

## Practising what we preach?

### The failure to apply sustainable livelihoods thinking where it is most needed - in the North

'Sustainable livelihoods' are two words put together initially without an explicit meaning. This has the advantage that the phrase can be appropriated and given meanings by different actors to suit their conditions and purposes.

A disadvantage, however, has been that meanings or implications which are complicate, inconvenient or threatening can be ignored. With this in mind, three aspects stand out for their importance and potential.

The first aspect concerns other qualities of livelihood and wellbeing. Other adjectives, apart from 'sustainable', have been applied to livelihoods including 'secure' and 'decent'. 'Secure' is captured by the interpretation of sustainable livelihoods that pays attention to shocks, stress and resilience. 'Decent' implies social acceptability, self-respect and a livelihood that is not demeaning and does not involve excessive physical hardship. Beyond this, there is also the quality of experience and fulfilment gained from livelihood activities.

The second issue is the concept of 'net sustainable livelihoods effects'. This means a new livelihood, or a greater degree of sustainability for an existing livelihood, may come at the expense of others. However, it could also create or enhance other livelihoods and their sustainability. For policies and programmes to contribute fully to equity and to achieve international development targets, the concept of net effects may be vital. It is better to think through, estimate and include important externalities than to exclude them because the means to measure them are lacking.

There are international and global dimensions to net livelihoods effects:

- War and civil disturbance are often devastating for livelihoods.
- International trade agreements and freer trade can strengthen and create livelihoods for poor people but they can also weaken or eliminate them.
- Agricultural subsidies in the North as well as the long-term trends of declining prices



Environmentalists march on Kingsnorth Power Station in the UK after the owners, E.ON, revealed plans to build a new coal plant, the UK's first in nearly 30 years

*Jenny Matthews, Panos 2009*

for primary products from the South have negative effects on a prodigious scale.

- Much of the world economic system is skewed to diminish and destroy the livelihoods of poor people.
- The third issue is the failure to apply sustainable livelihoods thinking to the North and to those who are rich in the South. This is disappointing. Sustainable livelihoods was quite readily accepted as a concept applying to 'others' – to poor people and to the South. It is conveniently overlooked that the least environmentally sustainable livelihoods and lives are 'ours': those of the better-off and relatively richer people.

Environmentally the very concept that works so well for poor people can be applied to the rich. Some major international advocacy non-governmental organisations are concerned with aspects of this, but there are no signs of personal carbon accounting, for instance, becoming a common practice.

The challenge is both personal and public. Are we – those who read this, the relatively rich and well-off – prepared to adopt the

A series of seminars, organised by the Livelihoods Network and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, is bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners to explore sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA). **Ian Scoones** and **Robert Chambers** reflect on the future prospects for livelihoods approaches to development.

wider definition of sustainability for our livelihoods and lifestyles? Are we willing to make our livelihoods and lives more sustainable in their effects, both economically through fairer trade relations and environmentally? What degrees of short-term irresponsibility, inconsistency and hypocrisy are we prepared to allow ourselves? At whom do we point the finger?

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# Re-energising livelihoods approaches

## New focus, new priorities?

**L**ivelihoods perspectives offer an important lens for looking at complex rural development questions. So why are they seemingly not as prominent today compared to a decade ago?

Key issues with which livelihoods approaches have failed to engage sufficiently include:

- processes of economic globalisation
- power, politics and links between livelihoods and governance
- long-term environmental change
- long-term shifts in rural economies and wider questions about agrarian change.

These failures mean that the research and policy focus has shifted away from the contextual, multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral insights of livelihood perspectives, often back, predictably, to macro-economic analyses. To be responsive to new contexts, livelihoods perspectives need to include concerns of knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics.

### Knowledge

Whose livelihoods count? Who is to say that subsistence farmers, poachers or sex workers are pursuing inappropriate livelihoods? Livelihoods analyses offer a way of uncovering complexity and diversity, but the important question is: what happens next? Which option is best, and for whom? Attention to the processes through which livelihoods knowledge is negotiated and used is required. Through this, opportunities to deliberate on the political choices inherent in livelihoods analyses can emerge.

### Politics

Livelihoods analyses of complexity and context must be located in a relational understanding of power and politics which identifies how political spaces are opened

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up and closed down. Such analyses must examine both structure and agency, and the diverse micro- and macro-political processes that define opportunities and constraints. They need to be informed by an explicit theoretical concern with how class, gender and capitalist relations operate, asking who gains and loses and why.

### Scale

As global transformations continue, attention to scale must be central to the reinvigoration of livelihoods perspectives. The challenge is to develop livelihoods analyses which examine networks, linkages, connections, flows and chains across scales, but remain firmly rooted in place and context. Such analyses must illuminate the social and political processes of exchange, extraction, exploitation and empowerment, and so explore the multiple consequences of globalisation on rural livelihoods.

### Dynamics

Another challenge for livelihoods perspectives is the ability to address long-term change, such as climate change. While the term 'sustainable livelihoods' implies that livelihoods are resilient in the face of both external shocks and internal stresses, in conditions of extreme vulnerability, resilience cannot always emerge through local adaptation. Instead, more dramatic reconfigurations of livelihoods may have to occur.

Livelihoods perspectives could be significantly enhanced by engagement with literatures on resilience of socio-ecological systems and on transitions in socio-technical systems, converging as they do on key ingredients of sustainable livelihoods, including adaptive capacity, institutional flexibility and diversity of responses.

These are challenging agendas, both intellectually and practically. For those convinced that livelihoods perspectives must remain central to development, this is a wake-up call.

The vibrant and energetic 'community of practice' of the late 1990s has lost focus.

There is an urgent need to rethink, re-tool and re-engage, and to draw from other areas of enquiry and experience. The themes of knowledge, scale, politics and dynamics offer an exciting agenda of research and practice to enrich livelihoods perspectives for rural development into the future.

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### See also

'Livelihoods perspectives and rural development', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36(1), by Ian Scoones January 2009  
[www.eldis.org/go/livelihoods&id=42752&type=Document](http://www.eldis.org/go/livelihoods&id=42752&type=Document)



Villagers grinding millet and maize in Mali using a machine powered by biofuel. This saves hours of strenuous work and is part of a renewable energy programme to help poor communities deal with climate change, Abbie Traylor-Smith, Panos 2007

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