7. Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development – Ian Scoones

In this episode of *Between the Lines*, IDS researcher Ian Scoones talks about his book, *Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development*. It's part of a series of small books for big ideas. The book looks at the role of social institutions and the politics of policy, as well as issues of identity, gender and generation. Ian argues that livelihoods approaches can provide a key lens to addressing challenges of poverty, inequality an environment and a useful framework for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Interviewing Ian is IDS researcher Marina Apgar.

MARINA APGAR: Ian, now you've spent over 30 years working on land, livelihoods and agrarian and environmental change in Africa and in 1998 you wrote the IDS working paper on sustainable rural livelihoods. And I remember actually reading it back in '98, '99, as a young development practitioner going out to the field and being very inspired by the fact that it started to help illustrate how rural livelihoods are integrated and interrelated. And so the framework that was part of that paper, the now very famous and much-used and, perhaps, abused as well, framework in that paper. And as you explain in the introduction of your book, the influential paper built on earlier work advocating for a livelihoods approach in rural development and so you've returned to this theme. Tell us what has motivated you to come back to this and write this book now.

IAN SCOONES: Well, thanks for the invitation and yes, the original paper that you mentioned did have a lot of . . . make a lot of waves and indeed was used and, indeed abused. And it took me a long time to come back to this debate. But 20 years after that paper was produced there were a number of events held and I was asked, as others were asked, to reflect on where the livelihoods approach had got to. And it was interesting, because 20 years on a lot of the discussions we'd had back then had disappeared from the general discussions of development. And the original motivation for livelihoods approaches, which, as you mentioned, go way before 1998, I mean, go back to colonial era studies of different places in Africa, India and elsewhere, were attempts to try and join the dots, link up different perspectives, different understandings of how people make a living in rural areas. And they weren't stuck in disciplinary or sectoral approaches, they were a real attempt to have a holistic integrated understanding. And in the mid-'90s we were invited by . . . it was actually before DFID, the Department for International Development, but we got a grant from the British government to look at livelihoods in Bangladesh, in Mali and in Ethiopia. And one of the things that we did back then was think, 'Well, how do we get a team to work on what's happening in these places?' I mean, that was the basic question: how do people make a living? Who's doing better? Who's doing worse? What are the changes that are happening in these settings? And that framework that you mentioned emerged out of those discussions. And it was a discussion between economists, anthropologists, geographers, natural scientists working on the technical aspects of agronomy and livestock production and so on. And it was a genuine attempt to try and think, 'Well, if there are different contexts in places, what are the resources people make use of? How do those result in different livelihood strategies and what are the outcomes?' And in the framework that we developed back then, there was a big

emphasis on institutions – institutions and policies – as mediating people's possibilities of different livelihoods. That was often dropped in the subsequent applications of the livelihood framework. But coming back to it, as I say, 20 years on – and now even more years on – the basic argument, I think, is still just as relevant, but still rather underemphasised both in development thinking, because we get stuck in disciplinary silos and development practice, because we get stuck in sectoral silos. So an attempt to revive the debate and come back to it was an important motivation for me and, indeed, was the driving force of developing the arguments in the book.

MARINA APGAR: Yes, exactly, as you say, this ability to look across silos and to look at how complex people's livelihoods are is what I think is at the root of the livelihoods approach that is still relevant today. And I think one of the things you do in the book also is that you . . . for those of us who are comfortable with that sort of deep knowledge of context, right, as the starting point, you then also push us to think about the macro and to think about those interactions, as well as both the empirical and the theoretical. So why is that bringing of those together so relevant, you think, in today's development context?

IAN SCOONES: Well one of the things that I try to do in the book, which is different to what the earlier livelihood discussions centred on, was to bring in, as you say, these broader questions of politics and, more generally, political economy. Because I think, quite rightly, there were a lot of critiques of the earlier approaches. It was very micro, it was very localist, it was all about what was happening in a very particular place. But I think one of the very pertinent critiques of that earlier livelihoods work was: well, what do changing economic relations at a global level, processes of economic globalisation and so on, how do they impinge on what happens at a local level? So that was a real motivation for extending the livelihoods framework and asking questions that went beyond the very particular questions of who has assets and which livelihood strategies are pursued and which outcomes happen in particular places. And I think by connecting debates that, again have a long, long history in critical agrarian political economy, for example, we can connect two strands of discussion, which actually haven't really been very well connected, bizarrely, because they're both concentrated and focused on questions of who wins and who loses in rural areas. The livelihoods approach is quite descriptive, it's quite detailed, it's cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary, as you say, but a political economy approach asks some other, more pertinent questions, I think. And in the book I borrow from actually an earlier book in the series, the first book in the series by Henry Bernstein, who does a fantastic job in his book of explaining some of the big issues in critical agrarian political economy. And that helped me think, 'Okay, this isn't too dissimilar from some of the questions we'd want to ask in a livelihoods approach.' And there's a very nice bit in Henry's book where he asks a series of questions, which I think help us push the livelihoods approach beyond its descriptive approach, from before. And those questions, I mean, I can just repeat them here, because I think they're helpful for anyone thinking about livelihoods. I mean, the first question is, basically, 'Who owns what?' or indeed, 'Who has access to what?' and that's about property and ownership and assets and resources – already part of the livelihoods approach, but also asking more analytically about the politics of access. The second question is, 'Who does what?' Well, that's a question of livelihood activities but also, crucially, social, gender, divisions of labour, who's a worker, who's not; who's working for whom and so on, and who's an employer. 'Who gets what?' Well, that's questions of income and

assets, but crucially, drawing from political economy, questions of accumulation: who is able to get more and invest more and through what means? And I distinguish in the book, following many others, accumulation from below where, for example, small scale farmers are making a profit and investing in their land, and accumulation from above. And then the fourth question Henry asks is, 'What do they do with it?' Well, that's the livelihood strategy, but questions of relationships between consumption and social reproduction and investments and savings. And we added two more questions in a debate that we were having in a group concerned with land-grabbing and land investment, because we felt that these questions needed to be added to by asking questions about relationships in society, relationships between social classes and with the state. And that's centrally about how processes of social and political change happen. And crucially, because I come from a tradition of working on environment, introducing environmental questions, political ecological questions about the relationship between politics and ecology. So those six questions together I think provide us with a root in to asking some very concrete and analytical questions that move the livelihood framework onwards and in the book, there are a number of different examples from India, from China, from Ecuador and so on. But I personally use this approach very much in my work that's been going on for . . . well, you mentioned some of the length of time that I've been working in this field earlier on, embarrassingly long time, in Zimbabwe, where I have indeed been working for over 30 years in a number of different places. And what I think this extended livelihoods framework helps us do is understand longitudinal change. So if we ask those six questions in the settings that I've been working in, in Zimbabwe, we can see how livelihoods approaches change, how patterns of accumulation change, who's winning, who's losing – basically how people are making a living and who's doing better and who's doing worse, but asking this in a much more analytical way that links to an understanding of political economy. And, of course, I've been studying issues of land reform and the consequences of land reform since 2000 in Zimbabwe and, of course, there's, not surprisingly, a lot of questions of political economy, institutions, politics, who gains access to what resources through what means, centrally part of the story. So it's not just collecting data, for example, on, 'How many crops are grown and what's the output of the crop and how many assets do people hold?' That's the descriptive element, which, you know, good solid agricultural economics does very well, but I think we have to ask these other questions in addition and I found this, having returned to this debate after all those years and connecting it with discussions in agrarian political economy, very productive. So I hope other readers find it too.

MARINA APGAR: So, we've been talking about how you recapture and reinvigorate these political dimensions that were originally in the framework, but perhaps got lost in how it was put into use. And we see that, I mean, as you know, I work a lot around complexity, that helps us see some of the similar, I think, questions and holding on however to the nuance, the relational, the complex, the messy, the ambiguous, which is what, indeed, the politics and power aspects of these questions and these processes of change are often about, is what becomes quite difficult in practice and particularly for decision makers and those out there sort of 'doing' development, if you like. So what I think you also do in the book, which kind of moves beyond remembering these lenses that might have been forgotten is that you also talk about, alongside the right questions, having an appropriate mix of methods. So the broadening out, actually how we go about understanding these complex processes of change: qualitative, quantitative, looking at the micro, at the macro, et cetera. But then perhaps the most

important bit of all is that you then say you have to be reflexive and you have to think about your bias. And that's moving, as you say, from the kind of analysis and understanding into actually being able to operationalise the approach. So who do you think needs to read the book in order to take that step and what does that mean to them today in this sort of era of SDGs and sort of global change processes?

IAN SCOONES: Well, the list of potential readers is long. This book series – indeed, there are there are quite a few books in the series now and they are being translated into lots of different languages, which I'm really delighted about, this particular one's available in Japanese and Spanish and is being translated into Chinese and a number of other European languages – was really for students and practitioners. I mean that's its original audience. The sort of tagline for the book series is: 'Small books for big ideas.' By far the most difficult book I've ever written, and I've written quite a few, because the spec was it had to be accessible, it had to be short, it had to cover everything and it had to be interesting and engaging. So, readers can judge whether that's the case. But it's been an attempt to try and distil this debate and indeed move it on. And I think moving it on for a wider audience, as you say, in this era of SDGs is crucial. So the SDGs, as you, know were launched with great fanfare in 2015, in fact, the same time the book was actually originally published, with slightly less fanfare, but it's quite intriguing to see how the SDGs have evolved since then. It's not surprising, but it's why this book becomes particularly relevant. Because the SDGs, as you know there are 17 goals, and goodness knows how many indicators, and so on, associated with them, were originally conceived as something about being integrated, about a joint project for humanity and so on and so forth. And rather like the fate of the original livelihoods framework, as it got absorbed into development agencies and it was, you know, the original one was taken up by not only the British government's aid agency but also FAO and NGOs of all shapes and sizes. It got instrumentalised and sort of pulled apart, you know. The framework had its pentagon and its, you know, and its checklists and the consultants got on board and ran training programmes to deliver it, which is what made me depressed about it for probably that period of 20 years. But the SDGs have suffered a similar fate, because rather than seeing them as a sort of integrated progressive goal, leave no one behind, integrate justice with environment and development. People have seen them, 'Oh, well that's my goal, that's my goal. Oh, how do we implement this goal?' Or, at the most, combining a couple of goals, 'And we can do water and women', for example. But it misses almost the whole point of the goals. Now my argument, I've just written a short paper for one of the UNDP publications, who's obviously a lead in the UN SDGs, is actually the livelihoods approaches are sitting there ready for thinking about implementing the SDGs. They're integrated, there's analytical framework, there's an approach that, as you say, links pertinent and analytical questions that are political, or have political dimensions to them, with practical methods and let's do it. Thinking about, in a livelihoods approach-type of way, about implementing the SDGs, and it doesn't have to be rural, my book focuses on the rural dimension but it could be in Brighton, it could be in Delhi, it could be in rural Zimbabwe, the same broad questions apply. So if we want to address the dual challenges of poverty and inequality as well as environment and injustice, then we have to think in that integrated way. And sometimes it's quite useful to look back and learn from experience in the past, because actually reinventing the wheel from scratch is often a little bit tiring. And sometimes there are some good ideas there. It can be repurposed for the contemporary era, but . . . So all the people out there thinking about the SDGs and their

implementation, wherever you are, you can have a look at the book and see whether this is a framework for moving the SDGs from the sort of rhetorical step, to something that's practical and implementable on the ground, but not suffering the same fate of the earlier livelihoods approaches of instrumentalising it and just it becoming a sort of formulaic ritual for spending money, rather than thinking about transformational change.

MARINA APGAR: Yes absolutely. I mean, towards the end of the book you have a bit of a call for action, don't you? Which is sort of along the lines of what you were just talking about. And there's linking from the, sort of, the right questions and the analytical and the thinking, into moving into the doing, and back to that thing about being reflexive. So, I guess, one last question would be: so as you looked back and you thought about what was originally there and brought it to light in today's context, what was the most surprising thing? Or what did you learn from doing that?

IAN SCOONES: I learnt a lot actually. But I think the most exciting part of doing the book was to try and make that link, which I think is central to it and central to the series as a whole, between livelihoods thinking coming out of development studies and sort of a broad understanding of development questions with, as I said before, agrarian political economy. And I went back even before the 1940s, back to Karl Marx's book *The Grundrisse* – he didn't write it as a book, he wrote it as a series of notebooks that only got published much later – but originally written in 1858. And he wrote in the introduction a really interesting piece about method in political economy. And very often we think of Marx only in relation to the sort of broad understanding of structural relations and big Political Economy, capital 'P', capital 'E'. But his understanding of what political economy meant, as a method was very much, in his words, thinking about the multiple determinations and relations in society – that I would call a livelihoods analysis, a sort of micro-understanding of the particularities of what people do and how people do it – and what he calls 'the concrete': the wider structural relations that affect what people do and what people can and can't do, who can accumulate, who can't? Who gets rich, who doesn't? Who becomes a capitalist, who ends up only as a tenant farmer or a worker or whatever. So 'the concrete' is about class relations and structural relations that affect how people can and can't live. So his argument is that method in political economy needs both. And it requires a constant iteration between the two. Well, that's basically the argument for a livelihoods approach, or at least a politically informed livelihoods approach. So I found that a rather useful way in to say, 'Okay, well there's a whole tradition of political economy that's emerged out of the writings of Marx and many others. How do we connect that?' And it's sometimes a little bit shocking in development studies that we don't go back to some of the sort of classic thinking. And I think that then becomes important. So there aren't, you know, anyone listening, don't worry, there's not huge tracts of Marx in the book, but there are inspirations that are coming from that type of thinking. And I thought that that was surprising, partly because I hadn't read it for years and years and years, but useful in a very contemporary setting. So I think that connection of relating the micro, the details, is what you started with at the beginning, and the macro and the structural, and thinking about those together, is essential for any of our analyses. And very often we don't have, necessarily, the capacities to bridge those. So it either has to be done in teams, with different people looking at different things, or with this vision of complexity and holistic analysis and so on that allows those connections to happen.

MARINA APGAR: Great, thank you very much.

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