Adapting Institutions: A Comparative Area Studies Perspective
German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg, 10.–11. April 2014

In April the GIGA celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by hosting an international conference that brought together leading scholars in the field of formal institutions and adaptive processes. The conference goal was to help establish the added value of comparative area studies (CAS). The inherent claim of CAS is that many social science disciplines would profit from the consistent application of systematic comparison and context sensitivity; most schools within these disciplines currently only use one at the expense of the other.

In his opening lecture, Laurence Whitehead (Nuffield College, University of Oxford) advocated CAS as the most appropriate way to research sociopolitical phenomena and highlighted both the methodological and the theoretical aspects of such an approach. He presented the "CAS imperative" (the need to combine contextual knowledge with a systematic comparative research design) as a driving force for renewed debates on the appropriateness of methods, which could in turn necessitate the use of "alternative toolkits" such as contextualised comparison or making explicit the "tacit knowledge" one has when talking about Latin America or Africa, etc. How institutions function was chosen as the core topic of this conference, as this is a field where both context sensitivity, drawn from area studies, and systematic comparison, used widely in comparative politics, come together and demonstrate the benefit of the CAS approach. During the conference, participants critically discussed all three sub-forms of comparative area studies (inter-regional, intra-regional and cross-regional comparison).

The idea of using the three variants of CAS was supported by both the more methodologically and the more empirically inspired conference contributions. Ben Reilly (Murdoch University) delivered a paper on reform processes in electoral law worldwide. He identified distinct patterns, that is, convergences in reform efforts by area (Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, etc.), and in parallel he rejected the presence of a universally homogenising trend towards proportional representation — which some of the literature on electoral reforms proposes. Reilly's findings support the relevance of belonging to an area (though such an area is certainly always socially constructed), something that can be demonstrated by juxtaposing regions; however, he also called for in-depth cross-regional comparisons to determine the causal mechanisms leading to specific types of electoral systems and to their convergence at the level of areas.

Nic van de Walle (Cornell University) examined African electoral autocracies and found that, generally, they are more stable than the literature anticipates. He argued that African electoral autocracies have developed manipulative techniques to "survive" elections. His contribution highlighted the validity of intra-regional comparisons with many context conditions held constant. Ariel Ahram (Virginia Tech) assessed the diffusion processes in the Arab Spring using all three CAS approaches (inter-, intra-, and cross-regional comparison) in a nuanced way. The intra-regional comparison helped identify some level of heterogeneity within Arab countries, whereas the cross-regional approach provided external validation for claims about diffusion mechanics. Likewise, the inter-regional perspective provided a comprehensive picture of the Middle East's integration in multiple networks of power.

Henner Fürtig (GIGA) referred in his presentation to an international trend towards the increased Islamisation of institutions (not least within the field of education) in states with a Muslim majority. Although Middle Eastern countries were prevalent in the sample, the findings transcend regional boundaries since Islamisation is also occurring in democracies and is even supported by Western countries, as the example of US involvement in post-Saddam Iraq shows. Mariana Llanos (also from GIGA) presented her ongoing research project on judicial

independence, which applies a cross-regional research design with cases from Latin America and Africa. She showed some commonalities not only within the regions (generally more interference by the executive in the judicial branch of government in Africa than in Latin America), but also within regime types located on different continents. Llanos openly addressed the practical difficulties of applying this type of cross-regional approach when the availability of data varies between the two different area contexts.

In terms of institutions' adaptive processes, a whole section of the conference was devoted to the current debate in the peace-building literature on hybrid institutions, or hybridisation. While the term "hybridisation" has a negative connotation in regime or democracy theory, the opposite seems to be true in most contributions focused on peace-building or transitional justice. One issue raised was the appropriateness of the term itself, as it intrinsically suggests the prior purity of both "local" and "imported" institutions, which then merge into something called a "hybrid." A second criticism concerned the analytical value of a concept that covers very different institutional realities. Finally, it was pointed out that the exact process of hybridisation remains under-researched (who does what, when and how?). In her presentation on transitional justice mechanisms, Anika Oettler (University of Marburg) showed that the decision to include a particular form or a specific case of transitional justice in a comparative analysis has to be well justified.

In her presentation on post-atrocity justice, Chandra Lekha Sriram (University of East London) referred to the oversimplification of the dialectic relationship between international and local institutions of post-conflict justice. She identified different types or "layers of hybridity." Susanna Campbell and Tanja Paffenholz (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva) each presented a case study on an eastern African country, but inspired by a comparative approach. Campbell investigated the complexity of the international peace-building process in Burundi, where transformed institutions and the transformation process itself rarely meet the local or international criteria for accountability. They risk "over-adaptation," with the most powerful (and not necessarily the most peace-loving) local stakeholders influencing institutional choice and the course of reform. In her presentation on peace-building in Kenya, Paffenholz identified both beneficial and dubious hybrid institutional arrangements, and also questioned the analytical usefulness of the hybridity discourse.

Roger Mac Ginty (University of Manchester), one of the promoters of the hybridity debate, suggested looking more closely at social practices in everyday peace-making. He asked for greater attention to adaptive processes from below, and the categorisation of specific habits (of conflict avoidance) as informal institutions. The study of formal institutional change (including agents, models and patterns) in a specifically post-conflict environment may also benefit from a CAS approach, as Nadine Ansorg (GIGA) made clear in her conceptual contribution to the conference. Some context sensitivity should already be inscribed as a necessity of peace studies — in accordance with the varying scope of damages during war. Context also varies, however, with regard to at least one other major factor: the variable influence of outside actors between and within different world regions has to be taken into account to explain the course and scope of institutional change.

An integral part of the conference was the first annual CAS Award ceremony. In spring 2013, the GIGA issued a call for nominations for the best articles in the field of CAS. Scientific journals and researchers nominated 37 outstanding articles, all of which were published (or pre-published online) between 2011 and 2013 in leading global social science journals. After the pre-selection process, the seven articles most in line with the award criteria were thoroughly reviewed again. The international jury, consisting of Scott Gates (Oslo Peace Research Institute and chief editor of the International Area Studies Review), Sean Yom (Temple

University) and Andreas Mehler (GIGA), unanimously agreed to award this distinction to an article by Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseman and Timothy Power (from Oxford University) entitled "Rethinking the 'Presidentialism Debate': Conceptualizing Coalitional Politics in Cross-regional Perspective," which was published online in Democratization in 2012. Paul Chaisty accepted the award on behalf of the authors and expressed his conviction that the annual award process will become an important reference point in the CAS field.

The conference ended with a panel discussion including Claudia Pragua from the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Dirk Berg-Schlosser (University of Marburg), Ariel Ahram, Laurence Whitehead and Andreas Mehler (moderator), who discussed, among other things, the implications of the CAS approach for researchers, using the topic of adapting institutions as an example. The diverse perspectives and issues dealt with during the conference will continue to be present within and shape the field of CAS. The conference organisers hope the event has increased awareness not only about the potential added value and methodological challenges of CAS but also about the appropriate level of generalisation for distinct forms of comparative research.

The BMZ generously contributed to funding the conference. The GIGA thanks the ministry for this invaluable support.

Andreas Mehler

11th Annual Conference of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS)

University of Portsmouth, 30. April – 1. May 2014

Themed on "Taiwan: Self vs. Other" the 11th annual conferences examined Taiwan's self-perception and the image on its domestic and international audiences. The conference offered two keynote speeches: one by Prof. Mau-kuei Chang (Academia Sinica, Taipei) who focused on the perception and impacts of mainland China's growing influence. He especially analyzed the impact of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, which led to the recent fierce student protests in Taiwan. In the second keynote speech Prof. Fu-san Huang (Academia Sinica, Taipei) dealt with the various interpretations of Taiwanese history, in particular highlighting the diverging views on the colonial Japanese period as well as on the early years of Guomindang rule. A panel on "Democratic Governance: Challenges and Responses" was financed and organized in cooperation with the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD, Taipei) and offered, amongst other, analyses by Shelley Rigger (Davidson College) on challenges of democracy comparing Taiwan and South Korea. Brenda S.A. Yeoh (National University of Singapore) presented a comparative analysis focused on Singapore, a multiethnic nation which, again, is being re-defined by migration.

The panel on "Taiwan in International Disputes and Cross-Strait Relations" where Wen-cheng Lin (Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung) offered a comprehensive analysis of the problems that the DPP, as the main opposition party, encounters in Taiwan. Saša Istenic (University of Ljubljana) provided an analysis of the media reports, which also showed that the discourse is dominated by the big players, Japan and China. Finally, Misato Matsuoka (University of Warwick) asked whether Japanese-Taiwanese relations play a role in the Diaoyutai/Senkaku dispute. In a panel on cross-Strait Relations Shiau-chi Shen (National Tsing-hua University, Hsin-chu) examined the puzzling fact that in Taiwan the growing power of China in economic and political terms has been accompanied by the rapid decline of any "Chinese national