adapting Institutions: Governance, Complexity and Social-Ecological Resilience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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While academic interest in institutions for robust environmental governance, complex adaptive systems, and adaptation to global environmental change is not new, it has reached a new era in the past few years, in part because of the current global political climate about adaptation to environmental change. Most current political rhetoric focuses on mitigation of climatic change, with little (if any) regard for adaptation strategies. This narrow political focus also overlooks important cases of adaptive institutions and adaptive governance. At the same time, the scholarly literature has lacked research that neatly summarizes challenges, opportunities, and new ways of looking at the governance of uncertainty, the evolution of adaptive institutions, and the inherent complexity of global environmental change and its impact across multiple scales.

This volume provides a nice addition to the growing scholarship on institutions, institutional analysis in global environmental governance, and adaptation. Building on earlier work of respected scholars Oran Young, Fikret Berkes, C. S. (Buzz) Holling, and Elinor Ostrom, editors Emily Boyd and Carl Folke bring together a solid group of scholars from a variety of disciplines, providing useful summaries of empirical cases and theoretical insights on adapting institutions and adaptive governance of complex socio-ecological systems.

This book integrates multidisciplinary perspectives on the evolving nature of institutions for the governance of environmental change across multiple scales. The clarity of presentation belies the depth of the insights offered. The editors note that “we are still searching for ways to think about what a ‘good’ governance system may look like, one that takes into account multiple perspectives, learning and knowledge in ways that are experimental, yet fair and equitable” (p. 267). Their analytical approach leaves room for future research, particularly on the potential sources of resilience and on factors that lead to institutional failure, erosion and instability.

Boyd and Folke define “adapting institutions” as those that allow a variety of actors “to deal with complexity, uncertainty and the interplay between gradual and rapid change” (p. 3). Most chapters regard adapting institutions as evolving their own rules and norms, and the contributing authors explore factors that made the institutions stronger and resilient or led to institutional failure. Perhaps the only exception to this strong, logical flow is Beatrice Crona and

Örjan Bodin's exploration of the methodological contributions of social network analysis to the topic; the definition of underlying terms most useful to this analysis, such as "fit," "adaptive governance," and "resilience" are unfortunately not given until the very end of the book. An additional theoretical chapter (perhaps between current Chapters 2 and 3) would have provided better flow and conceptual background.

The editors integrated empirical case studies from various countries and continents, as well as theoretical developments that blur disciplinary boundaries between political science, sociology, economics, and anthropology. Chapters explore how local institutions in Madagascar contributed to the resilience of the communities and ecosystems that rely on "taboo forests"; how institutional failures led to maladaptation and non-adaptive governance that created a food crisis in Niger; and on the elements of adaptation in the governance of post-tsunami coastal ecosystems. The chapters combine both rigorous empirical analysis and sound theoretical grounding, providing interesting and often nuanced explanations of factors that lead to (or impede) "adapting institutions." One conclusion that can be drawn from the book summarizes the entire volume: adapting institutions enable communities to withstand external shocks and abrupt changes in cross-scalar socio-ecological systems. Thus we need to learn which factors drive resilience in these institutions and reduce institutional erosion.

On the other hand, adaptive governance as a conceptual construct is much more complex than one might surmise from a superficial read of any academic literature on adaptation and governance, and it deserves a much richer treatment than the introductory and concluding chapters of this volume afford. This complexity stems largely from one's theoretical position regarding devolution of governing responsibilities. For instance, to some people, adaptive governance means ecosystems changing to adapt to whatever humans are doing to them. To others, it means that institutional rules and norms adapt to the ever-changing ecosystem. Adaptive governance recognizes the complex nature of cross-scalar dynamics of socio-ecological systems.

Contributors to this volume nevertheless offer insights into the processes by which enduring institutions are created, emerge naturally, and complete their cycles. The minor shortcomings are likely the result of the intellectual breadth the editors attempted to achieve. This volume is a must-read integrative collection of case studies and theoretical insights that set the stage for much-needed additional exploration of the themes of resilience, adaptive governance, and complexity in global environmental governance.