



# Adaptive institutions? Peasant institutions and natural models facing climatic and economic changes in the Colombian Andes



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## ABSTRACT

In the Colombian Andes, peasants have co-evolved with their environment for centuries, but it is uncertain whether traditional informal institutions and natural models are adapting to current and possibly unprecedented economic and climatic disturbances. This study investigated institutional adaptation and the social mechanisms of institutional change or continuity among peasants in the Eastern Andean Cordillera. The research was informed by evolutionary theories of institutional change and based on a qualitative approach that included data collected through a focus group, oral histories, key informant interviews and observations. This study suggests that reciprocal work exchanges, festivities and gender-based divisions of roles have been disused or changed due to economic pressures, but that most informal institutions have persisted due to selective outmigration, conformist intergenerational transmission, and practices of everyday resistance. The natural model of vital energy and the traditional peasant ethos represents a 'social attractor' that has influenced institutional continuity. This study highlights tensions between resilience, cultural diversity, and transformation that are important in many other marginal rural locations in the Andes. Future research should further explore first, under what conditions institutional adaptation is observed and when it is related to increased resilience, and, second, how transformability, social-ecological resilience and cultural diversity are related.

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## 1. Introduction

In the Colombian Andes, peasants have co-evolved with their environment for centuries, but it is uncertain whether traditional informal institutions and natural models are adapting to current and possibly unprecedented economic and climatic disturbances. This study investigated institutional adaptation and the social mechanisms of institutional change or continuity among peasants in the Eastern Andean Cordillera.

The future of Colombian peasantry in the face of current climatic and economic changes is the object of intense debate. Experts have observed climate change and increased climate variability in Colombia, and peasants are believed to be among those most disproportionately vulnerable to the projected changes (Feola et al., 2015a). Some have proposed that a lack of knowledge of technical and economic means most determines capacity to adapt (Ramirez-Villegas et al, 2012; DNP-BID, 2014). Others have suggested that legacy issues such as marginalization, unequal access to land,

violent conflict, and more recent concerns on land use conflicts (e.g. between mining and agriculture) and trade liberalization have led to the problem (Forero, 2010; Cárdenas and Rodríguez, 2013; Feola, 2013; Feola et al., 2015a). Many argue that this last concern—trade liberalization, specifically as a mechanism of integration of peasant communities in global economic structures—negatively affects rural communities' adaptive capacity and magnifies vulnerability (Eakin, 2005; Young and Lipton, 2006; Ribot, 2014; Wilson, 2012).

Successive Colombian governments have consistently employed trade liberalization policies, together with market-led agrarian reform, to achieve agricultural modernization. However, trade liberalization often clashes with peasants' traditional institutions, and farming practices, such as reciprocal systems of exchange and altitudinal zonation (Mayer, 2002; Stadel, 2008), which have historically guaranteed agricultural adaptation to the Andean environment. Trade liberalization is a form of forced cultural and productive transformation (Feola, 2015) that often reinforces the marginalization of non-commercial farmers who are outcompeted on globally exposed markets (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2002). This approach to rural development has led to collective protests in Colombia that paralyzed the country in 2012 and 2013 (Cruz, 2014;

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see also [Hristov, 2005](#)).

Other research of Andean peasants paints a picture of successful adaptation in both historical and current times. Various authors show that traditional informal institutions have persisted or re-emerged in the face of increased climate risk and market liberalization. For instance, sharecropping and reciprocal labour exchanges facilitate peasant access to more diverse land, inputs, and labour, and allows them to co-exist with liberalized agricultural markets ([Arias, 2005](#); [Espinosa, 2009](#)). Bartering and exchanging goods and labour helps reduce climate risk ([De Los Rios and Almeida, 2010](#)). Thus, modern and traditional institutions can coexist in 'hybrid cultures' ([Escobar, 1995](#); see also [Cleaver, 2001](#); [Postigo et al., 2008](#)) through complex dynamics of institutional and cultural change.

Authors have examined institutional change and adaptation in the resilience and governance literature ([Boyd and Folke, 2012](#); [Agrawal et al., 2008, 2012](#)), which has highlighted important theoretical gaps. First, research has focused mostly on the outcomes of particular institutional systems, but has largely overlooked how these systems came to exist in their current form ([David, 1994](#); [Ternström, 2012](#)). Other authors posit that traditional institutions are not static and brittle, but are in fact quite dynamic systems of norms ([Cleaver, 2001](#); [Raynaut, 2001](#); [Tengö and von Heland, 2012](#)); ultimately, there is a lack of understanding of how institutions adapt to a range of disturbances ([Boyd and Folke, 2012](#)).

Much research has focused on formal institutions, rather than informal ones ([Young et al., 2008](#); [Casson et al., 2009](#)). Considerable gaps still exist with respect to our understanding of informal institutions, and the mechanisms through which they can develop outcomes and adaptation ([Cleaver, 2001](#); [Jütting et al., 2007](#); [Casson et al., 2009](#); [Cleaver, 2012](#); [Forsyth and Evans, 2013](#)).

Other environmental change research has focused on environmental institutions (e.g. common property regimes), but non-environmental institutions—those not directly aimed at environmental governance, such as labour exchange, or barter—can more significantly influence human–environment interactions ([Cleaver, 2012](#)). Several authors argue that more research should be devoted to understanding the environmental performance of non-environmental institutions in adaptation to climate change ([Mitchell, 2008](#); [Underdal, 2008](#)).

This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the peasant settlement of Las Cañas in the Colombian Andes. Particularly, this study investigates institutional adaptation, or a lack thereof, and the social mechanisms of institutional change, or continuity. This study asks whether and which informal institutions and connected natural model are changing or persisting in response to climatic and economic disturbances, and how change, or continuity, has occurred.

The findings of this study will increase scholars' understanding of peasants' adaptation in the Colombian Andes and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on the mechanisms of institutional adaptation and cultural change.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the literature on institutional change, and particularly it presents evolutionary theories and theories of institutional continuity that inform this study. Section 3 presents the research methods adopted for this study, while the following section describes the informal peasant institutions and related natural model that were object of study. Section 5 describes the study area of Las Cañas, namely its biophysical, demographic and socio-economic characteristics and recent trends that provide the necessary context to the understanding of institutional change and continuity in this area. Section 6 presents the study's findings and discusses them in the light of the literature on institutional change. Finally, section 7 summarizes the main findings and identifies relevant questions for future

research on the relation between institutional adaptation and cultural diversity.

## 2. Theoretical context

Several competing definitions of institutions exist, but it is out of the scope of this paper to comprehensively review such definitions. For the purpose of this paper, institutions will be defined as the "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" ([North, 1990:97](#)). Institutions constrain and enable action by assigning power, rights, obligations, and giving a reason for action, based on collectively shared systems of meaning ([Searle, 2005](#); [Aoki, 2007](#)).

Institutions can be formal—laws, normally codified and enforced by specialised actors—or informal—reciprocal exchange, normally not codified and enforced endogenously by members of the relevant group—and create behavioural expectations that facilitate coordination and reduce uncertainty ([North, 1990](#); [Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)). At their best, institutions simplify problems and reduce the transaction cost of societal decision-making ([Wegerich, 2001](#)). Institutional effectiveness rests on institutions being perceived as objective facts taken for granted by social actors ([Taussig, 1980](#); [Aoki, 2007](#); [Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)).

Institutions change over time. [Kingston and Caballero \(2009\)](#) discuss two groups of institutional change theories: collective choice and evolutionary change theories (see also [Jütting et al., 2007](#)). While institutional change may occur through a combination of collective choice and evolutionary processes ([Poteete, 2014](#)) and evolutionary theories do not rule out collective decision-making processes as sources of institutional selection ([Dietz and Burns, 1992](#)), this distinction allows researchers to isolate some important differences in the sources of institutional change for different types of institutions.

Collective choice theories conceptualise institutional change as a centralised and explicit process led by a specialised entity that sets the rules within which individuals and organizations engage ([Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)). Contextual changes may shift the benefits for the actors involved in collective action, which triggers learning processes and the need to change the 'rules of the game.' Power relations and vested interests may steer institutional change towards institutions that result in inefficient outcomes, or hinder institutional change ([Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)). Collective-choice theories of institutional change have made important contributions to understanding formal institutions, but inadequately explain informal institutions. Informal institutions appear to have evolved in a decentralised fashion with little apparent effort to design a set of rules ([Dietz and Burns, 1992](#)).

For these reasons, evolutionary change theories are better suited to study the change process of informal institutions. These theories conceptualise institutional change as an evolutionary process, or one defined by the mechanisms of variation, selection, and inheritance ([Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)). New institutional variations emerge from the uncoordinated actions of multiple actors ([Kingston and Caballero, 2009](#)), and in different ways, including chance, interpretation of existing rules, and error ([Dietz and Burns, 1992](#)). Variations can then be selected through various processes, which [Burns and Dietz \(1992\)](#) name p-selection, s-selection and m-selection. P-selection corresponds to the usage of power—to sanction or incentivise diversion from existing norms; s-selection refers to social structures, as a result of intended, or unintended, structural design, usually by elites; and m-selection refers to the response of the material environment to human action, which makes human activity impossible in a particular environment based on certain rules.

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