

SUSTAINABLE RURAL LIVELIHOODS

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

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Ian Scoones

SUMMARY

The concept of 'sustainable livelihoods' is increasingly important in the development debate. This paper outlines a framework for analysing sustainable livelihoods, defined here in relation to five key indicators. The framework shows how, in different contexts, sustainable livelihoods are achieved through access to a range of livelihood resources (natural, economic, human and social capitals) which are combined in the pursuit of different livelihood strategies (agricultural intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification and migration). Central to the framework is the analysis of the range of formal and informal organisational and institutional factors that influence sustainable livelihood outcomes. In conclusion, the paper briefly considers some of the practical, methodological and operational implications of a sustainable livelihoods approach.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘sustainable rural livelihoods’¹ is increasingly central to the debate about rural development, poverty reduction and environmental management. But what does this new entry into the development lexicon actually mean? This short paper attempts to draw together some of the definitional issues surrounding the concept, before moving on to explore some of the central conceptual and methodological issues involved in investigating sustainable livelihood issues. The paper concludes with some brief reflections on the operational implications of a sustainable livelihood approach.

In particular, the paper tries to examine a range of key questions:

- How can you assess who achieves a sustainable livelihood and who doesn’t? In other words: what are the relevant outcome indicators?
- What are the livelihood resources, institutional processes and livelihood strategies which are important in enabling or constraining the achievement of sustainable livelihoods for different groups of people?
- What are the practical, operational and policy implications of adopting a sustainable livelihood approach?

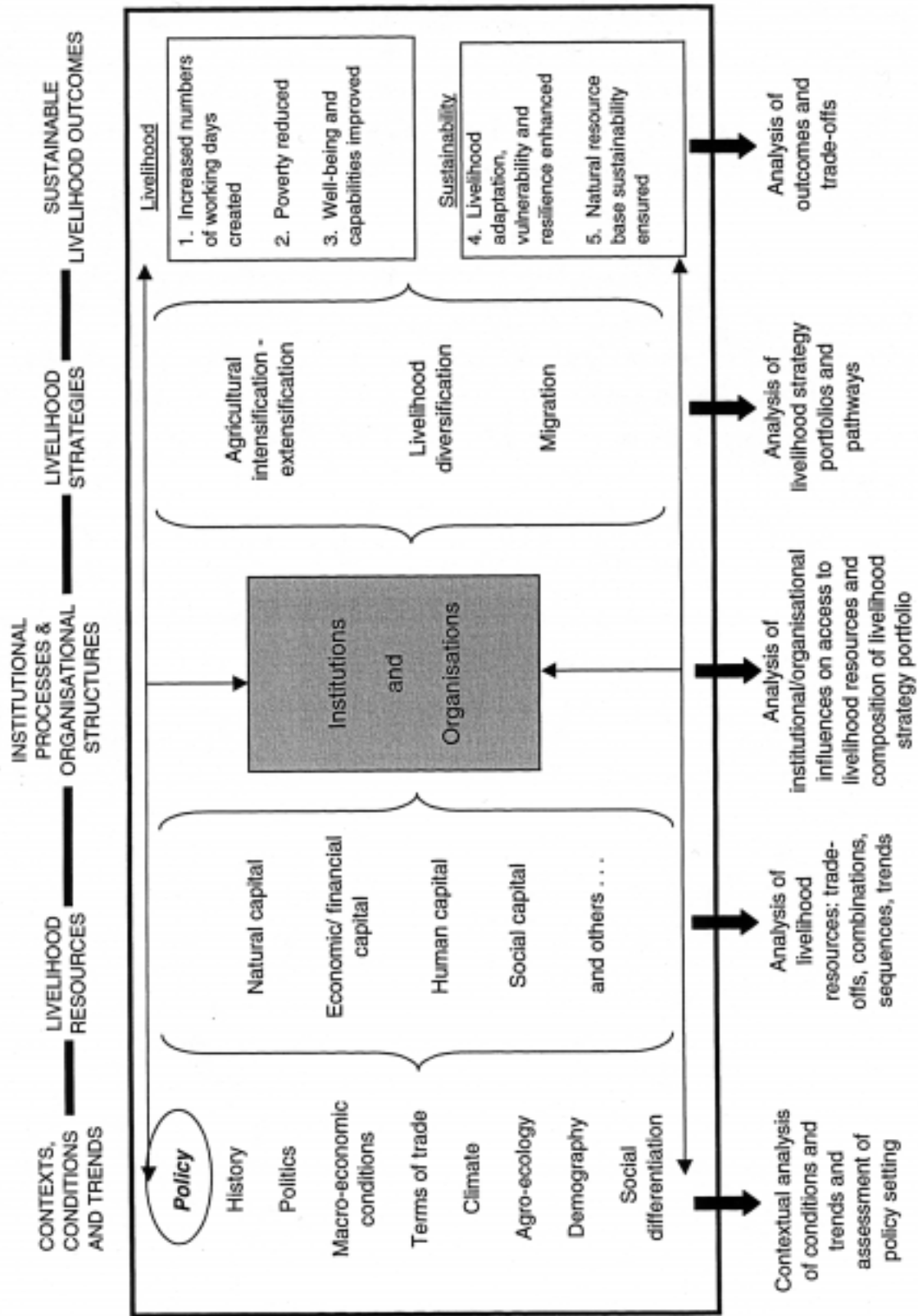
This paper aims to review the scope of these questions, clarifying the conceptual and analytical approaches, exploring the range of methodological tools and discussing the practical and operational consequences of a sustainable livelihoods approach. Empirical field research employing the framework discussed in this paper is currently underway in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali (with also some work in Zimbabwe). Only with the detailed results of this work will it be possible to assess fully the potential utility and limitations of this approach. At this stage, the focus is therefore on the framework for analysis; later outputs of the IDS Sustainable Livelihoods programme will aim to apply the framework in particular cases, with the use of specific examples.

A FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING SUSTAINABLE RURAL LIVELIHOODS

The IDS sustainable rural livelihoods framework (Figure 1) has a number of basic elements. The key question to be asked in any analysis of sustainable livelihoods is –

Given a particular *context* (of policy setting², politics, history, agroecology and socio-economic conditions), what combination of *livelihood resources* (different types of ‘capital’) result in the ability to follow what combination of *livelihood strategies* (agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification and migration) with what *outcomes*? Of particular interest in this framework are the *institutional processes* (embedded in a matrix of formal and informal institutions and organisations) which mediate the ability to carry out such strategies and achieve (or not) such outcomes.

Figure 1: Sustainable rural livelihoods: a framework for analysis



The framework can be applied at a range of different scales – from individual, to household, to household cluster, to extended kin grouping, to village, region or even nation, with sustainable livelihood outcomes assessed at different levels. The specification of the scale of analysis is therefore critical, as is an analysis of the interactions between levels in terms of net livelihood effects, both positive and negative (see below).

The following sections of this paper will examine the various elements of the framework in turn, starting with assessing outcomes in relation to indicators of sustainable livelihoods.

ASSESSING OUTCOMES: WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD?

Establishing indicators of outcomes requires a precise answer to the question: what is a sustainable livelihood? The now burgeoning literature on this subject is not particularly clear on this question. As with the now well-established term ‘sustainable development’, there are often uneasy compromises between different objectives embedded in the same definition. The term ‘sustainable livelihoods’ relates to a wide set of issues which encompass much of the broader debate about the relationships between poverty and environment. Yet in the existing literature, there is often little clarity about how contradictions are addressed and trade-offs are assessed. As Carswell et al (1997: 10) point out: “definitions of sustainable livelihoods are often unclear, inconsistent and relatively narrow. Without clarification, there is a risk of simply adding to a conceptual muddle...”

Drawing on Chambers and Conway (1992) among others³, the IDS team’s definition is as follows:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required 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.

This, in turn, can be disaggregated to highlight different sub-components. Five key elements of the definition can be recognised, each relating to a wider literature with, in some cases, established ways of assessing outcomes. The first three focus on livelihoods, linking concerns over work and employment with poverty reduction with broader issues of adequacy, security, well-being and capability. The last two elements add the sustainability dimension, looking, in turn, at the resilience of livelihoods and the natural resource base on which, in part, they depend.

i) Creation of working days – This relates to the ability of a particular combination of livelihood strategies to create gainful employment for a certain portion of the year⁴ This may be on or off-farm, part of a wage labour system or subsistence production. Sen (1975: 5) notes three aspects of employment – income (a wage for the employed), production (employment providing a consumable output) and recognition (where employment provides recognition for being engaged in something worthwhile). In terms of the income/production aspects, various target levels have been

suggested, but 200 days a year appears to be widely used as a minimum level to create a livelihood (Lipton 1991; 1993). Overall, the number of livelihoods created will be dependent on the proportion of the population available for work.

ii) Poverty reduction – The poverty level is a key criterion in the assessment of livelihoods. Various measures can be used to develop an absolute ‘poverty line’ measure based on income or consumption levels (Ravallion 1992; Baulch 1996). Alternatively, relative poverty and inequality can be assessed using Gini coefficient measures. There are a range of pros and cons for each measure, as well as some major measurement challenges (Greeley 1994). However, such quantitative assessments of poverty can be used in combination with more qualitative indicators of livelihoods (Jodha, 1988; Schaffer 1996).

iii) Well-being and capabilities – The notions of ‘well-being’ (cf. Chambers 1995; 1997) and ‘capability’ (Sen 1984; 1987) provide a wider definitional scope for the livelihoods concept. Sen sees capabilities as ‘what people can do or be with their entitlements’, a concept which encompasses far more than the material concerns of food intake or income. Such ideas represent more than the human capital which allows people to do things, but also the intrinsically valued elements of ‘capability’ or ‘well-being’. Chambers (1997) argues that such a well-being approach to poverty and livelihood analysis may allow people themselves to define the criteria which are important. This may result in a range of sustainable livelihood outcome criteria, including diverse factors such as self-esteem, security, happiness, stress, vulnerability, power, exclusion, as well as more conventionally measured material concerns (Chambers 1989).

iv) Livelihood adaptation, vulnerability and resilience – The ability of a livelihood to be able to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks is central to the definition of sustainable livelihoods. Such resilience in the face of stresses and shocks is key to both livelihood adaptation and coping (Davies 1996). Those who are unable to cope (temporary adjustments in the face of change) or adapt (longer term shifts in livelihood strategies) are inevitably vulnerable and unlikely to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Assessing resilience and the ability to positively adapt or successfully cope requires an analysis of a range of factors, including an evaluation of historical experiences of responses to various shocks and stresses. Different types of shock or stress, in turn, may result in different responses, including avoidance, repartitioning, resistance or tolerance mechanisms (Payne and Lipton 1994: 15).

v) Natural resource base sustainability – Most rural livelihoods are reliant on the natural resource base at least to some extent. Following Conway (1985), Holling (1993) and others, natural resource base sustainability refers to the ability of a system to maintain productivity when subject to disturbing forces, whether a ‘stress’ (a small, regular, predictable disturbance with a cumulative

effect) or a ‘shock’ (a large infrequent, unpredictable disturbance with immediate impact). This implies avoiding depleting stocks of natural resources to a level which results in an effectively permanent decline in the rate at which the natural resource base yields useful products or services for livelihoods⁵. Measuring natural resource sustainability is notoriously difficult, as it is critical to link indicators of resource depletion or accumulation (e.g. soil fertility levels, vegetation cover etc.) to both the temporal dynamics of system resilience (i.e. the ability to recover from disturbance) and livelihood needs (i.e. an assessment of whether natural resource change results in ‘effectively permanent declines in useful products or services’).

Clearly these five indicators of sustainable livelihoods are quite different in scope, with a range from very precise measures, amenable to quantitative assessment, to very broad and diffuse indicators requiring more qualitative techniques for assessment. No neat, simple algorithm for objectively measuring sustainable livelihoods emerges from this definition therefore. Indeed this would be highly inappropriate. The concept of sustainable livelihoods is a composite of many ideas and interests, the coming together of a number of different strands in the development debate. The important thing to recognise about the term is that it is always subject to negotiation. Thus contradictions and trade-offs between different elements of the composite definition (above decomposed into five parts, but potentially divided up in different ways) must always be recognised. Different people will inevitably have different views as to the priority indicators, and, where conflicts are highlighted, choices then have to be made. By disaggregating the definition into a series of indicators, however, such choices become explicit, making negotiation between outcome possibilities possible as part of any policy development, planning or implementation process which has sustainable livelihood concerns at its centre (see below)⁶.

LIVELIHOOD RESOURCES: COMBINING DIFFERENT TYPES OF ‘CAPITAL’

The ability to pursue different livelihood strategies is dependent on the basic material and social, tangible and intangible assets that people have in their possession. Drawing on an economic metaphor, such livelihood resources may be seen as the ‘capital’ base from which different productive streams are derived from which livelihoods are constructed. In Figure 1, four different types of ‘capital’ are identified⁷. Within each of these areas there is a wide literature and much debate about definition and measurement. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into this (but see Johnson 1997 for a review of some of the debates). Here a simple set of definitions is offered, each amenable to empirical investigation.

- Natural capital – the natural resource stocks (soil, water, air, genetic resources etc.) and environmental services (hydrological cycle, pollution sinks etc) from which resource flows and services useful for livelihoods are derived.

- Economic or financial capital – the capital base (cash, credit/debt, savings, and other economic assets, including basic infrastructure and production equipment and technologies) which are essential for the pursuit of any livelihood strategy.
- Human capital – the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health and physical capability important for the successful pursuit of different livelihood strategies.
- Social capital – the social resources (networks, social claims, social relations, affiliations, associations) upon which people draw when pursuing different livelihood strategies requiring coordinated actions.

This is clearly not an exhaustive list, and other forms of ‘capital’ can be identified⁸. In order to create livelihoods, therefore, people must combine the ‘capital’ endowments that they have access to and control over. These may be made up of personal capabilities, tangible assets (e.g. stores and material resources) and intangible assets (claims and access) (cf. Chambers and Conway 1992: 10). At any scale, livelihoods are composed in complex ways, with multiple and dynamic portfolios of different activities, often improvised as part of an on-going ‘performance’ (cf. Richards 1989).

Following on from an analysis of livelihood resources, a checklist of key questions arise:

- Sequencing – What is the starting point for successfully establishing a particular livelihood strategy? Is one type of livelihood resource an essential precursor for gaining access to others?
- Substitution – Can one type of capital be substituted for others? Or are different capitals needed in combination for the pursuit of particular livelihood strategies?
- Clustering – If you have access to one type of capital, do you usually have access to others? Or is there a clustering of particular combinations of livelihood resources associated with particular groups of people or particular livelihood strategies?
- Access – Different people clearly have different access to different livelihood resources. This is dependent on institutional arrangements, organisational issues, power and politics (see below). A socially differentiated view to analysing livelihoods is therefore critical, one that disaggregates the chosen unit of analysis – whether community, village or household – and looks at individuals or groups of social actors and their relationships, in relation to the range of relevant dimensions of difference (wealth, gender, age and so on) and the distribution of control over resources.
- Trade-offs – In pursuing a particular portfolio of livelihood strategies, what are the trade-offs faced by different people with different access to different types of livelihood resource? Depending on who you are, differential access to different types of capital may have positive or negative implications in terms of the success or otherwise in the pursuit of a sustainable livelihood⁹.
- Trends – What are the trends in terms of availability of different types of livelihood resource? How are different capital assets being depleted and accumulated, and by whom? What are the trends in terms of access? What new livelihood resources are being created through environmental, economic and social change?

LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES: PORTFOLIOS AND PATHWAYS

Within the sustainable livelihoods framework (Figure 1), three broad clusters of livelihood strategies are identified. These are: agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification and migration. Broadly, these are seen to cover the range of options open to rural people. Either you gain more of your livelihood from agriculture (including livestock rearing, aquaculture, forestry etc.) through processes of intensification (more output per unit area through capital investment or increases in labour inputs) or extensification (more land under cultivation), or you diversify to a range of off-farm income earning activities, or you move away and seek a livelihood, either temporarily or permanently, elsewhere. Or, more commonly, you pursue a combination of strategies together or in sequence¹⁰.

Identifying what livelihood resources (or combinations of 'capitals') are required for different livelihood strategy combinations is a key step in the process of analysis. For example, successful agricultural intensification may combine, in some circumstances, access to natural capital (e.g. land, water etc.) with economic capital (e.g. technology, credit etc.), while in other situations, social capital (e.g. social networks associated with drought or labour sharing arrangements) may be more significant. Understanding, in a dynamic and historical context, how different livelihood resources are sequenced and combined in the pursuit of different livelihood strategies is therefore critical.

Unravelling the connections between such complex and dynamic processes and the outcomes of different strategy combinations is therefore a key part of any investigation of sustainable livelihoods. One step in any such analysis requires an unpacking of each of the three core livelihood strategies to distinguish different dynamics and outcomes. Drawing on reviews of the wider literature¹¹, the following distinctions (or, more accurately, continua) can be seen:

- Agricultural intensification/extensification – between capital-led (supported often by external inputs and policy-led) and labour-led (based on own labour and social resources and a more autonomous process) intensification¹².
- Livelihood diversification – between an active choice to invest in diversification for accumulation and reinvestment, and diversification aimed at coping with temporary adversity or more permanent adaptation of livelihood activities, when other options are failing to provide a livelihood. Diversification therefore may involve developing a wide income earning portfolio to cover all types of shocks or stress jointly or the strategy may involve focusing on developing responses to handle a particular type of common shock or stress through well developed coping mechanisms.
- Migration – between different migration causes (e.g. voluntary and involuntary movement), effects (e.g. reinvestment in agriculture, enterprise or consumption at the home or migration site) and movement patterns (e.g. to or from different places).

A key issue in the analysis of livelihood strategies is the scale at which an assessment takes place. Livelihood strategies, for example, can be described at an individual, household and village level, as well as at regional or even national levels. But there are differences evident between scale levels in terms of the net

livelihood effects. For an individual it may be best to pursue a particular set of livelihood strategies in combination, but these may have either positive or negative impacts on other household members or the broader community. For instance, a successful agricultural intensification strategy pursued by one person may provide an opportunity for another person's agricultural processing or petty trading livelihood diversification strategy. By contrast, another type of agricultural intensification may undercut others' strategies by diverting such factors as land, labour, credit or markets. Similarly, in relation to livelihood diversification, it may make sense for individuals to specialise, while households diversify, or whole villages may specialise in a particular activity, in the context of a highly diversified regional economy. When assessing livelihood sustainability, therefore, an appreciation of scale issues must lead to a critical examination of such questions across hierarchical levels.

The combination of activities that are pursued can be seen as a 'livelihood portfolio'. Some such portfolios may be highly specialised with a concentration on one or a limited range of activities; others may be quite diverse. Different livelihood pathways are evident over different time-scales¹³. Over seasons and between years, variations in options emerge (Chambers et al 1981). Equally, within domestic cycles different combinations of strategies may be pursued sequentially, depending on changes in dependency ratios, health conditions and other factors. Over longer periods – over several generations, for example – more substantial shifts in combinations may occur, as local and external conditions change. It is this dynamic element, evident in the composition and recomposition of livelihood strategies, which is important to examine, especially in the context of assessing the sustainability of different options. This makes an historical approach central to any analysis.

The degree of specialisation or diversification may relate to the resource endowments available and the level of risk associated with alternative options. A range of options exists for confronting such risks. Five alternatives can be identified¹⁴: livelihood resources may be accumulated so that reserves and buffers are created for times when stresses and shocks are felt; activities associated with different livelihood strategies may be spread over space or over time, such that a particular risk, such as a drought event, does not affect all livelihood activities; the mix of activities may be changed to reduce the covariance among different sources of stress or shock; risk pooling options may be employed through various forms of insurance or consumption smoothing, so the effects of a shock or stress are ameliorated; and, finally, the overall resilience of the system may be enhanced such that the impacts of stresses and shocks are less dramatically felt.

Whether such livelihood pathways and portfolio combinations result in positive or negative change in relation to the range of sustainable livelihood outcome indicators is a critical issue. Several issues are important here. It is not only the total number of sustainable livelihoods created that is important, but also the level of livelihood intensity (Chambers 1987). Livelihood resources may be combined creatively and innovatively, often in complex ways, to create more livelihoods in a particular area. For example, degraded land may be transformed with the investment of labour and skill, resulting in the accumulation of natural capital, offering the potential for more livelihood opportunities. Equally, through the creation of local

economic linkages and the recirculation of knowledge, skills and resources, livelihood intensity may be increased in an area. Thus investigating the multiplier effects (both positive and negative) of particular options is an important issue in assessing sustainable livelihood outcomes. The impacts of one person's livelihood activities on others, both now and in the future is thus important. The net effects of investing in one set of livelihood strategies therefore need to be assessed, with future impacts discounted appropriately (cf. Chambers and Conway 1992).

Rural livelihood strategies are often heavily reliant on the natural resource base. For this reason, the IDS research has examined livelihood strategy choices along gradients running from relatively high to low natural resource endowment (IDS 1996). Such a gradient is also related to the level of risk and uncertainty experienced by resource users, with low natural resource endowment areas being frequently subject to drought, flooding or other natural hazards. But, although such areas may have higher levels of risk relative to income than high resource endowment sites, the absolute income loss if things go wrong in such sites is typically much less, making the potential size of loss, not just the risk of loss is also an important factor differentiating sites along such resource endowment gradients. Livelihood portfolios can therefore be expected to differ along such natural resource endowment gradients. In addition, within an area, different resource types may exist side by side, with people making use of small patches of wetland, together with irrigated areas, in combination with dryland arable land, grazing areas, woodlands and hills, for instance. This variation in resource type, along agroecological gradients and between sites, has implications for development investment strategies, with contrasting approaches expected in different areas with different natural resource endowment.

Socio-economic differences, of course, exist within any site, and these also have a major impact on the composition of livelihood portfolios. A wide number of axes of difference are relevant, including contrasts of asset ownership, income levels, gender, age, religious affiliation, caste, social or political status and so on. In relation to the analysis framework, these may refer to differences in basic livelihood resources (or access to different forms of 'capital') or to broader contextual factors.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS

So far we have been looking at selected elements of the framework – the livelihood resources which combine to allow various strategies to be pursued and different outcomes to be realised. But how is this process bound together? What structures and processes mediate the complex and highly differentiated process of achieving a sustainable livelihood?

Most previous approaches to looking at rural livelihoods have only cursorily asked these questions. In part this has been a disciplinary bias whereby economic analysis has concentrated on exploring the quantitative relationships between measurable variables. For example, the agricultural economics and related literature has many examples of detailed analysis of the relationships between, for instance, economic assets, indicators of agricultural intensification and poverty levels. This remains important, and remains a significant component of work on sustainable livelihoods. But, unless we understand the social

structures and processes through which sustainable livelihoods are achieved, a description of the relationships between variables and outcomes is somewhat limiting. For this reason, the framework outlined in Figure 1 has given particular emphasis to the study of institutions and organisations.

A broad definition of institutions, derived from the sociological and anthropological literature is taken here. This sees institutions as ‘regularised practices (or patterns of behaviour) structured by rules and norms of society which have persistent and widespread use’ (following Giddens 1979). Institutions may thus be both formal and informal, often fluid and ambiguous, and usually subject to multiple interpretations by different actors. Power relations are embedded within institutional forms, making contestation over institutional practices, rules and norms always important. Institutions are also dynamic, continually being shaped and reshaped over time. They are thus part of a process of social negotiation, rather than fixed ‘objects’ or ‘bounded social systems’. Institutions (in North’s terms the ‘rules of the game’) therefore are distinguished from organisations (the players) (North 1990), the interplay of both being important in the framework (Figure 1). According to Davies (1997: 24):

“institutions are the social cement which link stakeholders to access to capital of different kinds to the means of exercising power and so define the gateways through which they pass on the route to positive or negative [livelihood] adaptation”

So what?, you may ask. Why do institutions really matter for the policy and practice of development for sustainable livelihoods? A number of inter-related reasons can be forwarded:

- Understanding institutional processes allows the identification of restrictions/barriers and opportunities (or ‘gateways’) to sustainable livelihoods. Since formal and informal institutions (ranging from tenure regimes to labour sharing systems to market networks or credit arrangements) mediate access to livelihood resources and in turn affect the composition of portfolios of livelihood strategies, an understanding of institutions and organisations is therefore key to designing interventions which improve sustainable livelihood outcomes.
- An institutional approach sheds light on the social processes which underlie livelihood sustainability. Achieving sustainable livelihoods is not a deterministic affair; contestations, negotiations and trade-offs are evident at every turn. An insight into social relationships, their institutional forms (both formal and informal) and the power dynamics embedded in these, is therefore vital. Interventions in support of sustainable livelihoods therefore must be attuned to such complexity, if suitable institutional entry points are to be found.
- An approach which emphasises both formal and informal institutions and underlying rules and norms suggests a complex and ‘messy’ institutional matrix mediating the processes of livelihood change (cf. Leach et al 1997; Cousins 1997). For example, an analysis of an institutional matrix would look at which combinations of the wide range of informal and formal institutions and organisations operating at different levels – from within the household to the national (sometimes

international) level – particularly influence different people’s abilities to pursue combinations of different livelihood strategies, with what results for sustainable livelihood outcomes. Describing such an institutional matrix in any setting is, not surprisingly, far from an easy task. However, the recognition of such complexity allows scope for innovation in planned interventions at different levels, going beyond the conventional support for formal organisations or institutional mechanisms to look at combinations of formal and informal approaches.

A SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH: SOME OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Adopting a sustainable livelihoods approach has a number of significant operational implications. This section touches briefly on three areas – methodologies for field investigation, intervention options and planning approaches. In a number of significant respects such approaches differ from the conventional sectoral approach to development planning and intervention.

Methodological considerations

The framework for the analysis of sustainable livelihoods presented in this paper provides a holistic and integrated view of the processes by which people achieve (or fail to achieve) sustainable livelihoods (Figure 1). Investigating each element laid out in the framework – from contextual factors through livelihood resources to strategies and outcomes – with an institutional lens is potentially a significant undertaking. If the full range of differentiated and nuanced quantitative and qualitative information is to be amassed for the analysis, even a major field research effort may be insufficient to uncover all aspects of sustainable livelihoods in a given site.

But such exhaustive analysis may not be appropriate in all cases. The key for any intervention in support of sustainable livelihoods is to identify the institutional matrix which determines the major trade-offs (between, for example, types of ‘capital’, livelihood strategies and sustainable livelihood outcomes) for different groups of people and across a variety of sites and scales and so the variety of livelihood pathways available. In work of this sort the principle of ‘optimal ignorance’ must always be applied, seeking out only what is necessary to know in order for informed action to proceed. The framework discussed in this paper may help in such an investigation by acting as a simple checklist of issues to explore, prompting investigators to pursue key connections and linkages between the various elements. While it offers no predictive power, it hopefully encourages the right sort of questions to be asked.

The type of methods which may be used to answer such questions will necessarily be varied, and best used in combination. The range of conventional survey tools potentially can combine with appropriate qualitative methodologies and participatory rural appraisal techniques to form a ‘hybrid’ methodological approach, with sequences of methods designed to explore different questions posed by different elements of the framework¹⁵. With such basic information on key trade-offs collected in a systematic and rigorous manner, an iterative and more participatory planning process may proceed, where different options can be discussed and intervention choices negotiated among different stakeholders (see below).

Options for intervention: multiple entry points

Holistic conceptual frameworks, no matter what their intellectual merits are, are not necessarily good guides to intervention. Past experience of multi-sectoral and integrated development (as with the integrated rural development approach of the 1970s) has not always been positive. But the sort of integrative analysis advocated here, however, may help guide focused and well-targeted intervention, when supported by some straightforward administrative and management procedures.

With the emphasis on both livelihood resources and outcomes, as well as institutional processes, multiple entry points for development interventions are suggested by the framework. These range from more conventional options focused on supporting access to particular livelihood resources to allow for the more effective pursuit of particular livelihood strategies (or combinations), to more complex alternatives arising out of the social analysis of ‘messy’ institutional arrangements. Rather than focusing solely on conventional interventions (transfer of technologies, skills etc.), the sustainable livelihoods approach emphasises getting the institutional and organisational setting right, with emphasis on both formal and informal mechanisms. Such an approach will hopefully improve the effectiveness of conventional interventions, as well as extending the range of options across livelihood strategies.

The framework also suggests going beyond the sectoral approach to rural development. Policies for sustainable livelihoods cut across the conventional divides of government bureaucracy and professional specialisation. If the development objective is to create and sustain livelihoods, then agriculture, off-farm income generation, migrancy and remittances have to be looked at together, including the increasingly important rural-urban linkages in the wider economy. Many potential policy and intervention areas therefore cut across conventional boundaries. Credit and rural finance is a good case in point. Focused credit schemes (say concentrating exclusively on seeds and fertilisers) may not be the best option for improving livelihoods, if migration or off-farm diversification are the better option. Credit policies for livelihoods may focus on broader loan strategies with reinvestment routes controlled according to rural people’s own objectives.

Planning for sustainable livelihoods

Planning for what combination of interventions is most appropriate in a particular site presents some major challenges. For a start, defining what a sustainable livelihood is in a particular context is always open to debate (see above). As discussed earlier, the sustainable livelihood definition encompasses a range of different criteria, some of which may conflict. ‘Sustainable livelihoods’ is thus a normative concept made up of multiple and, sometimes, contested elements. Negotiating what is a sustainable livelihood among the variety of stakeholders must therefore be a first task in any intervention process. Negotiations, for instance, may have to take place over the focus for intervention. Should this be at the area level, or focused on particular villages or households or on identified target groups or individuals? As discussed in earlier sections, the framework can be used for analysis at different scales and, in turn, it may highlight some key

dilemmas and trade-offs. For example, when focused at an area level, different priorities may emerge than when focused on targeted groups, individuals or sectors.

Since there is also such a range of intervention options possible, and trade-offs between these are always evident, negotiation and discussion must continue throughout any intervention process. Planning for and implementing a sustainable livelihoods approach is therefore necessarily iterative and dynamic. As already discussed, it also requires the active participation of all different interested parties in the processes of defining meanings and objectives, analysing linkages and trade-offs, identifying options and choices and, ultimately, deciding what to do. A simple framework, such as the one presented here, combined with the integrative analysis derived from participatory field level analysis, may help in this challenging process by highlighting key issues, questions and contradictions, as well as pointing towards areas where actions may proceed and common goals can be achieved.

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NOTES

1. The term sustainable rural livelihoods has been adopted for this paper, as the work on which these reflections is based is largely rurally based. However, rural and urban livelihoods are clearly intertwined, and the rural distinction is somewhat artificial.
2. For example, see Ahmed and Lipton (1997) for a discussion of structural adjustment in Africa and sustainable livelihoods.
3. Early definitions of sustainable livelihoods can be found in the Brundtland report, WCED (1987). Various outputs from IDS in this period, including Chambers (1987, 1989) and Swift (1989) also develop a livelihoods focus.
4. In looking at this aspect of livelihood outcomes, cultural debates about what constitutes 'work' or 'leisure' must be taken into account.
5. For example; Abel and Blaikie (1989) offer a definition of land degradation in a rangelands context.
6. Some would argue that employing a range of incommensurable indicators, which potentially overlap and conflict, is antithetical to effective, rational planning. The lack of a simple mechanism for choosing options also potentially opens up the possibility for capture of the process by particular interest groups. However, complex choices subject to multiple and contested perspectives are never going to be amenable to simple decision rules, and must always be open to debate and negotiation. Choices of this sort are, in the end, political. Frameworks that help to open up the debate, allowing a wider range of actors to participate, and making processes of discussion and negotiation explicit and transparent, are therefore potentially valuable tools.
7. 'Capital' is conventionally seen as the stock of productive resources built up by human action by investing current income streams, and so increasing future benefits from a given input of labour or raw material. Such capital may depreciate, be consumed or be sold off. Under such a definition, it can be argued that natural and social 'capital' are not always appropriately termed 'capital' resources (Lipton pers. comm.).
8. For instance, the broader political conditions (including the relationship between the state and civil society) which allow or constrain the pursuit of different livelihood strategies may be termed 'political capital'. Equally, the embedded historical and cultural setting within which livelihoods are pursued may be captured by the notion of 'symbolic capital' (following Bourdieu). In adapting the framework presented here, DfID have separated out 'physical capital' in addition to the four used here (Carney 1988).
9. When looking at such a range of livelihood resources, trade-offs may be quite difficult to analyse as certain types of capital are 'things' (such as land resources) while others are 'processes' (such as social claims). Calibration across 'capitals' and between sites is also problematic. The intention, however, is to offer an heuristic tool for more qualitative discussion of key issues, rather than a precise measurement framework.
10. Such livelihood strategies may involve the use of a range of tactics. For instance, people may stint, hoard, protect, deplete, claim, borrow, share, steal and so on (cf. Chambers and Conway 1992:15).

11. For agricultural intensification, see Carswell, 1997; for livelihood diversification, see Hussein and Nelson, 1998; for migration see McDowell and de Haan, 1997, de Haan 1998.
12. Distinctions between capital and labour-led intensification are not always clear-cut, however. Extra capital can be both labour-saving (e.g. tractors) and labour-consuming (e.g. tube wells), while labour-led processes in the present may displace (or employ) future land, labour and capital. Outcomes can also be quite different depending on the relative prices of factors and outputs (Lipton pers. comm.).
13. A livelihood pathway can be seen as the result of a series of livelihood choices that have emerged over time. This may have been the consequence of a set of conscious and planned choices or the result of the unintended consequences of other actions.
14. This section is based on comments on an earlier draft made by Michael Lipton. See also: Walker and Jodha, 1986; Walker and Ryan, 1990 among others.
15. In the IDS Sustainable Livelihoods research a wide range of methods have been used. Early phases relied on secondary literature review combined with informal survey and rapid rural appraisal techniques to gain a broad overview of the area. This was followed by a focused questionnaire, survey, census and monitoring approaches to gain quantitative insights. Finally, more in-depth qualitative approaches were used to look at institutional issues in detail (e.g. life histories, biographies, case studies, oral histories etc.).

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SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS RESEARCH PROGRAMME (SLP)

This research project is exploring alternative routes to sustainable livelihoods for poor people in contrasting agro-ecological settings. The research asks two questions: an analytic one - what institutional arrangements enable some poor people to achieve secure, sustainable livelihoods, when others fail?; and a practical one - what policies can support both groups?

The work focuses on the institutional arrangements which allow people to achieve sustainable livelihoods, or otherwise. We understand institutions in a very broad sense to mean the regularised practices or patterns of behaviour structured by rules which have widespread use in society; such institutions may be formal or informal. Such institutions mediate a range of livelihood processes in rural areas. We are focusing on four, related, processes: agricultural intensification, crop-livestock integration, livelihood diversification, and migration.

These livelihood processes will be investigated in four case study countries - Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe - with research sites located along agro-ecological gradients from high to low natural resource endowment and differing livelihood systems. In each country we work closely with local researchers and officials. The work started in 1997 and will continue to 1999.

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For further information, contact Jeremy Swift, Ian Scoones or Annette Sinclair (Programme Assistant) at IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE (tel +44 1273 606 261; fax +44 1273 621 202; e-mail: A.Sinclair@sussex.ac.uk), or consult the IDS Environment Group web site at [Http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/research/env/index.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/research/env/index.html).

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