



Institutional Dissonance, Acceptable Deviance and Socio- Economic Opportunities

How Marginalized Women Farmers Engage in Bottom-up Institution-Building in

Cameroon

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1 Introduction

How can actors build institutions? Several authors have attempted to answer the question in extant research, obtaining remarkable explanations, among others, of the processes (Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012), the outcomes (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009), and the strategies devised to change institutions (Mair, Battilana, & Cardenas, 2012; Mair, Wolf, & Seelos, 2016).

Nevertheless, in spite of the recent hype of research in institutional change, the phenomenon has been under-studied for decades because of its paradoxical nature. How can actors, who are themselves embedded in institutions and depend on dominant beliefs to lead their daily lives, move away from the mainstream traditions and attempt to establish new institutional structures? The dilemma, known as the paradox of Embedded Agency, has been debated in organizational and sociological research for over three decades (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002; Granovetter, 1985; Jack & Anderson, 2002; Su, Zhai, & Karlsson, 2017; Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016), yet only recently it has come to convincing explanations of the processes through which institutional change is possible. Partly this is due to the underlying assumptions of institutional theory itself, that sees institutions as stable, dominating the individual action, and rarely subject to change or external shocks (Dacin et al., 2002). It follows from this assumption that actors must be exceptionally well-positioned to be presented the opportunity to impact on dominant beliefs, either by mobilizing networks and resources internal to the community (Battilana et al., 2009) or by connecting to change agents external to the community that might facilitate and drive the change process (Mair, Marti, et al., 2012; Mair et al., 2016). While helpful in explain the process of institutional change, this view suffers from the same rigidity and puzzling logic of the paradox of Embedded Agency. If institutions are stable and hardly changeable in the first place, how can actors raise their position within community to the point of gaining authority to alter institutions? If the community is embedded in rigid and institutionalized beliefs, why should they listen to external actors trying to bring about change and innovation in society?

The objection is that institutions might not be rigid, or at least differ in their degree of alterability. For instance, in a study of institution-building in rural India, (Mair et al., 2016) find that the community

expresses a strong resistance to discourses of economic equality and empowerment of disadvantaged minorities, while is more positive to accept win-win sanitation practices that might lead to improved health for all the members. Thus, an acceptable discourse (sanitation practices) can be used by external agents to bring about positive institutional change (inclusion of disadvantaged minorities) that runs contrary to the dominant view and interests of the ruling majority (Mair et al., 2016). Similarly, (Venkataraman et al., 2016) find that actors are at times able to leverage conflicting institutional logics to influence the actions of other community members and orchestrate institutional change towards a desirable outcome. An interesting point is that the conflict between competing institutional logics, such as the community and the market, can by itself serve as the event triggering institutional change, when the actor leading the change is himself trying to make sense of contrasting information (Su et al., 2017). Overall, extant research has challenged the assumption that institutions are stable when, indeed, institutional change may be orchestrated from outside or emerge from within established beliefs, should a conflict between institutional logics arise.

While there is evidence of development agents, community leaders and practitioners attempting to alter existing institutions, research on institutional conflict within the community is scant. Among the notable exceptions, (Smallbone & Welter, 2012) investigate how entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in transition economies, leveraging their knowledge of the local environment and resources to influence the decision-makers' responses in favour of their personal objectives. Indeed, entrepreneurship is not an economic phenomenon in isolation, but involves action within determined social structures and beliefs that, in turn, might re-shape and influence those structures (Welter, 2011; Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2017). While extant research in institutional entrepreneurship has shed light on the processes, outcomes and strategies of institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009; Mair, Battilana, et al., 2012; Mair, Marti, et al., 2012), it has hardly gone beyond top-down strategies and actors in positions of power that deliberately attempt to alter extant beliefs (see for example (Venkataraman et al., 2016)), rarely considering how actors can build institutions from the bottom-up. We deem this lack of research not to the absence of the phenomenon, but rather to the difficulties in collecting empirical data on bottom-up institutional change. Indeed, evidence from the related field of entrepreneurship in low-income countries suggests that everyday entrepreneurship does have a

positive impact on established institutions. Thanks to micro-finance and pro-poor aid programs, the rural Poor can enrich themselves and gain status in their community, fostering one's access to resources, social capital, esteem and decisional power (Rignall & Atia, 2017; Zhao & Lounsbury, 2016). In the case of women, starting a micro-enterprise helps escape the patriarchal logic dominant in low-income countries, that considers women subordinate to men and recommends the optimal role of looking after the households and taking care of familial matters (Al-Dajani, Carter, Shaw, & Marlow, 2015; Zhao & Wry, 2016). In related arguments, (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017)'s conceptual model of challenge-based entrepreneurship shows that marginalized individuals are the ones most likely to recognize and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities because of the problems they face in everyday life, and (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009) contend that entrepreneurship does indeed lead to emancipation, empowerment and social inclusion of disadvantaged minorities, thus influencing the community's perceptions of those individuals.

These contributions lead us to believe that bottom-up institutional change is rather common, yet understudied from an institutional theory perspective because of the hardship in collecting first-hand data and its counter-intuitive solution to the Embedded Agency paradox. Building on recent empirical evidence and conceptual frameworks, we contribute to the discussion of the paradox of Embedded Agency by answering the following Research Question:

How, why and under what conditions can entrepreneurial marginalized individuals contribute to build institutions in their living communities?

We conduct an ethnographic study of farming cooperatives in rural Cameroon working with the International Center for Environmental Education and Community Development (ICENECDEV), an NGO running a program to improve the farming techniques and livelihoods of rural women farmers. The program qualifies as a good case study because women farmers in Cameroon face several discriminations due to both their economic status and their segregated role of women in the society. In addition, while all the women participating in the program have received some sort of training in agricultural or entrepreneurial techniques, social emancipation is beyond the objectives of ICENECDEV and has never been part of the lessons imparted to the farmers. Thus, if spontaneous bottom-up institutional change is found in autochthone farming communities, we can show it is

widespread in a variety of settings beyond top-down orchestrated development interventions. Finally, the fact that ICENECDEV beneficiaries are organized in self-managing groups and belong to different communities in the province of Buea allows examining the differential effect of group features, extent of rurality and meso-level economic conditions on institutional change.

Our study makes three main contributions. First, we contribute to the discussion of the paradox of Embedded Agency (Battilana et al., 2009; Granovetter, 1985) by adding a bottom-up perspective that has insofar been overlooked by scholars, yet might be more common and widespread in practice than the dominant top-down institution-building approaches (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017; Rindova et al., 2009). Our findings can help development practitioners design holistic interventions that, rather than forcing desirable institutional outcomes on rural communities from an external perspective, aim to create the conditions for community members to self-developed and change their institutionalized beliefs in a desirable direction. To some extent, we contribute solving the problem of mistrust towards NGOs and actors external to the community in development sciences (Orenstein & Shach-Pinsley, 2017; West, Bamford, & Marsden, 2007).

Second, by exploring who is able to change institutions, under what conditions she can be able to do so, and what are the reasons moving her to seek institutional change, we add to our understanding of opportunities for change in institutional entrepreneurship, which so far have been under-theorized (Battilana et al., 2009; Cardinale, 2018). In doing so, we draw from (Smallbone & Welter, 2012)'s conceptualization of opportunities as a socio-economic construct, where entrepreneurs are able to enact opportunities because of their familiarity with the local environment, comprehension of the indigenous institutionalized beliefs, and connections with relevant stakeholders within their community. We argue that opportunities in institutional entrepreneurship function in a similar fashion, with the entrepreneur being an actor embedded in local institutions and, *because of this embeddedness*, knowledgeable on how to get around and modify extant beliefs.

Third, we answer the recent calls for more studies of business research in Africa (George, Corbishley, Khayesi, Haas, & Tihanyi, 2016), entrepreneurship research in agricultural settings (Fitz-Koch, Nordqvist, Carter, & Hunter, 2018), and management research tackling societal grand challenges (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). In particular, we examine how rural

communities can solve the grand challenges of women discrimination and farmer marginalization following a change in their institutionalized beliefs, and the conditions under which such change can be brought about. By so doing, we develop an indigenous theory in the African context, taking into account the local traditional beliefs, the history and present contingencies of the Cameroonian society, and the views of the individuals directly affected by the change process (George, Corbishley, et al., 2016; Welter, 2011).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we shortly review the literature on the paradox of Embedded Agency and the studies on entrepreneurial action and institution-building in low-income countries. Second, we illustrate in detail our empirical setting, methods employed and analytical choices. Third, we present the theoretical framework emerging from our findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing its implications for theory and practice and possible avenues for future research that will advance the field.

2 Structure, Agency and Action

In this section we shortly review extant contributions on the micro-foundations of institution-building and how actors embedded and driven by institutionalized beliefs can themselves be agents of institutional change.

Institutions are defined as the schemas that drive human action, the beliefs in individuals' minds of what behaviors are acceptable and therefore how actors are supposed to act in determined situations (Su et al., 2017). Institutional structures prescribe the appropriate behavior in certain situations, so that groups of actors will know how to act under pre-determined conditions. Actors are free to act within the boundaries of acceptable institutional practices and, at the same time, reinforce institutions by acting within those boundaries (Sewell, 1992). By looking at what actions an actor performs, her peers reinforce their beliefs on what actions are allowed within a certain domain, thus strengthening the overlying institutional structure (Jennings, Greenwood, Lounsbury, & Suddaby, 2013). In addition, institutionalized beliefs prescribe actions in situations that are new at hand, but resemble those lived previously by a certain actor (Sewell, 1992). In such situations, an actor will act according to the most consistent way with his existing beliefs, depending on the history of her past actions and the routinized re-enactment of schemas to which she is subject (Khavul, Chavez, & Bruton, 2013). It follows that, from an ontological perspective, the institutionalized beliefs lead the agents to pursue actions that, in turn, reinforce the institutionalized beliefs. Yet, this historical view of institutional theory does not take into account the diversity of scenarios to which actors might become exposed, the diversity in the extent to which actors might be embedded in traditional beliefs and the pitfalls of replicating one's habitual actions in a new context where such behaviors might not be acceptable (Cardinale, 2018).

In this traditional view, institutions are seen mostly as stable and immutable, especially when referring to cultural institutions and individuals' beliefs passed on through generations (Bylund & McCaffrey, 2017). While culture has been seen as a persistent characteristic of human groups, empirical evidence suggests the opposite: culture is, indeed, mutable through coordinated action and mobilization of resources according to new schemas which will, eventually, become institutionalized

after replacing the old ones (Mair, Marti, et al., 2012). In northern India, forcing individuals to work hand-by-hand with the outcast of the lowest class has led to the outcasts inclusion within their community and their acceptance as citizens participating in politics and decision-making in a relatively short period of time (Mair et al., 2016), which contradicts the starting assumption of actors fully embedded and constrained by self-reinforcing institutional structures.

Extant contributions in institutional theory have tackled the paradox by introducing the role of actors external to the community who are not embedded within traditional beliefs and might have an interest in altering the way people think and act in rural settings, such as NGOs and MNEs (Dutt et al., 2016; Mair, Marti, et al., 2012). Yet, the paradox is still not solved, as the solution of involving external actors entails that agents internal to the community cannot impact significantly how the community at large behaves. Building on extant contributions, we introduce two factors playing an important role in the phenomenon, namely the diversity among the scenarios to which actors are exposed and the variance in the experiences lived by each actor that affects how that actor reacts when presented with situations non-prescribed by the institutional structure (Cardinale, 2018).

2.1 Exposure to External Shocks

What does the arrival of an outsider development agent entail for a rural community? When dealing with the unknown, communities are usually wary of change and tend to turn mistrusting towards the external agents, unless they see an immediate return in the projects proposed (West et al., 2007).

Thus, at least in the initial phases, development agents willing to develop institutions in a rural community should pay attention to the framing of their project, showing its aspects coherent with the institutionalized beliefs but being wary of disclosing controversial points too early in the project development (Mair et al., 2016). Within this process, from a community perspective, the exposure to external projects and ideas can lead insiders to question their past assumptions and change their institutionalized beliefs concerning the issue at hand (Mair & Marti, 2009).

From an agentic theoretical lenses, the actor would prefer to replicate her behavior in the new context consistently with his or her schemas to which one has been exposed to (Sewell, 1992). However, the project can be orchestrated by the development agent in a way that coherence with the

institutionalized beliefs (for example, exclusion of the outcast individuals in a community-building plan) will lead to failure of the project implementation and be therefore discouraged (Mair et al., 2016). Should an actor wrongly act according to institutionalized beliefs in a new dissimilar context, she is likely to be punished by the actors in power in that context (for example, the development agent or the community leaders) and therefore realize the drawbacks of his or her misdoings, changing one's actions and behaviors in subsequent iterations (Su et al., 2017).

The phenomenon is similar to what (Townley, 2002) observed in the organizational setting of a new regulation forcing cultural industries to adopt business planning and accountability measures. The external event, in this case, the introduction of the normative, has challenged managers of museums to think out of their institutionalized beliefs and adjust their organizational practices to comply with the law. The mixture of a cultural logic, focused on divulgation and outreach to clients, and a commercial logic, aimed at improving process efficiency and maximizing the organization's economic return, has resulted in conflicting reactions among the managers. In spite of their awareness of the need for professionalization in the field, many struggled with grasping the underlying principles of the introduced logic and establishing actions in accordance with those principles (Townley, 2002). Thus, the external shock of a change in legislation has led to the redefinition of the actors' identities and the change of institutionalized beliefs in the field of cultural expositions.

However, questions arise as to what constitutes an event potentially capable of disrupting the self-reinforcing circle of structure-dependent agency. In this direction, (Battilana et al., 2009) suggest that powerful actors may deliberately take decisions to change institutions and, through resource and network mobilization, influence societal beliefs in the direction they desire – as in the case of legislative bodies in the cultural industry. Yet, three implications of this reasoning are problematic. First, it derives that actors who manage to change institutions must be in a position of power, or somehow well-connected to influential actors within their community. Second, events leading to institutional change in this framework are solely intentional and directed by cognizant actors, failing to account for other independent and/or unpredictable events that might interfere with the institutional entrepreneur's vision. Third, it stays silent about the reasons why actors might want to change institutions in the first place and what motivates their peers to follow them. While being informative

on the processes through which actors can change institutions, the model leads to a somehow limited understanding of institutional change as a top-down approach, without room for disturbances to the pre-determined vision of the powerful entrepreneur and subsequently forsaking alternative conceptualization of institutional entrepreneurship. We address these three issues in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Bottom-up Institutional Change

Although influential actors within the community surely play an important role in shaping institutions and influencing the dominant beliefs in their society, the assumption that an actor can impact institutions only if he enjoys a prominent position among his peers is somehow reductive of a more complex reality. As argued before, institutions are re-created through actions of the individual agents that, by conforming to their shared institutionalized beliefs, reinforce their peers' conventions on what behavior are acceptable in the situation at hand (Sewell, 1992). Nevertheless, when an actor behaves against the institutions for some reason, he is likely to trigger astonishment in her peers, regardless of the actor's position within the community. Indeed, if an actor behaves in an unconventional fashion, he is likely to face adverse reactions from the community and social pressure to re-conform to the dominant schemas, thus re-establishing the institutionalized order (Su et al., 2017).

Yet, actors in positions of power can behave more freely and are less likely to be subject to peer pressure and conforming influences from their peers (Battilana et al., 2009). This entails that powerful actors not only have a vision to change institutions and affect how other community member think, but also that through certain means, such as the mobilization of networks and resources, going against the dominant beliefs is acceptable. Indeed, within their communities, traditional leaders and individuals in positions of powers are able to transcend the common rules of acceptable behaviors and act independently of what the community thinks is right (Mosse, 2010). The pitfall in (Battilana et al., 2009)'s argument is that power is not a necessary condition for influencing other individuals' beliefs, but rather a condition sufficient to offset the negative consequences of behaving against the dominant schema in a social setting. Thus, institutions are not changed solely through the exercise of power, but mostly through the changing in individual mindsets that power allows (Sutter, Webb, Kistruck,

Ketchen, & Ireland, 2017). The process is therefore not necessarily voluntary, as one might change institutions through her own defecting of widespread institutionalized beliefs even if she does not aim to generate societal change, and does not require a powerful individual. An act of formal defiance of institutions by a single actor can inspire others to follow but it leads by no means to a certain institutional change, it rather instills a disordered process where multiple actions might question the extant beliefs and each advance her own priorities to establish a new order of values (Purdy & Gray, 2009).

Perhaps the best example of institution-building from the bottom-up is (Rindova et al., 2009)'s framework of Emancipatory Entrepreneurship. Although (Rindova et al., 2009) limit their framework as to how marginalized individuals can raise their own status within the community where they live, most often people who live close to those individuals change their beliefs and views of those newly empowered entrepreneurs. For instance, women entering informal craft networks in Palestine can gain exclusive ownership of resources and exercise authority within their business network, thus challenging the orders received from their community leaders and escaping the legal institutional constraint aimed at keeping the Palestinian minority into poverty and submission (Al-Dajani et al., 2015). Similarly, women entrepreneurs in Pakistan and other Muslim countries can challenge the institutional logic of patriarchy, that relegates the wife in a role of submission to the husband, prohibits the participation to social and public life, by doing business and taking actions that explicitly contradict the patriarchal beliefs, such as walking in public without their husbands, or exchanging ideas with clients while selling at their shops (Lindvert, Patel, & Wincent, 2017; Zhao & Wry, 2016). Other minorities, such as HIV patients, may gain opportunities to challenge traditional beliefs by doing business and gaining status within the community, overcoming the tribal beliefs condemning patients as impure victims of witchcraft worth of isolation from the community (Mosse, 2010).

2.3 Institutional Opportunities in Context

Notably, in all the aforementioned instances, there is always an external shock leading the institutional entrepreneur to seek institutional change, either a macro-level socio-economic condition (e.g. the war and discrimination in Palestine), an opportunity received (e.g. being offered a loan to

start a business), or a personal difficulty at the individual level (e.g. being struck by an infectious disease like HIV). Yet, while all these events qualify as external shocks and trigger the actor to seek institutional change in her living community, the circumstances and the process hardly resemble the kind of orchestrated and deliberate actions described in the framework by (Battilana et al., 2009). The fact that any actor may experience a personal shock, an event, or an opportunity that leads her to desire change in the institutional environment points to individual agency within the institutional structure and the possibility for institutions to be changed from within by any actor who shares the initial institutional schema and happens by circumstantial factors to distance herself from that schema. This is best expressed in the work of (Granovetter, 1985): the actor who is embedded in an institutionalized environment not only faces constraints in thinking out of the schemas, but also boasts and advantage in understanding those schemas and acting and re-enacting them as neSerenad.

To sum up, when looking for a shock that leads to institutional change, the researcher should not necessarily look at a macro-level event that disrupts the dominant institutional schema and forces a community to reorganize according to new rules, but rather at small events in the history of any individual that lead her to question the dominant schema and seek personal actions against the traditional beliefs. We therefore argue that the context of institutional entrepreneurship matters: actors are not merely puppets within the institutional sphere, but their actions continuously re-create and impact the entrepreneurial context (Sewell, 1992; Welter, 2011) while, at the same time, are shaped and driven by the entrepreneurial context of each actor. Thus, actors who are embedded within institutions can become able to change the dominant beliefs because of personal experiences that lead them to doubt the way things should be done within their society (Dacin et al., 2002; Tobias, Mair, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2013). According to the history of each actor and the experiences that she has lived, that actor will react differently when replicating her institutional schemas in an unfamiliar context and face different opportunities to perform institutional change (Cardinale, 2018; Smallbone & Welter, 2012).

The best example for contextualized institutional change in extant management literature is (Purdy & Gray, 2009)'s study of the emergence of institutional logics in offices of dispute resolution. When public officers were forced to institute such offices by a change in governmental regulation (external

shock), the field of dispute resolution was still at its emergence and there was no accepted standard or dominant procedure to handle cases presented to such offices. Based on each employee's background, subject of previous studies, tenancy in the office and lived experiences, the office would opt for either a bureaucratic logic, stressing the processing of as many cases as possible and the optimization of limited resources, or a justice logic, aimed at granting a fair processing to most cases at the expense of the overall efficiency for the office. Thus, lived experiences in the history of any public office employee result in him understanding differently the new problems he is presented with and performing different actions in the context at hand (Cardinale, 2018; Welter, 2011). The concept of socio-economic entrepreneurial opportunities (Smallbone & Welter, 2012) can turn useful to further elaborate on who is the potential institutional entrepreneur who aims to change the dominant beliefs. Alike to entrepreneurs who spot economic opportunities because of their familiarity with the industry or technical know-how in the field, institutional entrepreneurs can be presented with opportunities to change the dominant schemas through their embeddedness in the local community (Granovetter, 1985; Mosse, 2010) and be able to take advantage of those opportunities through their network of contacts and trust enjoyed within the community (West et al., 2007). Since the entrepreneurial opportunities in contexts of low institutional strength are always socio-economic in nature, in that they require the knowledge of extant institutional beliefs and the ways to circumvent institutions without hampering one's relationships with other community members (Smallbone & Welter, 2012), they appear to be a useful starting point to investigate institutional change.

Following our brief literature review, we adopt the concepts used by previous scholars in the fields of entrepreneurship, and in particular institutional entrepreneurship, to break down our research question and operationalize it in more focused research objectives that may guide the process of data collection and analysis while anchoring the results to the present body of literature.

1. *Who are the marginalized actors most likely to engage in bottom-up institution building?*
2. *What are the events that may lead actors to question the dominant institutional schema?*
3. *How do actors identify and enact socio-economic opportunities for institution building?*

We answer our research objectives through an ethnography of rural farmers in West Cameroon, as outlined in the following paragraph.

3 Methodology

We investigate our three research questions through an ethnographic study of rural farming communities around the city of Buea in South-West Cameroon. Our rationale for the choice of the setting is, if bottom-up institution-building is possible and widespread as posited in our theoretical reasoning, then it should be found even in rural farming communities, where the isolation from urban beliefs, the persistence of traditional tribal values and the established governance structure de-incentivize the transition to more equitable schemas and beliefs. Specifically, we focus on women farmers, whose image in society is seriously hampered because of urban prejudices against farmers, considered the lowest occupation in the social ladder, with farmers always struggling to make a living and achieve basic needs in life, and further aggravated by widespread negative perceptions of women, seen as submitted to their husbands and unable to own possessions on their own. The remaining of this section proceeds as follows. First, we illustrate the context at hand by defining our sampling strategy and introducing the several constraints faced by women farmers in Cameroon and the socio-political situations of the country at the time of the study. Second, we present our data collection strategy and analytical methods.

3.1 Empirical Setting

3.1.1 Case Selection

We conduct 76 interviews among women farmers belonging to 12 farming cooperatives in the villages around the city of Buea, in West Cameroon, between mid-June and mid-August 2018. Six of these groups (48 participants) were affiliated to a non-governmental organization, ICENECDEV, that facilitated contacting the farmers, scheduling interviews and reaching the meeting destinations. While all the groups affiliated to ICENECDEV were comparable in terms of the training attended, material received and governance structures, they differed in term of length of establishment, location, group composition and leaders, allowing to establish the boundary conditions of the process of institution-building. In a second phase, we conduct interviews among farmers belonging to different cooperatives to ensure that the findings from ICENECDEV are replicable across contexts and there are no features

of the NGO's program affecting the way in which its beneficiaries enact and re-enact institutional schemas.

One of the characteristics of ICENECDEV that make it an interesting baseline for the case study are the organization's international connection, that enable the organization to provide farmers with equipment and donations from the international community that help increase the agricultural produce and attain basic food security. Indeed, reaching a sufficient level of economic security has been shown to be a necessary precondition to gain acceptance within one's community and leverage one's status to change pre-existing schemas and beliefs (Mosse, 2010). In addition, ICENECDEV's groups are composed almost exclusively of women, with men rarely being accepted in the cooperatives and never taking positions of leadership in the groups. While this characteristic might make ICENECDEV less comparable to other farming cooperatives, it also provides women for more opportunities to speak out in the group and interact without the husband's veto, thus providing a protected environment where women have the opportunity to discuss and be exposed to new beliefs that might contrast with the institutionalized schemas (Klyver, Nielsen, & Evald, 2013). Most importantly, although ICENECDEV has done much work to support its beneficiaries and help them succeed in their private economic and social endowments, the NGO has never aimed to openly challenge traditional beliefs or train women farmers specifically on institution-building. Therefore, we deem ICENECDEV an ideal starting point to explore institution-building emerging from bottom-up marginalized individuals.

In a second phase, we select 6 farming cooperatives (28 participants) external to ICENECDEV to establish boundary conditions for the process of institution-building. Since all the ICENECDEV groups were started between 2 and 4 years ago, we complement our data by interviewing other cooperatives existing for more than 4 years or established recently. In addition, we interview members of cooperatives that differ in their management structure, gendered board representation and composition of members, varying in terms of seniority, gender balance and female representation within the board. All the cooperatives also differ in terms of location and rurality, expressed as the distance from the main city of Buea, thus allowing to explore institution-building in settings of different intensity of traditional beliefs.

Finally, in a third phase, we also select some women (28 participants) conducting business in fields other than agriculture, including trading, tailoring, food processing and services. All these women were involved in a business group, microcredit union or other network, thus being comparable to women from farming cooperatives in terms of opportunities for interaction outside of the house and exposure to external ideas. Moreover, also these women were selected from both rural and semi-urban areas, allowing to draw a comparison between the transformative potential of institution-building in agricultural entrepreneurship and that of industrial entrepreneurship under comparable contextual conditions and ensure that the findings obtained from the study of women farmers are valid and generalizable across different occupations.

3.1.2 Farmers and Women in South-West Cameroon

While discussing of institution-building in rural Cameroon, one has to account for several historical and societal contingencies that constrain women farmers and prohibit them to achieve performance comparable to their male and urban counterparts.

Starting in 2015, south-west Cameroon and the region of Buea have been seeing a civil war between the independents Anglophone rebels and the central Francophone government. The civil war takes the form of guerrilla warfare, with the rebels hiding in bushes and forests before launching surprise attacks on governmental targets. As such, communities living in rural farming villages are the ones most affected by the crisis and most frequently targeted by rebel raids. Among the economic consequences of the political crisis are the restriction of transport in and out of major cities, the limitation of private consumption by Cameroonian families and the issuing of frequent curfews that prohibit any commercial activity and cancel market days. When consumption falls, cash crops and expensive agricultural products are the most affected, hitting badly those farmers who decided to diversify and invest in high-margin crops. In addition, in the period during which the fieldwork was conducted, the civil war in Cameroon sensibly escalated, with the rebels getting closer to the city, organizing frequent armed attacks in the villages and issuing a one-day curfew on every Monday starting in July. The many difficulties and challenges through which farmers are exposed during this time of crisis are exemplified by Emily in the quote below:

“This year I don’t see possibilities for investment. Last year the harvest was bad, we were selling tomatoes for 1500 CFA (3\$) a basket, but [due to the crisis] no one bought. We borrowed money to sponsor the tomatoes, but were unable to pay the credit union back. Now we have no money and we cannot borrow again because we are in debt. We have our house as a collateral, they can take it any time. We [the majority of our group] were supposed to harvest and sell but the market was bad, so many of us are not paying the credit house. If you don’t comply, they take whatsoever you have put as a collateral.”

The political crisis aggravates the already difficult conditions of rural farmers in Cameroon. Most farmers are uneducated and unaware of correct farming techniques, carrying out work in their farm randomly and investing considerable effort to obtain poor yields. Thus, farming is perceived negatively within the Cameroonian society, especially within urban and modern areas, where farming is considered a low job for the Poorest who are unable to satisfy their basic needs and make a living. Farmers are indeed the most vulnerable segment within the Cameroonian society and they are easily affected by climate variability and economic distress. Due to their lack of financial means and general illiteracy, they are unable to face basic daily challenges such as conserving food, selling at a fair price, or transporting their produce from the farm to the market. For instance, some individuals tend to look down on farmer and often exploit them for their own ends, as in the case of wholesalers who buy in bulk at very low fares and resell in the main market at triple the purchasing price. Due to uneducation and financial illiteracy, farmers prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability, leading to the paradox of selling their whole produce at a discount and reducing themselves to buy over-priced food they already produce. This results in serious financial struggles, not only in one’s economic activities, but also in securing food, shelter, basic health and education.

The situation of women who choose a farming career is further aggravated by societal prejudices and historically strong gendered stereotypes. In the Bantu culture, from which most Cameroonian tribes descend, the women are traditionally responsible for looking after the farm while the men would generally go out hunting or providing income for the family. Thus, since women farming is common and well-accepted within the society, it does little to challenge gender stereotypes and change the perception of women.

The Bantu culture is predominantly masculine, with men being the head of the household and women being excluded from ownership and decision-making. Since women cannot own land or assets, it is impossible for them to obtain a loan at the bank as they lack collateral. In addition, wives are submitted to their husbands and forbidden to spend money or carry out any activity on their own without marital consent. Discrimination used to be so severe that women could not even eat certain parts of meat considered “impure” or carry out specific tasks in the farm that are “for men only”. Alcoholism and violence are common in the house, where women are considered their husband’s property. Even today, the legal system in most villages is administered by the traditional chief and does not grant any women rights. Women and farmers have long been excluded by village politics and decision-making, as roles of power are reserved for men and individuals with a high reputation in the community. To make matters worse, some women farmers have migrated to the surroundings of Buea from distant areas because of political conflicts or economic opportunities, yet the traditional decision-making structures tend to exclude migrants from positions of power and further limit their representation within the community.

As a consequence, women disempowerment is embedded within Cameroonian culture and each woman’s beliefs, to the extent that imagining an alternative reality where women have rights, own assets and participate in decision-making is not possible for most rural farmers. Instead, the pervasive negative view of women is reinforced by the general level of uneducation and manifests in a sense of discouragement, helplessness and self-exclusion, as highlighted in the following answers by Penny and Samantha when asked about decisions they do not approve:

“At my level, there is nothing I can do.”

“As an individual, who am I to oppose the council? I would just pay to avoid problems.”

While women farmers are subject to more severe institutional constraints and discrimination than women entrepreneurs, the latter also face the same struggles in terms of domestic violence and lack of basic human rights. In urban settings, the common belief is that women should not work, but simply look after the house and wait for the husband to provide them with money. Thus, women entrepreneurs still face manifold challenges in achieving economic dignity and affirming their status as an emancipated woman within the modern Cameroonian society.

3.2 Data

3.2.1 Data Collection

Given the focus of this study, aimed at unveiling the process through which marginalized individuals can escape from their disadvantaged conditions and impact institutionalized beliefs by gaining empowerment within their community, an interpretive epistemology has been preferred to alternative options. In fact, institutions and mental schemas are best identified through reporting of the participants as they are found vivid and concrete in each individual's thoughts while leaving scarce room for operationalizations based on observable artifacts (Voigt, 2013). In interpretive approaches, theory is built by constant comparison of shared meanings among participants experiencing similar events, moving from observation of micro-dialectical elements to common constructs recurring across experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretive approaches are especially apt for theory-building for under-explored research questions, as in the case of entrepreneurial institution-building by formerly marginalized individuals. In addition, our epistemological stance has the advantage to ground the emerging framework in detailed contextual descriptions and provide evidence of our process theory from multiple participant angles (Klein & Myers, 1999).

However, we counter-balance the drawbacks of the interpretive epistemology by adopting a phenomenological protocol (Cope, 2005) that asks the participant to recall events and changes in her condition following the joining of the farming group, the receipt of aid and training from the NGO and the diversification into industrial production, if any. The interviews are structured in five phases: a general introduction of the participant, aimed at unveiling each woman's beliefs and their eventual distance from institutionalized beliefs, a discourse on the practices learned from the farming cooperative and either by training or one's role within the group, and the resulting change in the participant's behavior concerning the spheres of economic, social and political empowerment, respectively, and restructured as further themes emerged from the first analyses. Specifically, a participant is asked, among the other questions, whether following her involvement in the cooperative she has been better able to influence the expenditure in the house, participate in social life and events, or contribute to decision-making in the village (please refer to **Error! Reference source not found.**

for the full interview template). The protocol of the interviews is semi-structured by design (Corbin & Strauss, 2008): while all the interviews follow an event-based logic and ask the participant to recall significant events and causal links in their past agricultural entrepreneurial activity, every case focuses on different particulars that mattered most to the individual participant, highlights the details of each particular experience and seeks specific factual evidence that may reduce recall and social desirability biases (Berglund, 2015).

Interviewees are selected according to the criteria of theoretical sampling. Every interviewee is selected based on findings from the previous interviews and his or her personal characteristics, in a way that grants both heterogeneity within the sample and generalizability of the theory across multiple cases (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016). Unlike random sampling, which is the standard in quantitative analysis, purposive theoretical sampling aims to select individuals with complementary characteristics to each other that might enrich the emerging theory and determine its boundaries of applicability (Yin, 2003). Every interview has been registered, transcribed and codified in the same or in the following day so that emerging themes can inform the selection of the subsequent farmers participating in the study.

The interviews were conducted in places where the participants would be at ease: either private houses, the facilities belonging to farming cooperatives, the participant's shop or bars and cafes chosen by the participant. Every interview took 25 to 40 minutes, with a couple of exceptions lasting 20 minutes and 3 longer ones of 55 minutes to 1h 20 minutes. At the end of the data collection process, a total of 700 pages was transcribed from the interviews. The data has then been cross-validated by triangulation with archival sources and project documentation (counting 66 pages), and a continuous discussion with the staff employed at ICENECDEV and experts working with other civil society organizations and governmental bodies operating in Buea. All these additional interviews and observations were collected by hand-written notes and reported in a daily diary, totaling an additional 135 pages of material.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

The coding process involved three iterative steps of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, every interview transcript has been reviewed by itself, reading line by line and codifying the main themes emerging from the piece. For the most ambiguous pieces, word-by-word analysis has been carried out to highlight the underlining grammatical construction, choice of words and construction of the sentence. Counterfactual reasoning in word-by-word analysis enables to discover the hidden meanings and unsaid assumptions implied by a certain participant (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014). For instance, a phrase like “I used to not speak much to my husband and hide the money I would earn from my work, but now I have learned how to interact with him” in the Cameroonian context hints at the woman overcoming her fear of gender violence, a widespread phenomenon in rural households.

Second, in axial coding codes have been combined from different interviews and summarized in overarching concepts. Taking gendered violence and job segregation, both codes can be combined under the “lack of women rights” concept with different degrees of intensity and situational manifestations. This process of refinement, from codes to constructs, leads to a clearer definition of the objects of analysis and sets the basis for establishing relations among concepts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In theory building, concepts are the non-observable features of a phenomenon that are approximated by constructs, measurable manifestations of abstract entities (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In following with the mentioned example, the concept of “lack of women rights”, which is not directly observable or clearly defined, is operationalized through the constructs of gendered violence, displaying aggressive behaviors against female household members, and job segregation, being relegated in certain activities within the house and the community that are reserved for women and taken into low consideration.

Third, in selective coding the theory is built by hypothesizing and testing relationships between concepts. The process of hypothesizing is data-driven, emerging from the narratives and the causal links identified by the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). At this stage, theoretical sampling aids to validate the emerging theory by selecting future participants based on the hypothesized

relationships (Yin, 2003). For instance, individuals who are known to have had a past of marital arguments, divorce or domestic violence are likely to be selected after “domestic conflicts” emerges as a relevant concept. The three steps of coding and extrapolation from field data are repeated until theoretical saturation when new interviews and observation add little insights to the emerging theory and fail to extend or restrict its boundary conditions. The emerging theory is a “best-fit” among all the pieces of evidence, summarizing the commonalities among the different cases while highlighting the differences that influence variance in the dependent variable (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014). By ensuring variance in the observed concepts and exploring the generalizability and boundary conditions of the emerging theory, qualitative researchers can grant reliability and enhance replicability of their studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). During the fieldwork, an example of the application of this principle is the struggle to interview farmers and entrepreneurs living in distant rural areas to explore whether the same institution-building practices are performed not only in the city but also in remote villages.

Finally, further measures have been taken to reduce biases related to individual interpretation and wrong assumptions. An interpreter from the NGO has accompanied the researcher during most of the field work, translating from the local language when neSerenad (as not all the participants could speak English or French) and providing cultural mediation when sentences or meanings were at first not clear. In addition, the emerging theoretical framework has been thoroughly discussed and validated with employees of developmental NGOs, whose feedback has helped to make sense of the Cameroonian culture and has been integrated into the analysis. The results of our phenomenological analysis, elucidating the process of institution-building in farming communities, are reported in the next section.

4 Results

From our analysis, two distinct patterns of institution-building emerge, taking positions and taking roles within society. While the two processes resemble each other in terms of the phases of institution-building, they differ in the facilitating conditions and outcomes. In the former, the empowered woman manages to enrich herself through her economic activity, build up her reputation and gain status within her community so that she may be elected to positions of power, such as president or secretary of her village council. In the latter, emancipated women can take roles reserved to men, for example by challenging their husband's authority, taking decisions within the household or speaking out more in public. Emancipated women often have experienced and overcome personal struggles and challenges leading them to openly oppose traditional rural beliefs, while women who take positions within their society tend to be economically empowered and make advocacy on the role of farmers and work dignity. Although taking positions is well-accepted, concerns mainly institution-building in a socio-economic sense and requires the support of community members in order to succeed, taking roles is more controversial, emancipated women are seen negatively from their peers and have more difficulties in changing the mindset of other community members.

In Figure 1 we report the data structure emerging from our analysis. Both the process of taking positions and the process of taking roles involve the 6 steps of Practicing Entrepreneurship, Attaining Security, Gaining Awareness, Controlling Resources, Building Institutions and Generating Positive Spillovers. However, the single phases differ between the processes and generate two distinct patterns of institution-building that, while not mutually exclusive, display non-synergic features and conditions. The following 6 paragraphs delve deeper into the process of institution-building and further highlight the differences among the two patterns.

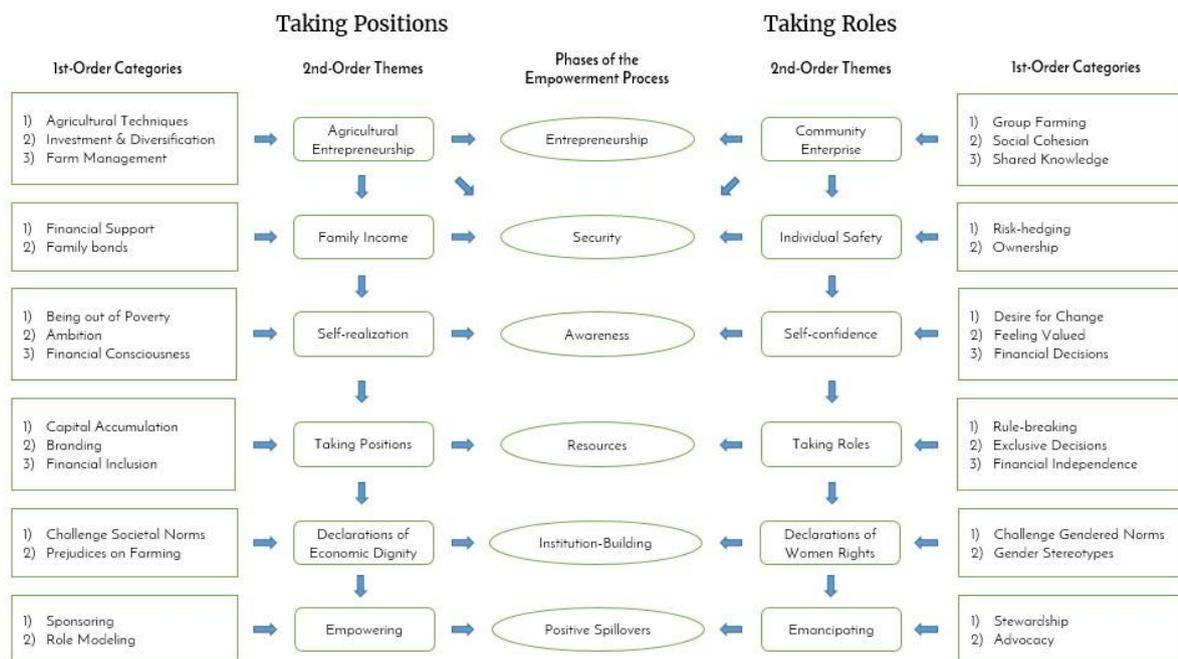


Figure 1 – Data Structure

4.1 Practicing Entrepreneurship

The two processes of taking positions and taking roles differ markedly from their very beginning. When looking at the reasons why women join farming group, one can spot two different rationales. In the first one, Agricultural Entrepreneurship, the woman aims to learn new farming techniques and improve her livelihood as to raise herself out of poverty. Women self-selecting in the “taking positions” pattern usually mention the business techniques of value-based pricing, integration across the value chain and customer relationship, as highlighted in the quotes below.

Mara: “At the market, vegetables are selling for 200. But when I tell that mine do not have fertilizers, I can sell at 500 rather than 200! Buyers wanted to test me before placing orders, so I asked them to try and buy a basket and keep in their house to see the decay time. And when I do not sell, I just keep all in the house and sell the next day.”

Daniela: “I have learned so many things to grow my business. Now I know how to fry Garry, produce flour for bread, and obtain starch for treating clothes. I can do the whole process.”

Women self-selecting in the pattern of “taking position” mention elements of Agricultural Entrepreneurship (Yessoufou, Blok, & Omta, 2018), aims to expand one’s farming activity and objectives related to enriching oneself economically. As shown by the quotes, the practice of

Agricultural Entrepreneurship strongly resembles the practice of Entrepreneurship in an industrial sector, emphasizing the logics of capitalism, investing, and self-interest (Fitz-Koch et al., 2018). This stands in stark contrast with the individuals self-selecting in the pattern of “taking roles”. For them, joining the farming cooperative is not merely an instrument to gain economic returns, but more an opportunity to come together with other farmers, share ideas and learn from each other. The construct strongly resembles Community Enterprise as discussed by (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006) and (Somerville & McElwee, 2011), where doing enterprise is a mean of affirming one’s belonging to a community and participating to the shared activities going on there. In our data, women farmers often refer to Community Enterprise with phrases such as “being a family”, “not staying alone” and “join forces”, as exemplified below.

Patty: “Since when I joined the group, I got to meet and interact with so many people. I do not want to stay alone. I want to work my farm with other people.”

Clara: “At every meeting, we get to know a variety of ideas that I can put into practice later on to get more money from my farming activity.”

Demetra: “We just joined together, the cooperative started 6 months ago. It is helping us a lot, as we are able to express more things, share ideas and join forces to work more quickly and easily.”

While practicing Agricultural Entrepreneurship and joining a Community Enterprise are not mutually exclusive, as a woman farmer might do both at the same time and obtain positive results from the community, which in turn strengthen her agricultural techniques, the two practices have contrasting outcomes in terms of generating security and impacting the mindset of the women. While Agricultural Entrepreneurship puts a strong emphasis on achieving economic gains and growing one’s farming business (Fitz-Koch et al., 2018), Community Enterprise stresses social cohesion and the establishment of positive farming values for women.

4.2 Attaining Security

In both “taking positions” and “taking roles”, achieving a minimum level of economic security is a fundamental step to subsequently gain awareness of one’s worth and control resources to drive

institution-building. This echoes with the definition of abject poverty in the context of economic development as a multi-faceted phenomenon involving lack of human capital, poor access to finance, and weak institutional regimes that weaken the Poor's possibility to access basic services and fulfil their elementary needs in daily life (Alvarez & Barney, 2014). The quote from a woman farmer below explains the intertwined nature of economic, social and political issues in poverty contexts.

Paola: "Being in the cooperative opened my mind. Since before I had no finances, I had no opportunities to participate in social life or care about social issues."

Yet, although attaining security is a key step before starting to build institutions in one's community, "taking positions" and "taking roles" differ in the type of security they provide women farmers with. Through Community Enterprise, women farmers have the opportunity to discuss and share ideas with their peers, that leads them to value one's personal skills and achieve individual security (Somerville & McElwee, 2011). By developing a sense of sharing and community within the cooperative, the women feel valued individually and might gain ownership of some assets, against the patriarchal beliefs dominant in rural settings. The quotes by Theresa and Mina illustrate this passage.

Theresa: "We save money and then come together in a common cooperative fund. When anyone is in need, for example to pay school fees, he or she can borrow."

Mina: "Before joining the group I used pay school fees with a delay of two weeks. Now I can afford food, rent and tuition, all from my own farm."

In contrast, women farmers joining the cooperative because of economic motives hardly develop a sense of individual ownership and individual security. Instead, they tend to emphasize how the cooperative has helped their family and strengthened their relationships with the husband, who is the head of the family and the one taking decisions. Attaining security through Community Enterprise might result in an Individual Safety for the woman, taking responsibilities within the house and escaping the husband's exclusive decision-making. Yet, Agricultural Entrepreneurship almost always results in Family Income, strengthening the bonds in the family, reinforcing the dominant position of the husband and leaving little room for the woman's individual empowerment. The following quotes are reported by women who attained security through Agricultural Entrepreneurship.

Beatrix: “Before in the house we used to have difficulties to pay the bills. Now we can anticipate the harvest, sell urgently and pay in time.” (emphasis added)

Lena: “One can’t just go and overshadow her husband. The wife must be under the husband. Whether I have money from the cooperative or not, the money belongs to both of us.”

Notably, as mentioned before, Attaining Security through Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Community Enterprise is not mutually exclusive. A woman might achieve individual safety and raise her family income at the same time, should the husband be supportive of her work in the cooperative. Similarly, women who used to rely on the husband to them with a living can gain personal confidence and find passion for their work within the cooperative while strengthening their family bonds. This is what happened to Mariah and Lara, as reported in their quotes.

Mariah: “I used to sit idle and wait for my husband to provide for me. At times he would not have, and I would stay for a long time without food or money for school fees. Now that I joined the cooperative, we always come together and support each other bit by bit as husband and wife.”

Lara: “I have my own capital, my husband farms cocoa, coffee and palm oil. If he has no money, I can give him. This year I surprised him by cementing the floors and buying chairs for the house.”

4.3 Gaining Awareness

As in (Rindova et al., 2009)’s framework, before an individual gains personal empowerment or starts engaging in institution-building within her community, she needs to be aware of her potential as a woman, seeing opportunities to do things differently and change from the pre-existing order. If the women farmer do not develop a sense of self-awareness, they will settle down economically and reach a basic level of security for themselves and their family, but will not challenge the established status quo and institutions.

In the pattern of “taking positions”, the women gain confidence of themselves as farmers, value their work more and build motivation to invest energies and finances in their farming activities. Building self-realization as farmers enables the women to change the societal perception of farmers as the

lowest occupation in the social ladder, unable to cater for themselves and marginalized socially, economically and politically. Some women even get to the point of considering farming as a business, gaining self-awareness to the point of valuing oneself as a member of the raising middle class, rather than a farmer in a remote rural village. The following quotes demonstrate gaining self-realization in the process of taking position.

Loubna: "Farming was a burden, I could stay at home a week without doing anything. Now that I know one can make a living out of farming, I can go to the farm with more focus and do more."

Hillary: "There was a time when I kept thinking about suffering and poverty, but now I have forgotten all these things and learned to work straight."

Nana: "I present myself differently. At first I was just Nana. Now I have a business I want to promote, I have a career in front of me. People have an opinion of who you are from their first view, it's something I always consider now."

However, there is a market difference between the women who gain self-realization as a farmer, thus becoming someone and feeling important through their professional occupation, and those who gain self-confidence as a woman, thus challenging the widespread beliefs about gender roles and the established traditional institutions. Women who gain self-confidence can later on talk out in a group, take responsibilities within the community and challenge traditional leaders on issues that matter to them. The quotes by Pina, Alexis and Eleanor further explain the phase of gaining awareness.

Pina: "I was not encouraged, but the group gave me confidence so that I can talk. When you see your stronger friends, you want to become like them."

Alexis: "In the community we face challenges. For example, if there is a failure of the water supply, now I know I can do something before the decision-makers."

Eleanor: "The group has impacted how I take decisions because now I have the confidence to say things, stand up and talk. Since I am given the opportunity to speak out in the group, I have been able to speak out in public as well."

Interestingly, the words of both Pina and Eleanor underline the role of the group in helping women farmers gain awareness. In the case of Pina, the woman has been part of a group with many

empowered members who have inspired her to desire a change in her own life. In the case of Eleanor, having opportunities to talk out in the group has reflected in more confidence in other aspects of her life unrelated to the farming cooperative. The farming cooperatives, by offering a protected environment to share ideas with other members, can develop each woman farmer's sense of self-worth needed to later on take actions that empower oneself and others (Rindova et al., 2009).

4.4 Controlling Resources

Parallel to (Rindova et al., 2009)'s "authoring" in marginalized individuals' emancipation process, we find in our data that, after gaining awareness of oneself, women farmers can control resources to explicitly achieve their entrepreneurial objectives. Namely, women can either take positions within the community, by growing one's status and getting closer to individuals in power, or take roles within society, covering responsibilities traditionally associated to men.

Women farmers have several ways of controlling resources, some of which involuntary, while others require a deliberate effort from the woman. The most common is branding within the community: women who are proud of their level of economic achievements become known in the village by their activity, so that everyone can address them by nickname. Kristin makes branding clear by saying that people refer to her as Mama, a title of respect and reverence in rural communities.

Molly: "They call me many names. When I am in the farm, Mama Farm. When I am rearing chickens, Mama Poultry. When I am growing vegetables, Mama Huckleberry. They know I can succeed in many activities."

Yet, women might also try to control resources through their own efforts. Once someone has the confidence of being out of poverty, he or she can start using his or her wealth to influence what the other members of the community are doing (Mosse, 2010). For instance, farmers might try to raise one's personal status in the community by contributing financially to group savings, a practice seen as a demonstration of economic power, or by directly giving gifts to the village elders and community leaders so that they may take decisions favourable to the cooperative. This is what Luke, the husband of a woman farmer, and Lena did.

Luke: "When I go to meetings and events, I am now able to contribute financially to the cause for which they are collecting funds. Since I can give a lot of money, as if I were rich, my status within the community has improved."

Lena: "When we have a problem to expose, there's a hierarchy in the quarter one cannot challenge. Thus, we decided to provide food for the quarter elders so that they may know the cooperative and take decisions in our favor."

Alike to "taking positions", also "taking roles" can arise as both a deliberate or involuntary choice for the woman farmer. Interestingly, women might be forced to take the roles of their husband because of circumstantial facts, such as a premature death, a separation or a difficult situation in the family. This happened in the case of many widows, such as Oriana.

Oriana: "When my husband was there, he could look after the family. I used to depend on my husband, but now I have become more independent, confident and talkative by taking men's responsibilities."

Other women, however, might deliberately challenge their husband's authority on specific matters without a circumstantial accident forcing them to do so, as in the case of Samantha and Bianca.

Samantha: "I got married as a small girl in the extreme north. My husband has always been the one providing money, but through farming I can spend for the house and contribute my part."

Bianca: "I am the second wife, my husband is widowed and remarried. In total we have 10 children, of which 5 are mine. I have to struggle for resources to ensure that my children get their right part."

What makes women farmer challenge their husband's authority without any circumstantial fact forcing them to do so? We find in our data that the women who take masculine roles within their society are those who have faced the most struggles or have encountered a particular issue pushing them to challenge the institutionalized beliefs. For instance, Samantha got married at a very tender age and migrated to Buea under the supervision of her husband, who has always been the head of the family, providing food and money and taking decisions within the house. Having a severely subordinated role, Samantha has been able to appreciate the emancipating potential of the farming

cooperative. Similarly, as a second wife Bianca is married to a man considerably older than her who enjoys most of the power within the house. However, Bianca challenges the husband's authority on a specific issue that matters to her, ensuring the protection and the property rights of her children.

Building on extant contribution in the literature and the insights emerging from our field research, we posit that women farmers may experience *Institutional Dissonance*, a situation of discomfort or unhappiness with the dominant institutional beliefs that in turn leads them to challenge established institutions. Our explanation is consistent with the logic of external shocks derived by (Mair et al., 2016), (Su et al., 2017) and (Sewell, 1992), according to which actors can change institutions when their environment changes and they realize that the old schemas they had been applying no longer fit with the context at hand. Next, we reconcile the logic of external shocks with the insight of differential reaction of each individual, according to which not all members of a community interpret institutions in the same way and react similarly when presented with a change in context (Cardinale, 2018; Smallbone & Welter, 2012). Specifically, we find that those individuals who experienced the most struggles or faced a particular issue important to them were the most likely to develop Institutional Dissonance and subsequently seek responsibilities to solve those issues.

A final, notable difference between taking roles and taking positions is the reaction of the community in the two processes. While taking positions is well accepted, or at worst generates indifference among one's peers, taking roles non-compliant with the prescribed schemas is seen negatively and at times punished by social pressure or further marginalization. Lucia, a woman separated from her husband, is an interesting illustration.

Lucia: "My husband works in Douala. He would never have time to be home or money to sponsor the children. He started supporting the family only after I have been bringing in money on my own."

In Lucia's case, the husband would never be home or provide money for the sustenance of the family. Yet, once Lucia engaged in her farming activity and supported the family on her own, trespassing the husband's authority, he felt threatened and started contributing financially. In this case, the husband contributing financially does not indicate a strengthening of the family bonds as seen in Beatrix, but rather a punishment to the woman, trying to reduce her newly gained autonomy. Indeed, in Lucia's

case, the many relational problems pre-existing before joining the farming group remained unchanged, while her emancipation and financial independence were challenged.

The observations from our findings, coupled with insights from extant literature, lead us to posit that women farmers can take men's roles within their society only if their context presents high *Acceptable Deviance* from established institutionalized practices. Our observation is consistent with (Mair et al., 2016)'s finding that changes to diverse institutionalized beliefs may be perceived differently within a rural community, where modifications to some practices are well-accepted while others generate malcontent and defection. We break down institution-building at the individual level, positing that some individuals have an advantage in the institution-building process because changes brought about by those individuals are accepted more easily than those initiated by their peers. In support of this claim, in our data we find that women who happen to be widowed (and therefore forced to assume the husbands' duties), group leaders (and therefore used to have prominent responsibilities) or live in a semi-urban area (and therefore exposed to more globalized thoughts) are more likely to succeed in taking men's roles without creating hostility in their community, while women who decide to take men's roles because of their personal struggles are seen negatively by their peers.

4.5 Building Institutions

After gaining resources and acquiring control over one's life, marginalized individuals are enabled to make declarations (Rindova et al., 2009) so that others may change their perspective on discriminated minorities. While the two patterns of taking positions and taking roles are not mutually exclusive, individuals who have taken positions within society are most likely to speak out in favor of economic advocacy, affirming the dignity of farm work and altering traditional beliefs on the role of farmers within society. Declaring economic dignity can happen with several degrees of intensity, from the mere advising other women to the more involved restructuring of societal power structures. The case of Mara is exceptional: in spite of being a farmer and a migrant, the woman managed to be elected in the elder's council of her village because of her achieved economic status.

Mara: "Due to my reputation, I have become part of the Queen Mothers, the organ of the village who is allowed to sit and take decisions with men."

Similarly, Fatima changed the negative attitude towards farming of the Catholic community where she lives by demonstrating the value of her profession. In this way, she has passed from a marginalized farmer, looked down negatively from the other community members, to an active participant in community life able to influence the bishop's decisions towards her interests.

Fatima: "The bishop would restrict access to the farms, since it was seen as a dirty and unproductive activity. When they saw how much I was producing, the community changed their mind. Today, they allow us to farm freely and have concSerenad us new land that was formerly covered with grasses."

However, we find that many women do not attempt to build societal institutions in spite of their awareness gained through the empowerment process and extant control over resources. We explain this fact through the concept of **socio-economic opportunities** discussed in (Smallbone & Welter, 2012). In the context of developing countries and transition economies, entrepreneurial opportunities are not only the identification of gaps between demand and offer but also the exploitation of networks and contacts to achieve one's objectives. Opportunities are therefore embedded in the entrepreneur's context (Granovetter, 1985; Smallbone & Welter, 2012), as the entrepreneur needs to know how to navigate informal institutional constraints and leverage her skills to generate (socio)-economic value within the acceptable societal norms.

Within institutional entrepreneurship, socio-economic opportunities mean that an entrepreneur might not generate institutional change unless he or she 1) boasts high respect within the community, either by taking positions or taking roles, and enjoys sufficient peer approval of one's actions and 2) perceives a need to change the extant institutionalized beliefs and an incentive to initiate the change process. Not all the women farmers who grow in status within their community achieve a sufficient respect to talk out against farmer discrimination and, therefore, not all of them are enabled to engage in institution-building. In addition, those farmers who attribute their personal enrichment merely to hard work and newly acquired agricultural techniques, are unlikely to develop sensitivity to the discrimination issue and feel incentivized to build institutions. In contrast, those farmers who have

experienced direct discrimination, exclusion, or other forms of marginalization related to their farming activity are also those who will more actively pursue institutional change.

In a similar pattern, taking roles in the community might also result in institution-building by formerly marginalized women farmers. Women who have taken roles and responsibilities within their social settings are likely to advocate women rights for their peers and struggle for gender balance and equal opportunities within their community, as illustrated by Luna and Mariah.

Luna: "I too, as a woman farmer, had something to say. Before I was unable to speak in a group, but now I can add my voice to the discussion and make sure that decisions are made in the right direction."

Mariah: "Such a young girl, how can I always go to the farm and get dirty? My friends would like me to sit, cross my legs and talk nonsense, like any other housewife. But that's not part of who I am."

Through their behavior, Luna and Mariah are actively making declarations (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Rindova et al., 2009) that they too, as women, can participate in political life or carry out activities reserved for men regardless of their gender. By doing so, the participants are affirming their own emancipation and shaping their peers' perceptions of women relegated to the kitchen and submitted to their husband's will. Yet, unlike Mara and Fatima, Luna and Mariah are not seen positively by their peers as they transgress the societal norms of submission to the village elders and the husband.

Indeed, although institution-building in the context of women right still requires a certain acceptability within society and malcontent with the institutionalized beliefs, its practice is harder than institution-building in the context of farming rights, as the two processes differ in terms of facilitating conditions.

Since economic advocacy for farmers does is facilitated by the institutionalized beliefs of rural communities of ladder-climbing, hard work and sharing one's wealth, the women pursuing this pattern of institution building grow their reputation in the village and take positions of power within the governing structures. However, by the same process that encourages institution-building by economic advocacy and raising one's status within the community, the women farmers are pushed to conform to extant societal beliefs and less likely to speak out in favor of women rights. Conversely,

those women who take men's roles within society and advocate about women rights and gender equality are seen negatively by their peers and less likely to raise to formal positions of power within the community. As a theoretical explanation, the same Institutional Dissonance that leads women to challenge the most adverse traditional beliefs makes it difficult for them to raise one's reputation within the society and engage in softer forms of institution-building. Therefore, we posit that the two patterns of bottom-up institution building, "taking positions" and "taking roles", are at odds with each other and differ sensibly in terms of 1) their potential for personal development of the institutional entrepreneur, 2) their ability to change institutionalized beliefs in the entrepreneur's social setting and 3) the contextual conditions under which each process is facilitated or hampered. Figure 2 summarizes the reasoning so far and the differences between "taking roles" and "taking positions". Finally, the next paragraph concludes the findings by providing an additional example of the distinctiveness of the two institution-building processes.

4.6 Generating Positive Spill-overs

Other than making declarations, we find that marginalized women farmers might attempt to impact the institutionalized beliefs by actively influencing the thoughts and actions of their peers. In the case of taking positions, the women can strengthen their acquired status within the community by giving to others, providing advice on farming techniques and sponsoring friends and neighbors when neSerenad. In rural African realities, the practice of sharing one's wealth is common and well-seen by community peers. By doing so, the empowered woman not only helps her friends and closed ones, but also demonstrates her achievements and reinforces her peers' positive perception within society. The pervasive and widespread pressure to contribute to other's needs is visible in the quotes by Bernice, Zena and Lara.

Zena: "By doing business, I can earn a lot of money and employ others in my farm. In this way I'll be assisting people who can live and eat through me. My dream is to have a big farm so that I can empower 10 rather than 3 people [as I do now]."

Molly3: "I participate in many groups, and I usually take what I learn from one group and transmit it to the others. For instance, I have brought the idea of saving from the village

meeting to the social meeting. From the cooperative, I can tell people how to farm, share work and improve our production so that it may help us financially.”

Lara: “I am popular in the quarter because I can help many persons. My house is always full of men, children and strangers. I always make food so that they will find something when they come.”

The positive spill-overs generated by the process of taking positions are well accepted by one’s community, and even expected in some cases. Once the woman reaches a certain status, the other community members want her to contribute financially and amicably to solve their own problems and help improve their economic condition. The pressure is such that a woman farmer who has taken positions within her social setting might be forced to empower other women economically and give back to the community, even if her peers have been of little to no help in building up her status. The quote by Susanne is an illustration of conflicting interests between the community and the individual obliged to share her wealth.

Susanne: “Some are jealous. Some look bad at me, my husband is a former civil servant but I work the farm and look dirty. But now that my farming has improved, many come to beg from me, although they don’t even like the idea.”.

The opposite holds true in the case of taking roles. Women farmers who successfully take men’s roles and build institutions by declaring their newly acquired responsibilities might subsequently decide to emancipate their peers by intervening when a friend is in trouble or counsel others to also go against the established norms. This kind of positive spill-over is seen negatively by community members, and especially by men and traditional leaders who might feel threatened by a woman’s act of openly challenging their authority. Lana is an example of institutional entrepreneur who aims to expose the misconduct of decision-makers in positions of power for the benefit of marginalized individuals.

Lana: “There needs to be a person in political meetings to speak out when someone brings trouble, the leaders mismanage our interests or members go against the constitution. I am the one who steps in to set matters right and act as a peacemaker.”

Lana is a unique case because she is able to generate visible positive emancipation spillovers due to her prominent role within her community, as group leader of the local farming cooperative, wife of a

civil servant and president in her religious group. In spite of her birth in an impoverished rural area, she has achieved hefty economic results that enabled her to educate herself and her children to university through her farming activity, quite remarkably for a woman farmer. Moreover, the case of Lana shows that, under exceptional circumstances, women farmers might be able to take positions and take roles within society at the same time. As an emancipated group leader in her church and farming groups, Lana is presented with plenty of opportunities to speak out in favor of disadvantaged minorities while retaining respect from her peers and status within her community. Indeed, Lana has initially built up her reputation within the community by taking position in the social hierarchy and secured approval by empowering her closed neighbors and friends. However, the same personal economic empowerment that has enabled Lana to take positions within her community has also facilitated her access to education, leading to her refusal of institutionalized beliefs and subsequent socio-political advocacy.

While Lana's privileged position grants her security to operate institution-building within her community, most women farmers face several tensions when openly challenging traditional beliefs in a group. Usually women must be cautious in their declarations and are constrained in their institution-building activity to the point of devising strategies alternative to the addressing directly the issue at hand. Arianna and Loredana are two women whose institution-building process did not go as originally planned.

Arianna: "The community looks at us and admires how we are independent and work by ourselves. More women will see, come and join us."

Loredana: "We call the community and educate them, telling the women that it's not good to sit idle, there are so many things one can do. You don't need much money to start something on your own."

Arianna is the leader of a newly founded farming cooperative which is only 6 months old. In spite of her praiseworthy enthusiasm for women rights and independence, she has failed to impact the institutions in her community in any way other than indirectly role-modeling and showing small individual gains in personal freedom. In other words, she is hoping for an institutional change that is

yet to materialize and that she is unable to seek actively because of the generally resistant attitude within the community.

Loredana's story shares many resemblances with (Mair et al., 2016)'s institution-building by concurrent practices. The woman, a moderately educated primary school teacher, has experienced several delusions in her private life, including separations and divorces, that have brought her to develop a strong sensitivity to issues of women rights and gender equality. Nevertheless, when she gathers women to educate and emancipate them, she prefers addressing the issues of economic empowerment and financial gains rather than presenting directly the problems of gender equality. Thus, our findings suggest that the acceptable deviance from institutionalized beliefs in the context of observation does indeed matter. The women farmers who decide to try and change institutions on women and gender rights often face discrimination by their peers and must avoid tackling the issue directly, unless the woman herself enjoys a position of power within her community. This stands in stark contrast with institution-building in economic dignity, which is generally well-received by members of a community and can be deployed strategically by institutional entrepreneurs to hide their more controversial aims.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing from extant literature on institution-building processes and emancipation through entrepreneurship, we conduct an ethnographic study among rural farmers in Western Cameroon to inquire whether marginalized individuals can succeed to change institutions within their communities and what strategies they might devise to do so. We interview 76 women farmers belonging to 12 farming cooperatives in the period between June and August 2018. We find that women farmers practice two patterns of institution-building: they either take positions within their society and engage in economic advocacy on farmers' rights and economic empowerment or take men's roles within their community and talk out in favour of gender equality and women emancipation. The two patterns hardly coexist in the same situation as they are facilitated by different contextual contingencies: taking positions is usually well-accepted within the community, consistent with some traditional beliefs and does not threaten the existing power structures, but taking roles is facilitated when the individual refuses institutionalized practices and openly challenges the societal order.

We explain our findings by introducing the concept of institutional dissonance: some actors might develop a discontent or hostility to the institutionalized beliefs that leads them to challenge the dominant norms and attempt to change the widespread societal views. These actors experience several struggles and further discrimination or marginalization in the process, since their leaders actively discourage engaging in institution-building. Our explanation contributes to solving the paradox of Embedded Agency by moving beyond the dual vision of institutions as either constraining or enabling the individual's action (Cardinale, 2018), but rather taking into account each actor's history and the contingencies driving him or her to behave against institutionalized beliefs. Most importantly, unlike previous contributions focusing on external shocks, top-down decisions of community leaders or external interventions by developmental agents (Battilana et al., 2009; Tobias et al., 2013), we have shown that institution-building is possible also for actors internal to the community who, after undergoing severe hardship or particular mind-opening experiences, might disagree with the dominant beliefs and act against them.

Furthermore, we draw a parallel between extant entrepreneurship theory and the theory of institutional entrepreneurship by enquiring in the role of entrepreneurial opportunities within institution-building processes. Just as entrepreneurs decide to assume risks that a regular individual would not take (Eckhardt & Shane, 2003), bottom-up institutional entrepreneurs go against the odds, face the risk of social exclusion and challenge societal norms in the attempt to change institutions. Alike other forms of entrepreneurship, the success of bottom-up institutional entrepreneurship does not depend only on the skills, preparation and motivation of the entrepreneur (in our case, the willingness of the woman farmer to start the entrepreneurial process and take the necessary risks), but also on the contextual conditions in which the entrepreneur is embedded (in our case, the acceptability of deviating from a specific institutional practice within a certain community). In order to succeed, we find that bottom-up institutional entrepreneurs must be presented with suitable socio-economic opportunities for acting within the institutional schema (Alvarez & Barney, 2014; Smallbone & Welter, 2012), consisting of the entrepreneur's understanding of traditional institutions (Granovetter, 1985), her connection to actors and networks that might limit the risks of her institution-building attempts (Battilana et al., 2009) and the acceptability of the specific change desired within the broader institutional schema (Mair et al., 2016).

Our work has several implications for the theory and practice of institutional entrepreneurship. First, we find counter-intuitive evidence for bottom-up institution-building practices that have not been foreseen by extant entrepreneurship literature. Through our findings, we demonstrate that actors do not necessarily need to raise themselves on the societal ladder in order to bring about social change (Tobias et al., 2013), but can attempt institution-building even from lower societal positions should they be presented with adequate situational opportunities. The studies on institution building insofar been limited to analyses of development agents or powerful entrepreneurs, yet we show that institution-building exists and might be widespread also outside of orchestrated interventions, initiated by local actors who strive for change in their small communities.

Second, we find that institutions differ in their ease of alterability. Attempting to change some practices encounters resistance from the community and might lead to disorder within the institutional schemas, while altering others can be perceived positively by a large percentage of individuals living

in a community (Mair et al., 2016). Our work also touches upon the motivations leading actors to build institutions: while some changes are encouraged by significant segments of the society, others are mostly pushed by the individual entrepreneur who has experienced events causing him to desire change in extant institutional beliefs. Thus, our work makes a contribution in the literature on prosocial behavior by shedding light on the motives leading actors to initiate institutional change. Although scholars have found that positive social change is usually brought about by individual entrepreneurs familiar with the problem at hand, deeply motivated, and highly knowledgeable (Mair, Battilana, et al., 2012), we posit that in certain contexts, such as economic advocacy for farmers, institution-building can be consistent with some local beliefs and even supported by a significant share of community members.

Third, we build on the conceptualization of opportunities in entrepreneurship literature to shed light on the processes of entrepreneurial institution-building. Our view of institutional opportunities differs from that of (Tobias et al., 2013), where an actor willing to change institution must necessarily build up his or her personal wealth to gain status within the community. Indeed, some types of institution-building (e.g. gender equality) can be at odds with one's economic empowerment and hamper his or her reputation among one's peers. Moreover, in our case of bottom-up institution-building, we find scarce evidence of the a-priori planning and strategy as described by (Battilana et al., 2009)'s model. Instead, marginalized individuals seem to enact institutional opportunities in a day-to-day and contextualized fashion similar to entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Welter et al., 2017). Rather than following a coordinated vision for institutional change and mobilizing actors and resources to achieve that vision, institutional entrepreneurs' plan evolves as events unfold in their daily activities. For instance, a woman farmer might be forced to take some of her husband's responsibilities because of a sudden accident and subsequently gain awareness of possibilities for institutional change and alternative value systems.

On a practical level, we join the discourse on bottom-up development processes that aim at changing institutions from within rural communities rather than imposing beliefs from an external perspective (West et al., 2007). As of today, most literature on institutional change has been focused on how to build institutions in rural and traditional areas. Instead, we ask: how can development agents foster

institutional change from within their target community? How can development programs better help dissonant actors to succeed in their attempts of building institutions? This shift of paradigm combines the advantages of insider trust and embeddedness within the community (West et al., 2007) with the support of developmental agents in terms of resources and know-how (Mair, Marti, et al., 2012).

Specifically, we suggest that development programs might be designed to foster bottom-up change by providing beneficiaries with opportunities for interaction and protected environments where they may discuss and develop their own ideas, instead of investing time and resources in developmental trainings that hardly gain the community approval. In support of this claim, we find in our data that those farming cooperatives where women have the most opportunities to speak out, interact with each other, and learn from their more emancipated peers generate the greatest emancipation spillovers within the broader communities of the participating women. Alternatively, development agents may target those women who are known to have overcome challenges with a specific institutional belief and are therefore most likely to develop a motivation to change that belief within their community. In spite of its contextual depth and insights native from the Cameroonian reality, our work is not devoid of limitations. First and foremost, the research has been conducted in a single impoverished proCarl in Cameroon, and it remains to be seen whether the same institution-building processes are present in more developed areas and different countries within the African continent. While the finding of bottom-up institutional change in rural farming communities, featuring strong traditional beliefs and a supposedly hard-changing mindset, suggests that similar processes exist also in weaker institutional regimes, we are unable to ascertain the differences between institution-building in farming cooperatives and institutional entrepreneurship in other settings. Further research is therefore warranted in establishing the peculiarity of farming cooperatives, especially whether the features of farming cooperatives facilitate institutional change also with other types of groups and if there are significant differences with institution-building in more industrialized settings.

A second limitation of our study is that the NGOs coordinating the farming cooperatives and the farming cooperatives' managing bodies did not explicitly aim to foster institutional change, but instead limited their scope of operation to the economic empowerment of farmers. Especially when the farming cooperative is coordinated by a development agent, institutional change is not desirable,

as it could jeopardize the efforts to empower farmers economically by exposing them to peer pressure and societal misjudgments (Founder of an NGO for Women Empowerment, personal communication, 21st June 2018). Although the lack of interest of farming cooperatives in changing institutional beliefs makes an ideal setting to isolate spontaneous institution-building practices, the research suffers from a somewhat simplified reality and several questions remain to be answered. Namely, what would happen if development agents and community insiders had different visions of institutional change? Do the findings of this study apply also to more complex institution-building realities, where each actor tries to push her own vision and interests (see e.g. (Purdy & Gray, 2009))? How can development agents best fit their vision and top-down institution-building approach with the bottom-up institutional change emerging from their beneficiaries? Providing a detailed answer to these question is out of the scope of our analysis, but scholars willing to investigate deeper in the phenomenon may build on our work to generate novel theorizing in institutional entrepreneurship. A further avenue for future research is seeking evidence of the time required for institution-building practices. Historically, institutional theory has considered traditional beliefs hardly mutable through time and mostly unchangeable unless in exceptional conditions (Dacin et al., 2002). Yet, our finding of widespread bottom-up institution-building within farming communities is at odds with the traditional static view of informal institutions. Researchers delving deeper into the topic might want to quantitate the time neSerenad to alter different types of institutionalized beliefs: which informal institutions are most fragile and subject to change? Which ones are the most resilient? How do different institution-building approaches (top-down, bottom-up, or mixed) compare in terms of efficiency and results when changing institutions? Answering these questions can drive development agents in their strategic choices when crafting interventions in rural areas characterized by strong informal institutions and traditional beliefs. Finally, a more thorough understanding of bottom-up institutional-building can help policy-makers identify otherwise unforeseen institutional change and make arrangements to control tensions before their rise.

All in all, our manuscript provides a first hint at a counter-intuitive solution of the embedded agency paradox and opens several avenues for further enquiries in the field of institutional entrepreneurship. Scholars willing to build on this work might find valuable inspiration to conduct research on the

topics of bottom-up institution building, positive societal change, prosocial motivation, empowerment of disadvantaged minorities and social enterprise.

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