

**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS AND EXTENSION
AGG 3811- RURAL SOCIOLOGY**

SOCIETIES AS SYSTEMS

A. The Social System

1. Introduction – The Problem of Social Order

Social order is a problem for the sociologist in that it needs to be accounted for. Really, it would not make much more sense, logically if all was chaos, if the world existed in a perpetual state of confusion, considering the number of individual actions enacted every day, seemingly according to the whims of the individuals concerned.

Take the situation at the level of the nation which tends to be the biggest unit the sociologist deals with. The members of a large society perform millions, or even billions, of social acts in the course of a single day. Yet the outcome is not bedlam, total confusion of chaos, but rather a reasonable approximation of order. This permits each in each individual to pursue his personal course without too seriously interfering with the pursuit by others of their purposes and goals. Indeed this order generally assures that each can actually facilitate to some degree the attainment by others of their goals.

The term social system simply describes the fact that this is true.

“When we say there is a social system, we refer to the coordination and integration of social acts which permits them to occur in a way which produces order rather than chaos.”

We can picture what we mean by a social system (in one dimension, position only) if we think about looking at societies or sections of societies from a long way away. If we did that, people would lose their individuality and look like ants scurrying about their affairs. We would see more individuals in one place than in another – more people would be seen in Cairo Road than in the middle of our fields. And, if we were to take time-lapse photographs and then oversee them we would find that some area would come out like heavy black lines while others were virtually clear. The resultant pattern could be said to represent the social system.

Another way to look at the social system is from the point of view of the individual which will also tell us something about the reasons for the existence of the social system.

A human infant is very much dependant on others, for its very survival and that is only the beginning of a life lived with and dependant on other human beings. This act forms the basis of other human social systems. Not only do people like to predict how others will behave in a wide variety of situations, day after day, it is absolutely essential that they do so. Otherwise human societies, large and small would collapse. Everyone, from a helpless baby through successive age groups, must know in advance that certain other persons will help meet h/her essential needs physical, social, cultural and psychic. Sharing in the daily enterprises of life work, play, worship, love, eating and drinking is necessary for individual and social well being. In other words, human beings regularly participate in mutual activities which form, maintain, and modify their common, patterns of behaviour. These patterns constitute social systems.

2. Definitions

a) System

To begin with a system is:

- i) “a conceptual construct that represents a complex, active and a unit as a whole, which is being specified for intellectual purposes”.
- ii) “an orderly arrangement of things that are different from each other but put together where they form a pattern”. For example, human body is made of various parts such as the nose, eyes, ears, legs and all, these parts are arranged in what is called an organic structure. All of which contribute to the whole functioning of the physical human body.

A system always exists in an environment (its “outside” the external) which is separate or which is intermingled with the system; in either case, the environment is the conceptualization of what is left over.

b) Social System

A Social System is defined as:

1. An orderly and systematic arrangement of social interaction. It is a net work of things that are different from each other but put together where they form a pattern. Using a similar example, human body is made of various parts such as the nose, eyes, ears, legs and all, these parts are arranged in what is called an organic structure.

2. entities or groups in definite relation to each other, to relatively enduring patterns of behavior and relationship within social systems, or to social institutions and norms becoming embedded into social systems in such a way that they shape the behavior of actors within those social systems. Social systems can be said to be the patterns of behavior of a group of people possessing similar characteristics due to their existence in same society.
3. As a plurality of individuals interacting with each other according to shared cultural norms and meanings.
4. as people in a society who are considered to be a system. This system is organized by a characteristic pattern of relationships. Examples of social systems include neighborhoods, cities, towns, the mail system, the public transportation system, online social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIN, My Space, the educational system, the economic system, political parties (including Green, Libertarian, the Tea Party, Independents, Republicans, Democrats, and any other political party), political action caucuses (PACs), and the residents of a mobile home park or manufactured home park.
5. is a central term in sociological systems theory. The term draws a line to ecosystem, biological organisms, psychical systems and technical systems. They all form the environment of social systems. Minimum requirements for a social system is interaction of at least two personal systems or two persons acting in their roles.

Each individual has a role to play that influences the behavior of others and is also influenced by their behavior. Thus, when we say there is a social system we refer to the coordination and integration of social acts which permit groups or societies produce order rather than chaos.

3. **Main Characteristics of a Social System**

All social systems have the following characteristics:

1. A social system consists of **interdependent parts**. The parts of the system are dependent on each other. These parts may be individual persons, groups or types of people, or even continuing organizations.

2. A social system is **based** on **meaning and interests shared** by the members or parts. **Meanings** refer to the **common definition of situations or actions**; **interests** refer **to goals of the system**.
3. A social system has **continuous existence over a relatively** long period of time, at least long enough for commonly accepted patterns of behaviour to be established among members.
4. A social system is **nourished by networks of communication** both between its internal parts and with the outside world.
5. A social system is characterized by **standardized, repeated and approved** patterns of actions.
6. Finally, a social system **fosters a sense of identity**, or belonging among members.

“To summarize, a social system consists of interdependent individuals or groups, or based on shared meaning and interests, continuing over time, each part communicating with other parts, directly or indirectly, so that approved patterns or action and a common sense or identity develops.”

4. Types of Social Systems

Social systems, varying in size and complexity, usually fall into five main types or categories:-

- 1) Simple relationships (dyads or some)
 - 2) Primary groups
 - 3) Secondary groups or organizations
 - 4) Communities
 - 5) Societies
1. **Simple Relationships** – These are bonds between two persons which persist sufficiently for continuing patterns of mutual expectations to develop e.g. a leader and a follower, a superior and a subordinate, two lovers, a husband and wife, a parent and child, two friends, two workmates and just to show that the relationship needn't be friendly, two enemies.

2. **Primary Groups** – These are small, intimate face-to face and usually cooperative social systems. Typically members have a high regard for one another and are intensely loyal, though the degree of affection and respect can vary from person to person and from time to time e.g. the family, the neighbours, playmates or companions at work or recreation. This kind of group provides a high level of security and cohesion, but at the same time it tends to impose its will on its members very strongly. Rules are usually not written but are clearly understood and often rigidly enforced.
3. **Secondary Group or Associations** – These are usually larger than a primary group and not so intimate. Involvement tends to be more one sided. They usually have specific goals, are structured rationally to achieve these goals assigning clearly positions to members and with impersonal sets of rewards and sanctions to control performance e.g. stores, banks, hotels, crime syndicates, government departments, the police, the legislature, hospitals, schools, political parties, churches and professional associations.
4. **Communities** – A community is a concentrated settlement of people in a limited territory within which they satisfy most of their daily needs and interests. A community is basically a geographic unit but since it is relatively self-sufficient, a sense of collective consciousness develops. Residents identify with the geographic area and with each other. This sense of identity is enhanced by the fact that persons in the community work, play, shop, trade and debate issues within its bounds and regularly interact with each other. Examples include Mutendere, Chipata and Mbala.
5. **Societies** – The word society is sometimes used to mean any reasonably large social system. However, in terms of the distinction between different sizes and complexities of social systems a society is the largest social system a sociologist commonly talks about. In order to qualify as a society in this sense, a social system must be sufficiently succinct (cut off from other entities, with an identity of its own and self-sufficient). We say a social system is sufficiently succinct to be called a society when it has:
 - a) Continuity such that it lasts longer than the lives of its participants.
 - b) Recruitment at least is partly through sexual reproduction.

- c) A reasonable degree of self sufficient to meet its own needs.
- d) More frequent interactions between member of the system than between members and outsiders.
- e) Members who have an allegiance to a common complex.
- f) A culture.

Each large system includes those that are smaller and they fit together like building blocks to build more complex structures. For example, a family has a whole series of dyads. A community contains both primary and secondary groups and a society includes all of the kinds of smaller social systems.

5. How can a social system exist?

Social systems can exist because there is a certain pool of common beliefs, people's range of alternative actions are similar, expectations more or less coincide; in short, because every society and in fact, every social system, has a culture.

B. Culture

1. What is Culture?

The word culture in sociology has a wider meaning than we view it in everyday life. In everyday life we often use the word culture to mean simply the national dance troupe, stories, pottery, paintings, pictures, plays, books and so on. This is a part of culture; but a very small part. Sociologists call this “high culture”. For the sociologist,

- i) “Culture is that complex whole which includes, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society”(British anthropologist Edward Tylor).
- ii) Culture is “the entire accumulation of artificial objects, conditions, tools, techniques, ideas, symbols and behaviour patterns peculiar to a group of people, possessing a certain consistency of its own, and capable of transmission from one generation to another “ (Cooley, Argell).
- iii) Culture is “the expression of our nature in our modes of living and our thinking. Intercourse in our literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment, (Maclver).
- iv) “Culture is the sum total of integrated learned behaviour patterns which are characteristics of the members of a society and which are therefore not the result of biological inheritance.” (E.A. Hoebel).
- v) “Culture is the complex whole that consists of everything we think and do and have as members of society”,(Bierstedt).
- vi) Mlinowski defines culture” as the handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends.

In terms of these definition, knowledge that the earth moves around the sun, the technique of shaving a beard, the procedures for enacting a new law and the rules for playing football are as much a part of modern Zambian Culture as the National Dance Troupe, the latest pop records, or president Kaunda`s book on Humanism.

2. The Terms Culture and Subculture

Every social system has a culture. However, in order to make things less confusing in a situation where there are social systems within other larger social systems, we distinguish between the culture of a whole society and the subcultures of the groups within that society. In a society there are certain things that all the members share – these we call culture. However, in addition to this each **social system has things which are shared by its members but which are not common to the society at large.** These special shared things which differ from the things shared by the whole society are called the subculture of the social system. The culture of that social system is made by the elements of the whole culture that the members of course, share and the subcultural elements they have developed which are peculiar to that social system.

3. Important Facets of Culture

Culture is learned – culture is not something which you are with. You acquire it. You learn it. (The process of learning it we shall discuss in our chapter).

CULTURE IS SHARED - culture is shared by the members of society. Within limits, people in a society know the same things, have the same things, use the same things, believe the same things, and do the same things.

4. Elements of Culture

There are three elements of culture;

- 1) Material culture
- 2) Ideas and beliefs (intellectual culture)
- 3) Institutions (Action Culture)

This may be restated as; the things we have, the things we know and the things we do.

1) Material Culture things we have

Material culture refers to material objects. The things we have, the things we use and things that have a special significance for us either artifacts, tools and equipment or any other concrete objects through which the more intellectual aspects of culture take shape. All the things that we have used contact, or have beliefs about affect what we believe and how we are therefore part of culture. They are however, only part of culture so far as, and in the way, they do.

2) Ideas and Beliefs or Cognitive dimension (the things we know)

- a) **Ideas and Beliefs** – We have ideas about a wide array of social phenomena. They include the beliefs we hold about the social, biological and physical world in which we live and about our relations with one another to society and to nature and such other beings and forces as we might discover, accept or conjure up. These include folklore, legends, proverbs, theology, science, philosophy, and practical know how. These ideas that we have obviously affect the way we act.
- b) **Value** – Values are beliefs about what is right and what is wrong in the society. They are usually in the form of general precepts although they need neither to be spoken or written. The values of societies can differ a great deal and have large influence on behavior in different societies.

3) Institutions (the things we do).

An institution is defined by Ginsberg as:

“..... recognized and established usages governing relations between individuals and groups.”

One can witness the birth of an institution, or something very like it, in everyday social life. When we say, three people setup a house together various problems arise, who shall sit where at the table or in the sitting room? What time are meals to be taken? Who shall use the bath when? And so on. They may confer on the subject or a solution may be found as occasions arises, but after a while we usually find that this is A chair that is B's; luncheon is at one o'clock and C has his bath before breakfast. Such rules will often come to dominate the lives of those whom they serve.

A sits in B's place and we hear “hey, that's my chair” and so on. The sitting arrangements, the times of meals and bathing have been institutionalized.

More formally

“Institutions may be defined as patterns which define what are felt to be proper, legitimate or expected forms of action or social relationship”

We have institutions to cover everything from the foods we eat and the cloths we wear to how we act with girlfriends, with our children and with our wives, to how we act at work and at play.

5. How do these elements of culture contribute to the social system?

The functions of culture for the social system

These elements of culture provide the basis for the common experiences which are needed to create the similarity and coordination of action that makes the action of our “ants” more systematic at random. (Variations around the norm exist of course, but normally only within a fairly narrow range and also, statistically, most people conform most of the time). They provide the basis for the existence of the social system.

This is what we call the function (i.e. something else) of culture for the society.

6. The function of Culture of the individual

Culture gives the individual something to fit into.

7. Relationships between society and culture and the individual.

One final note on this subject which is really only a restatement of a familiar theme. That is none of this has any real existence.

“societies are organized groups of individuals and cultures are, in the last analysis, nothing more than organized repetitive responses of society’s members.”

This “last analysis” is very important and must never be forgotten. When we speak of such social phenomena as ‘class’ “political structure”, ‘social group’ ‘religion’, ‘capitalism’, ‘socialism’, and so on, we are always referring ultimately to the conduct of individual men, women, and children.

(For Internal Circulation. Compiled by Ms D. J. Banda. Agricultural Economics & Extension Department 13/01/2014)