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employment, to recognize the primacy of local wishes and realities and to find ways of helping them to be realized. This applies especially when the needs are being articulated by those whom development professionals characterize as 'poor'.

Sustainable livelihoods: the poor's reconciliation of environment and development

Robert Chambers

I shall argue in this paper that the thinking and strategies advocated and adopted with regard to problems of population, resources, environment and development (PRED) have largely perpetuated conventional top-down, centre-outwards thinking, and have largely failed to appreciate how much sustainability depends upon reversals, upon starting with the poorer and enabling them to put their priorities first.

The context of the interrelationships between population, resources, environment and development is well understood and generally accepted. A summary overview, with which most would agree can set the scene.

The context is the rural South, mainly but not only in the tropics. Three major processes stand out. These are population growth, 'core' (urban, industrial, rich) invasions of rural environments, and responses by the rural poor.

Population growth

Rapid population growth is the norm in the South. According to World Bank estimates (rounded), in the thirty-seven years from 1988 to 2025, populations will grow by 80 per cent in low-income countries and by the same 80 per cent in middle-income countries, in total from less than 4 billion to over 7 billion, while in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) taken on its own the increase will be over 180 per cent, from 464 million to over 1.3 billion (World Bank 1990: 228-9). As in much of SSA, it is often where the environmental base is most fragile and deteriorating, and where the rural population is a high proportion, that population growth is projected to be most rapid.

'Core' invasions and pressures

The second process - 'core' invasions and pressures - is shorthand for extensions into rural areas of the power, ownership and exploitation of central, urban institutions and individuals which include the richer world of the North, governments of the South, commercial interests, and professionals who are variously wealthy, urban and powerful. 'Core' also reflects the bias of language and thought which makes urban areas the centre, from which other

areas, where many of the rural poor live, are 'remote'. Core invasions have mixed effects. They both generate and destroy livelihoods. They create conditions for population growth, and exercise pressure on the environment. The normal, core, centre-outwards view of these processes sees them as almost entirely benign; but the view from the periphery is radically different and a necessary corrective. In that view, the rich are seen as engaged on a massive scale in destroying and rendering less secure the livelihoods of the poor. The rich compete for and appropriate resources. Common land is enclosed and encroached by the wealthy. Forests, fisheries and ranching lands are appropriated by government and commercial interests. A common pattern is that logging and ranching interests, sometimes with corrupt forestry officials, contractors and politicians, come first and cut out the timber, and then poor cultivators come in their wake. It is the consumption of rich people and of the rich world which devastates tropical rain forests much more than encroachment by the poor which is so often blamed. There are many patterns and variations, but on a very wide scale, the core invasions of the rich North and of the rich in the South are appropriating and degrading resources on which the rural poor depend.

Responses by the rural poor

The third process is responses of poor rural people to population growth and core invasions. Patterns vary and exceptions are many. But a useful framework for discussion is a distinction between green revolution agriculture, in areas which are generally fertile, irrigated or otherwise well watered, uniform and flat, and low-resource or resource-poor agriculture in areas generally less fertile, rain-fed, diverse and undulating. In resource-poor areas, which are typical of most of SSA and of the hinterlands of Asia and Latin America, as populations grow and common property resources are appropriated, agriculture becomes more intensive, and for a time at least less sustainable as fallows shorten and/or livestock become more numerous. Core invasions and pressures, appropriations and exclusions by government and by the urban and rural rich, declining biological productivity, and rising human populations drive many of the poorer people to migrate.

This they do either seasonally or permanently, some to cities and towns, some to areas of green revolution agriculture, and some to forests, savannahs, steep slopes, flood-prone flatlands and other vulnerable or marginal areas. In these areas they may adopt sustainable forms of cultivation and pastoralism, but more often cannot, hindered and discouraged as they are by insecure tenure, lack of appropriate technology and poverty.

These three processes are linked in many ways, and are not sustainable. The policy questions are, then, how these pressures can be restrained, and how vastly larger numbers of people can be enabled to gain adequate, secure, decent and sustainable livelihoods in rural areas.

Normal professionalism: 'first' thinking and PRED

Normal professionalism means the concepts, values, methods and behaviour dominant in professions, and 'first' thinking refers to the ways of thinking prevalent in the urban, industrial and Northern cores of power and knowledge. In much normal professionalism and 'first' thinking (Chambers 1985, 1986), it is things, especially the things of the rich, which come first, while people come last, with the poorer rural people last of all. To caricature, the top-down view of 'the rural poor' sees them as an undifferentiated mass of people who live hand-to-mouth and who cannot and will not take anything but a short-term view in resource use. In consequence, it is held, their activities must be regulated and controlled in order to preserve the environment.

Such beliefs endure tenaciously, for four reasons. First, they are gratifying: it feels good to think that one knows better and that others are irresponsible. Second, they divert attention from the depredations of the rich, about which it is so much more difficult and uncongenial to do anything. Third, they justify the exercise of power against the poor, and that has its attractions. Fourth, these beliefs are self-sustaining because the official actions to which they lead provoke the poor to behave in ways which appear to justify the actions.

In the light of experience, though, beliefs have been modified. Population professionals now recognize that large families make sense to many of the poor, and see that eliminating poverty must usually precede or accompany the reduction of fertility. Professionals who start with resources and environment recognize that poor people are often behaving rationally, and sometimes rationally in desperation, when they exploit resources and the environment in ways which are not sustainable. Development thinkers now pay much attention to questions of political economy, of who gains and who loses in processes of economic growth or decline. All the same, for many professionals, and whatever their rhetoric, the rural poor, the remote, and women, still come late in processes of analysis and are sometimes relegated to terminal footnotes. They are not the starting point.

Sustainable livelihood security

The basic grounds for putting the poor first are ethical and not in serious dispute. For many that is enough in itself. But in addition, there are also overwhelming practical reasons. These apply even from the point of view of normal professional concerns with PRED. The argument is that unless the poor – the last – are put first, the objectives for environment and development will themselves not be attained.

Practical last-first analysis starts with what poor people want. Poor people have many priorities, and these vary from person to person, from place to place, and from time to time. Health is often, if not always, one. In addition a common and almost universal priority expressed is the desire for an adequate, secure and decent livelihood which provides for physical and social well-being.

This includes security against sickness, against early death, and against becoming poorer, and thus secure command over assets as well as income, and good chances of survival. Again and again, when they are asked, poor people give replies which fit these points. A phrase to summarize all this is livelihood security.

This line of strategic thinking was explored by the Brundtland Commission's Advisory Panel on Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Environment. The Panel developed sustainable livelihood security as an integrating concept, with these meanings:

Livelihood is defined as adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs. Security refers to secure ownership of, or access to, resources and income-earning activities, including reserves and assets to offset risk, ease shocks and meet contingencies. Sustainable refers to the maintenance or enhancement of resource productivity on a long-term basis.

(Food 2000 1987: 3)

Sustainable livelihood security integrates population, resources, environment and development in four respects: stabilizing population; reducing migration; fending off core exploitation; and supporting long-term sustainable resource management.

Stabilizing population

Part of the pressure on the environment comes from population increases, compounded by poverty and exploitation and displacement of the poor. For stabilizing human population, livelihood security may often be a precondition. The insecure and poor are sensible to have many children. It is rational for those who lack secure command over resources, and who expect some of their children to die, to have large families. This is both survival strategy and insurance. They need to spread risks and diversify their sources of food and cash, putting family members in different activities and places, and relying on surviving children for support in old age. The less they expect their children to live, the less they command a decent living, and the less they can look forward to a secure old age, the more sense it makes for parents to have more children.

Reasons for wanting and having lower fertility are not simple, and causality is complex and elusive. Good health and decent livelihoods, two major aspirations of the poor, are not in themselves necessarily sufficient for parents to want fewer children, but they appear as predisposing conditions. There is suggestive evidence that smaller holdings and secure tenure can combine to encourage lower fertility (World Bank 1984: 109).

A cautious statement which may understate the positive relationships is that in conditions where livelihoods are adequate, secure and sustainable, assets can be passed on to children, children are likely to survive and the benefits of child labour are limited, parents have less reason to want large families.

Reducing distress migration

Poor people rarely like to migrate. The suffering of migrants, whether rural (as recounted by Jan Breman (1985), a social anthropologist who accompanied rural migrants in Gujarat) or urban (as Dominique LaPierre's carefully researched 'novel' *City of Joy* testifies for Calcutta), is often appalling, and migrants further impoverish the poor in the areas to which they move by competing for resources, services and work. In many areas, migration into fragile marginal lands and into forests contributes to environmental degradation. But when people have secure control over resources which can provide them with adequate livelihoods they have incentives to manage them so that they do not have to migrate.

Fending-off core exploitation

Those with secure ownership of assets, or secure rights and access to resources, are often able to survive bad times without permanent impoverishment. They are better placed to resist exploitation, indebtedness, or the loss of productive assets through distress sale. It is where people are legally, politically and physically weak, and lack secure legal rights to resources, that they are most vulnerable. Fending off core exploitation or appropriation can mean that they and their children can stay where they are, and not join the ranks of those who have to migrate.

Taking the long view

Core interests tend to take a short-term view of resource exploitation. Conservationist rhetoric should not be allowed to mislead here. Government officials focus on the end of the financial year; politicians on the next election. Governments have often protected forests less well than have communities. Corrupt alliances of politicians, forest officials and contractors, if not universal, are still rather common: many have grown fat by felling, not protecting, forests. For its part, normal project appraisal by discounting future benefits and seeking high internal rates of return also takes a short-term view, while commercial interests concerned with profits take an even shorter one.

In contrast, poor people with secure ownership of land, trees, livestock and other resources, where confident that they can retain the benefits of good husbandry and pass them on to their children, can be, and often are, tenacious in their retention of assets and far-sighted in their investments. It is misleading to confuse the behaviour of those who are very poor and desperate with that of those who are poor but not desperate.

For the desperate poor, sheer survival is the priority, and, however much they may wish to, people find it difficult to take the long view. For the merely poor, though, once basic survival is assured, and given safe and secure conditions, there is evident a strong propensity to stint and save when the opportunity presents. What appears an inability to invest labour for the longer

term is often a rational recognition of insecurity: who will plant a tree or invest labour in works of soil conservation who fears the tree will be stolen, or the land appropriated, or the household itself driven away? Tenants-at-will rarely plant trees or dig terraces. In contrast, long-term tenure and secure rights of usufruct encourage a long-term view and the investment of labour and funds in resource conservation and enhancement, as is shown by extensive tree-planting in countries as different as Haiti, India and Kenya (Chambers and Leach 1987; Conway 1988; Murray 1986) and by the largely overlooked long-term investments in concentrating soil, water and nutrients in stable and productive microenvironments (Chambers 1990). As such examples indicate, many poor people with secure ownership, rights and access to resources invest for the future once they can meet their basic needs.

The implication of these four points is that poor people are not the problem but the solution. If conditions are right they can be predisposed to want smaller families, to stay where they are, to resist and repulse short-term exploitation from the cores, and to take a long view in their husbandry of resources. The predisposing conditions for this are that they command resources, rights and livelihoods which are adequate, sustainable and above all secure.

Four modes of thinking

Against the background of normal professionalism, 'first' thinking, and the case for sustainable livelihood, it is now possible to separate out four modes of thinking concerning environment, development and poor people. These are:

- environment thinking (ET);
- development thinking (DT);
- livelihood thinking (LT); and
- sustainable livelihood thinking (SLT).

To sharpen and simplify the points, though with risk of caricature, the contrasts can be presented in a matrix (Figure 7.4). This is then a source of practical working hypotheses.

ET and DT are both forms of 'first' thinking, manifestations of normal professionalism. When challenged, many with ET or DT mindsets will concede that of course people, and poor people, should come first, should be ends not means; but will then revert to their normal professional patterns of thought. In other respects ET and DT differ. Traditional or normal biologists of the past have emphasized the negative effects on the environment both of development and of poor people's livelihoods. For their part, traditional or normal economists have valued positive contributions to economic development and production from both environment (land, water, trees, crops, etc.) and labour (as aspects of livelihoods). ET takes the long view and values the future more than the present, whereas the DT of normal economists takes only a medium-term view and discounts future benefits as in conventional cost-benefit analysis.

	ET	DT	LT		SLT
The people concerned	Traditional biologists and conservationists	Traditional economists and 'developers'	The very poor	The poor	The professionals
Primary focus	The environment	Production	Livelihood survival	Livelihood security	Enabling adequate, secure and sustainable livelihoods
Major criteria in decision-making and evaluation	Conservation of resources Maintenance of diversity	Economic growth Productivity and economic returns	Immediate survival needs	Basic needs plus security	Sustainable gains by the very poor Livelihood security for all
Time horizon Value placed on the future	Long Higher than present	Medium Lower than present	Short Lower than by the poor	Short and long Higher than by the very poor	Moving from short and low (survival) to long and high (sustainability)
Normal structure of thinking	Ends Means				

Key: E = environment, including natural resources
 D = development
 L = livelihoods
 SL = sustainable livelihoods

Figure 7.4 Four modes of thinking compared

Note: The continuous arrows represent causal connections and directions emphasized in the way of thinking. The dotted arrows represent connections that are recognized but not stressed

A third mode of thinking, which can be called livelihood thinking (LT), entails reversals or 'flips' which at once alarm and exhilarate. When the priorities of the poor are the starting point, the elements in the analysis arrange themselves in a new pattern, and nothing is ever quite the same again. The first priority is not the environment or production but livelihoods, stressing both short-term survival and satisfaction of basic needs and long-term security.

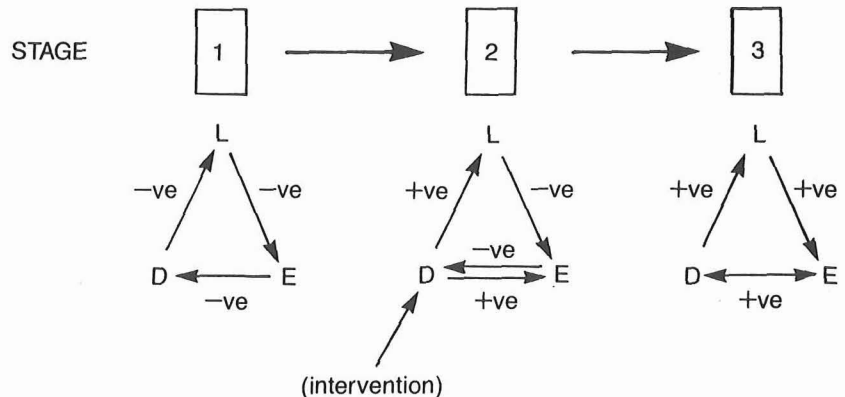


Figure 7.5 Applying sustainable livelihood thinking

Potential and opportunities

Sustainable livelihood thinking, putting poor people and their priorities first, leads to a search for potentials and opportunities. The question to be addressed, environment by environment, is how biologically, economically and in terms of social organization, more people can gain adequate, secure and sustainable livelihoods. Especially this means how people who are poor can avoid becoming very poor, and how people who are very poor can progress to becoming merely poor. When this question is the starting point, the potentials and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods for rural people appear as immense as they have been unrecognized. Two dimensions stand out here: bio-economic potentials, especially of resource-poor environments and agricultural systems; and professional error, biases and neglect which have left those potentials unrecognized and undeveloped.

Bio-economic potentials

Paradoxically, degradation often protects potential for the poor. Because land is degraded – deforested, eroded, waterlogged, saline, bare from overgrazing, flooded or unsustainably cropped – it has low value, especially where current management practices seem likely to persist. But again and again, when management practices are changed, remarkable bio-economic potential is revealed (see e.g. Bunch 1988; Conroy and Litvinoff 1988; Mishra and Sarin 1988). Some of these potentials are to be found in the livelihood-intensive creation and protection of micro-environments in which farmers, women and men, concentrate soil, water and nutrients (Chambers 1990). Others are for growing perennials, especially trees: in India, some 69 million hectares of degraded lands could be growing trees to produce annual biomass increments

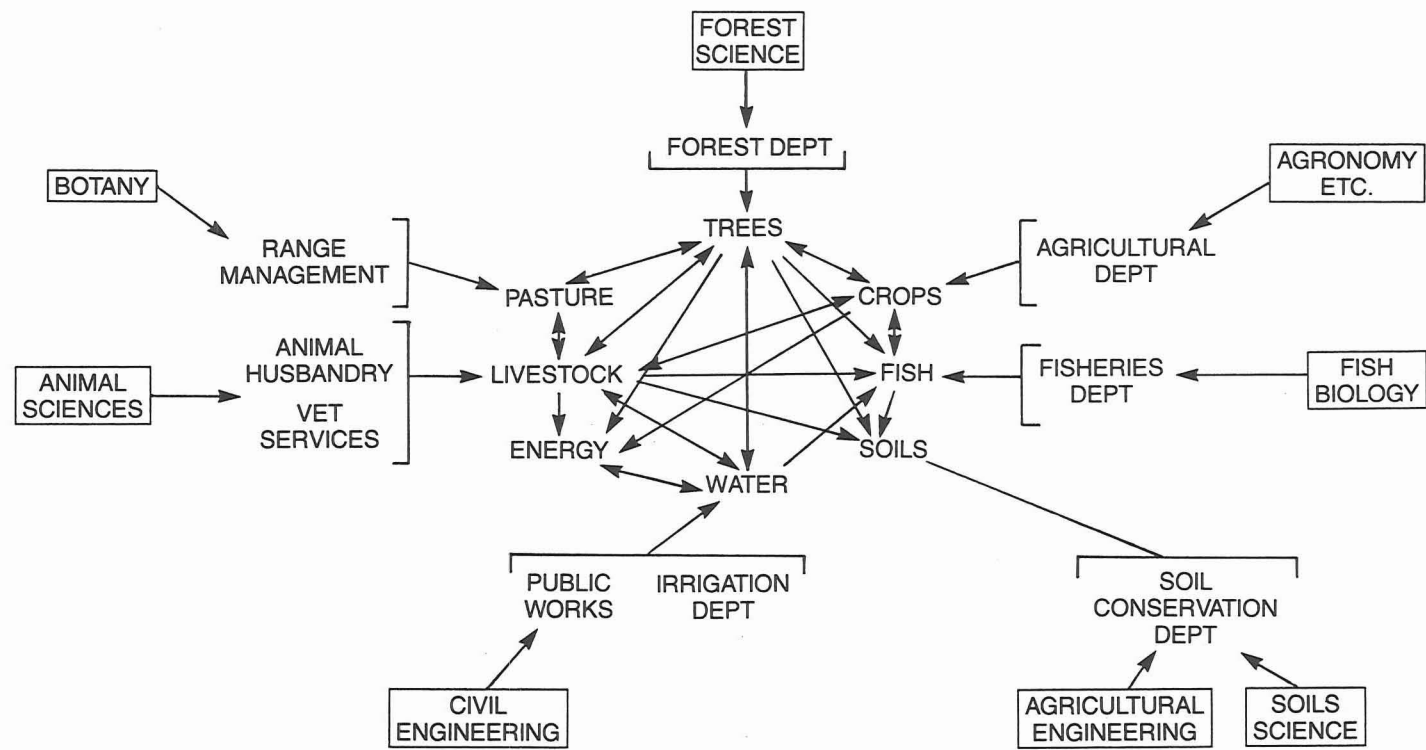


Figure 7.6 Disciplines, departments and professional gaps

Note: Gaps neglected by normal professionalism are represented by most of the lines in the centre, which often represent critical linkages in resource-poor farming systems

With all these neglected and protected potentials the opportunity for the poor depends on who gains from the new productivity. Because these gains have not yet been appropriated by the rich, there is a chance for the poor. But the closest commitment and attention are vital to ensure that those who gain most from change are the poorer, and not once again the less poor – the rich, businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians and the North.

Analytical and practical implications

This paper has analytical and practical implications, and generates an agenda for research. Five areas stand out.

The nature of secure and sustainable livelihoods

Normal professional analysis of deprivation tends to fix on 'poverty' which is defined in terms of flows. This originates in urban studies of wage earners, and in professionals' need to count and to make numerical comparisons (Chambers 1986). It sees the needs of poor people in terms of increasing those flows – of cash and of food, and often in terms of 'employment', meaning a single source of such income.

This view of deprivation is deficient in many respects. From a livelihood angle, two stand out. First, the urban and industrial concept of employment, with a single wage or salary, fits few rural realities. Most poor rural people have multiple sources of income and food as their livelihood strategy – cultivating, working as labourers, migrating, hunting and gathering on commons, artisan work, providing services, petty hawking, and so on. 'First' approaches to rural and agricultural development are often concerned with 'jobs' and 'employment', but this often does not fit rural needs and opportunities.

The second defect of the normal professional view of poverty is the neglect of vulnerability (IDS 1989) and the importance of security against impoverishment. Vulnerability to loss of assets and to indebtedness are persistent anxieties for many of the poor, who are concerned not just with increasing their consumption, but also with security and self-respect. One element, therefore, in a secure and sustainable livelihood will often be enough assets to be able to meet contingencies without becoming permanently poor, and to assure a degree of independence.

The policy implications of these two points are striking. First, SL approaches would often seek to strengthen and stabilize multiple source survival strategies. The strengthening of existing enterprises, or the introduction of new ones, especially if they fill in seasonal gaps in productive work, can enable households to move up above a notional sustainable livelihood line.

Second, as basic subsistence is increasingly assured, so priority shifts from flows to assets which can be used as buffers or banks to handle contingencies. The 'flow' approaches of normal anti-poverty programmes like the Integrated

- Strengthening 'gap' institutions like ICRAF (the International Council for Research in Agroforestry, in Nairobi), and ICLARM (the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management in the Philippines) which direct expertise to neglected gaps, linkages and potentials
- Sponsoring new initiatives and institutions to explore and exploit opportunities for the very poor and poor presented by other gaps, such as diversified livelihood forestry (Chambers *et al.* 1989), farming system intensification including the creation and use of micro-environments, and rural transport.

Appraisal, research and development by the poor

These implications concern professionals' own investigation and analysis, and their own actions on centralized structures. They are valid but only one side of the coin. The other, and once again neglected, side is where rural people, the poor and the very poor, themselves observe, analyse, research and act, and where it is their reality and their creativity which count. The normal professional belief is that only outsiders can effectively undertake these activities; but experiences with farmer participatory research (Amanor 1989; Chambers *et al.* 1989; Farrington and Martin 1988) and with participatory rural appraisal (IIED 1988; MYRADA 1990) have shown this belief to be at once false, damaging and self-validating.

Given the right conditions, farmers and poor people, whether literate or illiterate, whether women or men, have shown a greater capacity than outsider professionals have expected to map, model, observe, interview, quantify, rank, score, diagram, analyse, plan, experiment, innovate and implement and monitor change. Participatory mapping and modelling on the ground and on paper, multi-dimensional seasonal analysis with scoring and quantification, diagramming nutrient flows in farming systems, ranking village households for wealth or well-being, designing agricultural experiments – in activities like these rural people have shown an unexpected ability to present and analyse complex and diverse local systems and relationships.

The wonder is why it has taken so long for outsider professionals to learn this. The explanation seems to be that outsiders' attitudes and behaviour have validated their belief in the ignorance and incapacity of the poor: they have stood on pedestals and lectured; indigenous technical knowledge has been ignored and despised; and even more, the creativity of rural people has been smothered unseen. What has been missing is the combination of rapport, restraint, methods and materials for the expression and development of rural people's capabilities.

The opportunities now opened up look large and relevant. Agriculture is an example. Reductionist agricultural research has served industrial and green revolution agriculture by simplifying and standardizing through its high-input packages for uniform and controlled environments. But to generate more sustainable livelihoods in the fragile environments and through the risk-prone

agriculture of much of the South requires that farming systems become more complex, more diverse, and more internally intensive. Fortunately, it is precisely with local complexity and diversity that, through the new methods, the knowledge and analytical abilities of rural people show strength and power.

To encourage and enable poor rural people to express and enhance their knowledge and undertake their own analysis, experiments and action, requires new roles for outsider professionals: to convene, catalyse, and facilitate; to search for what people want and need; to search for and supply choices and advice; to support small farmers' and pastoralists' own experiments; and to work with communities to enable them to devise and test new approaches for managing their common and private resources.

These modes of participation have three elements: participatory methods; a culture of sharing, in which ideas, insights and methods are freely exchanged; and above all, professional attitudes and behaviour which are not arrogant but humble, not inhibiting but facilitating, not standing high but sitting low, not lecturing but listening and learning. The most underdeveloped and most badly needed technologies are not biological or physical, but social and psychological to enable normal professionals and bureaucrats to change their behaviour and attitudes, so that their actions instead of disabling and weakening the poor, enable them and empower.

The paradox of reversals

The practical conclusion is a double paradox: that population control, sustainable resource exploitation, environmental conservation, and rural development are all best served not by starting with them as things or themes in a normal professional, disciplinary or departmental way, but by starting with people; and that the people to start with are not the rural poor, but ourselves. The start has to be with our changing and learning. We have to learn how to enable and empower the very poor and the poor themselves to appraise, analyse and plan, to command and manage resources, to organize, to make demands, and to resist invasions from the cores.

In doing this, sustainable livelihoods provide common ground and common objectives for professionals and the poor. What most poor rural people want is then not the problem but the starting point for shared solutions. For it is precisely secure rights, ownership and access, and people's own appraisal, analysis and creativity, which can integrate what poor people want and need with what those concerned with population, resources, environment and rural development seek. To reverse normal professionalism and to put first the very poor and the poor is the surest path to sustainable rural development; and to make that reversal, we, the professionals, have to start not with them but with ourselves, with quiet personal revolutions.

These chapters (5, 6 and 7) in Part Two have covered a lot of ground. The economy has been shown to be far broader than is often portrayed, with households and voluntary organizations making an important productive contribution. The increasing role of services in industrialized economies has brought into question the attachment of value to products at their point of sale rather than to their functioning over their useful lives. The implicit hegemony and explicit economism of the 'development' world-view has been challenged; instead it is the release of people's own creativity which has been argued to be the mainspring through which they improve their lives. This improvement has been rooted in a holistic theory of needs and their satisfaction; and an operational methodology has been outlined as to how the motivation and potential that are inherent in the urge to satisfy needs can be realised. Finally, Chambers has discussed the role of powerful outsiders in the development process with a striking confirmation, from a very different perspective, of Santamaria's conclusion (in Ch. 1) of the importance of professional reversals in favour of a form of participation that gives priority to the felt needs of those whose development is in question.

All these points are of considerable importance in themselves. But in order for them to be effective in practice, there need to be ways of evaluating progress towards the objectives they imply. What indicators and measures of success of this sort of development can be used? That is the subject of the next chapter.