



Guidance Note: AAS-2012-27

Collaborative Governance Assessment

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1. Introduction

Communities set many objectives that cannot be achieved without addressing constraints in the governance context. These concern a range of institutional factors beyond the village level—relationships among government agencies, the influence of national policies, how conflicts with outside resource users are resolved, whose voice is heard regarding private sector investment decisions, and much more.

Governance, broadly speaking, is about how decisions are made on matters of public importance. Aquatic agricultural systems, like many complex socio-ecological systems, involve a wide range of resource users, a wide range of uses, and many competing interests. Understanding the governance context, and promoting improvements in governance where possible, is critical to achieving progress with regard to equitable resource allocation, access to markets, improvement of public services such as health and education, women’s empowerment, and other factors that affect poverty, food security, and livelihood resilience.

Many development interventions fail because they don’t address governance obstacles, or don’t take advantage of governance

opportunities. When local actors express concerns about conflicting agendas, power, and politics beyond the local scale; disconnected efforts; unclear division of responsibilities; or poor responsiveness to local needs on the part of government, private sector, or civil society groups, these point to governance issues that need to be assessed (Figure 1). Overcoming these obstacles requires processes that enable diverse stakeholders to build mutual understanding of the obstacles and opportunities in their governance context, explore options for influencing change, and take actions that help achieve collective priorities.

This Guidance Note presents a simple approach to analyzing the governance context for development of aquatic agricultural systems; it is intended as an aid to action research, and a contribution to effective program planning and evaluation. It provides a brief introduction to the value of assessing governance collaboratively, summarizes an analytical framework, and offers practical guidance on three stages of the process: identifying obstacles and opportunities, debating strategies for influence, and planning collaborative actions.

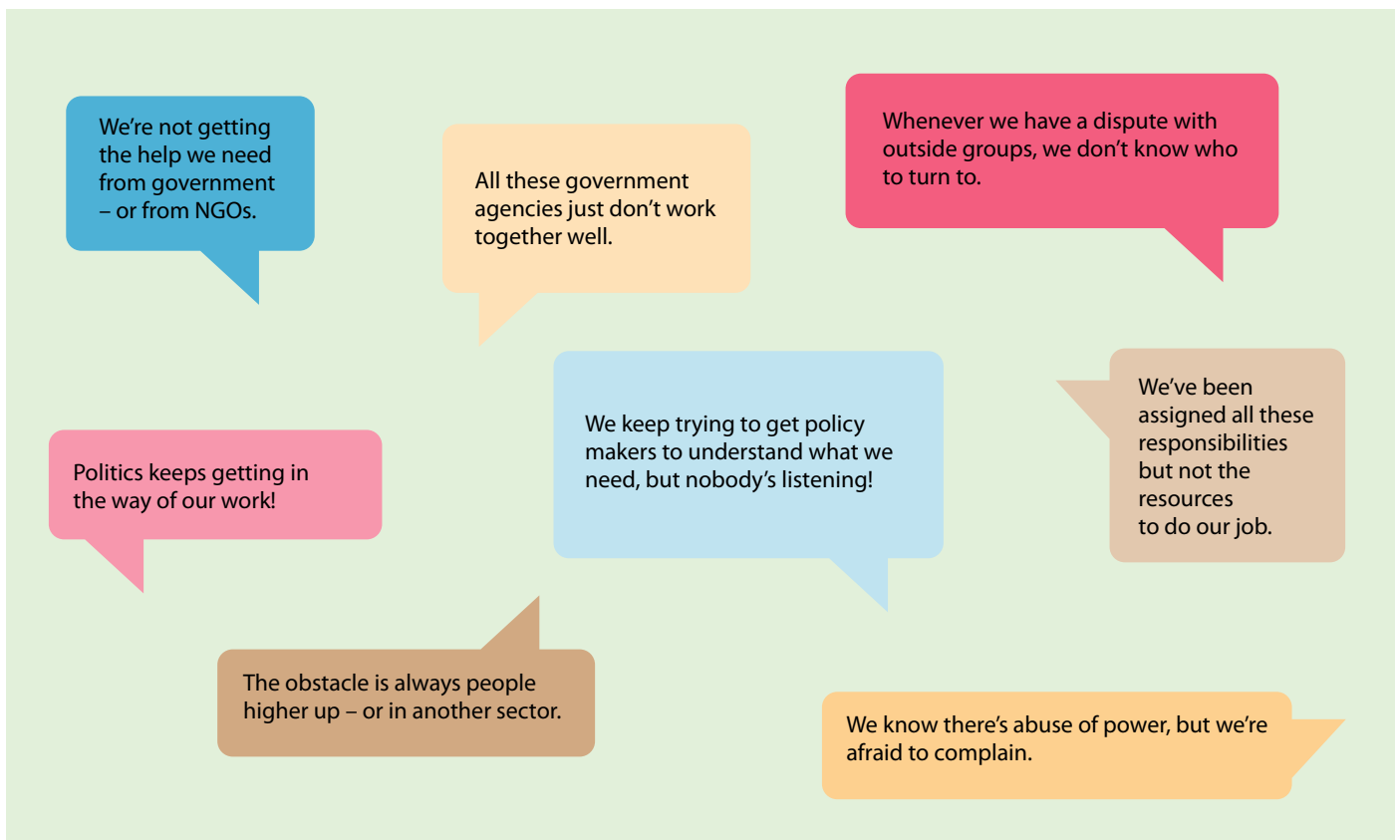


Figure 1. Common complaints that signal governance challenges.

2. Why assess governance collaboratively?

Donor agencies sometimes undertake governance assessments to better understand the structures and processes of decision-making in a country or a development sector. Academics sometimes undertake governance assessments to explore the importance of different institutional factors or to make comparisons between countries and regions. The process outlined in this Guidance Note has a different purpose. We’re interested in aiding communities, NGOs, government agencies, and other stakeholders to directly assess their own governance context, and to make appropriate choices accordingly—including identifying how outside groups can best assist local stakeholders to meet their objectives.

Bringing all key stakeholders into the process ensures that multiple perspectives will be represented, ensures that local actors have opportunities to influence each other’s understanding, and ultimately builds commitments to action that would not be possible through an outsider’s analysis alone. The underlying principles for this approach are drawn from a process known as “Collaborating for Resilience” or CORE (Ratner and Smith 2012).

CORE is a whole-systems approach to stakeholder interaction, analysis, and collaborative planning. Applicable in small as well as very large groups, the approach entails active listening to deepen awareness of the problem, the possibilities, and the perspectives

of different groups; sharing and debating competing points of view to ensure a full understanding of the forces at play; and, finally, narrowing in on the particular realm of actions within an individual's or group's control. As applied to governance assessment, these three phases focus on:

1. identifying obstacles and opportunities in the governance context (the 'listening' phase)
2. debating alternative courses of action or strategies for influence to address these obstacles or take advantage of these opportunities (the 'dialogue' phase)
3. planning and undertaking collaborative actions (the 'choice' phase)

Undertaking these steps in the process jointly with local actors can also help build institutional capacity, so that similar analysis, dialogue, and action planning can continue in the future. As shown in Figure 2, governance assessment is not finished at the end of a cycle of planning and action. The outcomes of prior efforts offer opportunities to learn about what can be done next, and other factors are likely to cause the governance context to shift and evolve over time as well, making it useful to repeat and update the assessment. By working together, diverse groups not only increase their own capacity to address the challenges at hand but crucially strengthen institutional relationships that are essential to sustaining collaboration in the face of future challenges.

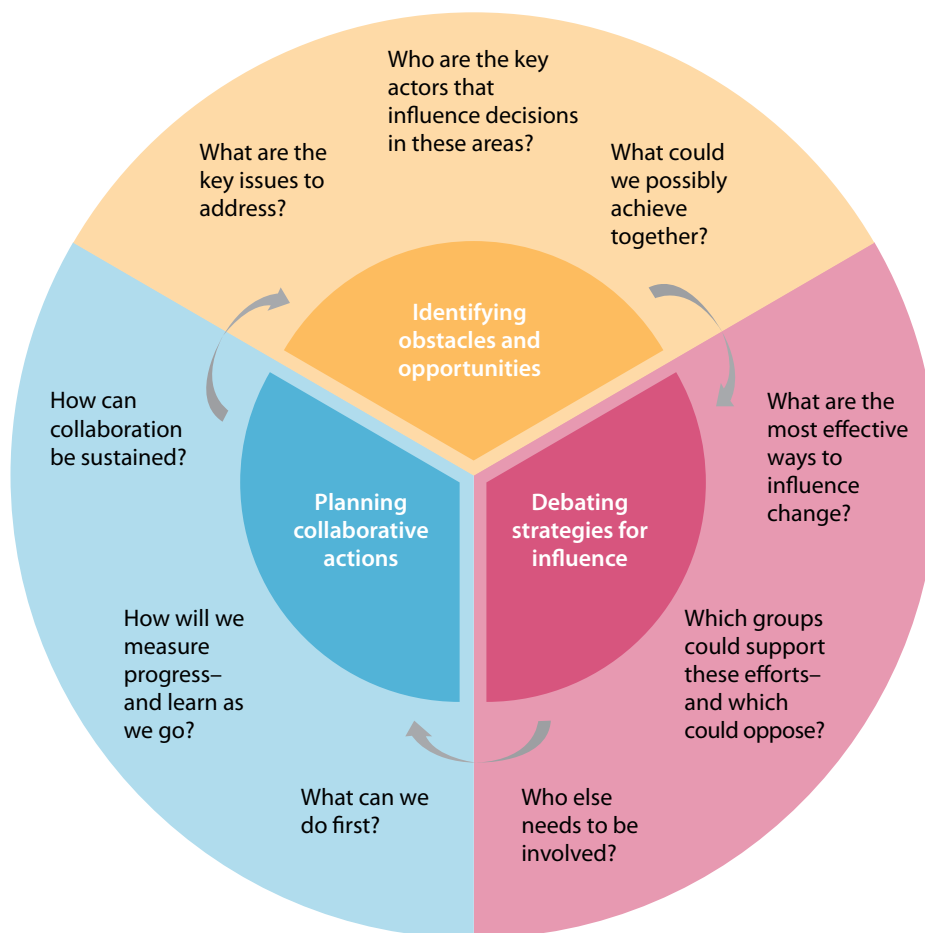


Figure 2. Three stages of collaborative governance assessment and action planning.

3. Analytical framework

The governance context of aquatic agricultural systems describes the domain in which people's authority to use, manage, or otherwise influence natural resources is exercised. It concerns the formal legal and institutional framework as well as the informal sets of norms, traditions, social networks, and power relationships that guide and constrain the interactions of stakeholders with one another and with the natural environment.

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The framework employed here focuses on three distinct dimensions of governance—stakeholder representation, distribution of authority, and mechanisms of accountability. These three dimensions provide the critical tools for assessing and describing the characteristics of different governance arrangements. Figure 3 provides key questions to help orient analysis of each of

these three dimensions of governance, as well as points of guidance or clarification and issues of particular concern that often merit attention in developing-country aquatic agricultural systems.

For each of these dimensions, both formal and informal mechanisms typically function in parallel (see Figure 4 for illustrations). In each case, the emphasis is on how decision-making works in practice, which may differ significantly from how it is meant to work in principle. In assessing mechanisms of representation, for example, formal mechanisms such as community representation in management committees, or local or regional bodies of government, need to be considered alongside informal mechanisms such as the communication of stakeholder interests through social networks or civil society organizations. To evaluate distribution of authority, it is critical to consider both formally allocated authority and powers assumed in practice. In some countries, for example, traditional civic or religious institutions may be involved in determining resource access or resolving environmental conflicts even if it is not their primary focus, and they may operate in parallel to the more formal bodies of village and district government.

Similarly, with regard to mechanisms of accountability, formal channels such as the court system need to be considered alongside informal mechanisms such as civil society advocacy and social movements. Compliance with and enforcement of laws

and local regulations may differ dramatically in practice, may be biased by the interests of government agencies, may be applied selectively to certain categories of resource users, or may be skewed according to class, ethnicity, gender, or religion.

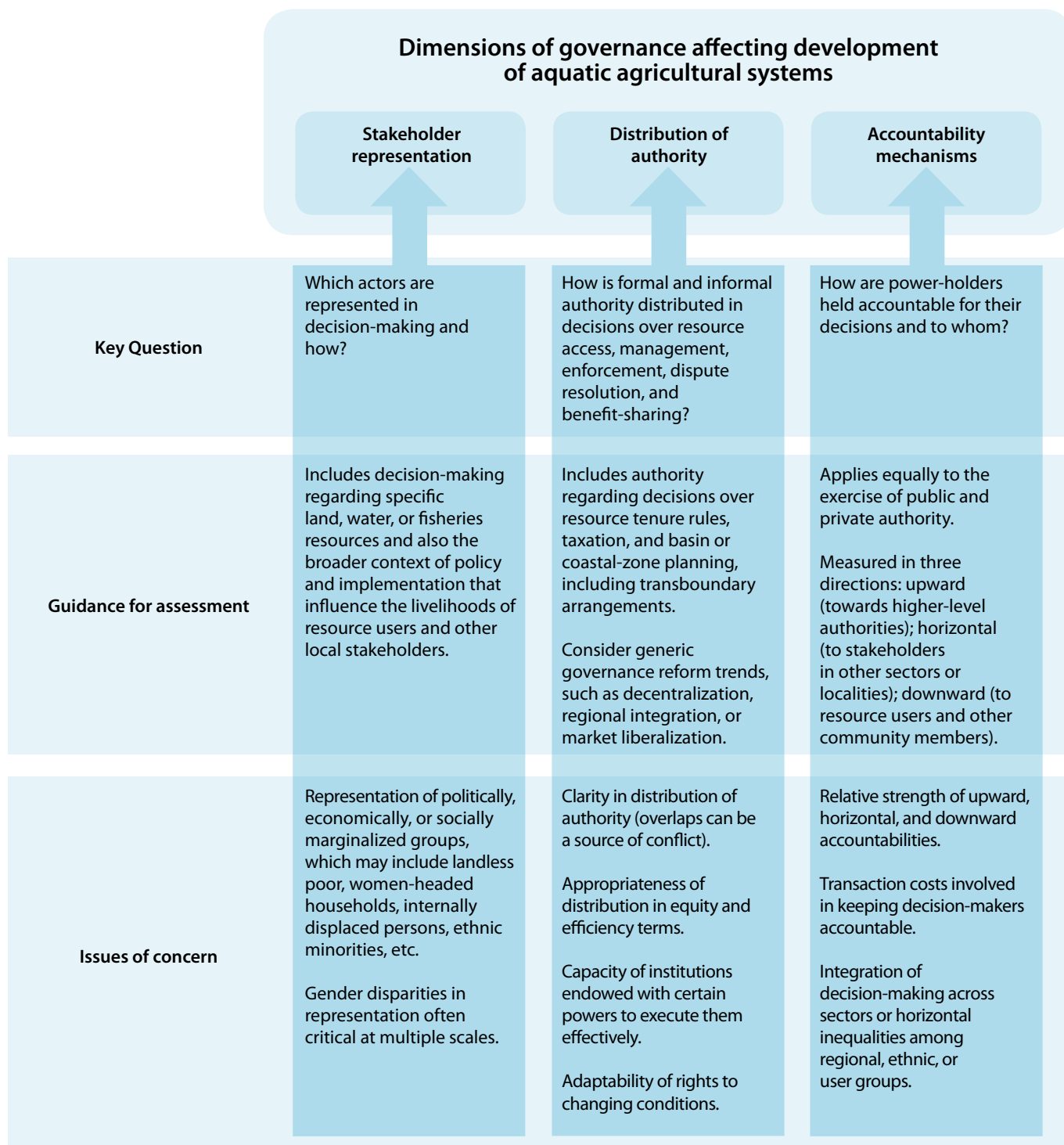


Figure 3. Key questions and considerations in analyzing the governance context for development of aquatic agricultural systems. *Source:* Ratner et al. 2012.

Dimensions of governance affecting development of aquatic agricultural systems

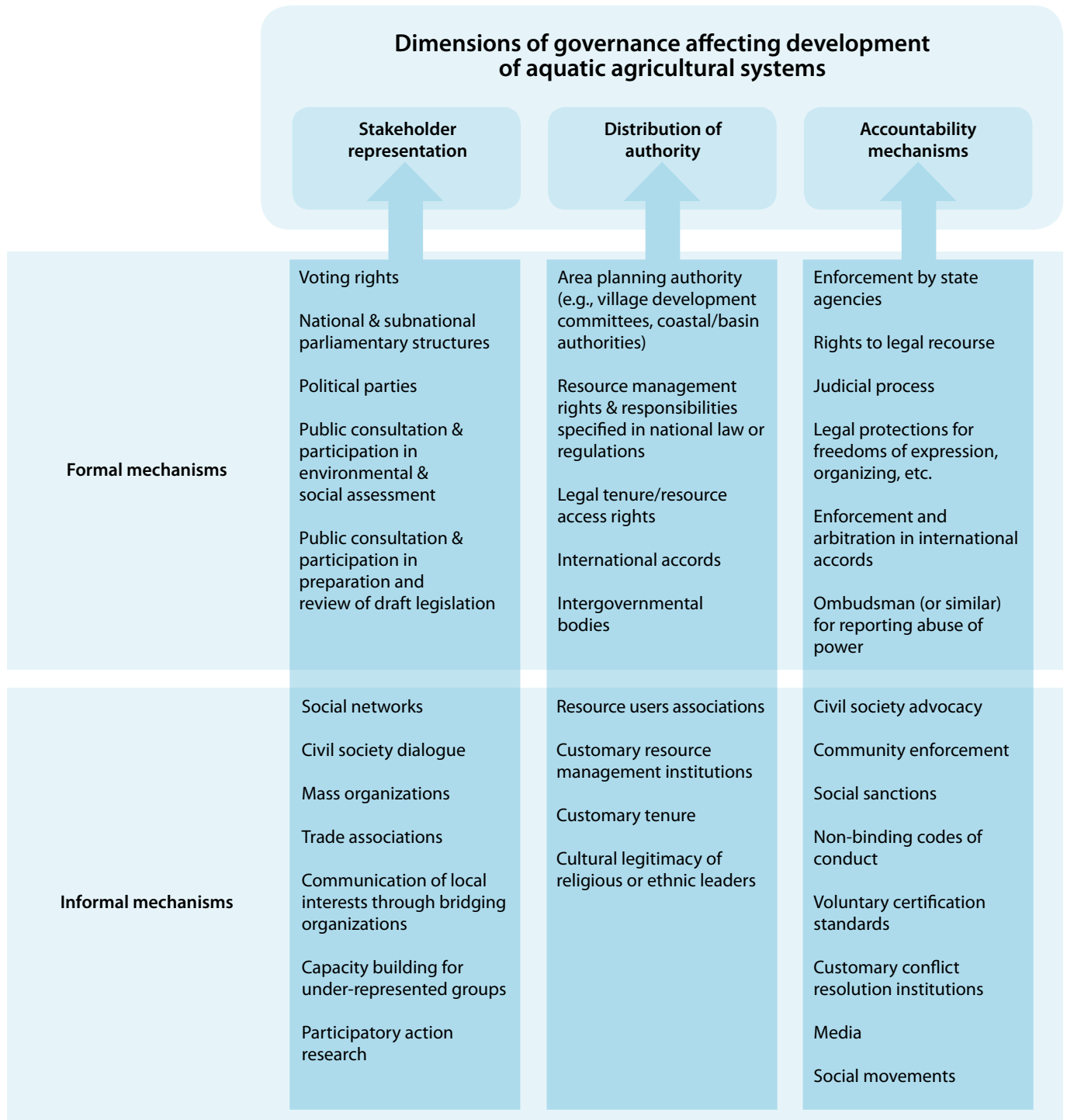


Figure 4. Examples of formal and informal mechanisms for three dimensions characterizing the governance context for development of aquatic agricultural systems.

Source: Ratner et al. 2012.



Visioning and network analysis in the Barotse floodplain, Zambia

4. Identifying governance obstacles and opportunities

Governance factors may be identified initially at the scoping stage of an initiative, where they may be considered an aspect of the overall ‘drivers of change’ (Warrener 2004). The assessment may also begin during a more detailed diagnosis of the development challenges in the focal area involving stakeholder consultation. The steps outlined here assume that there is a more general diagnosis and planning process underway, and the task is to embed a governance assessment within this. The analysis is not a ‘stand-alone’ activity; rather, it should be an integral part of the consultations undertaken with key stakeholders at national and local levels.

A governance assessment can also be undertaken at various geographic scales, and at various levels of depth. Here we describe an assessment focused on a sub-national ecoregion or programming ‘hub’ with multiple target communities, and a medium level of effort—about a three-week time commitment in total for the leader of the assessment during the three steps. This first phase of the assessment may be undertaken by a designated member of the program planning team or a consultant contracted for lead responsibility of the task. Ideally, this person should have a well-established prior understanding of the country’s political and institutional dynamics.

The primary value of the analysis comes not from new information, but rather from informed judgment about the description of key trends and how these are likely to affect program outcomes and impacts. For this, consultation with knowledgeable stakeholders representing different perspectives is essential. If there is a more general stakeholder consultation workshop to assess the potential priorities for a new program, this provides an ideal time to identify constraints or obstacles related to the governance context. There may not be time to probe and discuss these, but simply developing

Sample list of governance issues to explore (Khulna, Bangladesh):

- How can poor women regain access to waterbodies?
- Mechanisms to address conflicts over land tenure.
- Promoting dialogue and joint decision-making over water management in polders.

a bullet-point list provides an excellent starting point (see text box). The purpose is to characterize the governance context beyond the community level that is likely to influence success or failure in achieving program goals. So, it is essential that the analysis

take community-level perspectives as a starting point. This also helps focus the exercise, as there are always many more issues that could be assessed—we’re looking for the ones that will be most helpful to the program by identifying pathways to change that take into account the real institutional dynamics and power relationships at sub-national levels.

The general consultation should be followed by a more focused series of individual or small group meetings to solicit views from key stakeholders in government, civil society, the private sector, and the development aid community in country. These provide a chance to add to and refine the list of key issues, as well as to probe the underlying constraints and opportunities in more depth. Use the framework (section 2, above) as a guide for questions to address, but adapt these to the local context, and choose words that are readily understood.

Without prescribing answers, the framework aims to help structure discussion by posing questions about the present, the possible future, and the routes of influence to bridge that gap:

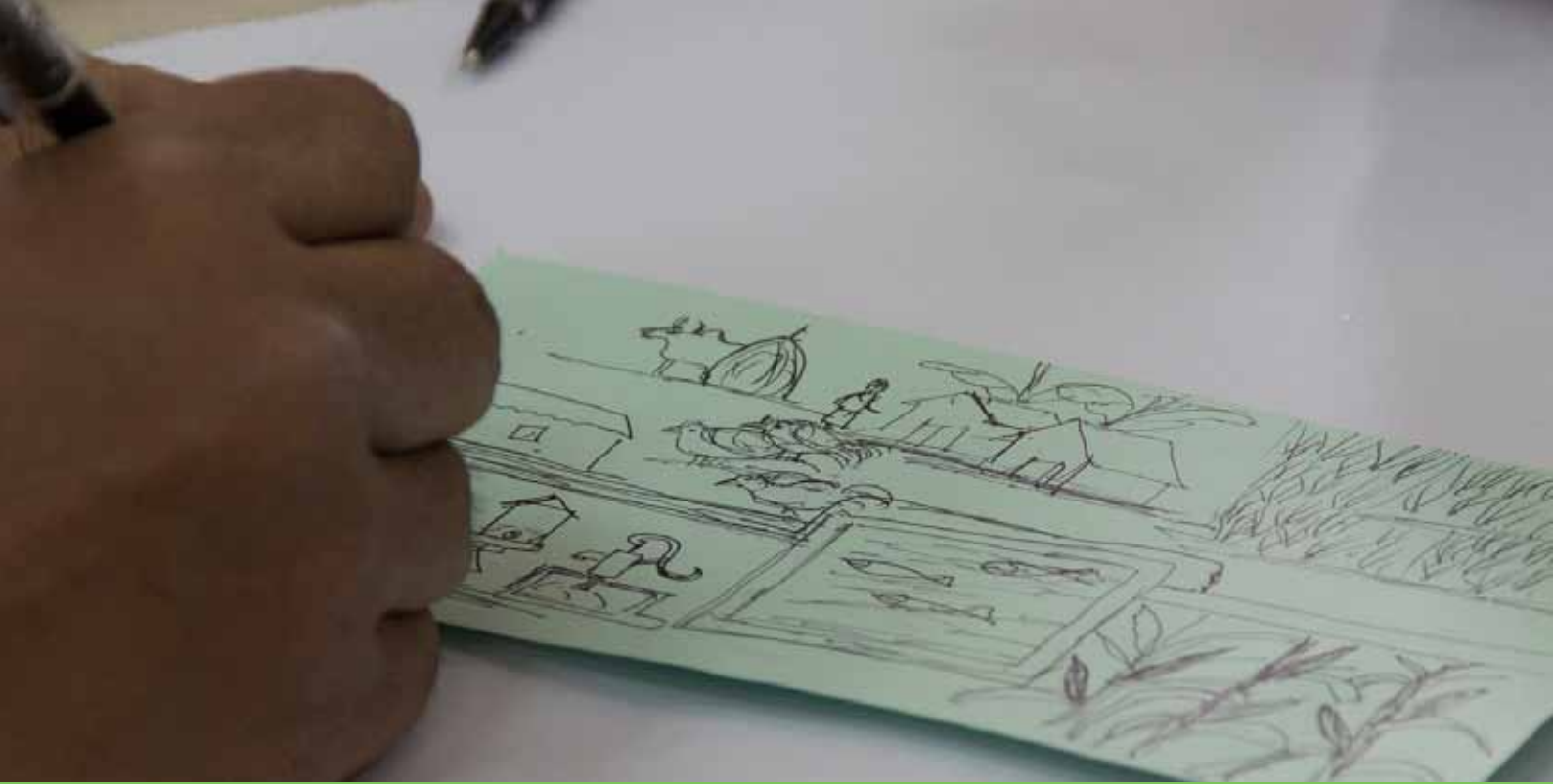
- How does the governance context affect local livelihood options now?
- What are the relevant institutions and relationships, including those we may not have considered before?
- How do these groups interact at present, and how are these relationships changing?
- What factors are unlikely to change, to which we’ll need to effectively adapt?
- Where are the opportunities for improvement?
- What groups might have influence in pursuing such progress?

The governance analysis focuses on three dimensions (stakeholder representation, distribution of authority, and mechanisms of accountability) and considers multiple scales, working outwards from the most immediate institutional context of the community. It also integrates consideration of the gendered nature of governance arrangements (CGIAR 2012). Where bribery is endemic or women have more difficulty in obtaining land tenure, for example, the analysis asks why, and as such works outwards to consider the role of actors and institutions at sub-national and national levels. Where feasible, a comparative approach that highlights differences and similarities in the governance context between communities (or between hubs) is especially useful, as this helps home in on pathways to influence.

At this stage, the job is not to find a solution but to broaden the discussion in a way that builds appreciation for the governance context, expands the sense of possibilities for action, and extends the field of people involved. At each encounter, the organizers should ask, “Who else should we be speaking to in order to understand these issues further?” The aim is not for a carefully “representative” sampling of views in a statistical sense. Instead, the aim is to be as complete as practical in the time available. The output of this phase (see text box) is a summary of a small number of key issues (typically 3 to 5), along with a preliminary analysis of each, discussing both constraints and opportunities for influence.

Sample outline for preliminary report on governance obstacles and opportunities:

1. Introduction to the program planning context.
2. Key issues identified – with summary matrix of constraints and opportunities.
3. Issue 1 – with discussion of how it affects program priorities, including quotes and individual perspectives that reveal these links.
4. Issue 2.
5. Issue 3.
6. Summary of consultation process.



Visualization helps communicate vision and strategies

5. Debating strategies to influence the governance context

The next phase moves to debating strategies to adapt to and influence the governance context, centered on the key issues identified above. A good method is a focus group discussion gathering a subset of those consulted (perhaps 8 to 12 people) to review and deliberate on a preliminary analysis. If feasible, this can be repeated at several levels (e.g., community, district, province). If not, there should at minimum be some form of follow up with partners at several levels to ensure diverse perspectives are included.

This begins with a sharing to summarize the conclusions from the preliminary report above. It's very useful to have a visual summary that can be easily modified or added to in the course of discussion. This is an opportunity to validate and modify the analysis so far, so the discussion may prompt an addition to the list of key issues, or a merging of a couple of issues.

For each issue in turn, it is then helpful to do a stakeholder mapping exercise, which shows visually who has influence on how decisions are made (see Figure 5). This combines the insights of everyone present, and helps prompt a deeper analysis. Once the group is satisfied they have a reasonable picture of how things are now, use the map as a basis for assessing gaps and opportunities for change: Where links between different sectoral agencies are weak, for example, would strengthening these be an effective way to address the issue? How could this be achieved? Where poor women or other social groups have little voice in decisions that affect them, how could their voices be enhanced? What initiatives are already underway that could be built upon to address these priorities?

In this dialogue phase, it's essential that participants each have an opportunity to make their voices heard and to truly understand not just other people's opinions but the experiences and the rationale informing their views on strategies for change. (See Ratner and Smith 2012 for guidance on how to facilitate this dialogue

process.) The focus group discussion should capture these insights for each issue. The goal is not to reach agreement yet, so where there are multiple options for addressing a certain issue, these should each be included. The output of this phase (see text box) is a short report summarizing the strategies identified and the rationale behind each. If the dialogue has led to some revision of the key issues, then the preliminary report from the first phase should also be revised accordingly.

Sample outline for report on strategies to influence the governance context:

1. Key issues identified – with summary matrix of strategies.
2. Issue 1 – with discussion of key stakeholders, options for influence, and rationale.
3. Issue 2.
4. Issue 3.
5. Summary of dialogue process.



Figure 5. A stakeholder mapping exercise done during a village-level dialogue workshop in the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia. Red stickers indicate relative influence on other actors.



Village leader reports back on obstacles and opportunities for governance change on the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia

6. Planning collaborative actions

The third phase uses the assessment to help make choices as part of the program planning. The leader of the governance assessment—or even better, a small team of partners representing different stakeholder groups—should present the results of the analysis so far. Ideally, this takes place during a broader program design workshop. This will involve some participants who were not involved in the consultation and dialogue phases above, so it's critical that the analysis be presented in a way that invites additional feedback, critique, or insights from those gathered.

Having reviewed and, if necessary, further debated the obstacles, opportunities, and strategies for influence, the workshop should then include a space for action planning. These planning discussions are usually best undertaken in working groups or teams (8 to 12 in a group). Not all elements of the governance context can necessarily be addressed as part of the program. The partners need to realistically consider:

- Which of these governance factors do we need to be aware of so that the program is designed in a way that adapts to changes underway?
- Which of these governance factors can we positively influence through the networks or connections we already have?
- Which strategies require us to develop new connections, relationships, or partnerships so that we have a chance of extending our influence?

New or modified strategies may emerge as participants consider the very practical choices of what they are prepared to commit to,

individually and collectively. In these discussions, it's essential to keep in mind the multiple possibilities for addressing governance constraints through formal and informal channels (see Figure 3). While most governance strengthening programs funded by international donors address government capacity (the 'supply side'), many opportunities—and often more rapid changes—come from strengthening civil society institutions (the 'demand side') (Bhargava 2011). Non-traditional partners such as media organizations should also be considered (Deane et al. 2006). Sometimes the most important outcomes result from routes of influence that researchers or program organizers cannot anticipate (Ratner et al. 2011).

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As these planning discussions unfold, it's also important for organizers to take note of where there is a need for further analysis or action research to explore options or support these actions as part of program implementation. Likewise, the monitoring and evaluation strategy should provide a means to help partners assess progress as they work to address the governance context, so that they can compare experiences, reflect, learn, and adapt their approaches over time. When employed as part of a cycle of planning, action, and reflection, the phases of collaborative governance assessment can help identify new constraints and opportunities as they emerge, improving the effectiveness and influence of partners in meeting their development objectives.

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With communities, changing lives

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