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Sustainable Rural Development or (Sustainable) Rural Livelihoods? Strategies for the 21st Century in Peripheral Regions

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Abstract

Ongoing discussions concerning the concept of development applied within the context of peripheral regions (including rural development, regional development, sustainable development, local development, etc.), and particularly its critical deconstruction, encourage us to look for new theoretical approaches and terminological constructs that would be useful in research and design of desired changes taking place in rural areas and that could substitute the contested notion of "development." The text discusses strengths and weaknesses of "sustainable rural livelihood" — as a concept, as well as a framework of academic analysis and action — in the context of its application within "rural development" studies.

Keywords: rural development, livelihood, rural peripheral areas

Introduction: On the importance of concepts "The concepts that think (for) us"[1]

Academics representing critical approaches within social sciences are seriously concerned about the power of established concepts that are supposed to organize research endeavour within mainstream disciplinary paradigms. They claim that our way of thinking is so strongly channelled through the existing sets of established ideas, that we are unable to notice what is left beyond them. There is not enough critical approach to concepts treated as obvious and therefore proper. We seldom think about their origin, or hidden sense they might contain. Emmánuel Lizcano states "the well-known metaphors think (for) us, while, in all our innocence, we believe that it us who think through them" (Lizcano 2006, 275).

Such worries have led some authors towards deconstruction, understood as critical dismantling of traditional modes of thought and overall accepted concepts. It proved to be particularly interesting when applied to ideas organizing our research and lives. In the field of social sciences, Immanuel Wallenstein already in the 1990s claimed that we should "unthink" — radically revise and discard — many of the presumptions that still remain the foundation of dominant perspectives today. While in the 19th century they were liberating, now they are rather barriers to a clear understanding of our social world (Wallerstein 1991). A similar idea inspired Alain Touraine in his book *Penser autrement*, where he claims the return of an empowered individual subject as a much needed perspective within 21st century social sciences. "Ideas that in our nearest past have been the most popular ones do not explain anything anymore and are useless as they only widen the gap separating the political and social world from the world of thought" (Touraine 2007, 17).

Among the notions considered as obsolete now, there is also the idea of "development." Social psychologist Harald Weltzer showed that the idea of endless growth has not only been present in economic, social and political discourse for at least two hundred years — since the Industrial Revolution it has been embedded in our emotional and cognitive lives as well. We do express it

1. Borrowed from Lizcano (2006).

in our professional career preferences and life plans, and in our quests to discover the "real me" or a "higher level of understanding." Those "mental infrastructures" — as he calls them — explain why we are so reluctant to deep changes — even if rationally we do accept they are needed (Welzer 2011).

The present text discusses the concept and framework of "sustainable livelihood" as an alternative to the well-known notions of local/rural sustainable development. In order to avoid pitfalls of a new "mental infrastructure" it is important to acknowledge both strengths and weaknesses of that approach and explore its potential of adaptation to differing and changing circumstances. The author refers to her own research experiences as well as to publications summarizing experiences of other academics and "development" practitioners.

1 "Development" and "sustainability" as contested concepts

In the introduction to *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, its editor and one of the co-authors, Wolfgang Sachs stated that: "the idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape" and „it is time to dismantle this mental structure" (Sachs 1992b, 1). That dismantling has been a task of many authors (Eade and Cornwall 2010; Veltmeyer 2011), but the basis of their critiques differ. Some of them look mainly at power relations underpinning development theory and practice. According to Sachs (1992a), Esteva (1992) and Escobar (1995), the modern meaning of the concept of development — is basically a tool of hegemony of the "developed" West over the rest of the "underdeveloped" world. It reduces the role of the latter to that of a passive beneficiary of development programs shaped according to western values, concepts, ideas and interests.[2] The post-development authors claim that traditional local knowledge, bottom-up initiatives and solutions should be more important in the search of satisfactory changes for local communities, than theories and concepts tailored elsewhere, giving cross-cultural evidences supporting that idea (*¿A dónde vamos…* 2004; Esteva and Prakash 1998; Latouche 1998; Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn 2006). Another group of authors draw attention to the fact that our understanding of development is based on the concept of growth. In the 21st century critiques of the development paradigm based on growth have been incorporated by a growing number of disciplines — beyond individual and marginalized voices heard earlier in social sciences. They rose to mainstream attention after the publication of a report, by economist Tim Jackson, issued in 2009 by the United Kingdom's official Sustainable Development Commission titled *Prosperity without Growth?* (Jackson 2009). It pushed forward actions of a network of academics and social activists called the "de-growth movement" who promote the idea of increasing human wellbeing by aiming at smaller scale economies, recovering traditional livelihoods and reducing pressure on ecosystems.

The meaning and essence of sustainability have been analysed and debated from different perspectives ever since the concept was brought up on the political and social agenda by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). The concept is ambiguous and unclear (Bonevac 2010), according to some critics — oxymoronic and therefore perverse while used by development institutions and governments (Latouche 2004). Its original meaning was strongly related to the need for protection of environmental resources, but later, it acquired the sense of endless, neo-liberal, durable development based on growth with some limits to exploitation of natural resources. Finally social sustainability was added as the third dimension of the concept. Consequently, today the term "sustainable development" is used both by the ecologists and private business, even if their final objectives are completely different (Paton 2008). In academic literature and among practitioners there are quite different ideas about the concept as a tool for effective change. Three different positions can be discerned starting with its rejection. Post-development critics say that exactly as in the case of the concept of development, sustainability is mainly rhetoric in the interest of the western world and the neoliberal economy. Some ecologists stress that natural resources have been subjected to economic interest, so the concept does not work and they rather prefer to avoid it in introducing clearer notions, such as

2. See the author's previous publications (Lisocka-Jaegermann 2011a, 2011b).

ecological citizenship. The other two positions accept the concept: in the first, represented mainly by politicians and planners, sustainable development is understood as a model that can guide decision making and action. Technical indicators are introduced as a measure of "progress" in its enforcing. The second one accepts the contested character of the concept trying to map its different meanings. Perhaps the best summary of debates on sustainability has been offered by Ian Scoones who reminds us that even if it is one of the most widely used buzzwords of the last twenty years, it is a "boundary term" "one where science meets politics and politics meets science" (2010, 153), valuable in spite of all the discrepancies.

2 Sustainable livelihood framework

The concept of "sustainable livelihoods" (SL) was elaborated in the 1990s, in the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, Great Britain (Chambers and Conway 1992) and since then it has been increasingly important in the development debate. "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social assets) 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" (Scoones 1998, 5). The concept somehow responds to objections of post-development critics, as it is based on the assumption that people usually built economically viable livelihood strategies that are strongly embedded in the places they live and based on local assets. Considering the diversity of situations observed in rural areas of the world and the diversity of cultures, we have to accept the diversity of livelihoods — both observed and possible (Ellis 1999). They do not necessarily correspond to western "development" ideas. The SL framework is founded upon the conviction that any intervention for a change must be based upon an appreciation of what underpins livelihoods. Defining local assets that comprise five different sets of capital: the human capital (including skills, knowledge, labour), natural capital (natural resources and environmental services), economic/financial capital (cash, credit, savings), social (networks, social relations, affiliations)and physical capital (infrastructure), as well as assessing people's access to them is the first step in diagnosis of local livelihoods (Morse and McNamara 2013). Emphasizing diversity of local assets, taking into account vulnerability and putting human agency in the center — are the main values of the approach that has been made popular by the British Department for International Development (DFiD).

Figure 1 represents graphically the most popular version of the framework — showing interconnections between transforming structures and processes and assets as well as the vulnerability context. Livelihood strategies lead to desirable outcomes that do affect assets and have to take into account factors of vulnerability and risk. The dynamic and systemic nature of the framework is another strong point. Considering culture within transforming processes makes it flexible enough to grasp peculiarities of diverging local situations. It is worth observing as well that the approach goes beyond sectored perspectives — strategies and outcomes can combine elements usually classified as urban or rural, industrial or agricultural, formal or informal, showing linkages between different sectors reflected in modes of livelihood (Ahmed and Lipton 1997; McDowell and Haan 1997; Rakodi 1999; Scoones 2010). Changing combinations of modes of livelihood can be analysed within a dynamic and historical context.

My field research experiences stemming from several local studies conducted with the application of elements of the sustainable livelihood approach (Lisocka-Jaegermann 2011a) show a diversity of elements that are part of livelihood strategies of rural households and rural communities, often neglected by the policy makers and even part of academia. Diversity enhances flexibility, resilience and maintenance of certain stability, as internally diverse livelihood systems are less vulnerable than undiversified ones; they are also likely to prove more sustainable over time, as they allow quick adaptation to changing circumstances. A combination of different sources of income coming from agricultural activities and husbandry, small scale trade, handicrafts, paid labour in agriculture and other activities, remittances sent from abroad by migrant family members, small business enterprise founded with remittances — are everyday realities of many inhabitants

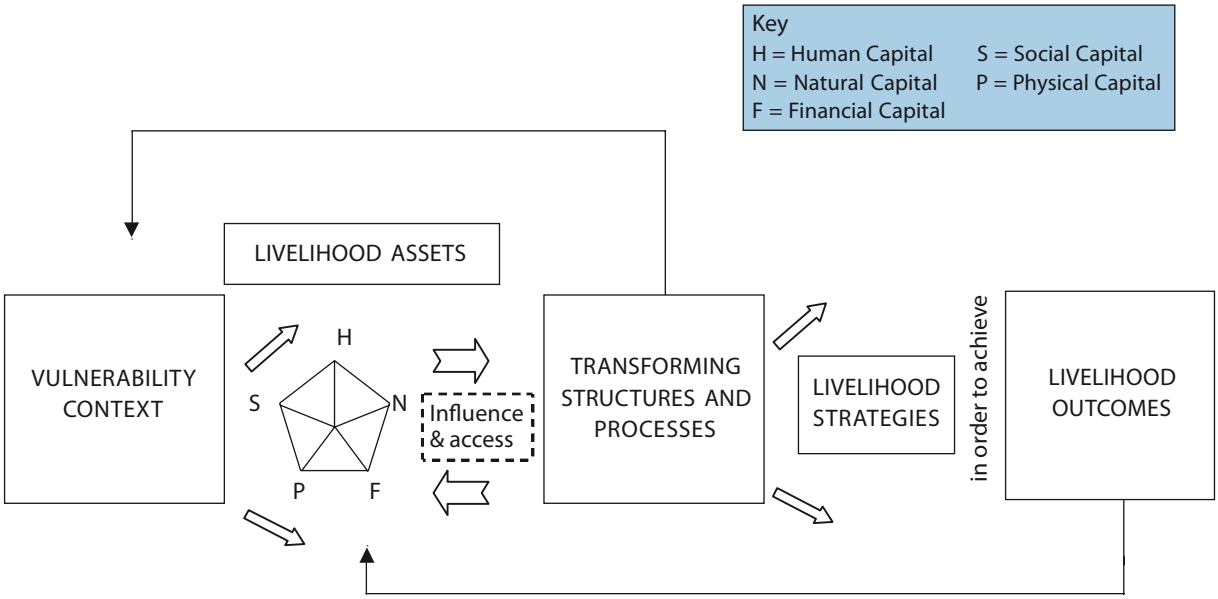

Fig. 1. DFiD Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

Source: Sustainable Livelihood Guidance Sheet, available at http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0901/section1.pdf

of rural areas in Latin America (Lisocka-Jaegermann 2011a; Lisocka-Jaegermann and Skoczek 2008/2009). The SL approach also shows clearly that different levels of analysis are necessary in order to understand the importance of micro-macro linkages crucial for understanding present day rural survival strategies of individuals and households.

3 Sustainable livelihood approaches within "development" practice and the academia: strengths, weaknesses and challenges

Major strengths of an SL framework have been already mentioned above. In order to summarize them it is worth recalling such features of the approach as: people-centred; assets centred — built on strengths and not on weaknesses, holistic, dynamic, grasping micro-macro links, and considering vulnerability and risks as an important part of livelihood. The approach encourages research on the relationships between different activities. It shows the complexity of rural realities. Like sustainability — it can be also treated as a "boundary term" helpful in contacts between researchers, development agencies, government institutions involved in designing "development" policies, and practitioners.

Experiences of more than 20 years of application of the concept of SL and the corresponding framework provide a basis for discussion of their weaknesses, problems and challenges implied by its use. The practical application of the framework rose in the late 1990s and in the beginning of the 21st century as numerous agencies and institutions encouraged practitioners to use it. The British DFiD — together with ODI (Overseas Development Institute) were following it from the very beginning (Carney 2002; Hussein 2002). In the reports and reviews analysed there are two clear diverging trends. Whereas for some organizations and authors the concept itself and the main ideas of the framework are just guidelines for a new way of thinking of local development projects or strategies of poverty alleviation, others look at them as at a chance of institutionalising a new approach — translating it into sets of "questions to ask," or list of values to be measured (Hussein 2002).

Practitioners — since the early stages of implementation of the approach talk mainly about technical difficulties in its application. In fact those can be seen as "the other side" of strengths. SL approach is time and money consuming as it requires multi-disciplinary teams and training of its members. Quantifying data (for instance, information on assets) can be difficult while it is often required as part of the "development project's mandatory logistics" (Baumann 2002, 21). Hussein claims that the review of the framework application by different organizations he made

"highlights the need for significant organisational change if SL approaches are to become routine in development practice. Development institutions and national governments are usually organised along sectoral lines, hindering the adoption of multisectoral approaches. Institutional structures and management procedures may need to change to fit flexible people-centred SLA — sectoral and departmental biases, priorities and mandates need to be re-examined." However — the review of the existing literature on SL practical application confirms it can be useful within a variety of scopes present in analysis of rural realities. "Development professionals have adapted an SL approach to meet their own needs and address what they perceive as shortcomings of the Sustainable Livelihood approach and framework. For example, the framework has been adapted to incorporate gender, power, markets and rights issues or has been used to complement legal frameworks and codes of conduct" (Hussein 2002, 55).

One of the challenges mentioned both by practitioners interviewed by Hussein and academic researchers that assess the framework consists in finding out how policies, institutions and political processes affect people's and households' livelihoods. Figure 2 represents one of the alternative frameworks, "enriched" by a South African organization Khanya. It emphasises the importance of linking local realities to central policies and institutions in its development interventions. Linking the micro level of households, the mezo one — of local and regional institutions, and the level of national and global policies seems to be one of the major problems within the framework's approach.

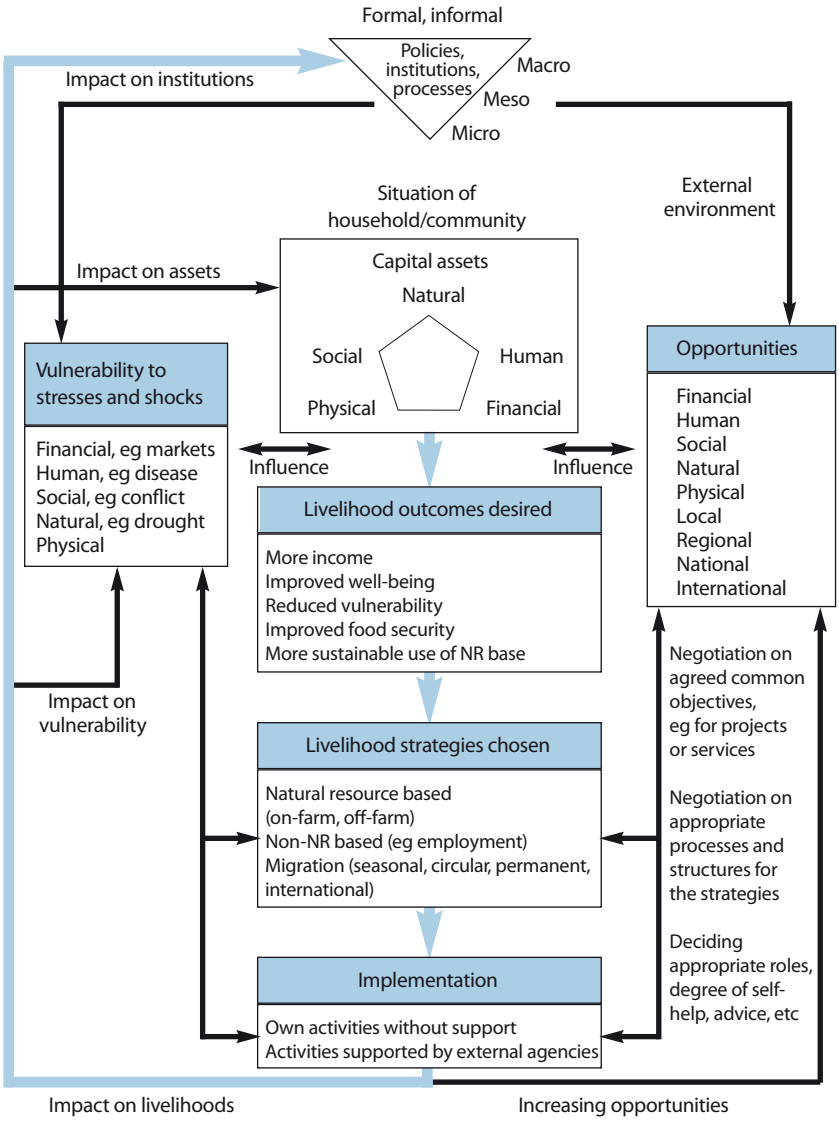

Fig. 2. One of the alternative frameworks of sustainable rural livelihoods

Source: Carney (2002, 57)

Khanya's version draws attention both to the fact that policies, institutions and processes related to them can affect both — vulnerabilities and opportunities; they are also important within implementation of strategies chosen on the micro level. Such perspective helps to consider — for instance — such diverse factors as macroeconomic trends, inflation or civil conflicts as parts of analysis of local realities.

The micro level of formal and informal policies and institutions — present in the Khanya scheme — corresponds to other weaknesses of the original framework represented in figure 1: power relations and conflicts of interests within the model are not acknowledged sufficiently although access to livelihood assets and opportunities is defined by power relations embedded in institutions, organizations and social relations (Haan and Zoomers 2005). The same authors mention as well the "unclear interface between access to resources and decision making" observing that the latter corresponds not only to strategies but also to "unintentional behaviour and structural factors" (Haan and Zoomers 2005, 45). As Scoones and Wolmer analysing different patterns of combination of agriculture and livestock herding say: "Livelihoods emerge out of past actions and decisions are made within specific historical and agro-ecological conditions, and are constantly shaped by institutions and social arrangements" (2002, 183).

In my opinion sustainability of livelihoods is the weakest aspect of the framework, seldom addressed in detailed case studies due to the vagueness of the term and lack of means to measure it over time. That is the reason why — in the academic literature — we often read just about livelihoods or rural livelihoods. Authors prefer to avoid discussions on the contested meanings of sustainability in that context.

Conclusions

Understanding and codifying complexity is not easy. The concept and the framework of livelihood studies aim at a holistic and dynamic approach to changing rural realities with their social actors and assets in the centre of attention. Awareness of the constraints of the approach is crucial. As the example represented in figure 2 shows, it is possible to include in the framework missing elements corresponding to practical and research needs. It is also possible to add new concepts that complete livelihood analysis and allow to move it beyond studies of individual cases. Haan and Zoomers suggest the introduction of notions of pathways and styles to describe patterns of livelihood activities "which emerge from a co-ordination process among actors, arising from individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations and institutional processes, both of which play a role in subsequent decision making" (2005, 45). Toner (2003) postulates better understanding on how institutions evolve, and Alberto Arce (2003), on the basis of his research in Bolivia claims that more attention should be paid to values. Lessons drawn from my own research experiences confirm the need of working upon methods of studies of power relations on the local level and on frameworks for assessing more complex risk/vulnerability patterns.

In spite of the weaknesses and challenges mentioned above the concept of SL seems more suitable for analysis of present day rural realities of peripheral regions than the worn out metaphor of "development." It is flexible enough to allow adaptations to diverse contexts and research interests. The systemic character of the framework — as presented in one of the alternative versions (fig. 2) obliges us to think in terms of dynamic interactions comprising different levels — from the micro to the macro. Its most important contribution lays in reversing the perception of peripheral realities: their social actors are seen as active and creative protagonists minimizing risks and taking advantage of available resources and not just passive recipients of "development" programs. The concept being a "boundary term" also helps to maintain communication channels between different stakeholders of the "development" agendas, contributing to the discussions on ideas shaping "rural development." There is no doubt it fits much better than "local/rural development" the postulates of renewal of social sciences for the 21st century formulated by Wallerstein and Touraine, among others.

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