What is an institution? An ontological debate illustrating community forestry of Nepal

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Abstract

Illustrating Community Forestry (CF) of Nepal, this article discusses the concept of 'institution' through the perspectives of the phenomenology of Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann (1966), the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984), and the conception of institution as people-nature relations. Phenomenologists concentrate on the structures of consciousness as individuals experienced and expressed while turning an objective world or phenomenon into a subjective one through objectivation, internalization and externalization/ institutionalization process. The structuralist holds that the creation of an institution is a reproduction of interaction between structures and actors. And other theorists (e.g., Leach et al., 1999; Ostrom 2005, 2009; Gupta et al., 2010; Young, 2010) consider that institutions for natural resources conflate with social institutions and mediate their relations. Although these theories are not explicit epistemologically in a pragmatic sense, they have indicated language, rules, (embedded) practices and knowledge are the referential artifacts of institutions. These theories are found applicable in the institutionalization/socialization history of CF as it had gone through the social rejection (i.e, objectivation) during the 1970s, internalization during the 1980s, and socialization of it during and after the 1990s. The socialization of CF after the 1990s was due to the formation of CF as a social space (a 'structure' or 'institution') to discuss social and environmental issues into one place where forest dependent users ('actors') rationalize the use of forest and its conservation for local environment in a more pragmatic sense (i.e., mediate people-nature relations). An institution for natural resources is, therefore, the combined perspectives of phenomenologists, structuralists, and those who think institutions as a mediator of people-nature relations. Thus, an institution is political (i.e., relations and interactions) and ecological/economic (i.e., access to natural resources, livelihood practices).

Keywords: Institution, practice, agency, phenomenology, social relation, community forestry

Introduction

The success of community forestry (CF) in Nepal is nationally and internationally acknowledged as a suitable method not only to sustain the livelihood of forest-dependent communities but also to manage and conserve local biodiversity. Community participation in forest management in Nepal was initiated in the 1970s, which, after the coming of the Forest Act of 1993, decentralization of power and resources management became a regular and widespread (especially in the mid-hills region) practice through the Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). Subsequently, CF (UG) has been considered as a mechanism to protect forests, conserve biodiversity, enhance economic situation of many villagers, and to establish local level institutions (Jackson et al., 1998; Gautam et al., 2002; Springate-Beginski et al., 2010). The formation and implementation of a CF is an example of an institution that exists in our society. There are several other socio-economic institutions which we express through various practices, relations and activities in the society.

A short description of the forestry institution reveals that an institution comprises mainly of four components, namely an *object/subject* (e.g., forest, relation, culture, tradition or *parampara*) to institutionalize, a *technique* to manage that object/subject (i.e., norms and rules – forest regulations and operation plan, religious codes), *actors* to involve in the management and practice (i.e., social beings, users – forest dependent communities), and *interaction* among them (e.g., activities to use, protect, manage, and distribute forests, and practice of socio-cultural norms and codes). These components are discussed differently, diversely and dispersedly in the philosophy of science. This article, based on the review of literature, attempts to analyse how ontologically and epistemologically phenomenologists, structuralists and those who deal with institution as a people-nature relation have expressed and experienced the institution of society.

In what follows, the next section analyses definitions of an institution. Subsequently, three conceptually different ontologies of institutions (i.e., institution as 'reciprocal typifications', 'embedded practices', and 'people-nature relation') are explained and analysed separately. Attempt was made to analyse the potential epistemological implication of an institution. Finally, the theories are discussed to relate the institutionalization history of CF in Nepal and conclusion is drawn at the end.

Definition of Institution

The emergence, existence, persistence and function of institutions have been variously defined and understood in the relevant literature. There is no single universal definition of institution and thus, confusion regarding institution may persist (Ostrom, 1986; Martin, 2004; Searle, 2005; Vatn, 2005). In the simplest way, an institution is a regular habit, action or behaviour which functions without explaining to other those who live in same social context or share the same language; for instance, a greeting (e.g., *Namaskar*). When you greet someone you do not explain that you greeted her/him because of some reason (i.e., for respect or courtesy). It is naturally understood by other people who you have greeted or those who have seen your act of greeting. Such actions and habits function like a natural order. Any activity and action of human that is repeated frequently orient to form a social pattern and, therefore, is a subject to habitualization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). According to these authors, during the course of time, individuals develop shared concepts, actions, and mental maps in the form of language, which establish shared meanings of their actions and shared cooperation among individuals. Then, any behavioural expressions and regular actions become understandable in society. Berger & Luckmann regard such shared concepts, actions and understandings as '*reciprocal typification'*.

To encompass various definitions of institution, it has been grouped them into three broad categories. First is the concept of institution as a facilitator of individual agents or actors that is also facilitated by those actors. Second is the concept of institution as a constraint of individual agents which also determines the opportunities to establish other ways to get benefits (social, materials etc.). And third is an institutional concept for people-nature relations, which combine both the above ideas and activate constellations of institutions to facilitate and constrain agents for natural resource management. The following definitions crystalize the above categories:

> "Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 72).

> An institution is established practices of the society (Giddens, 1984: 17).

> Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North, 1990: 1)

> [I]nstitutions mediate people-environment relation and regularize pattern of behaviour between individuals and groups in the society (Leach et al., 1999: 226).

> All humanly used resources are embedded in complex, social-ecological systems (SESs) (Ostrom, 2009: 419).

> Institutions are the prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, neighbourhoods, markets, firms, sports leagues, churches, private associations, and governments at all scales (Ostrom, 2005: 3).

The above definitions indicate multiple concepts of an institution. Berger & Luckmann consider institutions as regular actions which are subject to habitualization in society and are understood by those who share the actions. They believe human is a social product. These authors focus more on social 'structure' – norms, rules and regulation to facilitate human actions.

Giddens (1984) focuses on human 'practices' as a medium and production of social structures. 'Structure' and 'action' enable and constrain each other through regular 'practices'. During the course of exchanging behavioural practices in society, they create social relations and routines, which establish social systems comprising several institutions, such as marriage.

In contrary to Berger & Luckmann and Giddens, North (1990) considers established social institutions as constraints for the material and social benefits of individuals. But he agrees that institutions reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life, such as how to greet someone, borrow money from a bank, to participate in meetings, etc. But institutions also contain rules and regulations which prohibit or permit human actions, thus, limiting individual's choices. He considers that the purpose of rules of institutions is to define the way the game is played. Then, this also denotes how to win the game. So, people use their skills, strategies and techniques 'to win the game' or to gain benefits from the established institutions. To mould these tasks, people establish organizations, such as political body, economic body, social body and educational body.

Leach, Mearns et al. (1999) and Ostrom (2009) emphasize interactive relations between human and nature and incorporate environmental dimensions on human roles and actions while extracting natural resources. In the context of natural resource management, institutions rather mediate human-environmental relationships and activate social as

well as environmental institutions to get access to resources. It is so because when an individual gets access to natural resources it activates a constellation of institutions, such as his/her social status, gender, power, networks, etc. So, institutions are complex and they mould multifaceted socio-economic and environmental relations.

Finally, Ostrom's (2005) definition indicates diversity and various understanding of institutions in various social contexts. It also indicates elongated use of the term 'institution' in literature. The reason behind the diverse understanding of institution, as she says, is due to 'structured situations' of human relation. Structured situations denote market, elections, regular activities, hierarchies, sports, various social contexts, etc. These situations are guided by regularized behaviour of interaction, which are constructed by institutions.

Ontology of institution

A brief introduction of an institution in the above section can hardly convince a reader without knowing about the ontology of an institution. Taking insights from the phenomenology of Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann (1966), the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984) and those dealing with people-nature relation as institutions, this section tries to answer 'what is an institution?'. Phenomenology concentrates on the structures of consciousness as individuals experienced and expressed (Smith, 2016). The structuration theory holds that the creation of a social system is a reproduction of interaction between structures and actors (Giddens, 1984). And others believe that institutions related to natural resources conflate with social institutions and mediate their relationships.

Institution as reciprocal typifications

As mentioned earlier, Berger and Luckmann (1966) consider institution as the 'reciprocal typifications' which means an exchange of different types of actions between individuals in a meaningful manner. They argue that every individual is born into an objective social structure, which turns into subjective social structure through comprehensive and consistent induction of shared concepts and situations during internalization of shared habits. For instance, when we perform a certain type of action, let's say greeting or doing Namaste, it becomes habitualized in our regular social practice, and it becomes commonly recognizable (subjectively understandable). These actions generalize habits and become sources of knowledge for other individuals in the society. Thus, such generalized actions are institutionalized in the society. When a newcomer, let's say a child, observes such habitualized or generalized action, s/he objectively understands the action first, and when s/he internalizes it during the process of socialization (see

below) it becomes subjective, for instance, when children see parents greeting someone, they 'take for granted'. They don't understand (the meaning) why their parents need to do that particular act in such a specific situation and manner. On this level, children objectively understand the practice of their parents. When children internalize those practices, then they understand the subjective meaning of 'greeting' and perform exactly how their parents had done in course of their life. When generalized actions crystallize in consciousness, a symmetrical relationship is established between objective and subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, institutions function similar to natural instincts and they also provide relief by facilitating decision making process.

According to Berger & Luckmann (1966), there are three phases in the process of institutionalization for an objective reality to become a subjective reality to human beings.

Objectification/objectivation:

This is the phase where others observe actions, events and behaviours objectively or without knowing the subjective meaning of those actions, events and behaviours. An observer does not know the history of these events or behaviours; he/she considers them as 'things' or just as existing 'facts' outside them. For instance, children see the parents 'greeting' others as an objective fact and they just understand how the thing should be done. In other words, the subjective fact for parents becomes objective fact to the children. Later, these objective facts become habitualized during the process of internalization.

Internalization:

In this phase, an observer subjectively understands the objective fact of actions, events and behaviours. During the life course, children consciously understand the subjective meaning of an action, event and behaviour they have seen how their parents used to do/practice. The process of understanding subjective meaning of an objective fact is called socialization. During socialization, an individual becomes a member of his/her society through 'reciprocal typification' of shared situations and s/he will understand the social structures as subjective facts. These reciprocal typifications are the enduring facts of society, such as language, marriage, livelihood earning practices, etc. These are the institutions of the society. Then we not only understand each other's definitions of shared situation but also define them reciprocally (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Externalization:

In this phase, individuals perform practices subjectively. Such practices contain meanings which are understandable among those who share the same language. Individuals know how to do a certain action in a meaningful manner, such as greeting someone or collecting a specific type of herb from the forest. These shared practices are habitualized in society in a form of established institutions, such as livelihood earning activities, marriage, agricultural activities, forest management, ritual practices, etc. In this phase, individuals know the history of practice of their actions, which makes it easier for them to express a type of action in a certain social context.

Externalization of objectivated actions, events and situations through internalization/ socialization is a continuous process. This continuous process of society is an institution, and that's why an individual is considered as a social product (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). If a society does not properly internalize/socialize objectivated facts, these cannot be established in society and thus they cannot be institutions in that society. Although these authors indirectly include influence of material and political interest in the institutional change, they argue that institutions are socially constructed templates for action, generated and maintained through continuous interaction (Barley and Tolbert, 1997).

Although Bergen & Luckman provide us a way to observe an institution and institutionalization process of a society, several questions come up: Do institutions have a sole role to form social relation of individuals? Or individuals also form and customize established institutions? What do regular human practices comprise of during institutionalization process? How do practices influence social structures? These issues also need to be added to have a better understanding of an institution. In this context, Giddens's notion of human 'practice' as a medium and production of social 'structures' may provide further insights to understand an institution.

Institution as embedded practices

Anthony Giddens (1984) views that embedded practices which persist in society are the institutions, such as marriage, funerals, greetings, (or regular practices). Importantly, instead of giving priority to either action or structure, he prioritises both and emphasizes human practice, as a medium, to see the reciprocal relationship between structure and action. Structures are the rules and resources and actions of actor that become the practices and behaviours of individuals. He also emphasizes that human social practices, relations and activities vary with time-space context and they are 'recursive' in nature.

Here 'recursive' should be understood as 'human activities and practices which are not brought into being by any social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors' (Giddens, 1984: 2). On the basis of interactive nature of structure and actor/agent, Giddens develops the 'duality of structure', which is the core of structuration theory. Structuration is the process where, on the one hand, human practices are constrained and facilitated by structures; on the other hand, structures are also produced by human practices. It (social structure) simultaneously enters into the constitution of the actors (memory traces) and social practices, and exits manifesting the social actions of agent or actor. Thus, these two facets of social structure, as medium and outcome, are conceived as 'duality of structure' in the structuration process. Structure and interaction are the structural properties of the social system. And each structural property leads us to an institution, and clustering of institutions lead us to different social systems (Craib, 1992). Since embedded practices are the most important aspects of an institution, the actions of actors can be understood through an institutional perspective.

Structures are situated in human actions and do not exist externally. They remain in a form of memory traces and human ability (biological and physical) of knowledgeability, and are executed during social interaction by the actors. These social structures contain the rules and resources, but Giddens implicitly opines that these are not the rules like in the game (*cf.* North, 1990). In the game, we cannot change rules, we just follow them. However, the rules implied during social interaction are more like habitual and actors follow them routinely without openly expressing. These rules are the procedure of action and contain the characteristic of transformation during the course of social interaction. Social rules constitute the meaning and the sanctioning of social conduct (Giddens, 1984). Resources are the structure of domination (e.g., leadership), which is the foundation of power. Resources can be further categorized as allocative and authoritative. The former constitutes the ability to control economic resources and social relations leading to formation of economic institutions, whereas the later constitutes the ability to control people leading to formation of political institutions (Craib, 1992).

The embedded practices are rooted in the actors' day-to-day activities and performed through their livelihood earning practices in the material world. The embedded practices (e.g., actions of forest users) perform through an 'action' (of actor) which is the basis of Giddens' structuration process of social institutions. Giddens states that action is a continuous process and a flow that an actor executes during the course of social practice. Actor's execution of action may produce intended or unintended consequences. But the actions are the consequences of 'reflexive monitoring' of actors. It means an actor not only monitors his/her actions and other actions, but also monitors the social and physical

aspects of the society where they execute actions. In addition, an actor rationalizes his/her action, e.g., community involvement in forest management (i.e., action) because their livelihoods rely on forest resources (i.e., rationalization). The most important aspect of action is that it contains the transformative power or ability of change through monitored actions.

The conceptualization and formation of CFUG in Nepal is influenced by monitoring and transformative potentiality of community members (i.e., actions). Because the actual users of the local common resources (i.e., forest) have full information (i.e., knowledge) of the carrying capacity of resources, which (i.e, knowledge) guides users to monitor not only their own actions but also of others for the optimal use of available resources.

Actor (agent) executes the action discursively rationalizing the reason for his/her conduct. We know what we do. Giddens (1984) distinguishes motivation of action from rationalization and reasoning of action (i.e., reflexive monitoring). Because much of our day-to-day conducts are not directly motivated. Unconscious motivation (behavioural slips; slip of the tongue, spilling the coffee is an action of a person even though it has not done intentionally) is a significant feature of human conduct (Giddens, 1984: 6). Thus, practical action (practical consciousness) of an actor is the centre of an institution or structuration process. However, Giddens has not distinguished between discursive consciousness action and practical consciousness action rigidly. As he formulated, it is like the difference between what can be said and what is characteristically simply done (Giddens, 1984: 7). Importantly, an actor's ability for action (or agency) relies on as much knowledge and power as s/he has. The social structure, thus, enables action of actor and contains the transformative power during the production and reproduction of social practices.

An institution, thus, initiated through 'reciprocal typification' of an action meaningfully among the individuals becomes 'established practices' of society, such as language, marriage, ritual activities, forest using practices. Yet, institution can also be understood as spatially and temporally varying structured social activities. Enduring practice and persistence of institutions in society also permit them to have flexibility with uncommitted potentiality to adapt to new changes, that is, environmental and social (Aase et al., 2010). So, the reciprocal relation of structure and action through practice within institution, as explained by Anthony Giddens, helps to analyse society more closely than relying on Berger & Luckmann only. However, since human interact with and rely on natural resources for various reasons (e.g., sustaining livelihood) (see Poudel, 2018; 2019) institutions for natural resource management conflate people-nature relation with social institutions and mediate their relationships (Leach et al.,

1999; Gupta et al., 2010; Young, 2010), so all humanly used resources are embedded in complex social-ecological systems (Ostrom, 2009). The following section deals with these aspects of the institution.

Institution as people-nature relations

In a country like Nepal, natural resources such as forest is not only the source of livelihood earning but also the foundation of local environment (Poudel, 2014). Managing natural resources, such as forest, is, therefore, not only like regularizing human social behaviours as expressed by Burger & Luckman and Anthony Giddens. Rather an institution for natural resources mediates people-nature relation and regularizes pattern of behaviour between individuals and groups in society (Leach et al., 1999; Young, 2010). A constellation of institutions, such as social status, role, gender, economic power, networks, political power, etc. guide his/her access to natural resources. This may be the reason why politically oriented leaders, elite dominancy (Malla, 2001; Lama and Buchy, 2002; Timsina and Paudel, 2003) and gender inequality (Agarwal, 2001) determine access to forest resources in Nepal. Because in an agrarian society, an individual's social identity and status are the objects as well as instruments of investment to get access to natural resources (Berry, 1989).

North (1990) critically says that institutions are the rules of the game. In a practical setting, institutions determine the opportunities in the society and actors take advantage of those opportunities. How and how much resources one can accumulate are determined by his/her social position. For instance, among the members of a Community Forest Users Group or CFUG, poor villagers are still not getting as much access as they need for the subsistence in spite of equal institutional rights (Adhikari et al., 2004). This may be due to their weak social as well as economic status or weak agency.

At present, an institution designed for the management of natural resources, such as CFUG, is beyond the conventional understanding like a small spatial unit, a homogeneous social structure, and as a shared norm (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Rather, these institutions should be viewed as the involvement of differentiated actors with contested interests. Strategic actors can bypass the constraints of existing institution and create new institutions that match their interest (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Networks of powerful and well-connected (political) actors are able to control flow of knowledge and information (Yates, 2012). Thus, a growing number of intra - and inter-institutional relations should also be considered when conceptualizing institutions for natural resource management. This is so because an institution for natural resource management can have trickle down impacts on social, environmental and economic institutions of society.

The global environment changes and the way communities adapt to the change can only be understood by the adaptive capacity of institutions (Eakin and Lemos, 2010). Unlike other institutions, resource institutions should have the ability to manage socio-environmental challenges, which are non-linear in nature (Young, 2010). In the Nepal Himalaya, for instance, a farmer's adaptation to change is largely conditioned by the household's innovative capacity (Aase et al., 2013) and the institutions that facilitate innovation are central for building the adaptive capacity of farmers (Chhetri et al., 2012). Thus, at present, an institution – especially for natural resources - must be viewed in its dynamic ability.

In addition, institutions have ability to enable social actors to continuously learn and improve their institutions, allow and motivate social actors to adjust their behaviour, and institutions can also have ability to mobilize leadership qualities (Gupta et al., 2010). Thus, these diverse abilities of institutions guide individuals to customize behaviours in specific situations and lead individuals to make a conscious decision to form a new institution in a changing context. Institutional change takes place when existing institution's rules, norms and practices conflict with day-to-day functional needs of participants, become incompatible with and unresponsive to changing socio-economic environments, and no longer serve interest of local people who enact the rules and norms (Seo and Creed, 2002).

Referential artefacts of institution – an epistemological implication

Unlike animals, human do not have any instinct by birth. Instead, they develop institutions, which are their instincts. These institutions facilitate them to learn social norms through reciprocal typifications throughout their life course (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This is how individuals know their surroundings and environment and are able to exceed the geographical limit. Unlike human, non-human animals have their geographic limit. For instance, a polar bear cannot survive in the Sahara Desert. On the contrary, human can adjust in both kinds of natural environments. So, institutions facilitate, permit, and capacitate human to engage in different activities (e.g., knowledge production, role, status, professionalism) and environments (e.g., physical space, natural resource management), which enable them to form modern society at present. Although both (human and non-human animals) were alike at the time of origin, human, in terms of social progress, transcend animal-like society to the modern one through social and material institutionalizations. Figure 1, although it is hypothetical, illustrates the social progress of human and other animals from the hunter and gatherers to modern beings.
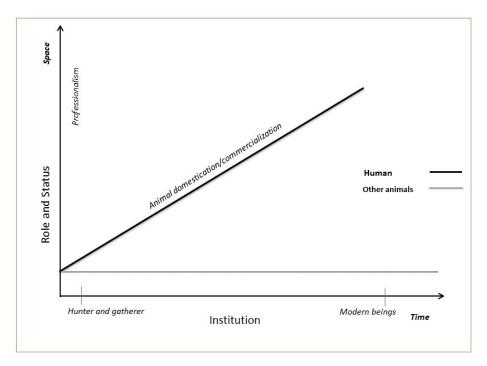
Figure 1: Institution – an instinct - makes human different than other animals

The figure implies that institutions have made possible human to appropriate resources, place and society, and render them for making their living in the material world.

The ontologies of institution presented in the above sections, that is, institution as (1) 'reciprocal typifications', (2) 'embedded practices', and (3) 'people-nature relation' are not explicit epistemologically in pragmatic sense, they, however, have indicated language, rules, (embedded) practices and knowledge are the referential artefacts of institutions. To activate institutions empirically these indicators facilitate to conceptualize an institution of a society.

Human language is an inherited referent of an institution. Because if one presupposes language, s/he has already presupposed institutions (Searle, 2005). Language provides a meaning of a phenomenon (object, organism, event etc.). Language continuously coordinates humans to convert objective knowledge in to subjective knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). If community members share a common language, they also share common practices and habits, and a performance of similar acts. According to Searle, (1) language has the ability to communicate meaning. For instance, a national flag could be just a piece of cloth if it has no institutional value as a symbol of nationality/unity

in society. (2) Language contains the deontic power, such as rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions, empowerments, requirements, and certification. For instance, unlike animals, humans can distinguish persons by their status (e.g, president, teacher, researcher, ordinary person), although all are human beings. (3) Recognition of meaning of status remains continuous through language. And, (4) language is the only medium through which other institutions, such as marriage, money, government, market, property, and forest management, etc. can be recognized. Language is also a mechanism to motivate groups of individuals collectively, which is called collective intentionality[1]. Language, therefore, has a primary role to constitute an institution in any society.

Ostrom (1986) considers rule as a concept to refer to an institution. She conceptualizes prescriptive nature of rules to understand an institution. A prescription refers to commonly known and used actions by individuals, such as required, prohibited, or permitted. These rules are the result of repetitive actions and implicit or explicit efforts of practitioners in defined/structured situations. A defined situation can be markets, committees, elections etc. (Ostrom, 1986). For her, rules differ from laws, because rules are well understood and acknowledged by the users whereas enforcement is required for a law to become a rule. Rules can be changed by the practitioners whereas laws cannot be changed by practitioners themselves. In addition, rule contains prescriptive force, which means knowledge and acceptance of a rule leads individuals to recognize that if they break the rule other individuals may hold them accountable (Harre, 1974; cited in Ostrom, 1986). Since a rule structures an action of an individual in a situation through obligation, prohibition and permission, individuals select actions from a set of allowable actions in any particular situation. Thus, rules attribute institutions.

Considering practice and interaction as a medium to transfer rules and norms into human actions, Crawford et al. (1995) try to develop the syntax of an institution, which includes attribute, deontic, aim, condition, and or else. All these components are applicable for a group or an individual. 'Attribute' component of an institution includes the characteristics of a group or an individual, for instance, size of membership, geographic location, resource availability, etc. for a group, and age, gender, caste-ethnicity, position, residence, etc. for an individual. The 'deontic' component of an institution consists of the rules of permission, obligation and forbidden for a group or an individual for particular actions. All the actions of an individual or a group, which are regularized by an institution, can be considered as an 'aim' of the institution. For instance, forbidding the felling of rare species of certain types of trees within particular CFUG's boundary is the

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1   Intentionality is the directedness of the mind with belief, desire, hope, fear, love, hate, pride, shame, perception digest etc. (Searle 2005: 6).

aim of that CFUG. The fourth component of an institution, namely 'condition' indicates the set of variables that define when, where and how certain conditions or rules apply for a particular action. For instance, determination of the day or month for the collection of firewood and timber by CFUGs is a kind of a condition. The fifth component, 'or else', consists of sanctioning nature of an institution, which must be backed by certain rules (Crawford and Ostrom 1995). This includes threat and punishment, e.g. imposing fine, physical punishment, confiscating timber cutting instruments by CFUG institutions etc. Thus, embedded practices attribute rules.

Knowledge as resource of institution is another referent of an institution. Individuals acquire knowledge during the process of socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The inherent characteristics of an institution, such as rules, norms, and beliefs empower society (individuals, organizations and networks) to cope with new social and environmental changes (Gupta et al., 2010) through the flow of knowledge and information (Yates, 2012). Thus, it encourages actors to find solutions to problems. Institutions continuously enable social actors to learn, improve and adjust their institutions. Institutions define leadership capacity, can mobilize resources, and have the principles of fair governance (Gupta et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This article presents an institution through the perspectives of the phenomenology of Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann (1966), the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984), and the conception of an institution as people-nature relations. As institution is regular habits or actions of human, a continuous change is the rule rather than the exception in an institution. Berger & Luckmann (1966) focus more on social structure – norms, rules and regulation to facilitate individual's actions whereas Giddens balances the role of actors (or individuals) and structure through regular practices to form social institutions *(*which is *recursive)*. Actors are also rational (social and economic) and reflexive (monitor activities). In addition, *domination of power* (social and economic) is apparent while considering people-nature relations, especially in natural resource-dependent society. So, all these facets comprise an institution of a society.

While analyzing the relationships between 'community' and 'forest' in Nepal historically, phenomenologists' process of socialization of a phenomenon (i.e., objectivation, internalization and socialization/extranalization of an objective world into subjective one) seems applicable. When the idea of Community Forestry (CF), a phenomenon, was initiated through the promulgation of the National Forestry Plan in 1976, communities were reluctant to accept it as it was not only top-down and centrally imposed, but local

communities were also provided limited use rights. The early CF was primarily guided by the conservationist motives and it did not consider the existing traditional practices of forest users (Collett et al., 1998; Malla, 2001; Gautam et al., 2004). Although the Plan was less strict compared to the Private Forest Nationalization Act of 1957, which sufficiently scared communities with the centrally imposed forestry rules, the implementation of the Plan did not please communities one more time. Consequently, communities did not internalize and socialize the early CF.

In the 1980s, the government realized the importance of communities' roles in local forest management and started transferring use rights to them. This was reflected in the 25-year Master Plan of Forestry Sector in 1989 (Gautam et al., 2004). This Plan was guided by two goals, that is, conserving forests and enhancing users' livelihood. It relinquished substantial amount of power and authority to community in the use and management of forests through forming forest user groups at local level. Although the promulgation of the Master Plan is considered as a paradigmatic shift in forestry policy making in Nepal (Gautam et al., 2004), villagers did not generally believe that the promise of decentralization of forest management would be effective (Malla, 2001). However, as the forest user groups were already started forming at the local level and communities were also enjoying some degree of use rights, the process of internalizing CF by communities through their regular actions and practices of forest use started after the implementation of this master plan.

Finally, after the promulgation of the Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulation 1995, communities were not only authorized to use, manage and sell forest products but CF was also developed as a grassroots institution to drive local economy and development, thereby to enhance local livelihoods, which further encouraged communities to institutionalize and socialize CF subjectively. At present, CF is considered as the most successful local-level forest management institution (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Ojha et al., 2008; Thoms, 2008) in terms of protecting forest, conserving biodiversity, enhancing economic situation of many villagers, and establishing local level institutions (Jackson et al., 1998; Gautam et al., 2002; Springate-Beginski et al., 201;, Oldekop et al., 2019).

The above subjectivation/socialization history of CF was due to the formation of CF as a social space to bring and discuss social and environmental issues into one place where forest dependent users rationalize the use of forest and its conservation for local environment in a more pragmatic sense. This is the place where structure and actions of actors, as Giddens (1984) proposes through the structuration theory, recursively interact, thereby the structure of CF is monitored, guided and restructured by the actions

of actors (i.e., community, forest users). Although the power relations in terms of access to and control/claim over forest resources and policy making vary among users on the basis of their social positionalities and agencies (i.e., ability of actors) (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013), CF is the most accepted forest management institution compared to other community-based forest management institutions of Nepal at present (Poudel, 2019).

Structuration or institutionalization process, thus, denotes structural influences on regular behavioural practice and decision making of actors and they also affect formal rules and laws as presented in the above case of CF subjectivation history. It evokes constructive and interactive relation between individual (i.e., actor) and structure (i.e., rules/institution) in a specific socio-environmental context which vary in space and time. As individual actors are creative and skilful, their regular practices also influence the structuration process (e.g., changes in forestry policies). Social structures and individual's actions are therefore recursively associated as Giddens (1984) argued. To understand these relations epistemologically in a pragmatic sense, an understanding of community's language, existing norms and rules, (embedded) practices and knowledge repository of existing institutions are quintessential.

Ontologically, an institution of society can, therefore, be conceptualized through the following prerequisites. (1) Formation, existence and persistence of institutions are due to a continuous practice of actions and behaviours of actors for societal needs, e.g., sustaining livelihoods. (2) It grows at all stages of the social relation of actors leading to institutional change varyingly in time-space context. (3) As society depends on natural resources for several purposes (e.g., livelihood, climate, environment), understanding an institution designed for natural resources demand social, economic and ecological perspectives. Finally, (4) institutions change when actors affect norms and when existing institutions do not match societal needs and interests in the context of external change. These four prerequisites or conditions suggest that an institution is the combined perspective of phenomenologists, structuralists and those who think institutions as a mediator of people-nature relations. Thus, an institution is a politically (i.e., relations and interactions) and ecologically/economically (i.e., access to natural resources and their managements, livelihood practices) established social practice.

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