

**Book Review: Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development. By Ian Scoones. Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 2015. 149pp. Price: £24.95 (Hardback), £10.95 (Paperback) and £9.99 (eBook).**

BLESSING Gweshengwe\*

Lecturer, Department of Rural and Urban Development, Great Zimbabwe University P.O Box 1235, Masvingo City, Zimbabwe

\*Corresponding Author: BLESSING Gweshengwe ([bgweshengwe@gzu.ac.zw](mailto:bgweshengwe@gzu.ac.zw))

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## Introduction

Livelihoods comprise capabilities, assets and activities for a means of living and are considered to be sustainable if they can cope with and recover from shocks and stresses (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Chambers 1995; Vercillo, 2016). They are complex, multidimensional, temporal and context-specific (Chambers, 1983; 2012; Nair, 2013; Scoones, 2015). As Scoones (2015, p.34) asserts: “it is not easy to get a handle on what is going on, for whom, where and why.” Hence, Chambers (1995; 1997) likens rural people to foxes that prey on different species in different ways. While livelihoods remain at the core of rural development practice, academic debate about their intricate nature is waning (Scoones, 2009). Yet, a continued critique of livelihoods thinking in the realm of both rural and urban development is justified.

In his 2015 book: *Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development*, Ian Scoones revives the debate about sustainable livelihoods (Scoones, 2015). He

always champions the inclusion of livelihoods perspectives in rural development thinking and practice (Vercillo, 2016). Scoones' scholarly work on livelihoods traces back to his empirical study in Zimbabwe, drawing broader conclusions about farming livelihoods in dryland Africa (Scoones, 1996). Since this time, Scoones' contribution to knowledge about livelihoods and development has been significant. This article highlights and evaluates the contribution of his 2015 book to livelihoods perspectives and rural development. The article also provides recommendations about how livelihoods insights may continue to be used in the eradication of rural poverty in developing countries.

## **Highlights**

In the introductory chapter, Scoones discusses the origin of and rationale for livelihoods thinking in rural development. He challenges claims in previous accounts that livelihoods thinking began with the influential work of Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway in 1992, but can be traced back to that of William Cobbett (1885), Karl Polanyi (1944) and Karl Marx (1973) (Scoones, 2015). This is a restatement of an argument he has previously used when examining the genealogy of rural livelihoods perspectives (Scoones, 2009). Scoones claims that livelihoods thinking emerged due to the need for people-oriented development; an idea discussed in detail in the seminal works on rural development, titled 'Putting the last first' (Chambers 1983) and 'Whose reality counts?' (Chambers 1997).

In the same chapter, Scoones also unpacks the concept of sustainable rural livelihoods, focusing on the definition(s) and use of the sustainable livelihoods approach. In doing so, he asks the questions: What livelihoods are

we talking about? Whose livelihoods? And, where are livelihoods established? Such questions, according to Scoones, need to be asked in every context, taking into consideration seasonality and inter-annual variation. The questions are pertinent in rural development thinking and practice.

Scoones (2015) asserts that the primary aim of a livelihoods analysis is to ascertain who is poor? Who is better off? And why? While it is well accepted that livelihoods are diverse and multidimensional; there is less agreement on methods for assessing livelihoods (Chambers 1983; Scoones, 2015). In response, Scoones presents, in Chapter 2, an enlightening discussion about the conceptual foundations and measurement of livelihood outcomes.

He proposed four foundational approaches for analyzing livelihoods and their outcomes, which are derived from different conceptual traditions, but all provide a multidimensional perspective of livelihoods. The first approach focuses on the individual and maximization of utility. Scoones (2015) explains how this approach examines the tradeoffs between options that individuals consider when striving to achieve welfare outcomes. The second approach is informed by social justice, fairness and liberty, and is linked to Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. Its scope and conceptualization of a good life are broad: both incorporate all aspects of a tolerable life. The third approach centers on the subjective, personal, and relational aspects of life; such as happiness, satisfaction and psychological wellbeing (Scoones, 2015). Finally, the fourth approach focuses on equality in society, especially concerning access to opportunities. Scoones emphasizes that each approach requires a different method for measuring livelihood outcomes.

Methods for measuring livelihood outcomes presented and critiqued in this chapter are:

- (i) Poverty line, which focuses on income or consumption level but misses many of the varied dimensions of livelihoods (Gweshengwe, 2019; Scoones, 2015).
- (ii) Household living standard surveys, which cover assets, income, expenditure, and health, among other relevant aspects. While the surveys acknowledge the multidimensionality of livelihoods, they do not well account for intra-household and community dynamics (Scoones, 2015).
- (iii) Human development indices, which focus on health, education and living standards and provide a national perspective on livelihoods. They, however, are constrained by the same limitations of household living standard surveys due to their dependence on household data (Scoones, 2015).
- (iv) Wellbeing assessments, which involve both objective and subjective analysis of wellbeing and go beyond health, education and living standards to include psycho-social dimensions.
- (v) Quality of life measures, which focus on psychological aspects such as satisfaction, esteem, self-worth and hope.
- (vi) Employment and decent work measures, which focus on formal and informal employment, as well as the quality of work.

Scoones argues that to some degree, each of these measures tends to results in paternalistic outcomes.

In Chapter 3, Scoones outlines an expanded livelihoods framework (p.36) that highlights ongoing debates about livelihoods approaches and the conceptual and methodological challenges that underpin them. Namely, the debates about (i) livelihood contexts and strategies; (ii) livelihood assets; (iii) livelihood change; and (iv) politics and power. The chapter ends with a discussion about what should be included within a framework. Scoones asserts that livelihood frameworks represent significant power and political aspects that command attention and resources differently across different contexts. The frameworks demonstrate a collaborative effect as they draw the attention of researchers, practitioners and policymakers (Scoones, 2015).

Chapter 4 focuses on institutions, organisations and policy processes. Institutions are described as the 'rules of the game', while organisations provide the settings or domains for the implementation of these rules (Scoones, 2015). Both institutions and organisations determine access to livelihood opportunities (Brand 2002) and Scoones argues that they are essential in understanding inequalities in access to resources within households or societies. The issues of difference, recognition and voice are also discussed. This considers how people are viewed, recognized, identified and appreciated as a result of their gender, age, race or other forms of differences and the implications this has on access to livelihood resources and opportunities. Institutions and organisations are framed as being influenced by three key elements of policy processes, namely: (i) the power of narratives (how policies are talked about and knowledge or expertise is deployed); (ii) the power of actors and networks; and (iii) the power of politics and interest.

Chapter 5 discusses Scoones' notion of the sustainability of livelihoods, which is shaped by Chambers and Conway's (1992. p. 5) definition: "a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base." Scoones' interpretation of this definition focuses on the link between livelihoods and natural resources, whereby sustainability is synonymous with not undermining the natural resource base. Livelihood analysis, thus, should ensure that resources are not overconsumed both now and, in the future, (Scoones, 2015). Scoones also draws on Chambers and Conway's (1992) conceptualization of the global connectedness of livelihoods, which states that access to livelihoods in one part of the world can impact access to livelihood options in another. All these issues are described by Scoones as central to livelihoods perspectives but are rarely taken into account in livelihoods debates and development practice.

He discusses how sustainability is more deserving of attention in livelihoods debates, which should pay greater attention to the dynamic relationship between people and the environment. Scoones traces this relationship back to the concern of Malthus (1798) about population growth and the environment. He then stresses the political consequences of those who experience resource scarcity at both the local and global levels. Also, Scoones considers the complexity and dynamic nature of non-equilibrium ecologies and asserts that ecosystems required a more sophisticated and adaptive response than management approaches that focus on protection, control and carrying capacity. This discussion also touches on adaptive

practices and lifestyles, as well as political ecology in the realm of sustainability.

In Chapter 6, Scoones emphasizes power and politics as contextual determinants of access to livelihoods. He argues that livelihoods analysis and interventions should pay more attention to the power relations that exist in social groups, as well as economic and political processes. Thus, the relationship between citizens, states and markets need to be at the heart of livelihoods analysis as it shapes how livelihoods are accessed in specific contexts.

Right questions need to be asked in livelihood analysis to better understand the dynamics of the political economy of livelihoods. The nature of these questions is discussed in Chapter 7. This includes a focus on ownership and access to livelihood resources; class and social groups; and the nexus between politics and ecology. Scoones suggests that the right questions may be used as an entry point for studies that link livelihoods to political economy. These questions may be used to enrich sustainable livelihoods framework(s).

Due to the nature of the *right questions* highlighted above, Scoones (2015) advocates for the use of mixed methods approaches in livelihood analysis. Hence, Chapter 8 is focused on methodological debates concerning livelihood analysis. In this chapter, Scoones critiques the narrow and singular-focused livelihood analysis methods used in the 1970s and 1980s that arose due to disciplinary specialisation. Resistance to this trend by academics and practitioners led to the emergence of alternative methods for analysing livelihoods, including Rapid Rural Appraisal, Participatory Appraisal, and

Participatory Learning and Action. Scoones discusses the operationalization of these alternative methods within development practice and recommends the adoption of integrated livelihood assessments, which may be implemented in many formats including vulnerability and poverty assessments, or as part of the household economy approach.

Scoones contributes to the debate about methods for livelihoods analysis by considering political economy analysis. In doing so, he suggests some potentially appropriate methods for addressing the key livelihoods questions outlined in Chapter 1. For instance, social surveys and wealth or asset rankings may be used to respond to 'who owns what' questions. However, Scoones cautions of bias, especially professional bias in the conduct of livelihoods analysis. He highlights the inattention paid by development professionals to political influences and local realities over technical drivers. This reflects the sentiments of Chambers (1983; 2017) in avoiding the top-down imposition of inappropriate development projects.

Scoones concludes his book by extending his thoughts on the influence of politics on livelihoods. He asserts in Chapter 9 that politics have been downplayed and have become lost in livelihoods analysis and calls for change in this regard:

Given the centrality of institutions, organizations, and policies in livelihoods analysis – and the key role of politics in shaping these processes – now is the time to recapture and reinvigorate the political dimensions of livelihoods analysis (Scoones, 2015. p. 109).

By this statement, Scoones recommends a change in four core political spheres. The first is in the politics of interests, which may be held at a

personal, household, organizational, national or international level and may take social, economic, political and other forms. The second is in the politics of the individual, lives, or lifestyles; which covers identity, choice and what a person thinks, feels and does. The third is the politics of knowledge: whose knowledge and reality counts? The final sphere is the politics of ecology, which centers on the relationship between ecology and livelihoods.

## **Analysis**

Scoones makes a significant contribution to advancing sustainable livelihoods perspectives. His book succinctly summarizes the genealogy of livelihood thinking and presents a clear rationale for the ongoing adoption of the livelihoods approach in rural development. Enriched insights are presented on the conceptual foundation and measures used to assess livelihood outcomes. Both of these aspects had not been adequately discussed in previous literature. The book invigorates the sustainable livelihoods framework by expanding it through a conspicuous link to power and politics. The revised framework has the potential to assist in improving existing livelihood frameworks. Also, the book offers an in-depth analysis of the sustainability of livelihoods. Indeed, past livelihoods debates paid less attention to the role of politics in livelihoods. The book champions the return of politics to livelihoods analysis and provides a clear rationale for how this can be achieved. In advancing the livelihoods debate, the book uses concrete examples drawn from different countries. However, rural development is about poverty reduction or improving the quality of life. Thoughts on livelihoods should be linked to poverty or quality of life. The book covers such

but not in a manner that one would expect. One would anticipate livelihoods discussion to be sufficiently linked to poverty analysis and reduction.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The publication of this book is well-timed, with the world experiencing a scourge of poverty, which is severe in rural areas of developing countries (Dercon, 2009; Gweshengwe et al., 2020; Haug, 1999). Under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1, member countries are working towards eliminating all forms of poverty by 2030 (Koehler, 2017). Thus, the invaluable livelihoods insights in this book are relevant to development practitioners and researchers and may easily be incorporated into rural development efforts in various ways. For instance, these insights may be used to enhance the effectiveness of integrated rural development programming within rural poverty alleviation efforts. While these efforts are multi-sectoral, they tend to overlook the significance of institutions, participation, processes, power, politics and policy dimensions, among other aspects (Haug, 1999). Each of these aspects may be adequately addressed using the livelihoods approach, and this book concisely explains how this can be achieved. The focus of SDG 1 on 'leaving no one behind' by implication includes efforts to eradicate rural poverty (Hoy, 2015; OECD, 2016; UNDP, 2018). The people-centred, bottom-up and participatory nature of the livelihoods approach (Chambers, 1997; Scoones, 2009; 2015) is aligned with this. The resilience and sustainability of both rural livelihoods and the environment are central to rural development and poverty eradication (OECD, 2016); and are supported through the use of the livelihoods approach (Chambers, 1997; Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2015). This book provides a detailed description of ways to promote

sustainability and resilience in rural development efforts, which include adaptive practice and lifestyles.

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