

## **Livelihoods perspectives and rural development**

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Livelihoods perspectives have been central to rural development thinking and practice in the past decade. But where do such perspectives come from, what are their conceptual roots, and what influences have shaped the way they have emerged? This paper offers an historical review of key moments in debates about rural livelihoods, identifying the tensions, ambiguities and challenges of such approaches. A number of core challenges are identified, centred on the need to inject a more thorough-going political analysis into the centre of livelihoods perspectives. This will enhance the capacity of livelihoods perspectives to address key lacunae in recent discussions, including questions of knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics.

**Keywords:** livelihoods; sustainability; rural development; knowledge; politics

### **Introduction**

Livelihoods perspectives have been central to rural development thinking and practice in the past decade. But where do such perspectives come from, what are their conceptual roots, and what influences have shaped the way they have emerged? This paper responds to these questions with an historical review of key moments in debates about rural livelihoods, identifying the tensions, ambiguities and challenges of such approaches. A complex archaeology of ideas and practices is revealed which demonstrates the hybrid nature of such concepts, bridging perspectives across different fields of rural development scholarship and practice. Yet, in arguing that livelihoods perspectives are important for integrating insights and interventions beyond disciplinary or sectoral boundaries, the paper also touches on some of the limitations, dangers and challenges. In particular, the paper highlights the problems arising from a simplistic application of synthetic frameworks which have come to dominate certain aspects of applied development discussion and practice over the past decade. Looking to the future the paper identifies a number of core challenges, centred on the need to inject a more thorough-going political analysis into the centre of livelihoods perspectives. This, the paper argues, will enhance the capacity of livelihoods perspectives to address key lacunae in recent discussions, including questions of knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics.

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Any basic search of literature or development project material will uncover numerous mentions to livelihoods approaches, perspectives, methods and frameworks. A mobile and flexible term, 'livelihoods' can be attached to all sorts of other words to construct whole fields of development enquiry and practice. These relate to locales (rural or urban livelihoods), occupations (farming, pastoral or fishing livelihoods), social difference (gendered, age-defined livelihoods), directions (livelihood pathways, trajectories), dynamic patterns (sustainable or resilient livelihoods) and many more.

Livelihoods perspectives start with how different people in different places live. A variety of definitions are offered in the literature, including, for example, 'the means of gaining a living' (Chambers 1995, vi) or 'a combination of the resources used and the activities undertaken in order to live'.<sup>1</sup> A descriptive analysis portrays a complex web of activities and interactions that emphasises the diversity of ways people make a living. This may cut across the boundaries of more conventional approaches to looking at rural development which focus on defined activities: agriculture, wage employment, farm labour, small-scale enterprise and so on. But in reality people combine different activities in a complex *bricolage* or portfolio of activities. Outcomes of course vary, and how different strategies affect livelihood pathways or trajectories is an important concern for livelihoods analysis. This dynamic, longitudinal analysis emphasises such terms as coping, adaptation, improvement, diversification and transformation. Analyses at the individual level can in turn aggregate up to complex livelihood strategies and pathways at household, village or even district levels.

Diversity is the watchword, and livelihoods approaches have challenged fundamentally single-sector approaches to solving complex rural development problems. The appeal is simple: look at the real world, and try and understand things from local perspectives. Responses that follow should articulate with such realities and not try and impose artificial categories and divides on complex realities. Belonging to no discipline in particular, livelihoods approaches can allow a bridging of divides, allowing different people to work together – particularly across the natural and social sciences. Being focused on understanding complex, local realities livelihoods approaches are an ideal entry point for participatory approaches to inquiry, with negotiated learning between local people and outsiders.

Following the strong advocacy for sustainable livelihoods approaches in development from the 1990s (Chambers and Conway 1992 and later Scoones 1998, Carney 1998, 2002, Ashley and Carney 1999), many development agencies started to advocate livelihoods approaches as central to their programming, and even organisational structures. Yet the simple, rather obvious, argument for a livelihoods perspective, as discussed further below, is not so easy to translate into practice, with inherited organisational forms, disciplinary biases and funding structures constructed around other assumptions and ways of thinking.

Over the last decade or so 'livelihoods' has thus emerged as a boundary term (Gieryn 1999), something that brings disparate perspectives together, allows conversations over disciplinary and professional divides and provides an institutional bridging function linking people, professions and practices in new ways. But several questions arise. Where did these perspectives come from? What brought

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.livelihoods.org/info/dlg/GLOSS/Gloss3.htm#1> (glossary for distance learning guide).

people together around such perspectives at a particular historical moment? And what tensions, conflicts and dissonances arise?

### **A brief archaeology of ideas and approaches**

Despite the claims of some genealogies of livelihoods thinking, such perspectives did not suddenly emerge on the scene in 1992 with the influential Chambers and Conway paper. Far from it: there is a rich and important history that goes back another 50 or more years where a cross-disciplinary livelihoods perspective has profoundly influenced rural development thinking and practice. One early example is the work of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in what is today Zambia. This involved collaborations of ecologists, anthropologists, agriculturalists and economists looking at changing rural systems and their development challenges (Fardon 1990). While not labelled as such this work was quintessential livelihoods analysis – integrative, locally-embedded, cross-sectoral and informed by a deep field engagement and a commitment to action.

Yet such perspectives did not come to dominate development thinking in the coming decades. As theories of modernisation came to influence development discourse, more mono-disciplinary perspectives ruled the roost. Policy advice was increasingly influenced by professional economists, rather than the rural development generalists and field-based administrators of the past. With the framing in terms of predictive models, of supply and demand, inputs and outputs, both micro and macro economics in different ways, offered a framing which suited the perceived needs of the time. The post-World War II institutions of development – the World Bank, the UN system, the bilateral development agencies, as well as national governments in newly independent countries across the world – reflected the hegemony of this framing of policy, linking economics with specialist technical disciplines from the natural, medical and engineering sciences. This pushed alternative sources of social science expertise, and particularly cross-disciplinary livelihoods perspectives, to the side. While, alternative, radical Marxist perspectives engaged at the macro-level on the political and economic relations of capitalism in post-colonial formations, they rarely delved into the particular, micro-level contextual realities on the ground.

Of course this was not universally true, and there were some important contributions of both economists and Marxist scholars, particularly in the fields of agricultural economics and geography, who offered a more nuanced view. The village studies tradition, dominated by economists, but not exclusively so, was an important, empirically-based alternative to other economic analyses of rural situations (Lipton and Moore 1972). A classic series of studies in India, for example, looked at the diverse impacts of the Green Revolution (Farmer 1977, Walker and Ryan 1990). In many respects these were livelihood studies, although with a focus on the micro-economics of farm production and patterns of household accumulation. In developing the distinctive actor-oriented approach of the Wageningen School, Norman Long was referring to livelihood strategies in his studies in Zambia at this time (Long 1984, see De Haan and Zoomers 2005). In the same period, from a different theoretical tradition, field studies such as the classic examination of rural change in northern Nigeria by Michael Watts (1983), *Silent Violence*, offered important insights into the contested patterns of livelihood change.

These studies provided important inspirations to wider bodies of work that followed. Building on the village studies work, household and farming systems studies of different sorts became an important part of development research in the 1980s (Moock 1986), particularly with a focus on intra-household dynamics (Guyer and Peters 1987). Farming systems research was encouraged in a range of countries, with the aim of getting a more integrated, systems perspective on farm problems. Later, agro-ecosystem analysis (Conway 1985) and rapid and participatory rural appraisal approaches (Chambers 2008) were added to the repertoire, expanding the range of methods and styles of field engagement.

Studies focusing on livelihood and environmental change were also an important strand of work. A concern for dynamic ecologies, history and longitudinal change, gender and social differentiation and cultural contexts meant that geographers, social anthropologists and socio-economists offered a series of influential rich-picture analyses of rural settings in this period.<sup>2</sup> This defined the field of environment and development, as well as wider concerns with livelihoods under stress, with the emphasis on coping strategies and livelihood adaptation.

This line of work overlapped substantially with studies that emerged from Marxist political geography, but had, in some respects, another intellectual trajectory which came to be labelled as political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Robbins 2003, Forsyth 2003). At root, political ecology focuses on the intersections of structural, political forces and ecological dynamics, although there are many different strands and variations. The commitment to local-level fieldwork, with understandings embedded in the complex realities of diverse livelihoods, but linking to more macro-structural issues, are all important characteristics.

The environment and development movement of the 1980s and 1990s threw up in particular concerns about linking a focus on poverty reduction and development with longer-term environmental shocks and stresses. The term 'sustainability' entered the lexicon in a big way following the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987 (WCED 1987) and became a central policy concern with the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 (Scoones 2007). The sustainable development agenda combined, often in a very uneasy way, concerns with livelihoods and the priorities of local people, the central feature of Agenda 21, and global concerns with environmental issues, enshrined in conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification. In cross-disciplinary academic research, these issues have in turn been explored in studies of socio-ecological systems, resilience and sustainability science (Folke *et al.* 2002, Clarke and Dickson 2003).

Thus all these approaches – village studies, household economics and gender analyses, farming systems research, agro-ecosystem analysis, rapid and participatory appraisal, studies of socio-environmental change, political ecology, sustainability science and resilience studies (and many other strands and variants) – have offered diverse insights into the way complex, rural livelihoods intersect with political, economic and environmental processes from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, drawing from both the natural and social sciences. Each has different emphases and disciplinary foci, and each has engaged in rural development policy and practice in different ways, with more or less influence. Where, then,

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Richards 1985, Mortimore 1989, Davies 1996, Fairhead and Leach 1996, Scoones 1996, among many others.

do ‘livelihood perspectives’ – and particularly ‘sustainable rural livelihood approaches’ – fit into this complex and variegated history?

### **Sustainable rural livelihoods: a policy story**

The connection of the three words ‘sustainable’, ‘rural’ and ‘livelihoods’ as a term denoting a particular approach was possibly first made in 1986 in a hotel in Geneva during the discussion around the Food 2000 report for the Brundtland Commission.<sup>3</sup> Involving M.S. Swaminathan, Robert Chambers and others, the report laid out a vision for a people-oriented development that had as its starting point the rural realities of poor people (Swaminathan *et al.* 1987). This was a strong theme in Chambers’ writing, and especially in his massively influential book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers 1983). About the same time, through the initiative of Richard Sandbrook, sustainable livelihoods became a focus for a conference organised by the International Institute for Environment and Development in 1987 (Conroy and Litvinoff 1988), and was the subject of Chambers’ (1987) overview paper.

But it was not until 1992, when Chambers and Conway produced a working paper for the Institute of Development Studies that a now much used definition of sustainable livelihoods emerged. This stated:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is now seen as the starting point of what came to be known later in the 1990s as the ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’. At the time its aims were less ambitious, and emerged out of on-going conversations between the two authors who saw important links between their respective concerns with ‘putting the last first’ in development practice and agro-ecosystem analysis and the wider challenges of sustainable development. The paper was widely read at the time, but it did not go much further, and had little immediate purchase on mainstream development thinking.

Arguments about local knowledge and priorities and systemic concerns with sustainability issues did not have much traction in the hard-nosed debates about economic reform and neo-liberal policy of that period. Despite numerous books and papers, the neo-liberal turn from the 1980s had extinguished effective debate on alternatives. Debates about livelihoods, employment and poverty emerged around the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen,<sup>5</sup> but a livelihoods angle remained at the margins of the mainstream, with debates framed in terms of employment. Of course strands of the participation argument for local involvement and a livelihoods focus were incorporated into the neo-liberal paradigm, along with

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Chambers (personal communication, October 2008), although, as he points out, there are various other earlier antecedents, including a paper for a 1975 Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting entitled ‘Policies for Future Rural Livelihoods’.

<sup>4</sup>As adapted by Scoones (1998), Carney *et al.* (1999) and others.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/>.

narratives about the retreat of the state and demand-oriented policy; yet, for some, this became part of a ‘new tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In the same way, sustainability debates became part-and-parcel of market-oriented solutions and top-down, instrumental global environmental governance (Berkhout *et al.* 2003). The wider concerns about complex livelihoods, environmental dynamics and poverty-focused development, however, remained on the side-lines.

But all this changed in the latter part of the 1990s and into the 2000s, when the formulaic solutions of the Washington Consensus began to be challenged – both on the streets, such as in the ‘battle of Seattle’ at the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference of 1999, in the debates generated by global social movements around the World Social Fora (from 2001 in Porto Alegre), in academic debate, including in economics (from Stiglitz onwards), and in countries whose economies had not rebounded with the magic medicine of neo-liberal reform and whose state capacities had been decimated along the way. More parochially, for those hooked into UK-focused debates about development, a key moment came in 1997 with the arrival of a new Labour government, with a development ministry, the Department for International Development (DfID), a vocal and committed minister, Clare Short, and a White Paper that committed explicitly to a poverty and livelihoods focus (see Solesbury 2003).<sup>6</sup>

In particular, in its opening section, the White Paper mentioned the promotion of ‘sustainable rural livelihoods’ as a core development priority. Indeed, the UK government had already commissioned work in this area, with several research programmes underway, including one coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, with work in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali. This multi-disciplinary research team had been developing an approach which attempted to analyse livelihood change in a comparative way, and had developed a diagrammatic checklist to link elements of the field enquiry (Scoones 1998). In addition to interacting with work being pioneered by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (Rennie and Singh 1996) and the Society for International Development (Almaric 1998), this drew substantially on parallel IDS work on ‘environmental entitlements’ which, building on the classic work of Sen (1981), emphasised the mediating role of institutions in defining access to resources, rather than simply production and abundance (Leach *et al.* 1997).

Like the IDS sustainable livelihoods work, this was an attempt to draw economist colleagues into a discussion about questions of access and the organisational and institutional dimensions of rural development and environmental change. Drawing on work by North (1990) among others, these approaches used the language of institutional economics, combined with considerations of environmental dynamics (especially from the ‘new ecology’ perspective) (see Scoones 1999) and social, political and cultural contexts, drawing on social anthropology and political ecology. It chimed very much with the work of Bebbington (1999) who developed a ‘capitals and capabilities’ framework for looking at rural livelihoods and poverty in the Andes, again drawing on Sen’s classic work.

In the notionally trans-disciplinary subject area of development, making sense to economists is a must. With economists only recently having discovered institutions – or at least a particular individualistic, rational-actor version – in the form of new institutional economics and social relations and culture, defined in terms of ‘social

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/whitepaper1997.pdf>.

capital’, following Putnam *et al.* (1993), a moment had opened up to generate some productive conversation, even if largely on disciplinary economics’ terms. Thus, both the environmental entitlements approach (Leach *et al.* 1997, 1999) and its more popular cousin, the sustainable livelihoods framework (Scoones 1998, Carney 1998) emphasised the economic attributes of livelihoods as mediated by social-institutional processes. The sustainable livelihoods frameworks in particular linked inputs (designated with the term ‘capitals’ or ‘assets’) and outputs (livelihood strategies), connected in turn to outcomes, which combined familiar territory (of poverty lines and employment levels) with wider framings (of well-being and sustainability) (see Figure 1).

This all echoed discussion around the meanings and definitions of poverty, which was beginning to accommodate broader, more inclusive perspectives on well-being and livelihoods (Baulch 1996). The input-output-outcome elements of the livelihoods framework were of course easily recognised by economists, and were amenable to quantitative analysis and the application of numerous long questionnaires. Some livelihoods analysis has unfortunately never moved much beyond this, missing out on wider social and institutional dimensions.

In particular, the focus on ‘capitals’ and the ‘asset pentagon’<sup>7</sup> kept the discussion firmly in the territory of economic analysis. There was of course important discussion about how assets could be combined, substituted and switched, with different portfolios emerging over time for different people in different places, and linking changes in natural capital (‘the environment’) with social and economic dimensions was an important step forward. A broader view of assets was also

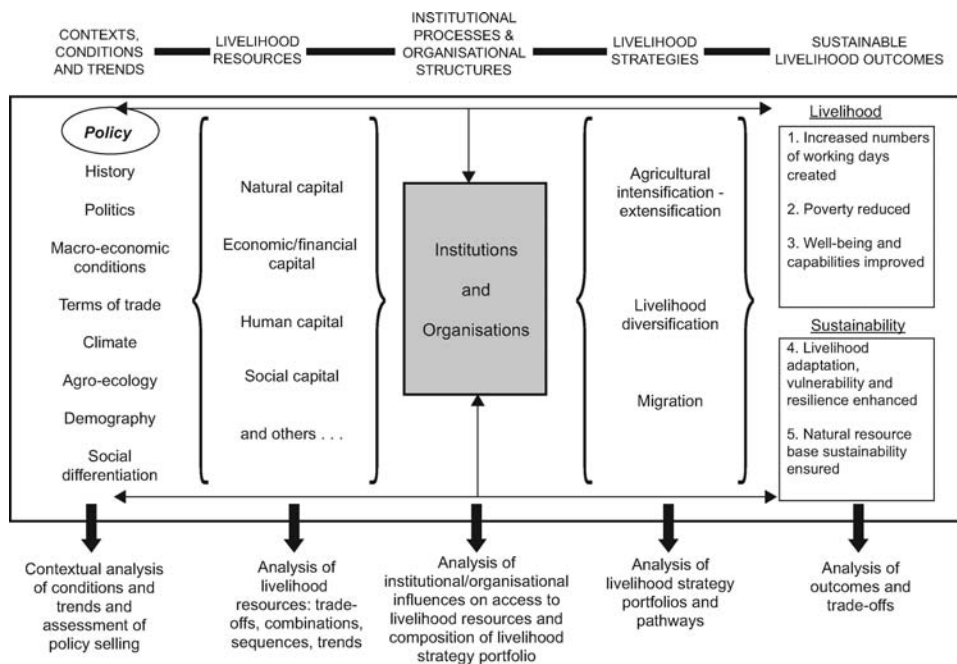


Figure 1. Sustainable livelihoods framework: a checklist (Scoones 1998).

<sup>7</sup>A core feature of the DfID version of the framework (see Carney *et al.* 1999).

advocated. Bebbington (1999, 22), for example, saw assets as ‘vehicles for instrumental action (making a living), hermeneutic action (making living meaningful) and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living)’. However, perhaps predictably, it was the more instrumental, economic focus that remained at the core of the discussion, and defined much subsequent action on the ground.

In some respects the focus on the ‘asset pentagon’ and the use of the ‘capitals’ metaphor was an unfortunate diversion. Other work on sustainable livelihoods had emphasised other features. For example, the IDS studies<sup>8</sup> stressed in particular the idea of institutions and organisations as mediating livelihood strategies and pathways. These were socio-cultural and political processes which explained how and why diverse asset inputs linked to strategies and outcomes. They were subject to power and politics and were where questions of rights, access and governance were centred. Thus a different explanatory angle, with a different disciplinary emphasis, was being offered within the same framework; one that emphasised complex processes requiring in-depth qualitative understandings of power, politics and institutions, and so a very different type of field research.

One explanation for the down-playing of this dimension of sustainable livelihoods analysis over time was the way a framework being used as a checklist for a multi-disciplinary field enquiry in three countries became something much bigger, with many more claims and associations attached to it. The move from diagrammatic checklist to framework – or more precisely the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, with capital letters, or the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, with an acronym, SLA, happened in the course of 1998. With the establishment of the new DfID, and a commitment to a sustainable livelihoods approach to tackling poverty enshrined in a White Paper, the old Natural Resources Department transformed itself into a Livelihoods Department, later with its own Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office. An advisory committee was established, led by Diana Carney then of the Overseas Development Institute in London. The committee consisted of DfID staff, from a range of departments, as well as outsiders from the research and NGO community. The committee deliberated on the way forward – how would a ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’ become operational? And how could a substantial amount of new development funds be channelled to livelihoods-focused poverty reduction? A simple, integrating approach was needed that would tie people into this conversation, and become a way of explaining – and making happen – the idea. At one meeting in London, the IDS checklist diagram was shared, and then transformed by more imaginative people with better skills in computer graphics to what became the DfID framework: essentially the same diagram, but with different nomenclature, and the asset pentagon which described the five ‘capital’ assets.

This was an exciting time, with enthusiasm and commitment from a new group of people with often a quite radical vision, and a government seemingly committed to doing something about it. This was not the old world of natural resources specialists (archetypically concerned with soils not people) and economists (with their interest in growth and trickle down), but a new, integrated perspective centred on normative, political commitments to banish poverty – and later supported by widespread public campaigns, at least in the UK, from Jubilee 2000 to Make Poverty History.

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<sup>8</sup>See Carswell *et al.* 1999, Brock and Coulibaly 1999, Shankland 2000, Scoones and Wolmer 2002.



Of course the social development advisors in DfID pointed out (correctly) that they had been advocating livelihoods approaches, sensitive to local needs and cultural contexts forever. Others argued that this was ‘just new wine in old bottles’ – a reinvention of the failed integrated rural development paradigm of the 1970s. But advocates of a sustainable livelihoods approach argued strongly that this time it was different. The mistakes of old-style, area-based development were not going to be made again, and social and cultural issues would not just enter as part of a *post-hoc* ‘told you so’ evaluation process, but would be right at the core of the development endeavour.

With money and politics behind an idea – and now an attractive and well-marketed framework, with guidance sheets, an on-line distance learning guide and a growing methods toolbox, shared through the web-based network, Livelihoods Connect<sup>9</sup> – the concept could travel, gaining momentum – and large doses of misapplication and misunderstanding along the way. The first stop on this journey was the DfID Natural Resource Advisors conference of 1998. Framework ideas had already been widely shared, and the concepts and practices were debated intensely with numerous case studies presented (Carney *et al.* 1999). There were of course strong detractors, but many realised the opportunities of opening up debates – as well as the implications for funding flows. The NGO community was important too, bringing fresh ideas and field experiences for elaborating a livelihoods approach from Oxfam, CARE and others. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Programme (FAO) too became interested, as did the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), creating a diverse array of livelihoods approaches (Carney *et al.* 1999).

In the coming years there was a snowballing of interest, with the flames fanned by effective promotion and communications activities. A whole professional cadre of livelihoods advisors was built up in DfID and other organisations, and soon comparative assessments of different approaches across agencies emerged, highlighting the differences in interpretation and application of different versions of ‘the SL framework’ (Hussein 2002). Livelihoods approaches now seemed to be applied to everything: livestock, fisheries, forestry, agriculture, health, urban development and more. A veritable avalanche of papers emerged, all claiming the sustainable livelihoods brand.<sup>10</sup> As the approach became more centrally part of development programming, attempts were made to link it with operational indicators (Hoon *et al.* 1997), monitoring and evaluation (Adato and Meinzen Dick 2002), sector strategies (Gilling *et al.* 2001) and poverty reduction strategy papers (Norton and Foster 2001). But perhaps the more interesting applications were areas where clearly cross-cutting themes could be opened up by a livelihoods perspective. Thus HIV/AIDS discussions were recast from a health to a livelihoods focus (Loevinshon and Gillespie 2003), diversification of livelihoods, migration and non-farm rural income was put at the centre of the rural development agenda (Tacoli 1998, De Haan 1999, Ellis 2000) and complex emergencies, conflict and disaster responses were now seen through a livelihoods lens (Cannon *et al.* 2003, Longley and Maxwell 2003).

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<sup>9</sup>[www.livelihoods.org](http://www.livelihoods.org).

<sup>10</sup>Applications were across sectoral areas – from water (Nicol 2000) to forestry (Warner 2000), natural resource management (Pound 2003), animal genetic resources (Anderson 2003), agriculture (Carswell 1987) to urban development (Farrington *et al.* 2002), river basin management (Cleaver and Franks 2005) and fisheries (Allison and Ellis 2001).

One of the recurrent criticisms of livelihood approaches is that they ignore politics and power. But this is not strictly true. Livelihoods approaches encompass a broad church, and there has been some important work that has elaborated what is meant, in different variants of different frameworks, by ‘transforming structures and process’, ‘policies, institutions and processes’, ‘mediating institutions and organisations’, ‘sustainable livelihoods governance’ or ‘drivers of change’ (cf. Davies and Hossain 1987, Hyden 1998, Hopley and Shields 2000, DfID 2004). These reflections have addressed the social and political structures and processes that influence livelihood choices. Power, politics and social difference – and the governance implications of these – have been central to these concerns (Scoones and Wolmer 2003). Unfortunately, though, such debates remained at the margins. While different people made the case for the importance of such political dimensions, dominant concerns were elsewhere – largely focused on a fairly instrumental poverty reduction agenda, framed by economics.

The various frameworks did not help either. Clearly an argument could be made that ‘power was everywhere’ – from contexts, to constructions and access to capitals, as mediating institutions and social relations, guiding underlying choices of strategies and influencing options and outcomes. Some tried to make politics more explicit, adding ‘political capital’ to the list of assets, and emphasising that social capital implied attention to power relations. But, as the critiques of a ‘capitals’ approach – and particularly a focus on social capital – have elaborated, such additions do not really deal with the complex intersections of the structural bases of power – in political interests, competing discourses and embedded practices – diminishing such complexity to a lowest common denominator metric (Harriss 1997). Thus, the regular pleas to pay attention to power and politics often fell on deaf ears, and an instrumental application proceeded as normal, but with a livelihoods label.

The ‘community of practice’ associated with sustainable livelihoods approaches in this period certainly had a strong normative commitment to poverty reduction and bottom-up, participatory approaches. The branded approaches began to be associated not just with analytical tools (frameworks and checklists), but normative positions. The DfID guidance sheets were quite explicit:

Firstly, the approach is ‘people-centred’, in that the making of policy is based on understanding the realities of struggle of poor people themselves, on the principle of their participation in determining priorities for practical intervention, and on their need to influence the institutional structures and processes that govern their lives. Secondly, it is ‘holistic’ in that it is ‘non-sectoral’ and it recognises multiple influences, multiple actors, multiple strategies and multiple outcomes. Thirdly, it is ‘dynamic’ in that it attempts to understand change, complex cause-and-effect relationships and ‘iterative chains of events’. Fourthly, it starts with analysis of strengths rather than of needs, and seeks to build on everyone’s inherent potential. Fifthly, it attempts to ‘bridge the gap’ between macro- and micro-levels. Sixthly, it is committed explicitly to several different dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic, social and institutional.<sup>11</sup>

A coalition of players was built up committed to this style of development. This cut across government, multilateral and NGO players who saw themselves in some way bound together by such a perspective. Wider social movements and local groups, as

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted at <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/toolbox/Livelihoods.php>; see DfID guidance sheets at [www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance\\_sheets\\_pdfs/sect8glo.p](http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance_sheets_pdfs/sect8glo.p).

well as government officials across developing countries, were also active, as this shift in positioning of the aid industry was coincident with their values and politics. Others took a more instrumental stand, as livelihoods thinking became a guarantee of a consultancy or funded aid project, and a proliferation of training courses and advisory services were now being offered from all sorts of sources and of varying quality.

### **The decline and fall of livelihoods perspectives?**

Where have debates about livelihoods and their sustainability ended up in 2009? For some, the destination is a development aid backwater, having lost both the political and financial momentum of being at the centre of influence. One reading of the story is a period of strategic opportunism followed by inevitable disappointment; of dilution and diversion, as ideas become part of the mainstream in large organisations. But there is another, more positive, reading. The rise of livelihood perspectives in rural development thinking and practice from the 1990s did make a difference. Aid money was spent in different ways, new people with different values and skills were hired, and, for once, even if grossly inadequately, local contexts were better understood and poor, marginalised people were involved in plans and decisions (Neely *et al.* 2004). The intersection of academic debate and practical action provided numerous insights and lessons (not all positive by any means) and, in the process, new articulations of livelihoods approaches were elaborated, linking livelihoods to debates on rights, governance and agrarian change, for example.

So why are livelihoods perspectives seemingly not as prominent today compared to a decade ago? Four recurrent failings of livelihoods perspectives can be highlighted. The first relates to the lack of engagement with processes of economic globalisation. To illustrate this, a return to the policy story is required. In the UK context, the 2000 White Paper focused on macro-economic and governance questions, and became known as 'the revenge of the economists'.<sup>12</sup> Despite the accommodation of economic thinking in the sustainable livelihoods framework, it was not enough. Livelihoods approaches were often dismissed as too complex, and so not compatible with real-world challenges and decision-making processes. Idealism, complexity, naïveté, lack of political nous and incompatibility with existing sectorally-based organisations were all accusations made. Other bigger, macro-economic, global-scale questions were, it was argued, more important, and a project-focused, micro-scale approach was not appropriate to the new aid modalities of direct budget support and the Paris agenda (Clarke and Carney 2008).

And such critics had a point. Livelihoods approaches, coming as they did from a complex disciplinary parentage that emphasised the local, have not been very good at dealing with big shifts in the state of global markets and politics. In the frameworks, these were dumped in a box labelled 'contexts'. But what happens when contexts are the most important factor, over-riding the micro-negotiations around access to assets and the finely-tuned strategies of differentiated actors? While the economists in the development agencies were arguing for a growth agenda, based on 'sound macro-economic principles', political economists were also ready to point out

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<sup>12</sup><http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/whitepaper2000.pdf>. By contrast to the 25 mentions of the word livelihood(s) in the 1997 White Paper, just three years on this paper had only three.

the dangers of naïve localism and idealistic liberal analyses that ignore the structural forces of class and capital.

The second failing relates to the lack of attention to power and politics and the failure to link livelihoods and governance debates in development. Of course there were attempts to engage, including work on livelihoods and decentralisation (Manor 2000, SLSA 2003a, Ribot and Larsen 2005), rights-based approaches (Moser and Norton 2001, Conway *et al.* 2002, SLSA 2003b) and linking wider questions of agrarian change (Lahiff 2003). But these efforts failed to have much purchase. In many ways, livelihoods debates had generated their own business, creating livelihoods for consultants, trainers, NGO practitioners and researchers engaged in local-level development. This largely practitioner community often failed to connect with those concerned with state politics, governance regimes and the emergent discussions around agrarian futures among the social movements. It had in many respects got stuck, both intellectually and practically. The weak and sometimes confusing and contradictory theorisation of politics and power, meant that an intellectual articulation with both mainstream political science governance debates and more radical agrarian change discussions was missing.

Another strand of development thinking which really came to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and was equally focused at the macro, global level, was the need to deal urgently with climate change. Were sustainable livelihood approaches up to this challenge, perhaps *the* big issue of the twenty-first century, one that development could not ignore? Despite the use of the word 'sustainable', the third failing has been the lack of rigorous attempts to deal with long-term secular change in environmental conditions. With more and more data confirming the likely impacts of climate change, particularly in parts of the world where poverty and livelihoods-oriented development has been focused, the danger was evident that livelihoods approaches, as originally conceived, were just ignoring the big picture: fiddling while Rome burned.

In livelihoods discourse 'sustainability' tended to refer to coping with immediate shocks and stresses, where local capacities and knowledge, if effectively supported, might be enough. The iconic cases of mobile pastoralists (Scoones 1995) or adaptive dryland farmers (Mortimore 1989) were well known. But were such local strategies enough? Many thought not, and new climate change adaptation studies emerged which focused on adaptation to long-term change (Adger *et al.* 2003). As discussed below, a central future challenge must be integrating livelihoods thinking and understandings of local contexts and responses with concerns for global environmental change.

Finally, a fourth area that livelihood studies failed to grapple with were debates about long-term shifts in rural economies and wider questions about agrarian change. A rich description of livelihood complexity in the present was one thing, but what were future livelihoods going to look like – in 10, 20 or 50 years? Perhaps local-level adaptation ameliorates poverty at the margins, but does it address more fundamental transformations in livelihood pathways into the future? These issues of course have been raised by many working firmly in the livelihoods tradition, including research on livelihood diversification (Ellis 2000) and 'de-agrarianisation' (Bryceson 1996) in Africa.

These four failures to engage – with processes of economic globalisation, with debates about politics and governance, with the challenges of environmental sustainability and with fundamental transformatory shifts in rural economies – have

meant that the research and policy focus has shifted away from the contextual, trans-disciplinary and cross-sectoral insights from livelihood perspectives, often back to a predictable default of macro-economic analyses. One response might be: fair enough, livelihoods perspectives were never meant to do more than this, and different approaches are needed for these new problems. Horses for courses. Another view, however, is that what livelihoods perspectives offer, these other perspectives often miss out on, with potentially damaging consequences. Instead, the argument goes, what is needed is a re-energising of livelihoods perspectives with new foci and priorities to meet these new challenges. This is the theme of the final section of this paper.

### **Re-energising livelihoods perspectives: new foci, new priorities?**

Livelihood perspectives offer, I have argued, a unique starting point for an integrated analysis of complex, highly dynamic rural contexts. Drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives and cutting across sectoral boundaries, livelihoods perspectives provide an essential counter to the monovalent approaches that have dominated development enquiry and practice. With more complexity, more diversity and more uncertainty about possible rural futures such an embedded approach is, I contend, essential. Yet livelihoods approaches have been accused of being good methods in search of a theory (O’Laughlin 2004). Does a re-energised livelihoods perspective need a new meta-theory to carry it forward? As discussed below, although a more explicit attention to the theorisation of key concepts, with especial attention to the understanding of power and politics is clearly required, a more pluralist, hybrid vision is probably more appropriate if a solid, field-based, grounded empirical stance is to remain at the core. But in order to be responsive to new contexts a number of challenges lie ahead. I identify four: the need to articulate livelihoods perspectives with concerns of knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics. Each offers opportunities for extending, expanding and enriching livelihoods perspectives from a variety of different perspectives.

### ***Knowledge***

In the last decade livelihoods debates have emerged in a particular discursive space in the development debate. Providing a ‘boundary terminology’, they have been able to break down divides, build bridges and transform the focus of debates and implementation practice in some fundamental ways. Livelihoods thinking has often carried with it some explicit normative commitments around a set of widely-shared principles – people matter, contexts are important, a focus on capacities and capabilities, rather than needs, and a normative emphasis on poverty and marginality. Such efforts have constructed new methods, frameworks, institutions and funding streams and, with these, new alliances and networks, or what Hajer (1995) would term a discourse coalition.<sup>13</sup>

Through processes of discursive framing – creating typologies and categories, defining inclusions and exclusions – this has forged a politics of livelihoods

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<sup>13</sup>The discourse and associated coalition remains however largely Anglophone. Sustainable livelihoods language and concepts have proven very difficult to translate into other languages – and sometimes fit uncomfortably with other culturally-defined intellectual traditions.

knowledge. 'Livelihood' is a seemingly neutral, descriptive word – about making a living – yet livelihood perspectives have been adopted widely, appearing in outputs from the World Bank to the most radical social movement. But what are the power relationships underlying this new discourse, and how do they in turn shape action? The underlying politics of livelihoods knowledge-making has been rarely discussed, and if so only obliquely. But when terms emerge which gain power and influence in constructing and shaping debates, it is worth reflecting on livelihoods perspectives as discourse, as well as methods and analytical tools.

Three dimensions are relevant. First, is the deployment of normative assumptions. Very often in discussion of livelihoods – and particularly sustainable livelihoods – a set of ideas about bottom-up, locally-led, participatory development dovetails with livelihoods analysis. But what is left out by this particular normative framing? For example, rights, justice and struggles for equality are sometimes obscured by more instrumentalist perspectives, coincident with conventional planned development and neo-liberal governance framings. Yet questions of values are central. Arce (2003), for example, offers the case of coca farming in Bolivia, asking whose livelihoods count – and to what and whose ends? Second, the livelihoods literature is replete with classifications and typologies, often contrasting ideal types with alternatives with pejorative ascriptions. But who is to say that, for example, subsistence farmers, poachers, border jumpers or sex workers are pursuing inappropriate livelihoods in need of rescue, discipline or transformation? Third, are questions of directionality and ideas of 'progress' in development. What does the framing of livelihood analysis say about whether things are heading towards positive or negative ends? What is assumed to be a 'good' or a 'bad' livelihood? What needs transformation through the disciplining practices of 'development'? These questions often remain unaddressed or only implicitly treated.

For example, the World Bank's 2008 *World Development Report* on agriculture focused on the importance of livelihoods, characterised by different strategies – based on farming (market-oriented and subsistence), labour, migration and diversification – and three different types of economy: agriculture-based, transforming and urbanised (World Bank 2007, 76). A strong narrative line suggests that progress (development) is about moving through a series of assumed evolutionary stages, with transitions which can be facilitated through a range of interventions in technologies, markets, support institutions and policies, as illustrated by the success stories of Brazil, China, India and Indonesia (cf. World Bank 2007, 5, figure 2). As with other narratives about agricultural change, with an implicit evolutionary argument about progress and modernisation (cf. debates about 'mixed farming', for example, Scoones and Wolmer 2002), the assumption is that the end point, with agriculture as a business, driven by entrepreneurship and vibrant markets, linked to a burgeoning urban economy, is the ideal to strive for.<sup>14</sup> Such framings of course present a normative version of 'good' and 'bad' livelihoods and so 'good' and 'bad' rural futures, defining 'progress' in a particular way. While accepting diverse, complex livelihoods as an empirical reality (certainly an advance from many other

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<sup>14</sup>By contrast, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD 2008), presented a very different, and much contested, narrative about progress, and directions for the future. Here, more complex, livelihood concerns were put centre-stage, with principles of equity, access and sustainability guiding the normative framing.

analyses), the assumption is that these are starting points for a future trajectory to something better.

When emanating from influential institutions and cast in a rational-technical framing, as with the World Bank's *World Development Report*, such statements carry with them major consequences. The institutional power behind ideas creates a particular politics of knowledge in the development field, and the role of the World Bank and other donor agencies are key (Broad 2006). Such dominant framings are, in turn, reinforced by educational and training institutions, as scientific knowledge, policy and development practice become co-constructed. Unpacking, questioning, challenging and recasting such perspectives is vital. Livelihoods analysis, by the World Bank or any other actor, is not a neutral exercise; knowledge production is always conditioned by values, politics and institutional histories and commitments (Keeley and Scoones 2003).

Therefore, although livelihoods analysis frameworks and methods definitely offer a way of uncovering complexity and diversity in ways that has often not been revealed before, the important question is: what happens next? Which option is best, and for whom? How do different framings get negotiated? How does knowledge for action get defined? The politics of knowledge and framing often gets kept under wraps. Livelihoods analysis is presented as a rigorous and rational process, yet inevitably it is pursued with many buried assumptions and commitments. While such analysis may be good at opening up inputs to debate, offering descriptive insight into local complexity, it is less good at defining outputs, which often get narrowed down. The problem is that livelihoods analysis can be made to serve multiple purposes and ends. As a malleable concept which opens up such rich diversity in empirical description, it can equally be squashed down into the narrow instrumentalism of log-frames and planning formats, or get deployed by particular political commitments, dominated in recent years by neo-liberal reform.

In order to avoid such closing down, and maintain a process of appraisal, assessment and intervention which remains open, attention to the processes through which livelihoods knowledge is negotiated and used is required (cf. Stirling 2008). With knowledge politics around framings and normative commitments more explicit, opportunities to deliberate upon the political choices inherent in livelihoods analyses potentially emerge. Rather than relying on a bland listing of principles or, worse, keeping such questions of values and politics off the agenda with a naïve plea to rationality, a focus on inclusive deliberation around livelihood framings and directions of change can come to the fore.

### ***Politics***

Politics and power thus must be central to livelihood perspectives for rural development. Politics is not just 'context', but a focus for analysis in and of itself. It is not just a matter of adding another 'capital' to the assets pentagon (Baumann 2000), with all the flawed assumptions of equivalence and substitutability inherent. While, as discussed earlier, some excellent work has been carried out on local-level power dynamics and institutional and organisational politics, the attention to power and politics must, of course, move beyond the local level to examine wider structures of inequality. Basic questions of political economy and history matter: the nature of the state, the influence of private capital and terms of trade, alongside other wider structural forces, influence livelihoods in particular places. This is conditioned by

histories of places and peoples, and their wider interactions with colonialism, state-making and globalisation.

All this is, in many senses, blindingly obvious. But an unhelpful divide often persists in livelihoods analyses between micro-level, locale-specific perspectives, emphasising agency and action, and broader, macro-level structural analysis. Both speak of politics and power, but in very different ways. This is down in large part to disciplinary proclivities, separated out along the classic structure-agency axis of the social sciences. Yet, livelihood perspectives must look simultaneously at both structure and agency and the diverse micro- and macro-political processes that define opportunities and constraints. While Giddens' concept of 'structuration' (1984) is rather cumbersome, the basic argument for recursive links across scales and between structural conditions and human action is essential. Although developed to some degree in some earlier precursors of the livelihoods frameworks (cf. Bebbington 1999, Leach *et al.* 1999), such basic analytical moves have not been central to livelihoods analysis, with a preference often towards locality and agency, black-boxing wider structural features.

This is a problem which needs to be addressed. It is one of the reasons that, in some respects, livelihoods perspectives have been side-lined in debates about governance and the politics of globalisation. The 1992 book, *Rural Livelihoods: Crises and Responses* (Bernstein *et al.* 1992) is probably the most comprehensive attempt to integrate livelihoods perspectives with these more structural political economy concerns. There are also other rich strands of scholarship to draw on, which would allow livelihoods analysis to put politics centre stage. However, these have sometimes got lost in the micro-economic reformulations of livelihoods analysis. Thus, the long-standing work on agro-food systems (Goodman and Watts 1997, McMichael 1994) and agrarian change (Bernstein and Byers 2001), for example, provide important insights, while political ecology explicitly explores links between the local level and broader political-economic structures (Peet and Watts 1996). In the same way feminist scholarship is keenly aware of links between personal and bodily questions and broader structural forces defining power relations in diverse livelihood settings (Kabeer 1994).

Attention to how livelihoods are structured by relations of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion and cultural identity are central. Understanding of agrarian structures requires, as Bernstein *et al.* (1992, 24) point out, asking the basic questions: who owns what, who does what, who gets what and what do they do with it? Social relations inevitably govern the distribution of property (including land), patterns of work and divisions of labour, the distribution of income and the dynamics of consumption and accumulation. As with gender and other dimensions of social difference, questions of class must be central to any livelihoods analysis. But, as O'Laughlin (2004, 387) argues:

Class, not as an institutional context variable, but as a relational concept, is absent from the discourse of livelihoods. Accordingly, political space is very limited – focusing mainly on 'empowering' the poor, without being clear about how this process takes place or who might be 'disempowered' for it to occur.

A more explicit theorisation of politics, power and social difference is thus required. Livelihoods analysis is still required to unpick the complex threads and contextual specificity, but it must be located, as O'Laughlin argues, in a relational



understanding of power and politics which identifies how political spaces are opened up and closed down.

So, how can an attention to politics and power be put at the heart of livelihoods perspectives? Some would say it already is. Much livelihoods analysis centres on the basic question of how different people gain access to assets for the pursuit of livelihoods. This must necessarily encompass questions of power and politics. Institutions – the rules of game governing access – are of course mediated by power relations. And struggles over access involve both individual efforts and collective action through organised politics, involving alliances, movements or party politics. The livelihoods ‘tool box’ is not short of methods for looking at this type of political process operating across scales.<sup>15</sup> But, as discussed, in the overly instrumental work driven by development imperatives these are often not used – or only in a light, descriptive way.<sup>16</sup> In sum, there is an urgent need to bring politics back in to livelihoods perspectives. As Sue Unsworth argues (2001, 7):

Poverty reduction requires a longer term, more strategic understanding of the social and political realities of power, and confronts us with ethical choices and trade-offs which are much more complex ... A more historical, less technical way of looking at things can provide a sense of perspective.

Thus to enrich livelihood perspectives further, there is a need to be more informed by an explicit theoretical concern with the way class, gender and capitalist relations operate (O’Laughlin 2004), asking up-front who gains and loses and why, embedded in an analysis informed by theories of power and political economy and so an understanding of processes of marginalisation, dispossession, accumulation and differentiation.

### ***Scale***

One of the claims of livelihoods perspectives is that they link the micro with the macro. As already discussed, this is often more of an ambition than a reality. One of the persistent failings of livelihoods approaches has been the failure to address wider, global processes and their impingement on livelihood concerns at the local level. Livelihoods perspectives have thus often failed to engage with debates about globalisation, for example, ceding the terrain to macro-economics, notoriously under-informed about local-level complexities.

As global transformations continue apace, attention to scale issues must be central to the reinvigoration of livelihoods perspectives. Again, while there have been failings and absences, there have been some important contributions which can be drawn upon and made more central to livelihoods approaches for the future. An important collection of papers edited by Tony Bebbington and Simon Batterbury (2001, 370) emphasised the significance of what they termed transnational livelihoods and the ‘analytical value of grounding political ecologies

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<sup>15</sup>See for example, Murray (2001, 2002); [www.livelihoods.org](http://www.livelihoods.org); [www.policy-powertools.org/](http://www.policy-powertools.org/); [www.chronicpoverty.org/toolbox/Livelihoods.php](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/toolbox/Livelihoods.php).

<sup>16</sup>There is a good argument for ‘optimal diplomatic omission’ in order to gain access to formal agendas and open up policy spaces – and livelihoods perspectives, with their all-embracing coverage and trans-disciplinary approach, are a good route to this – but this is no excuse for a lack of underlying political analysis to inform such engagements.

of globalisation in notions of livelihood, scale, place and network'. With cases examining migration, remittance flows and rural social movements, the importance of looking at linking solid, place-based analysis with broader scales, including trans-national connections, is emphasised. Looking beyond the local to wider landscapes is of course central to geographical analysis, and the notion of 'scape' has been extended to look at the patterns of practices of globalisation (Appadurai 1996). To meet these challenges, Bebbington and Batterbury (2001, 377) argue for:

A broader enterprise in which political ecology, cultural geography, development studies and environmental politics are all involved, even if they have differing entry points. This broader enterprise is one that struggles to understand the ways in which peoples, places and environments are related and mutually constituted, and the ways in which these constitutions are affected by processes of globalisation.

A variety of approaches lend themselves to this sort of analysis. Network approaches (Castells 1996), flow analysis (Spaargaren *et al.* 2006) and value chain, commodity system or filiere approaches (Kaplinksy and Morris 2001) have become important lenses in different areas for looking at processes of change across scales. Yet there has been poor articulation with livelihoods approaches. Some initiatives stand out, however. For example, there have been some excellent multi-sited, comparative, scaled studies linking local-level analysis to broader processes of change (e.g. Warren *et al.* 2001). There have also been attempts to link approach to, for example, understanding trade regimes and livelihoods (Stevens *et al.* 2003) or combining value chain and livelihoods assessments (Kanji *et al.* 2005). These are all efforts to build on if scale questions – linking the micro to the macro and *vice versa* – are to be addressed.

The challenge for the future is to develop livelihoods analyses which examine networks, linkages, connections, flows and chains across scales, but remain firmly rooted in place and context. But this must go beyond a mechanistic description of links and connections. Such approaches must also illuminate the social and political processes of exchange, extraction, exploitation and empowerment, and so explore the multiple contingent consequences of globalisation on rural livelihoods. They must ask how particular forms of globalisation and associated processes of production and exchange – historically from colonialism to contemporary neo-liberal economics – create both processes of marginalisation and opportunity. In such a view 'the global' and 'the local' are not separated – either physically or analytically – but intimately intertwined through connections, linkages, relations and dynamics between diverse locales. Livelihoods analysis must thus expose the inevitably highly variegated experiences of globalisation, and so the implications of multiple transformations and diverse livelihood pathways.

### ***Dynamics***

Another challenge for livelihoods perspectives is to deal with long-term change. The term *sustainable* livelihoods implies that livelihoods are stable, durable, resilient and robust in the face of both external shocks and internal stresses. But what stresses and what shocks are important? How is sustainability assessed? And how are future generations' livelihoods made part of the equation? This has been a weak element in

much livelihoods analysis, despite earlier pleas.<sup>17</sup> The focus instead has often been on coping and short-term adaptation, drawing on a rich heritage of vulnerability analysis (cf. Swift 1989), rather than attention to systemic transformation due to long-run secular changes.

For example, in a study from rural Zimbabwe, Frost *et al.* (2007) present a highly pessimistic vision of livelihood sustainability. They argue forcefully that livelihoods interventions in the study area have made no difference, and that people are stuck in a more fundamental trap which palliative, and very expensive, measures are not geared up to deal with. But such single time-frame analyses may miss out on longer-term dynamics and the potentials for more radical transformations. Historical analyses of livelihood change highlight how long-term shifts in livelihood strategies emerge (Mortimore 2003, Wiggins 2000). People's initiative and local knowledge enhances resilience to shocks and stresses. In long-run livelihood change, specific dynamic drivers, operating over decades, are highlighted as important. These include demography (Tiffen *et al.* 1994), regional economic shifts and urbanisation (Tiffen 2003), migration (Batterbury 2001), land-use (Fairhead and Leach 1996) and climate (Adger *et al.* 2003).

Without attention to these long-run, slow variables in dynamic change, a snapshot view describing desperate coping may miss slow transformations for the better – as people intensify production, improve environmental conditions, invest or migrate out. But, in the same way, a rosy picture of local, adaptive coping to immediate pressures, based on local capacities and knowledge, may miss out on long-term shifts which will, in time, undermine livelihoods in more fundamental ways. Long-term temperature rises may make agriculture impossible, shifts in terms of trade may undermine the competitiveness of local production or migration of labour to urban areas may eliminate certain livelihood options in the long-term.

Sustainability and resilience thus cannot always emerge through local adaptation in conditions of extreme vulnerability. Instead, more dramatic reconfigurations of livelihoods may have to occur in response to long-run change. This is highlighted in particular by the challenge of climate change. Livelihoods language has certainly been incorporated into thinking about climate adaptation, linking climate change to development objectives (Lemos *et al.* 2007, Boyd *et al.* 2008). But much of this has been rather instrumental, merely dressing up standard rural development interventions in climate adaptation clothing. Bringing perspectives on livelihoods into climate change responses requires more than this, with a more careful unpacking of the inter-relationships between vulnerability and resilience perspectives (Nelson *et al.* 2007).

Livelihoods analysis that identifies different future strategies or pathways provides one way of thinking about longer-term change. Dorward *et al.* (2005), for example, distinguish between 'hanging in', 'stepping up' and 'stepping out'. Different people, because of their current asset base and livelihood options, are likely, given future trends, to end up just coping, moving to new livelihood options

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<sup>17</sup>Chambers and Conway (1992, 26), for example, urged for a consideration of 'net sustainable livelihoods' defined as 'the number of environmentally and socially sustainable livelihoods that provide a living in a context less their negative effects on the benefits and sustainability of the totality of other livelihoods everywhere'. They also explicitly argued that the interests of unborn generations be included in discussions about contemporary development.

or getting out completely. In the same way Pender (2004) identifies future livelihood pathways for the highlands of Central America and East Africa based on comparative advantages – in agricultural potential, market access, infrastructure provision and population densities, among other variables. Thus for different sites, future pathways are envisaged – and so different types of intervention are required – if livelihood options are to be enhanced. On the basis of detailed livelihood analyses of mixed crop-livestock systems in Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe, Scoones and Wolmer (2002) identify eight different livelihood pathways, conditioned by patterns of social difference and institutional processes, with different people's options channelled down particular pathways, reinforced by policy processes, institutional pressures and external support.

These examples thus identify multiple future options – or pathways – some positive, some negative; some supported by external intervention and policy, some not. But how sustainable are such pathways, given the possible, but always uncertain, future shocks and stresses, and long-term drivers of change? Here other literatures may help enhance livelihoods thinking, and bring debates about sustainability more firmly back into discussions. First, are approaches focused on the analysis of the resilience of socio-ecological systems (Folke *et al.* 2002, Gunderson and Holling 2002, Walker and Salt 2006). These identify the importance of looking at interactions between slow and fast variables and cross-scale interactions between them, and the interactions these have on resilience – defined as the amount of change a system can undergo while maintaining its core properties. While emerging from ecology and a concern for complex, non-linear dynamics of ecosystems, resilience thinking has increasingly been applied to interactions between ecological and social systems across scales (Berkes *et al.* 1998). As with 'sustainability science' (Clarke and Dickson 2003), the central concern is with sustaining 'life support systems', and the capacity of natural systems to provide for livelihoods into the future, given likely stresses and shocks. While well developed for ecological and engineering systems, the extension of resilience concepts to social-economic-cultural-political systems is definitely 'work in progress', but an area with increasing attention and innovation.<sup>18</sup>

A second area, with similar concerns but with different origins, is work on transitions in socio-technical systems (Geels and Schot 2007, Smith and Stirling 2008). Emerging from science and technology studies, such approaches explore how interacting social and technical systems move towards more sustainable configurations. This may not be through gradual, incremental shifts, but through more radical transitions, where new social, economic and technological systems unfold. This may, in particular, emerge from 'niches', where experiments with alternatives occur at a small scale at the margins, only to become mainstream at a later date when conditions change and opportunities arise (Smith 2006).

Livelihoods perspectives could be significantly enhanced by some interaction with these literatures, converging as they do on key concerns for rural livelihoods – including adaptive capacity/capability, institutional flexibility and diversity of responses, as key ingredients of sustainability.

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<sup>18</sup>See in particular the work of the Resilience Alliance ([www.resalliance.org](http://www.resalliance.org)).

## **Conclusion**

Livelihoods perspectives offer an important lens for looking at complex rural development questions. As argued by Scoones and Wolmer (2003, 5):

A sustainable livelihoods approach has encouraged... a deeper and critical reflection. This arises in particular from looking at the consequence of development efforts from a local-level perspective, making the links from the micro-level, situated particularities of poor people's livelihoods to wider-level institutional and policy framings at district, provincial, national and even international levels. Such reflections therefore put into sharp relief the importance of complex institutional and governance arrangements, and the key relationships between livelihoods, power and politics.

But in order to have continued relevance and application, livelihoods perspectives must address more searchingly and concretely questions across the four themes highlighted above: knowledge, politics, scale and dynamics. 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 taken its eye off the ball. A certain complacency, fuelled by generous funding flows, a comfortable localism and organisational inertia has meant that some of the big, emerging issues of rapid globalisation, disruptive environmental change and fundamental shifts in rural economies have not been addressed. Innovative thinking and practical experimentation has not yet reshaped livelihood perspectives to meet these challenges in radically new ways.

But, more positively, around the four themes outlined above a new livelihoods agenda opens up. This does not mean abandoning a basic commitment to locally-embedded contexts, place-based analysis and poor people's perspectives; nor does it mean slavishly responding to the framings provided by dominant disciplines such as economics. But there is an urgent need to rethink, retool and reengage, and draw productively from other areas of enquiry and experience to enrich and reinvigorate livelihood perspectives for new contemporary challenges. A re-energised livelihoods perspective thus requires, first, a basic recognition of cross-scale dynamic change and, second, a more central place for considerations of knowledge, power, values and political change. The themes of knowledge, scale, politics and dynamics, I argue, offer an exciting and challenging agenda of research and practice to enrich livelihood perspectives for rural development into the future.

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