

# Crossfire

In this issue, **Richard Carter** argues in support of the following statement and **Patrick Moriarty** against:

**‘The “livelihoods” approach is too abstract, insufficiently pragmatic and should be abandoned.’**

*Dear Patrick,*

The ‘livelihoods’ framework is a way of thinking about some of the many factors that affect how people live and make a living. It is centred around the various kinds of ‘capital’ or assets that people have at their disposal – natural and physical, human and social, and financial. But it also takes into account the ‘vulnerability context’, the ‘transforming structures and processes’ and the ‘livelihood strategies’ which either threaten or enhance the use of capital and so result in positive or negative ‘livelihood outcomes’.

In principle, this framework has a certain attraction. It tries to be comprehensive, taking account of the many factors that determine whether people survive and prosper. It is concise, in the sense that it can be summarized in a single one-page diagram (Figure 1). And it gives the appearance of being strategic, in the sense that it should lead to the identification of useful interventions that will enhance people’s lives.

I will argue, however, that while being theoretically attractive –

especially to academically inclined social scientists – it is ‘too abstract, insufficiently pragmatic and should be abandoned’.

The livelihoods framework is very abstract in the way it is expressed. I mean two things by this: first, the individual terms – ‘human capital’, ‘vulnerability context’, ‘shocks’ and so on – are terms which tend to be understood in one way by one user and another way by someone else. They are terms that appeal to social scientists, who are used to analysing society in this way. It uses the language of one area of academic and professional activity, in a way that frequently fails to communicate to others – to natural scientists, engineers and technicians, and other professionals from non-social science backgrounds.

Second, the framework itself is abstract. Like many such conceptual frameworks, it includes various kinds of boxes and arrows, without explicit explanation of how the boxes relate to each other and overlap, and it doesn’t explain exactly what flows along the arrows. The assumptions underlying the framework are insufficiently explicit and, unsurprisingly, different users read different things into it.

The livelihoods framework is insufficiently pragmatic. By this I mean that its use as an analytical framework, or even as a checklist of issues to be considered, is all very well, but what direct practical action results from its use?

Most development workers would agree that there are few if any real examples of projects that have arisen directly from use of the livelihoods framework. If it is simply an analytical or academic tool, what use is it to practitioners interested in changing the access of communities to water, sanitation, agricultural markets, health care or education?

It seems to me that as development workers, we have two choices in how we analyse the situation communities face before we work with them to improve their position. One choice is to analyse everything (perhaps using the ‘livelihoods’ approach) and then to design complex (unmanageable) integrated programmes or, better, focused, manageable actions. The other is to begin with a focused attention on one key area which is known to be an area of need – for instance water and sanitation – but not to forget that many other factors link to this issue, such as politics, land tenure, cultural attitudes, conflict and so on. From nearly 30 years’ experience in this field, I believe the latter holds more promise than the former.

*Yours,  
Richard*

*Dear Richard,*

Poor livelihoods approaches! Aren’t you being rather unfair, particularly in accusing them of lack of pragmatism and over abstraction? Surely the real question isn’t whether a new approach is perfect, but whether it represents an advance on what is already there: will using it lead to better solutions and does it merit further development? I believe that it will and does.

To see why, let us examine the potential of a livelihoods-based approach to lead to improvements in our own sector. Take the issue of sustainability. I’m sure that you’ll agree that if all the systems built over the last 30 years were still functioning today we would by now be much closer to achieving our target of total coverage. One reason that so few systems are sustainable is that they are often poorly suited to the needs of their users. This is, in

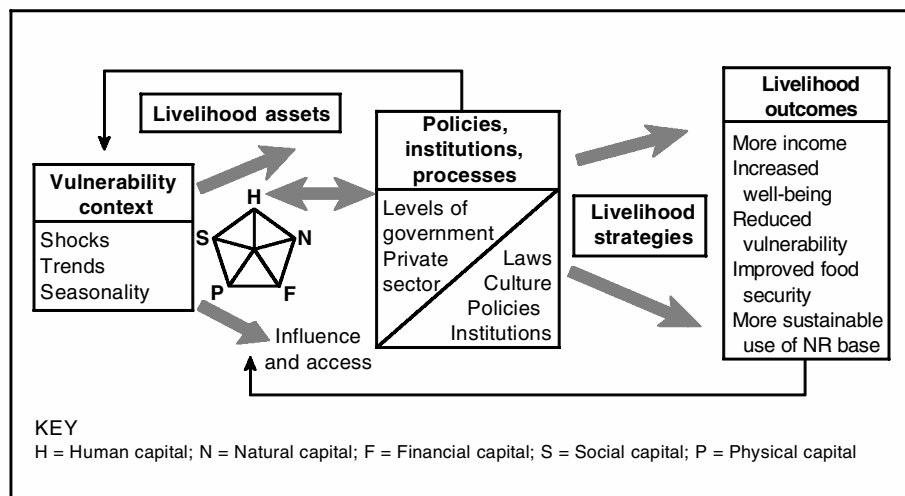


Figure 1 The livelihoods approach.  
Source: DFID ([http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance\\_sheets\\_rftsSect2.rtf](http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance_sheets_rftsSect2.rtf))



A Zimbabwean farmer waters cabbage in her vegetable garden. Interventions that recognize the economic as well as domestic uses to which water could be put may result in people being more able and willing to maintain their water supplies.

part, because our narrowly sectoral approach to providing domestic water and sanitation has tended to ignore other non-domestic (economic) uses. This not only demotivates people but ignores a major potential source of income for poverty reduction and O&M.

Livelihoods approaches provide a framework for cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary planning based on people's activities, needs and the realities of their environment. They help to guide us in asking the right questions and involving the right people. The trick, of course, is in their application, which brings us to the issue of abstraction and pragmatism.

DFID's livelihoods framework is, when all is said and done, a single diagram! It is intended as a framework for analysis – a guide to making sure the right questions are asked – not as a blueprint to be implemented from step 1 to 100 in exactly the same way all around the world. It doesn't particularly matter if people in Bangladesh and Bolivia choose to interpret the principal terms differently – as long as people in the same programme or district come to a clear agreement in their own situation.

To attack the framework as insufficiently pragmatic is also, I feel, to miss the point. Where pragmatism is needed is in its application: in working out exactly how to use it in a given situation, based on the size and scope of the activities to be planned. What and how much data should be collected? From primary or secondary sources? To what extent should stakeholders be involved and at what point in the planning process?

If the next 30 years of development are to be more successful than the last, then something has to change. Planning has to become far better – more flexible, based on real needs, assessed in the real context in which people live. Livelihoods-based approaches offer a route to achieving this. What is needed now is for pragmatic people to develop the practical tools and guidelines needed for their application.

*Yours,  
Patrick*

P.S. To see some examples of the wide range of non-domestic uses to which small-scale water supplies are used, see IRC's productive water-use website [www.irc.nl/prodwat](http://www.irc.nl/prodwat)

*Dear Patrick,*

I agree with you! We need ideas that, although not perfect, advance our understanding. We need flexible approaches (because our understanding is imperfect). And above all, we need realism – realism about how people live, about their aspirations, about what sort of interventions work and what doesn't work. The trouble is, I am not convinced that the 'livelihoods' approach really fulfils these goals, especially the last one, which is all about practical action to address the scandal of suffering and poverty.

Let's start with the need to have better understanding. Why is this so important? Simply because without having a good idea of 'what makes people tick' any practical interventions we make are unlikely to meet their real needs. We know this very well by observing that projects and programmes that are carried out without a high degree of participation in planning by the end users or beneficiaries tend to fail. Maybe the issue of sustainability has more to do with this than with a specific issue such as the integration of water for production with water as a social service. Outsiders can so easily fail to understand what people want and what is needed to ensure sustainability.

So we need to understand how people (individuals, households, communities, society) live their lives: what drives them; what causes them to act and behave as they do; how they cope with challenges; what attitudes they have to poverty, ill-health, hunger

and suffering; what things they value and how this is shown in practice. Part of this picture, and I stress that it is only part, is how people make a living.

The generally accepted definition of a livelihood is '... the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) for a means of living'. Even in materialistic western societies, this is only part of what characterizes individuals, families, communities and society. What about beliefs and religion? What about the value that people put on friendship, family, status, respect, tradition, dignity, hospitality, clothing, art and music? None of these things are adequately captured in the 'livelihoods' concept, and yet they determine how I act, just as much as how a woman in an Ethiopian village lives her life and reacts to change. As a colleague of mine has put it, 'livelihoods economizes human relationships – we are simply reduced to rational economic actors getting maximum utility out of the mix of human, financial, social, natural and physical capitals.' 'Livelihoods' is *too small* a concept to advance our understanding significantly.

I agreed with you that we need realism, and in particular about the following things:

- *Our own limited understanding of the communities with which we work and of the outcomes of our interventions.* We are outsiders, whether of the same nationality or foreign, and we do well to spend more time experiencing the societies we work with, rather than theorizing.
- *The locally specific nature of many of the issues I mentioned earlier.* As the expression puts it, 'the devil is in the detail'. Global theories, concepts and approaches are well and good, but unless these are informed by local detail, they will go adrift.
- *The need for flexible, genuinely participative approaches.* Because of our limited ability to predict the outcomes of what we do, we desperately need the real participation of the communities that are supposed to benefit.
- *The real reasons for the limited successes of aid and development.* These may have far more to do with lack of investment (in financial

terms and in people) and lack of long-term commitment than to the lack of a 'big idea'. In fact, the accelerating production and recycling of 'big ideas' in the west may actually be retarding, not helping, development.

*Best wishes,  
Richard*

*Dear Richard,*

It's funny, because I think we agree the fundamentals and so I don't really understand why you don't like livelihoods approaches. Is it, perhaps, that I am talking about livelihoods-based approaches more generally, and with a specific mode of application in mind, and you about DFID's livelihoods framework? To me they offer a pragmatic, bottom-up, participatory framework for improved planning (I see them as primarily a planning tool). So, if I look at your bullet points of areas where we need more realism, I see livelihoods-based approaches as having much to offer for at least the first three.

I wonder if your fourth point does not provide a clue as to where we differ. You see, I don't see livelihoods approaches as a 'big idea'. At least not in the way I understand you to mean. Participation is a big idea; holism is a big idea; so is working across sectors. I see the application of livelihoods-based approaches in the water sector as being a first step towards turning these underlying big ideas into something practical for our sector (I initially came to them through my work on local-level integrated water resource management, where they helped in identifying *how* water was important to people and therefore *why* they might be interested in managing it). I believe that livelihoods-based approaches are a potentially useful starting point precisely because they take some of these big ideas and put them into a framework that can be used for participatory, needs-based planning.

I also wonder if we have different assumptions as to the level at which livelihoods approaches are being (or should be) used? I see them as being of most potential in local-based (district, municipality, etc.) planning. So nothing to do with the big issues about international aid flows. But lots to do with the fuzzy, long-term work of

'capacity building'; improving how the people (be they from local government, line ministry, NGO or indeed external donor) who are actually responsible for bringing services to poor people do their jobs. Work that is critical if we are to achieve genuinely sustainable levels of improved service.

This is the approach that has been taken by our partner AWARD<sup>1</sup>, in South Africa's Limpopo province. AWARD is a small NGO involved in both domestic water supply and water resource management. Importantly, its role is primarily that of facilitator and supporter of local stakeholders, rather than implementer. For the last year it has been working on adapting Care's Household Livelihood Security (HLS<sup>2</sup>) approach to create a tool for improved planning of water supply provision. While it is very early days yet, the initial findings are positive. Not just for AWARD but, critically, for the local government partners who found that the adapted livelihoods framework provided a useful tool for cross-departmental needs identification and planning. The approach was so successful that the initial village-level

pilot work is now being replicated as part of the local government planning process at ward and district level.

At the end of the day, livelihoods-based approaches offer part of the solution to the area that is currently at the centre of IRC's work: the strengthening of local level capacity to provide sustainable (often community-managed) water supply and sanitation services. There are of course many other problems in the development world and you identify several. But we see this particular area as critical, and we find that livelihoods-based approaches help us in this work.

*All the best,  
Patrick*

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## References

- 1 To find out more about this work please see [www.nri.org/whirl](http://www.nri.org/whirl)
- 2 Care's HLS can be read about at [www.careinternational.org.uk/resource\\_centre/livelihoods.htm](http://www.careinternational.org.uk/resource_centre/livelihoods.htm)

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