Getting started

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Summary

The aim of the *Power Tools* series is to provide some practical help to those working to improve the policies and institutions that affect the lives of poor people. This first tool sheet describes what can be involved in such work, why it is worth doing, who should get involved, and how to get started.

What are *Power Tools*?

This series is not about chainsaws and other such motorised gizmos. It is about tools for working on the policies and institutions that affect poor people's lives – for understanding what is going on, and for trying to change it for the better.

By **power** we mean the ability to make decisions and put them into practice - to be in control. Power is the vital ingredient needed to make policies and institutions work. Of course power in the wrong hands, or badly used, is the reason why some policies and institutions don't work and why others cause increased poverty and inequality. Tools are needed to put power in the right hands – in those best placed to improve the lives of poor people.

By **tools** we mean methods, tactics and tips for tackling policies and institutions – from big strategic approaches, to smaller tactics for particular tasks, and even more specific tips and suggestions on what to try out. The idea is to provide ways to understand what is going on, to think about problems and opportunities, and to begin to address them.

It is worth defining what we mean by policies and institutions too – because these are terms on which everyone has a different view. **Policies** are commonly thought of as what organisations *say* they will do – but we are more interested in what they *actually* do because the point is not just to make good policy, but also to put it into practice. So we define policies as "what organisations do". **Institutions** include organisations – but they also include other long-lived patterns of behaviour, usually with rules attached, like traditions and **markets**. Whether policies and institutions are 'dead or alive' depends on the state of the **processes** through which they operate and change, or fail to operate and change. These notions are described further below, and some papers and websites with good practical material are listed at the end of this tool sheet.[1]

> *****!! Power tools - safety warning !!*****
>
> Power tools can be dangerous. Misusing these tools may cause damage – messing about with other people's lives, or at very least leaving a room-full of very confused people. Read the instructions before use, and proceed with caution!
>
> Not all tools will be needed in any one context. It is important to be selective, recognising that others may be better placed to use these tools, or may be doing useful work with their own tools.
>
> Finally, if these tools don't work, please help improve them and develop more. Remember the old adage, "only a bad worker blames his tools"!

Why and when to use

Compared to 'real life', the world of policies and institutions seems at times irrelevant and vacuous. Yet local actions will have limited impact and life-span unless wider institutional, political and legal constraints are tackled. At the other end of the scale, large scale programmes and plans often last only as long as particular supporters prop them up, and remain unfulfilled precisely because they are not politically engaged. Most lasting changes demand work on policies and institutions. And while the task may often seem too great, it is worth looking at the instances where power and politics have changed over time – in these instances it is 'real people' chipping away at problems who have generally brought about the change.

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[1] The series does not aim to describe the elements of good policies and institutions which can, with luck, be created through the use of the tools described. These elements are dealt with better elsewhere (see sources of further information at the end of this sheet).

Progress is made when policy and institutional processes start learning from local solutions. This can be encouraged by people coming together to tackle local problems, and by policy-makers giving them the chance to experiment. Support can sometimes be provided to those who are currently marginalised from policy and institutional processes, so that they can present their views and experience, and make their claims, more effectively. This requires tools to identify the individual and organisational choices that are the hub of local issues and problems, tracing the rules, structures, market and policy signals which affect them, and developing improvements. Tools are also needed to stimulate and free-up some current policy-makers and institutional leaders to learn, and be subject to checks and balances stemming from below.

When power tools may be needed for understanding and/or influencing policies and institutions – some examples:

Understanding	Improving
• Identifying room for manoeuvre in policies and institutions and connecting to political opportunities • Re-thinking institutional systems and structures • Identifying links with the wider environment within which a project or initiative operates • Understanding why decisions have been unfavourable and why power relations are loaded against certain decisions and actions • Working out how to scale up and spread successful initiatives • Building constituencies around new ideas and people • Monitoring projects, initiatives and the health of policy and institutions • Optimising the potential influence of information and findings	• Preparing a clear position and agenda with respect to other stakeholders and institutions • Drawing policy makers into the development and operation of projects and initiatives • Negotiating roles and functions within and between institutions • Fostering collaboration, vision and momentum for change within or between organisations • Designing or developing a strategy, plan or project • Re-building motivation after key changes in personnel, structures, location etc • Developing training initiatives involving policy and institutional issues • Responding to direct requests to develop policies and institutional systems and processes

There are many situations where work on policies and institutions may be inappropriate. Before launching into such work it is worth considering whether the situation meets the following *necessary conditions*:

1. *Reason* - clarity on the need and purpose of the work - identifying the real issues
2. *Timeliness* - key people must already feel some need for change
3. *Capability* – sufficient skills and enthusiasm to make a start
4. *Location* - an independent but influential institutional location for coordination can be helpful
5. *Trust and commitment* - of those who will be expected to take part
6. *High-level support* – sufficient interest and 'open doors' provided by at least some key institutional leaders
7. *Space* – sufficient room and flexibility in participants' workloads to take this work on board
8. *Tactics* – a reasonable idea of how to influence those who need to agree changes
9. *Expectation of reward* – reasonable hope that the work will lead to significant beneficial changes for participants
10. *Learning mechanisms* – to make the most of the consequences, whether they be success or failure

Tools will only work when the conditions are right. However, tools may be adapted and changed to work in new conditions, and we hope that this series will provoke and encourage others to try them out in other conditions, to modify them and, if they don't work, to develop better ones.

Who should work on policies and institutions?

Those who are in the best position to make policies and institutions really work for improving poor people's livelihoods – by ensuring they reflect local conditions whilst also being able to integrate local, national and possibly global needs – often do not consider it worthwhile to tackle policy and institutional issues. This series of *Power tools* aims to help demystify policy and institutions - for those profoundly affected by them, but not currently engaged with them, to show how to engage and begin to make changes for the better. Tools like this could be used by:

- *Local groups* with a proposal to make or a problem to tackle concerning policies and institutions for service delivery, market operation or wider political structures
- *Workers on aid projects* concerned with understanding the wider context and constraints, and with spreading local project success
- *Advisers on governance, livelihoods and various sectors* who want to ensure that project initiatives and technical assistance are focused on achieving long term impact
- *Government service delivery agency staff* who want to work out how change in their own agencies might improve service delivery to local people
- *Government agency leaders* who want to re-think their roles, links with wider political structures and internal processes in the face of trade and information liberalisation, privatisation, decentralisation and other changes
- *Pro-active private sector company managers* who see their long term interests as relying on environmental care, good stakeholder relations and socially responsible investment
- *Policy makers and programme/strategy developers* who want to ensure that objectives are linked to on-the-ground practice so that both are continuously improved
- *Advocacy groups and lobbyists*, when representative of relevant constituencies, who can convert good understanding into agenda-grabbing actions and catalyse positive social and environmental effects
- *Analysts and academics* who may be held in positions of considerable trust by other stakeholders and may thus play key roles in forming opinion, clarifying positions and developing options for change

Of course, any or all of these groups may not have the positive intentions noted above. Some may seek to ensure maintenance of the *status quo*, to stifle debate or to ensure that self-serving but destructive policy and institutions prevail. Some may be capable only of over-simplification or confusing everybody. But this is no argument for discouraging more people to undertake work on policy and institutions. With more tool users, we may indeed see some poor quality or harmful work done, but we should also see more groups being clear about their own positions and priorities. This will enable groups to learn more about each other, see who the current policy/institutional winners and losers are, and increase the momentum and organisation for positive change.

How to get started

This section offers a quick introduction - a general sequence of steps – which should enable a start to be made on policy and institutional issues. By going through these steps it will become apparent what further help and range of tools may be needed for the particular situation at hand.

Identify the issues - the problems and the opportunities

Clarity on the reason for working on policies and institutions is the first step. Usually the issue at hand is a problem or an opportunity; sometimes the issue relates to recognition of a policy or institutional failure or success and the need to develop and spread the lessons from it. In any case, a preliminary definition of the issue is needed.

An initial assessment is also needed on whether the issue can be tackled, whether there might be 'room for manoeuvre' on it - i.e. whether working on policies and institutions is worthwhile. For example, a problem may be too big, intractable, complex, expensive or dangerous to be worth tackling. Or it may simply be the wrong moment to broach the issue, or there may be others in a

better position to work on it. This initial assessment may also provide pointers to how to proceed. For example, information might best be gathered from key informants in an informal way rather than throwing the whole thing open to deep consultation at an early stage.

Once it is established that an issue can be worked on, through this informed 'gut feeling', it is useful to capture it in a clear written description. Such a description should aim to define the issue, its possible cause or chain of causes, the people involved, and the values and assumptions made. Further work reviewing existing information and the range of opinions about the issue will allow the related policy and institutional factors to be identified. These factors may be influences *on* the issue, or policy and institutions influenced *by* the issue.

Develop initial understanding of: context, actors, process, instruments and impacts

Understanding why and how particular policy and institutional influences are 'shaped', and how they change (or stay the same), requires consideration of many factors. These factors can be divided into five main groups: context, actors, processes, contents and impacts. It is usually important to make explicit investigation of each of these groups and the links and interplay between them.

- *Context.* Policies and institutions are conditioned and shaped by a wide range of contextual factors relating to the physical, cultural, political, technological and economic environment, and to decisions made in the past. These factors include:
  - ❑ Pressures from stakeholders and society at large
  - ❑ History of past policies and institutions
  - ❑ Capacity to drive and implement
  - ❑ Tenure systems and patterns of ownership
  - ❑ Economic and market conditions
  - ❑ Resource conditions

- *Actors.* In any one context, various people will have a bearing on policy and institutions. These actors and the power structures involved in decision-making need to be identified. The actors involved in policies and institutions typically play a 'cast of characters'. Familiar characters in any policy/institutional play include: the crafty coordinator, the wise old-timer, the spark/enthusiast, the godparent, the donor, the faithful team worker, the maverick, the political obstacle and the saboteur. Once actors have been identified, the range of influences on them can begin to be unpacked. These influences include:
  - ❑ Group/organisational factors, such as mandates, rules, norms, functions and institutional culture
  - ❑ Individual motivation factors, such as ideological predispositions, pursuit of political objectives, position and control of resources, professional expertise and experience, institutional loyalties, enhancing the standing of own agencies, and personal attributes and goals, such as rent seeking.

  Two *Power Tools* useful in identifying these influences are *Stakeholder power analysis* and *The four Rs.*

- *Process.* Here we are interested in identifying the way in which agendas translate into practice – the dynamics and interactions which bring about change by, and within, policies and institutions. An important first step is to develop a conception of the processes which make sense in a particular context. Such processes, and the 'signs of life' to look for in them, include:
  - ❑ Planning and management – efficiency and effectiveness
  - ❑ Participation – representation and responsiveness
  - ❑ Money and information handling – transparency and accountability
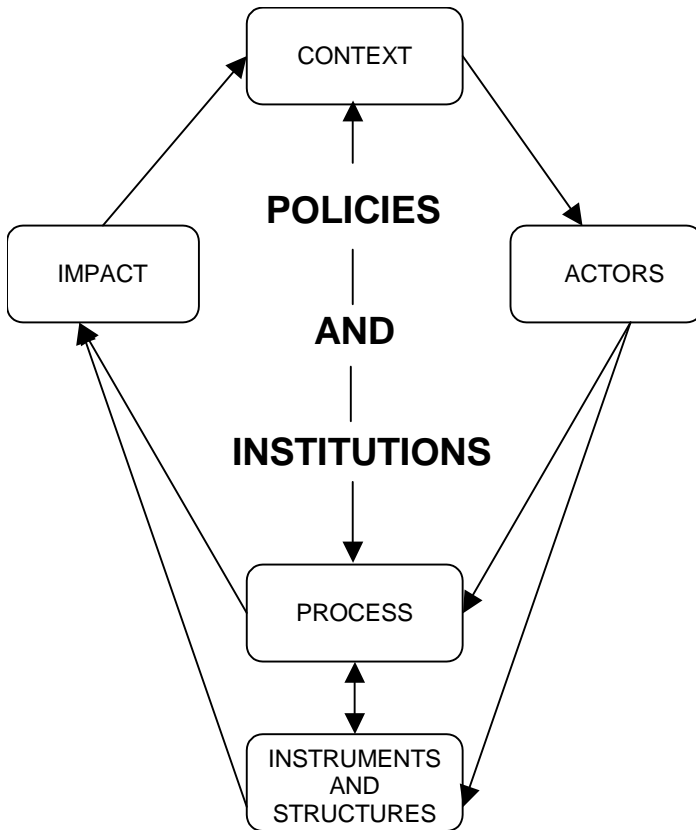 - ❑ Skills and capability – learning and motivation
  Work on policy and institutions needs to understand these processes in particular places, and to recognise that they are usually tied to other processes elsewhere. It needs to combine work at local community level with work in more distant offices and corridors where influential

decisions get made. This makes it possible to look at the interactions between the different levels and at the connections between these levels and everyday life – to see what is really going on.[2]

- ***Instruments and structures***. Here we are interested in the instruments or mechanisms of policy and the arrangements of institutions. The contents of policy are generally the central focus in the above processes. Policy contents are highly specific to particular cases. Typically there may be instruments and mechanisms involved which are of one or more of the following types: regulatory, economic/ market, informational, institutional, contracts/ agreements. It is useful to ascertain whether there is general agreement over the contents and, even if there is agreement, what is the level of 'policy inflation' in relation to actual capacity to implement real policy. The arrangements of institutions refer to the institutional architecture – the various agencies involved and their relationships - and the organisational structures and mechanisms within those agencies. *Stakeholder influence mapping* introduces a good way of starting to understand instruments and structures by 'mapping' them out.

- ***Impacts***. Processes, instruments and structures vary greatly in their impact, from dramatic to inconsequential, on poverty reduction and other aspects of people's lives. Impacts may be the expected ones, or they may be quite unexpected. They may be seen quickly or only be revealed in the long term - hence the importance of reviewing impact regularly and building up a time series. Often the link between policies, institutions and impact is very hard to ascertain. The work of tracing causes from effects, and effects from causes is a key challenge. These impacts may be assessed at three levels: immediate *outputs* of action; the *effects* of those outputs; and the long-term *outcomes* of those effects. Impacts are likely to shape, or become part of, the context for any future change in policies and institutions. *Stakeholder influence mapping* introduces some ways to begin looking at policy and institutional impacts, while some approaches to monitoring and evaluation listed at the end of this paper also provide useful guidance.

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[2] More effective tools are often needed for working on processes, particularly on those linked to markets, supply chains and terms of trade. We hope to make progress on these in the Power Tools series in the near future.

A framework for analysing change in policies and institutions

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                    ┌─────────────┐
                    │   CONTEXT   │
                    └─────────────┘
        ┌─────────────┐       ┌─────────────┐
        │   IMPACT    │       │   ACTORS    │
        └─────────────┘       └─────────────┘

              POLICIES

                AND

            INSTITUTIONS

                    ┌─────────────┐
                    │   PROCESS   │
                    └─────────────┘

              ┌──────────────────┐
              │   INSTRUMENTS    │
              │       AND        │
              │   STRUCTURES     │
              └──────────────────┘
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Recognising that change in policies and institutions comes from the interplay of context, actors, process, instruments and impacts, the above information can then be assessed and integrated into a basic framework which describes the links between the factors and shows the respective parts they play in the problem or opportunity.

Identify type of influence desired - and plan a strategy for achieving it

If any good is going to come from working on policies and institutions, a clear focus on the type of influence desired is needed from the start. There is a wide range of possible objectives here, ranging from just hoping that someone will listen, to working with a policy-maker for a particular policy decision, to trying to build long-term consensus among groups that might one day influence policies and institutions. The work may help to think about issues and define problems, rather than to seize on solutions. Clear identification of the scope and possible tactics for using the planned work, i.e. some form of 'dissemination and influence strategy', will ensure that resources, expertise and specific objectives are well focused.

Match scope of work to available time and resources

Short, sharp pieces of work have the advantages of timeliness in relation to key events, good political momentum, and the ability to exploit a state of urgency. But they can be too quick for some people to be involved, they may produce results that are insufficiently well informed, and they are unlikely to be well coordinated with other initiatives. Larger, longer approaches give time to explore issues, time to bring in the right actors and for reactionary actors to see the need for change. But they run into trouble if the money dries up, people lose interest, protagonists change, policy issues are no longer pertinent, and policy makers can't digest the results. Perhaps the best compromise is a permanent forum or learning group (see below) to keep an eye on policies and institutions, and the ability to call in short studies as and when needed.

Select working mechanisms

The team and working mechanisms are obviously rather dependent on the issues and scope of the process. But, in general four types of mechanisms may be needed:

- *Convenor. A* respected lead institution or figurehead, the secretariat and 'face' for the work
- *Steering group.* A multi-agency body - comprising a mix of those connected to policies and institutions, and those affected by them - which steers and keeps the work on track
- *Working, or learning, group*. Conducts the analysis and develops proposed options
- *Key informants.* These are the 'policy-affected' people, and those with diverse and useful perspectives, such as writers and the media. *Stakeholder power analysis* will help to identify these. Key informants may be involved through e.g. local surveys, interviews, participatory appraisals and small working groups

Formulate specific objectives and methods

The foregoing preliminary work - on identifying issues, understanding the context, and building a big picture of how the issues fit in this context, needs to be discussed amongst team members and other involved actors with a view to:

- *Select priority aspects of the problem/issue/opportunity*. Priorities might be assessed by reference to criteria for human and ecosystem well-being and practicality, e.g.:
  - ❑ central to poor people's livelihoods or key economic sectors
  - ❑ possibility to act without extra finance
  - ❑ key environmental hazards
  - ❑ presents major learning opportunity
  - ❑ visible to the public/ multiplier effect
  - ❑ high priority amongst key actors
  - ❑ timeliness in relation to a pending decision
  - ❑ linked to current work - topicality - and skills - comparative advantage
- *Formulate objectives and questions.* Things cannot be left as 'issues', as this does not help to provide direction to analysis or developing solutions. For example, 'watershed degradation' is less useful a formulation than 'what incentives have encouraged watershed conservation? And how can we remove perverse incentives to deforest key watersheds?'
- *Agree the outputs and who will get them* - it is important that this should not be a surprise once it has been produced, and so actors' expectations and political/legal procedures and implications need to be discussed beforehand.
- *Select and sequence methods*. Many effective methods for work on policies and institutions require actors to be prepared in advance. For example, considerable trust and confidence need to be built before government agency officers will be critical rather than 'toeing the party line'.

Analyse potential impact of findings, and revise

Once some work on policies and institutions has been carried out (see other tools in this series for some guidance), and tentative findings have been produced and synthesised, actor positions and institutional factors may need to be revisited and re-analysed to predict the consequences and probability of the findings having impact. Often it may be necessary to revise the tentative findings in the light of this re-analysis. For example, if the impact desired is a particular policy decision, the power of actors and institutions in relation to that targeted decision needs to be assessed. The probability of implementation of the decision can then be estimated. If the probability is low, options include:
- Accept the low probability
- Change the scope or depth of the recommendations, e.g. from fundamental to incremental change or *vice versa;* from a desire to change to a desire to obtain agreement on future change

- Modify the recommendations, e.g. repackage using more appealing terms; modify and work with actors to create ownership and support; redirect to provoke controversy, deepen public concern and build strong support for meaningful actions

Produce outputs – and use them

Findings and recommendations need to be driven by the right 'vehicle' to stand a chance of changing policies and institutions for the better. Packaging and presentation are all-important. If communication throughout the study with different potential study 'users' has been good, the ground will be well prepared. But it is important that recommendations are seen to be 'owned' by the broad group of key actors, not just the author of any analysis. Briefing, debate, and decisions need to take place in the highest relevant forum. Informal briefings with such ultimate arbiters throughout the process can be helpful, and 'bouncing' analysis and ideas in stages with their advisors is crucial. At these high levels, oral communication is generally the most effective - any written briefings will have to be very short.

In using the findings from work on policies and institutions, there are some key lessons from experience of how effective change processes are kept alive:

- *Recognise multiple valid perspectives and the political nature of the game.* Promote recognition of different conceptions of what the problems and priorities are. People's priorities should be judged not on whether they are 'true' or 'rational', but on the level and degree of social commitment which underlies them - who 'subscribes' to them, and what impacts that has.

- *Get people to the negotiating table.* Each group of actors needs to present their priorities in ways which they can 'sell' to others. Current inequities, resource degradation or communication stalemate may persist because of poor knowledge amongst actors of each others' perspectives, powers and tactics, and the potential for change in these.

- *Make space to disagree and experiment.* Where policies and institutions involve people with completely different levels of power and resources, with a history of disagreement, consensus can be illusory, disabling or merely a sham. Non-consensus-based approaches are often needed, which can accept dissenting views. Such approaches may temporarily manage conflicts, but they seldom permanently resolve them.

- *Learn from experience and get organised.* Good policies and institutions help 'learners' from different groups to come together, to pose questions, solve problems and evaluate information for themselves. It allows local experimentation and initiative to thrive and aggregate at national and international levels. Experiments with different pilot projects and trials of policy tools are vital for actors to explore each others' claims, make mistakes, learn, and make changes for themselves.

Further lessons from experience of change in policies and institutions are contained in some of the following sources of further information.

Links/sources of further information

A very useful range of relevant material is now available on the www.livelihoods.org website. The following references are given because they not only develop ideas and present useful experience themselves – but also provide useful listings of further material.

Ashley, C. and Hussein, K. 2000. *Developing methodologies for livelihood impact assessment: experience of the African Wildlife Foundation in East Africa.* ODI Working Paper 129, Overseas Development Institute, London (www.odi.org.uk/publications/working.html)

Bainbridge, V., Foerster, S., Pasteur, K., Pimbert, M., Pratt, G. and Arroyo, I.Y. 2000. *Transforming bureaucracies: institutionalising participation and people centred processes in natural resource management – an annotated bibliography*. Institute for Development Studies, Brighton and International Institute for Environment and Development, London (www.iied.org/agri/bibliographycontents.html)

Keeley, J. and Scoones, I. 1999. *Environmental policy processes: a review*. IDS Working Paper No. 89, Institute for Development Studies, Brighton (www.livelihoods.org)

Mayers, J. and Bass, S. 1999. *Policy that works for forests and people*. Series Overview. International Institute for Environment and Development, London. (Summary on www.iied.org/ptw/oversum.html)

Pasteur, K. 2001. *Changing Organisations for Sustainable Livelihoods*. (www.livelihoods.org/post/PIPs1-postit.html)