Sustainable rural livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st century

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to provoke discussion by exploring and elaborating the concept of sustainable livelihoods. It is based normatively on the ideas of capability, equity, and sustainability, each of which is both end and means. In the 21st century livelihoods will be needed by perhaps two or three times the present human population. A livelihood comprises people, their capabilities and their means of living, including food, income and assets. Tangible assets are resources and stores, and intangible assets are claims and access. A livelihood is environmentally sustainable when it maintains or enhances the local and global assets on which livelihoods depend, and has net beneficial effects on other livelihoods. A livelihood is socially sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and provide for future generations. For policy and practice, new concepts and analysis are needed. Future generations will vastly outnumber us but are not represented in our decision-making. Current and conventional analysis both undervalues future livelihoods and is pessimistic. Ways can be sought to multiply livelihoods by increasing resource-use intensity and the diversity and complexity of small-farming livelihood systems, and by small-scale economic synergy. Net sustainable livelihood effects and intensity are concepts which deserve to be tested. They entail weighing factors which include environmental and social sustainability, and net effects through competition and externalities. The objective of sustainable livelihoods for all provides a focus for anticipating the 21st century, and points to priorities for policy and research. For policy, implications include personal environmental balance sheets for the better off, and for the poorer, policies and actions to enhance capabilities, improve equity, and increase social sustainability. For research, key questions are better understanding of (a) conditions for low human fertility, (b) intensity, complexity and diversity in small-farming systems, © the livelihood-intensity of local economies, and (d) factors influencing migration. Practical development and testing of concepts and methods are indicated. For the reader, there is a challenge to examine this paper from the perspective of a person alive in a hundred years’ time, and then to do better than the authors have done. Gordon Conway is Representative for the Ford Foundation in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. He was previously Professor and Chairman of the Centre for Environmental Technology at the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine. In the mid 1980s, he also established the Sustainable Agriculture Programme at the International Institute for Environment and Development in London. He has worked extensively in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, mostly on issues of agriculture and environment. For comments on an earlier draft we are grateful to John Lawton, Melissa Leach, and Michel Pimbert. The views expressed are ours and should not be attributed to the Institute of Development Studies or the Ford Foundation.

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