



Social Transformation, Institutional Adaptation, and the Reshaping of Collective Life

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ABSTRACT

Social transformation is increasingly shaped by ecological disruption, technological change, migration, development, demographic shifts, and evolving social values. Existing scholarship often examines social transformation, institutional adaptation, and collective life separately, leaving their interrelationships insufficiently integrated. This study examines how institutions respond to structural change and how adaptive processes reshape collective identities, participation, social practices, and access to resources. A qualitative conceptual design was employed using an integrative literature review and narrative thematic synthesis of 25 scholarly sources published between 2016 and 2026 across sociology, institutional economics, development studies, environmental governance, organisational research, and digital society. Five principal themes were identified: drivers of social transformation, forms of institutional adaptation, mechanisms enabling adaptation, barriers to institutional change, and consequences for collective life. Institutions responded through policy reform, governance restructuring, organisational learning, normative adjustment, and technological integration. Adaptation was supported by participation, social networks, leadership, legitimacy, transformative learning, and collective imaginaries, but constrained by path dependence, fragmented governance, cultural resistance, competing interests, and unequal power. The findings show that transformation can strengthen collaboration, innovation, civic engagement, and collective resilience, yet it may also reproduce exclusion, concentrated authority, and unequal adaptive capacity. Effective institutional adaptation, therefore, requires procedural justice, transparency, cultural sensitivity, and meaningful participation. Institutions can manage complex social change more equitably when structural flexibility is combined with legitimacy, inclusion, and fair distribution of resources.

Keywords: Collective life, Institutional adaptation, Social change, Social transformation, Transformative governance

Introduction

Contemporary societies are undergoing transformative processes that are interrelated and characterised by ecological disruption, technological change, migration, demographic changes, economic restructuring and new cultural expectations. These changes are not just social transformations that affect individual social practices, but also remodelling of institutions, relationships, identities and systems of collective organisation. Social transformation is thus best understood as an historically and multi-dimensional process, in which the political, economic, cultural, demographic and technological are engaged in a multi-scalar interaction (Haas et al., 2020). These changes are not typically even. The impact and direction of their actions are shaped by current power dynamics, institutional capabilities and the capacity of various social groups to shape change.

In an era of unprecedented social and ecological change, scholars have returned to the question of how social and ecological transformation are interrelated. Human impact on planetary systems on a scale that requires a rethinking of the conventional separation between society and nature. Society and nature are equally changeable and are mutually influencing each other's evolution, according to Ellis (2023), who states that social and ecological systems co-evolve, that societies shape their environments and that environments shape social organisation, development and adaptation. Technical solutions are not enough to solve the problems of climate change, biodiversity loss, urbanization and resource insecurity. They need institutional transformation, institutional change and a rethinking of predominant development models. Development processes reorganise production, labour, social relations and access to resources, which may result in unequal outcomes and new forms of inequality (McMichael and Weber, 2020). The analysis of social transformation needs, therefore, to be based on the concepts of power, distribution and institutional control.

Institutions are intermediaries in these processes, making expectations, controlling behaviour, and stabilising collective life. They are resilient as they can manage new social and risk requirements. Adaptation is one of the key institutional functions discussed by Lascaux (2023) as the process of adjusting rules, norms and organisational practices to new circumstances. One of the ways institutions can adapt is through the development of new policies, reinterpretation of existing norms, organisational restructuring, or regulatory reform. This change cannot be automatic. Zikos (2020) shows how the presence of such institutional conflict takes place in transformative contexts where actors have conflicting interests, unequal resources and divergent conceptions of legitimacy. Andrews-Speed (2016) also highlights path-dependence, weak governance, vested interest and embedded norms as important challenges to institutional transformation in low-carbon transitions.

Learning and collective interpretation are also key aspects of institutional adaptation. Boström et al. (2018) list critical reflection, participation, pluralism and emotional engagement as conditions for transformative learning. These processes enable people and communities to challenge the status quo and develop alternative solutions to social and ecological problems. Collective imaginaries play a role in shaping expectations for possible and desirable futures (Milkoreit, 2017). Where reforms are proposed that challenge identities, values or cultural continuity, institutional resistance may remain. Brulle and Norgaard (2019) characterise this as "social inertia" – the avoidance of disruptive change by communities to ensure the maintenance of familiar meanings and social arrangements.

Social networks and community relations also contribute to the inclusiveness and effectiveness of adaptation. Barnes et al. (2017) demonstrate that the structure of a network affects the flow of knowledge, access to resources, coordination and collective action in a social-ecological system. Community-based adaptation is more sustainable if local knowledge and participation, along with local institutional support, are integrated into the decision-making process (Chung Tiam Fook, 2017). The interaction among the emerging communities can also give rise to new modes of belonging and collective identity (Nur, 2024). However, place, social diversity and evolving spatial relations must be addressed in adaptive governance, and not by the uniform use of institutional solutions (Healey, 2017). This capacity can be deepened through collaborative inquiry and shared learning, which helps to shape together the practices of organisations and communities by revising them (Garmston & Wellman, 2016).

While there is a lot of existing scholarship on social, institutional and community change, these are typically discussed in isolation. There is a lack of focus on how institutional adaptations affect the collective identities, relationships, participation and daily social routines. This study attempts to fill this void by studying social transformation, institutional adaptation, and collective life in a way that brings together the dynamics of power, learning, conflict, social networks, and future imaginaries.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The study examines the relationship between social transformation, institutional adaptation, and the restructuring of collective life. It identifies the major forces driving social change, evaluates the mechanisms through which institutions respond to emerging pressures, and analyses how these responses influence collective identities, social relationships, participation, and shared practices. It also assesses the roles of power, conflict, learning, and social networks in shaping adaptive outcomes.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study is a qualitative conceptual design with an integrative literature review approach and a narrative thematic synthesis approach. In this way, social transformation, institutional adaptation, and collective life can be explored, as these concepts are shared among a number of disciplines such as sociology, institutional economics, development

studies, environmental governance, organisational research, and the digital society. The review is not intended to calculate estimates of the effects of interventions or obtain pooled statistical results. It captures arguments and empirical facts together and recognises common causes, processes, tensions and collective effects.

The analytical body consists of 25 academic publications from 2016-24. The corpus consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters and a work paper that is widely accepted. The sources selected here were chosen because they directly addressed their research and contributed to the understanding of the interconnections of structural change, institutional response and reorganisation of collective life.

2.2 Source Identification and Selection

The literature was structured into three main areas: social transformation, institutional adaptation and collective restructuring. The following themes were selected as the basis for choosing which sources to include: ecological and developmental transformation, institutional change, governance adaptation, social learning, collective identity, community resilience, digitalisation, organisational change and transformative social innovation.

Conceptual search terms used were social transformation, institutional adaptation, institutional change, collective life, collective identity, social-ecological transformation, transformative governance, community adaptation, social learning and digital transformation. Other concepts were included if they helped to illuminate the subject of the analysis, such as institutional legitimacy, social inertia, power, conflict, participation and technological mediation.

Sources were saved if they offered a different theoretical explanation, empirical example, or a mechanism in explaining the process of the research that was relevant to the research goals. When the discussion of transformation was marginal, its institutional significance was not apparent, or the publications made an argument strongly mirrored in the existing publications, these were excluded. Selection was based on the conceptual depth and the diversity of disciplines, and the analytical relevance of the works and not on numbers.

2.3 Analytical Scope

The review looks at transformation on many and multiple levels concurrently. Ecological disruption, migration, development, technological change, demographic change, and shift in social values are examples of structural drivers. These institutional reactions are regulatory, governance, organisational, normative, and technological. The analysis also takes into account the mechanisms that drive such responses, such as power, legitimacy, conflict, social learning, participation, networks and future imaginaries.

Collective outcomes were studied with regard to identity, belonging, solidarity, participation, shared practices, inclusion and institutional trust. This multi-level scope allowed for the evaluation of both the presence and extent of adaptation, as well as the re-distribution of authority, opportunities, risks, and social recognition within certain types of adaptations.

2.4 Data Extraction and Organisation

Each source was extracted using a structured extraction framework. Data collected included author, year, disciplinary focus, analytical context, main argument, institutional focus, and relevance to collective life. Four dimensions were given particular attention: drivers of transformation, types of institutional response, mechanisms that facilitate or hinder adaptation and collective outcomes.

The material retrieved was arranged in an analytical matrix. The transformation drivers were environmental pressures, development processes, migration, digitalization and changing cultural expectations. Institutional responses were policy change, organisational restructure, collaborative governance, institutional learning and normative adjustment. Power relations, legitimacy, conflict, participation, network structures and collective imaginaries were the mechanisms of mediation. Collective outcomes were: Identity, Belonging, Social Co-ordination, Participation, Inclusion and shared practice.

2.5 Thematic Synthesis

The analysis was an iterative process involving themes. First Reading revealed multiple themes that were linked to the words transformation and institutional change. These concepts were coded into the general categories of adaptation, resistance, governance, legitimacy, learning, identity, participation, power and social networks. These codes were then collapsed into broader themes, which shared the same relationships that recurred in the literature.

There were three stages to the synthesis. The first identified the pressures in the structure which were creating social change. The second looked at how institutions interpreted, resisted, accommodated and redirected these pressures. The third examined institutional responses and their impact on collective identities, social relationships, participation and everyday practices. Shared mechanisms were identified as those common to multiple ecological, technological, organizational and community settings, while context-dependent patterns were identified through comparisons across these contexts.

2.6 Methodological Rigour

The criteria used as sources were clearly stated, the extraction of information was structured, there was repeated comparison, and thematic classification was consistently applied to strengthen rigour. The scholarly sources that were established were given priority, and all the publications were assessed based on the study objectives instead of just their topical relevance. The analytical dimensions used were consistent throughout the entire corpus to avoid interpretive inconsistencies.

The contradictory viewpoints were kept to avoid the linear and uniformly progressive institutional adaptation, or because it was seen as a good thing for society. The synthesis will thus incorporate evidence of institutional learning and collective resilience, as well as path dependence, conflict, exclusion, social inertia, and unequal adaptive capacity. The orientation is a crucial step towards a more nuanced understanding of the way in which institutions play a role in social change and affect the future shape of collective life.

3. Results

The thematic synthesis of the 25 included sources produced five principal themes: drivers of social transformation, forms of institutional adaptation, mechanisms enabling adaptation, barriers to institutional change, and consequences for collective life. These themes were identified across literature from sociology, development studies, institutional economics, environmental governance, organisational research, and digital society.

3.1 Drivers of Social Transformation

The following six social drivers of change were established: ecological disruption, technological change, migration, development processes, demographic changes and changing social values. Climate change, biodiversity loss, resource insecurity, and more broadly, social–ecological instability were linked to ecological pressures. Development processes were associated with variations in resource distribution, social stratification, labour relations and production system.

Changes in migration and demography were linked to shifting patterns of settlement, movement, identity and community building. Communication, administrative systems, administrative routines, public service delivery and citizen–institution interactions were impacted by technological change. Collective behaviour and institutional responses were also shaped by changes in the cultural expectations and social values.

3.2 Forms of Institutional Adaptation

The five types of institutional adaptation were found to be policy change, institutional governance restructuring, organisational change, the change of norms, and technological incorporation. The most obvious were policy and regulatory reforms, in climate governance, low-carbon transition and public administration. Governance restructuring was defined as being characterised by changes in the coordination, participation, decision-making and relationships of public, private, and community actors.

Collaborative management, mentoring, professional learning and changes of existing practice were among the organisational adaptations. Normative adjustment was effected through changes in institutional rules, expectations, roles and institutional practices accepted by the institution. Technological integration involved the use of digital platforms, information systems and new technical infrastructures. A specific type of adaptive activity was the building of legitimacy around new technologies and institutional arrangements. Table 1 shows drivers and forms of institutional adaptation.

Table 1. Major Drivers of Social Transformation and Corresponding Forms of Institutional Adaptation

Transformation driver	Main manifestations	Institutional response
Ecological disruption	Climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource insecurity	Policy reform, climate governance, adaptive regulation
Technological change	Digital communication, automation, and platform systems	Technological integration, digital governance
Migration	Mobility, settlement change, identity negotiation	Service restructuring, community integration policies
Development processes	Labour change, economic restructuring, inequality	Governance reform, redistribution mechanisms
Demographic shifts	Population change, urbanisation, and ageing	Organisational and public-service adaptation
Changing social values	New expectations, cultural change, social claims	Normative adjustment, institutional role redefinition

3.3 Mechanisms Enabling Adaptation

Six enabling mechanisms were identified: learning, participation, social networks, leadership, legitimacy, and collective imaginaries. Transformative learning involved critical reflection, pluralism, emotional engagement, and collaborative knowledge production. Participation was associated with community involvement, procedural fairness, and opportunities for local actors to influence decision-making.

Social networks supported information exchange, access to resources, coordination, and collective action. Leadership and mentoring contributed to organisational adaptation through communication, shared inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving. Legitimacy was especially important where institutions introduced unfamiliar technologies, policies, or practices. Collective imaginaries shaped how future risks and possible institutional responses were understood.

3.4 Barriers to Institutional Change

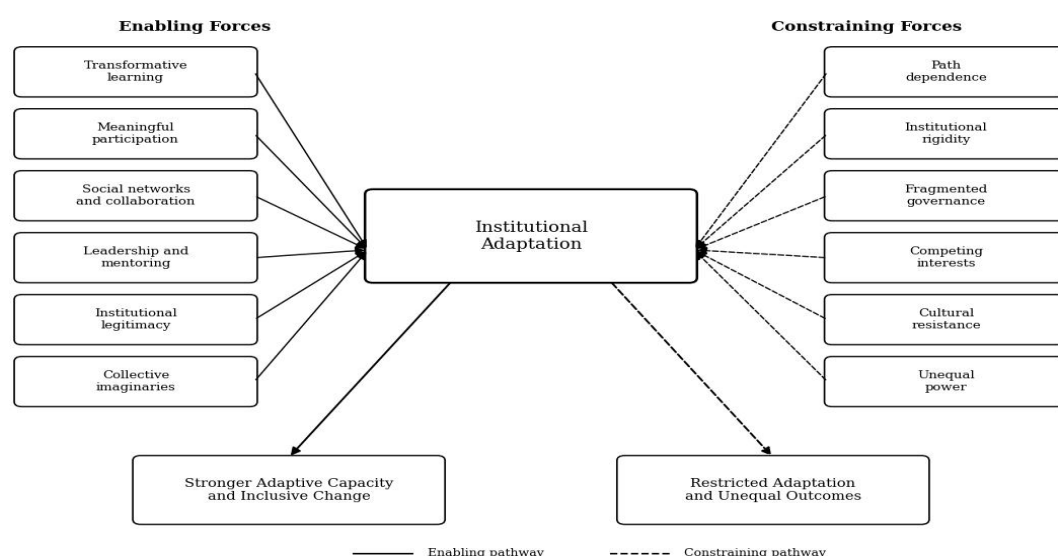
Six principal barriers were identified: path dependence, institutional rigidity, fragmented governance, competing interests, cultural resistance, and unequal power. Path dependence was associated with established regulatory structures, organisational routines, and inherited institutional arrangements that limited flexibility. Fragmented governance was reflected in weak coordination across agencies, sectors, and institutional levels.

Competing interests and unequal power affected the direction and pace of institutional change. Cultural resistance was linked to the preservation of established identities, routines, and social expectations. Deeply embedded social values were also resistant to direct policy intervention or behavioural messaging. These barriers commonly appeared together rather than as isolated constraints. Table 2 presents the enabling mechanisms and barriers.

Table 2. Mechanisms Enabling Institutional Adaptation and Barriers to Institutional Change

Dimension	Enabling mechanisms	Corresponding barriers
Knowledge and learning	Transformative learning, shared inquiry	Institutional rigidity, limited learning capacity
Participation	Community involvement, procedural fairness	Unequal influence, restricted participation
Relationships	Social networks, mentoring, and collaboration	Fragmented governance, weak coordination
Leadership	Communication, guidance, and collective problem-solving	Competing interests, concentration of authority
Legitimacy	Trust, acceptance, institutional credibility	Cultural resistance, low public confidence
Future orientation	Collective imaginaries, shared visions	Path dependence, attachment to established practices

Figure 1 illustrates how enabling and constraining forces jointly shape institutional adaptation.

**Figure 1. Enablers and Barriers to Institutional Adaptation**

3.5 Changes in Collective Life

Changes in collective life were identified in four areas: identity and belonging, participation, social practices, and access to institutional resources. Collective identity formation was associated with interaction, shared experience, and adaptation within emerging communities. Digital environments expanded the spaces in which affiliation, identity expression, and community formation occurred.

Participation changed through new forms of civic engagement, community adaptation, collaborative governance, and digital interaction. Platform-based governance altered citizen–administration relationships by increasing digital service access and creating additional channels for public participation. Community-focused adaptation involved local knowledge, shared decision-making, and interaction among residents, institutions, and experts.

Collective practices were also reshaped through place-based governance, organisational collaboration, and institutional learning. Place-sensitive approaches incorporated local conditions, spatial relationships, and community priorities into decision-making. Collaborative organisational models supported shared inquiry, group learning, and collective problem-solving.

3.6 Unequal Outcomes of Transformation

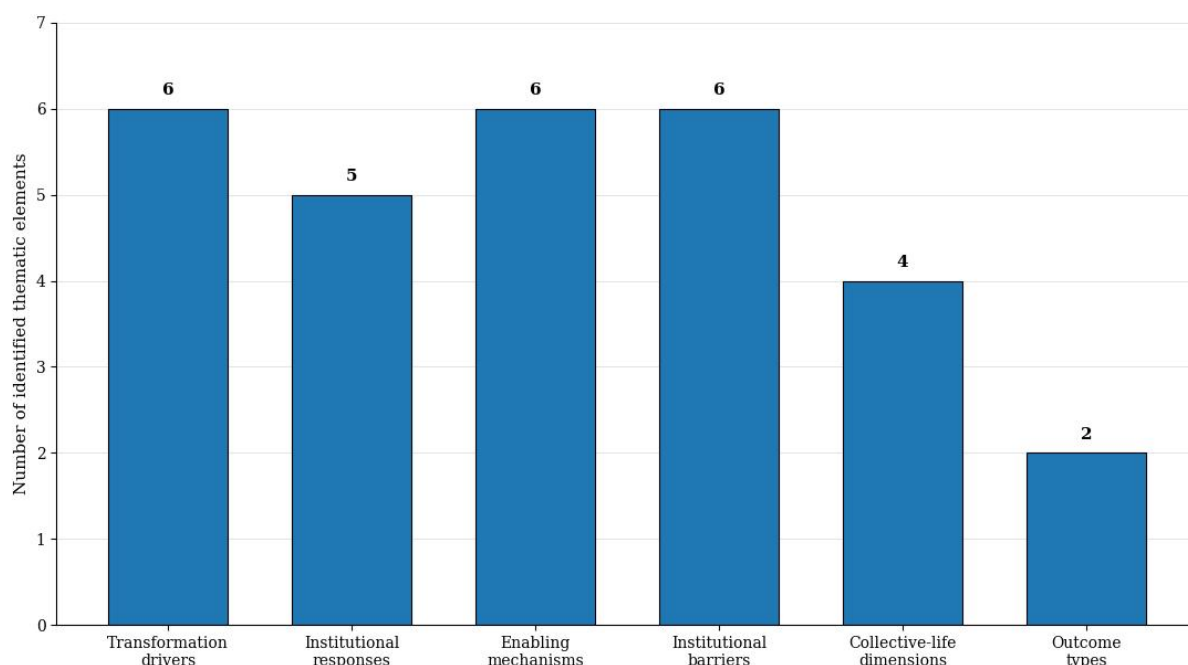
The reviewed literature reported both enabling and restrictive outcomes. Enabling outcomes included expanded participation, stronger learning networks, institutional innovation, and new forms of collective organisation. Restrictive outcomes included exclusion, unequal access to resources, concentration of authority, and uneven exposure to social and ecological risks.

Transformative social innovation was associated with both empowerment and disempowerment, depending on the distribution of authority, recognition, and resources among participating actors. Differences in adaptive capacity were linked to unequal access to knowledge, technology, institutional influence, and social networks. Collective outcomes, therefore, varied across social groups and institutional contexts. Table 3 summarises changes in collective life and related outcomes.

Table 3. Dimensions of Change in Collective Life and Associated Outcomes

Dimension of collective life	Observed changes	Enabling outcomes	Restrictive outcomes
Identity and belonging	New affiliations, negotiated identities, digital communities	Stronger belonging and recognition	Identity exclusion and unequal visibility
Participation	Civic engagement, digital participation, shared decision-making	Broader involvement and agency	Tokenistic or unequal participation
Social practices	Collaboration, collective learning, community adaptation	Improved coordination and problem-solving	Dependence on dominant institutions
Institutional access	Digital services, networks, and governance channels	Greater access to information and resources	Digital exclusion and unequal access
Power and authority	Redistribution or concentration of influence	Empowerment and institutional voice	Disempowerment and concentrated control

Figure 2 compares the thematic elements identified across the study domains.

**Figure 2. Distribution of Identified Themes Across Analytical Domains**

4. Discussion

The results indicate that social change and institutional change go together, and that both processes engage in reshaping collective life, in terms of the different ways organisations relate to one another, the technological systems, the governance mechanisms, the cultural meanings and how people are involved. Beyond policies, institutional responses involve socialisation, mentoring, symbolic work, digital infrastructures, and building legitimacy. These mechanisms affect the way that people and groups view change, learn new knowledge, and react to new expectations. Relational processes within organisations are particularly important, as they convey norms, facilitate common understandings and enable continuity in times of structural change (Allen et al., 2017).

Technology was a key facilitator and moderator of institutional adaptation, with effects not automatically and socially neutral. Information technologies open new opportunities for coordination, communication, delivery of services, and participation, but have outcomes that are shaped by the institutional logics in which they are applied. Technological affordances are mediated by values, routines, and authority structures, in that the same technology can reinforce the existing routines and values in some contexts and can facilitate change in others (Faik et al., 2020). Platform governance is a good example of this as it is changing citizens–administration relationships, increasing access for citizens to services, and providing more opportunities for citizens to participate and hold governments accountable (Janowski et al., 2018).

Digital environments also change the context in which collective identity, affiliation and interaction are created. Virtual systems are not strictly defined by technical ability, but are socially created by governance decisions, cultural norms,

and divergent visions of a future virtual system (Bibri, 2022). Although digitised life is intertwined with other relations of power and inequality, the identities of those recognised, who are visible, and who control digital resources remain unequal (Reed, 2018). Digital adaptation can help to reinforce the connectivity and collective organisation, but it can also imply exclusion, surveillance, and unequal control.

Another key condition that influences institutional adaptation's legitimacy is procedural justice (Gillard et al. 2016). Not only the policy outcome, but also whether policy changes provide affected communities with meaningful participation in decision-making, is relevant to transformational change. Locally legitimate adaptation requires political skills, political identification and fair processes (Holland, 2017). Effectively reproducing inequalities if people participate but don't have a lot of influence. Institutional responses are more believable if they are transparent, participatory and sensitive to local knowledge and experience.

The findings also suggest cultural continuity and social values, which are well entrenched. While values can be changed through policy changes or behavioural change, institutions can encourage the change through such means. Social values are a product of lengthy cultural, relational and historical processes, and are not easily influenced by instrumental policies (Manfredo et al., 2017). The reasons for the resistance to reform when it challenges existing identities, moral commitments, or the collective meanings can best be understood with this in mind.

There's also a symbolic and political process that's needed for institutional change, which has to be ongoing. Organisations and institutions are formed by the set of practices that create identities, stories and approved modes of action (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). If these new technologies and institutional structures aren't seen as suitable, reliable and in line with social norms, they are unlikely to stand the test of time. Despite the challenges, the legitimisation of potable water reuse shows the importance of communicating, building alliances, reframing and securing regulatory alignment for innovation to happen (Binz et al., 2016).

Transformation also has 'unequal' effects. While social innovation can result in an increase in participation, agency and collective capacity, it can also lead to disempowerment if authority and resources remain concentrated (Avelino et al., 2019). Assessing institutional adaptation should thus be done in terms of its transformative potential as well as its distributional impact. This study has some limitations in its design (qualitative), size of the corpus (multidisciplinary), and lack of primary data. Comparative, longitudinal and mixed methodological studies with a focus on marginal people, digital exclusion, unequal levels of adaptive capacity and long-term impacts on trust, identity, participation and collective resilience should be conducted in the future.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed that social transformation is induced by a web of ecological, technological, economic, demographic and cultural pressures which are interconnected, and that their impact on identity, participation, social practices and access to collective resources is mediated by the processes of institutional adaptation. Responses of institutions occur at the level of policy change, institutional change, institutional learning, institutional norms and institutional technology. But these responses are effective depending on the legitimacy, participation, social networks, leadership and adaptive capacity of institutions. Path dependence, weak governance, cultural inertia, conflicting interests, and power differentials impede institutional change and limit its impact on social groups and communities. Collective life can be enhanced by deeper cooperation, new ideas, greater civic involvement and common learning, but also by creating and reinforcing exclusion and centralising power and enhancing the differential access to knowledge and institutional power. For sustainable adaptation, just administrative flexibility or technological advancement are not enough, but transparency of governance, procedural justice, cultural sensitivity and meaningful public participation are needed. The ability to balance continuity with reform is better in institutions that can do so in changing circumstances, which helps them to be socially trustworthy and collectively resilient. The interdependencies provide a valuable context for designing more inclusive institutional responses that spread opportunities, risks and benefits of transformation more fairly.

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