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How to Research the Changing Outlines of African Livelihoods

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Abstract

This paper examines how to research the changing outlines of African livelihoods in the present era of globalisation. After an analysis of the historical and theoretical context in which the modern livelihood approach developed, two trends in modern livelihood studies are discussed, i.e. its increased holistic features and the surmounting of its micro-orientation. Subsequently, the most pressing issues in livelihood research are reviewed: decomposition of households, and the increased diversification and increased multi-locality of livelihoods under globalisation. The next section focuses on two major theoretical and methodological challenges facing the livelihood approach at present. First, with respect to the problem of access, we will demonstrate that the livelihood approach can become more powerful analytically by improving its theoretical depth through incorporating valuable elements of sovereignty and power. Second, there is the 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 operationalise the improved theoretical depth. We then propose livelihood trajectories as an appropriate methodology for examining pathways of African livelihoods. In doing so, the paper also suggests an agenda for future research on African livelihoods.

Résumé

Cet article examine les aspects changeants des systèmes de survie africains dans le contexte actuel de la mondialisation. Après une analyse du contexte historique et théorique au sein duquel l'approche moderne aux systèmes de

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survie a été développée, nous débattons de deux tendances existant au niveau des études sur les moyens de survie, notamment l'aspect holistique grandissant caractérisant ces études et le dépassement de sa micro-orientation. Des questions d'actualité dans le domaine de la recherche en systèmes de survie sont ensuite évoquées : la décomposition des foyers, et la diversification accrûe ainsi que le caractère de plus en plus multi-local des moyens de survie dans le contexte de la mondialisation. La partie suivante porte sur deux principaux défis théoriques et méthodologiques auxquels est actuellement confrontée l'approche aux systèmes de survie. Tout d'abord, en ce qui concerne le problème de l'accès, nous démontrons que l'approche aux systèmes de survie peut avoir un contenu analytique plus percutant, en améliorant sa profondeur théorique à travers l'intégration des éléments de souveraineté et de pouvoir. Deuxièmement, il existe la question de l'accès aux opportunités donnant accès aux moyens de survie, en relation au processus de prise de décision. Dans ce contexte, nous passons en revue divers concepts, tels que les stratégies et styles de survie, afin de rendre opérationnelle cette amélioration de la teneur théorique. Ensuite, nous proposons des trajectoires de survie, comme méthodologie adaptée permettant d'examiner les voies de survie en Afrique. Cet article propose par la même, un agenda pour la recherche future en matière de systèmes de survie africains.

Introduction

In their attempt to understand inequalities in Africa, development scientists and practitioners are increasingly concerned with analysing prosperity and poverty from a livelihood point of view. Since the 1990s, the livelihood approach has gained momentum as a way of looking at development by putting people at the centre, stressing their active role in exploring opportunities and coping with change. Generally, poor people are the focal point of these studies. But as opposed to earlier approaches to poverty that tended to portray people as victims of structural constraints and focussed on the material aspects of life from the perspective of specific, locally bound interactions, the modern approach recognises that livelihood is multi-dimensional, covering not only economic, but also political, cultural, social and ecological aspects. Moreover, today's livelihoods are based on a range of assets, income opportunities, and product and labour markets which are located in different places and interact in turn with other places, meaning that livelihoods both depend on global forces and shape them. This paper examines how to research the changing outlines of African livelihoods in the present era of globalisation.[1] The paper is divided into four main sections.

Section one analyses the historical and theoretical context in which the modern livelihood approach developed. Modern livelihood 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 Discus-

sion Paper in 1992. In their interpretation, 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 & Conway 1992: 9-12). Two trends in modern livelihood studies are identified. The first concerns its increased holistic features and the second the way in which its micro-orientation can be overcome.

In section two, the most pressing issues in livelihood research are reviewed. Livelihood research brought about a large number of case studies on the particularities and diversity of livelihoods. The section especially looks for trends in African livelihoods. The first part deals with the decomposition of households. It identifies a trend towards increasingly individualised livelihoods. The importance of this trend becomes clear in the next subsection about increased diversification of livelihoods under globalisation. We will show that the rise in livelihood opportunities runs parallel to the decomposition of households. In the final part of section two we will show that these trends also display important new aspects deriving from ideas about multilocal livelihoods and livelihood networks.

Section two provides the context for a discussion in sections four and four on the two major theoretical and methodological challenges facing the livelihood approach at present. In section three there is the problem of access that we believe is the key issue in the conceptualisation of livelihood and therefore, the key to unravelling poverty. We will demonstrate that the approach can become more powerful analytically by improving its theoretical depth through incorporating valuable elements from development sociology and gender studies, notably those concerning the issue of sovereignty and power. In section four, we consider 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 operationalise the improved theoretical depth. We then propose livelihood trajectories as an appropriate methodology for examining these issues.

I. The livelihood approach: Principal roots and substance

After the structural perspective of *dependencia* and the neo-Marxism of the 1970s and 1980s, a more productive actor-oriented perspective was adopted in development studies. Like its predecessor, it emphasised inequalities in the distribution of assets and power, but it also recognised 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 drew attention to

related issues like poverty, vulnerability and marginalisation. A micro-orientation became predominant, accompanied by a clear focus on local actors, often households.

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 microeconomics, with its focus on the atomistic behaviour of individuals, and the historical-structuralist approach, which focussed 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 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 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' (Schmink 1984: 87).

Various types of household studies appeared in the 1980s. A large number of studies were conducted under the heading of new household economics, focussing 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 argued that household decisions are often made within 'the confines of lim-

iting structural constraints, although families nevertheless operate with a degree of relative autonomy' (Humphries 1982, quoted in Schmink 1984: 95). In a special 1987 issue of the journal, *Development and Change*, Guyer & Peters (1987) arrived at the same conclusion. In their article they also made specific reference to power relations, which makes their judgement equally valid for the present livelihood 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 & Peters 1987: 209).

Livelihood 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 marginalised, in the early 1990s a new generation of more optimistic household studies was conducted, which approached households from a livelihood perspective and showed how people are able to survive.

In its optimism the livelihood 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 livelihood 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 (Institut Institut for Development Studies Sussex) and Gordon Conway (International for Environment and Development), themselves also 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 & Conway 1992). In a chronology of the development of the sustainable livelihoods approach, Solesbury (2003a) explains in a recent paper that the 1987 Brundtland Report, 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 must be regarded as the direct predecessors of their paper. Interestingly, Arce (2003:

202) argues that Chambers brilliantly embraced the momentum of the environmental sustainability discussion, then peaking because of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in that year. He argues that it was not sustainability, but security and income that were Chambers's central issues for the development debate and he consequently turned the discussion on its head, re-interpreting sustainability as a matter of trade-offs for poor people between vulnerability and poverty. Whatever the original intention, environmental issues did take a more prominent role in the livelihood 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. The project originated from SID's grassroots initiative programme and focussed on the question of how to increase the effectiveness of grassroots and other kinds of civil society organisations. What is most striking is the emphasis in the project on organisations rather than, households or individuals and on political arenas rather than 'making a living' (Amalric 1998). In view of our discussion below on access modalities and power relations, it cannot be denied that SID's Sustainable Livelihoods Project showed a degree of farsightedness.

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

A major impetus to the further development of the approach was brought about by the election of the New Labour government in 1997. According to Solesbury (2003b: 2), the pro-active, self-help image of the sustainable livelihoods approach in improving the lives of the poor fitted very well with the image the new administration wanted to project. Sustainable livelihoods became an important theme in the UK's development policy, while the Department of International Development (DFID) initiated a multitude of new research projects and policy debates on the subject. Generally, livelihood was defined in only a slightly modified version of the one originally developed by Chambers & Conway (1992). 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 livelihood frameworks used by various authors are

> not intended to depict reality in any specific setting... (but) rather 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 are considered to be analytical devices for supporting poverty eradication.

The combination of a supportive political environment, ample resources and available intellectual capacity based on cross-linkages between researchers and research groups resulted in an overriding British DFID input into the livelihood discussion. There is a risk that this could result in a neglect of useful contributions from others who also either use livelihoods as a concept or study 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) 'entitlements', which were more appropriate for understanding poverty and famine, instead of just property. As a matter of fact, both Sen's entitlements and his later work on capabilities (Sen 1985) comprise major sources of inspiration to livelihood researchers. A range of studies working from a vulnerability and social security perspective has also deepened the understanding of the livelihoods of the poor. They focussed on the locally organised forms of social security, which were not embedded in state regulations or formalised in written rules and were always

context-specific and restricted to small areas (Ahmad et al. 1991; Von Benda-Beckmann et al. 1988; quoted in Kaag et al. 2004).

II. African livelihood dynamics in the era of globalisation

Up to now, livelihood research has resulted in the publication of a large number of case studies, bringing to the fore the particularities and diversity of African livelihood situations and practices. The authors stress the diversity of poverty situations and the multi-dimensionality of livelihoods, but make less effort to aggregate and generalise their findings. The following is an attempt to analyse the tendencies during the last ten years, especially considering 'livelihoods in globalisation' and the implications for and a view on local development.

With respect to globalisation we refrain from easy images such as financial flash capital driving up or pushing down share prices, as worldwide competition between firms, as uniformity of consumer goods, as information spreading as quick as lightning through television, mobile phones and e-mail. Instead, we define globalisation with De Ruijter (1997: 381-382) as technological innovations in transport, automation and telecommunications resulting in massive exchanges of people, goods, services and ideas. The result of this innovation is that globalisation is no longer a process of internationalisation, but rather the characteristic of a system spanning the globe, meaning that each particular entity has to be understood within the framework of the world as a whole. De Haan (2000: 354-357) suggests that next to the increased homogenisation of economy, society and culture, one is also inclined to recognise counter-forces leading to increased diversity, cultural fragmentation and increased importance of regionalism. The re-invention of local traditions and identities is seen as an answer to the loss of identity through cultural homogenisation. This so-called 'localisation' is not limited to the social and the cultural domain, but is identified in the economic and the political domains too. The latter concerns the restructuring of the welfare state with its privatisation and deregulation, or even clear-cut disintegration. So, we understand globalisation as the interaction between global forces and unbounded worldwide flows on the one hand and local contexts on the other hand, i.e. what Robertson (1995) called 'glocalisation'.

Social change: Decomposition of households

By putting people at centre stage, livelihood research has helped to open the black box of the household. While considering it as 'a single decision-making unit maximising its welfare subject to a range of income-earning opportunities and a set of resource constraints' (Ellis 1998: 12), households were usually 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. The boundaries and functions of households were usually defined primarily in economic or material terms, and only secondarily in terms of cohesion, for example a set of social relations and mutual obligations defined by kinship or forms of reciprocity.

Yet contemporary livelihood studies like to stress that instead of being victims, people rather play active roles in achieving their livelihood. This focus on the active involvement of people in responding to and enforcing change also engendered an increasing awareness of diverging positions within the household. Rather than being 'harmonious' entities pursuing an optimal balance, individual household members are currently pursuing individual ways to improve their situation. Although it started as awareness for intra-household relations, one now tends to arrive at the conclusion that under globalisation the characteristics and functions of households have undergone rapid change. The old assumption of a nuclear or extended family – comprising a male breadwinner, his sometimes non-working wife, dependent children, and other family members – needs to be revised, just as is the case with traditional patterns of labour division. Individuals, rather than pursuing an optimal balance in a harmonious domestic unit, now pursue individual ways to improve their situation, for example by diversifying their livelihood or by moving to a new location in order to exploit new opportunities. In many cases, traditional solidarity-based principles of pooling incomes, consumption and labour force within households have diminished. Thus, although they remain members of the domestic units we call households, individuals are increasingly considered to act independently. Furthermore, next to the already well-known disintegration of extended families comes the disintegration of nuclear families. The single-person household is not limited to industrialised societies. Also, in many parts of the world, the number of female-headed households has increased. Besides, the elderly have increasingly become a separate and often isolated group, no longer cared for in extended families.

Along with the growing complexity of the division of labour, the interests of a household's individual members will not always be consistent with the family goal and vice versa. Variations in personal capacities and motivation affect the interrelationships among the various activities as well as the degree of internal cohesion. Conflict and competition may arise between activities and among members of the household. What benefits the individual need not benefit the family and vice versa.

The following example from northern Togo illustrates our argument (de Haan 1993). It also makes clear that the trends established do not come out of the blue. We consider globalisation only as a recent phenomenon in the sense that it should be regarded as the contemporary stage, perhaps even the tailpiece, of a historical process of internationalisation and growing interdependence that started with modern colonialism. Therefore, the changes in livelihood we observe often have colonial roots. Rather, it is the scale and intensity of the identified change that make it a characteristic of globalisation.

The case of northern Togo

At the eve of colonialism northern Togo was an agricultural society organised along lines of kinship in clans and lineage. Production was organised through the lineage and the power of its eldest based on spiritual relations with the ancestors and his control of the marital system. The eldest decided when it was time to offer one of the daughters of the lineage to another lineage in order to receive a bride for one of the young men in exchange. Marriage, and subsequently the birth of offspring, was the only way for a man to increase his social status. These rules gave the eldest in the society authority over the labour of the young men of their lineage and consequently over the most important livelihood activity, i.e. agriculture. Of course, intra-lineage tensions occurred, but the point is that in the end the young had to adapt to the decisions of the old, as women had to comply with decisions taken by men. There simply was no alternative to turn to in this closed society.

However, colonialism did offer that alternative by creating product and labour markets. The French colonial administration levied personal taxes to be paid by every able-bodied, adult man. Producing newly introduced groundnuts and selling them to trading firms was the first way to pay them. As of the 1930s, and still continuing until after independence in 1960, gradually every men cleared a personal field to grow groundnuts, and later on, cotton. Sale of the produce, as well as the allocation of labour and other inputs on these personal fields fell beyond the authority of the lineage eldest. Growing monetary incomes from these commercial fields increased the independence of young men from the eldest. From the 1970s the same trend with respect to women became apparent. They started to grow vegetables, rice and cassava for the market on small personal fields, next to their traditional home gardens. As a consequence, since the 1960s the lineage as a residential and production unit comprising some fifty people, from the lineage head to his younger brothers, wives and children, gave way to the household consisting of about 12–15 persons, i.e. a man, his wife(s) and their children. But already in the 1980s also in these households agricultural decision-making

became a complicated process. Millet and sorghum, the staple foods, were grown on communal household fields under the supervision of the head of the household. However, merely in his organisation of inputs (fertiliser mainly) and labour for these grain fields, he had to compete with his own personal fields and those of his wives and older sons. And then we do not even touch upon the issue of whose income has to cover which expenditure.

At present, northern Togo itself only has a modest (urban and rural off-farm) labour market. However, the emerging colonial labour market that offered a second alternative to traditional livelihoods was situated in the cacoa producing export areas in southern Ghana. In the early days, these cacoa areas formed a temporary or even permanent way to build up an independent livelihood outside traditional society for thousands of young men from northern Togo. This position is now taken over by the main West African cities on the coast.

By now, due to the integration in larger wholes, households in northern Togo are no longer the solidarity-based residential and production units pooling incomes, consumption and labour. Even in nuclear households, members are increasingly acting independently. The single-person household is hardly found in this rural region; it belongs more to the world of migrated men in the big coastal cities. However, as a reverse of this, the number of female-headed households indeed increased. Moreover, a few elderly people now live on their own in poverty, sometimes with a little grandchild as housekeeper and often depending on charity.

This case exemplifies our argument that a trend towards increasingly individualised livelihoods, or at least individual decision-making concerning livelihood opportunities, can be detected. Its consequences for local development will became clear in the following sub-sections. Moreover, the case shows that local contexts, in this case both the cultural norms of authority and gender and the ecological potential for a particular kind of dry-season, cash crops, gave rise to a specific outcome in which both homogenisation and localisation can be recognised.

Economic fragmentation: Multi-tasking and income diversification

Livelihood studies have ascertained that during the last decade, increasing numbers of people have opted for a development path characterised by multi-tasking and income diversification. There exists a tendency towards livelihood diversification, 'a process by which ... households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their standard of living' (Ellis 2000: 15). Today, few of the African poor derive all their income from just one source, for example, wage labour, or hold all their wealth in the form of just one single asset.

In livelihood studies, diversification is described as a structural phenomenon, which exists both in the urban and the rural context. In many cases, the bulk of income of the rural poor no longer originates from agriculture, and it is no longer realistic to classify the population as small farmers or the landless poor. At the same time, among the urban poor, part of the population is now involved in urban agriculture, which provides an additional food supply. Multiple motives prompt people to diversify their assets, incomes and activities. Multi-tasking is mentioned as a way to compensate for insufficient income or temporary crisis situations. It is a strategy to escape poverty, to cope with insecurity or to reduce risk. Ellis (2000) stresses that diversification is pervasive and enduring in the sense that the phenomenon occurs everywhere and does not seem to be transient. Diversification does not mean having occasional earnings besides a main activity: it means multiple income sources. Although many families derive their income from an ever-expanding range of different sources, this does not usually result in higher incomes. 'It is the maintenance and continuous adaptation of a highly diverse portfolio of activities that is a distinguishing feature' of the poor (Ellis 2000: 4). Poverty in particular induces households to intensify strategies for generating income, using available labour and resources as fully as possible. Of all people, the poor tend to be the most engaged in complex, multi-activity income strategies. They adjust, cope, create and re-create their livelihoods under the impact of macro-economic circumstances, climatic variability and institutional change.

> While both diversity and diversification may be taken overall to mean multiple and multiplying income sources, they are more invoked in the rural development context to imply diversification away from farming as the predominant or primary means of rural survival. Thus the expression 'highly diversified rural livelihoods' typically conveys the idea of livelihoods in which own account farming has become a relatively small proportion of the overall survival portfolios put together by farm families (Ellis: 2000: 14-15).

Even though livelihood research has contributed to a better understanding of how poor people maintain their lives by diversification, little is known about the mutual cohesion and interaction between their activities. The internal consistency of a portfolio of activities varies from case to case, and depends on seasonality, the division of labour and the availability of assets. Sometimes there is a facilitating relationship; that is, one activity is a necessary condition for the other. One example in Africa is the association between agriculture and animal husbandry through the exchange of feed, manure and animal traction. Other activities are much more complementary: they are related to each other by the principle of communicating vessels, for example

combining agriculture with non-agrarian activities in order to compensate for declining returns from farming. In other cases, activities are mutually exclusive, or they compete: for example, migration might be incompatible with spending sufficient time in farming.

In order to arrive at a conclusion, first and foremost it is important to note that globalisation has apparently boosted the range of livelihood opportunities even in remote corners of the globe, and that the poor especially try out as many of those opportunities as possible. This does not necessarily mean that prosperity increases, but it does mean the local development looks much more varied than ever before.

Secondly, it shows the significance of our findings in the previous subsection on the decomposition of households, because parallel to the diversification trend runs the individualisation trend. Partly households diversify because individual members are able to decide in relative autonomy about the allocation of resources they have access to. No longer can the household head decide what will be done, nor is there always some kind of a 'household boardroom meeting' about which income opportunities to explore or resources to allot. The same holds true for the pooling of revenues. On the other hand, we do not argue that the household will become an insignificant feature in globalisation. Decision-making on the household level still is a reality and, even more important, individual decision-making is better understood against the background of the characteristics of the household people belong to.

Spatial dispersion: Multi-local livelihoods

In addition to multi-tasking, there is another trend in which poor people are increasingly developing multi-local livelihoods (see also De Haan 2000: 354). In development geography much attention has been paid to regions as bounded space and to people being rooted to space. Concepts such as carrying capacity were applied to express a region's ability to support a certain population. But in current times, as a result of rapid urbanisation and the improvement of communications and transport technology, people's mobility has greatly increased. Greater numbers now live on the edge of urban and rural life, commuting from the countryside to the urban centres on a daily basis. Also, poor people supplement their income by travelling large distances to earn additional money as a temporary migrant. Finally, there is a considerable group of transnational migrants. Especially in such countries as Morocco, Ghana, Lesotho and Senegal, large groups are temporarily or permanently living abroad, where they work as agricultural labourers or as legal and illegal housekeepers.

Thus, persisting poverty under globalisation is reflected in the large numbers of rural and urban households now exploiting opportunities in different

places and therefore living on both agricultural and urban incomes. Old dichotomies such as urban-rural should therefore be reconsidered. Large numbers of people are no longer rooted in one place: although they maintain relations with their home community, they are also attached to other places. As a consequence, individuals are no longer organised as co-resident groups (that is, concentrated in space) but resemble individual nodes, connected to each other by social networks, along which flow remittances, information and food. Thus, people's lives become highly interconnected via global networks.

The potential power of these global networks, especially the ones created by transnational migration, is clearly demonstrated by De Haas (2001: 315-318) in his study of migration impacts on local development in the oases regions of Morocco.

> In the Todgha valley migration has significantly contributed to improving many people's standard of living. Many rural families have now moved from absolute poverty to being able to afford better nourishment and living conditions ... remittances can be considered as a safety net for underdeveloped rural areas, and can substantially contribute to alleviating poverty. The analysis has also demonstrated that current and returned international migrant households tend to invest more than do non-migrant and internal migrant households ... (I)nternational migrant households do not generally spend excessive amounts of disposable income on conspicuous consumption ... (M)igration should be perceived as a livelihood strategy that aims to spread income risk through diversifying the household's income sources. Migration should be seen in the light of the general processes of income diversification and partial de-agrarisation and de-ruralisation of oasis livelihoods ... (M)igration can, in addition, be seen as a household strategy for overcoming local constraints on investments in the local economy ... In addition, through indirect multiplier effects, investments and consumption by migrants seem to have indirect positive effects on the economy of the valley. Investments by migrants create local income earnings possibilities for many non-migrants. Migration only seems a successful strategy for those families with relatives working abroad. Internal migrants often lead a difficult life, struggling to survive and leaving their families financially insecure. Their incomes ... are often unstable. Unlike the international migrant group, this group is seldom able to escape from poverty and (cannot) durably improve livelihoods by investing money in the local economy.
>
> The analysis also pointed to the high spatial variability of migration impact. At the valley level, for example, local environmental conditions such as the availability of water and land clearly influence the intra-valley spatial allocation of agricultural investments ... Notwithstanding its positive impact, there is also reason to believe that the development potential of migration is not being fully realised.... (E)xcessive bureaucracy and widespread corruption tend to

> complicate and slow down administrative procedures like, for example, obtaining business permits or title deeds on land and property ... (M)ost inhabitants of the Todgha have a profound distrust of the central state and its local representatives.

Instead of defining their home in terms of boundedness, homogeneity and exclusion, people have to create new identities and find new social security mechanisms. Those who are living abroad are often inclined to cluster together in the same neighbourhood. Establishing and maintaining good relationships with others is of crucial importance for enhancing and maintaining a living (Kaag et al. 2004). Local development can no longer be explained without taking into account the remittances sent by family members who have decided to migrate, and the flows of information connecting local space with the outside. On the other hand, a proper understanding of the livelihoods of migrants in their area of residence can only be achieved by taking into account their linkages with the home area. Actors do not behave or make decisions isolated from their social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories they happen to occupy. Instead, their attempts and purposive action are instead embedded in concrete circumstances.

III. The question of access to resources and opportunities

In this section we focus on access as the key issue in the conceptualisation of the livelihoods of the poor. In order to arrive at a proper understanding of access, we will first review the holistic understanding of livelihood. Secondly, we will re-examine the most significant conceptual attempts to capture access. Thirdly, we will argue that the livelihood 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.

The holistic understanding of livelihood

According to Long (1997, quoted in Appendini 2001: 24-25), 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, in particular, we find an indication that the understanding of livelihood has to go further than the economic or material objectives of life. Wallman (1984, quoted in Appendini 2001: 25) already noted 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 does not concern material well-being, but rather that it includes material as well as non-material well-being. Livelihood should be seen as a dynamic and holistic concept, which is best illustrated by Bebbington (1999: 2002):

> 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, the multi-dimensionality of poverty, taking into account of how the poor perceive it themselves, is an important achievement of the livelihood 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, various elements of human capital are included, as well as social capital. The emphasis is on the flexible combinations of, and trade-offs between, capitals, i.e. if a countrywoman does not have land to cultivate, she will try to acquire a plot through her network of social relations, which is social capital; labour, which is human capital, becomes physical capital, once the irrigation canal is constructed, and so on. (See also Moser [1998] for the urban context).

Two layers of critique can be formulated in this respect. The first layer is that often in this inventive focus on capital trade-offs, many authors do not know how to go beyond material motives and aims. Arce (2003: 205-206) 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, as a second layer of critique, we raise the fundamental question of the flexibility of these interchanges of capitals. They are bound by property relations and configurations of power; very likely the same arrangements that induce poverty in the first place. Although transforming structures, mediating processes, institu-

tions and organisations appear in all livelihood frameworks, part of livelihood studies tends to downplay these structural features and focus on capitals and activities.

Social exclusion and political arenas

This way of looking at the issue portrays poverty as the result of a failed attempt caused by bottlenecks in the access to capitals. In a historical perspective, a pattern of social differentiation emerges between people who have succeeded in choosing successful trajectories of upward mobility and those who have not. The latter were left behind as others improved their position, and were 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 maximising their own returns. In that way, social exclusion is a process in which groups try to monopolise 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 legitimise this fencing in of opportunities. Social exclusion and poverty are then the consequences 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 countrywoman 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 conclude that livelihood is organised 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. De Haan (2000: 352) summarises the situation as follows.

> 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 and, therefore, the dividing lines between individuals and between groups are 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 countrywomen above does not only need access to a plot and irrigation water, but also 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 point. We will first discuss the work on 'environmental entitlements' at IDS that fed directly into the Institute's livelihoods work (Scoones 1998), after which we will turn to Ellis's (2000) view on institutions.

The IDS environmental entitlements approach (Leach et al. 1999) 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. '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 well-being'. '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 complicated, as is 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. Thus endowment is the right in principle, and entitlement is what one actually gets. Moreover, the authors 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 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 (Leach et al. 1999: 233).

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 (Leach et al., 1999: 235-236).

> We find their endeavour extremely useful for two reasons. Firstly, it keeps an eye open for conflicting interests in organising 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. (1999) 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 find Ellis's (2000: 38, following North 1990) analysis ranging from general and abstract to specific and concrete into social relations, institutions and organisations more useful.

Instead of helplessly piling these up, as some others do, he clearly discerns and defines them. Social relations comprise gender, caste, class, age, ethnicity, and religion. Institutions are formal rules, conventions, and informal codes of behaviour, such as laws, property rights and markets. Organisations are groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives such as government agencies, NGOs, associations and private companies (Ellis 2000: 38 quoting North 1980: 3-6).

However timely and appropriate the manner in which both authors have given the livelihood approach the necessary conceptual foundation in contrast to the otherwise mechanical and a-political 'transforming structures

and processes', we believe that, in the final analysis, they have not yet managed to get to grips with power relations. They are hesitating to take the next step from institutions to power. We think this has much to do with the somewhat non-ideological stance of the livelihood approach. Now that it has outdistanced the constricted structural perspective of the 1970s and 1980s, emphasised the agency of actors and been embraced by New Labour-like 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 livelihood approach should now prepare to face power relations in order to complete its conceptualisation of access.

Power relations

Gender studies recognised years ago that a neglect of power relations in society would not bring the understanding of (and solution to) the deprivation of women's position in the development process any closer (Kabeer 1994). 'Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott 1991: 26).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 – sovereign power in Foucault's terms – is the kind of power one often thinks of: the power one can possess, the power over people such as the power of the feudal lord over the labour of his bondmen. However, gender studies corroborate the view that disciplinary power merits ample attention. This is the kind of power that is normal to us, that is unquestionably accepted as truth, that cannot be possessed, but exists only when exercised. This is the power that makes the bondman accept serfdom or women accept a subordinate gender role; it is the power component of the institution called gender or of other informal institutions referred to in the preceding sub-section. Although Foucault maintains that individuals are both subjected to power mechanisms and are, at the same time, its creators, he sees less room for actors to induce change than Villareal (1994). The latter follows Giddens's 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 other's 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 sheer 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, i.e. to use their room to manoeuvre (Villareal 1994: 8-14). Here empowerment starts. In our view, the livelihood approach should include an analysis of the wielding and yielding process as part of the institutional analysis explained in the preceding sub-section.

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 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', i.e. 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 the power relations. This ultimately leads to 'power over', overcoming subjugation. We argue that such an analysis, focussing on the various layers of power, would complete the conceptualisation of access as the key issue in the livelihood approach.

IV. Access and decision-making

In this section we examine the access to livelihood opportunities in relation to decision-making. The issue at stake finally boils down to developing an appropriate methodology to investigate decision-making regarding the allocation of livelihood capitals, the availability of opportunities, the acquisition of access qualifications and the utilisation of returns. In our search for such a methodology, we need to discuss consecutively the unit of decision-making, strategic or intentional versus unintentional behaviour, and the impact of more structural constraints or opportunities. This discussion leads to the examination of strategies, styles and pathways as concepts for disentangling strategic behaviour embedded in structural contexts. Lastly, trajectories are discussed as a suitable methodology.

Strategic versus unintentional decision-making

Contemporary livelihood 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 livelihood 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). Or households were usually 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 put in question the view of behaviour as strategic.

First, under the influence of gender studies, which draw attention to intra-household differences, the household is no longer considered as a homogeneous unit of corresponding interests. Second, contemporary individualisation only accelerates 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 related to the foregoing, livelihood is becoming increasingly diversified. Today, very few people 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 result in 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 not necessarily any longer organised in one place. Despite the fact that mobility bears costs and risks, a phenomenon like labour migration increases the multi-locality of livelihood. Multi-locality diminishes coherent decision-making by households. It thus becomes clear from this enumeration that individual goals and household goals may diverge, so that the concept of household strategy is open to question. Moreover, more generally, although people constantly weigh different objectives, opportunities and limitations in response to external and internal circumstances that change over time, we know at the same time that household behaviour is not always intentional and conscious. In many cases, there is hardly a difference between a household's strategy and a household's 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. When discussing risk management, Devereux (2001) makes a distinction between *ex ante* and *ex post* strategies. In his view, *ex ante* strategies (for example, 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. He thinks that cutting food consumption to one meal a day, as rural Africans, although already malnourished, routinely do during the annual *soudure*, cannot be called strategic (Devereux 2001: 512).

Livelihood styles and African pathways

Structural components with an impact on strategies and opportunities may have a geographical or demographic character. However, the emphasis in the following sub-section is on socio-cultural components. These are particularly important, because they are closely related to the key issues of access and power discussed above.

With the purpose of analysing the impact of socio-cultural components, both 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 only an 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, i.e. its dynamic nature and its regulation by social relations, institutions and organisations, is reflected in the concept of styles as defined above. To both authors, the styles, which are, in fact, emic classifications from their research findings, represent behaviour that reflects both 'long-term practices and institutions on the one hand and individual strategic choices on the other' (Nooteboom 2003: 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. Nooteboom (2003: 207) distinguishes four livelihood and social security styles: enterprising people, money people, stingy people and village people. We consider the concept of styles to be an attempt to shift attention away from neo-liberal thinking to a more structural one or, better, from Giddens towards Bourdieu's *habitus*. Habitus is a system of

acquired dispositions, primarily defined by social class, which are acquired through socialisation. Through this internalised 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 livelihood 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 the others. On the other hand, adaptation of habitus may take place and life trajectories may occur in which actors change social position. This is why actors with different dispositions at the start may have developed, in the end, 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 actor's life paths.

These days, the term 'pathway' is used more often in livelihood studies, but unfortunately without much agreement on its precise meaning. Breusers (2001: 180), in a study of pathways to deal with climate variability in Burkina Faso, only rudimentarily describes pathways as decisions actors take in response to available options, environmental constraints or contingent events. This makes pathways synonymous with strategies.

A valuable step forward has been made by Scoones and Wormer (2002) in their study of pathways to crop-livestock integration in Africa. They criticise the unilinear evolutionary sequence view of crop-livestock integration with mixed farming as the most sustainable and efficient farming system at the highest stage. They re-explore diverse patterns of crop-livestock inter-

actions, called pathways of change, hitherto considered as uncompleted or as a cul-de-sac, avoiding normative assumptions about the desirability of one option over another. 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 and power relations and institutional processes, 'the social fabric that has intersected with technology, ecology and socioeconomic differentiation to create particular ... pathways' (Scoones & Wormer 2002: 27). Pathways show that people do make their own livelihood, 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' (Scoones and Wormer 2002: 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 arises from individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations, and institutional processes, which both pre-structure subsequent decision-making. Scoones and Wormer (2002: 195) think 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 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, i.e. very much in line with Bourdieu, then policies to support the livelihood of the poor face a gloomy future: in such a context it is very difficult to determine whom to support with what.

African livelihood trajectories

To shed more light on how livelihood activities in Africa give rise to the regularities of pathways, we propose employing the methodology of livelihood trajectories. We consider it to be an appropriate methodology for examining individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations and institutional processes, which both pre-structure subsequent decision-making. 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 – 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 put into the context of power and institutions. As

such, the livelihood trajectory is more an analytical construct, but it cannot be realised without an open rapport between researcher and informants. After all, 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; sometimes new rooms of opportunities are successfully exploited, but perhaps more often a person ends up in a room that very much resembles the room from which they have tried to escape a while ago. Informants may report accurately on the opportunities they successfully or unsuccessfully exploited, but it is much more difficult, yet indispensable, to understand why some opportunities were not even considered. After all, these are usually opportunities informants did not even think of for reasons of convention, i.e. 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, socioeconomic, cultural or temporal contexts. Thus 'livelihood trajectories' should explicitly focus on matters of access to opportunities, especially the mapping of the working of power, i.e. starting with 'power within', via 'power with and to', finally to 'power over'. The livelihood approach allows for both the intentional, strategic behaviour of actors and the historical, sociocultural repertoire; and it represents a dynamic standpoint on livelihood, which takes into account successes and failures, as well as social and geographical mobility, instead of making rigid and static assumptions about class, gender etc. In current research, livelihood is usually analysed in relation to a single location, by understanding 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 recognised as pathways, which go beyond the specific case.

Conclusion

After reviewing the roots of the livelihood approach, we have established in this paper that a new generation of livelihood studies emerged in the 1990s in direct response to the need to develop more effective policies to alleviate poverty. We then focussed on the dynamics of African livelihoods, which were becoming increasingly individualised, diversified and multi-local. Two

major challenges then faced the livelihood approach. First, we turned to the problem of access, which is increasingly recognised as the key issue in the conceptualisation of livelihood and the unravelling of poverty. We established that access to livelihood opportunities is governed by social relations, institutions and organisations and that it includes power as an important explanatory variable. Second, we discussed the relationship in livelihood between access and decision-making, noting the occurrence of both strategic and unintentional behaviour and the importance of structural factors, and discussed styles and pathways as concepts that try to disentangle regularities. We defined a pathway as a pattern of livelihood activities which emerge from a co-ordination process among actors, arising from individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations, and institutional processes, which both prestructure subsequent decision-making. We then reached the conclusion that livelihood trajectories are an appropriate methodology for facilitating the analysis of pathways in Africa.

One such African pathway deserves our full attention for a livelihood analysis, and that is the multi-local networks of African livelihoods spreading like wildfire around the globe. To study the Senegalese brotherhood of the Murids, the Mazabits from Algeria, the Burhaniyya from Sudan or the Pentecostalists from Ghana as emerging diasporas, trading networks or transnational communities are all legitimate perspectives. However, these perspective pass over their most distinct feature: they constitute networks of African livelihood which seem more promising for strengthening African development than what has been achieved up to now. These multi-local African livelihood networks seem to have solved Granovetter's (1983) paradox: their success is explained by the 'the strength of strong ties'.

Note

1. In order to grasp the changing outlines of African livelihoods, this paper builds on two articles we wrote to improve the general conceptualisation of livelihood research: 'Development Geography at the Crossroads of Livelihood and Globalization', *The Journal of Economic and Social Geography* 94 (3): 350-362 (2003); and 'Exploring the Frontier of Livelihoods Research', *Development and Change* 36 (1): 27-47 (2005).

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