Informal Institutions and Strategies for Social Change

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Behind the Briefs

New Perspectives on Informal Institutions & Intractable Problems

Informal institutions are often defined as the sets of informal rules that exist outside and alongside “formal” structures of government. Although “formal” rules such as laws and public policies are important, informal rules can have an equal or greater influence on human behavior. Of particular importance are norms, a specific type of informal rule dictating the “appropriate” behavior for certain situations. Increasingly, policy makers and advocates are taking note of the importance of these unwritten rules of behavior—both as new obstacles and as new opportunities for policy reform to address the many difficult problems facing society.

In April 2012, a diverse group of scholars and practitioners gathered for two days on the campus of Purdue University to discuss how more attention to informal institutions might offer new perspectives on several “intractable” policy problems facing the world today: climate change, food security, and women’s human rights. This policy brief synthesizes several strategies for using informal institutions to help promote social and policy change. Additional policy briefs summarize how informal institutions affect the specific policy problems of climate change, women’s human rights, and food security. All four policy briefs and the full proceedings of the workshop, including short biographies of the experts cited in this brief, are available at www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/intractableproblems.

The Importance of Informal Institutions

It is increasingly evident that informal institutions shape a large portion of human behavior, often motivating actions inconsistent with formal laws and policies. Despite their importance, informal institutions get relatively little attention among those trying to solve important policy challenges, who tend to focus on changing formal rules through new public policies. Workshop participants documented a wide range of ways in which informal institutions both support and conflict with the official laws and policies that are the “formal” institutions of society. Thus, the first lesson of the workshop is that informal institutions are important potential causes of and solutions for social problems and those seeking to address these problems should not overlook the importance of these “unwritten” rules.

More specific lessons regarding the role of informal institutions and norms in promoting policy and social change are described below.
Informal Institutions as Instruments of Social Change

The workshop generated four overarching strategies for using informal institutions to stimulate major social and policy change. We discuss each of these strategies here in general terms, reserving more detailed discussion of their application to specific problems for additional policy briefs in this series available at www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/intractableproblems.

1) Reinforcing Existing Norms That Promote Desired Social Change

In some cases, existing norms may hold untapped potential for promoting behavior change that would ameliorate an important social problem. People may be more likely to adopt a new practice when they are reminded of existing norms promoting that behavior. In fact, messages highlighting the widespread nature of a given practice can be more influential in eliciting behavior change than messages offering reasons for the desired practice.

For example, a workshop presentation noted research on motivating environmental behavior that found a message describing the large numbers of other hotel guests who reused their towels was more effective at getting subjects to reuse their own towels than a similar message describing the environmental benefits of towel reuse (Schultz et al. 2008). In this sense, behavioral rules based on perceptions of what most people actually do (which psychologists refer to as “descriptive norms”) can be more influential than behavioral rules based on a persuasive argument about how individuals should behave (which psychologists refer to as “injunctive norms”). In other words, it may sometimes be more effective simply to highlight the relatively widespread adoption of a desired behavior than to argue for it.

2) Challenging Existing Norms That Obstruct Desired Social Change

While some norms can promote desired social change, others serve as obstacles to reform. Certain gender and familial norms, for instance, can be a major impediment to the enactment of new policies protecting the human rights of women. In addition, informal institutions can undermine enforcement of new formal rules even after policy reforms are adopted. Policies mandating new actions related to food security, environmental conservation, or violence against women may remain ineffective when in conflict with strongly established norms related to gender and family roles, social status, and consumption.

An important strategy for norm-based change, therefore, is “foregrounding” these problematic norms: making people more aware of them and often questioning them or subjecting them to scrutiny in order to weaken their influence over behavior. This process of foregrounding certain gender norms, for example, can lead some people to adjust their behavior to avoid sexist practices (Becker and Swim 2012). Activists have also foregrounded problematic norms by sponsoring women’s testimonials in Congressional hearings or at United Nations conferences. In these testimonials, women describe their experiences of violence, thereby breaking taboos against speaking out on the subject and drawing attention to the ubiquity and harmful nature of violent behavior supported by norms of masculine dominance.

3) Invoking Alternative Norms to Create New Policy Opportunities

Workshop presenters also noted that people must determine which norms make sense for particular situations, and they may have different interpretations of which norms apply in particular contexts. Due to this ambiguity, a third norm-based strategy for social change is the idea of “normative
reframing,” or re-conceptualizing an issue in terms of an alternative norm that suggests new policies or behaviors. By recasting hunger as a human rights issue, for instance, advocates can tap the power of norms against violating human rights to generate greater support for policies promoting food security. Similarly, climate activists have had some success opposing limits on emissions from poor nations by reframing the right to emit greenhouse gases responsible for climate change as a human right for all people.

At the same time, a norm must “fit” reasonably well with an issue for this reframing to work. Policies giving away pollution rights to power generators, for instance, were vulnerable to political reform based in part on the weakness of the

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application of the “squatters’ rights” norm that underwrote prior policies creating new private rights in land and other natural resources to this new situation. By foregrounding the implicit reliance on a norm rewarding beneficial labor as justification for giving away emissions allowances based on a harmful activity (pollution), environmental advocates de-stabilized the political status quo and made major policy change possible in the form of requiring polluters to pay for their emissions of greenhouse gases (Raymond 2010).

4) Creating New Norms to Facilitate Social Change

In some cases, workshop participants also noted, those seeking to promote social change have to create and disseminate an entirely new norm consistent with their goals. Examples of norm change discussed at the workshop showed how activists have consciously worked in communities to generate and practice a new norm, pointing to the collective (i.e., interactive and group-based) process of norm creation and diffusion. The discussion also highlighted the role of both persuasion and imitation in helping to spread the new norm to others. Persuasion is often important in the early stages of norm dissemination, while eventually imitation may play a greater role once a critical mass of individuals or communities have adopted the new norm. At this later point, descriptive norms can be even more powerful.

The development of new norms related to preventing violence against women offers several good examples of this strategy at work. In North America, for example, women met in “consciousness raising” groups, to consider and criticize sexist norms. In these groups, women collectively developed analyses of social problems and came up with models of new social practices. In the international arena, it took activists nearly two decades to create norms resulting in the first intergovernmental Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (United Nations 1993). Disagreement and conflict initially prevented coordinated action on the issue of “crimes against women” until activists were able to agree, after extensive deliberation, on a common set of behaviors to be prohibited by new norms against what these activists called violence against women (a new concept at the time), including female genital mutilation (FGM), state violence against women, dowry deaths, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and stalking. Bringing these violations under a single conceptual umbrella provided a basis for solidarity among women who previously had been divided (Weldon 2006).
Summing Up

This brief has reviewed the general importance of informal institutions—sets of informal rules that exist outside and alongside “formal” structures of government—in promoting and obstructing social change. Although changes in a society’s formal laws and public policies may seem like the best option for creating social change, the work reviewed in this brief indicates that equal or greater attention to informal rules of behavior is often required.

The brief also illustrated how specific informal rules of appropriate behavior, or “norms,” can create both obstacles and opportunities for those seeking to address difficult social problems. In particular, the brief reviewed four norm-based strategies for promoting social change:

1) Reinforcing existing norms that promote desired social change
2) Challenging existing norms that obstruct desired social change
3) Invoking alternative norms to create new policy opportunities
4) Creating new norms to facilitate social change

Although no single strategy will be relevant to every problem, this brief has presented short examples of how these four norm-based strategies for social change offer promising new ideas for making progress on many seemingly intractable global problems.

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