

Book Reviews

Scoones, Ian. 2015. *Sustainable rural livelihoods and rural development*. UK: Practical Action Publishing and Winnipeg, CA: Fernwood Publishing. 137pp. ISBN: 9781853398759; £10.40, CA\$18.95, ebook £7.00.

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The concept of 'sustainable livelihoods' (SL) is an analytical framework that emerged from existing studies of rural livelihoods systems, agrarian change, and community development going back to the work of William Cobbett, Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, Amartya Sen and several influential household and micro-economists. Tony Bebbington, Henry Bernstein, Debbie Bryceson, Robert Chambers, Gordon Conway, Susanna Davies, Frank Ellis, and Norman Long worked on new livelihood definitions and approaches in the 1980s and 1990s. They argued, in different ways, that the sustainability of rural livelihoods should form the basis for improved rural development and poverty alleviation. Ian Scoones at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in the UK was also one of the key players. He wrote a short working paper that set out a succinct approach to understanding livelihoods, which he hoped would also be amenable to scrutiny by influential development economists, who believed poverty could best be tackled through utility maximization and modernization paths (Scoones 1998). It emphasized "...the economic attributes of livelihoods as mediated by social-institutional processes" (p8). He designed a well-known diagram showing how capital, assets and resources lead to certain types of livelihood strategies and outcomes, influenced by a set of contexts and institutional processes (Figure 1).

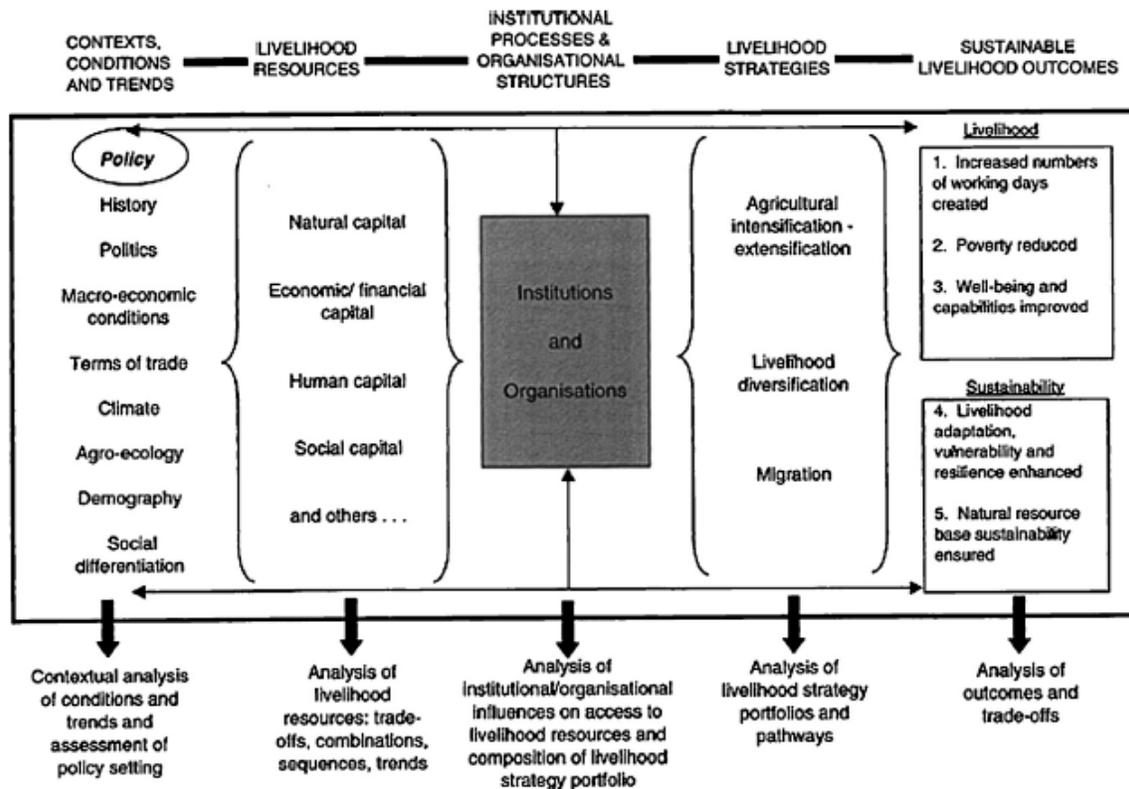


Figure 1: The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones 1998; Scoones 2015, p36)

From modest beginnings, this work led to something many researchers aspire to – substantial 'policy uptake' and funding for empirical research and practical elaboration, particularly in the UK in the context of an enlarged and invigorated British government aid program. 'Sustainable livelihoods' drove the agenda of the newly-badged British aid agency (DfID) for about five years from 1997, and it was central to the revitalization of the UK's aid effort under the new Labour government of the day. About £200m (US\$285m) was spent by the UK on support to sustainable livelihoods, largely in rural environments and through projects and inter-sectoral programs led by in-country 'rural livelihoods' teams, especially in Anglophone recipient countries in Africa and in South Asia (Batterbury 2008; Morse and McNamara 2013). DfID employed 'Livelihood Advisors', reworked the SL model as 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches' (SLAs), commissioned millions of pounds of research and publications, and funded and populated the now-defunct *livelihoods.org* website (and a successor, *livelihoodsrc.org*) (Carney 1998).

These efforts were short-lived. By 2002, after a rethink on aid policy and in line with the Millennium Development Goals, the entire focus of DfID's aid platform shifted to sectoral program-based aid, in-country capacity-building, and direct national budget support. Livelihoods work, with its local focus, diminished and since the late 2000s it has all but disappeared in the agency. The holistic dimension of understanding rural livelihoods through detailed fieldwork, and then making informed decisions about how to support livelihoods through projects and strategic interventions, was lost or certainly de-emphasised. British academics like me wondered if this was the revenge of those pedalling a 'markets and growth' development economics agenda, and certainly the debate in the UK shifted markedly, although it did still recognise important local issues like climate adaptation as part of development goals (Batterbury 2008).

Scoones does not elaborate much on the debate, but for certain DfID economists of the early 2000s, I am sure SL ideas were deemed expensive, and sometimes uncomfortable or unworkable (Batterbury 2008). In countries like Ghana, home to several livelihoods projects, Britain's substantial aid efforts have now re-focused on economic reforms, business support, gender equality and health; by 2014 support for key rural concerns like transport, agriculture, land and water management – the backbone of support to rural people in the 1990s- had ceased. The holistic and bottom-up assessment of aid priorities of the SL period has been reversed. But the SL framework was accepted by other agencies internationally, notably the large NGOs like CARE, Save the Children and Oxfam, UNDP, and some small in-county organisations that were happy to absorb and rework it to underpin their local projects. They continue to do so to this day. SL is therefore a development approach that got knocked sideways but has never really died (Morse and McNamara 2013). In academic circles, Scoones' working paper alone has been cited 2,900 times and new studies continue to be published (Bennett 2010; Lisocka-Jaegermann 2015; Morse and McNamara 2013).

The book is a look back at the 'livelihoods phase' in international development thinking, but it also offers a sanguine assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of SL. The audience for the book is primarily academics and students of development, but there are nuggets of wisdom that will appeal more broadly, and it is being translated for release in several different languages. It is short, cheap, and deserves wide dissemination. The book is particularly interesting given Scoones' central role in the ideas being discussed. It is striking to think that a 'framework' developed by applied academics really did become government 'policy' that unrolled rapidly and through the deployment of key staff in DfID (p.39).

For political ecologists, the book shows how SL challenged neoliberal economic development models, by focusing on the rural poor and their persistent vulnerability, often tracing this to the very markets, neoliberal politics and economic growth models that agencies and governments were actively supporting elsewhere in their programs. The book's most interesting aspects are the proposed extension of the SL approach today, to ask a new set of questions relevant to the altered world climate. These build on a political economy tradition in agrarian and development studies that influenced the SL approach to some extent, but it could not receive priority at the time of the SL explosion because governments and development agencies found it too challenging. Questions about persistent vulnerability, 'accumulation by dispossession', and social justice now have increased saliency given the mounting interest in anthropogenic environmental impacts and nefarious grabs for natural resources affecting the rural poor across the developing world. Nurturing sustainable livelihoods for the poor is not just about recognising their exceptional skill at making a living in-situ, which was the focus of many academics and development workers in the 1990s (including myself). It is

also about diversifying livelihoods, jumping scales, and nesting home 'places' within productive networks. It also involves overtly political projects - mitigating vulnerability to land grabs, droughts and floods, natural disasters, corporate greed and venal politics.

Scoones' extended livelihood framework tries to encompass the real political economy of livelihoods (p.82). In the closing sections he combines some ideas traced back to Henry Bernstein with his own, to come up with six key questions we should be asking. These are: *Who owns what* (or who has access to what)? *Who does what?* *Who gets what?* *What do they do with it?* *How do social classes and groups in society and within the state interact with each other?* *How do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies and vice versa?* We could add something on how people makes sense of their realities, but asking these questions, which are illustrated by short examples, is very useful for communities themselves, but also for researchers and development practitioners.

Scoones expresses some regret that due to an implicit localism and a failure to engage with politics and power in certain development agencies, these vital questions were not all considered sufficiently in the first round of livelihood research in the 1990s (although they were, I would argue, in subsequent work from the 2000s). The original SL concepts became too blocky in use, and they collapsed complex agrarian histories and context into 'categories', as part of an 'asset pentagon' and 'capitals' analysis that some readers will be familiar with. 'Political capital' was excluded from the pentagon. Scoones concludes that the actions and the politics of the individual (p112) still need to be combined with the "wider, structural and relational dynamics that shape localities and livelihoods" (p115). Some of these dynamics are ecological and a "...political ecology approach to livelihoods analysis has long been part of the broader intellectual canvas" (p114). This requires "moving across scales" (p115) and from the micro to the macro. Sustainable livelihoods thinking must broaden in scope, he argues, in practice and methodologically, and the "right to a sustainable livelihood" is "something that is worth fighting for" (p116). Political ecologists need to consider this, and they will benefit from reading the book's historical account of SL. The book also shows how to express complex agrarian issues in a comprehensible way and to a range of potential readerships. Sadly, political ecology has yet to achieve such a degree of 'uptake.'

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