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**Reframing Institutional Change: The Role of Context**

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**Abstract:**

Being core to the study of organizations and organization theory and connate fields, institutional change has gained considerable research attention over the last two decades (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017). While there have been previous efforts to frame the antecedents and the outcomes of institutional change (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Dorado, 2005; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006), the field remains fragmented with a wide array of “conceptualisations and theoretical claims” (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017: 1886). Tolbert & Zucker (1996) and Van de Ven & Hargrave (2004) called for viewing institutional change as a process. Consequently, Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017) conceptualised the processes of institutional change as resulting from exogenous triggers, purposeful agency, or improvisation in micro-processes and practices. More recently, scholars have integrated perspectives such as sense-making (Baez & Abolafia, 2002), social ties (Qureshi, Kistruck, & Bhatt, 2012), soft power (Wouter Paul, & Koen, 2015), collective action (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2006), inaction (Wijen & Ansari, 2007), and accidental action (Doldor, Sealy, & Vinnicombe, 2016). This has further enriched our understanding of the processes underlying institutional change. Yet, we still lack an understanding of whether and how these processes could vary across different contexts (i.e.: in developed, emerging, and developed economies). This review, therefore, aims to address this question by focusing on unpacking the process of institutional change in developed, emerging, and developing economies to address whether, how and why they could differ in different contexts and consequently offer a framework to guide future research. Using the institutional logic frame which views institutional change (stability) as composed of actors, actions, and contexts, and using the work of Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017), we draw a number of propositions linking these three components in developed, developing and emerging and developing economies. We then test these propositions through a review and scrutinization of the literature of institutional change produced in these contexts.

## **Introduction**

Organization scholars have been studying the role of institutions in shaping the behaviour of organizations since the 1970s (Lawrence, Leca, and Zilber, 2013). Back then, institutions were seen as dominant entities that shape the behaviour of organizations and organizations had only one choice; to conform to the pressures of such institutions. Yet, over the past two decades, scholars have shifted their attention to study institutional change, where organizations (or actors) do not just necessarily conform, seek legitimacy, and become isomorphic but they can also engage purposefully or unpurposefully in shaping these institutions. With a myriad of “conceptualisations and theoretical claims” (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017: 1886), the study of institutional change has become both rich and highly fragmented. Several perspectives which now stand as a distinct research streams intersect or overlap with the study of institutional change. These include institutional entrepreneurship (Garud, Hardy & Maguire, 2007), institutional work (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010), and institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012).

Institutional entrepreneurship is a stream of literature that focuses on institutional change and how actors enable it. Actors and their purposeful action lie at the heart of this stream as they can recognise institutional deficiencies and engage in strategies conducive to institutional change (DiMaggio, 1988 and Paceco et al., 2010). They could, therefore, challenge and resist existing practices and institutionalise alternative ones (Pacheco et al., 2010). Under this stream, some scholars focus on actors’ strategies to bring in institutional change (actor-centric), while others focus on the processes that actors are involved in while being engaged in entrepreneurial activities (Greenwood et al., 2017). Actor-centric strategies include collective action (shared goals and group tensions), political tactics, framing, professionalization and theorization (Pacheco et al., 2010; Greenwood et al. 2017). All of these strategies involve may purposeful or accidental networking.

Actors are also at the heart of the institutional work perspective (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) which focuses on the role of actors in institutional entrepreneurship, deinstitutionalisation, or institutional maintenance (Greenwood et al., 2017). According to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006: 215) institutional work is ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions. This definition which adopts a bottom up approach to institutional change focuses upon actors and their purposeful action to manipulate the context in which they operates (Lawrence, Leca, and Zilber, 2013). This research stream is mainly interested in three categories of questions: how institutional work occurs (processes), who does the institutional work (role of actors), and what constitutes institutional work (agency relationships) (Lawrence, Leca, and Zilber, 2013).

While it has actors’ sensemaking at its heart, the institutional logics perspective is argued to be an overarching frame that has three components: the context, actors, and actions (purposeful or not). According to Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012: 2) “Logics represent frames of reference that condition actors’ choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity”. Logics could broadly refer to ‘*patterns of beliefs, practices, values, assumptions, and rules that determine what is meaningful and legitimate in a given field*’ (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Glynn, 2013). Logics are thus referring to cognitive frames or frames of references that shape identities and action but reflect them (Glynn, 2013). This perspective thus enriches our understanding of the process of institutional change (or lack of change) by incorporating the role of the context and its conditions and by delving more into the process of actors’ sensemaking and identities that together with the context inform the action/inaction and practices of actors. In this perspective, actors could be representatives of logics or strategic users of logics (Greenwood et al., 2017), depending on their sensemaking and on the conditioning context within which they operate.

While several reviews have been conducted to take stock of the rich yet fragmented literature of institutional change (eg.: Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Dorado, 2005; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017), we still lack an understanding of the role of the context in shaping and being shaped by the processes of institutional change. Viewing the process of institutional change (or lack of change) as being composed of the three pillars of the context, actors, and processes of action (or stability) as offered by the institutional logics perspective, we still lack an understanding of the interplay of these three pillars; particularly with reference to the context. Our review is suggested to fill this gap by reviewing and taking account of the processes of change and role of actors in the context of the developed, emerging, and developing countries. We do so by offering a novel conceptualisation of the macro-institutional context that varies across three dimensions; magnitude of the presence of institutional voids, uncertainty versus stability, and receptivity to change. We use our conceptualisation to shape a number of propositions that integrate the role of the context. We then test these propositions via a literature review of empirical findings reporting institutional change occurring within the contextual dimensions provided and offer a future research agenda that takes account of the role of context in institutional change accordingly.

### **Context and institutional change**

The role of institutional context in which a firm operates is a key determinant of how agents of change act and make choices. The institutional context has been emphasized by organisational theorists for almost two decades. Different types of institutions whether formal or informal, are likely to serve as backdrop against which agents of change can identify novel and innovative ways to bring on change (Beckert, 1999). Stable environment, where there are clear institutionalised scripts, norms and formal rules, is likely to inform purposeful agency (North, 1990; DiMaggio and Powel, 1991; Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Child, 1972). The more stable a country's institutional framework the more likely agents of change will be able to undertake

calculative rational decisions. For agents to make rational choices, they need to have access to reliable information, where they can predict with certainty the possible outcomes of different courses of actions (Beckert, 1996; Sarasvathy, 2001). Having stable institutions in place allows agents of change to identify opportunities for change and sometimes challenge and violate established institutional norms and presupposed scripts (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Beckert, 1999). Actors find themselves in a situation where they are constrained by existing institutional logics and structures and this triggers their motivation to bring about change and choosing best course courses of action to create change (Kiss and Danis, 2008).

By contrast, unstable, complex and volatile institutional frameworks suffer from a high degree of uncertainty, whereby actors are unable to identify with certainty opportunities for change and predict likelihood of success of different courses of actions (Sarasvathy, 2001; Beckert, 1996; Knight, 1921). One of the key underlying causes is the limited access to reliable information. These environments are often characterized by institutional dysfunctionalities and voids (Kiss and Danis, 2008; Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

The notion of uncertainty is closely linked with the way agents of change make sense of their surrounding and motivation to bring about change. They are unlikely to adapt planned and calculative choices but rather may engage in unintentional and improvised courses of action to create institutional change (Sarasvathy, 2003; Baker and Nelson, 2005). Emerging and developing economies are characterized by underdeveloped and volatile environments. This increases the levels of uncertainty and creates opportunities for change. Recent studies focusing on social entrepreneurship and bottom of the pyramid contexts (Karnani, 2007; Prahalad, 2012) highlight that in emerging economies actors engage in practical unplanned micro-level forms of agency, which bring about small changes that when aggregated can create different paths/trajectories of institutional change (Gray, Purdy and Ansari, 2015; Emirbayer &

Mische, 1998; Micelotta, Lounsbury and Greenwood, 2017). How and why actors make sense of their surroundings and courses of action is a key driver that creates different trajectories of institutional changes.

#### Multidimensionality of context and its impact on individual actor's institutional logic:

The role of contextual differences and dynamics in understanding organisational phenomena has long been recognised by organisational and International Business scholars (Griffin, 2007). In its essence contextual dynamics and effects is what differentiates between domestic and International Business Research (Teagarden et al., 2018: 303). The question that arises is what we mean by 'context' and how does it affect actor's logic and the process of institutional change/ stability. One argument is that context involves multiple levels of analysis (micro, macro and meso levels). In other words, it refers the broader institutional framework within a country, an industry or field, or firm's immediate surroundings (Spender, 1989; Khanna and Papelu, 2010).

Context is a multi-facet and multi-dimensional concept. It involves several facets that differentiates between different countries, economies as well as individual actor's tendency to respond and sometimes shape the context in which they are embedded (Uzzi, 1997).

Social actor(s) who initiate change engage in different processes that are not always rational or purposeful but rather may involve unplanned and improvised actions that influences the context in which they operate and shaped by it (Micelotta, Lounsbury and Greenwood, 2017; Beckert, 1999).

In this paper, we adopt the institutional logics perspective which refers to the actor's cognitive framework that shapes the way s/he makes sense of the context and courses of action. We argue that the context is composed on existing institutional pillars (formal or informal pillars), which



differs according to the country level of development in which the change is attempted (Scott, 2001). We conceptualise the macro-institutional context in which actors engage in processes of change (whether purposeful or improvised) as being composed of three interrelated dimensions or facets; magnitude of institutional voids, institutional uncertainty versus stability, institutional receptivity to change. In the following lines, we link these dimensions to the country (macro-institution) state of development to draw our propositions.

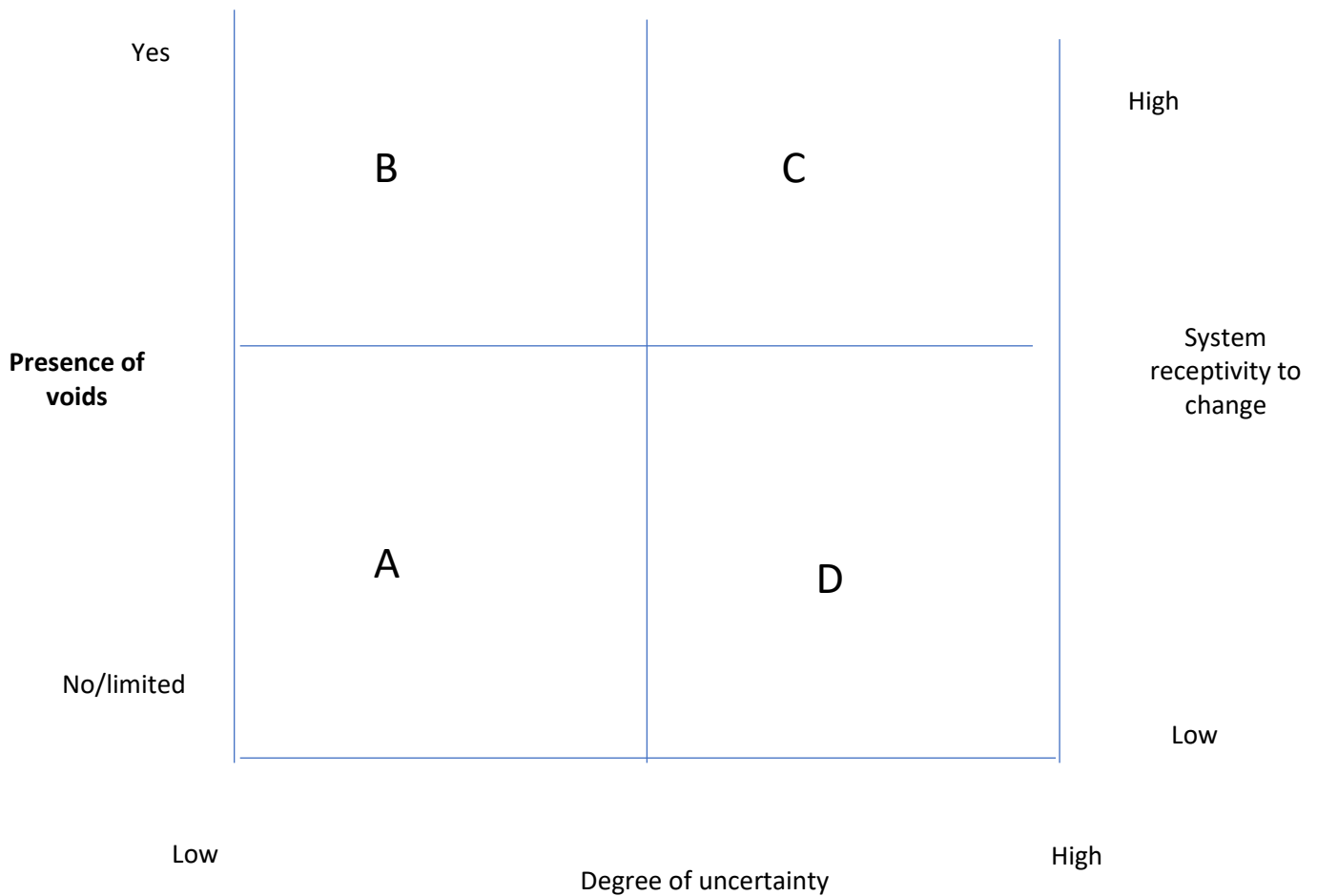
The more developed a country's level of economic development, the less likely it will suffer institutional dysfunctionalities and voids. Institutional voids are often manifest as "gaps between formal rules and norms, and their enforcement in daily practice" (Rodrigues, 2013, p. 14). Institutional voids are likely to occur in emerging and developing economies (Narooz and Child, 2017; Kiss and Danis, 2008). This facet reflects the influence of institutions as an exogenous context that shapes and affects individual actors' behaviours but also such voids are affected by actors' choices.

The second facet of context refers to the degree of stability inherent in social actors' immediate surroundings (that could be country or industry or network). Context stability is closely related to notion of uncertainty. In other words, actors embedded in stable contexts tend to suffer less from uncertainty and can predict with some confidence the future outcomes of their individual actions (Sarasvathy, 2001; Beckert, 1999). By contrast, actors embedded in unstable and volatile contexts are likely to suffer from high degree of uncertainty. Their decisions are less likely to be rational and calculative due to difficulty of predicting the likelihood of their actions' success. They tend to engage more in unplanned or improvised decisions.

The last facet of context is the systems receptivity to change. When a change agent initiates a certain change, it is unlikely that different systems/contexts-whether that's an certain institution, organisation or network- would have the same degree of receptivity (Pettigrew,

Woodman, and Cameron, 2001). Different contexts portray varying degrees of resistance and/or openness to change. Emerging economies are characterised by high rates of economic growth, they are susceptible to economic and social reforms. They are less likely to have very rigid and inflexible systems that would take years and time to change. This applies more to the case of emerging economies that are transitioning from centrally lead traditional economies to more market-based economies-such as Russia and Taiwan (World Economic Situation and Prospects, 2018; UN Country classification, 2014). These emerging markets are under process of institutional change in terms of economic liberalisation and legal institutional restructuring and reforms (IMF, 2000). By contrast, developing economies are more likely to be characterised by volatile and hostile contexts that may resist or hinder change (Narooz and Child, 2017).

These three facets or dimensions of context are interrelated and have a profound effect on the individual actor(s) sense making and courses of actions. In other words, context sets the parameters upon which individual agents of change will act to influence and change the context, as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Multi-dimensionality of context and actor's institutional logic*

[A] uncertain /unstable context, limited voids and low receptivity to change- unlikely to exist.

[B] uncertain/unstable context, high/medium presence of voids and medium/ high receptivity to change- likely to occur in developing economies where the market tends to be fragmented and the high incidences of institutional voids due to dysfunctional institutions which is associated with high degree of uncertainty. Availability of reliable and complete information is less likely to occur, which intern hinders the actor's ability to undertake

informed and calculative decisions and courses of action (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Actors are likely to be able to identify change opportunities as they emerge (Schumpeter, 1991; Sarasvathy, 2001) or use means they have at their hand to bring in change that may be at the grassroots level and once aggregated or accumulated over time become a significant change (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Micelotta, Lounsbury and Greenwood, 2017). Moreover, they are likely to leverage and create informal networks to fill in those voids, access resources they need and form informal pressure groups to lobby and forge institutional change for their advantage (Narooz and Child, 2017).

Therefore, we draw our first proposition:

P1: developing economies will be characterised by an institutional context that is uncertain, of high/medium magnitude of voids, and of medium/high receptivity to change. This is expected to affect actors' behaviour by making them more reliant on informal networks. This is expected to result in processes of change that are purposeful or improvised, yet change is expected to be more revolutionary or transformational in nature -adopting Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017) typology.

[C] stable context with low degree of uncertainty, high incidences of voids and openness to change.

This is likely to occur in emerging economies such as Poland and Russia. these are markets that have some long-standing institutions that are not fully developed but are subjected to legal/social reforms and market restructuring (UN country classification, 2000) The institutional context is likely to be flexible and less rigid compared to developed economies with long history of established and well-developed institutions. The actors are likely to adopt a mixed logic approach (where planned and unplanned logics are intertwined. Similarly, actors are likely to rely on both formal and informal networks to access resources they need and to bring on potential change. For example, they may rely on formal means to create an industry

group (or special interest group – with a legal structure like industry association) to bring on change based on collective force (Beckert, 1999) or through forming their own informal alliances to create those special interest groups to create change. Therefore, we propose that:

P2: emerging economies will be characterised by an institutional context that is stable, of high/medium magnitude of voids, and of high receptivity to change. This is expected to affect actors' behaviour by making them reliant on a mix of formal and informal networks. This is expected to result in processes of change that are purposeful or improvised, yet change is expected to be more transformational in nature (adopting Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017) typology).

[D] stable context with low degree of uncertainty, limited voids and low receptivity to change.

This is likely to occur in developed economies with strong and well developed institutional framework that has been established over a long period of time. The likelihood of having a gap between formal and informal institutions is limited (Khanna and Palepu, 2010; Kiss and Danis, 2008). Actors embedded in this context have access to reliable information and can access resources they need through formal means. This makes it easier for actors to make calculative and planned decisions, whereby the likelihood of success can be estimated and the choice between different means to achieve predefined goals is possible (Sarasvathy, 2003). those means are likely to be choice between different arm length relationships to access needed resources or formation of formal alliances to bring about needed institutional change.

Therefore:

P3: developed economies will be characterised by an institutional context that is stable, of low magnitude of voids, and of low receptivity to change. This is expected to affect actors' behaviour by making them more reliant on formal networks. This is expected to result in processes of change that are purposeful, yet change is expected to be more

developmental in nature - adopting Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017) typology.

### **Proposed methodology**

Our review involved three steps. We began by focusing our review on literature on institutional logics, institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship and limited our search to articles published between 1990-2018. The choice of 1990 is the time where the concept institutional change became prevalent (following Micelotta, Lounsbury and Greenwood, 2017; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014). We developed a search protocol -with inclusion and exclusion search criteria. Our initial search focused on such as keywords ‘institutional change’; institutional logics, ‘institutional entrepreneurship’; ‘agents of change ‘;’institutional work’. We then focused on studies from different contexts -i.e. different countries or regions and al studies that clearly specified their focus on ‘emerging, developed or developing economies’. Comparative studies were also included in our inclusion criteria<sup>1</sup>. We excluded studies that focused on ‘institutional economics’. The next step involved keyword search in abstracts and article titles using google scholar, Business source complete database. We also used ABS list of 3\* and 4 \* journals in management, organisational studies, international business, entrepreneurship, business ethics and public administration. We used advanced search options to focus on peerreview journals, within the aforementioned time frame and used google scholar suggested search strings and combination of key words to guide our search efforts. We are still in the process of compiling database of theoretical, conceptual and empirical articles. We plan to examine the titles and abstracts of all the papers we will gather and retain only those articles that explicitly demonstrates incidences of institutional change in a particular context and that

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<sup>1</sup> we also included studies that focused on different agents of change such as’ social entrepreneurs, developmental entrepreneurs’

highlights the processes conducive to institutional change. The initial round of coding and discussion among the articles were categorised according to certain contextual parameters and matrix in Figure 1 was developed.

### **Conclusive summary:**

In this paper we attempt to examine the key contextual parameters that shapes actor's institutional logic and result in different types of institutional change. We introduce a novel categorization of contextual parameters and how it shapes institutional logics, microprocesses and different levels/types of institutional change. Using the institutional logic frame which views institutional change (stability) as composed of actors, actions, and contexts, and using the work of Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood (2017), we drew a number of propositions linking these three components in developed, developing and emerging and developing economies. We then test these propositions through a review and scrutinization of the literature of institutional change produced in these contexts.

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