Value contestations in development interventions: Community development and sustainable livelihoods approaches

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Abstract
This paper situates community development and sustainable livelihoods approaches as forms of strategic thinking based on different value orientations within the development policy sphere. The two approaches are presented as part of a continuum in the field of development; however in their differences we see reflected a critical shift in the relationship between the state, the market and people. Despite these differences, what they both share is a dismissal of the value contestations that underpin people's livelihood interests and experiences. This argument is illustrated with a case from Bolivia, which demonstrates that any policy capacity to act at a local level today must involve a willingness to tackle issues of value contestation and the impacts of globalization. This raises the question of how policy values relate to the complexities of the everyday practicalities of livelihoods and livelihood discontinuities.

Introduction
There is now a widespread consensus that development approaches as totalizing and deterministic conceptualizations, or as empirical referents for policy interventions, need to be critically examined. The nature of development has dramatically changed over the last sixty years and this is reflected in changes in development thinking. Indeed, the contemporary swing back to ‘market-led’ development and ‘withdrawal of the state’, manifests in deregulation policies, liberalization and privatization strategies, requires

1 I would like to thank Eleanor Fisher for helping me to formulate central ideas on sustainable livelihoods, which are incorporated into the text.
new conceptual frameworks to locate policy discussions where issues concerning social change and intervention are central.

The following discussion considers the contexts in which community development and sustainable livelihoods approaches have developed in order to identify their policy orientation. By policy orientation, I mean the sets of ideas, assumptions and methodologies that orients policy-makers and practitioners when addressing specific development problems. Neither community development nor sustainable livelihood approaches are consistent idioms with a clear set of interrelated propositions. Both have been formulated and elaborated over time in response to a contingent international context and changing development issues. However, both influence the way development problems are presented and solutions put forward. This is more the case with community development, which is considerably older than the sustainable livelihoods approaches that developed in the 1990s; but nonetheless the latter have become influential. Despite inconsistencies and differences within each idiom, some common characteristics can be captured in order to understand their assumptions about the nature of development processes.

**Community development**

As an idiom of intervention, community development has its origins within politico-administrative transformations of the nation-state, and in competing European and American reformist and socialist intellectual traditions (Campfens, 1997). Mannheim’s analysis of planning (1948) makes clear that important readjustments from a liberal to a centralized and regulatory state were part of the war effort in the period leading up to the Second World War. Then after the war, a set of welfare principles underpinned a planning strategy that was extremely important for the re-constitution of the nation-state. These principles were concerned with generating and sustaining a process of social development through the state allocation and distribution of resources. From the 1950s onwards, social policies became the means to promote better living conditions, with people’s rights to resources becoming constructed within a range of social programmes. From this perspective, community development can be seen as contributing to the extension of the nation-state in promoting modernization and political control.

As part of the administrative role of the new state, certain functions of the ownership of capital were removed from capitalist control. This was possible as part of the new state administrative functions, which counteracted uneven economic growth and political conflicts through planning. In effect, this reformed the liberal nature of capitalism without abolishing claims to private property. Community development was part of this
process of state restructuring and its continuity underlies what was, arguably, one of its main objectives, namely, the mobilization of local political support to build up a united nation-state. Oakley (1998, p. 366) discusses this issue, arguing that, as an outcome, community development has given priority to the physical and infrastructural symptoms of under-development, in effect undermining local cultures and creating divisions between people.

In the improvement function of the state in developing countries we see the blueprint of the European post-war welfare state. The improvement function generated a model for the promotion of community development programmes. In both industrialized and developing societies, we find the nation state engineering social relations through new re-distributive regimes and presenting itself to achieve a more socially inclusive society. However, by the late 1970s, a strong wave of criticism started to challenge the bureaucratic and institutionalized nature of community development and the way it had been used to integrate people into the nation-state. Dore and Mars (1981) have argued that it is only in theory that community development has assumed the defence of grass-roots movements and the interests of impoverished people. Indeed, one could label the promotion of social and cooperative movements and searching for alternative forms of organization and social change as a smokescreen oriented to cover up the political nature of community development as an instrument of state control. From this perspective, the failure of community development to achieve all its development goals was closely related to state policies to distribute resources in order to achieve national unity and progress and to integrate communities into the nation state (see Batten, 1957; Long, 1977; Macpherson, 1982).

**Sustainable livelihood approaches**

The political landscape of developing countries was again transformed with the growth of neo-liberal ideologies during the 1980s. Unlike the 1950s, international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, now sought to promote national transformation in developing countries. This led to the market being presented as the epitome of natural regulation and transparency; an institution that could respond to changes and shocks within the modern world much more flexibly than the ‘developmental state’. By the 1980s, the developmental state’s mode of operation was

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2 The exception that confirms the rule is the case of Chile, which became the guinea pig for Western neo-liberal policies during the 1970s, before they were put in place within developed nations.
characterized as corrupt and full of political patronage, rent seeking and inefficiency (Ellis, 2000, pp. 160–179). Development experts spoke of the certainties of a ‘pure’ market economy in which state transparency and accountability was a necessity for the political unity of developing countries.

This market-oriented development language conveyed both a change in policy meanings – from state intervention to the mobilization of individual resources for generating local capacity, vitality and competition – and the rise of new intellectual ideas. From the end of the 1970s, this heralded different theoretical approaches and controversies in the field of development studies and led to a critical re-thinking of the needs-based approach to development, prevalent in the 1970s (see the Brandt Report, 1979). It is against this background of macro-readjustment policies trying to achieve stabilization and reform at global level that sustainable livelihoods approaches have evolved.

The ideas that underpin sustainable livelihoods approaches were formulated in a period when policy-makers perceived nation-states to be less politically important than regional markets or the economic global interdependence of national governments. Global support for national neo-liberal monetarist readjustment policies reversed the legitimization of welfare state policies, while promoting the withdrawal of the state from community development programmes and favouring the promotion of a neo-liberal development discourse based on individual economic values.

The rupture of economic growth models was underlined by the apparent global ecological crisis, placing questions of ecological and social sustainability at the forefront of international development agendas. In this line, the World Commission on Environment and Development (the ‘Brundtland Report’, 1987) criticized the ‘standard agenda’ of key environmental issues and was pivotal in accommodating social issues with local and environmental concerns, placing sustainable development firmly at the forefront of international agendas (Redclift, 1987; Adams, 1988).

In response (1988; 1989) to the ‘Brundtland Report’, Chambers has argued that whilst moving in the right direction in terms of an agenda for considering poor people, it perpetuated conventional top-down, centre outward, thinking. His views were in keeping with a body of work criticizing state intervention and planning (Long and Van der Ploeg, 1989). For Chambers sustainability was not the central issue in the development debate. He clearly embraced the moment by turning the discussion on its head and asking about the trade-offs for poor people between vulnerability and poverty or more positively between security and income. This methodological reversal allowed him to start his analysis from the livelihoods of poorer people and, engaging with the evolving rural development agenda, he advocated ‘sustainable livelihood security’.
For Chambers, a focus on poverty lines concerned only with ‘flows’ – income and outlays – excludes what is important to the poor, i.e. reserves to meet contingencies. This argument encompasses an actor-oriented approach to sociology, in which it is clearly stated, that ‘the priorities of the poor are the starting point, the elements in the analysis arrange themselves in a new pattern, and nothing is ever quite the same again. The first priority is not the environment or production but livelihoods, stressing both short-term satisfaction of basic needs and long term security’ (1989, p. 1). This statement is testimony to a new and critical way of thinking about poverty and sustainable development, which drew attention to the politics of value in development, while re-positioning the significance of supporting the livelihoods of poor people. Within this argument, emphasis was placed on the need to understand how peoples’ livelihoods include a secure command over assets, as well as income. In this respect, Chambers wanted to locate vulnerability as the fifth dimension of deprivation, alongside physical weakness, isolation, poverty and powerless. This led him to argue that reducing vulnerability was linked to improving net assets, while poverty reduction was based on increasing low incomes (Chambers, 1989, p. 1).

Chambers’ contribution raises critical issues as to the way in which social actors valorize environmental concerns. However, in our view, his perspective suffers from a peculiar narrowness: first, because it focuses on the internal dynamics of net assets at the expense of contests over social value and actors’ understandings of their own reality; and second, because of the assumption that a theorization of vulnerability could provide a better understanding of the sustainability concept. Of course, Chambers could not have predicted the way a tentative research programme challenging the abstractions of sustainable development would be taken up by donors in the development of sustainable livelihood approaches (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Carney, 1998; Scoones, 1998).

Writing alongside Chambers, Swift (1989) deepened analysis of the complex reality of peoples’ vulnerability to famine. His analysis concentrates on tracing the intellectual roots of what makes people vulnerable. In doing this, he critiques Sen’s entitlement theory (1981). He argues that we need to explain why there is a collapse in peoples’ coping mechanisms at a particular point in time. He went on to suggest that vulnerability may be historically cumulative, therefore some communities may have very little room to cope in the present because it has built up over time.

Sen did not address differential vulnerability within or between communities facing similar production or exchange situations. According to Swift, this shortcoming may have been a logical consequence of the unit of analysis chosen by Sen, namely households and not individuals. Also, Swift critically interrogates Sen’s work on the differences between communities
and their expectations of government assistance. Sen’s lack of explanation of why households may go to considerable lengths to preserve their assets, of what happens after famine in terms of vulnerability and also of how to characterize war and civil disturbance led Swift to rethink the concept of assets to improve our understanding of vulnerability.

More complex than Chambers’, Swift’s concept of assets is a real contribution to the debate on vulnerability. He subdivided assets into ‘investments’, ‘stores’ and ‘claims’. ‘Assets in this broad sense (including investments, stores and claims) are created when production leads to a surplus beyond immediate consumption requirements, and households use this surplus, willingly or unwillingly, to invest (including investment in better education or health), to build up physical stores of all sorts, and to “invest in claims” by putting more resources into the community or government’ (1989, p. 11). Unfortunately, Swift’s refined concept of assets, in which vulnerability should not be confused with poverty (in this line see Moser, 1998, p. 3 and Lipton and Maxwell, 1992, p. 10), omitted a theoretical justification of why, when analysing peoples’ livelihoods, the notion of assets rather than capital should be adopted. This important theoretical blind spot has contributed to an amnesia, which underpins theoretical inconsistencies in the DFID sustainable livelihoods approach, and unintentionally undermines the issue of value contestations in shaping directly or indirectly everyday life experiences and peoples’ interactions with their livelihood.

A more dynamic approach to the understanding of local livelihoods, which stresses the interplay and mutual determination of the contestations of values and relationships and which recognizes the central place played by human action and identity rather than capital is needed. This contention is explored in the following section.

**Sustainable livelihoods: Assets, capital, and value judgements**

So let me briefly turn to the issue of why assets are not the same as capital in order to argue that any conflation between the two concepts should be rejected, because it distorts the orientation of a sustainable livelihoods approach. The nature of the approach is to understand the emergent properties of how people cope with vulnerability, as the basis of subsequent livelihood strategies. From my perspective, the starting point of a sustainable livelihoods approach should be the actors’ reality. This should not be negated by reducing actors to different types of capital (the ‘asset pentagon’), which falls back upon the individual strategies of actors and their households.

Weeks (1978) has pointed out that the main difference between neoclassical economics and classical economics was the issue of value theory
(see also Gregory, 1982). According to classical economists, value was determined by the labour time expended in production, whereas neo-classical economics explained value by the choices made by individuals for commodities (the subjective utility derived from commodities) and by the availability of basic inputs – land, labour and capital – alongside knowledge of how these inputs could be combined in production. The difference between these two theories was in the value judgements used to measure productive assets in order to deal with the process of change and evaluate development. Weeks cites Robinson (1953–4) who points out that the term capital used by economists is meaningful in an institutional context where productive assets are privately owned. It follows that the concept of capital is conceptually bound to the capitalist regime of production.

From this perspective, the notion of capital may be appropriate for understanding livelihoods constructed around classes that are defined by their capital assets and by their individual access to private property. However, in societies where livelihoods are organized around complex mixtures of collective and private property ownership, the form of individual capital assets may not be that significant in judging people’s vulnerability, sustainability, or strength in the making of viable (or productive) economic, political and community attachments and organization. To ignore actors’ understanding of their ‘reality’ and how they put to work the exclusive or inclusive character of existing institutions and social relations is an important omission. As such, it casts into doubt value judgements about the role and significance of individual strategies and decisions in the maintenance or transformation of existing livelihoods.

A large number of people may not have a ‘pure’ sense of ownership instilled by an institutional, liberal, market economy. By implication, the term ‘capital’ cannot apply to them as a yardstick to judge their livelihood vulnerability or strengths. So the question is, are these people excluded from sustainable livelihoods analysis, which uses the term capital(s) as the central concept in framing value judgements? Ironically, Swift himself makes this criticism against Sen’s entitlement theory, in order to present his analysis of vulnerability and security based on a classification of assets. More to the point, I would argue that Swift’s implicit notion of assets correctly tries to incorporate in the analysis those social interactions and exchanges which do not involve the buying and selling transactions connected with the Western notion of capital. If this is the case, this implicitly touches on the conceptual incompatibility of the concept of assets and the concept of capital to analyse livelihood vulnerability (which he clearly differentiates from Sen’s theory of entitlements).

Because Swift does not explicitly discuss the limits of the notion of capital to understand livelihood realities and the significance of conceptualizing
those complex varieties of social transactions – which cannot be measured or evaluated according to the rate of capital return – his work has contributed to conceptual misunderstandings. Indeed, in this respect much of the policy-oriented sustainable livelihoods literature has failed to recognize the conceptual and methodological importance of the differences between assets and capitals (Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Farrington et al., 1999).

In terms of theoretical misunderstandings, Scoones (1998) is something of a milestone. He set himself the task of presenting the definitional issues surrounding the concept of sustainable rural livelihoods. The didactic value of the paper resides in introducing what he calls the livelihoods framework of analysis and reiterating the significance of the connection between poverty and environment. Following Swifts’ notion of what constitutes livelihood security, he creatively refurbishes some of the most obvious points of the debate not as unresolved issues, but as a framework to identify livelihood strategies and outcomes.

Scoones’ paper can be viewed as controversial because he conflates different ideas and authors, jumping uncritically over conceptual differences surrounding the vulnerability and livelihood debates. What is striking is how the logic of an ‘economic metaphor’ – i.e. livelihood resources – is used to construct an explanation that focuses on capital, as the base ‘from which different productive streams are derived . . . [and] . . . from which livelihoods are constructed’ (Scoones, 1998, p. 7). Searching for a derivative understanding of livelihoods, he postulates an identification between four types of capital, as generating these productive streams from which livelihoods are constructed.

Scoones’ reformulation of a sustainable rural livelihood framework displaced Chambers’ focus on the priorities of the poor as the starting point of the livelihood analysis concerns with vulnerability and security (much the same criticisms apply to Carney, 1998, which draws on the work of Scoones). While some authors (Ellis and Biggs, 2001, p. 445) see this as a positive move, there are a number of knotty theoretical questions surrounding the relationships between capitals, resources and social actors: in particular the significance of reducing livelihoods to the mobilization and deployment of social and organizational resources, for the pursuit of economic and environmental goals.

A key question concerns how to give operational meaning to the conceptualization of fragmented capital assets starting with peoples’ own understanding of the world. In the ‘real context’ in which people live, we find contests over social value including the co-existence of several, seemingly incompatible, interpretations of social value within the same set of social relations or institutions. This challenges a view of the holistic and uniform nature of values – as appears in sustainable livelihoods approaches
whatever their cultural context, offering instead an analysis of the inter-
weaving of social and economic values, and the working of local economies,
power and agency.

A second question relates to the nature of neo-liberal policies and the 
widener institutional changes within which market-led policies are taking 
place. Here we must give thought to how we might develop a more 
 thorough actor-oriented analysis of the externalization of production tasks 
and of ‘scientification’ processes.

Sustainable livelihoods approaches are part of a new international consen-
sus about redefining ‘objects’ of social change and safeguarding the 
rights of the development community to intervene and transform relations 
between the state and civil society, while questioning ‘traditional’ develop-
ment practices. Growing attention is given to those approaches rejecting 
development as a blueprint of bygone Western notions of nationalist senti-
ment of communal solidarity, while strengthening the accountability and 
responsiveness of the state in enabling participation and good governance.

Ideas of individual freedom, citizenship and rights are idioms constructing 
a new rhetoric at whose heart is an awareness of global transformations and 
the dependence of contemporary life upon private regimes and notions of 
individual freedom. To what extent sustainable livelihoods approaches can 
incorporate contests over social values and actors’ own understandings of 
their reality remains to be seen in development theory and practice.

To examine the importance of value contestations in development practice, 
I present a case from Bolivia. This case shows how development interventions 
are received and processed by particular audiences. Since local understand-
ings and knowledge have a filtering effect on externally generated policies, 
they are contested because they impinge on the re-organization of everyday 
life. In this respect, community development and sustainable livelihoods 
approaches represent a state of animation, in which, as external approaches 
of intervention are necessarily institutionalized and de-institutionalized, they 
enter the existing life-world of the individuals and social groups affected by 
development programmes. These interventions are mediated and trans-
formed by a configuration of actors and social and cultural properties, these 
emergent actions create simultaneous and contradictory tendencies towards 
market-led development, good governance and decentralization.

Livelihoods, development and coca production in Bolivia

This case considers the situation of Bolivia from the 1980s, focusing on the 
coca growing area of Chapare. At the time, development focused on 
‘alternative development’, as dictated by policy-makers to combat coca leaf 
and cocaine production. The War Against Drugs was used as an intervention
policy targeting the social and marketing concerns that affected people who sought to secure a meagre livelihood in the tropical lands of Cochabamba.

Policy-makers and development experts perceive these producers as not integrated and their apparently conflicting social character (i.e. being illegal peasants) as being a consequence of their marginality from the wider institutions of the nation-state. Bolivian sociopolitical objectives sought to reinforce the unity of the nation-state by combining the mobilization of communities and local development while controlling cocaine production. However, this policy created a contested field of values between local people and the Bolivian State.

The agency for alternative development in the tropical lands of Cochabamba and the United States Agency for International Development were given the mandate to implement a package of development programmes to stop or dramatically diminish coca leaf production. Development initiatives, such as diversification of agriculture, credit, financial support, the organization of an agro-industry based on tropical products, the construction of roads and the development of commerce were implemented with relative success.

Local producers, even those convinced by the argument that they needed to legalize local markets through replacing illegal crops like coca with legal ones such as citric and tropical fruits, considered that the substitution of coca leaf production constituted a threat to their identity. They made this ‘value-claim’ in two ways: first that it was part of their cultural identity as farmers in the Bolivian tropics to produce and consume coca, and second, that they were citizens of a sovereign country and therefore not subject to a United States policy, which confused coca with cocaine.

The alternative development programmes focused on promoting high value crops to satisfy international market demand. However, in the process they undervalued farmers’ experiences and the high financial and personal costs they had suffered under macro-economic adjustment policies. Grassroots opposition to alternative development programmes generated national and international dissatisfaction with Chapare farmers themselves. Development experts and policy-makers projected an image of these farmers as criminals and voiced serious objections to farmers associations, arguing that local farmers were merely trying to justify the global narco-traffic network.

Farmers complained that in meetings with development experts and government officials they were outnumbered and that in the end local initiatives that did not fit within expert ideas for the programme were always ignored. These kinds of situations illustrated the value contestations between local farmers’ and the political values of development experts, with
local farmers aware of the limits of any intervention that positioned their interests and initiatives simply as part of a ‘resource potential’ offered by the alternative development programme. The experts tried to engineer political and social solutions through the control and distribution of resources, to achieve the integration of people into the nation-state as a means to solve the production of illegal crops.

The development experts’ impossibility of incorporating local value representations of the social and political contradictions and claims associated with coca, both within the region and between region and state have militated against finding a policy alternative to coca leaf production. Consequently, farmers perceived development intervention to be an instrument used to decriminalize farming practices away from the cultivation of coca, rather than a means to enhance local livelihoods on terms defined by the people themselves.

Conflicts were further exacerbated by strong local control of the coca farmers’ trade union which, during 1990s, helped to galvanize ethnic, farmer and urban grass-roots civil claims within Bolivian society. These value-claims over territorial and political control with the nation state generated violence and human rights violations. In this context, development interventions tried and failed to politically demobilize coca producers or socially ‘redeem’ them to the eyes of policy-makers. As an approach to development intervention, the alternative development programme did not recognize the orientation of local peoples’ livelihood aspirations to reconcile the discontinuity of interests between the Bolivian state, international pressures from US policies and local actors.

The Bolivian case presents us with an example in which the insights of the development intervention are needed to improve existing development approaches. Community development approaches and the early formulations of a sustainable livelihoods approach are inadequate for contemporary development issues. They need to reconsider how development issues are surrounded by value contestations and underpinned by human agency, which in practice makes relative expert value judgements. One lesson is that the values and practices of local farmers involved in the making of their livelihood in the Chapare, decentred Western experts’ community development values over a period of two decades. Chapare farmers constructed a set of values and a political language combining the use of traditional idioms coupled with the need to exploit the opportunities offered by the global market, while taking distance from the value orientations of government policy. Cases like these should lie at the heart of any revitalized policy attempt to discuss new approaches to development policy. Such situations could constitute a pivot around which sustainable livelihood
approaches could aim at reconciling notions of resource management and actors’ capacity to process social experience whilst coping with life under the most extreme forms of political coercion and natural degradation. The fact is that learning from experience has forced us to move our interpretations of development reality away from community development initiatives of integrating local people and the state. The repositioning of the individual economic subject is clearly a shift from development, as an endowment of community potentials, into a series of ‘post-privatized’ events and contestations, which do or do not make the exercise of endowments possible in the organization of livelihood strategies. In the Bolivian case, the combination of illegal–legal production, as part of multiple income-generating activities makes rural positions of inequality and power, and are part of a complex set of local–global spatial re-organization practices. Some of these are indeed contradictory and contested value practices, but to what extent these social properties influence the content and orientation of individual livelihood strategies requires further analysis.

Conclusion

This article has considered two development approaches, locating them in relation to the changing face of intervention policies and practices. It has been argued that both community development and sustainable livelihood approaches have ignored the complex social properties of value-contestation in development policies, giving rise to sociological concerns over whether the orientation of development policy really has the potential to change peoples’ reality in a positive way. The article has traced, briefly, different policy trajectories to the root of their approaches (language, concepts and orientations) and how they have changed over time. We argued that peoples’ economic and sociopolitical activities and organizing practices in effect are still peripheral concerns to mainstream development methodologies and policy frameworks. Abstract interpretations of how reality should be understood seldom give real relevance to actors’ priorities or recognize the diverging values and interests of ‘policy subjects’ and how these interests are brought together to construct local claims, a variety of social relations, actions and language strategies. In spite of the gradual formalization of the development field as a specialism that has transcended functionalist understanding of social reality, conceptual abstractions, such as community and sustainable livelihoods, retain a reified policy language ignoring value contestations.

It is important to emphasize that expert language can not simply make invisible peoples’ experiences of development problems or displace their interests and priorities, as part of a state of affairs that an approach needs to
address. Although the field descriptions of anthropologists have brought new issues and ‘realities’ to the fore, much more is needed. It is necessary to make policy methodologies and frameworks more receptive to the emergence of practices of development and the generation of counter-tendencies that routinely result from policy attempts to fix development problems.

These are intricate issues, which lead us to question how to approach social realities with policies that may contain contradictory elements, in terms of the outcome for peoples’ experiences of inequality and poverty. Hence the Bolivian example shows that, whilst attempts at new development interventions have made some progress, the implementation of a different type of change has reproduced old issues and revitalized key conceptual and methodological concerns. The net result of these methodological and framework advances has not reconsidered or improved the methodological enhancement of incorporating actors’ contestation over values in those policies ostensibly aimed at achieving democratic integration and a more equitable distribution of services and resources. So environmental and political sustainability stills remains an unfulfilled experts’ agenda where public choices and policy changes can be established without any theoretical or practical impediment.

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