

Livelihoods research: some conceptual
and methodological issues

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This paper offers a review of conceptual and methodological issues in the pursuit of livelihoods research, with particular reference to southern Africa. Disparate and partly overlapping frameworks of investigation are outlined, with an emphasis on three key questions. First, how is empirical research at the micro-level related to analysis of the structural, historical and institutional elements of the macro-context? Second, what combination of methods most effectively allows us to trace trajectories of change in diverse livelihoods over time? Third, how are livelihoods frameworks most usefully deployed to investigate and understand processes of differentiation, accumulation and impoverishment?

Introduction: towards 'principles' of livelihoods research

Most people who live in the rural areas of poor countries, and many who live in urban areas, are engaged in an unremitting struggle to secure a livelihood in the face of adverse social, economic and often political circumstances. Two points are central to an understanding of such struggles. The first point is that the circumstances of poverty and the reasons for poverty have to be understood through detailed *analysis of social relations* in a particular historical context: between those with land and those without land, for example; between rich and poor households; between men and women; between rural and urban households and the institutions of the market and the state. The second point is that the modes of livelihood that typically prevail both within households and between households are highly *diverse*. Rural households, for example, on which this paper concentrates, may derive a part-livelihood from farming; a part-livelihood from migrant labour undertaken by absent household members in urban areas or other rural areas; and a part-livelihood from a variety of other activities, more or less informal, such as petty trade or beer-brewing. Variable combinations of activities of this kind, likewise gendered in respect of unequal dispositions of labour and appropriations of income between men and women, are often themselves subject to rapid change over time. For these two reasons, rural livelihoods are not at all easy to study.

Both these points were strongly illustrated in an exemplary text, *Rural Livelihoods: Crises and Responses* (Bernstein et al., 1992). Through exploration of 'agrarian structures and change' in three different regions of the world - Latin America, India and sub-Saharan Africa - and through detailed analysis of 'making a living' and 'survival and change' at the household level, the authors explored the vitally important processes of marginalisation, dispossession, accumulation and differentiation that have affected rural communities and go far towards explaining poverty in the late twentieth century.

Two vignettes from the lives of poor people in very different rural areas may be used to illustrate the importance of analysis of social relations and of understanding diversity of modes of livelihood. The first concerns a family of marginalised share-croppers in a Bangladesh village whose circumstances of the mid-1970s were graphically described in Hartmann and Boyce's moving book *A Quiet Violence* (1983). Despite hard work and constant struggle, Sharifa and Abu were forced to sell most of their own fragments of land and even to chop down fruit trees for sale as firewood in order to pay debts and buy a few days' supply of rice.

We had to borrow money to eat. Sometimes neighbours would lend us money without interest, but we often had to sell our rice before the harvest. Moneylenders would pay us in advance, and take our rice at half the market price. No matter how hard we worked, we never had enough cash. We started selling things - our wooden bed, our cow, our plough. Then we began to sell our land bit by bit. Now we have less than one *dun* left, and most of that is mortgaged to Mahmud Haji (quoted in Bernstein et al., 1992, p. 19).

The second vignette is drawn from Charles van Onselen's massive biography (1996) of an obscure black South African who strove throughout his long life to sustain a tenuous grip on land alienated to white settlers. Kas Maine (1894-1985) was a farmer who did not own land but engaged in many different share-cropping contracts with white landlords in the maize-growing region of the south-western Transvaal. Through the first half of the twentieth century Maine and his family experienced the shifting pressures of the market place, the mounting exactions of landlords and the relentless politics of white supremacy. Eventually they were evicted from the land altogether, so that he ended his life in a remote and dusty relocation camp in a former African 'homeland'. Kas Maine met those pressures with hard work, cunning and sometimes desperation. To supplement a livelihood constantly under threat from an arid and volatile climate and the often arbitrarily tightening screw of the landlords, he engaged in many different activities in the informal economy: shoe- and saddle-repairing, knitting and tailoring, traditional healing. Both stubborn and versatile, he showed single-minded commitment to farming in adverse circumstances and also great enterprise in his pursuit of many other sources of income in a difficult social and political environment. His wives, meanwhile, whose labour in a tough domestic regime was mainly committed to his farming efforts, also strove to secure a small cash income on the side through their own complementary activities: selling cowdung, rearing pigs, brewing beer, occasional 'piece-jobs'.

Closely linked to the observation of diversity of modes of livelihood at any one time is the idea of *diversification* of livelihoods over time. For example, a broad comparative review of a process described as 'de-agrarianisation' in sub-Saharan Africa concluded that perhaps 60-80 per cent of rural household income in the late 1990s was derived from non-farming sources, by comparison with an approximate 40 per cent in the 1980s (Bryceson, 1999). There were many different reasons for such changes: structural adjustment programmes, sharply worsening terms of agricultural trade, the collapse of meso-level infrastructures of support for small farmers, devalued currencies, new opportunities and necessities of cross-border smuggling and trade, etc. The literature on diversification, its causes and its implications, is usefully and systematically reviewed by Ellis (1998a). It is important to remember that it is not only poor households that are forced to diversify in order to make ends meet as best they can. Richer households also diversify their economic activities - as for example in the case of businessmen who are 'weekend' farmers - and this can be a path to accumulation. It is also important to note that migration for work elsewhere is one typical mode of diversification in the livelihoods of the rural poor

that has arguably been inhibited by politicians and under-valued by policy-makers (de Haan, 1999).

Three questions arise out of recent valuable research work undertaken in the mid-1990s and the late 1990s, under the auspices of different projects, for example by the African Studies Centre at Leiden University, the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex and the Overseas Development Institute in London [for references see below]. The first question is how, in view of the complexity of individual household trajectories of change that are illustrated in the two vignettes above, it is possible to derive defensible generalisations about the experience of large numbers of the rural poor over time. The second question is how to achieve a better understanding of the links and the tensions between different levels of analysis: the micro-level of the household, the meso-level of institutional intervention through local government, development agencies or regional markets, and the macro-level of national policy-making. The third question, in the light both of prevalent neo-liberal policy prescriptions and of the reality of diversified rural livelihoods across a number of conventionally discrete economic sectors, is how policies are to be devised in practice that will have an effective impact upon the disparate livelihoods of the rural poor.

It is perhaps helpful to distinguish between the following approaches, separate in principle but closely linked in practice. Firstly, we need to understand diversity at a moment of time (the *circumspective* approach). This may be tackled through a combination of surveys, interviews and various techniques loosely grouped under the heading of Participatory Rural Appraisal. The objective is to open up questions about the proportional importance of and, above all, about significant relationships between different economic activities: for example, that between urban wage earnings and rural consumption or investment in farming. Secondly, we need to understand change over time (the *retrospective* approach). This requires analysis of the historical context, inference of the broad trends of change, and critical investigation of the institutional framework through which relations between macro- and meso- and micro-levels are worked out over time. It also requires empirical investigation at the household level, which may be undertaken through a combination of methods: longitudinal comparison of household livelihoods, either in a strict sense or in a loose sense, with careful attention to the difficulties that arise out of the fact that a household observed in the mid-1990s cannot be treated as the 'same' household as might have been observed in the mid-1970s, even if partly reliable base-line data of this kind can be identified; and retrospective reconstruction of processes of change through intersecting life-histories. The objectives of this approach are to identify 'household' or family trajectories of accumulation and impoverishment and thence particular structural matrices of *vulnerability*. An admirably explicit discussion of the problems that arise in a study of this kind is found in Bagchi et al. (1998).

Thirdly, academics are increasingly aware, either by professional inclination or through the pressures of donor funding for their research, of the need to influence policy and action (the *prospective* approach). This should include analysis of the effects of past policies, which are often haphazardly reproduced under different political regimes; a commitment to changing 'mind-sets' amongst government officials, planners, donors, NGOs, etc.; the development of specific rationales for intervention at various levels; and procedures for monitoring and evaluation. The objectives of the prospective approach are better co-ordination of planning and implementation across sectoral boundaries; and building alternative conceptual frameworks for facilitating opportunities for improving livelihoods. In this context, however, it is essential to take account of the fact that, as the single life of Kas Maine demonstrates so vividly, the experience of the rural poor must be understood *in*

relation to the experience of other social classes. For this reason, the idea of 'differential [or adverse] incorporation' into the state, the market and civil society is perhaps more appropriate than the now conventionally predominant idea of 'social exclusion' from the state, the market and civil society. Also for this reason, 'practical' policy-making cannot and should not be separated from hard-headed analysis of the political and social context in which policy is made and of its effects on different social classes (cf. Cowen and Shenton, 1996).

From the above brief overview, I derive the following 'principles' of livelihoods research.

1. Livelihoods research, of its nature, is essentially carried out at the micro-level: that of 'households' and 'communities'. It involves empirical investigation of combinations of modes of livelihood and, above all, of the relationships between them. It also involves pushing to the limit of their potential various methods of understanding changes that have taken place over time.
2. For research into changing livelihoods to be illuminating and useful, however, it is essential to define the structural, historical and institutional elements of what may for convenience be called its macro-context. A time-frame must be specified, key variables identified, important trends of change discerned.
3. In so far as livelihoods research is directed to the diagnosis of the causes of chronic poverty, the circumstances of poverty and the reasons for poverty should be understood through detailed *analysis of social relations* in a particular historical context. This implies a structural or relational view of poverty, and, in turn, that understanding of its 'persistence' or its intractability or its 'deepening' should be driven by questions about inequalities of power.
4. It also implies that livelihoods research and discussion of its implications for 'policy-making' should contain explicit reflection on the particular, relevant, contexts in which 'policy' is made, with reference to key questions such as the following. Who makes policy? How is it made? For what purposes? For whose benefit? With what outcomes?

A variety of methods and approaches

Some examples of disparate and partly overlapping methods of studying livelihoods are briefly outlined here. In sequence, they move from the general framework advocated by DfID to specific regional studies undertaken in southern Africa. They express a clear bias toward the study of rural livelihoods. It is important to recognise that this is not disconnected, however, either conceptually or methodologically, from the study of urban livelihoods along lines elaborated, for example, by Beall and Kanji (1999). There is a rapidly proliferating literature in this field, and - apart from the highly selective references singled out below - the reader's attention is also drawn to the following work that is specifically relevant:

- A series of country case-studies and comparative reviews produced under the auspices of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex (for example, de Haan 1999, de Haan et al., 2000) [see also www.ids.ac.uk/ids/env/envact.html].
- The Sustainable Livelihoods Working Paper series and the Natural Resource Perspectives briefings published by the Overseas Development Institute

(ODI) [www.odi.org.uk/publications/working.html; www.oneworld.org/odi/nrp/].

- The mass of country studies carried out in sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s under the auspices of the De-Agrarianization and Rural Employment project (DARE) co-ordinated by Deborah Bryceson at the University of Leiden (for an overview, see Bryceson, 1999) [asc.leidenuniv.nl/dare.htm].
- Elizabeth Francis' valuable recent book *Making a Living* (2000), in which she explores the dynamics of struggle over livelihoods through comparative study of change in eastern and southern Africa.

1. The Sustainable (Rural) Livelihoods framework

The phrase Sustainable Livelihoods may be traced from the work of Robert Chambers and others, through a research programme undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, involving work in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali in particular.

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 and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (DfID, 1999, Section 1.1; see also Scoones, 1998, and Carney, 1998, p. 4).

This approach has been broadly adopted by the Department for International Development (DfID) and a range of other development agencies and is therefore described here as the 'official' or dominant framework [see also www.livelihoods.org]. DfID (1999, 2000) has issued detailed 'guidance sheets' which are useful to explicate what rapidly became a familiar framework in the late 1990s, shown in the accompanying diagram [not attached]. Within a particular 'vulnerability context', defined for example by shifting seasonal constraints, short-term economic shocks and longer-term trends of change, people deploy five types of 'livelihood assets' or capital in variable combinations, within circumstances influenced by institutional structures and processes, in order to pursue diverse 'livelihood strategies', with more or less measurable 'livelihood outcomes'.

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

Some strengths of the SL approach are as follows.

- It seeks to understand changing combinations of modes of livelihood in a dynamic and historical context.
- It explicitly advocates a creative tension between different levels of analysis.
- It acknowledges the need to transcend the boundaries between conventionally discrete sectors (urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, formal/informal, etc.).
- It implicitly recognises the necessity to investigate the relationships between different activities that constitute household livelihoods, which in turn requires attention both to intra-household and to extra-household social relations.

Some weaknesses, however, may also be identified.

- Elements of the 'vulnerability context', such as rampant inflation and extreme uncivil conflict and ripples of mass redundancy, are surely much more important than would appear to be allowed for.
- The language of 'multiplier effects' predominates, as does the presumption that it is possible to expand people's 'asset pentagons' in a generalised and incremental fashion. Inequalities of power and conflicts of interest are not, perhaps, sufficiently acknowledged, either within local 'communities' themselves or between 'communities' and, for example, regional elites and government agencies.
- The notion of 'participation' that dominates the discourse of intervention - with typically unresolved tension between these two words - presupposes heavy investment in 'community' on the part of donor agencies and thence a rhetorical tendency to disguise or weaken the probability that, in one way or another, enhancement of the livelihoods of one group or stratum or class will undermine the livelihoods of another group or stratum or class.
- The qualifier 'sustainable' begs many questions which are not resolved even by positive 'livelihood outcomes' of the kind indicated in the framework. 'Sustainable' for whom? By what criteria? In the short term or the long term?

More generally, equating 'assets' theoretically with varieties of 'capital', through the 'asset pentagon' inscribed in the diagram, intellectually distorts our understanding of capital and politically distorts our understanding of the causes of poverty. On the first point, capital is properly a social relation between people, not an attribute of rich or poor households or individuals, respectively. On the second point, attention is displaced from the inequalities of power that must surely be invoked to explain the persistence or the worsening of poverty. For a powerful critique of the notion of 'social capital', in particular, as it has been adopted by the World Bank and other agencies in recent years, see Ben Fine's book *Social Capital versus Social Theory* (2001).

2. Frank Ellis: combining sample surveys and participatory techniques [eastern Africa]

Frank Ellis, an agricultural economist at the University of East Anglia, is an important contributor to recent thinking on livelihoods, diversity and vulnerability, through influential articles (1998a, 1998b) and his recent book *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries* (2000). In Part I of this book he develops in detail a similar framework of analysis to that outlined in the section above, and in Part III he elaborates the combination of survey and participatory methods that, in his view, opens up the possibility of a better understanding of rural livelihoods.

He outlines a critique of large-scale income surveys, on largely familiar grounds, with reference to studies undertaken in Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania in particular, and concludes that they are of very limited use in understanding changes in rural livelihoods over time. Smaller-scale sample surveys relating to particular communities or regional populations are of rather more use. He also advocates various different PRA methods (key informants, semi-structured interviews, informal group discussions, focus group discussions, Venn diagrams, etc.) for discovering, quite quickly, the mediating processes within which livelihood strategies are adopted', relating to social relations, institutions and organisations. He then offers a useful summary of the typical characteristics of different field methods, under the headings of large-scale sample surveys, small-scale sample surveys, semi-structured or participatory enquiry, and case-studies (Ellis, 2000: 196-7).

Ellis illustrates the practical application of these disparate methods through a case-study carried out in three villages in northern Tanzania in 1997. An experimental combination of methods was applied, guided by 'considerations of cost-effectiveness and timeliness in obtaining policy-useful research results' (Ellis, 2000: 200). They were:

- Semi-structured focus group discussions
- A participatory wealth-ranking exercise
- A sample survey of household demography and remittance income, farm incomes, non-farm income sources and household assets [30 households interviewed in each of three villages]

Typologies of livelihood strategies were derived from these exercises, and households were 'mapped' according to the relative robustness of income contributions derived from each mode of livelihood. With some qualifications and reservations, the expectation of the study was broadly confirmed: that focus group discussions and other participatory methods were well-suited to discovering the 'vulnerability context' of rural livelihoods; while sample survey methods were better suited to 'examining more concretely how the assets and activities of the poor differ from those of the better-off' (Ellis, 2000: 227).

3. Livelihood trajectories [western Nepal, eastern India]

[Bagchi et al., 1998]

The explicit research aim of the ESCOR-funded project on Long-Term Change and Livelihoods, initiated by the Overseas Development Group (ODG) at the University of East Anglia, was to describe and explain trajectories of change for individuals and groups over time, through fieldwork in 1996-7 in 15 villages in Western Nepal and two villages in West Bengal and Bihar. The comparative base for the work in Nepal was a sample survey of 667 rural households in Western Nepal carried out by the ODG in 1974-5. The team drew on other survey work undertaken in the mid-1970s to support the comparative longitudinal work in the other two areas.

Livelihood trajectories, according to the team:

- provide insights into the changing welfare and capabilities of individuals and of groups;
- can illuminate the process of change by revealing the ways in which negotiation, bargaining and struggle can alter circumstances;

- make it possible to 'bridge the supposed micro-macro divide' by a process of aggregation upwards from the lives of individuals;
- combine insights, in a seriously inter-disciplinary spirit, from the many different paradigms prevalent in development studies.

On the third point above, 'progressive aggregation admittedly moves away from the rich and revealing, life-as-lived from day to day embeddedness of [Livelihood Trajectories], but increasingly makes possible generalization and structural explanation as one moves upwards from households to local communities, districts, regions and states'. Livelihoods analysis 'starts from daily lives and experiences' but moves on 'to explore not only "how people make history" but also the constraints that limit their functioning and capabilities'.

This project was explicitly 'longitudinal' in pursuit of its principal objectives, although not - for the most part - in the strict sense of following up the same individuals over time. Such research, while fraught with methodological problems, is potentially very valuable because of the time-scale of comparison. It is also highly unusual in practice, largely because of the massive wastage incurred through the familiar phenomenon of 'loss of institutional memory' over much shorter periods of time than the two decades considered here. A particular virtue of the article cited (Bagchi et al., 1998) is its explicit discussion of these methodological problems: for example, the difficulties of replication of the original sample(s) against the need for random sampling of population(s) 20 years later; the 'gain' of pursuing 'original' households against the 'loss' of a demographically unrepresentative range of households, etc. In the Nepalese case, the team found, only about 40 per cent of the original 1974-5 respondents were still living in 1996-97. However, without access to reliable baseline studies in West Bengal and Bihar that suited the particular purposes of the study, the team had to adopt 'a more opportunist and eclectic construction' of livelihood trajectories, through the use of various studies carried out at different times and for very different purposes.

The team used a variety of research techniques, such as village mapping, wealth-ranking, formal randomised sample household surveys and life histories. They also experienced major tension between quantitative and qualitative techniques. 'The quantitative data provided the basis for showing *what* and emphasizing what was representative, while the qualitative was able to reveal *how* and *why* and to highlight differences and variety within the range of human experiences in the areas studied - experiences that could help explain, problematize, and contextualize differences and changes in average values of variables from the quantitative survey' (Bagchi et al., 1998: 461).

4. Khanya: the 'vertical transect' methodology [southern and central Africa] [www.khanya-mrc.co.za]

Khanya-managing rural change cc is a private consultancy based in Bloemfontein, South Africa, that in recent years has committed much of its work towards developing the applications of a livelihoods framework in the context of poverty reduction strategies. It has undertaken DfID-funded studies in Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Eastern Cape and Free State of South Africa, and on the basis of this experience drafted extensive 'Guidelines for Undertaking a Regional/National Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Study' (Khanya, 2000; see also Goldman et al., 2000a, 2000b). The Sustainable Livelihoods approach, in their view, does help to structure analysis of the support required to assist the poor. Particularly important are 1) a holistic analysis of strengths and 2) an understanding of macro-micro linkages. 'Decentralised

approaches are needed, in which the district level acts as the interface between micro-level understanding of clients, with macro-level policies, and provides the key intermediation in terms of matching poor people's preferred outcomes and strategies with appropriate service delivery... At levels higher than district the complexity of achieving effective coordination and integration of services and programmes becomes too great' (Goldman et al., 2000b, p. 4).

Khanya identified the advantages of the approach as follows (Goldman et al., 2000a, p. 3): its participatory methodology; the opportunity and need for pre-project ownership creation; developing a common methodology. Four levels were identified: the community level; the local service-provider level; the meso-level; the centre. Through their experience in three countries in southern Africa, they laid out a series of phases in developing a poverty reduction strategy using the Sustainable Livelihoods approach:

- Developing an interest in and commitment to such a strategy
- Organising a detailed study
- Conducting and writing up the study
- Developing the strategy
- Implementation of the strategy

The main political requirement was a sense of 'ownership' and commitment in appropriate departments of government at a fairly high administrative level. The principal methodological approach, however, was a variety of PRA exercises undertaken directly with local people. 'The approach used builds from what we see (and don't see) in the reality of people's lives - so the focus of the study is on learning from people on the ground, the micro-level, understanding what impacts on their lives from that level, and how successive levels above support (or don't) the operation at micro-level' (Khanya, 2000, p. 5).

Khanya offers the experience of a *vertical transect* methodology, proceeding from an overview of policies at the centre to rapid assessments at village, district and provincial levels and then return to the centre. Such a vertical transect, they recommend, should involve an intensive study of about 6 to 8 weeks, with a multi-disciplinary team of 3 to 5 people for efficiency and economy. The team proposed the following more detailed schedule: a few days at the centre; one week on PRA investigations in case study locations; moving through layers of government service and support with workshops, semi-structured interviews and key informants; returning to case-study locations for at least one day to validate and triangulate, as well as further to explore specific identified issues; and arrangements for involving local people in the production of the report. Much weight was attached to the analysis of rural livelihoods in case-study areas. Some basic quantitative data could be gathered from participants, but the principal techniques were those associated with PRA, with an emphasis on 'the community themselves' defining their circumstances, needs and desired outcomes.

One problem with such an approach is that constituencies defined separately for the purpose of setting up focus groups, such as 'farmers', 'women', 'youth', 'pensioners' etc. often overlap in practice. The whole point of livelihoods research, after all, is to understand the ways in which diverse modes of livelihood are inter-related through the management of complex household portfolios in circumstances of structural change, not simply to identify the supposedly discrete concerns and interests of distinguishable social categories of the population.

5. Changing livelihoods: life histories and 'cluster' analysis [South Africa]

[www.man.ac.uk/idpm/mlsc-za1.html]

The objectives of the ESCOR-funded Multiple Livelihoods and Social Change project (life-span 1998-2001) were as follows:

- to analyse socio-economic differentiation in two densely populated but relatively remote (former 'homeland') areas of South Africa;
- to identify the intervening socio-economic, political and institutional variables that affect efforts to alleviate poverty through improved livelihood opportunities;
- to develop a distinctive combination of methods for the study of multiple household livelihoods as they change over time, and for relating changes at the micro-level to changes at the macro-level.

Fieldwork was undertaken in the Central District of North-West Province and 'greater' Qwaqwa, Free State. Elizabeth Francis worked for 3 months in two adjacent villages in North-West in March-June 1999. She conducted forty-one life history interviews with people in forty different households in these two villages and with farmers on nearby state land. She used a unified interview framework that included questions about contemporary livelihoods. Interviews lasted around two hours. She also conducted interviews dealing with the local and regional institutional context with chiefs, headmen, local councillors, other local political activists, members of local community-based organisations, district council officials, provincial government departments and the National African Farmers' Union.

Her sample was constructed in order to capture differences in livelihoods, resource access and income levels, without any claim that it was statistically representative. She used snowball sampling, in order to understand inter-household relations through looking at clusters of associated individuals and households. Commercial farmers led her to people they had employed, members of other households introduced her to their kin and in-laws, to people they brewed beer with, people who herded their stock or helped them regularly, people who paid them to do domestic work, or to people who fostered their children. In following up relationships between individuals in different households, there was a tension between her wish to explore these further and her understanding of the importance of keeping the sample as widely-based as possible, in order to avoid potential biases. She asked informants about dispersed household members, kin with whom there was a lot of contact, and other people with whom there were relationships which impinged on livelihoods.

Francis found that patterns of inter-household inequality reflected, above all, differences in respect of access to a regular income (predominantly through wages, remittances or pensions); but also differences of access to information and support networks and to agricultural credit and state land, and variable ability to enforce share-cropping contracts. She developed the following typology of socio-economic 'positions', between which households moved on account of pervasive uncertainty and vulnerability in a risky environment (Francis, 2000, pp. 48-50).

- Households which had experienced income growth since the 1970s, or which had accumulated land, access to land or capital equipment (10 households, of which 3 seemed to be moving towards the second 'position').

- Households whose income was relatively stable and/or which were managing from month to month (23 households, of which 6 seemed to be moving towards the third 'position')
- Households which were falling into greater poverty, which were obviously not coping (6 households)

Rachel Slater carried out one year of fieldwork in 'greater' Qwaqwa between August 1998 and August 1999. She worked in ten research locations that were selected to represent different modes of livelihood, geographical locations, environmental conditions and settlement histories. The sequence of investigations is briefly summarised here.

- 29 interviews were carried out with traditional leaders and local and provincial government officials. These allowed identification of key informants who offered insights into historical and contemporary livelihoods issues in Qwaqwa and who facilitated the research process.
- 125 semi-structured interviews were carried out with a minimum of ten households in each location, to provide baseline information about household size and composition, sources of household livelihoods and patterns of migration in the pursuit of livelihoods. No rigid sampling pattern was used, but as broad a range of people as possible was included.
- Ten 'clusters' of households were identified, defined by significant relationships between members of different households who collaborated in different ways in the generation of their respective household livelihoods, and the connections were followed up in detail.
- 40 individuals were selected from the clusters and life history interviews were carried out, which offered a retrospective view on trajectories of change and facilitated an understanding of how livelihoods had changed over time.

By placing these changes in the context of local and national transformations, it was possible to relate some of the household-level changes to socio-economic, political and institutional changes at the regional, provincial and national levels.

This outline gives some indication of the complementary use of diverse methods of investigation in practice, on a relatively small scale. It also raises a question of general importance. Just as household livelihoods themselves straddle the boundaries between conventionally discrete economic sectors (industry/agriculture, formal employment/informal economic activity) and often the boundaries between conventionally discrete geographical spaces (urban/rural), so livelihoods research must transcend local 'communities' in order to comprehend both intra-household relationships and significant inter-household social relationships as these change over time. Both forms of relationship may be geographically 'stretched' over considerable physical distances. Neither form is readily susceptible to proper investigation through the conventional methods either of household survey work carried out within specified communities or of 'participatory' workshops confined to such communities. This immediately begs the question of an appropriate trade-off between work in one 'community' that purports in one way or another to be representative of that community, and work of a more dispersed but intensive kind that seeks to investigate at first hand disparate economic activities, and the relationships between them, that together comprise any one household livelihood but that often 'stretch' far beyond the physical boundaries of the community. For examples of such highly labour-intensive work, which inevitably gives weight to dense individual case-studies over the kinds of statistical generalisation that may be

derived from sample surveys, see Murray (1995, 2000), who reports on investigations of changing livelihoods through the 1990s in the eastern Free State, South Africa. A vital part of the effectiveness of this kind of work was following up the same individuals and families at different points in time, scattered as they often were in different places, with repeated (small-scale) household surveys to plot demographic turnover and the trajectories of individuals' experience. It could not, however, be claimed in any serious sense to be 'participatory'.

6. Combining quantitative survey and 'participatory' research: Sechaba [Lesotho] [www.sechaba.co.ls/]

Sechaba Consultants are "a Lesotho-based, independent research company committed to presenting the socio-economic experience and concerns of local people in the development process". They have carried out a series of poverty studies in Lesotho through the 1990s, which now constitute a valuable longitudinal series (Sechaba Consultants, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2000), not in the strict or narrow sense of having followed the same 'households' over that time period but in the looser sense that similar or comparable questions were asked in 1991, 1994 and 1999-2000 to households sampled from the same areas. In the case of the most recent study, the survey was of 3,280 households in 130 villages and urban areas scattered across the country. The 1999-2000 work partly builds on their earlier work, in order to achieve comparability of conclusions concerning trends and patterns of poverty (Phase I), and also adopts a sustainable livelihoods model adapted from that of CARE International (see, for example, Mohasi and Turner, 1999, p. 15), which was explicitly committed to facilitating the expression of the views and priorities of Basotho themselves (Phase II). They reflect throughout the report (Turner et al., 2001) on the tensions which arose out of the combination of the two paradigms: a large-scale household questionnaire survey (Phase I) with a participatory livelihoods analysis (Phase II) reflecting the categories produced by and the experiences emphasised by respondents.

From the results of the large-scale household survey they created quantitative variables within the terms of reference of the livelihoods framework adopted, relating 1) to household assets, 2) to shocks and stresses, 3) to household activities or, in their terminology, livelihood choices, and 4) to household well-being. One recurrent source of tension, however, was that it was very difficult to apply local definitions of well-being in a standardised way for the country as a whole. They therefore applied two different definitions, and strove consistently to avoid confusion between the two.

We explain in some detail how Basotho define wellbeing ..., drawing mainly on the locally generated definitions from Phase II of the survey. These can be generalised into four broad categories: the very poor, the poor, the average and the better off. We also offer an empirical, synthetic definition of wellbeing categories, based on variables built from the much larger Phase I data set and in turn applied to that data set at various points in the report. For that purpose we have used five 'categories' or quintiles, not the four developed from the Phase II data. That may seem perverse. But it is essential to emphasise that, whereas the 'categories' from the Phase I data are equal slices of the survey population across the spectrum from lowest to highest wellbeing, the Phase II categories represent sub-groups of different sizes (Turner et al., 2001, p. 70).

The advantage of the methodology applied in Phase I was comparability of research findings with the 1991 and 1994 surveys. The 1999-2000 work confirmed, for example, that deep poverty continued to be concentrated in remote mountain areas, and also identified a new form of poverty prevalent amongst the poorest people in urban areas. Examination of macro-trends relating to the decline of formal employment both in South Africa and in Lesotho through the 1990s helped to interpret the survey findings relating to the declining proportion of households in all quintiles with a member in wage employment. The advantage of the methodology applied in Phase II was a very different emphasis – by comparison with prevalent diagnoses of Lesotho as a ‘basket-case’ requiring massive external intervention to relieve poverty – on the practical ingenuity and considerable achievements of ordinary people in striving to overcome their worsening socio-economic predicament. The analysis did reveal, however, an apparently disproportionate weight still attached to agriculture as a livelihood strategy; an inappropriate faith in job-creation as a route out of poverty; and a certainly misplaced attribution to ‘government’ of the responsibility for solving the problems of the poor. The ‘strategic vision’ developed by Sechaba placed emphasis for purposes of practical policy on two vital forms of support: the need to facilitate people’s own efforts to enhance their livelihoods, particularly in the western and northern lowlands and foothills; and the need to ensure improved safety-net provision, particularly in remote mountainous areas and for the urban poor. All policy interventions, however, had to be predicated on a “coordinated and effective response” to the massive crisis of HIV/AIDS (Turner et al., 2001, p. x).

Conclusion

The following concluding points emerge from this brief and selective summary of some research frameworks that have been adopted to investigate changing livelihoods.

First, while the declared preoccupation of policy may be how to achieve a reduction of poverty, investigating the livelihoods of poor people also requires attention to the livelihoods of people who are better off. Trajectories of change for any one social class are related to trajectories of change for other social classes. It follows that the use of livelihoods research to study poverty specifically implies attention to the livelihoods of other people who are not poor.

Second, largely for this reason, the terms of reference relating to research on ‘sustainable livelihoods’ which predominate in much donor and institutional discourse are problematic. They often beg the questions of the time-scale that is relevant for an assessment of whether particular combinations of modes of livelihood are indeed ‘sustainable’, for whom, and by what criteria; and they readily conflate empirical study of the past and the present (the ‘retrospective’ and the ‘circumspective’ approaches) with wishful thinking for the future (the ‘prospective’ approach).

Third, it is evident from the review above that combinations of different methods of research are likely to be appropriate for the effective conduct of livelihoods research. Whatever the particular combination adopted in particular circumstances, it is helpful to reflect explicitly throughout on the respective advantages and disadvantages, the potential and the limitations, of this method or that method. Relatively small-scale sample surveys, varieties of ‘participatory’ methods, and more or less ‘deep’ life-history research all have their place. In some circumstances, it may be possible and useful to apply the ‘dispersed intensive’ method advocated at the end of section 5

above, of pursuing particular households and related individuals repeatedly over time, in different places that transcend any one 'community'.

Fourth, whatever the combination of methods adopted at the micro-level to achieve a better understanding of various trajectories of change in household livelihoods, it is an essential pre-condition of that work to undertake a strong analysis at the regional or national level, and often at the international level also, of the *political economy* of change: key socio-economic trends, shifting political and economic and institutional pressures, the social relations of conflict and inequality that determine so many of the opportunities and constraints for different social classes within and beyond the population of immediate concern. The seductive rhetoric of 'participation' offers no substitute for independent rigorous analysis of this kind.

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