

9. Endpiece:

The Politics of Livelihood Opportunity

**Ian Scoones and
William Wolmer**

1 Rethinking livelihoods

As previous sections of this *Bulletin* have shown, the livelihoods of poor, rural people in southern Africa are highly complex, often vulnerable and subject to many uncertainties: biophysical, economic, institutional and political. Any neat prescriptions or models about livelihoods do not stand up for long. Yet, as we have seen, whether in relation to wild resources, land or water and across the countries, certain basic assumptions are repeated. Despite the fact that these do not generally reflect empirical reality, they remain pervasive and influential in the framing of policy.

Thus the models used in policy often have deeply embedded assumptions within them about how people do and want to live. This can frame policies in particular ways, not always for the benefit of poor people. Words like "subsistence", "agriculture", "jobs" and "plots" and even "rural" need unpacking and interrogating. If the starting point is people's actual, lived livelihoods, then the perspectives on policy can be very different to the mainstream. For example, in Sangwe communal area in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in rural southern Africa, people combine dryland farming with gardening, with small-scale business, with local piece-work and occasional, periodic migration in a highly complex portfolio of activities which are varied by age, gender, wealth group and so on. Virtually no-one is a full-time farmer, with a standardised "economically viable" plot from which all sources of livelihood are derived. And if they fit this picture at any time, it is no guarantee that this will remain the case in the future or was so in the past. Thus agricultural policy and extension recommendations that assume a particular "model" farmer may be way off the mark.

Ways of thinking and framing policy debates are reinforced by sectoral and disciplinary approaches to research, policy and bureaucratic organisation. Rural development policies are plagued by such narrow sectoral thinking. However, a livelihoods approach opens this up, highlighting complementarities and sometimes basic trade-offs between different sectoral approaches. For example, credit provision in rural areas is very often associated with particular delimited activities: agriculture (credit for inputs, for instance) or small-scale enterprise (credit for equipment etc.), for

example. But this may hamper people's scope and flexibility. As part-time farmers or part-time entrepreneurs, people may not want the whole package, but may instead prefer to have a provision of "credit for livelihoods", where such resources could be deployed across an array of activities which make up the current livelihood portfolio. Yet, despite the rhetoric of integrated planning, budget support approaches, and poverty-focused assessments (in the PRSP and NEPAD initiatives, for example), there is little evidence of new, cross-sectoral, livelihoods-oriented approaches emerging, rather sectoral approaches are often replicated in practice.

A livelihoods approach potentially allows us to challenge the way we think about rural people and development options. Previous articles in this *Bulletin* have highlighted how this is needed in southern Africa. Identifying the need to challenge conventional approaches is one thing, but outlining what to do about it is quite another. In the last three articles (Part III), we have highlighted three different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, ways of framing rural development policy, each with very different implications for what should be done in the name of sustainable livelihoods for rural development. The following section extracts the highlights of these findings and identifies the key policy directions required if a sustainable livelihoods approach is to become a reality in southern Africa.

2 Policy directions?

By summarising some of the key policy challenges highlighted in the previous articles, four themes are identified:

1. *Redistribution as a prerequisite.* External, donor-led interventions in southern Africa have focused on a standardised reform agenda, without appreciating the historically inherited structural inequalities. Greater thinking needs to focus on real redistributive reforms, particularly in land, but also in other areas. Simplistic neo-liberal economic reform and liberalisation policies have been ineffective in delivering economic and livelihood benefits to the poor across the region. Increased inequalities have made things worse for many,

disrupting past livelihood practices and undermining forms of social security and safety nets. Land is perhaps the key livelihood resource, even in areas where agriculture is not the major source of livelihoods. This is because land can act as security, as a means to gain access to other livelihood options, and as a lever for other forms of investment and linkage. Land reform, including land tenure reform, is therefore central to rural development policy.

2. *The politics of the "free" market.* Market engagement is critical for rural livelihoods. But markets are socially and politically embedded institutions. Access to markets for the rural poor is highly differentiated, influenced by the differential market power of different players, high transaction and entry costs and so on. These broader features matter, if poor people are to benefit from a market economy, and alliances with the private sector. Conventional approaches link successful private investment and entrepreneurship exclusively with private property rights. But other forms of ownership may be just as viable at generating livelihood opportunities, if effectively supported. The obsession with private property as the only route to success must be abandoned in favour of a variety of different approaches, backed by legal and other supportive measures.
3. *Multiple decentralisations.* Different forms of decentralisation are occurring in parallel, and often in ways that compete with each other. Administrative reform in sector programmes to allow for decentralised delivery of services may compete with political reform allowing for democratic, decentralised local government. New political authorities with downward accountability to electorates may be undermined by decentralised service delivery (through line ministries, NGO or donor projects etc.) which has upward accountability to the funder. More funds come down the line than from local taxation, potentially further undermining the capacity and sustainability of local democratic institutions. Democratic decentralisation is premised on a particular form of local democracy, which may sit uneasily alongside other forms of local

authority, which gain legitimacy through other routes. The conflicts between new local government authorities (councillors and councils) and “traditional” authorities (chiefs and headmen) are rife. In some settings party-related affiliations further influence the power dynamics at a local level. Without resources, new elected authorities may quickly lose legitimacy, and fail to provide the development benefits they claim. In practice multiple, parallel systems exist, with opportunities for confusion, high transaction costs and conflict. Local government reform must therefore take account of existing power and authority systems and not wish them away in the development of new systems of local governance.

4. *Realising rights.* Rights on paper and rights in practice are two different things. A rights-based discourse at the policy level does open up possibilities for poor people to claim rights, but only if the relevant support and capacity is there. Otherwise intermediary organisations and institutions tend to exclude, reinforcing existing power relations and resource access. Indeed, a rights discourse may be used to support a continued neo-liberal approach to land reform, or as the basis for water privatisation (see articles in Part II). If a rights-based approach is to have an emancipatory, livelihoods-enhancing result, support for rights claiming, including the development of movements focused on livelihoods issues, will be an important route for capacity development among poor communities, although challenges of language, communication, information and organisation are raised.

3 Sustaining livelihoods: political challenges

Redressing imbalances in market entry and engagement, making decentralisation really work to poor people's advantage, and realising rights increasingly enshrined in progressive legislative frameworks are huge political challenges. In southern Africa competitive party politics, as much as it has been allowed to operate at all, has not really managed to deal with such issues. In terms of policies and programmes many parties appear not

hugely different, and politics is fought out in area or ethnic-based contests, where histories and identities are more important than substantive policy issues. Yet the opportunities to mobilise around such questions as land access or water rights by rural people may be being missed. Although some social movements, including the Land Campaign in Mozambique or the Landless People's Movement in South Africa, have had some tangible successes, such mobilisation can still easily be bypassed by government. In Zimbabwe, it could be argued that the war veterans lobby constituted a movement for land reform which the government found irresistible, although the degree to which this was actually orchestrated by the ruling party for political gain is a moot point. Overall, though, support for increasing rights claiming capacities, including mobilisation, political lobbying and civic organisation, is perhaps a key priority for rural development and livelihoods-focused efforts.

Only with such pressure exerted from outside the formal structures of political and developmental institutions, will the knee-jerk response of market solutions, redistribution to the elite (at best) and concessional safety nets for the poor be challenged. Yet political pragmatism suggests that compromises and trade-offs will be part of the game, and strategic alliances between elites and the poor may be part of the picture in the struggle for improving livelihoods in marginal areas. Whether these are alliances between urban-based advocacy groups/NGOs and rural groups, or more direct commercial/entrepreneurial arrangements for joint ventures, where recast patron-client arrangements result in a more equitable sharing of benefits, new alliances around a pluralist and activist politics for livelihood improvement are an urgent priority.

Such a scenario, however, looks somewhat optimistic, some even might say fanciful, under the prevailing conditions in southern Africa. In Mozambique, extreme aid dependency, with conditionalities associated with HIPC debt relief and poverty reduction strategies, ties government and with it a bureaucratic, political and business elite, into a particular package of reforms. In South Africa, the policy commitment to fiscal prudence in order to attract foreign investment is supported by a strong political bloc of ruling politicians, an emergent and powerful black elite and big business

and is unlikely to be swayed, even with growing grassroots and union disquiet. And in Zimbabwe, the increasingly desperate despotic nationalism of the Mugabe regime has unleashed a combination of economic meltdown and political violence that means any chances of alternative voices being heard are, for the time being at least, extremely limited.

That said, the argument of the articles in this *Bulletin* is that donors, activists, government officials, rural organisations, NGOs and others, should not abandon the search for a realistic, but politically sophisticated, sustainable livelihoods approach. In so doing, they should avoid succumbing to the beguiling assumptions and slick rhetoric of mainstream stances. Such perspectives, as we have seen, have not delivered sustainable livelihoods for the poor in southern Africa. Indeed, it could be argued that they have made matters worse. It is time for a change. Alternative approaches that encourage sustainable livelihoods are inevitably going to be normative, political and have to deal with power. They must also be realistic and rooted in an understanding of the history and complexities of real-life African political and administrative systems

Such an agenda, for example, would necessarily have to build on and transform, or at least ameliorate, forms of “patrimonialism” and “clientelism” in order to see through a redistributive agenda for the transfer of assets to the poor. It would see elite-poor relationships, including “benevolent” forms of patronage, as a key dynamic and potentially a stimulus to economic

growth and a source of social security. It would encourage the organisation and mobilisation of rural people around livelihoods issues, whether land reform, HIV/AIDS drugs, or water access and foster links to party-based democratic politics. It would abandon the artificial and misleading separation of public/private, state/non-state in both analysis and prescription. And finally, it would recognise that state revenues, particularly of the local state, need to be generated in ways that encourage forms of downward accountability, rather than reliance on donors or central government. Such an agenda, and clearly there is much more than this list of examples, would hopefully create a realistic, yet new and radical politics of livelihood opportunity and would, in turn, begin to address some of the underlying and deeply rooted origins of the contemporary crisis of livelihoods in the region.

The details, out of necessity, would vary from place to place, but avoiding assuming a neat, western-style liberal democracy as the template for development intervention is probably a good starting point. Simple, technical/managerial “good governance” solutions, in the name of “sustainable livelihoods”, or any other framework for that matter – just will not wash. As the livelihoods crisis of the region has become so dramatically and tragically apparent, now is the time to start the critical thinking, the adventurous experimentation and the thorough reflection on the difficult learning process that good development should always be about.