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# Exploring the Frontier of Livelihoods Research

Leo de Haan and Annelies Zoomers

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the value of livelihoods studies and examines the obstacles which have prevented it from making a greater contribution to understanding the lives of poor people over the past decade. After examining the roots of the livelihoods approach, two major challenges are explored: the conceptualization of the problem of access, and how to achieve a better understanding of the mutual link between livelihood opportunities and decision-making. The article concludes that access to livelihood opportunities is governed by social relations, institutions and organizations, and that power is an important (and sometimes overlooked) explanatory variable. In discussing the issue of access to livelihood opportunities, the authors note the occurrence of both strategic and unintentional behaviour and the importance of structural factors; they discuss concepts of styles and pathways, which try to cater for structural components and regularities; and they propose livelihood trajectories as an appropriate methodology for examining these issues. In this way, the article also sets the agenda for future livelihoods research.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern livelihoods studies found their intellectual inspiration in the general understanding of the lives of poor people advocated by Gordon Conway and Robert Chambers in an IDS discussion paper in 1992. In their interpretation, a livelihood refers to the means of gaining a living, including livelihood capabilities, tangible assets, such as stores and resources, and intangible assets, such as claims and access (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 9–12).

This article briefly examines the principal roots and substance of the livelihoods approach to provide the context for a discussion on the two major theoretical and methodological challenges facing the livelihoods approach at present. First, there is the problem of access, which we believe is the key issue in the conceptualization of livelihoods and, therefore, the key to unravelling poverty. We will demonstrate that the approach can

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become more powerful analytically by improving its theoretical depth through incorporating valuable elements from development sociology and gender studies, notably those concerning the issues of sovereignty and power. Second, there is the question of access to livelihood opportunities in relation to decision-making. In this context, we review various relevant concepts, such as livelihood strategies and styles, in order to operationalize the improved theoretical depth. We then propose livelihood trajectories as an appropriate methodology for examining these issues. In so doing, this article also sets the agenda for future livelihoods research.

### **THE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH: PRINCIPAL ROOTS AND SUBSTANCE**

After the structural perspective of *dependencia* and neo-Marxism of the 1970s and 1980s, a more productive actor-oriented perspective was adopted in development studies. Like its predecessors, it emphasized inequalities in the distribution of assets and power, but it also recognized that people make their own history and it even opposed the view that economic concerns are necessarily of primary importance. This new actor-oriented perspective was mostly interested in the world of lived experience, the micro-world of family, network and community (Johnston, 1993: 229) and it drew attention to related issues such as poverty, vulnerability and marginalization. A micro-orientation became predominant, accompanied by a clear focus on local actors, often households.

#### **Household Studies**

In household studies, increased attention was paid to household strategies as a means of capturing the behaviour of low-income people. The concentration on households was considered useful for its potential to bridge the gap between micro-economics, with its focus on the atomistic behaviour of individuals, and historical-structuralism, which focused on the political economy of development. The household also came into vogue in a more practical sense; it was considered a convenient unit for the collection of empirical data.

In contrast to the earlier tendency to conceive poor people as passive victims, these household studies and, more specifically, the concept of household strategies, highlighted the active or even proactive role played by the poor in 'providing for their own sustenance despite their lack of access to services and to an adequate income' (Schmink, 1984: 88). Whereas Oscar Lewis had introduced the *culture of poverty* in 1968 as 'a set of deprivations that were perpetuated across generations, continually undermining the capability of the poor to change their own situation' (Schmink, 1984: 87), it was increasingly acknowledged that poor people were able to

adapt or respond to changing circumstances. More specifically, household studies permitted the examination of differential responses to general structural conditions, as well as the analysis of changes specific to subgroups of the population. In Schmink's words: 'In response to the opportunities and constraints defined by broad historical and structural processes, the domestic unit is conceived of as mediating a varied set of behaviours (for example, labour force participation, consumption patterns, and migration) that are themselves conditioned by the particular makeup of this most basic economic entity' (ibid.: 87).

Various types of household studies appeared in the 1980s. A large number of these were conducted under the heading of 'new household economics', focusing on labour and land allocation and income strategies and using micro-economic household modelling as an explanatory tool. Subsequent household studies have used a variety of concepts, of which the most common were 'survival strategies', although Long (1984) was already calling them 'livelihood strategies'. Survival studies were more sociologically than economically inspired and were mainly interested in the micro-social behaviour of poor people in coping with and surviving different types of crises, such as falls in prices, droughts and famines. Even though most of these studies started from the idea that households have a veneer of free choice, they showed that household decisions are often made within 'the confines of limiting structural constraints, although families nevertheless operate with a degree of relative autonomy' (Humphries, 1982, quoted in Schmink, 1984: 95). In a 1987 special issue of *Development and Change*, Guyer and Peters arrived at the same conclusion. They also made specific reference to power relations, which makes their judgement equally valid for the present livelihoods approach, as we shall show below. They wrote:

The major shortcoming of structural-functional and economic approaches to the household is the neglect of the role of ideology. The socially specific units that approximate 'households' are best typified not merely as clusters of task-oriented activities that are organized in variable ways, not merely as places to live/eat/work/reproduce, but as sources of identity and social markers. They are located in structures of cultural meaning and differential power. (Guyer and Peters, 1987: 209)

### **Livelihoods Studies**

While many household studies ended in rather pessimist conclusions, showing how poor households were increasingly excluded from the benefits of economic growth and thus marginalized, in the early 1990s a new generation of more optimistic household studies appeared, which approached households from a *livelihoods* perspective and showed how people are able to survive.

In its optimism, the livelihoods approach is an expression of the *Zeitgeist*, but it is also a direct response to the disappointing results of former approaches in devising effective policies to alleviate poverty, such as those based on

income, consumption criteria or basic needs. According to Appendini (2001: 24) the central objective of the livelihoods approach was 'to search for more effective methods to support people and communities in ways that are more meaningful to their daily lives and needs, as opposed to ready-made, interventionist instruments'. Robert Chambers (at IDS) and Gordon Conway (at IIED), themselves drawing upon insights from previous research on food security and agro-ecological sustainability, are widely acknowledged for having put livelihoods, then usually called 'sustainable livelihoods', at centre stage (Chambers and Conway, 1992). In a chronology of the development of the sustainable livelihoods approach, Solesbury (2003a) explains that the 1987 Bruntland Report (WCED, 1987), the Greening of Aid Conference at the International Institute for Environment and Development in the same year, and the first *Human Development Report* in 1990 (UNDP, 1990) must be regarded as the direct predecessors of the Chambers and Conway paper. Arce (2003: 202) argues that Chambers brilliantly embraced the momentum of the environmental sustainability discussion, then at its height because of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development. He argues that it was not sustainability, but security and income that represented Chambers' central issues for the development debate and that he consequently turned the discussion on its head, re-interpreting sustainability as a matter of trade-off for poor people between vulnerability and poverty. Whatever the original intention, environmental issues did play a more prominent role in the livelihoods discussion in the 1990s than they do at present.

In the meantime, UNDP (see Hoon et al., 1997), Oxfam and CARE adopted the concept of sustainable livelihoods (Solesbury, 2003a: 3). The Society for International Development (SID) in Rome also started a Sustainable Livelihoods Project, which originated from SID's grassroots initiative programme and focused on the question of how to increase the effectiveness of grassroots and other kinds of civil society organizations. What is most striking is the emphasis in the project on organizations rather than households or individuals and on political arenas rather than 'making a living' (Amalric, 1998). That SID's Sustainable Livelihoods Project showed a degree of farsightedness will become clear in the discussion below on access modalities and power relations.

Significant work on sustainable livelihoods continued at IDS. Important insights were gained from the study of environmental entitlements, focusing on access and institutions (Leach et al., 1999), which fed directly into the sustainable rural livelihoods framework (Scoones, 1998). Other substantial contributions came from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), on natural resources (Carney, 1998; Farrington et al., 1999), and from the Overseas Development Group of the University of East Anglia, on the diversification of livelihood activities (Ellis, 1998).

A major impetus to the approach, at least in the UK, came from the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Solesbury (2003b: 2) argues that the pro-active, self-help image of the sustainable livelihoods

approach for improving the lives of the poor, dovetailed with the image that the new administration wanted to project. Sustainable livelihoods became an important theme in the UK's development policy, with the Department of International Development (DFID) initiating a multitude of new research projects and policy debates on the subject. Generally, the definition of livelihood was only slightly modified from the original concept developed by Chambers and Conway (1992), while sustainability was understood both as long-term flexibility and as ecological soundness: 'A livelihood system comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base' (Carney, 1998: 2). The sustainable livelihoods frameworks used by the different authors were, it was claimed:

not intended to depict reality in any specific setting . . . [but] rather [used] as an analytical structure for coming to grips with the complexity of livelihoods, understanding influences on poverty and identifying where interventions can best be made. The assumption is that people pursue a range of livelihood outcomes (health, income, reduced vulnerability, etc.) by drawing on a range of assets to pursue a variety of activities. The activities they adopt and the way they reinvest in asset-building are driven in part by their own preferences and priorities. However, they are also influenced by the types of vulnerability, including shocks (such as drought), overall trends (in, for instance, resource stocks) and seasonal variations. Options are also determined by the structures (such as the roles of government or of the private sector) and processes (such as institutional, policy and cultural factors), which people face. In aggregate, their conditions determine their access to assets and livelihood opportunities and the way in which these can be converted into outcomes. In this way, poverty, and the opportunities to escape from it, depends on all of the above. (Farrington et al., 1999: 1)

The various frameworks were thus considered to be analytical devices for supporting poverty eradication.

The combination of a supportive political environment, ample resources and available intellectual capacity showed itself in many cross-linkages between researchers and research groups and resulted in an overriding DFID input to the livelihoods discussion. However, there were also useful contributions from others who used livelihoods as a concept or studied related fields. In the context of disaster analysis, Blaikie et al. (1994) elaborated an access-to-resources model, which proved extremely useful in explaining poor people's livelihoods and their coping mechanisms in periods of crisis. They partly built on Sen's (1981) concept of entitlements, which was more appropriate for understanding poverty and famine than the narrower notion of property.<sup>1</sup> A range of studies working from a vulnerability

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1. In fact, Sen's work on entitlements (1981) and his later contribution on capabilities (1985) both comprised major sources of inspiration to livelihood researchers.

and social security perspective also deepened the understanding of the livelihoods of the poor. They focused on the locally organized forms of social security, which were not embedded in state regulations or formalized in written rules and were always context-specific and restricted to small areas (see Ahmad et al., 1991; von Benda-Beckmann et al., 1988; Kaag et al., 2004).

## **THE QUESTION OF ACCESS**

In this section we focus on access as the key issue in the conceptualization of the livelihoods of the poor. In order to arrive at a proper understanding of access, we will first review the holistic understanding of livelihoods. Secondly, we will re-examine the most significant conceptual attempts to capture access. Thirdly, we will argue that the livelihoods approach could become more forceful analytically if it improved its theoretical depth; especially on power issues, it could learn from insights from development sociology and gender studies.

### **Holistic Understanding of Livelihoods**

Appendini (2001: 24–5) quotes the claim of Long (1997) that the term livelihood ‘best expresses the idea of individuals or 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’. In the latter idea, in particular, we find an indication that the understanding of livelihood has to go beyond the economic or material objectives of life. As Appendini (*ibid.*: 25) also notes, Wallmann (1984) had already stressed that:

Livelihood is never just a matter of finding or making shelter, transacting money, getting food to put on the family table or to exchange on the market place. It is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships and the affirmation of personal significance . . . and group identity. The tasks of meeting obligations, of security, identity and status, and organizing time are as crucial to livelihood as bread and shelter.

This is not to say that livelihood is not a matter of material well-being, but rather that it also includes non-material aspects of well-being. Livelihood should be seen as a dynamic and holistic concept. In the words of Bebbington (1999: 2022):

A person’s assets, such as land, are not merely means with which he or she makes a living: they also give meaning to that person’s world. Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act. Assets should not be understood only as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents’ power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources.

The improved understanding of the holistic meaning of livelihood (and, subsequently, of the multidimensionality of poverty, which takes account of how poverty is perceived by the poor themselves) is an important achievement of the livelihoods approach. It reveals itself not only in its view on livelihood outcomes, but also in its attention to a variety of capitals upon which the poor draw to shape their livelihoods. Besides conventional assets like land, livestock or equipment, these include various elements of human capital and social capital. The emphasis is on the flexible combinations of, and trade-offs between, different capitals. For instance, if a rural woman does not have land to cultivate, she will try to acquire a plot through her network of social relations, or social capital; similarly, labour — human capital — is converted into physical capital once it has been used to construct an irrigation canal.<sup>2</sup>

However, two layers of critique can be formulated at this point. The first layer is the criticism that, in this inventive focus on trade-off of capitals, authors often do not know how to go beyond material motives and aims. Arce (2003: 205–6) commented that the reduction of ‘livelihood to the mobilization and deployment of social and organizational resources for the pursuit of economic and environmental goals’ is questionable. Below this, in a second layer of critique, is the fundamental question of the flexibility of these interchanges of capitals. They are still bound by property relations and configurations of power which play such a major role in inducing poverty in the first place. Although transforming structures, mediating processes, institutions and organizations appear in all livelihood frameworks, there is a tendency within livelihoods studies to downplay these structural features and to focus on capitals and activities.

### **Social Exclusion and Political Arenas**

The social exclusion approach portrays poverty as a failure caused by bottlenecks in access to capitals. In a historical perspective, a pattern of social differentiation emerges between people who have successfully chosen trajectories of upward mobility, and those who have not. The latter are left behind as others improve their position and are excluded as a result (Gore, 1994: 7). However, there is more going on. Failed access and the resultant poverty or social exclusion can also be the result of a mechanism by which some people exclude others from access to resources, with the objective of maximizing their own returns. Seen in this way, social exclusion is a process in which groups try to monopolize specific opportunities to their own advantage. They use property relations or certain social or physical characteristics such as race, gender, language, ethnicity, origin or religion to

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2. See also Moser (1998) for the urban context.

legitimize this fencing-in of opportunities. Social exclusion and poverty are then the consequence of social closure, a form of collective social action which gives rise to social categories of eligibles and ineligibles. To return to the example above, the rural woman will never have a plot if others are able to deny her land, or she will never grow profitable vegetables on it when others deny her irrigation water. Livelihood activities are not neutral, but engender processes of inclusion and exclusion.

We can thus conclude that livelihood is organized in arenas of conflicting or co-operating actors. According to Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk (1994: 38), these co-operating actors are not permanent social groups who present themselves irrespective of the problem posed. In the words of de Haan (2000: 352):

They are rather groups of differing composition, which present themselves depending on the problem. Sometimes it is an occupational group, sometimes it is a status group like women or youths, sometimes it is a kinship group, sometimes a network of mutual assistance or clients of a patron, and sometimes a group of individuals with a common historical trajectory of livelihood strategies.

Conflicting interests exist between these groups, which are fought out in local and extra-local political arenas. Depending on their role and activity, individuals belong to different interest groups; the dividing lines between individuals and between groups are therefore never rigid, but variable and fuzzy. In fact, general categories such as ‘the poor’ do not exist; in the arena of livelihood, inclusion and exclusion may differ in each dimension.

### **Institutions**

Access is not only an issue affecting the use or acquisition of capitals: it is also an issue associated with the beneficial exploitation of livelihood opportunities. For example, in order to qualify for the profitable urban vegetable market, the rural woman above not only needs access to a plot and irrigation water, but also to transparent market prices or a trustworthy trader to sell to. Thus, access depends on the performance of social relations and these are sometimes far from harmonious. Fortunately, a number of livelihood authors have elaborated on this. We will first discuss the work on ‘environmental entitlements’ at IDS that fed directly into the institute’s livelihoods work, after which we will turn to Ellis’s view on institutions.

The IDS environmental entitlements approach concentrates on people’s access to natural resources by drawing upon Sen’s entitlement approach and making use of his set of concepts — endowments, entitlements and capabilities — to argue that: ‘endowments refer to the rights and resources that social actors have’; ‘environmental entitlements refer to the alternative sets of utilities derived from environmental goods and services over which social actors have legitimate effective command and which are instrumental in achieving wellbeing’; and ‘capabilities . . . are what people can do or be with

their entitlements' (Leach et al., 1999: 233). Thus, entitlement means what people *can* have, rather than what they *should* have; the latter is a right. At first glance, endowments come close to capitals and entitlement to accessing them. However, on further consideration, the comparison is more complex, as demonstrated by the concept of 'mapping'. Mapping refers to how people gain endowments and entitlements; it is the process by which endowments and entitlements are shaped. Thus, 'mapping' rather than 'entitlement' equals access: both access and mapping relate to the process of inclusion. Endowment is the right in principle, and entitlement is what one actually gets. Moreover, Leach et al. usefully extend the original understanding of endowments and entitlements by making it more dynamic. Besides stressing that livelihood also covers ways of gaining access beyond the market, such as through kinship, they make it clear (ibid.: 233) that:

there is nothing inherent in a particular ... good or service that makes it *a priori* either an endowment or an entitlement. Instead, the distinction between them depends on the empirical context and on time, within a cyclical process. What are entitlements at one time may, in turn, represent endowments at another time, from which a new set of entitlements may be derived.

This is illustrated by the example of the gathering of remunerative leaves in Ghanaian forests. Before the leaves become endowments, people have to gain rights over them through 'endowment mapping'. This depends on their entitlements: village membership gives collection rights to leaves in commonly-owned forests; household membership to leaves on one household's farmland (or through negotiations with other appropriate land-holding families); in forest reserves leaves can be gathered only with an official permit. Usually, women first set up a trade to finance these permits. Leaf gathering is again a mapping process, because of competition among gathering groups of women and between women within a group, over leaves and sites. Moreover, the mapping also extends to competition with husbands over time spent and other household duties. Once the leaves have become endowments, the entitlements derived from the leaves include direct use, or cash income from their sale. But before the cash contributes to women's capabilities or well-being, a new cycle of endowment and entitlement mapping starts on how it is spent. The way the cash is spent is the result of the women's intra-household bargaining arrangements with their husbands and co-wives (ibid.: 235–6).

The work of Leach et al. is extremely useful for two reasons. Firstly, it keeps an eye on conflicting interests in organizing livelihoods. Communities are not treated as static or undifferentiated; multiple identities and conflicting values and claims over the natural environment occur. Secondly, it shows how this political arena of livelihood should be analysed — through the working of institutions. Access is shaped by institutions; at the same time, these institutions are repeatedly confirmed and reshaped by livelihoods. Leach et al. expand their argument to all social, legal, formal and informal institutions at the micro, meso and macro levels which influence

endowment and entitlement mapping and the final acquisition of capabilities. We agree with that, but nevertheless find the analysis of Ellis on social relations, institutions and organizations (Ellis, 2000: 38, following North, 1990), which ranges from general and abstract to specific and concrete, even more useful.

Instead of heaping social relations, institutions and organizations together, as some others do, Ellis clearly discerns and defines them. Social relations comprise gender, caste, class, age, ethnicity, and religion. Institutions comprise both formal rules and conventions and informal codes of behaviour, so include laws, property rights and markets. Organizations are groups of individuals bound by the purpose of achieving certain objectives, such as government agencies, NGOs, associations and private companies (Ellis, 2000: 38, quoting from North, 1990: 3–6).

Although these authors have given the livelihoods approach the necessary conceptual foundation to separate it from an otherwise mechanical and a-political ‘transforming structures and processes’ approach, there is still something lacking. In the final analysis, they have not managed to get to grips with power relations, seeming reluctant to take the next step from institutions to power. We think this has much to do with the somewhat non-ideological stand of the livelihoods approach. However, having outstripped the constricted structural perspective of the 1970s and 1980s, having emphasized the agency of actors, and been embraced by New Labour and like-minded administrations, which have in their turn stressed personal responsibilities, even for the poor, in contrast to the prohibitive collective responsibility of the welfare state, the livelihoods approach should now prepare to face power relations in order to complete its conceptualization of access.

## **Power Relations**

Within gender studies, there was a recognition some years ago that to neglect power relations in society would mean a failure to reach any understanding of (or solution to) the deprivation of women in the development process (Kabeer, 1994). In the words of Scott (1991: 26), ‘Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power’. Gender studies therefore started analysing power as the critical mass upon which livelihoods depend and empowerment as the key to development or well-being. The classical notion of power — Foucault’s ‘sovereign power’ — is the kind of power that one can possess, the power over people such as that of the feudal lord over the labour of his bondmen. However, gender studies has demonstrated the importance of ‘disciplinary power’ — the kind of power that is normal to us, that is unquestioningly accepted, that cannot be possessed, but exists only when exercised. This is the power that makes the bondman accept his

serfdom, or women accept a subordinate gender role; it is the power component of the institution called gender or of other informal institutions.

Although Foucault maintains that individuals are both subjected to mechanisms of power and are, at the same time, its creators, he sees less room for actors to induce change than, for example, Villareal (1994). The latter follows Giddens' idea of the continued interaction of agency and structure and the possibility that actors by their will deviate from discourses shaped by previous generations and thus induce change in structure. She speaks of the 'room for manoeuvre' that women have. In the interaction between individuals, power never completely belongs to one of them. The outcome of the interaction is always the result of negotiation, taking into account each others' goals irrespective of the inequality at the outset. Power relations are re-created in interaction and thus constitute a dynamic process of 'wielding and yielding'. The wants of the power wielder are influenced and shaped by the other in the subordinate position. From this point of view, women are not pure victims, but also have an active role in their subordination. However, this means at the same time that they not only have the possibility of rebelling, but also of improving their position within the wielding and yielding process — that is, the possibility to use their room for manoeuvre (Villareal, 1994: 8–14). Here empowerment starts. In our view, the livelihoods approach should include an analysis of the wielding and yielding process as part of its institutional analysis.

Rowlands' (1997) conceptual framework of empowerment provides an effective analytical tool for examining this. 'Power within' refers to individual changes in the confidence and consciousness that individual actors experience in shaping their livelihood. This kind of self-understanding does not necessarily result in individual (or collective) improvement of livelihood but, if it does, it is called 'power to' — that is, to transform lives, to improve capability as in skills, income and market or job access. It is usually argued that this power to improve livelihood can be supported or even created by joint action. 'Power with' means networking with others for joint action to challenge and change power relations. This ultimately leads to 'power over', overcoming subjugation. Such an analysis, focusing on the various layers of power, would complete the conceptualization of access as the key issue in the livelihood approach.

#### **ACCESS TO LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES: DECISION-MAKING**

We now turn to the second of our two issues, access to livelihood opportunities in relation to decision-making. This boils down to developing an appropriate methodology to investigate decision-making on the allocation of livelihood capitals, the availability of opportunities, the acquisition of access qualification and the utilization of returns. In our search for such a methodology, we will discuss the unit of decision-making, strategic or

intentional versus unintentional behaviour, and the impact of more structural constraints or opportunities. Finally, this discussion leads to the examination of strategies, styles and pathways as concepts for disentangling strategic behaviour embedded in structural contexts. Trajectories are discussed as a suitable methodology.

### **Strategic vs Unintentional Decision-making**

Contemporary livelihoods studies focus on the active involvement of people in responding to and enforcing change. Their aim is to make clear that, rather than being victims, people play active roles in achieving their livelihoods by continuously exploiting opportunities. Against this background, the idea of capturing behaviour in terms of strategies is understandable. For example, a household was often regarded as 'a single decision-making unit maximizing its welfare subject to a range of income-earning opportunities and a set of resource constraints' (Ellis, 1998: 12). Alternatively, 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: 9). However, a number of trends have emerged which raise questions about the view of behaviour as strategic.

First, influenced by gender studies which draw attention to intra-household differences, the household is no longer considered a homogeneous unit of corresponding interests. Second, contemporary trends towards individualization only accelerate the breakdown of households: men, women and children are supposed to pursue different goals or, at least, are believed to have different interests. Third, and relatedly, livelihoods are becoming increasingly diversified. Today, it is less common for people to collect all their income from any one source, or hold all their wealth in the form of any single asset. Multiple motives prompt households and individuals to diversify assets, incomes and activities. Note that this does not necessarily correlate with higher incomes: poverty, in particular, induces people to intensify ways of generating income, using available capitals as fully as possible. Of all people, the poor tend to be engaged in complex, multi-activity income generation for survival (Ellis, 2000). Fourth, and again related to the foregoing, livelihoods are now less likely to be organized in one place. Despite the fact that mobility bears costs and risks, phenomena such as labour migration increase the multi-locality of livelihood, and multi-locality diminishes coherent decision-making by households.

It thus becomes clear that individual goals and household goals may diverge, so that the concept of household strategy is open to question. More generally, although people constantly weigh different objectives, opportunities and limitations in response to external and internal circumstances that change over time, we know that household behaviour is

not always deliberate or conscious. In many cases, there is a close link between a household's strategy and its history: 'The concept of . . . strategy can lose its meaning to the extent that it becomes a mere functionalist label applied *ex post* to whatever behaviour is found' (Schmink, 1984: 95). Livelihood research shows that human behaviour should not always be seen as conscious or intentional: much of what people do cannot be classified as strategic. In the case of risk management, Devereux (2001) makes a distinction between *ex ante* and *ex post* strategies. He suggests that *ex ante* strategies (such as planting low-risk, but low-return, crops in dry areas) are forms of intentional behaviour, but he finds it debatable to call *ex post* behaviour 'strategic', when it includes such examples as cutting food consumption to one meal a day, a routine practice amongst already-malnourished Africans during the annual *soudure* (Devereux, 2001: 512).

### Structural Components

Zoomers (1999) distinguishes four categories of strategies in her study of rural livelihoods in the Andes: accumulation, consolidation, compensatory and security. She does not perceive these strategies simply as intentional or unintentional behaviour, but acknowledges structural components within them. For instance, geographical settings, whether rural or urban, different agro-ecological zones in mountainous regions, and distance to markets, influence the set of opportunities and outcomes. The success of farmers may be related less to strategic actions than to location-related factors; seasonality plays an important role; the household life cycle can also be a major determining factor. Families have different starting points, and processes of upward and downward social mobility are less unilinear than many assume. While the poor are generally expected to experience further deterioration, the rich are presumed to be in a favourable position for improvement. However, Zoomers found substantial numbers of people who used to be poor, but are now rich, and people who used to be rich, but are now poor (ibid.: 46–7). Thus, in her categorization of strategies, both intentional and structural elements arise.

Accumulation strategies involve establishing a minimum resource base and preparing for future expansion. They are applied in particular by recently married couples and families with young children seeking to accumulate capitals for future improvements. The main goal is to obtain the minimum manoeuvring space necessary for upward social mobility. Accumulation is usually guided by a long-term strategic view of future income resources. Strategies include migration, land acquisition and labour recruitment. After achieving a level of affluence following a period of upward mobility, wealthier households apply consolidation strategies which involve investments to stabilize the household's well-being and

improve quality in the short term. These households have surplus assets to invest. In most cases, the family members are older. The major strategy discerned here is land improvement. Compensatory strategies prevail among farmers dealing with a sudden shock, such as crop failure or loss of labour power, and among poor farmers dealing with a structural shortage of land or labour power, such as incomplete households. Both experience downward social mobility; they try to survive, and to find a way up (again), through migration, economizing, selling capitals, borrowing and bartering, and reliance on family social security. Security strategies are especially common in villages at higher altitudes, where life is less secure for ecological reasons, and are mostly practised by young families with small children. Security strategies include diversification by multi-cropping and multi-tasking, exploring non-agricultural opportunities, sharecropping and stockpiling (*ibid.*: 48–51). Zoomers stresses that this categorization should not be taken as fixed, but as flexible: ‘Livelihood is like Pandora’s box; there are many concealed aspects. Livelihood strategies are also a moving target... Any given strategy should be conceived as a stage rather than a structural category’ (*ibid.*: 47–48). Instead of classifying farmers on the basis of what they own, it is better to characterize them in terms of their objectives and priorities. This means that, at different periods, the same persons may pursue different strategies. These are influenced not only by the results of preceding activities, but also by personality characteristics.

The structural components emerging from this study clearly have a geographical and demographic character. In the following sub-section, socio-cultural components are discussed. These are particularly important, because they are closely related to key issues of access and power discussed above.

### **Livelihood Styles and Pathways**

With the purpose of analysing the impact of socio-cultural components, Arce and Hebinck (2002) and Nooteboom (2003) have elaborated the concept of styles. Arce and Hebinck (2002: 7) argue ‘that a focus on organizational practices might take the livelihood framework beyond the unit of analysis of individual strategies’. A style consists of a specific cultural repertoire composed of shared experiences, knowledge, insights, interests, prospects and interpretations of the context; an integrated set of practices and artefacts, such as crop varieties, instruments, cattle; a specific ordering of the interrelations with markets, technology and institutions; and responses to policies. Rather than being a strictly individual matter, a style is also treated as a group feature. Examining social security, Nooteboom (2003: 54) defines styles as ‘distinguishable patterns of orientations and action concerning the variety of means to achieve security; these

patterns are structured by an internal logic and conditioned by social, economic and personal characteristics of people involved’.

Thus, the orientation of our argument about access — its dynamic nature and its regulation by social relations, institutions and organizations — is reflected in the concept of styles. In both these works, the styles — which are, in fact, *emic* classifications from the authors’ research findings — represent behaviour that reflects both ‘long-term practices and institutions on the one hand and individual strategic choices on the other’ (Nootboom, *ibid.*: 55). In this way, the crude intentional–unintentional controversy acquires substantial analytical depth: individual strategic behaviour is acknowledged while, at the same time, it is bounded not only by structural constraints imposed by geography or demography, but pre-conditioned (a better term is probably embedded), as it were, by the available historical repertoire. This repertoire grounds the behaviour which was called unintentional above. Nootboom (*ibid.*: 207) distinguishes four livelihood and social security styles: enterprising people, money people, stingy people and village people.

The concept of styles can be seen as an attempt to move away from neo-liberal thinking to a more structural approach — from Giddens towards Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’. Habitus is a system of acquired dispositions, primarily defined by social class, which are acquired through socialization. Through this internalized system of dispositions, or classificatory schemes, new situations are evaluated in the light of past experiences. However, the evolving set of structures is not static in the sense that it determines livelihoods in a fixed way, but is generative and develops and changes over time because of the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1980). On the one hand, patterns in livelihood arise because persons of the same social class, gender or caste have similar dispositions and face similar life opportunities, expectations of others etc., resulting in a livelihood typical of their group. In so doing they develop a particular habitus, which distinguishes them from others. On the other hand, adaptation of habitus may take place and life trajectories may occur in which actors change social position. Thus, actors with different dispositions at the start may ultimately develop the same, successful livelihoods.

However, although the result may be the same, the pathway was different, and it is the pathway that shapes the habitus. According to de Bruijn and van Dijk (2003: 1–2):

A pathway is different from a strategy, because a pathway need not to be a device to attain a pre-set goal which is set after a process of conscious and rational weighing of the actor’s preferences. Rather it arises out of an iterative process in which in a step-by-step procedure goals, preferences, resources and means are constantly reassessed in view of new unstable conditions. Individuals decide on the basis of a wide range of past experiences, rather than on a vision of the future, while these recollections of the past depend to a great extent on our intellectual concern in the present. Actors co-ordinate their actions with other actors. In this co-ordination process regularities arise which pre-structure subsequent decisions.

Following this discussion, we propose to use the concept of pathway for the observed regularities or patterns in livelihood among particular social groups and to use trajectories for individual actors' life paths.

Although the term 'pathway' is used more often in livelihoods studies nowadays, unfortunately there is little agreement on its precise meaning. Breusers (2001: 180), in a study of pathways to deal with climate variability in Burkina Faso, gives a rudimentary description of pathways as decisions which actors take in response to available options, environmental constraints or contingent events. This makes pathways synonymous with strategies. In the Development Pathways Studies of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), pathways are characterized as patterns of change in livelihood strategies (Pender et al., 2001). These studies arose out of the need to overcome the one-size-fits-all approach to technical assistance in achieving sustainable agricultural development and reducing poverty and, subsequently, to design different and more realistic approaches to different pathways:

A development pathway represents a common pattern of change in resource management, associated with a common set of causal and conditioning factors. . . . The causes and consequences of such pathways are likely [to be] different and the opportunities and constraints affecting natural resource management decisions likely [to] differ across development pathways. . . . Across and within development pathways there may be differences in agriculture and natural resource management strategies at both household and collective levels. (Pender, Scherr and Duron, 1999: 2–4)

Development pathways are determined primarily by differences in comparative advantage, which largely depend on three critical factors: agricultural potential, access to markets and population pressure (Pender, Place and Ehui, 1999: 36–7). Collective and household level responses affect outcomes, including natural resource conditions and economic conditions, and these outcomes feed back to local conditions, institutions and pathways. Two things stand out. First, although the concept of development pathway allows for internal diversity among households, it is the general correspondence of their actions that becomes the pathway. Second, the analysis is performed at the community level on data from stratified sample surveys and shows very little of how access, institutions and power, as well as co-ordination and learning from past experience, give rise to this general correspondence of actions. However, in these studies, too, pathway is used on a group rather than an individual level.

A valuable step forward has been made by Scoones and Wolmer (2002) in their study of pathways to crop–livestock integration in Africa. They criticize the unilinear, evolutionary sequence view of crop–livestock integration with mixed farming as the most sustainable and efficient farming system. They re-examine diverse patterns of crop–livestock interactions, called pathways of change, which were hitherto seen as incomplete or as a cul-de-sac, avoiding normative assumptions about the desirability of one option over another. Like the IFPRI studies, they examine various cases of African

crop–livestock interactions at the household, community and regional levels within the context of people’s livelihoods. However, in doing so, they pay particular attention to social differentiation, power relations and institutional processes — that is, ‘the social fabric that has intersected with technology, ecology and socio-economic differentiation to create particular . . . pathways’ (Scoones and Wolmer, 2002: 27). Pathways show that people do make their own livelihoods, but not necessarily under conditions of their own choosing: ‘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’ (ibid.: 183).

We may conclude from this and the previous section that pathways are best defined as patterns of livelihood activities which arise from a co-ordination process among actors. This co-ordination emerges from individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations and institutional processes, both of which pre-structure subsequent decision-making.

One aspect has not yet been resolved. Where Zoomers (1999) encourages us to look upon strategies as a stage rather than a structural category and to classify actors in terms of their objectives and priorities rather than what they own, Scoones and Wolmer (2002: 195) believe that ‘pathways of change are non-linear and appear non-deterministic inasmuch as various actors starting from different positions of power and resource endowments may have arrived at similar configurations by very different intermediate steps’. Thus, they both acknowledge the temporality of livelihood activities, but seem to differ on the predictability of the orientation of the outcome. If different actors with different starting points may arrive at the same outcome through different steps — very much in line with Bourdieu — then policies to support the livelihoods of the poor face a gloomy future. In such a context it is very difficult to determine whom to support with what.

### **Livelihood Trajectories**

To shed more light on how livelihood activities give rise to the regularities of pathways, we propose to employ the methodology of livelihood trajectories, which provides an appropriate methodology for examining individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation. The analysis of livelihood trajectories makes use of life histories, but in contrast to the usual life histories (Francis, 1992), which typically report on the outlines of behaviour such as the chronology of the actors’ lives, livelihood trajectories try to penetrate into a deeper layer of beliefs, needs, aspirations and limitations and especially need to be contextualized in relation to power and institutions. As such, the livelihood trajectory is more of an analytical construct, but it cannot be realized

without an open rapport between researcher and informants. The identification and discerning of income opportunities and constraints, which are taken for granted, of social norms, which are respected unconsciously or intuitively, and of undisputed power relations, are not routinely reported. Depicting livelihood trajectories can perhaps best be described as unravelling a historical route through a labyrinth of rooms, with each room having several doors giving access to new livelihood opportunities; but the doors can be opened and the room of opportunities successfully entered only with the right key qualifications. As a result, some doors remain unopened and rooms of opportunities not accessed; while new rooms of opportunities are sometimes successfully exploited, a person often ends up in a room that very much resembles the one from which he or she was trying to escape. Informants may report accurately on the opportunities that they have successfully or unsuccessfully exploited; however, it is much more difficult — but vital — to understand why some opportunities were not even considered. These are usually opportunities that informants did not even think of for reasons of convention, that is, elements of access like social norms, institutions, power etc. The only way to reveal them is through systematic comparison of actors' decisions in different geographical, socio-economic, cultural or temporal contexts. Thus livelihood trajectories should explicitly focus on matters of access to opportunities, especially mapping the workings of power, starting with 'power within', via 'power to', and, finally, to 'power over'. The livelihoods approach allows for both the intentional, strategic behaviour of actors and the historical, socio-cultural repertoire; it represents a dynamic standpoint on livelihoods, which takes into account successes and failures, as well as social and geographical mobility, rather than making rigid and static assumptions about class, gender and so on. In current research, livelihoods are usually analysed in relation to a single location, seeking to understand the geographical, socio-economic and cultural micro situation. More emphasis should be placed on comparative research, or a systematic comparison of livelihood decisions in different geographical, socio-economic, cultural or temporal contexts, so that patterns can be recognized as pathways which go beyond the specific case.

## CONCLUSION

This article has shown that a new generation of livelihoods studies emerged in the 1990s in direct response to the need to develop more effective policies to alleviate poverty. The livelihoods approach currently faces two major challenges. The first of these is the problem of access, which is increasingly recognized as the key issue in the conceptualization of livelihoods and the unravelling of poverty. Access to livelihood opportunities is governed by social relations, institutions and organizations, and it includes power as an important explanatory variable. The second

challenge is the relationship between access and decision-making, which involves both strategic and unintentional behaviour and structural factors. In this context, styles and pathways are used as concepts that try to disentangle regularities. A pathway can be defined as a pattern of livelihood activities which emerges 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. In trying to meet the identified challenges, the notion of livelihood trajectories provides an appropriate methodology for facilitating the analysis of pathways.

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