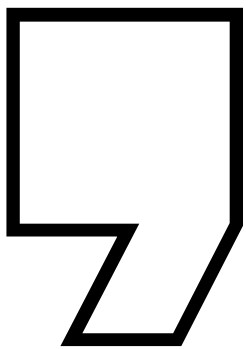


Researching livelihoods and  
services affected by conflict



# How to study livelihoods: Bringing a sustainable livelihoods framework to life

Working Paper 22

Simon Levine

September 2014

# About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people in conflict-affected situations (CAS) make a living, access basic services like health care, education and water, and perceive and engage with governance at local and national levels. Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core themes, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity in conflict-affected situations

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000 in Sierra Leone, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction of Wageningen University (WUR) in the Netherlands, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan.

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# 1 Introduction

The research agenda of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) is built around three overarching research questions. The third of these, on livelihoods, is framed as follows:

What do livelihood trajectories in conflict-affected situations tell us about how governments and aid agencies can more effectively support the ways in which poor and vulnerable people make a living?

SLRC's ability to make a sensible contribution to this question relies on a capacity to do good livelihoods research and the potential of the various studies from eight different countries<sup>1</sup> to contribute to learning at a more general level by having enough in common in their analytical perspectives. The purpose of this short paper, therefore, is to describe in clear and concise terms what a livelihoods approach is and to guide researchers who are unfamiliar with it to use it to generate answers to their own research questions.

The livelihoods perspective, developed originally in the 1990s (Chambers and Conway, 1991; Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999), is still widely recognised as offering the most comprehensive framework for understanding how people live. For a time it fell out of fashion, partly because it was rooted in a perspective on development (as opposed to research) that itself fell out of fashion – as development approaches tend to do. But it appears to be coming back into wider use<sup>2</sup> and it is to be hoped that it will be applied more widely and more rigorously this time, particularly given the much more sophisticated understanding of its limitations that has developed in the past two decades (see for example Scoones 2009 for a useful overview of the debates and critiques of livelihoods approaches).

The livelihoods approach was a response to overtly technical and technocratic approaches to rural development, which were concerned primarily with improving the efficiency and productivity of agricultural practices in developing countries. These tended to generate technical advice, but their apolitical perspective and their lack of focus on people meant that they did not explicitly analyse why people made the choices they did and what constraints different people might face in trying to apply different 'solutions'. A livelihoods approach has at its core a preoccupation with wanting to understand 'how different people in different places live' (Scoones, 2009), and how and why people make the choices that they do. This rejects the idea that people's wellbeing can be understood based solely on a simple technical or financial analysis of the sectors in which people earn their living, or that this would be an adequate basis for developing policy or interventions to support them.

A livelihoods approach tries to hold two perspectives that have sometimes been viewed as opposites. On the one hand it is essentially an actor-oriented perspective, seeing people as active agents who make their own choices and devise their own strategies. It has also essentially become what is now often called a 'political economy analysis', because it looks at how people's possibilities and choices are shaped by the broader structures of society in which they live – politics, power, institutions, culture, and so forth. The need to hold two radically different perspectives at the same time does not make good livelihoods analysis easy. It is necessary to embrace the diversity and complexity of people's livelihoods and so avoid the easy generalisations of some macro-economic or national development planning approaches which are least likely to be relevant to the poor or to people in situations of conflict and recovery; but equally, it must find useful things to say at a societal level and beyond the individual or household, and so avoid reducing any livelihood description or prescription to the apolitical thinking that is often seen in development.

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<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, S Sudan, DR Congo, Uganda and Sierra Leone.

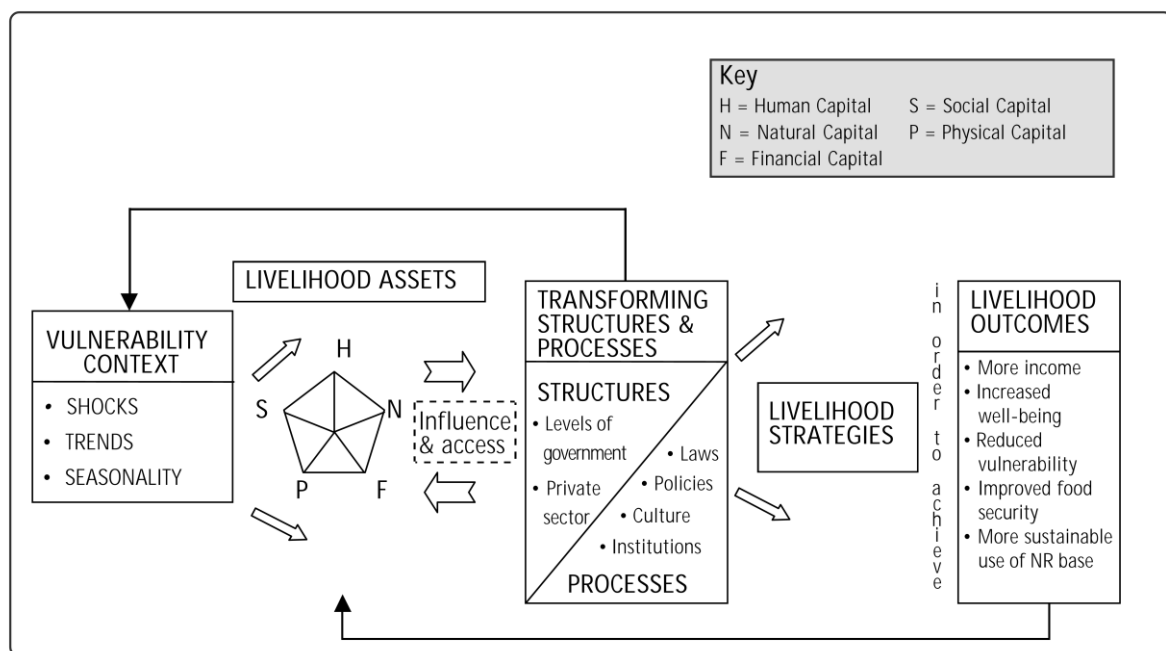
<sup>2</sup> Particularly with an increasing interest in 'resilience'. It is clearly the source of key elements in various recent resilience frameworks such as TANGO (2012) and Practical Action's framework (Ibrahim and Ward 2012).

There is relatively little disagreement around the central principle that people’s ability to have a sustainable and adequate livelihood is shaped by the interplay of the resources which people are able to use and the institutions and ‘politics’ which influence how people can use resources and to what effect.

There is a core of [sustainable livelihoods] thinking that is accepted by almost all those that utilise the approach, and that is the requirement to understand and act upon the asset limitations of the poor, the risks they confront, and the institutional environment that either facilitates or blocks them in their own endeavours to build pathways out of poverty. (Ellis, in Hussein, 2002: 11)

Various livelihoods frameworks<sup>3</sup> were developed on the back of this thinking, of which the most commonly used and ‘conceptually sophisticated’ (according to Pain and Lautze, 2002) is DFID’s Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) which continues to prove influential today (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Sustainable livelihoods framework**



Source: DFID, 1999.

The frameworks have come under two very different kinds of criticism. On a theoretical level, some critics took the SLF to task over a perceived failure to address a range of issues, including violence and conflict (e.g. Collinson et al., 2003; Lautze and Raven-Roberts, 2003) and gender relations, or for placing too much emphasis on material assets and economics.

...the livelihoods approaches that emerged in the late 1990s came to rest on an unstated, and largely un-interrogated, assumption: livelihoods are principally about the maintenance and improvement of the material conditions of life. (Carr, 2013: 80)

It would perhaps be fairer to say that the narrow focus came from those who used the frameworks (unsurprising since the framework was developed by and for *practitioners* of economic development),<sup>4</sup> because the SLF itself has proved to be adaptable – and capable of taking on board the various critiques, while maintaining the core livelihood perspective. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to discuss adequately the theoretical modifications (and improvements) which have been introduced to

<sup>3</sup> De Satgé 2002 and Hussein 2002 discuss some of the versions developed by operational actors.

<sup>4</sup> The SLF is most associated with DFID – a development donor, not an academic institution.

livelihoods thinking by people like Collinson (2003) and Lautze and Raven-Roberts (2003). Any reader who is interested in livelihoods in a place of conflict would be advised to read those short papers and others included in annex.

The second, and most often heard, criticism of the SLF is that it is 'too complicated to be useful'. In part, this simply reflects the fact that life is complicated and any perspective which wants to understand something as broad as how people maintain their livelihoods has to deal with an enormous number of complex questions. Good livelihoods research can never be easy. In part, this criticism, which is usually made by practitioners of livelihood development, is really a critique of the very low level of investment that has been made in understanding people's livelihoods before rushing off to help them. But there is also a truth in the criticism because, though the SLF remains a useful conceptual picture of how livelihoods are shaped, it is not readily applicable as a research tool.

It is this last difficulty which this paper tried to address. This paper does not attempt to offer a critique or replace or modify the sustainable livelihoods conceptual framework – work which has been adequately done by others. It simply offers a practical research guide that can help to bring existing Sustainable Livelihoods Frameworks to life. There is no single correct way to study livelihoods. Ideally, more livelihoods research would consist of longer-term longitudinal studies, which would be far more effective at capturing the dynamics of change and the unfolding story of livelihood choices made and acted out. Whatever choices are made, this paper suggests one way to use the SLF in a relatively straightforward but sophisticated way in order to build a more solid understanding of people's livelihoods.

## 2 Using a livelihoods framework

### 2.1 Where to start with the framework

Livelihoods frameworks are too often expected to be used to ‘explain livelihoods’. This is both an unrealistic demand of any piece of research and a misunderstanding of the role of a framework. No single research study can include everything which is covered by a framework, and it is not the job of the framework to set the research questions. A framework sets out the possible areas which may influence the topic being studied (here, livelihoods) and it provides a way of approaching the chosen research questions. The research questions must be chosen by the researcher according to their objectives. The SLF is usually associated with *household* livelihoods but it can and should be used for thinking about individuals, specific groups of people, villages or districts (Scoones, 1998), as well as about issues that go beyond the purely economic.

The classic SLF begins with the ‘vulnerability context’. The most usual approach to understanding livelihoods or justifying a livelihoods intervention is to start by addressing the context that shapes them (see Figure 1). However, this creates difficulties<sup>5</sup> because it puts a huge explanatory burden on any livelihoods study. ‘Vulnerability contexts’ are always highly intricate, including dimensions from the domains of economics, politics (local, national and regional), informal power dynamics, demographic trends, formal and informal institutions and often conflict(s) – each of which will have a different impact on different people and the interactions between the forces are almost infinitely complex. No country can be fully ‘explained’, and so any study will fall between two stools: it will be impossible to link properly the contextual description to specific livelihoods decisions and outcomes; and because it will inevitably be a very partial description of the ‘context’, it will almost certainly omit details which prove to be important in shaping some people’s livelihoods. (This practical difficulty is probably a factor in the disconnect exhibited by many proposals for livelihoods interventions between the ‘contextual description’ and any understanding of actual livelihoods’ constraints or indeed the intervention itself.)

An alternative approach is to start with the people whose livelihoods are being studied. The context, the institutions and the broader social and political dimensions can be analysed later, and from the perspective of people’s livelihood choices and livelihood outcomes. It is easier to make what people are (and are not) doing the analytical centre of a study if this is made the starting point rather than, as is often the case, the end point of research and analysis. This sequencing, of course, depends upon researchers already understanding enough about the overall context to know what to look and listen for.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2 Step 1: Understanding what are people doing

Understanding people’s livelihood strategies involves answering two questions: what are (different) people doing to make a living? And *why* are they doing what they are doing? The usual objective in undertaking livelihoods research is to inform strategies for improving people’s livelihoods and this cannot be achieved without answering the second question.

For detailed livelihoods research to be useful, very broad classifications of common patterns in activities (‘irrigated farming’, ‘agro-pastoralism’, ‘low input fishing’) should not be described as

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<sup>5</sup> Lautze and Raven-Roberts (2003) remove a distinct ‘vulnerability context’ box altogether, but on different grounds. They reject the idea that vulnerability is externally determined rather than being created by the very dynamics that drive and determine livelihoods. This is an important conceptual insight, but it is still often more practical to use a research guide that visually separates out elements even when they are not conceptually distinct. This paper therefore continues to use a ‘context’ box, but with the caution that a researcher should take the critique of Lautze and Raven-Roberts seriously.

<sup>6</sup> This should certainly be true for SLRC, because the researchers are expected to have a significant degree of familiarity with the overall history and broader picture of their countries and case study areas.



'strategies'. A strategy is not merely a pattern of behaviour: it is a set of guiding principles by which people try to organise themselves to achieve their goals. If SLRC is to provide useful insights, the research needs to understand people's lives and their rationality at a detailed level, understanding what people had hoped to do and why, and then what they actually did and why. Many differences will appear among those who are often considered to be practising the same 'livelihood strategy'; and the finer the level of disaggregation, the more useful the research will be. Attention should be first on finding the widest possible array of specific strategies: subsequently, in analysis, patterns to these differences can be looked for. These will be patterns that are genuinely grounded in real, individual decisions and actions.

Standard SLF diagrams show livelihood strategies as being shaped by the assets which they can claim and by various institutional factors (or 'policies, institutions and processes' – PIPs). Livelihood outcomes then flow from these strategies. However, this should not imply that a given economic reality determines what all people try to do, or that what they do will determine their outcomes. This implication can be avoided by making the strategies and where these come from an explicit object of study. There are everywhere significant individual differences between people – they have different abilities, different interests, different attitudes to risk – which all play a role in shaping different destinies. This is no less true in a village in Sri Lanka than in London or New York. People will only choose a strategy from among those that they feel are possible for them. This immediately opens up two avenues of research. First, the options which are available to people can always be influenced by policies, government investment, and so on. It may be as important to understand which options have not been encouraged as to understand those which are possible. Deciding what was not done that could have been done will inevitably depend upon the judgement of those making the analysis, and so for this question it is as well to consult a wide range of expert opinions. Second, the possibilities which people see depends partly on what is there, but also on their own perceptions – their perceptions both of the options available and of themselves and what they can do. This is discussed below in Step 2.

Strategies only make sense with a prior understanding of what it is that people are trying to achieve. Livelihoods research sometimes carries an implicit assumption that 'rational' behaviour involves striving for optimal economic outcomes (whether minimising risk or maximising income).<sup>7</sup> This is obviously false: very few people judge their wellbeing solely by their economic status,<sup>8</sup> and particularly not in conflict and post-conflict situations. Different people have different goals. Those interested in supporting livelihood recovery, as SLRC does, need to understand not only this range of goals but also why it exists: that is, what has had the biggest influence in shaping them (e.g. ethnicity, age, wealth, education, power, geographical location, political allegiance, etc.)? Specifically 'livelihood' goals have to be sited within broader life goals. In contexts of post-conflict, insecurity or political uncertainty, many people may give high priority to goals related to personal security. Personal security, which goes beyond personal or family survival, is likely to be an important goal even where there are few direct threats to life. People may be working with a longer-term goal of social integration or acceptance; to ensure that their children can migrate somewhere safer or with more opportunities; to maintain a family presence in more than one location as 'insurance'; or to protect their assets (e.g. land) for the future. (Another layer of complexity will be added later because it will be necessary to understand why different people within a family – a husband and wife, for instance – may have very different goals, both economic and non-economic.)

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<sup>7</sup> No assumption should be made that behaviour is either rational or irrational. On any individual's characterisation, both rational and irrational behaviour will exist. Livelihoods research should simply try to explain what people do, where possible also understanding it in terms of rationality of the individual or society concerned.

<sup>8</sup> The critique by Carr (2013) that the SLF only looks at economic goals and that 'the explanatory power of livelihoods approaches [is limited] by shifting a range of motivations for livelihoods decisions outside the analytic frame' is important, but could better be addressed at the *application* of the approach by people who have made the assumption that 'livelihoods are principally about the management of one's material circumstances'. A premise of this paper is that livelihoods approaches were developed precisely as a holistic framework capable of seeing how economic and non-economic forces influence each other – and that they can and must be used to do this.

Understanding strategies involves three questions:

- 1 What were people's goals or objectives?
- 2 What strategies did they choose?
- 3 What did they actually do?

What people did will rarely be in exact accordance with what they had intended. For many people, activities are developed day by day, and most economic activities (farming, business, fishing) respond to circumstances, including to their need to undertake different non-economic (unpaid) tasks. We should expect the 'performance' of a livelihood<sup>9</sup> to play out differently from what people told us had been their plan for several possible reasons:

- The plans they tell us about may be idealised.
- Their plans are disturbed or have to be reformulated in the light of events.
- People have goals and strategies which demand trade-offs and compromises (and which may only be revealed by those compromises).

Understanding the chain from goals to activities may best be approached indirectly. Posing abstract questions about 'objectives' tends to generate idealised and generic answers. (Most people take much of their rationale so much for granted that it is hard to articulate strategies.) It cannot be assumed that a household has a single set of coherent objectives. Different household members will have competing or complementary objectives, in part because they have different economic opportunities (e.g. because of unequal claims on resources). More than this, every individual will have a range of potentially conflicting objectives, arising for example from the need to balance social and economic objectives. The picture of people's actual goals and strategies will be more reliable when the researcher has identified and *understood the trade-offs* that people have to make – and thus why the different household members are doing what they do. This demands an iterative process, moving backwards and forwards between goals, strategies and activities.

It can be difficult to get 'inside' a livelihood directly, and yet unhelpful to understand it from too great a distance. One useful way of approaching livelihood rationality is by contrasting what people do with what they don't do – what could be described as looking for contrasts 'at the edges'. Entry points into a conversation about what they are not doing can be looked for whenever different people are doing different things, whenever plans and strategies have changed, or whenever what people are doing appears surprising or sub-optimal by our own particular set of assumptions. We can then seek to understand differences between what different members of a family are trying to do, or why one household is doing something different from what others in the village or street are doing. Research can ask people about the different options that they felt they had and why they chose one path rather than another; or it can use a life-history approach to see how what people did over time has changed. The researcher must supplement people's account of options not followed with an analysis of the choices they feel that people did not have or which they perhaps could have followed but were not aware of. In analysis, the question 'why are they doing *this* and not *that*?' is then used to answer the question 'why are *they* doing this (when *others* are doing that)?'

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<sup>9</sup> Richards (1985), in his work on agriculture in Sierra Leone, used the memorable phrase 'agriculture as performance' to describe what academics call 'sequential decision making'. He argued that farming could not be understood as the implementation of an already set plan, but only as a living plan, involving daily adaptation to changing circumstances and needs that takes place within a more constant framework of values, objectives and broad strategy.

### Box 1: Households or people

Most livelihoods analysis takes the household as its basic unit of analysis, which puts a stronger focus on the economic side of livelihoods. Occasionally an analysis of different people within a household will take place, but this is usually confined to a gender perspective, and this is too often only remembered after the livelihoods analysis has been conducted – giving rise to the oft-posed question of ‘where to put it’. Gender then tends to be relegated to a question of intra-household distributions (e.g. of resources or decision-making powers). This treats gender analysis as a separate process from livelihood analysis. But a household cannot be understood without a gender lens, and gender is about much more than power relations within the household. It affects everything about the way all a household’s members (male and female) live, the way they set goals, claim assets in society and are treated by institutions.

Sometimes, studies or programmes set out to class gender as ‘cross-cutting’, so a gender dimension is included in the analysis of the context, of assets and PIPs. This approach may work for female-headed households, but it is often unclear what to do about the majority of women who are not household heads. The problem is similar to the difficulties of integrating contextual or political economy analysis with livelihoods (discussed above): it is impossible to conduct a separate gender analysis of everything and then tie it on to an un-gendered ‘livelihoods’ analysis,<sup>10</sup> because that would be both too large a study and because it is impossible to tie the gender and livelihoods studies together adequately.

Livelihoods cannot be understood satisfactorily by taking only the individual or the household level. Some decisions and outcomes can best be understood by looking at a household collectively as single team; but in other ways goals, strategies, activities and outcomes have to be understood at individual level, with the household acting as an arena of ‘struggle and negotiation’ between people of different generations, sexes, etc.

There will sometimes be a place for a full gender, inter-generational or other study on a particular aspect of livelihoods, but all livelihoods research can make progress towards including lenses which highlight how people are different in two ways. Beginning with people’s goals and perceptions – and understanding these (and their strategies) as a combination of the economic and non-economic – will make it easier to understand how different sets of goals co-exist and compete within a household. Including (for example) a gender lens in a study of the context, institutions and so on can be kept manageable if the focus is kept tightly on the livelihood itself. Focusing on ‘how goals, perceptions, strategies, activities and outcomes are affected by gender’ and analysing differences due to gender in the way people’s livelihoods are affected by institutions, policies and other contextual factors is easier to manage than a full gender analysis of each distinct institution which may affect livelihoods. It is important to remember too that gender is only one aspect of identity and power, and only one determinant of how people are affected by context and PIPs. Neither women nor men are ever homogenous groups, and gender may not be the most important determinant of difference. The determinants of identity and livelihoods must be discovered empirically, not assumed.

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<sup>10</sup> This is what is often done though, and it reinforces the tendency to have two sets of ‘solutions’: those addressing distinct problems (e.g. lack of assets, conflict, etc.) and those treating a distinct target category as a problem (‘the youth’, ‘the women’, etc.).

## 2.3 Step 2: What shapes livelihoods?

There is little significant disagreement between the various diagrams used to map out SLFs over the overall ways in which livelihoods are shaped. This paper therefore uses the most common (DFID) version of the SLF (Figure 1), which separates out three boxes:<sup>11</sup>

- the context (or ‘the vulnerability context’)
- assets (natural, financial, social, human and physical)
- policies, institutions and processes (PIPs).

To some extent these boxes are artificial constructs, bringing together quite different kinds of forces (e.g. what do ‘shocks’, ‘trends’ and ‘seasonality’ really have in common apart from being together in the SLF ‘context’ box?). It was suggested above that livelihoods research should not make a separate study of ‘the context’, but should rather use people’s decisions as reference points from which to understand the kinds of forces which shape them. The same principle can usefully be applied to the other boxes: where there is already a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the situation, they can best be analysed by paying due attention to the ways in which people’s livelihoods are shaped by the various forces (political and institutional factors, different kinds of assets,<sup>12</sup> social relations, broader economic forces, and so on). If this is done, and if the focus is kept on the arrows rather than the boxes, then any lack of cohesion among the various factors combined in each box matters less.<sup>13</sup> This should also help to consider the links between the different factors or boxes: for example, asset ownership is not a simple *economic* fact about a household, but is about the claims that people are able to make over assets and their ability to have these claims respected. This question is one about social relations, institutions, politics and power. (An obvious example here is land rights: land ownership is often a key determinant of livelihood success, but it is necessary to understand both why some people have claims to more land than others – and why only some people are able to have their claims to land respected.) A livelihood perspective, then, means a study which includes all the dimensions of culture, politics and power that together are often called ‘political economy’.<sup>14</sup>

The advantages of this approach are quite practical and were discussed in step 1. Separate studies of institutions and of people’s economic lives, with little connecting them, do not make a livelihoods analysis. The driving and quite simple idea behind livelihoods research is that different people are doing different things, and the job of research is find out why.

This approach leads to turning the conceptual framework of the SLF (Figure 1) into a practical research map (sketched out in Figure 2). This map is not intended as a replacement or improvement for the SLF conceptual framework, but is simply an attempt to bring it to life. In black, on the right hand side, is what can be called the livelihood chain (from goals to outcomes), as already discussed. In red, on the left, are the various influences which are contained in different ways in the various SLFs (in boxes called PIPS, context, assets, relative power, etc.). It has already been suggested that it is easier to understand what the SLF calls ‘livelihood strategies’ by separating out people’s objectives/goals, their strategies, and what they actually do. There are two other changes from the conventional SLF, both made to make research easier by drawing out what has tended to be left conceptually implicit in various versions of

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<sup>11</sup> Collinson 2003 adds a separate box of ‘relative power/vulnerability’ and Lautze and Raven-Roberts 2003 turn the assets box into an ‘assets/liabilities’ box. Both are intended to stress that the degree to which assets are useful or detrimental to people can vary enormously (especially in conflicts) and can be the result of a power struggle. Again, this paper uses the more conventional diagram, but strongly suggests that their analysis be studied and taken on board.

<sup>12</sup> The SLF way of describing ‘human capital’ or ‘human assets’ is an overly economic term. It should be remembered that it is used to capture a wide range of characteristics: people’s abilities of various kinds and, a multitude of factors relating to their psychological and personality such as their willingness to experiment, their aversion to risk, the degree to which they conform to social norms, etc.

<sup>13</sup> This was, of course, always the idea behind the SLF, and many researchers have approached livelihoods in exactly this way. This paper is not offering a new insight, merely trying to make current best practice more explicit, since it is far from universal.

<sup>14</sup> It is confusing to hear sometimes that research has ‘combined a livelihoods and political economy perspective’, since by definition the former includes as much of the latter as is relevant.

the SLF already developed: the map suggests separating out influences related to identity; and, in a conceptual modification, it adds the dimension of people's perceptions.

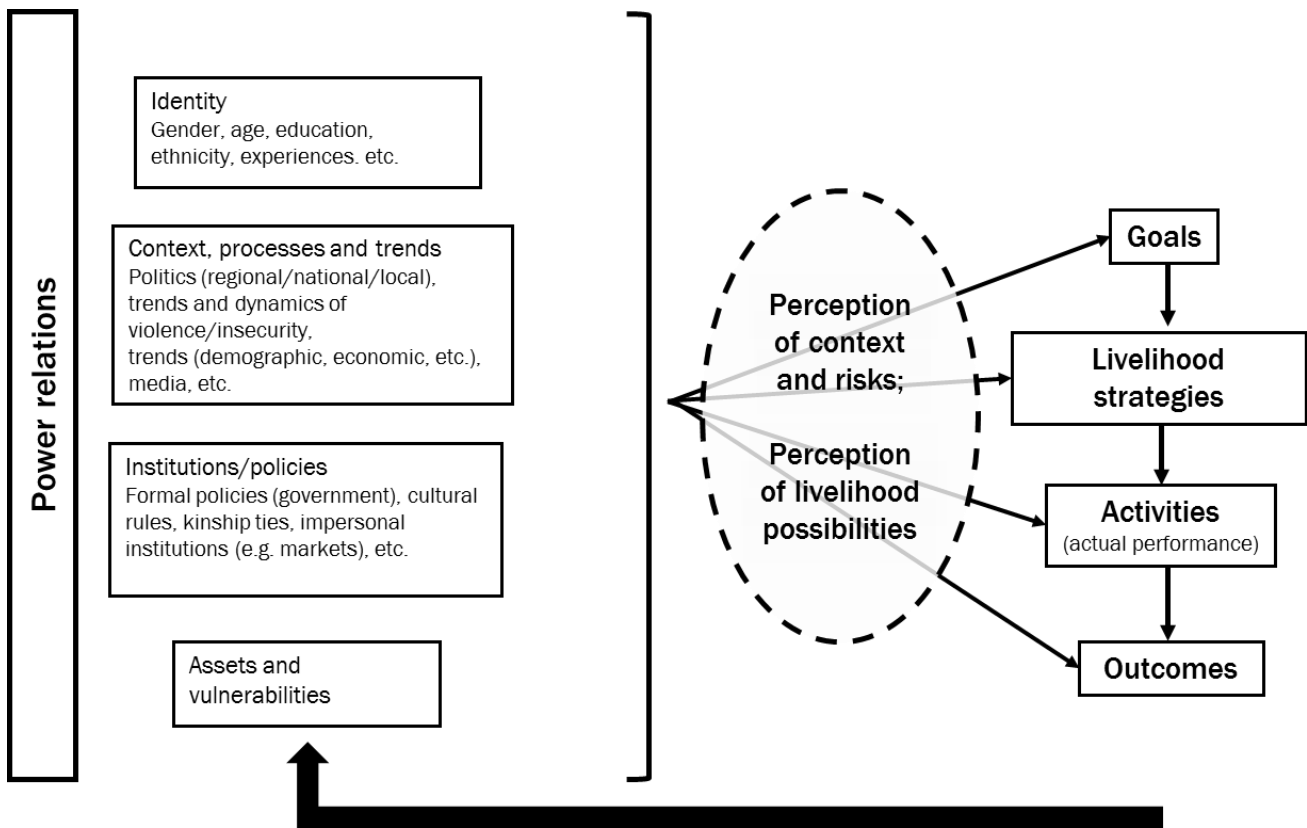
### 2.3.1 Identity

'Identity' is a vague term and it is not the intention of this paper to over-theorise it. Identity is used to describe both how people see themselves and how others perceive them, which may sometimes be very different. Both may be important in determining people's livelihood choices and outcomes. Identity may include people's age, their gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education, their political allegiance or other characteristics which they feel determine who they are and/or determine with whom they are identified by others. People, of course, often have more than one identity, and different identities may be more important in shaping different aspects of the livelihood. Some of these characteristics could be seen in the conventional SLF (e.g. as human capital, social capital, relative vulnerability, etc.) but such a classification tended to portray the characteristics in a narrower economic sense. Identity probably always plays a role in influencing people's objectives: there are good reasons for thinking that in conflicts, post-conflict settings and other crises it plays an even greater role in shaping their opportunities, strategies and livelihood outcomes, because it may affect how they perceive and are perceived by so many different people, organisations and institutions. It is important to stress that the map is not imposing a set of answers to a livelihoods question but proposes a way of asking questions. No assumptions should be made about the characteristics which are most influential in determining identity or in determining the way in which this affects livelihoods. Certainly, no attempt should be made to classify people by one identity alone, and research must be open to see how different facets of identity may influence livelihoods in different ways. (It is saddening to see how often assistance uses simplistic categories such as 'the Youth' or 'the Women', assuming that everyone's life is determined and in the same way by their age or sex.)

### 2.3.2 Perceptions

Perceptions have not been explicitly studied as part of livelihoods frameworks. However, although it is normal to speak of people reacting to some feature of their context (e.g. a conflict, market prices, etc.), in fact people always react to the context as *they perceive it*. There are many possible reasons why different people will perceive the same overall context in different ways. There may be 'objective' differences in the way they will be affected by the same events or trends; different things matter to different people (especially differing between men and women or between different ages or generations); people have different abilities to deal with events or trends; and there are subjective differences in what people think the future may bring. These perceptions should not be ignored. What people perceive and think is the starting point for understanding their rationality, and if we simply impose our own understanding of the situation onto them, then we are effectively closing off being able to understand them as rational agents in charge of their own destiny. (For humanitarians, they risk becoming 'beneficiaries', 'people-affected-by-crises', 'vulnerable' – i.e. people with needs, not people with goals and strategies.) Their perceptions matter for another reason: differences in people's perceptions are unlikely to be random, but are usually shaped by their identity, their relative power and wealth, their abilities, how they are treated by institutions and policies, and so on. In other words, they are determinants of action which can and need to be *understood*.

**Figure 2: An operational map for research using a SLF**



**2.3.3 Assets, institutions, policies and the rest**

There is little need to repeat what has already been adequately discussed and analysed elsewhere on the ways in which assets, institutions, politics, processes and power shape livelihoods. A few comments only need to be made in relation to the research map proposed here.

The different boxes should not be considered in isolation. For example, a finding that ‘people’s livelihoods were different because they had different asset levels’ is useful only as the start of a line of enquiry and not its conclusion. The institutional, political, social or cultural reasons why some people have different levels of assets needs to be adequately treated.

Aid practitioners in particular (perhaps not seeing their assessments as ‘research’) slip sometimes into superficial ‘conclusions’ that are more obvious than they are useful. Explaining that ‘markets’ are the main determinant of livelihood choices doesn’t help anyone know what to do without a more detailed explanation of how and why different people react as they do to the aspect of markets that is found to be most important, whether that is prices, expected seasonal variations, access to markets, informal taxes, the reliability of markets, economic or social costs or risks in engaging in markets.

All the factors in the different boxes may influence all aspects of the livelihood chain (goals, perceptions of what is possible, strategic choices, activities and outcomes). The previous suggestion (see step 2) that differences can often be seen most clearly through contrast applies here too. Nothing ever affects everyone in the same way, and making comparisons between people, places or different times can help illuminate this. (A comparison with a very different context may also be helpful, especially in getting away from an assumption that a certain reaction is normal or inevitable; or, where there are differences

in apparently similar contexts, in helping to reveal what exactly it is in the situation that caused the effect.)

A comprehensive research pathway does not oblige a researcher to try to study everything. The full set of factors may need to be considered, but the scope of their influences may be limited by the research question. For example, if research is interested in how local government decision making affects the livelihoods of fishermen, then an obvious focus of attention will be on political and power relations within local government, and between local government and the people.<sup>15</sup> Use of a livelihoods framework should ensure that generic observations about ‘the people’ are avoided in favour of an analysis which includes consideration of the ways in which the relations between local government and different people (in both directions) are shaped by their wealth, their identity, their geographical location, other political forces, and so forth.

There is no magic solution to the difficulties of undertaking this kind of analysis. This paper does not advocate any one particular research tool or methodology. It is the task of the researchers to use their skills and knowledge, and their familiarity with previous work on the same subjects and the same places in order to decide how the questions can usefully be addressed. The full range of quantitative and qualitative tools from a range of disciplines and perspectives (sociological, economic, anthropological, political economy, technical, etc.) may be appropriate for generating useful insights. No researcher can master the full range of methodologies and perspectives. Every study is necessarily limited: as long as each study is explicit about what it can offer and what its limitations are, then the insights it generates will be useful.

## **2.4 Step 3: Understanding livelihood outcomes**

Surprisingly little attention is given to understanding people’s livelihood outcomes – at least, this ought to be surprising given the amount of interest shown in supporting them. Few aid interventions include serious attempts to monitor or assess livelihood outcomes, and most of those that do maintain a restricted project vision, e.g. only looking at income created by a project rather than trying to see how it fitted in with and contributed to what people were trying to do, how they spent their time and resources, and the impact on dynamics between households and groups. There are some clear methodological difficulties in measuring outcomes and assessing the impact of interventions, but these difficulties alone cannot explain, much less justify, so little attention to anything beyond the outputs<sup>16</sup> of interventions.

All interventions interested in supporting livelihoods should have mechanisms in place for gaining an ongoing understanding of how people are doing (i.e. ‘livelihood or outcome monitoring’) and for learning afterwards how any policy or intervention actually affected people’s lives (i.e. outcome evaluation or assessment). Because this is so rare, there is much less existing research to act as a guide than ought to be the case.

Outcomes can only be understood by combining a personal and a household perspective, which makes simple survey methodologies very difficult to apply on their own. In any study, it is important to ensure consistency in perspective all along the livelihood chain. This will be most obvious in cases such as gender analysis or analysis of inter-generational competition, when it may make little sense to assess the impact of individual discrimination (of a woman, a young person) by reference only to a household description of the resultant livelihood status.

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<sup>15</sup> All research faces the challenge that it must maintain a specific research focus but at the same time also be open to seeing if the research topic is really significant. In this example, research would have to be open to the conclusion that local government is not a significant determinant of fishermen’s livelihoods at all.

<sup>16</sup> In the technical project jargon, outputs are what a project delivers and outcomes are what happens as a result to people’s lives. Even those organisations that may claim to monitor or assess outcomes are frequently using their outputs as ‘outcomes’. For example, a common indicator of World Bank public works programmes is the number of person-days’ work provided, which is really a project output that says nothing at all about people’s livelihood outcomes.

Livelihoods are too often identified with a purely economic perspective (see above, Step 1). As discussed, people make choices for a wide variety of reasons, including to maximise future individual freedom of choice; in order to maximise safety rather than income (especially in conflict and post-conflict situations); to maintain assets such as land for future generations; to maintain a family presence in several locations as an insurance policy; to increase social status; because of social or religious obligations; for personal pleasure or satisfaction; and many more.

It makes the research much harder, of course, if livelihood outcomes cannot be equated with food access, food security or levels of poverty. It does seem obvious though that if people develop livelihood strategies according to their personal (and family) objectives, it makes little sense to assess the outcomes of those strategies without considering they were trying to achieve. In practice, there are very few examples of livelihood outcome assessments that make any reference to what people were trying to do.

### **Box 2: Households or people**

Recent SLRC field research with people who had returned from forced displacement in Uganda showed that many households were not engaging in strategies to maximise income or increase material assets. This was because they had other priorities as life returned to something approaching normality after a decade of forced displacement. The acquisition of the favourite asset, livestock, was often immediately followed by giving it away because people's main livelihood-related goals included the social acceptance achieved through payment of 'bride price' which had often been left as an unpaid debt during the war. Another goal for which people often made economic sacrifices was maintaining a presence on their land in order to prevent it from being lost for their children.

It would be absurd to assess the success of their livelihood strategies (i.e. their livelihood outcomes) without thinking about how far they had succeeded in achieving it – and the various costs they paid to achieve it. This is not currently standard practice.

There are two challenges to incorporating people's own objectives into a frame of reference for assessing livelihood outcomes. First, livelihood objectives are rarely explicitly researched. Neither development projects nor humanitarian assistance are usually based upon finding out what these are or documenting them. Secondly, since objectives vary across the population, there are methodological difficulties in generating general and generalisable findings. Objectives cannot easily be understood through direct closed questions, so the tools which can be used on large numbers of respondents (e.g. surveys) cannot match answers with the objectives of respondents. There are further difficulties in quantifying success meaningfully (how do we score people's success in strengthening their claims to land rights or in achieving social integration?) and yet more in then aggregating individuals' quantitative scores at a population level. The temptation to use some presumed universal objective, such as increasing income, as a proxy or indicator of 'success' is understandable, even if ultimately profoundly dangerous. Qualitative methodologies will certainly be needed, but it may be possible to incorporate some quantitative work into a mixed methods approach. Researchers must be encouraged and incentivised to show innovation and skill in designing tools rather than 'playing safe' with methodologies that are tried and tested but fundamentally not fit for the purpose for which they are used.

It is also necessary to understand the costs that people have paid and the (potential) gains they may have made in achieving their objectives. It has been argued that, in humanitarian crises, the almost complete separation of thinking about livelihoods and protection must be ended (e.g. Jaspars and O'Callaghan 2010). A broader view of livelihoods and people's objectives, and proper attention to trade-offs, would surely ensure that there would be no need to try and combine 'two perspectives' because



understanding people's protection threats and how they handle them would be an integral part of how we understand their livelihoods.<sup>17</sup>

It is nevertheless reasonable to assume that food security and economic welfare remain an integral part of almost everyone's livelihood goals – and that they are justifiably an important concern of those interested in supporting recovery from conflict, and hence a legitimate policy preoccupation. Every way of assessing how well people are doing is open to question and interpretation, and this paper does not repeat the well-known challenges. There are great divisions between those who believe that asking about annual household income is the most useful measure of economic well-being and those who believe that it generates little reliable or useful information in certain kinds of situation (in particular, in conflict and fragile contexts where the ability to collect any reliable and accurate data is limited). Some reliable methods for assessing annual household income have been developed, using probing interviews with small numbers of respondents rather than closed questions with large samples.<sup>18</sup> However these are not capable of statistical treatment and there are those who believe that this invalidates their use.

A less contentious indicator of economic security is people's ability to invest, which broadly reflects the degree to which they feel able to sacrifice current well-being for the sake of an improved future. Almost everyone will try to invest in some way, at least with their time if not financially. It is necessary to take some time to establish how different people invest, especially those with fewer economic means who may think of investment as something that only richer people do. (The choice of words in questioning may be important. Investment is what people do when they have something that they choose not to enjoy immediately because they want to have a greater benefit later. Planting a tree or paying school fees for a child are investments. Choosing to cultivate a field rather than work for immediate payment farming for someone else is an investment, made because the expectation of returns on farming is higher than for the same time spent as hired labour.) When it is established what forms this takes for different population groups, investment can be quantified relatively simply in different dimensions (e.g. by asking how many people invested, how much they invested, whether their investment is increasing or not, etc.).

Another useful indicator of livelihood outcomes in situations where it is expected that most people will suffer some stress or difficulty is their use of coping mechanisms. The term 'coping mechanism' is often poorly used. It refers to something that someone does not normally do at that particular time of year but which they do when faced with difficulty.<sup>19</sup> People usually have some 'hierarchy of coping' (see Maxwell 1996) and comparing how 'hard' they have to cope is in some way an indicator of their wellbeing. (Comparisons can, of course, only be made between years *at the same time of the year*, and not from one month to another if different behaviour means different things. Almost all household economies are to some degree seasonal, even in urban employment.) Using the indicator, though, is not straightforward as it requires detailed research to set it up in order to 'calibrate' it for different socioeconomic groups as a coping hierarchy on a seasonal calendar. The current common use of a restricted 'universal' set of steps that people take when short of food, often called a coping index and also used as the 'Household Food Insecurity Access Scale' (Ballard et al., 2011) is designed to assess immediate hunger stress in times of crisis and is not useful as an indicator of livelihood outcomes or food security.

Other useful parameters which usually (but not always) change with levels of economic wellbeing and so can be useful indicators of livelihood outcomes include dietary diversity, asset ownership, and

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<sup>17</sup> This should change how 'protection interventions' are thought of as a separate set of intervention type, rather than as whatever is done to help people avoid the risks they face to their personal security. However, the current bureaucratic division of mandates, sectors and clusters is, sadly, unlikely to disappear soon.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Household Economy Approach (see Boudreau 2008).

<sup>19</sup> It makes no difference whether it is something that people do not normally do at many time of year or simply whether they are doing it at a time of year when they normally don't have to do it – either way, it is 'coping'.

subjective assessment by respondents of their wellbeing. Asset ownership in particular needs to be tailored to local circumstances. Literature is available on the use of these tools and indicators which is not repeated here.

Assessing outcomes is only half the task needed for livelihoods research. It is also necessary to understand what determined these outcomes. In part, outcomes depend on the strategies actually employed, but any among the full range of forces (institutions and policies, assets, relative power, identity, etc.) may have played important roles in determining how successful the strategies were. The research approach parallels that already described: the researcher should explore whether people who used the same strategy had different outcomes; and if so, discover why.

Understanding livelihood outcomes can be summarised as follows.

- The SLRC research agenda aims to establish how well people are recovering from conflict and the role external interventions play in supporting this. This makes it essential for livelihood research within SLRC to include an understanding of livelihood outcomes.
- Understanding livelihood outcomes should not be confined to assessing or measuring people's *economic* success: it can and should encompass all the dimensions of livelihoods which are most important to the people concerned, and be capable of guiding an understanding of the way in which people's economic and non-economic goals are intimately interrelated.
- There is no perfect way of assessing or measuring 'livelihood outcomes'. The choice of parameters will depend upon the context. All parameters will need careful interpretation, and research should thus actively look for reasons why any indicator might not (always) reflect livelihood status.
- It is nevertheless useful for a multi-country research project to find some degree of commonality in how livelihood outcomes are measured. There are opportunities to have common approaches without trying to use a single indicator across all situations and research questions. These approaches could include: the degree of success in people meeting their own objectives; economic success (income/consumption, food security); people's security in the future and their patterns of investment; people's ability to cope, the range of their choices and their resilience.
- The purpose of assessing livelihood outcomes must not be forgotten. It is not very useful simply to know how well off people have become. External actors need to understand what has shaped livelihood outcomes in order to know how best to support them in future. Understanding outcomes therefore means being able to relate the outcome, the choice of strategy and the various factors (discussed in step 3) that are believed to be most likely to determine outcomes.

### 3 Conclusions

It is proposed to use the existing sustainable livelihoods framework as a starting point in the quest to understand people's livelihoods. Many of the inadequacies of much livelihoods research and assessment come about because no livelihoods framework has been used or because only lip service has been paid to using one. This has often been because of a perception that the framework is too hard and no simple guide to how to use it practically in research or assessment has been available. Most of the criticisms of the SLF can be taken on board by applying the SLF in a better way and this paper sees no reason to reinvent a functioning wheel. An additional problem has been that much livelihoods work has been generated by practitioners, development or humanitarian, who consider themselves to be undertaking a technical 'assessment' and have not considered either that assessment is a form of research or that a full livelihoods perspective is essential to generate useful ways of supporting people.

Livelihoods analysis often does too little because it tries to do too much. It sets out to describe the vulnerability context and the policies, institutions and processes that shape livelihoods, and inevitably ends up as too superficial a description to explain how those factors have shaped the livelihoods of different people. It could be said that they have focused on describing the boxes in the diagram instead of explaining the arrows. This reinforces a common tendency to focus on material assets, and technical and economic factors, underplaying the importance of institutions and 'politics' (as broadly understood).<sup>20</sup> This is most common in processes that are thought of as 'assessments' rather than research. A generic, technical and depoliticised description of what people do to make a living is rarely an adequate basis for understanding people's constraints and opportunities and thus for seeing how best livelihoods can be supported.

This paper suggests that these problems can be avoided by starting with what people are doing to make a living; and using an enquiry as to *why* they have made those choices as a vehicle for understanding how their choices and strategies have been shaped by the context and institutional environment in which they live. A suggested sequence for analysis is thus:

- What exactly needs to be understood and which questions need answering?
- What are different people doing to make a living (both at a household level and individuals within households)?
- Why have they made particular choices? (Understanding their objectives, including a focus on peoples' perceptions of what is possible and how this is shaped by their identities).
- How are these choices and the livelihood activities that result from them shaped by context, politics, power and institutions?
- How successful are people with the livelihood activities that they are pursuing? This can be looked at in several dimensions: Are they becoming better off? Are they becoming more secure or resilient? Do they feel safer? Have they met their own objectives?
- Disaggregation at all stages of the research is the key to good livelihoods work. The more that it is possible to understand *differences* between people, the better the livelihoods work. This applies both to understanding their different strategies, and also the different ways in which any of the explanatory factors of livelihoods (assets, institutions, policies, context, etc.) have shaped the livelihoods and choices of different people.
- None of this is conceptually new. It does though place particular emphasis on some often neglected aspects of livelihoods analysis. The paper argues for more attention to be focused on people's perceptions of their world and what it is possible for them to do; to their objectives; to non-economic aspects of livelihoods; and for a much clearer focus on

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<sup>20</sup> In the academic sphere, analysts have often stressed the importance of institutions and politics both theoretically (e.g. Lautze and Raven Roberts, 2003; Collinson et al., 2003) and from specific situations (e.g. Young et al., 2009 in Darfur, and Pain and Kantor 2011 in Afghanistan, Vlassenroot and Raeymakers 2014 in DR Congo, and Vervisch et al 2013 in Burundi, among many others). Unfortunately, practice has not always been informed by this kind of thinking.

people's multiple identities (related to gender, ethnicity, age, etc.). Ultimately the test of good livelihoods research remains simple: does it explain why different people do different things and have different outcomes?

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