

The bricolage of formalisation: Organisational order under institutional multiplicity in artisanal and small-scale mining

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Abstract

Formalisation is often understood as the rational codification of activity and the extension of bureaucratic order into informal domains. This paper challenges that assumption by advancing a new conceptualisation of formalisation as institutional bricolage, a recursive process through which actors construct organisational order by recombining heterogeneous elements of law, custom, morality, and market practice. Drawing on the organisational realities of artisanal and small-scale mining, the paper advances a theory of how organisation emerges under institutional multiplicity, where coherence is produced not through institutional convergence but through ongoing translation and negotiation. Three mechanisms, institutional translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment, explain how actors transform ambiguity into functional and legitimate organisational arrangements and why hybrid forms persist as stable governance configurations. This perspective revises foundational assumptions in institutional theory by reframing legitimacy as an enacted accomplishment and organisational learning as path-dependent experimentation. It also extends debates on hybrid organising and governance by demonstrating that effective formalisation in plural institutional environments depends on adaptive translation rather than uniform rule enforcement. By positioning frontier economies as sites of theoretical insight, the paper shows how bricolage provides a generative mechanism for understanding how institutional order is assembled, maintained, and adapted under conditions of multiplicity.

Keywords

institutional bricolage, formalisation, institutional multiplicity, artisanal and small-scale mining, frontier economies

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Introduction

Formalisation is one of organisational theory's most enduring constructs, yet it remains analytically underdeveloped (Kanon, 2024). It is typically understood as the rational codification of activity, the point at which rules, procedures, and legal recognition transform diffusion practices into coherent organisational form. This Weberian conception continues to inform research on bureaucracy, governance, and institutional development (Sager and Rosser, 2009). It also underpins policy and development discourse, where formalisation is treated as both a normative goal and a managerial solution. In artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), for example, formalisation is framed as a linear progression from informality to legality and from disorder to institutional coherence (Jiménez et al., 2024).

This dominant view rests on a core assumption: that formality and informality constitute discrete and hierarchically ordered states, and that movement between them can be engineered through the imposition of codified rules (Marx and Kelling, 2019). Such binary logic obscures the institutional complexity that characterises frontier economies (Nason and Bothello, 2023). Efforts to formalise ASM rarely yield clean transitions into legality. Instead, they generate hybrid governance arrangements in which legality, authority, and compliance are continuously negotiated (Besharov and Smith, 2025). In these settings, formalisation does not eliminate ambiguity; it reorganises it (Agbevade, 2020). These outcomes challenge prevailing theoretical assumptions about how organisational order emerges under institutional fragmentation.

This paper addresses this gap by advancing formalisation as a generative organisational process rather than a unidirectional transition. Drawing on institutional bricolage (Cleaver, 2002), we argue that formalisation involves the ongoing fabrication of organisational form through the recombination of heterogeneous institutional elements. Institutional bricolage

explains how actors construct workable arrangements from the materials, rules, meanings, and relationships available in their immediate environment rather than from complete institutional designs (Baker and Nelson, 2005). In natural resource governance, this logic is especially relevant because formal and informal arrangements are often recombined rather than replaced (Cleaver, 2017). Under institutional multiplicity, such re-combinatory work enables actors to construct functionality and legitimacy across multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting institutional regimes (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). In the ASM context, actors do not simply adopt formal templates; they assemble fragments of law, custom, morality, and market practice to create workable arrangements (Ofosu et al., 2025). These practices are not evidence of failed implementation but central mechanisms through which the boundaries of the formal and the informal are constructed.

By theorising formalisation as institutional bricolage, this paper revises foundational assumptions in institutional theory. Instead of viewing formalisation as convergence toward a dominant institutional logic, we conceptualise it as a recursive process of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment through which actors generate organisational coherence under multiplicity (Mountford and Cai, 2023). This perspective shifts attention from compliance to the microprocesses through which legitimacy and functionality are enacted across plural institutional orders. ASM thus serves not as an empirical anomaly but as a revealing context for organisational theory (Jiménez et al., 2024). It demonstrates how coherence can emerge from multiplicity and how governance is constructed through ongoing negotiation rather than rational design (Broin, 2024).

Building on this departure, this paper makes three contributions to the literature. First, re-framing formalisation as institutional bricolage reorients core assumptions in organisational

and institutional theory by shifting attention from institutional replacement to situated recombination. Whereas bricolage research has shown how actors make do with available resources under constraint (Baker and Nelson, 2005), this paper extends that logic to formalisation by showing how actors recombine legal, customary, moral, and market-based elements to construct organisational order. Rather than viewing legitimacy as the outcome of convergence toward dominant templates, this perspective explains how actors construct coherence under institutional multiplicity through selective recombination (Rout et al., 2024). Legitimacy therefore becomes a recursive and performative accomplishment rather than a static attribute or the predictable result of isomorphic pressures (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019).

Second, the paper contributes to theories of institutional maintenance and change by developing a process-based view of formalisation. Institutional order is not treated as the stabilisation of a single dominant logic, but as something continually produced through translation, negotiation, and adaptation. This aligns with work on institutional complexity that emphasises organisational responses to multiple and competing institutional demands (Greenwood et al., 2011), while extending it by specifying bricolage as the mechanism through which plural institutional elements are made workable.

Third, the paper extends research on organisational learning, and capability development by showing how learning emerges through experimentation and iterative recombination in plural environments. In such settings, capability is not simply transferred through formal templates but developed through the interaction of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment. This connects to capability research that emphasises adaptation under changing regional and institutional conditions (Alonso and Kok, 2018), while showing how such adaptation unfolds through bricolage. The perspective also

advances governance and development scholarship by demonstrating that effective formalisation in plural contexts depends on interpretive flexibility and adaptive learning rather than the enforcement of uniform regulatory templates (Broin, 2024). In doing so, it highlights institutional diversity as a source of resilience and positions governance as a process in which legitimacy and capability co-evolve through ongoing bricolage.

Advancing theory through the lens of institutional multiplicity

The ASM sector is frequently depicted as chaotic, informal, and in need of regulation. Such portrayals obscure its organisational diversity and institutional sophistication (Ofosu and Sarpong, 2023). ASM encompasses kinship-based cooperatives, itinerant labour networks, and semi-industrial enterprises embedded in transnational commodity chains (Ofosu et al., 2024). These organisations operate within overlapping regimes of authority including customary land tenure systems, state licensing, religious norms, and global market standards, each offering distinct and sometimes conflicting criteria for legitimacy (Robbins, 2013). This institutional complexity provides a valuable context for examining how organisational form and legitimacy are constructed when actors engage with multiple, coexisting institutional orders (Nason and Bothello, 2023).

Institutional multiplicity does not reflect a temporary disorder awaiting resolution through formalisation (Besharov and Smith, 2025). It is the underlying terrain on which organisation is enacted and sustained. Actors in ASM do not comply with formal rules; they navigate, re-interpret, and selectively mobilise diverse institutional logics to create operational coherence (Dembetembe, 2025). The outcome focuses on institutional alignment and bricolage through the continual assembly of organisational arrangements from heterogeneous

and occasionally incompatible institutional fragments. Bricolage is of significant importance because multiplicity generates competing pressures and provides the available repertoire of legal, customary, moral, and market-based elements from which actors construct order (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010). This recombination is not arbitrary, because actors remain constrained by inherited authority structures, resource limits, and legitimacy demands (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). Research on plural institutional environments shows that coherence is often constructed through translation, negotiation, and sensemaking rather than imposed through hierarchical convergence (Whittle et al., 2023).

Current management and development literatures are limited in their ability to theorise such complexity. Formalisation is typically conceptualised as a linear transition from informality to formality, driven by compliance, professionalisation, or bureaucratic integration (Gallien and Boogaard, 2023). This framing assumes the presence of a stable institutional architecture and interprets hybrid outcomes as failures or incomplete transitions. Embedded within this view is an epistemic bias that privileges Western bureaucratic rationality as the normative endpoint of organisational development (Höllerer et al., 2020; Suddaby et al., 2013). As a result, scholarship often overlooks the diverse ways in which actors in frontier economies construct legitimacy and organisational order through improvisation, negotiation, and institutional creativity.

Empirically, however, formalisation frequently generates ambiguity rather than reducing it (Jiménez et al., 2024). It requires actors to translate regulatory categories into locally meaningful practices, negotiate legitimacy across plural authorities, and perform compliance under conditions of uncertainty (Black, 2008). These practices are not peripheral; they are central mechanisms through which organisational order is produced and sustained. Research on institutional work and hybrid organising suggests that ambiguity can

be a generative resource for innovation and learning, as actors continually reconfigure institutional logics to achieve workable coherence (Vedula et al., 2022).

To advance organisational theory, a shift is required from viewing informality as a condition to be resolved to examining how organisation emerges within institutional multiplicity. From this perspective, formalisation is not a regulatory endpoint but a mode of organising that is recursive, adaptive, and embedded in moral, customary, and improvisational logics that shape everyday action (Gallien and Boogaard, 2023). This reframing positions institutional multiplicity as a source of theoretical insight rather than a problem to be eliminated. It aligns with broader movements in institutional theory to prioritise dynamic processes of emergence, adaptation, and recombination over static structural accounts (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Formalisation, therefore, is better understood as a situated process of bricolage through which organisational capability and governance capacity are constructed under plural institutional conditions (Graf et al., 2023). Rather than striving for convergence toward a singular institutional logic, actors assemble coherence through the adaptive translation of diverse logics (Robbins, 2013), demonstrating that organisational order can arise from institutional diversity as well as from uniformity.

Reframing formalisation: Institutional bricolage as organisational mechanism

To theorise formalisation in frontier economies, this paper develops institutional bricolage as the mechanism through which actors construct functional organisational order under conditions of institutional multiplicity. In organisational research, bricolage explains how actors make do by recombining available resources, practices, and meanings when complete templates are unavailable (Baker and

Nelson, 2005). Institutional bricolage extends this logic to governance by showing how formal rules, informal norms, and socially embedded authority structures are reinvented in practice (Cleaver, 2002). Building on this literature, formalisation is conceptualised here as the recombination of legal codes, customary norms, moral obligations, and market practices into workable organisational arrangements that generate continuity and adaptation under plural institutional conditions (Carstensen and Röper, 2022).

In the ASM sector, bricolage is not a marginal or temporary response to constraint but the prevailing mode of organising (Jiménez et al., 2024). Actors assemble fragments of law, custom, and moral authority to create locally intelligible and operationally viable practices (Ofosu and Sarpong, 2023). A mining licence may be legitimised through ancestral land rights, environmental obligations negotiated through kinship networks, and safety commitments expressed through moral or religious rituals (Prno and Slocombe, 2012). These practices are not deviations from formalisation but its enactment. They represent situated efforts to construct organisational coherence within ongoing ambiguity.

This perspective departs from conventional institutional theory, which has historically emphasised conformity, diffusion, and isomorphism as pathways to legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Emerging research shows that institutional stability often reflects improvisation, negotiated meaning, and situated adaptation rather than rule-based compliance (Furnari et al., 2021). Institutional bricolage foregrounds this generative agency by conceptualising actors as active constructors of order who assemble coherence from diverse institutional materials (Graf et al., 2023). It reframes formalisation as an interpretive and creative process rather than the administrative codification of pre-existing practices.

Bricolage also extends current understandings of hybrid organising. The hybridity

literature explains how organisations incorporate multiple institutional logics within a structural configuration (Pache and Santos, 2021). Bricolage shifts attention to the processual labour through which such configurations are sustained. While hybridity denotes structural coexistence, bricolage captures the situated work through which actors make hybridity operational by recombining available practices, meanings, and authority relations (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010). This distinction is important because ASM organisations do not merely contain multiple logics; they actively assemble workable arrangements from them. In ASM, hybrid forms are the outcome of ongoing bricolage rather than a condition that precedes it. Organisational coherence is therefore continually enacted, not achieved once (Höllerer et al., 2020).

The explanatory value of bricolage is especially salient in frontier economies, where formalisation initiatives coexist with entrenched customary institutions, limited regulatory capacity, and fragmented governance infrastructures (Graf et al., 2023). In these environments, actors cannot rely on a single set of rules or stable authority structures (Raynard, 2016). Instead, they engage in situated institutional translation, interpreting regulatory categories through local moral economies, relational norms, and practical constraints (Vedula et al., 2022). This interpretive work renders abstract regulatory expectations meaningful and actionable, enabling organisational order to emerge under conditions of multiplicity.

Finally, institutional bricolage highlights the epistemic assumptions embedded in dominant models of formalisation. Conventional governance perspectives often privilege bureaucratic rationality as the universal standard of legitimacy (Kanon, 2024). This narrowing of epistemic possibilities marginalises forms of organising grounded in relational, moral, or customary authority (Rout et al., 2024). By foregrounding bricolage, this paper opens conceptual space for recognising alternative

bases of organisational legitimacy and capability. It also reframes the policy-theoretical nexus by suggesting that governance in plural institutional contexts is more effective when it supports translation and adaptive experimentation rather than enforcing convergence (Mair et al., 2015). Through this shift, the paper positions bricolage as a central mechanism for understanding how formalisation unfolds where institutional multiplicity, rather than coherence, defines everyday organisational life.

Formalisation as institutional bricolage

In frontier economies such as ASM, organisational order does not emerge from the diffusion of bureaucratic templates but from the continual reconstruction of meaning,

legitimacy, and capability under conditions of institutional multiplicity (Ofosu et al., 2024). Formalisation in these contexts unfolds through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: institutional translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment. Through these mechanisms, actors convert ambiguity into workable coherence (Ofosu and Sarpong, 2023). Each mechanism operates within the distinctive material, moral, and political environment of ASM (Jiménez et al., 2024), where governance is simultaneously administered by the state, negotiated through kinship, and shaped by global commodity chains. To clarify the paper’s theoretical architecture, Figure 1 presents a proposition-driven framework of formalisation as institutional bricolage under institutional multiplicity. It shows how institutional multiplicity enables bricolage through institutional translation, identity reconstruction, and capability

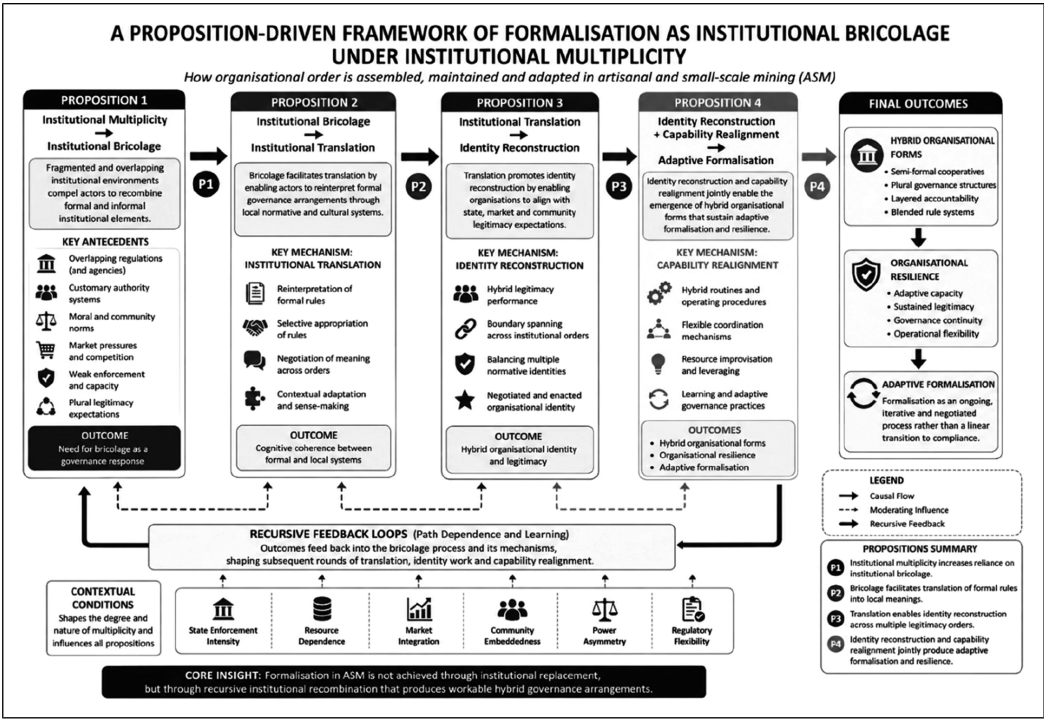


Figure 1. Proposed framework.

realignment, generating hybrid organisational forms, resilience, and adaptive formalisation.

Institutional translation: Reinterpreting formality through local logics

Institutional translation refers to the interpretive work through which miners and local officials transform abstract regulatory categories into practices that align with local moral economies (Maher et al., 2019). Because bricolage involves situated ways of acting and knowing, formal rules become meaningful only when they are reworked through the practical understandings available to actors in the field (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010). When licensing rules require environmental rehabilitation, for example, cooperatives may translate this expectation into communal tree planting or rotational land use practices (Prno and Slocombe, 2012). Such adaptations anchor regulatory requirements in locally meaningful norms rather than in externally imposed bureaucratic rationality, illustrating how institutional bricolage reinvents formal rules through socially embedded practice (Cleaver, 2002).

This mechanism builds on scholarship that conceptualises translation as a generative process of institutional change (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019). In ASM, translation is not a linear transfer of meaning from state to community. It is a recursive dialogue in which miners reinterpret legal texts through customary idioms, and regulators reinterpret compliance through the locally adapted practices they observe (Ofosu et al., 2024). The result is a negotiated governance vocabulary through which legality and legitimacy converge.

Proposition 1. In plural institutional environments, higher levels of institutional translation by organisational actors will be associated with greater cognitive coherence between formal regulatory categories and locally held moral or customary understandings.

Identity reconstruction: Performing legitimacy across regimes

Translation produces shared meaning, but legitimacy requires recognition. Identity reconstruction captures the recognitional dimension of bricolage, as ASM actors assemble credible organisational identities from institutional categories already available in the field (Jiménez et al., 2024). Miners signal formal compliance through permits, uniforms, and safety procedures, while simultaneously reaffirming ancestral land claims and communal responsibilities. These practices allow them to inhabit multiple institutional worlds without fully privileging one over another.

This mechanism extends research on identity work by demonstrating that identity reconstruction in plural contexts is constitutive of governance (Brown, 2019). State authorities recognise miners through bureaucratic documentation, whereas communities recognise them through kinship and stewardship obligations (Dembetembe, 2025). Bricolage enables actors to sustain legitimacy in both domains by selectively emphasising identity elements that resonate with each audience, a process consistent with the view that bricolage involves situated recombination rather than the application of a fixed institutional design (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010). In this way, identity becomes a resource for continuity and negotiation rather than a source of tension.

Proposition 2. The extent of institutional translation within an organisation will be positively associated with the development of hybrid organisational identities that are recognised as legitimate by both state authorities and local community actors.

Capability realignment: Constructing functionality through hybridity

Once hybrid identities are socially validated, organisations gain the space to experiment with new forms of coordination and control

(Battilana and Lee, 2014). Capability realignment captures the operational dimension of bricolage, as actors build functionality by recombining available routines, tools, relationships, and authority structures under constraint (Jiménez et al., 2024). Cooperatives may combine bureaucratic record keeping with oral reporting to elders or integrate state-mandated safety inspections into communal work rotations, illustrating the bricolage logic of making do by applying available resources and routines to new organisational problems (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Therefore, functionality emerges through negotiated recombination rather than adherence to a single institutional template (Kanon, 2024). Trust generated through hybrid identities enables actors to test and revise coordination routines (Brown, 2019). Adaptive capability becomes a relational accomplishment that depends on navigating the intersections of law, morality, and resource constraint (Alonso and Kok, 2018).

Proposition 3. Hybrid organisational identities that are recognised across regimes will increase the likelihood that organisations engage in capability realignment, resulting in the adoption of routines that integrate formal regulatory requirements with customary governance practices.

Hybrid Outcomes: Institutionalised Plurality and Organisational Resilience

The interaction of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment generates organisational forms that are both hybrid and resilient because repeated recombination becomes routinised over time (Maher et al., 2019). In ASM, these hybrids may involve cooperatives that hold state licences yet govern internal affairs through customary councils, or community monitoring systems that satisfy both environmental regulators and ancestral custodians (Besharov and Smith 2025). These organisations endure because their legitimacy

is distributed across multiple authorities and because their routines preserve the flexibility associated with distributed and embedded agency (Garud and Karnøe, 2003).

This view reframes hybridity as institutionalised bricolage: a stable configuration of ongoing adaptation rather than an incomplete transition. Research on hybrid organising suggests that durable hybrids rely on recursive connections between meaning systems and operational practices (White et al., 2021). ASM illustrates how bricolage institutionalises these recursive connections, converting institutional contradiction into a source of organisational resilience (Graf et al., 2023). Plural accountability ensures that when one institutional regime falters, others sustain functionality (Black, 2008).

Proposition 4. Organisations that exhibit stronger interactions between institutional translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment will demonstrate higher levels of organisational resilience, as reflected in the sustained operation of hybrid routines under shifting institutional pressures.

Boundary conditions, alternative explanations, and dynamics

Environments characterised by institutional pluralism and resource constraint. In settings where authority is fragmented, regulatory infrastructures are weak, and normative orders overlap, actors cannot rely on coherent institutional templates (Mountford and Cai, 2023). Under such conditions, as in ASM, formalisation does not follow a linear progression toward bureaucratic order (Dembetembe, 2025). Instead, it unfolds as a recursive process in which organisational forms are assembled from heterogeneous institutional fragments.

This logic does not extend to contexts where state enforcement is strong and institutional

convergence is feasible. In advanced economies or in sectors with mature governance architectures, formalisation more commonly follows diffusion and compliance logics (Benner, 2022). Actors face fewer interpretive ambiguities and clearer penalties for deviation, which limits the scope for bricolage (Piazza et al., 2024). The mechanisms outlined in this framework, therefore, capture a particular organisational condition in which multiplicity is not a temporary deviation but the constitutive terrain of action. For policymakers, this implies that governance strategies based on uniform templates or strict procedural enforcement are likely to falter in plural contexts (Black, 2008). Effective governance requires recognising when formalisation is structurally bricolagic rather than administratively programmable (Graf et al., 2023).

Engaging with these boundary conditions also requires addressing alternative interpretations. A central limitation of bricolage is that recombination does not necessarily produce accountable or progressive order (Carstensen et al., 2023). Because actors work with available institutional materials, bricolage may reproduce existing inequalities, reinforce informal authority, or stabilise weak accountability rather than transform it (Cleaver, 2002). This concern is valid. Bricolage can produce negative externalities, including environmental degradation when adaptive routines circumvent safety standards, regulatory capture when informal negotiation substitutes for accountability, and legitimacy inflation when symbolic compliance obscures persistent irregularities (Glasbeek, 2025). These outcomes are not anomalies but inherent risks of bricolage as a mode of organising, particularly when recombination is shaped by unequal power relations and contested legitimacy demands (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019). They indicate that the framework explains how organisational order emerges under ambiguity, not whether the resulting order is normatively desirable.

These risks do not invalidate the framework; they illuminate its dual potential. The

consequences of bricolage depend on the dominant logics that guide recombination and on the power relations that shape translation and adaptation (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). When bricolage embeds formal norms within customary practices, for example, by integrating environmental standards into collective labour rituals, it can generate adaptive forms of compliance and enhance organisational resilience. When expediency supersedes accountability, bricolage can erode legitimacy and governance capacity (Maher et al., 2019; Pritchett et al., 2013). The variability of these outcomes underscores a central point: bricolage is an explanatory mechanism that reveals how organisation and governance materialise under conditions of uncertainty, rather than a design template that guarantees desirable results.

The dynamics of bricolage are recursive and path dependent because repeated acts of recombination shape the repertoire of institutional materials available for subsequent action (Smets et al., 2012). Early acts of translation influence how identities are reconstructed, which in turn shape the development of organisational capabilities and the direction of subsequent translations; this reflects the distributed and embedded character of agency in bricolage processes (Garud and Karnøe, 2003). These feedback loops can stabilise hybrid governance arrangements or provoke regulatory backlash (Pache and Santos, 2021). Over time, recurring cycles of translation, identity work, and capability adaptation may institutionalise bricolage as a durable governance mode or, alternatively, trigger pressures for greater bureaucratic uniformity (Carstensen et al., 2023). Understanding these temporal patterns requires longitudinal and comparative inquiry that examines how bricolage trajectories evolve in response to political, ecological, and market shifts (Furnari et al., 2021; Langley et al., 2019).

In the ASM context, these recursive patterns are evident in the way initial licensing schemes reshape community authority structures, which

then inform subsequent adaptations in environmental and labour practices (Jiménez et al., 2024). These processes demonstrate that bricolage is not a static response to institutional fragmentation but a dynamic mode of governance that continuously redefines the boundaries between formal and informal institutional orders.

Discussion and implications for theory

Reframing formalisation as institutional bricolage does more than illuminate a neglected empirical phenomenon. It also extends bricolage research by showing that the object of recombination is not only material resources or organisational routines, but the institutional boundary between formal and informal order. Existing bricolage research has emphasised resource construction under constraint (Baker and Nelson, 2005) and the reinvention of institutions through socially embedded practice (Cleaver, 2002). This paper extends that logic by specifying how translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment convert institutional multiplicity into formalisation as an organisational process. In doing so, it revises core assumptions in organisational and institutional theory by challenging the teleological view that institutional convergence is the primary pathway to organisational legitimacy.

Much institutional scholarship continues to treat legitimacy as the outcome of conformity to dominant templates and isomorphic pressures (Höllerer et al., 2020). In contexts marked by institutional multiplicity, however, legitimacy is constructed through the distributed and selective recombination of institutional elements (Mountford and Cai, 2023). Actors achieve coherence by drawing on fragments of law, custom, morality, and market practice. This perspective extends institutional theory by conceptualising legitimacy as a recursive and performative accomplishment rather than a

static attribute or a predictable effect of diffusion (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019).

This reframing has significant implications for theories of institutional maintenance and change. When legitimacy is viewed as enacted through bricolage, institutional order becomes an ongoing process of translation and adaptation rather than the stabilisation of a single institutional logic (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). The ASM context shows that organisational coherence can be sustained without convergence toward a unified institutional framework (Kanon, 2024; Ofosu et al., 2025). Instead, coherence emerges through relational performances that tie together diverse institutional expectations. This process-based view aligns with calls for institutional scholarship to focus more closely on micro-level practices, sensemaking, and ongoing institutional work (Vaara and Whittle, 2022). It encourages researchers to study legitimacy as an activity that is continually produced through heterogeneous arrangements rather than as an endpoint.

The argument also reorients theories of organisational learning and capability development. Conventional models assume relatively stable institutional environments where organisations can replicate and refine best practices (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). In plural settings, however, organisational learning is emergent and improvisational (Macpherson et al., 2022). Institutional bricolage highlights learning by doing as the central mode through which actors combine institutional fragments, test new routines, and gradually stabilise workable practices (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). Learning becomes path dependent and relational, shaped by the recursive interaction of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment (Williams, 2021). This positions organisational capability as an adaptive accomplishment rather than a transferable resource, shifting attention from replication of established routines to their recombination across institutional domains (Alonso and Kok, 2018).

The framework also contributes to research on governance, sustainability, and development. Formalisation policies often privilege bureaucratic rationality as the normative ideal, treating hybrid outcomes as signs of incomplete or failed implementation (Pritchett et al., 2013). Understanding formalisation as bricolage suggests that effective governance in plural institutional environments depends on interpretive flexibility and adaptive learning. Governance becomes a process in which legitimacy and capability coevolve through iterative translation, negotiation, and feedback (Agbevide, 2020). This perspective resonates with emerging work on adaptive governance and institutional resilience, which emphasises the value of institutional diversity over standardisation. It points scholars toward examining how governance systems can support experimentation and translation rather than enforcing uniform compliance.

Implications for practice

Reconceptualising formalisation as institutional bricolage changes how practitioners diagnose and support organisations operating under institutional multiplicity. Formalisation should not be treated as the insertion of bureaucratic templates into informal settings, but as the construction of organisational order across competing regimes of authority, legitimacy, and accountability (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). ASM organisations already coordinate labour, land access, production, community obligations, and market exchange through locally embedded systems of order; informal economies are therefore not institutional voids, but settings structured by alternative arrangements that shape coordination and growth (Nason and Bothello, 2023). Practitioners should begin by identifying which existing routines can be connected to formal regulatory objectives, rather than assuming that local arrangements must be replaced. Hybrid arrangements should not be dismissed as incomplete formalisation, because hybridity may

provide the organisational form through which actors remain functional across competing institutional demands (Pache and Santos, 2021).

Practitioners should also evaluate hybrid routines rather than either reject or romanticise them. Some arrangements connect formal standards to trusted local enforcement; others may conceal exclusion, environmental harm, or symbolic compliance (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Bricolage can sustain institutional continuity while reproducing weak accountability when recombination is shaped by unequal authority (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). The practical value of the framework is that it helps cooperative leaders, development agencies, regulators, and supply-chain actors distinguish accountable bricolage from harmful improvisation and embed formalisation in everyday coordination rather than inspection-oriented compliance.

Implications for policy

Reconceptualising formalisation as institutional bricolage also changes how policymakers should design and evaluate formalisation programmes. Policy should not treat formalisation as a legal transition achieved through licensing, registration, and enforcement alone. In plural institutional environments, formalisation is a governance process through which rules become meaningful, legitimate, and operational across overlapping systems of state, customary, community, and market authority. Policies that prioritise administrative appearance over grounded implementation risk producing formal structures without real governance capability (Pritchett et al., 2013). In ASM, this means that policy success should not be measured only by the number of licences issued or miners registered, but by whether formalisation strengthens coordination, accountability, safety, environmental responsibility, and livelihood viability.

The framework identifies three intervention points: institutional translation, Identity

reconstruction, and capability realignment. Institutional translation implies that regulators should design rules that can be adapted into locally meaningful practices without diluting core standards (Nordling, 2019). Environmental, safety, and labour regulations should retain clear thresholds, but their implementation should allow context-sensitive pathways through cooperative routines, community monitoring, and customary accountability systems. This is consistent with polycentric regulation, where legitimacy and accountability are constructed across multiple governance sites rather than imposed from a single centre (Black, 2008). Identity reconstruction implies that policy should recognise the plural status of ASM actors. Miners are not only regulatory subjects; they may also be land users, community members, cooperative actors, livelihood providers, and market participants. Formalisation policies that ignore these identities risk generating resistance or symbolic compliance. Capability realignment implies that policy should build implementation capacity gradually through staged compliance, local monitoring, technical support, and feedback systems. Sustainable ASM formalisation depends on institutional arrangements that support viable livelihoods and locally workable governance practices (Jiménez et al., 2024).

Policy must also combine flexibility with safeguards. Recognising hybrid governance does not mean accepting all local practices as legitimate. Bricolage can generate adaptive order, but it can also enable capture, exclusion, environmental harm, or weak accountability when power relations shape whose interests are recognised (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019). Policymakers should therefore evaluate formalisation by governance capability rather than administrative uptake: whether hybrid arrangements improve transparency, inclusion, dispute resolution, environmental monitoring, labour protection, and adaptive learning. This shifts policy from institutional replacement toward responsible institutional recombination.

Future research directions

Although reframing formalisation as institutional bricolage offers a new lens for understanding organisation and governance in plural institutional environments, the argument presented here has limitations that invite further inquiry. The framework is derived from contexts characterised by fragmented authority, weak enforcement, and overlapping normative systems, which means that its applicability to highly centralised or tightly regulated settings remains uncertain. In environments where institutional templates are dominant and deviation is costly, bricolage may play a more constrained role or manifest in different forms (Greenwood et al., 2011). Future research is therefore needed to clarify the conditions under which bricolage is likely to emerge, vary, or recede, and to identify how the mechanisms of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment operate across institutional fields with differing levels of convergence.

A first promising avenue concerns the performative construction of legitimacy under institutional multiplicity. If legitimacy is enacted rather than conferred, research must examine the interpretive practices through which actors make formality meaningful within diverse moral and epistemic orders. This calls for more granular investigation of institutional translation, the mechanism through which actors convert abstract regulatory categories into culturally intelligible practices and narratives of authority. Ethnographic and process-based studies could illuminate how translation stabilises hybrid governance, how failures of translation undermine compliance, and how regulatory systems might institutionalise translation as a formal component of adaptive governance. Such work would deepen understanding of how legitimacy is performed, contested, and reproduced across overlapping governance regimes.

A related trajectory lies in advancing theory on organisational learning and capability emergence when institutional environments

lack stable templates. Bricolage positions learning by doing as the central mode of adaptation in plural settings, where functionality emerges through iterative experimentation rather than through replication of established routines (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Future research could examine how cycles of identity reconstruction and capability realignment generate resilience and innovation, not only in frontier economies such as artisanal and small-scale mining but also in sectors experiencing regulatory flux, including digital platforms, climate finance, and transnational supply chains. Studying these recursive learning processes could reposition organisational learning theory toward a model of path-dependent improvisation, where adaptation is simultaneously cognitive, institutional, and political (Benner, 2022). This perspective also informs governance research by suggesting that policy systems able to institutionalise feedback and iterative adjustment are more likely to sustain adaptive compliance than those oriented toward eliminating variability.

A further area for exploration concerns the political economy and ethics of bricolage. Because bricolage is relational and shaped by unequal power, understanding whose logics prevail in recombination and whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate becomes essential (Sadeh and Zilber, 2019). Comparative studies could investigate how power asymmetries, gendered hierarchies, or postcolonial dynamics influence participation in the co-production of formality. Such inquiry would connect organisational theory with critical development and decolonial scholarship, positioning bricolage as both an explanatory mechanism and a lens for examining equity and accountability. It would also contribute to governance theory by clarifying how plural systems can preserve accountability without defaulting to coercive convergence or technocratic control.

There is also scope to theorise the temporal and evolutionary trajectories of bricolage. The mechanisms of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment are

recursive and path dependent, suggesting that bricolage may evolve from a provisional coping strategy into a stable institutional mode (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Glasbeek, 2025). Longitudinal and historical analyses could trace how cycles of bricolage consolidate or erode over time and identify the conditions under which hybrid arrangements become institutionalised as legitimate governance orders. This temporal perspective could generate new insights into the co-evolution of formal and informal institutions and contribute to comparative institutionalism and state theory.

Methodologically, studying bricolage requires research designs capable of capturing its processual, interpretive, and multi-level character (Langley et al., 2019). Future studies could combine ethnographic immersion with comparative process tracing or configurational methods to identify the causal conditions under which bricolage stabilises or collapses. Mixed-method approaches that integrate computational text analysis with field observation may further illuminate the interpretive dynamics of translation and the diffusion of hybrid practices across institutional fields.

Finally, there is an opportunity to build a broader research agenda that connects organisational theory with the science of policy design. Viewing governance through the lens of bricolage reframes policymaking as adaptive coordination rather than blueprint implementation. Empirical studies could investigate how plural actors maintain coherence under complexity through participatory monitoring, distributed information systems, or algorithmic tools that support learning from feedback. Such work could advance emerging scholarship on governance as a learning system, in which the capacity to interpret, adapt, and recalibrate becomes a core institutional competence.

Conclusion

Reconceptualising formalisation as institutional bricolage challenges the assumption that

organisational order emerges through institutional convergence or rational design. In contexts marked by institutional multiplicity, coherence arises through the mechanisms of translation, identity reconstruction, and capability realignment rather than through uniform compliance (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). These mechanisms explain how actors assemble functional and legitimate organisational arrangements under fragmented authority, weak enforcement, and overlapping normative systems (Carstensen and Röper, 2022). In doing so, the paper clarifies the boundary conditions under which bricolage becomes the dominant mode of formalisation.

This perspective extends institutional theory by reframing legitimacy as a recursive and enacted accomplishment rather than the predictable outcome of conformity to dominant templates (Glynn and D'ainno, 2023). It advances research on hybrid organising by specifying how hybrid forms are sustained through ongoing recombination instead of structural coexistence alone (Pache and Santos, 2021). It also contributes to governance scholarship by showing that effective formalisation in plural settings depends on adaptive learning, translation, and iterative adjustment rather than prescriptive regulation (Langley et al., 2019).

Rather than treating frontier economies such as ASM as exceptions to theory, this lens positions them as sites where institutional processes are visible in their most dynamic form. Recognising bricolage as a central mechanism of organisational emergence enables institutional scholarship to develop a more plural, adaptive, and processual understanding of how order, legitimacy, and capability are constructed in complex governance environments.

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