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Research paper

# Identifying ripple effects from new market institutions to household rules -Malawi's Agricultural Commodity Exchange

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction of new rules in an institutional field provides agents with a new set of opportunities and constraints on which they can leverage to change the rules in other institutional fields. Inspired by Elinor Ostrom, we term this causality a ripple effect, born out of the initial institutional changes. In this article we enquired in what ways women farmers could transfer genderblind changes in the market to the household. We developed a diagnostic tool to capture this propagation of effects and tested our framework with a study of the Agricultural Commodity Exchange for Africa (ACE) in Malawi. We found that the introduction of ACE has produced weak but positive effects for women, some of which rippled the changes in the rules to improve their household situation. Some women see in trading with ACE an opportunity to retain freedom and avoid a constraining married position in the household.

## 1. Introduction

Institutions guide human behaviour and cluster in institutional fields that indicate the appropriate course of action in different situations. Most research on institutional fields studies them one by one, in isolation from each other, when in fact the number of institutions, their interconnectedness and their force are far greater than generally recognised by policy-makers, as Ostrom argued (2005). The social life of agents occurs across different institutional fields and in each one of them institutions have the double role of constraining and enabling agents' action. An agent can find significant room for manoeuvre in one institutional field and a rather constraining environment in another institutional field. As institutions evolve, changes of rules enable or restrain a new collection of actions in an institutional field, and we reason that these changes can affect the agent's repertoire of institutional opportunities and constraints in other institutional fields. In other words, agents can leverage on new sets of opportunities and constraints across institutional fields and their agency may be enhanced or further limited.

Elinor Ostrom introduced the notion that changes in one institutional field "ripple" on other institutional fields Ostrom (2005: 58). Our motivation is to study these ripple effects, which we define as the propagation of rule changes in one institutional field on to another institutional field via the actions of agents. With this approach on institutional fields, we wondered if women could leverage on changes in the institutional field of the market to affect the gendered rules in the

institutional field of the household. In principle, gender-blind policies and programmes are not designed to affect the gender rules and benefit women specifically. There is also a certain assumption in the feminist literature that changes in market institutions rarely contribute to the advancement of women's positions in society, as highlighted by Scott et al. (2012). Some empirical studies on intra-household gender dynamics in Africa have already underlined the capacity of women to adapt their household strategies to benefit from market economic activities and "operate outside the constraints imposed by customary patriarchy" (Scott et al., 2012: 564).

We decided to adopt a pragmatist feminist perspective (Whipps and Lake 2016, Scott et al., 2012, McKenna 2001, Seigfried 1996) that postulates, for instance, that human action is creative, human beings have situated freedom, and action is adaptation fitted to the problematics of specific situations. We were inspired by Scott et al. (2012: 564) in highlighting that pragmatic feminism allows for the possibility that gender-blind market institutions may contain mechanisms that "can be harnessed for feminist purposes". Diagnosing them correctly, as Rodrik (2010a,b) reminds us, is far more challenging. We aimed at contributing a tool to better understand in what ways ripple effects occur.

## 2. Methodology

Our research was motivated by enquiring in what ways genderblind changes in the market institutional field enabled women to affect their

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situations in the household institutional field, if at all. This enquiry required to delve deeply into the daily lives of women that engage in both institutional fields, i.e. market and household. We hence chose to do a case study of the introduction of genderblind rules in a market where women trade, if possible with similar businesses. We were inspired by [McCall's suggestion \(2005: 35\)](#) that case studies represent the most effective way of empirically researching the complexity of the way that the intersection of institutional fields on specific agents affects their everyday lives. We found suitable conditions for such a study with women farmers in rural Malawi, because we have a long research presence and would have the access that the study demanded. We selected the introduction of the Agricultural Commodity Exchange for Africa (ACE) in Malawi and focused on small holder farmers that produce maize, groundnuts, and pigeon peas in the central regions of the country. In 2013 ACE introduced a warehouse receipt system with access to finance and storage, a market information system and capacity building for farmers, and claims to have improved the choices of farmers. ACE documents make no mention of gender and do not address women farmers at all, despite the fact that the vast majority of farmers in Malawi, as in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, are women ([Doss, 2011, 2014](#)). We hence concluded that it was a genderblind institutional reform in which gender considerations were basically ignored.

Our research had multiple objectives and dimensions, and in this particular paper we aim at understanding ripple effects and not to evaluate the impact of ACE on women. Hence, we designed a framework to gain insight into what different institutions “do” and “prescribe” from the experiences and stories of farmers. We focused only on women farmers and how they navigate the rules in the market and the households; we do not analyze the situations of men farmers. We designed the study for a small sample of women farmers who would share their personal life story for our research, used ACE services regularly and for at least three years, and wanted to improve their income. Our sampling needed to cover different household situations, so we asked ACE staff to identify for us twelve female smallholders that have been using ACE services since 2013. The sample included four married, four single and four divorced or widowed women. The data collection methods employed in the field were qualitative and involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, retrieval of documents and marketing materials and news articles. Our fieldwork took place between February and May 2016. We also interviewed 9 ACE staff members, a local researcher and four experts. In addition, we did one focus group discussion with three female farmers. Interestingly, ACE struggled to identify young not-yet-married women in their client base, which could indicate a combination of different things such as few young women consider farming and trading commodities, Malawian women marry young, or ACE is inaccessible for young single women. To ensure spatial representation of the participants we selected participants in both semi-urban and rural areas of the central region of the country.<sup>1</sup> The database is too limited to generalize our findings, but it has allowed us to proof our diagnostic tool to identify a ripple effect.

In the next section we set out our theoretical position and in section four we build a framework to diagnose ripple effects across institutional fields. In section five we discuss the situation of women in Malawi and in section six we scrutinise in what ways the introduction of ACE as a gender blind policy rippled to the benefit of women, if at all. We further discuss the potentials and limits of the framework to identify ripple effects and conclude with reflections on areas for future research.

<sup>1</sup> The data we present here comes from a larger research project on the effects of inclusive innovations on the lives and businesses of women entrepreneurs in Malawi that included a round of data collection by one of the authors between February and May 2016 and February and March 2017.

### 3. Gender, institutions and ripple effects

Our study focuses on the actions of social actors, which are regulated by institutions in institutional fields. We follow Hodgson's definition of institutions as embedded “systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interaction” ([Hodgson 2006: 2](#)), so institutions create stable expectations on the behaviour of others. In this definition, rules are “socially transmitted and customary normative injunction or immanently normative disposition that in circumstances X, do Y” ([Hodgson 2006: 3](#)). The introduction of a commodity exchange modifies the actions of buying and selling in the market in a pre-existing landscape of rules of exchange. The new institutions set rules of the type that in X do Y' and in comparison to the previous set of rules, they create a disposition to modify behaviour at the time of trading.

As explained by [Wacquant \(1998\)](#), agents do not face undifferentiated social spaces but distinct spheres of life endowed with specific rules, regularities, and forms of authority. Authors address these clusters of institutions as fields ([Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992](#), [Fligstein and McAdam 2011a,b](#)), domains ([Laumann and Knoke, 1987](#)) or networks ([Powell et al., 2005](#)). While they have different meanings, these terms generally address “meso-level social orders” where actors interact with knowledge of the rules, the relations and the purposes of the field ([Fligstein and McAdam, 2011: 3](#)). Each field has characteristics in terms of boundaries, origins and transformation.

[Fligstein and McAdam \(2011\)](#) describe the various fields as a set of Russian dolls, one inside the other, whereby changes in one institutional field can destabilise the rules in other fields. [Ostrom \(2005: 58\)](#) introduced the notion that changes in one institutional field “ripple” on others, so we will refer to these as ripple effects. We take the framework developed by [Polski and Ostrom's \(1999: 39\)](#) to analyse types of rules-in-use to capture how these prescriptions cluster to form an institutional field, and to follow how the introduction of new rules on market exchange has affected or not women's lives in the household.

Several authors have referred to the complexity and interconnections among institutions and the context and field in which they emerge and operate ([Ostrom, 2005; Sindzingre, 2006; Andersson and Agrawal, 2011; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011a,b](#)). [Polski and Ostrom \(1999\)](#) identified seven types of rules in any institutional field. The *position rules* affect participants (individuals or groups) when they perform a certain role. Participants are included or excluded from that position by *boundary rules*, while *authority or choice rules* prescribe what is possible and acceptable for the position. The action arena is further shaped by *information rules* that state what is known and communicated, and by *aggregation rules* which are the mechanisms to control a situation. Costs and benefits are regulated by *payoff rules*, and the likely outcomes depend on *scope rules*. These rules form together an institutional field, such as a market. [Fig. 1](#) represents any institutional field, such as a market in which “a farmer” occupies the position that, according to the position rules, can exchange goods via ACE.

Institutional fields centre on agents whose actions are informed by institutions and whose agency depends on. [Hodgson \(2003\)](#) argues that institutions act as hidden persuaders and both enable and restrain behaviour, so institutional change in one field may affect the agents' sets of opportunities and constraints in the other fields where the agent is active. In the household, decision making and welfare distribution signal that households do not actually function in isolation but are affected by the “hidden enablers” in other fields. [Smajgl and Larson \(2007: 15\)](#) contend that research often isolates the different fields of a social order despite the need to study them “as a part of the institutional layer it is embodied in, as well as part of the economic, ecological, social layers it might impact on or be impacted by”.

The concept of ripple effect captures subsequent and unintended changes in the rules that were not directly expected within the initial field of institutional change. We hence conceive a dynamic web of institutional fields in which changes in rules in one field can ripple out and create a pathway of change within and across other fields, so

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