



“Summary of article by Robert Chambers: Sustainable Livelihoods: The Poor’s Reconciliation of Environment and Development” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 61-64

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### **“Summary of article by Robert Chambers: Sustainable Livelihoods: The Poor’s Reconciliation of Environment and Development”**

One of the practical applications of the human development paradigm is the sustainable livelihoods approach, which proposes a reversal of traditional thinking, arguing that one must start with the needs of the poor if one wants to address problems of environmental destruction.

#### **Starting with the poor**

“...[T]he thinking and strategies advocated and adopted with regard to problems of population, resources, environment and development (PRED) have largely perpetuated conventional top-down, centre-outwards thinking, and have largely failed to appreciate how much sustainability depends upon reversals, upon starting with the poorer and enabling them to put their priorities first.” (214)

Three main processes stand out in defining the interrelationships among those four areas:

- *Rapid population growth* is common on the South, and it is often the most rapid in fragile rural areas;
- *‘Core’ invasions and pressures* into Southern rural areas by Northern and/or urban institutions both generate and destroy livelihoods, but for many of the rural poor livelihoods are made less secure.
- *Responses of the rural poor* to population growth and core pressures can involve the unsustainable exploitation of local resources and eventually the migration of significant populations to other areas where livelihoods often remain insecure.

These processes are linked and are not sustainable. The policy goal, then, is to restrain these pressures to enable much larger numbers of rural people to gain secure and sustainable livelihoods.

To create sustainable livelihood security we must overcome “first thinking” – the approach many Northern development professionals take to such problems. “To caricature, the top-down view of ‘the rural poor’ sees them as an undifferentiated mass of people who live hand-to-mouth and who cannot and will not take anything but a short-term view in resource use. In consequence, it

is held, their activities must be regulated and controlled in order to preserve the environment.” (216) Though some professionals now recognize that the rural poor are behaving rationally – for example, having large families as a form of old-age security – the poor are still rarely the starting point.

There are overwhelming ethical reasons to put the poor first, but there are also compelling practical reasons. First we must understand what poor people want. While this varies from person to person and place to place, basic to most is an adequate, secure and decent livelihood. This includes “security against sickness, against early death, and against becoming poorer, and thus secure command over assets as well as income, and good chances for survival.” (217) Poor people want to be able to take the long view.

Putting what they want first integrates PRED by focusing on four goals:

*Stabilizing population:* It is rational for people who lack secure access to resources and income and who expect some of their children to die to have large families. They are spreading risks and diversifying sources of food and cash, while planning for old-age security. Good health and decent livelihoods are critical to reducing population growth. “[I]n conditions where livelihoods are adequate, secure and sustainable, assets can be passed on to children, children are likely to survive and the benefits of child labor are limited, parents have less reason to want large families.” (217)

*Reducing distress migration:* Poor people are forced to migrate, competing for resources, services, and work in urban areas or increasing pressures on other fragile lands and/or forests. Secure access to resources and livelihoods reduces the pressure to migrate.

*Fending off core exploitation:* To resist core pressures that would dispossess the rural poor of their security are better able to survive difficult economic times. They must be legally, politically and physically strong, with secure rights to resources. With that security, they are better able to manage and survive.

*Taking the long view:* Conflicting with conservationist rhetoric, it is core interests – businesses, governments, politicians – that take a short-term view of resource exploitation. “In contrast, poor people with secure ownership of land, trees, livestock and other resources, where confident that they can retain the benefits of good husbandry and pass them on to their children, can be, and often are, tenacious in their retention of assets and far-sighted in their investments.” (218) It is the desperate poor, not those who are poor but not desperate, who are more liable to over-exploit resources: “Who will plant a tree or invest labor in works of soil conservation who fears the tree will be stolen, or the land appropriated, or the household itself driven away?” (219)

“The implication of these four points is that poor people are not the problem but the solution. If conditions are right they can be predisposed to want smaller families, to stay where they are, to resist and repulse short-term exploitation from the cores, and to take a long view in their husbandry of resources. The predisposing conditions for this are that they command resources, rights and livelihoods which are adequate, sustainable and above all secure.” (219)

## **Going beyond outmoded thinking**

To achieve such a reversal in traditional approaches to the problems of the rural poor, we need to go beyond “first” thinking. Two expressions of this are environment thinking and development thinking. Environmental thinking takes the long view, values the future more than the present, and emphasizes the negative environmental effects of “development” and of poor people’s livelihoods. Development thinking takes the short-to-medium view, discounts future benefits of present actions, sees progress as an increase in production, and views livelihoods simply as labor. In each case, professionals are the critical actors, environmentalists in the first and economists and development professionals in the second.

The necessary step is to move to “livelihood thinking” where the poor are the critical actors and the starting point, and the priority is meeting both their basic short-term needs and their long-term security. Sustainable Livelihood Thinking (SLT) integrates these by focusing on “enabling very poor people to overcome conditions which force them to take the very short view and ‘live from hand to mouth.... It seeks to enable them to get above, not a poverty line defined in terms of income or consumption, but a sustainable livelihood line defined to include abilities to save and accumulate, to adapt to changes, to meet contingencies, and to enhance long-term productivity. ... This will stabilize use of the environment, enhance productivity and establish a dynamic equilibrium ... of population and resources.” (221) This is not an add-on to existing approaches but an alternative.

This immediately leads to a search for potentials and opportunities to help more people gain adequate, secure and sustainable livelihoods, biologically, economically, and in terms of social organization. The potential is as immense as it has been unrecognized. Bio-economic potential is often tremendous, because changes in land-management on degraded land can often unleash remarkable potential for both production and livelihoods. In parts of India, for example, poor people could be growing perennial trees on degraded land, stabilizing the environment and increasing production of many forest products tenfold, in the process supporting more people in a sustainable way.

## **Practical implications**

This approach generates an agenda for research in which five areas stand out:

*The nature of secure and sustainable livelihoods:* The traditional view of deprivation has an urban concern with employment and income which does not fit normal conditions: most poor rural people have multiple sources of food as well as cash income. It also neglects vulnerability and the importance of security. SLT shifts attention to assets as well as flows of food and income.

*Sustainable livelihood-intensity:* This concept can serve as a project criterion, in which a development project will be appraised on the basis of the number of people it moves above the sustainable livelihood line.

*Policies for sustainable livelihood security:* There is a long list of policies that can promote sustainable livelihood security, including peace, equitable and secure rights and access to resources, access to basic services, safety nets, land reform, and many more.

*Support for the new professionalism:* The challenge here is to change curricula, training methods, the selection process for technical personnel, and much else, to develop a new generation of professionals trained to think and act in a way that breaks with “first” thinking.

*Appraisal, research and development by the poor:* The poor, those affected by such policies and projects, must be involved in the process of analyzing problems and designing and implementing solutions.

This provides common ground for professionals and the poor. “For it is precisely secure rights, ownership and access, and people’s own appraisal, analysis and creativity, which can integrate what poor people want and need with what those concerned with population, resources, environment and rural development seek.” (229)