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Citation

Haan, L. J. de. (2008). Livelihoods and the articulation of space. In P. Hebinck, S. Slootweg, & L. Smith (Eds.), *Tales of Development: People, Power and Space*. (pp. 51-60). Assen: Van Gorcum. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13495>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13495>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Livelihoods and the articulation of space

Leo J. de Haan

Introduction

Livelihood studies aim to understand and contribute towards an improvement of livelihoods, primarily those of the poor. However, the spatial dimension of livelihoods is often overlooked, which results in a local bias and an overemphasis on the place, to the detriment of space. Linking up with the recent 'spatial turn' in social science, this paper attempts to determine the relationship between contemporary livelihoods, i.e. livelihoods in the current era of globalization, and the articulation of space. It starts with a short description of globalization, followed by an overview of the origins of the modern livelihood approach and its roots in geography. These sections serve as points of departure for a discussion of the contemporary articulation of space. Instead of adopting van Naerssen's (1979) structuralist perspective on articulated space, the paper takes an actor-oriented perspective, with the section on the 'spatial turn' in social science discussing present-day views on space and place and the position of livelihood studies in the light of globalization. A preliminary conceptualization of the contribution of livelihood networks to the contemporary articulation of space then follows.

Globalization

Globalization is not just a process of internationalization but a characteristic of a 'global system' in which each particular entity has to be understood within the framework of the world as a whole (de Ruijter, 1997). Globalization means, first of all, an increased homogenization and interdependency in the world. Clearly identifiable centres are giving way to nodes that differ in time and dimension. For some, the driving force is mostly socio-political but for others it is primarily economic and stems from production and markets. However, the trend towards global markets and politics is usually mirrored by growing diversity and an increased importance of regionalism and community, i.e. a trend towards localization. Thus, in addition to homogenization, globalization also implies greater fragmentation, for example cultural fragmentation with the reinvention of local traditions and identities, as an answer to the loss of identity through homogenization. Robertson (1995) strikingly characterized globalization as 'glocalization', i.e. confronting trends of both homogeneity and heterogeneity in time and space.

This view of globalization as a process not just of internalization but primarily as increased interdependency of a world system is similar to the way van Naerssen (1979) characterized the world at the end of the 1970s. He considered it an interdependent system of regions, resulting from a worldwide articulation of

modes of production. The essential driver was economic, i.e. the development of forces of production, and spatially localized in the centre. Asymmetrical economic relations, in addition to political and social relations stemming from these economic relations, have resulted in unequal development and an articulated space of interdependent centres and peripheries.

Nowadays, interdependency can still be considered a common denominator of the world system but other drivers, mainly social, cultural and political, in addition to economic are also taken into consideration. The spatial picture of the 1970s has become fragmented and fuzzy and today it is more difficult to mark out clear centres and peripheries. And although a clearly bounded Third World no longer exists, large parts of the world population still remain excluded from economic and social progress (de Haan, 2000a). This exclusion does not relate to countries and regions as a whole but instead to social groups within these areas. All this also requires a re-examination of the present articulation of space. In the following section, therefore, recent views on the articulation of space are explored in addition to the spatial outlook of an actor-oriented perspective as an alternative to a structuralist perspective. However, the geographical roots of the livelihood approach need first to be explained.

Geography and livelihoods

After the impasse of the structural perspective of ‘dependencia’ and neo-Marxist studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Schuurman, 1993; Booth, 1985), a more productive actor-oriented perspective emerged. It recognized inequalities in the distribution of assets and power but, above all, it stressed that people make their own history. This new standpoint was concerned with the world of ‘lived experiences’, the micro-world of family, networks and communities, and a micro-orientation with a focus on local actors, often households. At the same time, the household also came into vogue in a more practical sense, being seen as a convenient unit for the collection of empirical data. Many so-called household studies drew pessimistic conclusions, showing that poor households were being increasingly excluded from the benefits of economic growth, and were thus becoming marginalized (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

The 1980s was the era of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), a macroeconomic recipe to reduce debt and eliminate poverty. However, SAPs were too narrowly macroeconomic and did not pay sufficient attention to the often adverse consequences of proposed adjustment measures for the poor. At the beginning of the 1990s, a more people-sensitive approach was needed. At the same time, a new generation of more optimistic household studies was conducted – namely livelihood studies – showing how people were surviving. In its optimism, the livelihood approach was an expression of *Zeitgeist* but was also a direct response to the disappointing results of former attempts to devise effective policies to eradicate poverty (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway, themselves drawing on insights from previous research on food security and agro-ecological sustainability, are widely acknowledged for having put livelihoods – then usually called ‘Sustainable Livelihoods’ – centre stage. In fact, Chambers brilliantly embraced the momentum of the then-current environmental sustainability discussion,

interpreting sustainability as a matter of trade-off for poor people between (mostly environmental) vulnerability and poverty. In the early 1990s, the UNDP contributed to the renewed debate on poverty with its annual Human Development Reports. A major impetus to the further development of the approach was the 1997 election of the new Labour government in the United Kingdom. The pro-active, self-help image of the Sustainable Livelihoods approach in improving the lives of the poor fitted very well with the image 'New Labour' and Tony Blair's administration wanted to project. Sustainable Livelihoods became an important theme in the UK's development policy, with DFID initiating numerous research projects and policy debates on the subject. The World Bank finally jumped on the bandwagon with its 'Voices of the Poor' report (Narayan, 2000), in which Chambers also had significant input. Apparently, the Bank wanted to seize the momentum but in fact never gave any clear follow-up.

Livelihood is usually defined as comprising 'the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living' (Carney, 1998, based on Chambers and Conway, 1992:7). According to Long (1997), who has been influential in the Netherlands, livelihood 'best expresses the idea of individuals and groups striving to make a living, attempting to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, coping with uncertainties, responding to new opportunities, and choosing between different value positions'. Increasingly, a holistic conceptualization of livelihood became generally accepted. This is best reflected in Bebbington's (1999:2022) formulation: 'A livelihood encompasses income, both cash and in kind, as well as the social institutions (kin, family, village), gender relations, and property rights required to support and to sustain a given standard of living. A livelihood also includes access to and the benefits derived from social and public services provided by the state such as education, health services, roads, water supplies and so on.'

The livelihood approach thus proved attractive to a range of social scientists, geographers included. De Haan & Zoomers (2003: 351), following de Haan (2000b:346), identified the notion of 'genre de vie' (a way of life) in early twentieth-century French geography as the first conceptualization of livelihood in modern geography. For anthropologists, the concept of livelihood became familiar a few decades later when Evans-Pritchard (1940) used it when describing Nuer strategies for making a living, and pointed to its mainly economic resource base. Economists recognize their livelihood roots in more recent household studies in the 1980s, which are usually identified as 'household economics' and in Polanyi's (1977) attempt to develop an economic science that was holistic and human-centred as opposed to being mainstream (formalist) economics.

Returning to geography and the conceptualization of livelihoods, it is interesting to note that when geography was recognized as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, a great deal of attention was paid to the landscape and the strong belief in the moulding power of the physical environment on human activities. This interest in the physical features of the landscape lasted a long time, even though increasing attention was paid to human agency and man's capacity to choose between a range of possible responses to physical conditions. De Haan and Zoomers (2003:351) explain how 'Vidal de la

Blache was the first to introduce the concept of livelihood, or “genre de vie”, to explain that within a specific geographical setting there is a “highly localised, rooted, stable and socially bounded connection between people and the land” called the “pays” (Johnston *et al.*, 2000:294). After World War II, livelihood as a concept almost completely vanished from geography due to the dominant structural perspectives of ‘dependencia’ and neo-Marxist approaches. Once these lost their appeal, a much more actor-oriented post-Marxist approach emerged in development geography. While it continued to put the emphasis on inequalities in the distribution of assets and power, it acknowledged that people make their own history, though not independently of structural imperatives. It also drew insights from other approaches such as feminism, for example with respect to power relations (Johnston, 1993:233-34). Post-Marxist development geography focused on local development as ‘the world of lived experience, the micro-world of family, network and community’ (Johnston, 1993:229). In geography, therefore, attention increasingly turned to issues of poverty, vulnerability and marginalization at ‘the geographical scale of experience’, as Taylor (1982) called it.

‘It is from this position that the revitalisation of the livelihood approach in geography started. Its orientation on actors and agency and its view on local development is best explained by Johnston (1993:236-245) who showed that Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory gave way to a view of the “locale”. This provides on the one hand the setting of human interaction and on the other hand is the subject of transformation by this interaction. According to Giddens, a particular ‘locale’ provides resources and knowledge on which actors can base their action and at the same time it constrains human actions because it binds them to the resources and knowledge provided. The concept of locale became known as “locality” in British geography: the everyday working and living space of actors. Johnston (1993:243) summarised it as follows: the structuration of social relations in daily life contains many similarities but leads to different outcomes in different places, recognising the uniqueness of the place without denying causation and general operative processes. Focusing on place prevents the structure-agency view of becoming either voluntaristic or deterministic: everyday life provides both the context for people’s actions and is re-created by those actions. Local differences are reflections of cultural variations, which refute economic determinism. However, local differences do not challenge the existence of general operative processes.’ (quoted in De Haan and Zoomers, 2003:351).

The spatial turn in social science

As the instigator of the spatial turn in social science, Lefebvre (1991) argued that space is not a neutral container within which social relations occur but is a constitutive element and active former of those social relations (Cornelissen 2007:119). Moreover, Lefebvre made it clear that space must be regarded as an on-going production of social relations rather than an inert, neutral or pre-existing phenomenon. Consistent with his neo-Marxist background, Lefebvre maintained that the reproduction of social relations of production within this space will lead through necessity to the dissolution of old relations and the

generation of new relations. However, unlike the neo-Marxist theories discussed by van Naerssen (1979) that postulated the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production, Lefebvre emphasized the possible emergence of 'new spaces'. In his view, the spaces of modernity or 'abstract space' are created by trends of homogenization, hierarchization and social fragmentation in capitalism, which at the same time curb variations in local culture, history and natural landscape. Spaces of modernity are the spaces of private property, markets and labour. However, new spaces may appear – the so-called differential spaces – that will resist forces of homogenization and emphasize differences. In fact, Lefebvre (1991) had a dialectical perspective of the conflict between abstract and differential space.

In political science, the spatial turn invited different conceptualizations of the state as a manifestation of collective spatial imaginings, which are not necessarily territorially bound. It also led to changed understandings of political concepts like deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Cornelissen, 2007) to come to grips with seemingly diverging processes under globalization. As Lefebvre (1991) already made clear, this did not mean that studies of locality became irrelevant, quite the opposite in fact. Appadurai (1996), another architect of the spatial turn, called for more studies on the 'production of locality' and pointed at the relevance of area studies, assigning them the task of studying the historically uneven course of globalization, but not necessarily resulting in homogenization. In his view, different societies appropriate modernity in diverse ways so studies of areas, with their different geographies, histories and cultures, are extremely relevant. Appadurai 'stresses that locality itself is a historical product and subject to the dynamics of the global. Areas put in this way represent sites for the analysis of how localities emerge in a globalizing world, how colonial processes underlie contemporary politics, and how history and genealogy inflect each other' (Al-Zubaidi, 1998:1).

However, what is often neglected by *Zeitgeist* and its awareness of agency is the asymmetry of global relations. The uneven course of globalization, heterogeneity etc are connected with the exclusion from economic and social progress of hundreds of millions of people in large parts of the world.

Against this broader theoretical background, the modern livelihood perspective must clarify its understanding of contemporary globalization. Despite the importance of locality, the one-sided local orientation, which is still prominent in many of today's livelihood studies especially those with an interest in natural-resource exploitation, is outdated. A new conceptualization of the articulation of space along the lines indicated by Lefebvre and Appadurai stands out, through a focus on the asymmetry of the global-local nexus or glocalization, as mentioned above.

This means that the general geographical interpretation of development characterized by Kleinpenning (1997:13) 'as an in time and space varying, but always complex ensemble of generically heterogeneous factors on various spatial levels of scale: natural and social, internal and external, historical and actual' remains unchallenged. But it also means that one should carefully compose the analysis, i.e. no local without the global, no natural without the social and, something that is apparently the easiest to neglect as Kleinpenning (1997:15) explains, no contemporary without the historical. Attention to the global-local

nexus must assure that the geography of livelihoods does not become diverted into the study of local customs and (folk)lore.

The emergence of livelihood networks

Livelihoods in the era of globalization are increasingly organized in networks. This trend has been encouraged by the interrelated and accelerated processes of individualization, multi-tasking and mobility.

In modern livelihood studies the poor are no longer regarded as victims but play an active role in shaping their own livelihoods. This focus on the active involvement of people in responding to change and also enforcing change corresponds with an increased awareness of the trend towards individualization. For a long time, 'family' or 'household' used to be the unit of analysis in actor-oriented development studies, with households seen as decision-making units maximizing their welfare with respect to a range of income-earning opportunities and resource constraints (Ellis, 1998:12). They were usually defined as co-resident groups of persons, who shared most aspects of consumption, drawing on and allocating a common pool of resources, including labour, to ensure their material reproduction. From this awareness of intra-household relations comes the realization that globalization has impacted on the characteristics and functions of households. Instead of pursuing an optimal balance in a harmonious domestic unit, individuals now pursue their own methods to improve their situation, for example by diversifying their livelihood or moving to a new location to exploit new opportunities. In many cases, traditional solidarity-based principles of pooling incomes, consumption and labour within households have become weaker or at least changed. Thus, although individuals remain members of domestic units (families or households), they are increasingly acting independently. Extended families are breaking down into nuclear families; nuclear families are disintegrating further; and single-person households are no longer limited to industrialized societies. In many parts of the world, the number of female-headed households has risen and the elderly have increasingly become a separate and often isolated group, no longer cared for in extended families (de Haan and Zoomers, 2003:354).

The second trend is multi-tasking or diversification. Livelihood diversification is 'a process by which ... households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their standard of living' (Ellis, 2000:15). 'Today, few among the poor derive all their income from just one source or hold all their wealth in the form of just one single asset. In many cases, the bulk of income of the rural poor no longer originates from agriculture, and it is no longer realistic to classify the population as small farmers or the landless poor. At the same time, among the urban poor, part of the population is now involved in urban agriculture, which provides additional food supply' (de Haan and Zoomers, 2003:356).

People have various motives for diversifying their assets and activities. Multi-tasking is seen as a way of compensating for insufficient income or temporary crisis situations. It is a strategy to escape poverty, cope with insecurity or reduce risk. It is also becoming increasingly clear that diversification is persistent and enduring in the sense that the phenomenon occurs everywhere and does not

appear to be temporary. Diversification does not mean having an occasional income in addition to a main activity; it means multiple income sources and it is a distinguishing feature of the poor (Ellis, 2000:4). It is poverty that induces households to intensify their income-generating strategies, using any available labour or resources as fully as possible. They adjust, cope, create and recreate their livelihoods under the impact of macroeconomic circumstances, climatic variability and institutional change (Ellis, 2000:14-15).

Individualization and multi-tasking are joined by a third process, namely a rapid expansion in people's mobility as a result of improvements in communications and transport technology. Increasing numbers of people are now living on the edge of urban and rural life, commuting from the countryside to the urban centres. Poor people too supplement their incomes by travelling large distances to earn additional money as temporary migrants. Finally, there is the considerable group of transnational migrants. However, one should not fall into the trap of 'immigration paranoia', which is so prevalent in western politics at the moment. Most migration, in fact, takes place within regions of the developing world and not from developing to industrialized countries. But on the other hand, the impact of remittances and flows of information generated by migration should also not be underestimated. The relevant issue here is that the focus should not be on migration as it is the combination of individualization, diversification and mobility that matters.

As a consequence, individuals are no longer organized as co-resident groups concentrated in space but resemble individual nodes that are connected to each other by livelihood networks along which remittances, information, ideas, goods and people flow. These multi-local networks of livelihoods have spread quickly around the globe. And the question is what this means for livelihood studies in the future. Livelihood networks deserve closer scrutiny by a new generation of livelihood studies because the 'network transformation' has not yet been properly researched as the focus is too limited to migration per se.

One interesting question would be if livelihood networks mirrored the network society, as conceptualized by Castells (1996). He has pointed at the emergence of a new type of firm – the new network enterprise – which is based on the space of flows, so characteristic for contemporary information networks. However, the components of these network enterprises are located in places. Castells (1989: 69-70) showed that the more organizations depend upon flows and networks, the less they are influenced by the social context associated with the places of their location. But people on the other hand do live in a physical world, the space of places. However, because of this tension, people risk losing their sense of Self and, as a consequence, are trying to remodel their identity (Castells 1996). Clearly, the remodelling of identity by migrants is partly captured by the contemporary conceptualization of transnational communities, but the challenge of conceptualizing the livelihood component as a flexible network firm or enterprise is not taken up. In either case, the asymmetry in relations through the working of 'power relations' calls for further attention.

To conclude

The modern livelihood perspective offers interesting prospects regarding the conceptualization of contemporary articulation of space. From an actor-oriented viewpoint, livelihood studies tend to favour locality or place but analysis of the global-local nexus has shown that this nearsightedness can be overcome.

The impact of the emergence of livelihood networks – triggered by the combined processes of individualization, diversification and mobility – on the articulation of space has yet to be explored. It has been argued that the outlines of this conceptualization should be linked to the debate on the network society. Finally, attention to the asymmetry of relations, i.e. analyses of power relations, should be a key element points of view. This cannot be overemphasized. Only then will it become clear how large parts of the world's population remain excluded from economic and social progress.

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