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Poverty is Bad: Ways Forward in Livelihood Research

Mayke Kaag, Rik van Berkel, Johan Brons, Mirjam de Bruijn, Han van Dijk, Leo de Haan, Gerben Nooteboom and Annelies Zoomers¹

1. Introduction: Getting to grips with persistent problems of poverty and inequality

More than ever before, the world is one, yet still divided. Despite economic growth, technological change, better communications and the accumulation of knowledge, many people are still poor and getting even poorer. Moreover, access to and control of resources remains highly unequal.

How can these persistent problems of poverty² and inequality be understood and tackled? There are many angles from which to approach such issues with diverse entry points including macroeconomic indicators, the role of the state, global political and economic relationships, and so on. In the last few years, the concept of 'livelihood' has gained popularity among both scholars of poverty and development issues and policy makers. It is used mostly as a sensitising concept indicating an approach to poverty issues that aims to be people-centred, non-sectoral and grounded in the multidimensional reality of daily life. What current livelihood studies have in common is that they concentrate on the actions and strategies of people trying to make a living in adverse circumstances.

This livelihood perspective has proved to be interesting for scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds, and has, to date, produced studies dealing with a diversity of themes and focusing on diverse categories of people all over the globe, but always from the perspective of people's day-to-day struggles in making a living. Thus, livelihood studies may focus on the way people cope with ecological disaster and economic and political adversity (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1995), on the effects of resettlement (Dekker 2002) and processes of deagrarianisation (Bryceson 1999), on social-security mechanisms (Nooteboom *forthc.*), diversification (Ellis 2000) and problems of sustainable livelihoods (Carney 1998). Research may cover groups as diverse as women traders in Tadjikistan (Kanji 2002), farmers in the Bolivian Andes (Zoomers 1999), San Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert (Taylor 2002), or unemployed workers in the European Union (Van Berkel & Brand 1996).

We – a group of human geographers, anthropologists, an economist and a social psychologist – have discovered common ground and interest in the livelihood debate, and feel that the livelihood approach as mentioned above is indeed useful for studying poverty issues. At the same time, there are still ways forward to be explored. How can, for instance, actors' perceptions of the environment, of themselves, and of the dynamics and processes they are involved in, be implied? Can processes of inclusion and exclusion be analysed from a livelihood perspective? How can the effects of

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² In this paper, we take the view that the essence of poverty is the fact that one or several basic conditions for generating a living are not being met. The conditions considered most vital for making a living are to a certain extent context specific and subject to (cultural and social) interpretation and evaluation.

globalisation processes be taken into account? These are the kinds of questions that need to be posed if the term ‘livelihood’ is to help us understand the complexity of current problems of poverty and development. With this paper, we hope to contribute to the discussion and to offer some preliminary answers.

It is important to realise that scientific approaches and theories are no ready-made stocks of coherent ideas that can smoothly be applied to some clear-bounded problem, but that they emerge incrementally, by searching and adaptation, going back and forth, by trial and error. The livelihood approach also was not thought up by a group of scholars one rainy afternoon. It has developed over the years through scientific debate, adaptation to changes in social reality, the cross-fertilisation of different domains within science, and exchanges between social scientists and policy makers. People felt attracted to ideas concerning livelihood and began to use the concept in various parts of the world and in different academic circles. It is only in retrospect that what these studies have in common can be seen, and thus, what a livelihood approach implies. Furthermore, to fully grasp its significance, the context in which the livelihood approach emerged must be understood.

Consequently, our argument is developed by tracing the roots of the livelihood approach in its historical context and considering the debates that have nurtured it. It is shown that the livelihood approach constitutes an important new way of viewing poverty and development issues as compared to earlier approaches. This does not preclude that we see some challenges ahead, as we will point out in section 3. In Sections 4 to 7, we will link our observations to specific research themes and to our own research practice. Section 8 considers some of the methodological problems faced when carrying out livelihood research. In the conclusion, we will resume the results of our explorations and indicate some ways forward - based on the fundamental assumptions that people are valuable and that poverty is bad.

2. Genealogy of the livelihood approach: Synergy of policy and academic debate

The concept of livelihood is not new. Evans-Pritchard, for example, was using it back in 1940 when describing the Nuer’s strategies for making a living. Other social scientists to employ the term include Kimble (1960), Pandit (1965) and Freeman (1975). In these studies, ‘livelihood’ is used in a rather concrete manner to describe the ways in which people make a living, and mainly points to the economic resource base people have at their disposal for doing this. The term was taken for granted and constituted in fact no issue for debate.

One of the few scientists before the end of the twentieth century to elaborate the concept of livelihood more theoretically was the economist Polanyi (1886-1964), who died before finishing his book *The Livelihood of Man* that was only published in 1977 (ed. Harry W. Pearson). In this and in his earlier work, some basic aspects of the later livelihood approach can already be distinguished. Polanyi wanted to develop an economic science that was holistic and human-centred. He considered the economy as socially, culturally and historically embedded, as opposed to mainstream (formalist) economics that was merely occupied with individual maximising behaviour. In his substantive definition of the economy, the term ‘livelihood’ was central and pointed to the fact that in order to live, people need a material base to satisfy their needs and wants. He stressed that ‘the means, not the wants are material’ (1977: 20).³ Although his

³ That is why, elsewhere, he spoke of ‘want-satisfying material means’ (Stanfield 1986: 35).

ideas on the essence of the economy were influential (although mainly in the social sciences such as anthropology and social geography, and to a lesser extent in his own discipline of economics) and triggered fierce debates over substantivism and formalism, the term 'livelihood' was not explicitly taken up by other scholars.

It was only at the end of the 1980s that a livelihood approach began to take shape in the sense that we perceive it today. The emergence of this approach can be attributed to the convergence of several processes both in developmental practice and scientific debate. In fact, a fruitful cross-fertilisation of science and policy has taken place.

The 1980s was the era of Structural Adjustment Programmes, which served as a macroeconomic recipe for solving problems of development and poverty in the so-called Least Developed Countries. The programmes did not go uncontested however. It was suggested that they were too narrowly macroeconomic and did not pay sufficient attention to the often adverse consequences of the proposed adjustment measures for the poor. Reports such as UNICEF's 'Adjustment With a Human Face' (Cornia, Jolly & Stewart 1987) stressed that a more people-sensitive approach was needed that would pay explicit attention to human welfare and the fulfilment of basic needs, both in the short and in the long term. The WCED report 'Our Common Future' (1987) also contained a plea, albeit modest, for 'putting poor people first' (Chambers 1987). In contrast to unitary macroeconomic approaches, the insight took root that situations of poverty are diverse in character and that poverty is a multidimensional problem, involving not only economic but political, cultural, social and ecological aspects as well.

The development of these ideas converged with developments in more academically oriented approaches that – as early as the 1970s and 1980s – tried to develop a bottom-up and actor-oriented view. Robert Chambers has been one of the pioneers in the field and influential in the elaboration of the livelihood approach at the IDS at the University of Sussex (Chambers 1987, Chambers & Conway 1992). In economics and geographical studies during the 1970s and 1980s, an interest in the informal sector and in survival strategies of the poor had already emerged (Schmink 1984). Survival and coping strategies had also already been an important focal point in studies of risk and hazard such as in those by scholars from the 'political ecology' school (Blaikie 1985, Blaikie & Brookfield 1987, Wisner 1978, cf. Blaikie *et al.* 1994).

Amartya Sen's school of thought has also been influential. Sen stressed the importance of investigating entitlements instead of just property for understanding poverty and famine (Sen 1981). Later on, he developed his 'capabilities approach', pointing to the need to assess poverty issues with an eye on what a person is capable of doing and being, and on his or her own perceptions of what is desirable (cf. Sen 1985, Dreze & Sen 1989).

It was in this context that the livelihood approach emerged. Unlike the unitary macroeconomic approaches to combating poverty, it stresses the diversity of poverty situations and the multidimensionality of the poverty problem. In addition, a livelihoods approach focuses on the agency and the capability of actors, on 'strengths rather than needs' (Murray 2000).

Interestingly, while the livelihood approach emerged in part as a critical response to World Bank and IMF policies in the 1980s, it appeared to converge with the evolution of development policy in the early 1990s. Complementary to macroeconomic

adjustment measures that had preached the retreat of the state, the delivery of public and private services directed at specific target groups progressively gained more attention. The livelihood approach fits well into this shift because of its focus on particular groups of poor people and its analysis of what they can do themselves and what (services) they need.

While the roots of the livelihood approach thus lie in the 1980s and early 1990s, the basic ideas have been further developed through contributions made by scholars from different disciplines over the years. At first, economists and human geographers constituted the majority, but later on other disciplines such as anthropology and social psychology entered the debate as well. Three types of contributions can be distinguished. Firstly, most publications with a livelihood perspective are case studies that focus on the livelihood strategies of a particular group of people in a particular environment (Dekker 2002, Kanji 2002, Taylor 2002). Secondly, there are a few influential contributions that are more theoretical and broader in scope, such as those of Ellis (2000), Bebbington (1999), De Haan (2000), Moser & Norton (2001). Thirdly, efforts have been made within policy circles to develop analytical frameworks that allow the livelihood situation of a target group to be captured and the subsequent formulation of adequate policy interventions. DFID is the main representative of such an approach, but the World Bank, Oxfam International, and others have also incorporated the livelihood theme within their policies.

3. Challenges in current livelihood research

First of all, it should be stressed that the livelihoods perspective incorporates worthy new insights into the essence of global poverty problems. The point of departure is the idea that the poor are important and imbued with agency; they actively shape their lives by means of material and non-material assets, depending on the context in which they have to make a living. In this respect, the livelihood approach is a valuable counterweight against structural approaches to poverty – both macroeconomic and basic needs – that tend to portray people as mere victims of structural constraints. This paper, however, takes the view that this point of departure is conditional but not sufficient in good livelihood research.

Firstly, because a group of poor people and their actions and strategies are taken as the main entry point for analysis, there is the risk of adopting too narrow a view and of ignoring the context of structural constraints, such as power inequalities (cf. Moser & Norton 2001, Adato & Meinzen-Dick 2001). In addition, differences within these groups or categories, such as gender and age differences, may easily be glossed over. One of the consequences of such neglect is that a positive image of poverty is created: ‘they are poor, but see how nicely they are doing’. This is not only not in line with reality but even dangerous, as it diminishes the urge to address structural causes of poverty such as unequal power relations and unequal access to resources.

To give just an example, *Working the Sahel. Environment and Society in Northern Nigeria* (Mortimore & Adams 1999) is an excellent study of how people manage, through flexibility and adaptation, to carve out an existence despite a capricious and harsh climate. Although the achievements of Sahelian households in sustaining and even developing their livelihoods are more than impressive, the authors overstate their argument by omitting some important points. They only focus on the people who have managed to survive and have remained in the rural economy, and the

households and individuals who died, gave up or moved to the slums of the cities do not appear in their account. Additionally, the degree of human suffering on the spot cannot be taken lightly either, as is illustrated by the high infant mortality rate. Also the role of institutional factors, such as land tenure, village-based institutions for labour and wealth-sharing, markets and state organisations are only considered in passing. These are, however, important factors for explaining (differences in) resource endowments and farmers' strategies (Van Dijk 2002).

Secondly, apart from the basic problem of how to deal with the actor-structure dilemma in livelihood studies, there is the issue of people-centeredness. Livelihood studies aim to be people-centred but what exactly does this mean? Some livelihood studies expose a rather narrow vision of man, depicting him as *homo economicus* mainly occupied with using assets to obtain well-defined economic goals. This view has been increasingly criticised in the last few years. Thus, it has been stressed that for people to be considered as 'whole', it is necessary that their perceptions and ideas, their hopes and fears, their norms and values, etc. are all taken into account (cf. Alkire & Deneulin 2000, Kaag 2001). In the same vein, Bebbington (1999: 2022) states that assets are not only vehicles for instrumental action (making a living) but also for hermeneutic action (making life meaningful), and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living). Sen (1997) also challenges the instrumentality that is inherent in much economic thinking. He makes a strong plea for considering human capability as an end and not only as a means of reaching the aim of development or economic gain: people are considered an end in themselves and he thus refers to real people-centredness. It often proves difficult, however, to translate these insights into research and policy.

Thirdly, livelihood studies face the challenge of incorporating current developments and of catching up with a rapidly changing world. Attention, for example, should be paid to the influence that globalisation processes have on livelihoods and that lead to the formation of transnational networks, various forms of rural/urban linkages, and the emergence of new forms of social and cultural bonds. Applying a strong local or regional focus in livelihood research is no longer self-evident, nor is it necessarily obvious that the focus will be on the household as the main unit of research.

To summarise, the livelihood approach is useful in that it tries to get to grips with poverty problems 'from the bottom up', and in so doing, stresses the agency of poor people and considers their actions and strategies worthwhile. The challenge is not to lose sight of the structural environment that may constrain their initiatives. In view of this, a processual perspective that puts people and their actions at the centre of the analysis but that at the same time considers these actions as the result and the constituent of broader and longer-term processes can be valuable. From this perspective, livelihood practices are seen as embedded actions and livelihood is considered more a process than a system. Livelihood research should capture the dynamics at play, and make visible the interaction between people and their environments (synchronic dynamics), as well as considering how this changes over time (diachronic dynamics).

When livelihood is considered as a process, issues such as risk, social security, social exclusion and globalisation appear as interesting starting points for analysis. These issues are elaborated on in relation to livelihood in the following sections. A processual perspective can naturally be adopted from different angles, depending on the aims and subject of the research. The following should, therefore, not be read as an exhaustive overview of how to research livelihood from a processual perspective. It merely offers

some examples of how livelihood could be studied as a process and what can be revealed by perceiving livelihood as such.

In Section 4, the theme of risk is discussed, pointing to the volatility of many livelihoods and people's subjective interpretations of this volatility. While risk can be studied at an individual level, in Section 5, we focus on the social level, considering livelihood (in)security and social-security mechanisms. As with risk (pointing to people's perceptions of the future), social security (indicating the arrangements people make to secure their livelihoods over time) includes a longer-term perspective. A focus on social security arrangements allows further to make the cultural and social embeddedness of livelihood visible. The relationships between richer and poorer members of a community also form part of the analysis. While social security arrangements concern ways of social inclusion, Section 6 takes the opposite view by focusing on the theme of social exclusion. It is argued that, up to now, little attention has been paid to processes of exclusion in livelihood studies in developing countries, in contrast to studies that focus on problems of poverty in Europe. There are, however, many points for exchange and debate. Section 7 adopts an even broader point of view and explores how processes of globalisation may influence livelihood practices and, on this basis, offers some directions for future livelihood research.

4. Livelihood and risk

Livelihoods can be analysed as a system or as a process. In the DFID definition that 'livelihood comprises capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living' (DFID 2002), system characteristics seem to dominate. A process perspective puts more emphasis on the versatility of livelihood assets or more specifically on the versatile modes of access to assets. An immediate consequence of defining livelihood as a process is the incorporation of the variable, stochastic nature of its elements.

It is in this context that risk appears as a crucial concept in understanding livelihood processes in developing as well as in developed countries.⁴ This section illustrates how economic theories on risk analysis and risk behaviour offer instruments to deal with the seemingly randomness of many variables influencing people's livelihoods. In addition, it indicates some linkages from a risk analysis perspective to issues of insecurity, vulnerability and poverty, and thus shows how risk analysis may be useful in livelihood research.

Broadly defined, risk is the subjective interpretation of randomness. Randomness may concern a range of variables related to livelihood outcome (income, health, sustainability, etc.) or to livelihood conditions (climate, politics, etc.). Randomness means that obtaining knowledge is problematic and that decisions are to be made through the interpretation of risk factors and the weighing up of different probabilities. Such an interpretation is inherently subjective: risk assessment is the product of complex cognitive and heuristic processes (Slovic 2000). In this, cultural understandings concerning the meaning of different variables play an important role. For example, is rain considered as a gift from God or as a natural phenomenon?

Understanding risk should include some notions about probability and variability, and a recognition of the differences between risk and uncertainty (Vose 2000). Risk analysis assumes that the probability of things happening is, by definition,

⁴ Paradoxically, an increase in knowledge and information causes an intuitively larger exposure to risk.

subjectively determined. The decision-maker does not need to know the true parameters but formulates expectations about them. Moreover, the parameters are commonly stated with intuitive keywords such as 'risky', 'profitable', 'attractive', etc. From the perspective of the decision-maker, limited information about the probability of things happening leads to uncertainty. This may be due to a lack of knowledge about the distribution of the parameters but can also be due to a lack of adequate measurement tools, for example in the case of soil fertility. When uncertainty occurs, priorities have to be set as to what extent relevant parameters should be included in the decision-making process.

The preceding facilitates a more precise conceptualisation of insecurity and vulnerability. Insecurity is the specific probability that some livelihood parameters fall below a certain value such that the prevailing livelihood process is threatened. Vulnerability refers to the exposure to, and the impact of specific risks on livelihood conditions and involves each of the preceding risk concepts, as illustrated in the following example of a poor potato farmer in the highlands of the Philippines, whose income level only just allows him to meet his family's basic needs. Potato cultivation is a risky enterprise because of highly variable yields and any adverse event can destroy the source of income (loss of plant material, soil diseases, typhoons, etc.). Moreover, the farmer applies pesticides without sufficient knowledge of the product he is using and without wearing protective clothes, which makes him vulnerable to health risks. Such health risks are considered extremely high by outsiders, yet the farmer may not even worry about them because of a lack of knowledge about the harmful effects of pesticides, for reasons of carelessness because 'nobody wears protective clothes', or because he simply has no choice.. If he did not grow potatoes, he would not have any other source of income. Risk analysis allows an investigation of both people's livelihood circumstances and their interpretation of circumstances, with an eye on the future.

5. Livelihood (in)security

While livelihood primarily refers to people's means of making a living and the activities that provide food, housing and a monetary or non-monetary income, and risk points to the threats and probabilities inherent in a livelihood, livelihood security deals with the stability and resilience of this livelihood in the long term.

Livelihoods are never stable and especially poor people in developing countries regularly worry about whether there will be enough food for their families, whether they will have work or money, or be able to obtain a loan. When confronted with misfortune in the family (i.e. illness, income failure, or loss of a family member), or on a larger scale with an economic crisis, civil war or famine, the consequences are often hardest for vulnerable categories of people. Recovery following disaster or bad luck may be difficult: their house might be falling apart, new clothes cannot be bought, and genetic (live)stock and/or savings may have been exhausted. In addition, they may have seen their networks of kin, friends and neighbours shrink as their status declined and this means it can be highly uncertain whether they will be able to find support when a subsequent disaster strikes. The shocks and stresses people face can be of a material, financial, social or religious nature and causes and consequences often cannot be separated.

In this context, livelihood security draws attention to the everyday practices and difficulties that people face in making a living and the ways they try to safeguard their

livelihood when times get tough. It aims at understanding people's responses when confronted with misfortune, danger and crises, and it focuses on the multiple ways people try to secure their livelihood, directly through their own efforts or indirectly through support and care from others.⁵

In livelihood studies, the importance of a secure (or sustainable) livelihood was acknowledged, for example, by Chambers (1989) who was among the first to write about the vulnerability of the poor:

Vulnerability here refers to exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in coping with them. Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks, and stress to which an individual is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss.

Being vulnerable and insecure has a 'relational' aspect as social isolation – not a (temporary) decline in income – is the greatest threat to livelihoods. What makes the difference between being vulnerable or not is whether one is excluded from, or is a member of, systems of redistribution and access. In other words, a lack of social relations and social networks accounts for the vulnerability of poor people. Not being able to participate in systems of (information) exchange, insurance, access to resources, and redistribution prevents people from receiving social assistance and protection in times of need.

The term 'social security' refers to the ways in which people, households, and societies try to protect themselves against shocks and stresses that threaten the continuity and stability of their livelihood in a social way (i.e. by help, interaction and/or exchange with others). Social security studies often focus on non-state and locally organised forms of social security⁶ that are not embedded in state regulations and legislation. Most are not formalised in written rules and regulations, are context-specific, restricted to small areas, and mainly organised by local people.

Social security studies aim to go beyond the study of income, economic conditions and actors' strategies and to include both material and non-material aspects of shocks and stresses to the livelihood of people and households, including the perception and experience of shocks and stresses, time, and context. Social security is a point of departure for the study of the long-term strategies of people in a context of both protection and provision of support by the examination of institutions, arrangements and limitations. This means that attention is paid to levels beyond the individual or the household, such as neighbourhoods, kinship relations and social groups. It offers the opportunity to include both poorer and richer members of society and their relationships in the analysis and to reveal diversity in strategies as well as diversity in mechanisms of support.

This underlines the fact that society is not an amorphous collection of individuals who are individually coping with insecurities and risks, each of them successful or not due to personal skills, vulnerability or ownership of assets and resources. People constantly interact, mutually influence, enable or constrain, exchange and mobilise relationships with other people who might give access to resources and support in times of need.

⁵ Some examples of livelihood studies with a strong emphasis on insecurity include: Chambers & Conway 1992, Devereux 2001, Ellis 2000, Evers 1993, De Haan 2000, Huijsman 1986, Murray-Li 1999, Niehof & Price 2001, and Sen 1999.

⁶ Since the end of the 1980s, the study of local forms of social security has gained momentum. Examples of such studies include: Ahmad, Dreze & Hills 1991, Von Benda-Beckmann *et al.* 1988, Biezeveld 2002, De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1995, Van Ginneken 1999, Hirtz 1995, Leliveld 1994, and Platteau 1991.

Establishing and maintaining good relations with others is of crucial importance for enhancing and maintaining a living. At the same time, others can be a major source of insecurity. The question in this respect is how exactly people handle these insecurities and dilemmas of exchange and support. Who cares for vulnerable and weak members in society– and under what conditions – if they cannot make a living themselves, or if their sources of livelihood are severely hampered by misfortune or contingencies? Do any viable arrangements and institutions exist to protect villagers against the negative consequences of misfortune? And if so, in what ways and to what extent do these arrangements and institutions provide support for individuals and households in times of need?

6. Livelihood and social exclusion

Processes of social exclusion are important when one aims to go beyond people's livelihood activities and strategies to establish the causes and the effects of poverty. Poverty does not suddenly emerge but is often the result of historical processes of exclusion: exclusion of access to natural resources, trade opportunities, knowledge, social services, etc. Poverty, in its turn, also contributes to social exclusion: the person who cannot meet his/her social obligations due to a lack of means or who cannot live up to social expectations of what a good member of a community is or has, runs the risk of being excluded. It appears, however, that social exclusion, up to now, has not been an important concept in livelihood studies, contrary to approaches to poverty in Europe and the United States. However, the social exclusion debate has much in common with debates on livelihood (cf. De Haan & Maxwell 1998, Jackson 1999). The observations presented below illustrate that it may in fact be enriching not to concentrate on livelihood discussions and literature only but also to look at parallel debates and discourses.

Since the 1980s, the concept of 'social exclusion' has gained increasing importance in the European Union, both in terms of policy debates and in the social sciences. In a way, it has become an alternative to the concept of poverty, especially in the policy discourse within the European Community context. The distinctions between both concepts have been debated extensively, not only for reasons of conceptual demarcation but also because of the policy implications this shift in the use of concepts has, should have or might have. Some have welcomed the concept of social exclusion as providing a more multidimensional and dynamic approach to the analysis of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society. Others have criticised it because it was seen as drawing attention away from the financial hardship of the poor, from issues of social inequality and from the importance of redistributive policies.

Of course, there is no such thing as 'the' social exclusion discourse. In her analysis of social exclusion and 'New Labour' in the UK, Levitas (1998) distinguished three social exclusion discourses that partly reflect the debates surrounding poverty/social exclusion concepts: the redistributionist discourse, the social integrationist discourse, and the moral underclass discourse. Another example of different social exclusion discourses can be found at the level of EU policy initiatives. Having initiated its 'Employment Strategy' in the late 1990s, the EU recently started its 'Inclusion Strategy' as a kind of supplement to its employment strategy. Traditionally, policy makers in the EU and in member states have been inclined to see employment as the 'royal road to inclusion', which raises the question of how policy initiatives aimed at

promoting inclusion should differ from policy initiatives aimed at stimulating employment.

As far as we know, the concept of 'livelihood' has not been used in the discourse on social exclusion in Europe, nor has it been applied in social science research or in policy debates. Nevertheless, some clear parallels can be seen between the genealogy of livelihood presented at the beginning of this paper, and the social exclusion discourse.

One of the core characteristics of the livelihood approach is that it advocates an approach to poverty issues that is people-centred. If this implies that both social scientists and social policy makers should focus on people's strategies to make something out of their lives, both in a material and non-material sense, then the debate on social exclusion in the EU still has a long way to go. Much social science research as well as policy making is top-down oriented. In the social sciences, an 'objectivist' approach classifies people as excluded, marginalised or included using outsiders' standards for inclusion and exclusion, without paying attention to people's own perceptions and experiences of their own situations. In policy making, a 'paternalist' approach prescribes *that* people should be included and *how*, and defines what groups are in situations of exclusion and thus constitute 'problem groups' to be targeted with policy interventions. At the same time, social policies often counteract individual survival or inclusion strategies, for example, by criminalising informal activities or by not allowing welfare recipients to engage in unpaid activities, which are considered to reduce their labour-market availability. Both approaches can lead to serious gaps between the way scientists and policy makers look at social reality on the one hand, and the views of the 'excluded' and 'poor' about their own reality on the other. This may seriously jeopardise the adequacy of scientific knowledge and the effectiveness of social policy interventions (Leisering & Leibfried 1999, Van Berkel & Hornemann Møller 2002).

Of course, reality is more complicated than this. There are increasing numbers of research projects that are paying attention to vulnerable people's 'survival strategies', to what being 'excluded' or 'poor' means to them, etc. And policy interventions have been developed that try to connect to these survival strategies and to people's own experiences and perceptions in a bottom-up approach. In some cases, the concept of 'reciprocal adequacy' is being used (Valkenburg & Lind 2002), on the one hand to ground scientific knowledge in the common-sense knowledge of the people under investigation, and on the other hand to underline that successful policy interventions require that interactions between interventionists and policy target groups are a dialogue rather than a monologue. In the social sciences, reciprocal adequacy implies continuous debate between the researched and researchers as to what adequate scientific knowledge is. In social interventions, reciprocal adequacy implies the active participation of clients in defining the problems that interventions should solve, as well as deciding on the means and objectives of those interventions. Nevertheless, the 'objectivist' and 'paternalist' traditions described above are still dominant.

Another parallel between the livelihood and social exclusion debates is the reductionist tendencies that can be observed in both. Even though the concept of social exclusion was introduced among others to emphasise the multidimensional character of social vulnerability and marginalisation, policy makers and researchers are still inclined to adopt a reductionist view though, in contrast to the concept of poverty, the emphasis is on employment and labour-market participation rather than on income and

consumption. Once again, there are exceptions to this. In the policy field, the European Union's Inclusion Strategy as a supplement to its Employment Strategy could be cited as an example. Nevertheless, the reductionist view that unemployment implies exclusion, that employment is the key to inclusion and that employment will trigger inclusion in a wider sense is still dominant.

A third issue clearly present in both the livelihood and the social exclusion discourse is the vision of man underlying both social science research and social policies. Debates on the welfare state and its perverse effects, as well as on the future of social policies refer to the modern citizen as *homo economicus*, a calculating citizen who tries to obtain maximum profit from welfare state arrangements without being very eager to assume any responsibilities. Combined with a behaviourist view of human behaviour, this leads to social policy reforms that increasingly emphasise the obligations of those dependent on welfare, make living on welfare increasingly unattractive, and develop all kinds of sticks and carrots that are used as stimuli to steer the behaviour of those on welfare in the desired direction. This vision of man has not been without debate. Compared to the two issues discussed above, this has perhaps the longest tradition of extensive debate, and of research into the worlds of the 'poor' and 'excluded' to show that as a theoretical framework to make sense of people's behaviour, the *homo economicus* approach falls short. In this context, some social scientists have introduced the concept of *homo honoris* as a different vision of man that leads to different interpretations of similar behaviour (see, for example, Engbersen *et al.* 1993).

The points elaborated on above can be illustrated by considering evaluation studies of activation programmes. Often, these evaluations assess the effects of activation programmes in terms of the policy makers' objectives only. Usually, this means investigating whether these programmes have contributed to the employability of participants, to labour-market entry and to welfare independence. Whether policy interventions empower or counteract the objectives, strategies and needs of participants is hardly subjected to research. This reflects the objectivist and reductionist tendencies in social science research. Furthermore, the emphasis in evaluation studies is often on the sticks and carrots applied in processes of activation instead of on the quality of activation processes and activation offers. In other words, the focus is on the participant as *homo economicus* rather than as *homo honoris*. Of course, one could explain these characteristics of evaluation studies as a result of the fact that many of the studies have been commissioned by institutes responsible for policy making and policy delivery. However, this is a partial explanation only: they also reflect the routines and 'habitus' of many social policy students.

There are clear parallels between the livelihood debate in developmental studies and the debates on exclusion and inclusion in the European Union, both in the social sciences and the policy communities. Even though the concepts that are used are different, there seem to be numerous issues for a fruitful debate between both research and policy areas.

7. Livelihood, globalisation and multi-locality

Globalisation is not only a process but also a characteristic of the global system, in which each particular entity has to be understood within the framework of the world as a whole. Under globalisation, equilibrium and stability are further away than ever

before. 'Globalisation places a premium on flexibility and adaptability, and those least able to respond to change are likely to be those adversely affected' (Ellis & Seeley 2001: 1). Livelihood nowadays is thus continuously in change. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly multi-local and multiple or multidimensional. The general picture of livelihood under globalisation will therefore become one of increased rearrangements of strategies using various capitals in different locations. This is explained below in a discussion of the changing meaning and significance of households for livelihood and the increased importance of networks.

A household was often regarded as 'a single decision-making unit maximising its welfare subject to a range of income-earning opportunities and a set of resource constraints' (Ellis 1997: 12). Households were defined as 'co-resident groups of persons, who share most aspects of consumption, drawing on and allocating a common pool of resources (including labour) to ensure their material reproduction' (Schmink 1984: 89). Thus, a household's boundaries and functions were usually defined primarily in economic or material terms, and secondarily in terms of cohesion, for example, as a set of social relations and mutual obligations that were defined by kinship or other types of reciprocity. More recently, it became clear that an individual's and a household's goals sometimes conflict and that the cohesion of the household is often quite weak, especially in cases of temporary migration. The old assumption of a nuclear or extended family – comprising a male breadwinner, his non-working wife and dependent children and other family members – has been rejected, as have traditional patterns of labour division. This does not necessarily mean that the old assumptions were erroneous but rather that in recent decades new patterns of labour division have appeared. Along with globalisation and the new communication and transportation technology, the characteristics and functions of households have rapidly changed. The number of female-headed households has increased, the elderly have increasingly become a separate and often isolated group who are no longer cared for in extended families because their children have moved, and children have become divided into two groups – those who are supported and go to school and those who are forced to work to supplement the household's income. Traditional solidarity-based principles of pooling labour, incomes and consumption within the household have changed.

In addition households do not necessarily organise their livelihoods in one place (Salman & Zoomers 2002). Labour migration had already ensured that rural households lived both from agriculture and remittances. With globalisation, the multi-locality of a household's livelihood accelerates and livelihood has become increasingly dependent on social networks, information networks, etc. Nevertheless, access to assets in a certain place still has considerable impact on livelihoods, and multi-locality should not be exaggerated. Mobility remains a cost item with its own risks. Even so, multi-locality and diminishing household cohesion are giving rise to livelihood networks. Individuals are no longer organised as co-resident groups (i.e. concentrated in space) but instead resemble individual cells connected to each other by networks of remittances, information, etc.

Finally, livelihoods are becoming increasingly diversified (i.e. multidimensional), with social groups, households and individuals combining several livelihood strategies. This may involve deploying different activities in one locality, but also spreading activities over different locations, contributing to the observed tendency of increased multi-locality.

The consequences of livelihoods becoming multi-local and multidimensional are that increasing attention has to be paid to networks. They are considered as a set of

relations, or ties, among actors. In this case, actors can be understood as social groups, households or individuals. Social relations or ties may range from kinship, friendship and village membership to patron-client relationships, union or political party membership and ethnic bonds. Social relations do not have to remain local and even kinship is becoming increasingly multi-local, with relatives migrating to different urban and rural areas. Social relations can overlap and people may be part of a variety of networks. Granovetter (1985) saw all economic actions as being embedded in social relations, which means that economic behaviour can only be understood as part of social behaviour. Markets, for example, also have to be considered as social institutions.

Any social relation can be mapped as a tie having both a content and a form. The content of a tie can include anything from goods, services, friendship or love, to money, information or advice. The form of a tie concerns the strength of the relationship and may range from weak to strong. Relations between family members, friends and close colleagues are considered to be strong ties involving people who frequently communicate with each other and with other actors in the same network, and who value the relationship highly. Weak ties occur between members of different networks, i.e. between people who have less contact and who value their relations less.

At first sight, strong ties seem important in sustaining a livelihood and family and friends are the first to be called upon. Agricultural work and food are shared among family and friends in the village. Remittances from migrants in the city are mostly received by kin. Granovetter (1983), however, pointed to an issue that may also help to shed light on the value of different forms of ties for globalising livelihoods. He argued that weak ties are important for people looking for a job. Even the modern meaning of 'networking' emerged in this context: people looking for a job benefit more from contacts with members of networks other than with the one(s) they are part of. Contacts with members of another network may yield new information about job opportunities or may once more lead to new contacts. The only complication is that people usually view information from strong ties as being more trustworthy than information from weak ties. This may hinder the recognition of feasible opportunities offered by weak ties. Having said this, let us return to what has been said about livelihoods and globalisation. If globalisation places a premium on flexibility and adaptability, leading to continuously changing multi-local and multidimensional livelihoods, then the bonus of adaptation is perhaps better realised through weak than through strong ties.

These observations suggest that networks, translocal ties and multidimensionality are increasingly important for livelihoods analysis in a globalising world.

8. Reflections on research practice

While new insights may be fairly easily embraced at a theoretical level, they often prove difficult to translate into research practice, partly due to the tendency to hold on to received concepts and research methods. When exploring ways forward in livelihood research, they should be critically assessed as well.

It is evident that the concepts chosen for doing research will influence the research findings. To give an example: the concept of 'strategy' has the connotation of trying to reach predefined goals, and of rational, planned action. In reality, however, many people cannot plan in advance because of an insecure environment (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1995). In addition, individual and family goals and priorities will not remain

constant. Livelihood should be conceived as a moving target (Zoomers 1999). In the same vein, thinking in terms of capitals may tend to lead to a research design and to results from which *homo economicus* emerges, someone who is mainly occupied with investing his assets to reach his or her goals. Depicting people solely as economically rational and strategically acting actors does no justice to other aspects that inform human behaviour, such as a sense of responsibility, anger, fear or love.

It is not the intention here to plead for the introduction of a whole range of new concepts. What should be stressed however is that it is important to critically assess the terms by which any analysis is made, to be aware of the inherent connotations and the way the research is directed. Sometimes, it is sufficient just to make connotations explicit, sometimes it is useful to apply other terms that are more apt to make clear what one is trying to reveal. Instead of the term 'strategies' for example, the term 'pathways' could perhaps be more useful. It points to the fact that insecure conditions often make it difficult for local actors to make strategic decisions in advance. Instead, their strategies unfold as they interact with the changes in this dynamic production environment. The term 'pathways' indicates that they are more a result of these interactions than of anything planned in advance (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 2001). Furthermore, the concepts of networks, multi-local and multi-spatial livelihoods could be useful in overcoming the rather restricted perspective of the traditional household.

Turning to the issue of methods, it may appear attractive to start with a large survey to gain an overview of the situation and the problems of the target group(s). On the basis of the findings of such a survey, case studies are then mostly done to supplement the general picture. Traditionally defined households are often taken as the unit of research without critical reflection. One of the problems with this way of organising research is that the choices made at the outset are going to direct subsequent research phases, and that these choices are based on the researcher's definition of the problem. It could instead be more useful to start talking and listening to people in order to find out their definition of the problems they encounter, what their relevant social frameworks are, etc. and to try to build subsequent research on the insights thus gained.

Furthermore, we would like to highlight the use of frameworks such as the DFID rural livelihoods framework. The latter is clearly elaborated in schemes and diagrams, has clear definitions, a good glossary, etc. (see www.livelihoods.org), and as such has proved to be attractive to researchers and policy makers. Its strong point is at the same time one of the framework's main weaknesses. While some argue that this kind of scheme should only serve as a tool and cannot capture the complex dynamics of livelihood systems (Ellis 2000: 29), it appears that in practice they invite being used as frames to be put over the social reality one wishes to study: research becomes filling in boxes. This is particularly detrimental in cases of livelihood research as it aims to be people-centred, dynamic and sensitive to diversity. Thus, while we acknowledge that schemes such as DFID's may facilitate the analysis of research findings, they should only be used as a supporting means.

Throughout this paper, it has been argued that it is important to pay attention to power relations and the structural constraints within which people have to function while making a living. For this, research methods are needed that allow a close analysis of people's actions and the establishment of links between these actions and more structural phenomena and transformations in society at large. We therefore have made a plea for a processual perspective on livelihood that enables one to capture the ongoing dynamics of people's interaction with their social, institutional and material

environment. Longer-term research, such as on 'livelihood trajectories' as proposed by Blaikie *et al.* (1998), is a way of attaining such a processual view. This is not, however, always feasible, nor is it necessarily the best way. Other methods of obtaining a longer-term perspective include studying current perceptions of the future or current social arrangements that are being made to secure a livelihood over time. Tracing life histories may be particularly good for eliciting individual perceptions of ongoing processes (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 2001), while studying 'diagnostic events' can be helpful in unravelling the interplay of different processes underlying (changes in) current livelihood practices (Kaag 2001).

Up to now, livelihood research has predominantly aimed to bring to the fore the particularities and diversity of livelihood situations and practices, while much less effort has been put into arriving at an aggregation and generalisation of research findings. This is a pity, as a certain degree of generalisation is needed to further academic development. In addition, generalisation is often a necessary step in order for research to be used for policy formulation. Clearly, the challenge is to make visible the diversity of the ways in which people try to make a living, while also revealing the similarities and generalities involved. In this respect, setting up comparative research that, departing from particular case studies, aims at the unravelling of trends appears promising for academic as well as for policy purposes.

Conclusion

This paper has critically assessed the contribution of the livelihood approach to the study of problems of poverty and inequality. It was recognised that the livelihoods perspective incorporates worthy new insights in the essence of poverty problems, in that it is acknowledged that poor people are important and imbued with agency, and actively shape their lives by means of their (material and non-material) assets, depending on the context in which they have to make a living. In so doing, the livelihood approach is a valuable counterweight against structural approaches to poverty that tend to portray people as mere victims of structural constraints.

Some challenges in relation to current livelihood research have been identified as well. In particular, a plea was made for a balanced view that not only considers the poor themselves but also acknowledges the context of the structural constraints in which people have to make a living. In this respect, differences between individuals and categories of people deserve explicit attention as well. Additionally, we pleaded in favour of a people-centred approach that considers humans as 'whole' beings instead of reducing them to mere economic actors. In this, cultural and social aspects are important. Further, an open mind is needed to see the changes livelihoods are currently undergoing as a result of the world's rapid globalisation. Finally, a critical stance has to be maintained both towards the ways of conducting and organising research and the concepts one chooses to use. In particular, we suggested to adopt concepts and research methods that allow for a processual perspective.

In the end, it is the vision of man that underlies and informs research. Often, this is not made explicit in the social sciences but is taken for granted because of the grand theories that form the basis of a discipline. As livelihood studies claim to be holistic and non-sectoral, they claim in fact to go beyond disciplinary divides. The livelihoods perspective seems to offer sufficient common ground for scholars from different

backgrounds to cooperate and exchange findings. However, such discussions and cooperation can be confusing when underlying assumptions about the world are not shared. This is not to say that all livelihood researchers need to adopt a similar worldview, but at least one should be aware of the different perspectives to allow a fruitful discussion and exchange of ideas. It could be that on the basis of such fundamental discussions, more explicit theoretical underpinnings could be developed that would provide the livelihood perspective with more theoretical weight and analytical strength.

Our point of departure has been the basic idea that people are active and worthy agents who have to be taken seriously in their efforts at making a living *and* that poverty is bad. This recognition offers room for people's own perspectives, strategies and judgements, while at the same time acknowledging human responsibility for addressing inequalities. It asks for livelihood studies that put people at the centre of the analysis but that also pay explicit attention to the structures in which people have to make a living, whilst being sensitive to the fact that these structures are provisional and bound to change over time due to the ongoing interaction between actors and their socio-economic, political, cultural and ecological environment. It is exactly such a dynamic view that allows for the capture of the limits and forcefulness of human agency.

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