THE LIVELIHOOD APPROACH: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION

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Summary: The livelihood approach is an important actor-oriented perspective in development studies, including geography of development, which strongly influenced development oriented research and development practice. This paper deals with the original outlines of that approach and its subsequent critique and evolution. It discusses the basics of the original livelihood approach in its development cooperation context around the turn of the millennium. Both its broader popularity in academic research and the initial critique it met are explained. The neglect of power relations was an important flaw of the initial livelihood approach. The paper demonstrates how the following generation of livelihood studies managed to come to grip with that shortcoming and how it developed an understanding of the operation of power in livelihood strategies that can effectively contribute to livelihood enhancement. Finally, this paper criticises current livelihood research for limiting itself to the production of series of studies presenting almost endless variations of local livelihoods. The paper argues for the rise of another type of livelihood studies, which aims – through meta-analysis of the multitude of livelihood studies available and through comparative research – at broader generalisations that may challenge existing theories.

Zusammenfassung: Der Livelihood Ansatz ist eine wichtige, akteursorientierte Perspektive in der Entwicklungsforschung und Entwicklungsgeographie, welcher sowohl die entwicklungsorientierte Forschung, als auch die praktische Entwicklungsarbeit entscheidend geprägt hat. Im Rückblick auf das ursprüngliche Konzept dieses Ansatzes, betrachtet der vorliegende Beitrag die Entwicklung der Livelihood Forschung, die einhergehende Kritik und die konzeptionelle Veränderung im Laufe der Jahre. Ausgehend von der ursprünglichen Entstehung im Kontext der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit um die Jahrtausendwende, wird sowohl die breite Popularität in der Entwicklungsforschung als auch die Kritik, auf die dieser Ansatz stieß, diskutiert. So war die Vernachlässigung von Machtbeziehungen eine entscheidende Schwachstelle in der Frühphase der Livelihood Forschung, die erst in späteren Studien überwunden werden konnte. Der Beitrag mündet in einer kritischen Betrachtung der gegenwärtiger Forschungsarbeiten, welche sich durch die schier unendliche Präsentation immer neuer Fallbeispiele und lokaler Variationen selbst limitiere. Gefordert wird demgegenüber eine neue Form der Livelihood Forschung, die ausgehend von einer vergleichenden Metaanalyse der zahlreichen vorliegenden Fallstudien, die Herausarbeitung grundlegender Gesetzmäßigkeiten erlaubt und somit dazu beiträgt, die bestehenden theoretischen Zugänge zu erweitern.

Keywords: Livelihood approach, livelihoods, power relations, meta-analysis

Introduction

With hindsight, my academic interest in the livelihood approach was characterised by a continuous commitment to contributing, on the one hand, to a sound scientific conceptualisation of the way of life of poor people in the Global South and on the other hand, to developing effective support mechanisms to enhance their livelihoods. The latter does not necessarily imply my unqualified support to development as a hegemonic project of modernity (Schuurman 2001, 61–62), nor does it deny the uncomfortable feeling that many development practitioners experience "that they are continually fashioning discourses and policies that do not reflect the realities they face in projects and local settings" (Büscher 2008). This paper and the 7th International Lecture in Development Geography are reflections of that interest.

This paper wants to pay tribute to an important actor-oriented perspective in development studies – of which geography of development is one of the constituting disciplines – that strongly influenced development oriented research and development practice. It deals with the original outlines of the livelihood approach and its subsequent critique and evolution.

In the first section, the basics of the original livelihood approach are discussed, as well as the development cooperation context around the turn of the millennium in which it emerged. The second section deals with the broader popularity of the livelihood approach in academic research, the initial critique it met and how this was overcome. In the third section,

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the neglect of power relations of the approach is discussed. This section also demonstrates how the following generation of livelihood studies managed to come to grip with that shortcoming and developed an understanding of the operation of power in livelihood strategies that can effectively contribute to livelihood enhancement. The fourth section identifies another shortcoming, i.e., the continuous production of studies presenting almost endless variations of local livelihoods. This section argues for the rise of another type of livelihood studies which aims – through meta-analysis of the multitude of livelihood studies available and through comparative research – at broader generalisations that may challenge existing theories.

The basics of the livelihood approach

Livelihood studies were brought to the centre stage of development studies in the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, when the so-called Sustainable Livelihood Framework was strongly promoted by the Department for International Development (DFID), the British state development cooperation agency. It was part of an attempt of the New Labour government to design a set of distinguishable policies that would profile the Blair administration as builder of the 'Third Way' between the rusted labour ideology of the past and the neoliberal ideology of the preceding conservative administration. Sustainable Livelihoods became the core of DFID's poverty alleviation policy (Solesbury (2003a, b). According to Geiser et al. (2011b, 258) DFID explicitly aimed at "a refocus on assistance to the poor". The pro-active, self-help image of the poor in Sustainable Livelihoods thinking fit very well with the image that the new Blair administration wanted to demonstrate. As a consequence, DFID initiated a large number of new research projects and policy debates on the subject in collaboration with a number of British think-tanks and research groups and started to finance development interventions based on that (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 30–31).

In the initial period, the explanation of the basics of Sustainable Livelihoods was supported almost as a rule by a diagram, of which plenty of variants were circulating after a few years. Many of these variants can be traced to developmental organisations, displaying in this way their own interpretation of Sustainable Livelihoods.

Poor people stood at the centre and were seen to build their livelihood strategies on a set of vital resources called capitals, usually arranged in the form of a pentagon. This pentagon became the branding label for livelihood frameworks and there was a time when the only serious livelihood researcher was the one presenting his or her own version of the pentagon. Usually the explanation started with human capital, i.e., first and foremost labour but also skills, experience, knowledge and creativity. Then followed: Natural capital, i.e., resources such as land, water, forests and pastures, but also minerals; physical capital, i.e., houses, tools and machinery, food stocks or livestock, jewellery and farm equipment; financial capital, i.e., money in a savings account or in an old sock, a loan or credit; and finally social capital, which pointed at the quality of relations among people, for example, whether one can count on support from one's family or (mutual) assistance from neighbours. Natural capital was considered very important in rural areas, while in urban areas it was considered less relevant as compared to shelter and wage labour. Moreover, in urban livelihood studies, basic infrastructure like transport, water and energy was mostly included in physical capital together with shelter and production equipment (de Haan 2000, 344).

In this way, the livelihood approach focused very much on how people organised their lives, more on opportunities and more on agency, rather than concentrating on their impoverishment as in the 1980s household and survival studies used to do. One could simply think that in its optimism, the livelihood approach was an expression of the *Zeitgeist*. However, it was also strongly motivated by the need to develop more effective poverty alleviation policies. And more effectiveness was expected to come from bottom-up and participatory methods, i.e., putting emphasis on poor people's lives and daily needs, rather than from the top-down interventionist methods practiced so widely up to then. In that respect, the livelihood approach was much indebted to the work and inspiration of Sen (1981) on entitlements and of Robert Chambers (1983) (Chambers et al. 1989; Chambers 1994a, b, c), who – hardly accidentally – also co-authored the first paper on Sustainable Livelihoods. This paper, including its definition of livelihood, is frequently referred to as the Sustainable Livelihoods foundation paper.[1)]

[1)] "a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with or recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contribute to net benefits to other livelihood at the local and global levels and in the short and long term." (Chambers and Conway 1992, 6)

But Carney's definition of livelihood – building on the one from Chambers and Conway – became general currency: "A livelihood system 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 and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base" (Carney 1998, 2). Moreover, it is important to note that "livelihoods rarely refer to a single activity. It includes complex, contextual, diverse and dynamic strategies developed by households to meet their needs" (Gaillard et al. 2009, 121).

The livelihood approach was also attractive because it had an open eye for the wider context in which the poor organised their livelihood strategies. The approach acknowledged that these strategies are embedded in structures and governed by institutions: Rainfall is bounded by climate, land is placed in property systems and wages and prices are ruled by supply and demand in markets and government regulations. This wider context was considered fundamental because an important part of the poverty alleviation policies and interventions was meant to aim at opportunities and constraints in these structures that would either enable or prevent the poor from organising effective livelihood strategies. If these policies and interventions could become more effective, it would bring the poor less vulnerability, more well-being and more sustainability.

Therefore, notions like claims and access were considered key in the livelihood approach. These notions point at the possibility to call upon moral and practical assistance and to effectively use the resource in practice. For example, the real opportunity to gather firewood in the forest; to use water for irrigation from the village well; to obtain food from the compound's granary; or to obtain information about prices for cattle or the possibilities for temporary wage labour elsewhere in the region (de Haan 2000, 344–345). Capitals or assets can be held in private or as common property, rented, borrowed, grabbed, stolen or conquered. What matters is that the poor have access to them when needed, i.e., are able to use them in practice. "Access is the process that brings stakeholders from endowment to entitlement" (Geiser et al. 2011a, 317).

But the wider context – or structure – was not only regarded as a potential constraint to the livelihood strategies of the poor. The approach also wanted to stress the potential of livelihood strategies to influence and even to change structures. This attention for poor people's agency, as their capacity to integrate experiences into their livelihood strategies and to look for outlets of aspirations, ambition and solutions to problems, is prominent in the livelihood approach. "Human agency enables man to reshape social conditions […]. Agency is embodied in the individual but embedded in social relations, through which it can become effective" (de Haan 2000, 349).

As indicated, DFID was instrumental in creating a more or less coherent livelihood approach. The department financed a number of research projects, applied the approach in development interventions on its own account, and financed interventions of international developmental NGOs that were interested in applying it. At the International Development Institute in Sussex (IDS), important contributions originated from the research on environmental entitlements, focusing on access and institutions. Influential research on diversification came from the Overseas Development Group of the University of East Anglia and research on natural resources from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Developmental organisations like UNDP, OXFAM and CARE adopted the concept of sustainable livelihoods, as did the Society for International Development (SID) (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 30). Through these big international NGOs, dozens – perhaps even hundreds – of NGOs in developing countries followed.

Finally, "the World Bank finally jumped on the bandwagon with its "Voices of the Poor" report, in which Chambers also had significant input. Apparently, the Bank wanted to seize the momentum, but in fact never gave any clear follow-up" (Narayan 2000, quoted from de Haan 2008, 53).

Moreover, it can be ascertained with hindsight that beside the usual printed material from academic journals and publishers, working papers from research groups, policy briefs from think-tanks and toolboxes from developmental agencies, it was the first time in the history of development studies that texts on a particular topical concept were to a large extent freely floating and available on the internet.

Its broader popularity and initial critique

However, there is more to say about the popularity of the livelihood approach than its promotion by developmental organisations and the free availability of relevant texts on the internet. The concept also fell back on well-known and often older approaches in various academic disciplines and became quickly taken up in academic debates on development too, reaping both adherence and critique.

In classic French geography, livelihoods were called *genres de vie*, meaning the entity of livelihood strategies of a human group in a specific region (Vidal de la Blache 1911a, b). In this region, the interaction with the natural environment was considered crucial for the development of livelihood strategies though these strategies were not seen to be determined by the natural environment. Contrary to the contemporary understanding of livelihoods as shaped by interactions between the local and the global (de Haan and Zoomers 2003), a *genre de vie* was regarded as a more or less closed regional system.

Another obvious line of descent could be traced to the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, using it in the early 1940s to describe the Nuer's way of "making a living" in Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940). While in classic French geography individual livelihoods formed a regional system with a clear history and identity, in anthropology livelihood was used much more concretely as a set of activities – mainly economic – through which people make a living. In the first instance, this concrete view on actors' activities, "giving attention to ground realities, what people do and what people really have", set the trend in modern livelihood studies. It allowed for a genuine interest in poor people's lives and offered researchers from various backgrounds an entry point for cooperation (Geiser et al. 2011b, 261-262).

But the concrete and economic take on livelihood strategies was soon criticised from various angles. One important source of inspiration was the work of the early 20th century economist Karl Polanyi, through his posthumous book 'The Livelihood of Man' (1977). Polanyi gave the concept of livelihood a more theoretical weight, by considering the economy as socially, culturally and historically embedded, as opposed to mainstream economics that is merely concerned with individual maximising behaviour. Polanyi argued that people need a material base to satisfy their needs and wants, but to understand their livelihoods; one has to go beyond the material and thus beyond formalist economics (Kaag et al. 2004, 51).

Hence it was argued that poverty could not be regarded as merely a matter of income or material well-being – as was already indicated by Chambers – but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon. Informed by participatory research, it became recognised that the poor look on their livelihoods in a holistic way. This was very well captured already at an early stage by Bebbington – quoting Giddens: "A person's assets, such as land, are not merely means with which he or she makes a living: they also give meaning to that person's world. Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act. Assets should not be understood only as 'things' that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation.

They are also the basis of an agent's power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources" (Bebbington 1999, 2022) Elements of the *genre de vie* concept resonate here too, especially the system perspective, which can be attributed to Bebbington's training in geography.

A second source of inspiration for criticising the concrete and economic take on livelihood strategies came from critical social science. From its origins in the *Frankfurter Schule* of the 1930s, critical theory was concerned with issues of justice, exclusion and power – including the oppressive aspects of power – as the key elements to understanding societal processes. Its objective went beyond understanding or explaining; it aimed at bringing about social change with equity. No wonder that the livelihood approach, with its explicit focus on agency, poor people's daily lives and bottom-up, participatory poverty alleviation and so on, drew the immediate attention of critical scholars. This already began with the critique on the notion of capitals, indicating the vital resources of livelihood. The original idea was to put various connotations as resources, assets and capital on a par with each other, suggesting flexibility between them because they would be interchangeable. For example, a poor family might lack enough land, but could rent it through financial capital or borrow it through social capital. The criticism was that in its inventive focus on trade-off between capitals, the livelihood approach did not go beyond material motives and aims. By calling resources "capitals", livelihoods were regarded in an economic view, placing the emphasis on material aspects such as production and income, and analysing livelihoods in neo-liberal terms of economic investments and gains. For instance, Arce commented that such a conceptualisation reduces "livelihood to the mobilization and deployment of social and organizational resources for the pursuit of economic and environmental goals" (Arce 2003, 205–206).

Should the livelihood approach therefore be considered as a neo-liberal project? Indeed, it tended to focus much more on opportunities than on constraints, more on actor's agency than on structure, more on neutral strategies than on failed access due to conflicts and inequalities in power. This becomes clear, upon rereading an instruction

from the initial period on how to understand the Sustainable Livelihoods framework. The framework was regarded as an "analytical structure for coming to grip with the complexity of livelihoods, understanding influences on poverty and identifying where interventions can best be made. The assumption is that people pursue a range of livelihood outcomes (health, income, reduced vulnerability, etc.) by drawing on a range of assets to pursue a variety of activities. The activities they adopt and the way they reinvest in asset-building are driven in part by their own preferences and priorities. However, they are also influenced by the types of vulnerability, including shocks (such as drought), overall trends (in, for instance, resource stocks) and seasonal variations. Options are also determined by the structures (such as the roles of government or of the private sector) and processes (such as institutional, policy and cultural factors), which people face. In aggregate, their conditions determine their access to assets and livelihood opportunities and the way in which these can be converted into outcomes. In this way, poverty, and the opportunities to escape from it, depends on all of the above" (Farrington et al. 1999, 1)

Rather than a neo-liberal project, the livelihood approach did not want to choose between neo-marxism and neo-liberalism. Rooted in the Third Way discourse of New Labour – not only in the UK but all over Europe – it took a somewhat non-ideological stand. It stressed personal responsibilities – even for the poor – in contrast to the collective responsibility of the welfare state and it downplayed structural constraints. Add this to the consideration that for development professionals "a depoliticized understanding of development is instrumental […] as this helps them focus on the key elements of their work, without being 'distracted' by the potential conflicts of interest among their partners and the power implications of development processes" (Hout 2012, 418 (single quotation marks in the original)) and it is altogether fair to conclude in retrospect that globalisation and its dominant ideology shaped much of the new understanding of livelihoods.

Coming to grip with power relations

Livelihood activities are not neutral. They engender processes of inclusion and exclusion and power is part that. And though neo-liberalism was dominant, one cannot lump everything and everyone together under that label. As Bohle (2007, 11) correctly notices, the livelihood approach bears resemblance to rights-based approaches. Both recognise responsibilities of the global community to eradicate poverty and to promote human rights, and share concerns with empowerment and participation. This makes clear that attention for power relations was never completely absent in livelihood studies. Also the influence of Sen's work on entitlements and capabilities cannot be overlooked. As already indicated above, his work was of major inspiration to livelihood studies and stimulated the attention for power relations.

In this section, three overlapping domains that gave an important impetus to the analysis of power relations in livelihood studies are discussed, i.e., political ecology, gender studies and studies on political arenas.

Firstly, challenging contributions to the analysis of power came from human and political ecology, which moved away from a structural neo-marxist gaze towards local complexities, as Geiser et al. argued (2011b, 258). An influential input was the access-to-resources model by Blaikie et al. (Blaikie et al. 1994). The model proved extremely useful in explaining poor people's livelihoods and their coping mechanisms in periods of crisis and disasters, while their second model – the pressure-and-release model inspired by political economy – maintained a focus on power structures as a root cause of vulnerability.

Bohle and Fünfgeld (2007, 666–668) pointed at further progress in political ecology. They distinguished three stages in its development. The first generation of studies in the 1980s – though appealing for its view on environmental problems as social, economic *and* political in origin – was criticised for its "underdeveloped sense of politics". The second generation of political ecology in the 1990s, therefore, started to treat politics, power relations, institutions of civil society […] more seriously (Bohle and Fünfgeld 2007, 667). Notably, the environmental entitlements approach emerged in this phase. In particular Leach et al. (1999) made Sen's original understanding of endowments and entitlements more dynamic. They argued that "there is nothing inherent in a particular good or service that makes it a priori either an endowment or an entitlement. Instead, the distinction between them depends on the empirical context and on time, within a cyclical process. What are entitlements at one time may, in turn, represent endowments at another time, from which a new set of entitlements may be derived" (Leach et al. 1999, 233).

According to Bohle and Fünfgeld, a third generation of studies in political ecology addressed the urgent societal issues of the 2000s, such as the relation between geopolitics, violence and environment. In developing a political ecology perspective for research on vulnerability, violence and human security, the authors called for more political understanding of livelihoods through connecting the concept of violent environments to the livelihood framework. That means attention "to the transformation of resource systems under the impact of violence, to the shifts in environmental entitlements, to the politicization of livelihoods and to new vulnerabilities created during these processes … [for] vulnerable people" (Bohle and Fünfgeld 2007, 668, 672).

A second domain that gave an impetus to the conceptualisation of power relations in livelihood studies was gender studies. Foucault's theory of power often constituted the core of power analysis in gender studies and Rowland's conceptualisation of power (Rowland 1997) was a fruitful attempt of making Foucault operational. Rowland saw power operating at four interconnected levels, i.e., "power over", a negative and controlling power exercised in win-lose relationships; "power with", a collective power based on mutual support, solidarity and collaboration with non-individualised benefits; "power to', a generative or productive power which creativity allows actors to exercise their agency for the realisation of their aspirations; and finally, "power within", the strength that nurtures self-esteem and respect for and acceptance of others as equals.

For example, Lakwo (2006) used these levels of power to analyse power relations in a study on the effects of micro-finance schemes in rural communities in Uganda. He makes clear that women's livelihoods did not improve in a material way, but that from a power perspective, their non-material well-being did improve considerably (de Haan and Lakwo 2010, 542). On the individual level, women gained pride from sharing income and from adopting a male role as payers of taxes and bride prices (for their brothers). Moreover, they acquired prestigious skills, like money management and bank account management, through their newly created or recently expanded enterprises. On the household level, women moved further from their homes for income generating activities, hired male labour, individually owned smaller assets and jointly owned (with their husbands) larger assets. They improved their bargaining position vis-à-vis men and they negotiated with their husbands over expenditures and allocation of investments. On the community level, they resisted polygamy, which as a result became less accepted in their communities. They sold beer despite the church fiercely opposing it and they built life-time security in their natal homes (as fall-back), through investing there in friendships and livestock (de Haan and Lakwo 2010, 538–542).

"Seen from Rowland's four-dimensional power analysis, it is evident that women are being empowered in the process of making a living as they challenge their second-class gender position and status, with the result that their self-image (power within) has improved dramatically. Collectively, they are using their power with others to assault male or community dominance […]. By so doing, they have established a change in marital relations towards interdependency that reflects a power transformation associated with gains in assuming power over their own lives. Finally, it can be noted that through microfinance, women are gradually challenging hitherto hegemonic gender relations by recreating new gender spaces within which they can live a life of equality. Accompanying such changes are emerging dynamics within the household and community relations regarding access to, ownership of and decision-making over livelihood assets and strategies. Consequently, old hegemonic gendered livelihood practices are slowly being permeated and the sanctions that used to reinforce such hegemony are wilting away (de Haan and Lakwo 2010, 542)."

A third domain, i.e., studies using the notion of political arenas, provided another methodology for conceptualising power relations in livelihood research. It started with Long's notion of interface (Long and Long 1992), i.e., interpreting the encounter of development practitioners and their "target" groups, as an encounter of fields of social organisation, world views, values, knowledge and power. Subsequently, the notion of "(local) political arena" was introduced by Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk (Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk 1994). They presented an interpretation of the interface as a place of concrete confrontation between actors, within the specific spatial connotation of a development project. The authors distinguished various strategic groups of different composition in those arenas, presenting themselves depending on the issue at stake. Sometimes the local stakeholders present themselves as an occupational group (farmers vs. pastoralists) or a kinship group, and sometimes as a patron-client network, an age group (youth vs. elders) or a gender group (women vs. men).

Already in 1999, the Society for International Development's (SID) Sustainable Livelihoods Project focused on political arenas and power relations

rather than on individual livelihoods (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 30). It was the first livelihood study to do so. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan's example was followed by de Haan and Kamanzi (de Haan and Kamanzi 2011) studying development cooperation interventions in Tanzania. They started with the assessment that development practitioners follow official objectives in their interventions, but also hold implicit assumptions and representations of what they need to do and about the local community they are working in. The local community stakeholders also hold their own representations of the development project and the development practitioners involved. Moreover, community stakeholders have their own livelihood objectives and strategies. Even in incidences of elite capture, the authors found a bargaining process in the community arena between the elite and the less powerful. Clearly, power asymmetries existed, but the less powerful organised the encounter in such a way that they were still able to gain something for their livelihood despite their subordinated position. These strategies of the subordinated and powerless, called organising practices, were particularly successful in cases where the powerful, in their turn, became subordinated in a supra-local arena and then needed the support of their local community (de Haan and Kamanzi 2011, 136).

While in this conceptualisation of political arenas, the focus was on direct confrontations of groups, the social arenas of Etzold et al. – grafted onto Bourdieu's social fields – are not necessarily spaces of direct interactions but spaces "in which all actors share the same operating rules […] for instance a settlement, a market, public space or specific economic sector". "Actors manoeuvre in accordance with the arena's dominant institutions". Different arenas will have different institutions or "different modes of regulations that structure the interactions of their actors" (Etzold et al. 2009, 5–6). However, it is not the direct interactions of actors that are important to understand, but the way a particular mode of regulation, which is in effect in an arena is constantly negotiated by actors. Since the more powerful will have greater influence in this negotiation process, it is rather through the modes of regulation that they affect the livelihoods of the less powerful. Subsequently, the authors offer a valuable operationalisation of how livelihoods in informality can be understood. They conclude for Dhaka that "informal food-related interactions are […] not marginal or ineffective activities of the urban poor, but significant contributions to the efficiency, functionality and resilience of mega-urban food systems" (Etzold et al. 2009, 20).

Interestingly, Etzold et al.'s social arenas have also a clear spatial dimension, next to economic, social, temporal and functional dimensions. For a street food vendor in Dhaka, selling food also turns out to be a continuous negotiation process about space and locality. Similarly, in a study on urban livelihoods and institutions in Nairobi, Hendriks (2010) demonstrates that in order to improve their quality of life, the urban poor engage in different interfaces. Following Lefebvre, Gaventa and others, he characterises "spaces" both as ways to conceive or perceive opportunities for engagement to organise a livelihood and as actual sites that are attended and used by the poor. He then analyses negotiation processes in individually and collectively "claimed spaces" created by poor households individually or collectively and "invited spaces", offered by the government.

Furthermore, with the help of Gaventa's (2006, 25) power cub – a conceptualisation of various forms of power at different levels of scale and in different kind of spaces, Hendriks also analyses negotiations at the intersection of local spaces with spaces at the supra-local level. The study shows that in meeting the needs of the poor "national institutions remain dominant. International institutions are both accommodating and constraining, though are largely mediated through national institutions. National institutions recently became more inclusive and accommodating in the area of private sector and business development and through fiscal decentralization, though still do not match the poor in Nairobi's informal settlement. National institutions in other areas have been either lacking or largely restrictive" (Hendriks 2010, 370).

Here we touch upon a major challenge for the livelihood approach, i.e., how to overcome its bias towards the local. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many livelihood studies were only concerned with the local context of the poor. Nowadays, it is generally accepted that a local bias can best be overcome by including global-local interactions in the analysis. But typically, this is realised by focusing on how the global is contested and moulded locally and how local communities create localities by crafting contested and negotiated spaces. However, the reverse is often neglected, i.e., how localities shape the global space, how local livelihoods impact on global politics, or how local livelihoods shape global welfare and global well-being. This is precisely what de Haan and Kamanzi (2011) have tried to achieve in their study mentioned above on Dutch development interventions in Tanzania. By extending their power analysis beyond the local political arena with similar power analyses on the district, national and international level, they not only focussed

on local power relations, but also on the relationship between local impeding structures and supra-local structures, i.e., the functioning of supra-local institutions.[2] In this way, a chain of political arenas was studied ranging from local livelihoods in Tanzania to decision-making on development cooperation with Africa in the Netherlands. Analogous to global value chain analyses, various links in the development cooperation chain were studied and their mutual influence and impact on the final outcome were determined. In doing so, the impact of poverty alleviation policies on local livelihoods could be determined as well as the way local livelihoods shaped the poverty alleviation policies, nationally and internationally. In sum, the study on Tanzania did not limit itself to an analysis at the local level, but continued to follow the chain upwards to the global.

Aiming to merge the local and regional level in a study on markets and livelihoods in Ghana, Bamler (2011, 16–18) offers yet another way of studying local-global interactions. He makes a distinction between aggregated (macro/regional) and individual (micro/local) quantitative data and structural/institutional (macro/regional) and individual (micro/local) qualitative data. Through a continuous alternation of quantitative and qualitative analyses of both individual behaviour and objective structures – facilitated by bridge hypotheses or similar constructs – congruent or complementary results can be separated from divergent results. When results are congruent, different methods of analysis have created a consistent picture and thus a valid explanation. For example, when quantitative macro-analysis has identified certain market opportunities and qualitative and quantitative micro-analysis has ascertained that smallholders actually identified these opportunities, than one can speak of congruent results. However, when results are divergent, data acquisition and analysis may be faulty or a rethinking of theories and explanations is necessary.

Overcoming the deadlock of endless variation

Over the past two decades, the livelihood approach has produced a multitude of livelihoods studies presenting an almost endless variation of local livelihoods without being able to present generalised trends. Therefore, another challenge is to come to grips with that variation. Attempts should be made to deduce conclusions from livelihood studies, conclusions that surpass the local level and aim at generalisation.

For example, macro-data show that in sub-Saharan Africa, standards of living improved after independence (in the 1960) well into the 1970s. Subsequently, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a disastrous decline. It was not until the late 1990s that recovery started, resulting in present standards of living often being better than in the 1970s (de Haan 2010, 101–102). But this long-term trend of progress, deterioration, rebound and renewed progress is not reflected very clearly in research on livelihoods in Africa.

Kanbur (2001) argued that this so-called micro-macro paradox can be explained by a methodological problem of aggregation. An enormous variety of concrete livelihoods may be hidden behind average figures. Indeed, macro-economic studies have established a decrease in poverty in Africa, but warned already at an early stage that particular regions (peripheral regions; areas with a high variability in precipitation) and particular social groups (those with little education; with little access to land; with increased health risks; and women in particular) might lag behind (Christiaensen et al. 2003). Neuburger has pointed at the same phenomenon in Latin America; regional disparities are enormous. Moreover, "due to economic, social and political parameters, poor people particularly in rural areas have no chance to improve their living conditions" (Neuburger 2007, p. 217).

But there is more to say. "In livelihood research, an increased awareness has developed that quality of life means much more than material welfare in terms of income, yield or even health. A holistic approach to livelihoods [became] necessary in which a wealth of dimensions – cultural, social, economic and political – are included in the analysis for a better understanding of the complexity of livelihoods. As a result, livelihood research is digging deeper to gain analytical quality. [However], […] because of the desire to scrutinise the complexity of livelihoods, the scale of research remains limited. In general, we are dealing with case studies that only cover one or two localities" (de Haan 2010, 103–104). What we now need are attempts that surpass the local level and aim at generalisation. This call for generalisation not only concerns poverty levels, welfare and well-being. It also applies to other livelihood issues, i.e., environmental degradation and climate change, mobility and migration, the quality of space, and of course the underlying power relations.

[2] Note that in poverty studies, the state has an important role to play in regulating power relations and removing bottlenecks to allow an emancipation of the poor.

Consequently, the livelihood approach should now concentrate on two supplementary research strategies: Meta-analysis and comparative research. "Meta-analyses are studies that compare existing case studies and try to synthesize them, using a systematic analytical framework. Such studies bring together primary data from underlying studies in order to determine if and where broader generalizations can be made than would have been possible on the basis of individual case studies. Meta-analyses put stringent requirements on the methodological quality of underlying studies because the methodological account of these underlying studies must be clear and replicable to allow for new analysis and possibly new interpretation. Therefore meta-analysis is research of previous research and not just a synthesis of previous findings[3] […]. Qualitative meta-analysis has to penetrate the theoretical and methodological points of departure of underlying studies because all the findings and conclusions depend on them and all analysis would otherwise be built on quicksand" (de Haan 2010, 105–106).

Qualitative meta-analysis of livelihood studies is still not well-known, but it is an interesting methodology for the livelihood approach to develop. Therefore, it is important to discuss some examples.

First of all, meta-analysis is certainly not just a literature review of other relevant livelihood publications, as Nkala et al. (2011) mistakenly think when reviewing more than 40 studies on the role of conservation agriculture in influencing desired livelihood outcomes in Southern Africa. Nor can Kreutzmann's (1998) attempt to develop a comparative analytical framework to study livelihoods in peripheral high mountain regions be called a meta-study. But his comparative analytical framework could constitute the starting point of a meta-study.

In fact, Bennett and Franzel (2009) provide the best example of how the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework itself can constitute the conceptual framework for a meta-analysis. They scrutinised 32 underlying studies from Africa and Latin America on the capacity of organic and resource-conserving agriculture to improve the livelihoods of poor smallholders. Although it was often argued in the past that the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework should not be used as a rigid prescription for interventions or research, it becomes clear from this study that a uniform approach does enable meta-conclusions to be drawn. But that is only the first step. As explained above, meta-analysis is research of previous research and makes high demands on the methodological quality of underlying studies. In that respect, the authors were disappointed. "We found very few studies of livelihood effects […] that used (1) rigorous cost-benefit analysis, (2) consistent methodologies that allowed generalizations of results or (3) methods of selecting samples that would yield insight into the likelihood of farmers succeeding […]" (Bennett and Franzel 2009, 68).[4] Bennett and Franzel conclude that in certain instances organic and resource-conserving agriculture can have positive results on livelihoods of poor farmers. But from the extensive livelihood research agenda they develop after drawing this conclusion, it becomes clear that their study stand midway between a synthesis and a meta-analysis.

Yet, the attempt should be appreciated. On the basis of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and the underlying studies, they show how costs, risks and benefits can be estimated. They also depict global trends – in certification and consumer markets - that form the context in which smallholders operate. Also, the authors are able to identify so-called enablers of livelihood improvement, i.e., how higher accumulation of one type of capital can drive increases in the other types through three subsequent stages of increased market integration.

Textbook examples of methodologically-sound qualitative meta-analyses are the studies of Misselhorn (2005) on household food security in southern Africa and Glasmeier and Farrigan (2005) on the potential of community forestry for poverty alleviation. Misselhorn's "first step was the development of a framework illustrating the key theoretical determinants and outcomes of food security […], which were distilled from both the food security literature and from a review of 49 [underlying] case studies. Within the context of this framework, the second step was the development of a list of 33 theoretical drivers of food security taken from the food security literature and the case studies themselves […]. The third step was the individual examination of each of the 49 case studies in which every factor cited in the studies having *direct* negative impact (i.e. independent of another drive) on food se-

[3] Note that some authors do use the term synthesis for a qualitative meta-analysis.

[4] Also in adjacent fields of study, the lack of methodological rigidity seems to be a recurrent problem. In poverty studies measurement failures, ad hoc changes in survey design and changes in definition and methodology are frequent and often so large that these compromise the creation of sound longitudinal poverty records (Walters et al. 2012).

curity in the community was noted. Citations were then tallied under the appropriate category in the theoretical list of drivers. Each citation was further classified as being either an issue of access or production (in some cases as both), and as either a crisis or ongoing condition. The number of times a driver was cited as acting *indirectly* (i.e. *through* another listed driver) was separately tallied." (MISSELHORN 2005, 35 (italics in the original)) MISSELHORN did not expect to produce a distinct and static list of causes of food security. Given the broad geographical coverage and the accompanying variable socio-political landscape of the underlying studies, such an expectation would have been illusive. But the meta-analysis did identify "*common processes* that take *specific forms in particular communities*" (MISSELHORN 2005, 37 (italics in the original)) According to MISSELHORN these common processes, in their specific forms, are also important to understand the varied outcomes of alternative policy responses to food insecurity.

GLASMEIER and FARRIGAN examined more than 250 cases of community forestry in order to determine to what extent community forestry could be adapted to improve livelihoods of rural poor in the United States. They started with the design of a meta-theory. "The purpose of the meta-theory was to construct a conceptual frame for testing, interpreting and developing the extant theory of community forestry into a new theory in relation to poverty alleviation" […]. Subsequently, the meta-analysis "required the establishment of an analytical strategy and coding system to categorize data and interpret findings in relation to the research question" (GLASMEIER and FARRIGAN 2005, 58–59). Through a meta-method, the findings of the underlying studies were compared and contrasted. In the meta-synthesis, the applicability of community forestry as an instrument to poverty alleviation in rural United States was discussed. And though GLASMEIER and FARRIGAN point to a number of valuable lessons for poverty alleviation in the United States in their meta-synthesis, they also have to conclude that "[i]nsufficient reporting practices and the lack of replicability of project designs make the ability to ascertain the validity of outcomes stated in community forestry literature impractical if not impossible" (GLASMEIER and FARRIGAN 2005, 65) Despite the failure due to the quality of underlying cases, the step-by-step account of the meta-study by GLASMEIER and FARRIGAN is worth following.

This discussion shows that meta-analysis in livelihood research is still in its infancy. Moreover, it became clear that its success depends first and foremost on the quality of the underlying case-studies. It is of course worrisome that the methodological soundness of these case-studies – or at least the lack of a clear account of the methodology used – was criticised by authors of the meta-studies. Livelihood researchers should consider this as a cry of alarm and take it to heart. Perhaps a step forward could already be made if livelihood researchers would more systematically engage in comparative research. Comparative livelihood research does not necessarily have to aim for broad generalisations world-wide. But it does mean that similarities and differences in livelihoods are systematically marked out on the basis of a comparative explanatory framework or that existing theories are challenged with comparative empirical data.

Epilogue

This paper argued that the major shortcoming of the livelihood approach, i.e., the neglect of power relations, was due to the supposed non-ideological context in which it was first developed. But, it also explained how a subsequent generation of livelihood studies managed to integrate the analysis of power relations in a meaningful way. It resulted in an understanding of the operation of power in livelihood strategies that enabled development interventions to effectively contribute to livelihood enhancement.

In addition, the paper showed that the local bias of livelihood research is being increasingly overcome. However, though many livelihood studies now examine how the global processes are being contested at the local level, it is high time to pay attention to the question of how localities shape the global space and how local livelihoods shape global welfare and global well-being.

The paper also argued that the time has come that the livelihood approach, besides producing a continuous flow of studies on local livelihoods, starts a new line of studies. This line of livelihood studies should aspire to formulate broader generalisations through meta-analysis and comparative research, which may eventually challenge existing theories.

A few years ago, CLARK and CARNEY in a retrospect paper regretted the declining influence of the livelihood approach. They argued that after the initial difficulty of coming to grips with policies and institutions – read power relations – the livelihood approach developed into a very useful analytical or heuristic tool, that "provide a way to order information and understand not only the nature of poverty but also the links between different aspects of people's livelihoods" (CLARK and CARNEY

2008, 7). One cannot agree more when they carry on that, "[i]n order to continue to make progress with S[ustainable] L[ivelihoods], it is important to build on concrete achievements and learn from what we know" (Clark and Carney 2008, 5). However, Clark and Carney's perspective is narrow-mindedly focused on DFID's concern with livelihoods. That concern might have been diverted by the rise of the Millennium Development Goals as the new policy frame and by budgetary problems. However, this paper has demonstrated that the livelihood approach has developed into a mature actor-oriented perspective in development studies with a focus on understanding and enhancing poor people's livelihoods. It has very little to do anymore with DFID, but all the more with progress in development oriented research and development practice.

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