RESEARCH ARTICLE

Strengthening the evaluation of sustainable development interventions: Inputs from a social interfaces analysis and livelihood research

Pablo Rodriguez-Bilella

CONICET, Universidad Nacional de San Juan, San Juan, Argentina

Correspondence
Pablo Rodriguez-Bilella, CONICET, Universidad Nacional de San Juan, San Juan, Argentina.
Email: pablo67@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the Brundtland Commission voiced its call for sustainable development, multiple actors at different levels have been increasingly interested in establishing a means to monitor performance and to assess progress towards sustainable development. Different approaches have been developed and tested, and the key role of a clear conceptual framework for guiding the assessment process has been recognized. An alternative perspective can be offered by the incorporation of a social interface analysis and a livelihoods approach in order to strengthen the evaluation of sustainable development interventions both at the project and strategic level. This paper firstly shows the link between a non-normative approach of governance and the social interface analysis, which is explicitly introduced. Secondly, the notion of sustainable livelihoods is presented as the basis for an approach more interested in the agency of households and communities and their potential, competence, capacities, and strengths, rather than their weaknesses and needs. Thirdly, as the social interface analysis implies that theory is grounded on empirical investigation, the paper introduces a case study in four Andean communities in Central West Argentina, where inputs from the social interface analysis and livelihood research were used in order to assess the impact of an external "community-based" development intervention. Finally, the relevance of the two approaches to foster a more nuanced evaluation of sustainable development interventions is discussed.

KEYWORDS
development interventions, evaluation, governance, social interfaces analysis, sustainable development, sustainable livelihoods research

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the Brundtland Commission voiced its call for sustainable development, multiple actors at different levels have been increasingly interested in establishing a means to monitor performance and to assess progress towards sustainable development. Different approaches have been developed and tested, and the key role of a clear conceptual framework for guiding the assessment process has been recognized.

At the project level, some of the most important efforts have been the community-based approaches, where the community involvement in the implementation and evaluation of sustainable projects was central. However, the important emphasis given to these approaches has often been linked with disappointing results. One of the reasons for this concerns shortcomings in the multiple underlying assumptions of key concepts like 'community', 'sustainability', and 'development' and of the relationships between them. An alternative perspective can be offered by the incorporation of a social interface

analysis and a livelihoods perspective in order to strengthen the evaluation of sustainable development interventions both at the project and strategic level.

This paper firstly shows the link between a non-normative approach of governance and the social interface analysis, which is explicitly introduced. Secondly, the notion of sustainable livelihoods is presented as the basis for an approach more interested in the agency of households and communities and their potential, competence, capacities and strengths, rather than their weaknesses and needs. Thirdly, as the social interface analysis implies that theory is grounded on empirical investigation, the paper introduces a case study in four Andean communities in Central West Argentina, where inputs from the social interface analysis and livelihood research were used in order to assess the impact of an external "community-based" development intervention. Finally, the relevance of the two approaches to foster a more nuanced evaluation of sustainable development interventions is discussed, along with the possibilities of this approach of evaluation and its wider relevance for current debates on environmental policy evaluation.

2 | GOVERNANCE, EVALUATION, AND INTERFACE ANALYSIS

The governance of sustainable development has been among the most topical issues in academic, business, and policies debates in developed, transitional, and developing countries. The reorganization of state institutions (from a welfarist position as a provider of support to one of coordinator and manager of the various participants in the process of governance) has resulted in the transformation of the institutional map of government into a system of governance which involves a complex array of agencies and institutions drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors (Goodwin, 2003; Little, 2001). At the same time that the concept of governance began to be widely employed by social scientists working from an institutionalist perspective, several works explored issues of effective governance. This is exemplified by the call for 'good governance' made by most international organizations, involving a whole range of institutional, political, administrative and economic reforms.

de Vries (2001) has strongly argued that the concept of 'governance' has lost much of its analytical strength, being undermined by prescriptive policy-oriented work–that is, looking at how governance can be 'improved' rather than being critical of the politics of participation, or being wary of the neo-populist underpinnings of governance. In the direction of an analytical non-normative approach of governance processes, the post-structuralist governmentality perspective (Rose, 1996) has paid attention to the techniques employed by government agencies in searching for their particular objectives, and has offered key critical insights to inform research on governance (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Murdoch, 1997). However, this perspective has tended to overstate the coherence and unity of governmental programmes without paying much needed attention to the agency of individuals and institutions, particularly the possibilities for contestation and resistance.

A non-prescriptive governance approach, emphasizing mutual adjustment, self-governance and resistance to central guidance, will share an analytical focus on retaining the necessary space for the agency of political actors. An analytical conceptualization of governance should concentrate on the construction of accountabilities and moralities both as a result of the deployment and appropriation of policy discourses by different sets of actors and as emergent properties of social interaction between interveners and beneficiaries as de Vries (2001) has argued. Such a perspective would promote evaluation of development interventions as socially-constructed processes that are political in nature and involving struggle, conflict and negotiation among interest groups trying to control others and the critical resources involved.

Moving beyond a normative approach would help to bear in mind institutional aspects and to include the costs of governance into the analyses. In this way, the potential of market and private governing modes for the specific economic, institutional and natural environment in each country, region, and subsector could be properly assessed, as well as the effective modes for public interventions design (government, UN, EU, international assistance, etc.) (Jamieson, 1998).

It is here where an evaluation informed by a social interface analysis could be useful to analyze how discourses are deployed in particular social arenas, and to give more attention to issues of strategy and social life (Rodríguez-Bilella, 2007). This implies reflecting on the efforts of local government agencies and actors to influence the operation of these broader forces as they affect them in particular contexts. An interface analysis to development interventions (Long, 2001) acknowledges that people are not merely passive recipients of broader forces affecting their lives, and also recognizes the complex interaction between actors' 'projects' and practices, their intended and unintended outcomes, and the factors creating both the constraining and enabling frameworks of social action.

The interface analysis can be situated among the emancipatory evaluation paradigm, along with developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011), participatory appraisal (Chambers, 1994), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et al., 1996), and transformative evaluation (Mertens, 2009). Emancipatory scholars, by assuming that knowledge is not neutral, understand that it is influenced by human interests. In this way, knowledge reflects the power and social relationships within any society. Emancipatory evaluation suggests that an evaluator be deliberate in balancing the organizational perspective with the beneficiaries for whom the programs and activities are offered, believing that the inclusion of the beneficiaries ensures critical new knowledge about the quality and inadequacies of a program. An interface analysis distinguishes for having a critical view of the beneficiaries participation and the (many times) paternalistic view of empowerment endeavors (Hickey & Mohan, 2004).

Power, politics and social difference—and the governance implications of these – are central to understanding the way they influence livelihood choices. An evaluation informed by an interface perspective has to pay attention to power relations, since livelihoods are not neutral social activities, but they engender processes of inclusion and exclusion, and they are organized in arenas of conflicting or co-operating actors over access to livelihood assets and opportunities (De, 2008).

In this sense, the evaluation of sustainable development interventions could gain new depth by undertaking a more explicit social interface analysis (Long, 2001), which helps to recognize the agency of social actors in interactive situations, requiring a more thorough analysis of the ways in which different social actors manage and interpret new elements in their life-worlds.

A social interface analysis tries to understand how different actors and strategic groups pursue different interests within the development project over the political, economic, and symbolic resources of which development interventions are so rich. In this sense, an evaluation of development interventions will not only make an assessment of whether different activities have managed to fulfill the original objectives of the intervention, but furthermore, it will emphasize an analysis of the contingent social processes accompanying its implementation.

The social interfaces analysis becomes an analytical tool to explore and understand issues of social heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and the conflicts inherent in processes involving external interventions. This type of analysis pays particular attention to examining the types of discontinuities that exist in development situations, and the dynamics of the interactions that take place between them. A central issue is how actors' goals, perceptions, values, interests and relationships are reinforced or reshaped by this process, and at the same time, how the intervention itself is reshaped.

Some critics of the interface analysis have mentioned that focusing in interactional processes could be seen as a new style of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) or a psychological approach of micro-scenarios. The misunderstanding of the critic is that the interactional processes do not include only face-to-face relationships, but also more remote ones. In this way, an evaluation could focus at different scales of a programme or organization and, very important, also pay attention not only to policy or programme processes initiated by any external body, but also those less formal "policy" goals and "projects" formulated and carried out by local groups and organizations (Arce & Long, 2007).

The adoption of a social interfaces analysis entails shifting the focus to the issue of strategic interests surrounding development intervention, and not limiting the analysis to looking at the stated objectives of the project or program and the degree to which these were fulfilled. It requires looking at interventions as arenas of conflicts over the material, political, symbolic and economic resources of the development projects, programs or policies (Long, 2001). In this way, evaluation should look into the different logics and rationalities of the social actors involved in the donor/recipient interface.

The interface analysis also depends on the development of an appropriate research methodology that can facilitate the analysis of social action and interpretation. This does not mean that it can be reduced to methods and techniques of data collection and classification, but it stresses that the analytical perspective of the interface analysis should be accompanied by a methodology consistent with it. In this sense, the social interface approach is very close to the anthropologic tradition of social research, where the detailed observation of, and engagement in everyday life situations, is a key component of the approach (Tapella & Rodríguez-Bilella, 2008).

One way for achieving the desired consistency between the interface analysis and a particular methodology has been the carry out of a series of case studies that could provide the opportunity to highlight and analyze the processes by which social actors manage their everyday life, showing how they play an active role in their processes of social reproduction and transformation (Long, 2001). Other methodological tools that are coherent with the interface analysis are the social network analysis (Scott, 1991), the construction of actor linkage matrix and determinants' diagram (Biggs & Matsaert, 1999), the life-history approach (Bertaux, 1981) and the study of occupational careers (Long & Roberts, 1984).

In the next section, a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach–which implies an actors´ perspective–will be introduced in order to show its potential in evaluation research, based on its interest in the agency of communities and their potential rather than their weakness and needs.

3 | SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD RESEARCH IN THE EVALUATION OF DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

Humans have continuously interacted with natural systems, resulting in the formation and development of coupled human and natural systems, integrated systems in which people interact with natural components. These couplings have evolved from direct to more indirect interactions, from adjacent to more distant linkages, from local to global scales, and from simple to complex patterns and processes (Liu et al., 2007). The unsustainable practices and policies that threaten the health of ecosystems and communities of all types reflect a "disconnect" between natural and human systems.

While sustainable solutions seek to integrate the environmental, social and economic spheres in ways, which support the integrity, health and restoration of both of these systems, achieving this integration requires new ways of thinking across disciplines and new ways of translating academic research into practice. Livelihoods research provides all with a common framework and reduces the prospect that any one discipline (or sector) will dominate. In this way, it can facilitate a bridging of divides—particularly across the natural and social sciences—allowing different people to work together (Scoones, 2009). New insights could be gained if development interventions are conceptualized as re-coupling human and natural systems in more sustainable ways, linking these interventions to biodiversity conservation goals, bringing up the quality of life and the quality of the environment in tandem.

> Doing so highlights notions such as: multiple stable states, resilience, vulnerability, feedback, inter-scale coordination, participation, governance and cooperation... To make progress on rural development and biodiversity conservation goals, both must be targeted in a coordinated, planned manner. While human and natural systems are always coupled, the ways that they are coupled are more or less sustainable. (Webler, 2008: p. 1)

Sustainable development as a policy paradigm has as a salient feature: it shifts the terms of debate from traditional environmentalism, with its primary focus on environmental protection, to the notion of sustainability, which requires a much more complex process of trading off social, economic and environmental priorities. For Jacobs (1999), sustainable development is a normative and political concept and to a high degree its value has to be sought precisely in its ambiguity and contestability.

In contrast with much of the literature which used to focus on barriers to sustainable development, a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach emerged in the 1990s, more interested in the agency of communities and their potential, competence, capacities and strengths, rather than their weakness and needs. The approach was a direct response to the disappointing results of former ones in devising effective policies to alleviate poverty, such as those based on income, consumption criteria or basic needs. Allison (2003) traces the origins of the approach to studies concerned with understanding the differential capability of rural families to cope with crises (droughts, floods, or plant and animal pests and diseases), stating that it borrowed ideas from the ecological literature concerned with the sustainability of ecosystems or agroecological systems (Conway, 1987; Holling, 1973).

The concept of 'sustainable livelihoods' became a focus of extensive research, as well as an important organizing framework for the development efforts. Many sustainable livelihoods approaches were developed[1] in order to achieve a better understanding of natural resource management systems. However, there was a fast move from studies with a strong environmental flavor to others where natural resources were just one among other assessments or "capitals" (Bebbington, 1999). In this way, instead of prioritizing the natural system as has commonly be done in sustainable development studies, sustainable livelihoods research recognized a range of assets or 'capitals' required to sustain a livelihood: natural capital (supplies of water, air, soil, genetic resources, etc.), economic capital -sometimes called 'financial capital'—(including savings, income, remittances, and credit); human capital (the knowledge, skills, health and physical ability of a group of people); and social capital (the social networks, relations and affiliations that people have).

Bebbington (1999) develops an analytical framework for analyzing rural livelihoods in terms of their sustainability and their implications for rural poverty, stressing the holistic nature of livelihoods and considering them in terms of access to five types of "capital" asset— produced, human, natural, social and cultural capital-

> Assets … are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act... The framework thus understands these assets not only as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents´ power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources. (Bebbington, 1999: p. 2022)

Poor people have usually been the focal point of livelihood research, being understood not as victims of structural constraints, and

recognizing that livelihoods are multidimensional, covering not only economic but also political, cultural, social and ecological aspects (De & Zoomers, 2003: p. 350). In this way, Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches were applied to inform the design of policy and development interventions aimed at reducing poverty in less developed countries. In this trend, the central objective was to search for more effective methods to support people and communities in more meaningful ways for their daily lives and needs, as opposed to ready-made, interventionist instruments (Appendini & Nuijten, 2002).

In the field of sustainable studies, two distinct conceptions of sustainability have been developed. *Strong Sustainability*, which is more in the spirit of environmentalism, asserts that it is "natural capital" that should be sustained, being one extreme a complete eco- or biocentric view of sustainability. *Weak Sustainability*, which is more likely to be embraced by conventional economists, is centered on well-being and can be characterized as a state in which "well-being does not decline through time". According to this view, development can be called sustainable as long as total capital grows, or stays at the same level. This distinction between strong and weak sustainability is a result of different visions about how a sustainable world can and should look like, how to manage change, and implies different objectives of "what should be sustained" (Hediger, 2006). Livelihood research and its links with sustainable development will require:

> … compliance with critical levels of natural capital and basic human needs that are not addressed by notional conceptions of neither weak nor strong sustainability. (Hediger, 2006)

With their emphasis in diversity, livelihood research has challenged fundamentally single-sector approaches to solving complex development problems (Scoones, 2009). This understanding contrasts markedly with development policies and projects implemented by national and local governments, NGOs and international organizations, which have historically tended to focus their efforts on single sectors of the economic and social life. In this way, the sustainable livelihood perspective –at the same time that it may inform and let compare the different models of weak and strong sustainability- goes beyond this distinction and provides new insights for the further development of models that are more coherent with the idea of sustainable development.

For government initiatives, many development agencies (like Oxfam, Care), as well as in the research world the interest in supporting and analyzing sustainable livelihoods has continued. Scoones (2009) considers that perhaps the most interesting applications of livelihood approaches were areas where clearly cross-cutting themes could be opened up by a livelihoods perspective: HIV/AIDS discussions were recast from a health to a livelihoods focus (Loevinsohn & Gillespie, 2003), diversification of livelihoods, migration and non-farm rural income was put at the center of the rural development agenda (De Haan, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Tacoli, 1998) and complex emergencies, conflict and disaster responses were seen through a livelihoods lens (Cannon et al., 2003; Longley & Maxwell, 2003).

The sustainable livelihood approach assesses development interventions based on their impact on poverty. However, there is no one prescribed livelihoods 'method' for evaluation, although the focus, principles and framework of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach add further value and insights. The livelihood research emphasis on more locally based research and the power of case studies as a basis for theorizing about development is exemplified in the next section.

4 | CASE STUDY IN ANDEAN COMMUNITIES IN CENTRAL WEST ARGENTINA

The case study under consideration[2] is the *Programa de Conservación de la Biodiversidad* (PCB), implemented by the *Administración de Parques Nacionales* in Argentina, mainly financed by the Global Environmental Fund (GEF). The main component of the PCB supports production micro-projects by financing investment oriented to support production for the market or for household consumption for settlers and communities of limited resources in the nearby areas and zones of influence of new national parks.

In the province of San Juan, in the central west of Argentina, the PCB was implemented in four Andean communities in the Iglesia district. These are communities located at 2000 meters over sea level, in micro irrigated oases, with agriculture, forest, fruit and cattle production activities. Before the PCB began, a study was carried out in these communities in order to identify heterogeneities and orient the types of production projects to be supported.[3] A social typology was constructed based on these activities, where the three most relevant types were the following ones:

A. Small Farmers: Settlers whose main income comes from farming or cattle farming.
B. Salaried small farmers: Families with similar characteristics as the previous ones, but they count with a stable income from jobs as civil servants (municipality, local police, irrigation department, etc.).
C. Unemployed Rural Poor: Although they usually have access to land, they are not farmers but are occasionally hired to do farm and non-farm activities, usually obtaining their income through the search and sale of firewood loads, or the accomplishment of petty labors ("*changes*"). Another important source of income has been State run unemployment programmes.

The micro-projects the PCB financed in these communities involved more than 100 families, and the projects were oriented to support and strengthen the small agricultural production systems by diversifying the production for the market and for the household consumption. The social typology constructed was used to guide the micro-projects formulation and to orient the decisions about the type of projects to finance.

Eighteen months after the programme began a preliminary assessment of the PCB impact was carried out, paying particular attention to the evaluation of the relevance of the micro-projects in helping to increase income or household consumption, as well as the degree in which people had a sense of "ownership" of their production project and had adopted (at least partially) the technology suggested. It resulted quite clear that for both small farmers and salaried small farmers the micro-projects had been very successful, having been encouraged in their production activities by the PCB development intervention. Farmers adopted most of the technologies suggested, made good use of their investments, and were also eager to demand more attention from the extension workers of the PCB.

By contrast, the results of the PCB implementation for the unemployed rural poor were quite heterogeneous, beyond their apparent homogeneity (that is, similar conditions in their income sources, livelihood strategies, poverty, etc.). While some of the households replicated the success of the small farmers´ projects, others failed to give a good use to the investments, showed apathy towards the extension workers, and did not have a sense of ownership over their micro-project. It was necessary to conduct a deeper analysis of the livelihoods life-trajectories of the unemployed rural poor in order to shed new light and understand better those contrasting results.

For this analysis, the evaluation employed the case study as a research strategy, understanding that it would offer a holistic view of the processes involved as well a realization of the topic under research (Yin, 1989). More concretely, a qualitative case study strategy was used to explore and understand the differential impact of the PCB in the category of the unemployed rural poor. Interviews constituted the main data source, and 2/3 of the unemployed rural poor beneficiaries were interviewed through in depth and semi-structured interviews. The interviews followed a flexible agenda, where the main topics of the life trajectories of these actors were recorded. Most of the time, the interviews were made with the presence of one or more relative of the interviewed. The extension workers were also interviewed, and a workshop was held to discuss with them the preliminary results of the evaluation. These were also reviewed too with the national coordinator of the PCB.

The analysis showed that there were two different groups within the type of the unemployed rural poor, who in spite of sharing their present characteristics differ in their socio-cultural background. One of these groups was constituted by families that had historically presented conditions of chronic poverty and had not been ever linked with agrarian livelihoods but mainly did petty jobs in towns, with temporally off-migration. It was for these families without an agricultural tradition or trajectory that the PCB impact was quite poor, if not completely null. It was easily detected that they had not done a good use of the subsidy, as they had bought new animals and quickly sold or changed them for food or clothes. Something similar happened with agricultural tools, which at best were abandoned and left.

For the other group within the rural unemployed poor, the situation was quite different. The key factor that distinguished them was their trajectory or life-history in the countryside. These families (locally called *yesqueros*) had been goat keepers in the Andes *pedemonte*, living from goat and cheese sales to settlers and tourists. During the last 20 years, their life systems went on deteriorating for several reasons (i.e., a general fall of income and by consequence

smaller sales, an increase of the cost of life, which limited their possibilities to reach a minimum food security level, etc.). All this increased the pressure to sell their animals and move to the small towns of the area, where their children could access breakfast and lunch at school, and adults could easily obtain the governmental unemployment subsidy and also have more opportunities for petty jobs.

As the original typology was built without paying attention to the livelihoods trajectories of the families, no distinctions had been drawn between these former farmers and the other rural unemployed poor. The distinction became clear once it was evident that for the families with an agricultural trajectory, the PCB had had a high positive impact, allowing them to recover much of their historical activity through goat purchase and improvement of their herds of goats by the technical assistance received. In addition, the resumption of the production activity occurred in a context of better prices for goats and cheese, as well as an increasing presence of tourists and buyers in the zone (many of them technicians of the new mining companies in the area). Most of the families have begun investing in housing, which can be also understood as a measure of accumulation. Articulated with the unemployment subsidies, the PCB has functioned as a "return to the field" programme.

Beyond the more material dimensions, issues of identity for these families were also found. Most of them have expressed their joy for returning to produce as (very) small farmers, improving their infrastructure for animals (yards, water trough) and also cultivate pastures and trees, small orchards, and so forth. For these actors, the PCB intervention reinforced and reshaped many of their goals, perceptions and values, making an original link with their former trajectory as small farmers.

5 | LIVELIHOOD RESEARCH AND INTERFACE ANALYSIS: SCALE AND RELEVANCE

The PCB assumed that with its development intervention strategy most of the rural people involved in the micro-projects could easily have access to the different resources required in the process of composing sustainable livelihoods. However, a narrow conception of those resources led to a disregard of the households' trajectories, thus boosting the possibility of a more limited impact for most of the non-farmers poor.

This was also exacerbated by the competition for technical assistance, where extension workers were diverted from paying greater attention to the less "professional farmers". Greater difficulties existed, then, for their articulation with the majority of the poor, who found difficult to access that service. It is in this sense that *access*, as the key issue in the conceptualization of livelihoods (De & Zoomers, 2005), was not just an issue affecting the use or acquisition of resources but also an issue associated with the beneficial exploitation of livelihood opportunities.

The constructed typology ended up fixing the different types in static categories, without delving deeply on settlers´ life trajectories and how their livelihoods actually depend on a very wide range of assets, that can be more natural resource related, or human resource related, or "social capital" related (Bebbington, 1999: p. 2031). This could be worked differently by the application of a social interface analysis to the evaluation of processes of external intervention. This type of analysis can render a better understanding of the experiential dimension of poverty and livelihood issues as well as issues of social heterogeneity and cultural diversity. Furthermore, it is in the production and reproduction of cultural practices where key inputs and outputs of livelihoods trajectories can be found and fostered.

Social interface analysis and livelihoods research was useful in this evaluation in order to undertake an holistic assessments of the development intervention, particularly by explicitly discussing the different stakeholders´ interests, both at the local level (as "beneficiaries", extension workers and front-line workers) as well as the regional or national level (planners and policy actors). A social interface analysis helps to not restrict the analysis of power processes to an understanding of how social constraints and access to resources shape social action, but also to explore the extent to which specific actors perceive themselves capable of maneuvering within given contexts or networks and develop strategies for doing so. A social interfaces analysis for sustainable livelihoods should have as its starting point the actors´ reality, one that should not be negated reducing actors to different types of "capitals" (natural, financial, social, etc.) (Arce, 2003: p. 204).

The evaluation of the PCB shows that it resulted clearly successful with small farmers as with former farmers. One possible recommendation could be that, in order to be completely successful, the PCB should focus firmly on (actual or former) farmers´ households, as they would have greater possibilities of taking advantage of its intervention strategy. But this would mean to reinforce the actual path of intervention: to successfully attend just few families in these communities, where less than 10% of the rural poor laborers households have an agrarian background, and less than 38% of the total population can be considered small farmers (salaried or not). In sum, the PCB intervention strategy successfully reached just a small part of the rural poor of these Andes communities, by working with ways of seeing the world that continue to crunch rural livelihoods into the category of agricultural and natural resource-based strategies (Bebbington, 1999: p. 2021).

The evaluation showed that livelihood research also should go beyond an individualistic understanding of livelihoods, which are socially generated and culturally defined. They emerge out of past actions, and decisions are made within specific historical and agro-ecological conditions, being constantly shaped by institutions and social arrangements (Scoones & Wolmer, 2002:p. 183).

The holistic nature of sustainable livelihood research lends to the identification of priority areas for policy intervention or improvement, although windows of opportunity for influencing policy may be transient, and will vary substantially from one setting to another (Farrington et al., 1999). Efforts to gather information on people's assets and aspirations are necessarily micro in orientation, although many factors that affect livelihoods have distinctly macro characteristics. A thorough evaluation of sustainable livelihoods seeks to understand what such policies are, why they operate well or poorly in

practice, and then to identify how the structures and processes through which they function can be improved (Farrington et al., 1999).

Livelihood evaluation implies a change in the stress from the one-time evaluation of *project outputs* (management or project level evaluation) to *livelihood impact* evaluation (stakeholder or community level evaluation). Although it is correct to think that the use of the livelihoods perspectives could face some challenges for a proper sustainability assessment when the level of intervention moves from the 'simple' project level to the 'comprehensive' or 'strategic' one, the conceptual perspective of the interfaces analysis may lead to question if we have really learnt all that we can from "projects".

> *I will suggest that important lessons remain to be understood from them—about the relationship between policy and practice, the politics of partnership, the co-existence of different agendas and interests, about the production of success or failure, or about the effects of policy change on organizations. Furthermore, I will argue that these issues have a greater not a lesser significance with a move 'upstream' in international development that only increases the black box of unknowing between development policy and its effects* (Mosse, 2004:640-641)

In the next section, the possibilities of this approach of evaluation will be explored, examining its wider relevance for current debates on environmental policy evaluation, as well as with the institutionalization of sustainability evaluation systems.

6 | CONCLUSIONS: LINKING EVIDENCE FROM COMMUNITIES TO POLICY MAKERS

Evaluation is, among other things, a means of promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in social and organizational life. In that sense and more recently, evaluating public policies and programmes has become an increasingly important part of the policy process. One area where evaluation has come to the fore in recent years is environmental policy, which has called for evaluations of new approaches, regulations, and instruments. A clear progress has been made in sustainability evaluation, as the number of tools, methodologies and processes for assessing sustainability is in the hundreds. In that sense, finding the appropriate assessment instrument is critical to match theory with practice, and to have successful outcomes in improving sustainability (Poveda & Lipsett, 2011).

While environmental problems tend to be very complex, that complexity is further increased when the complex human, social, technical and economic interactions involved are taken into account. Together with that, environmental problems are closely related to equity, since the consequences tend to be very unequally distributed. These characteristics call for an evaluation model that pays attention to the intrinsic complexities of sustainable development interventions.

While one pressing question is how to evaluate programs that claim "sustainable development" as an explicit goal, discussions linked to

sustainability occupy almost all social spaces, yet there is not much research that makes the concept operative, and most discussions remain theoretical. Thus the proposal to move the debate from theory to practice (Reed & Dougill, 2003), as an answer to the growing demand for a better understanding of what works and why in the environmental sector. At the same time, the joint consideration of the intertwined social and ecological processes acting both in local and global scenarios presents considerable methodological difficulties (Folke et al., 2005).

In order of "scaling up" the field of evaluation associated with the interface analysis and the livelihood perspective, investment in a learning process within the intervention at the project level is key in its the transition to the strategic one (policy, plans, and programs) (Thomas-Slayter & Sodikoff, 2003). Although apparently limited in scope, an evaluation informed by a social interfaces approach that emphasizes the detailed analysis of the social practices of situated actors, can provide new insights into the nature of local governance. For instance, it can illustrate that much of the governance normative approach is naïve in assuming that bottom-up rural development will necessarily lead to more extensive and more equal local participation that will empower and build the capacities of all those living in rural communities (Rodríguez-Bilella, 2007).

Livelihoods research has usefully pointed to the different assets, both material and social (that is, tangible and intangible), that affect the strategies which people adopt. These assets have to be understood as vehicles for instrumental action (making a living), hermeneutic action (making living meaningful) and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living) (Bebbington, 1999: p. 2022). Although some of these assets or "capitals"—like the social, political and cultural ones—are not easy to (or should not) be quantified, their role is certainly important in understanding and evaluating development interventions.

An interface perspective in livelihood studies can foster more nuanced evaluation of development interventions by emphasizing human agency and the room to maneuver that can exist within otherwise constraining institutions and structures. It can also stress that before searching for policy solutions, we need an understanding of the social processes through which policy intervention enters the life world of the individuals and groups affected and thus come to form part of the resources and constraints of the social strategies they develop (Long and van der Ploeg 1994). It will also encourage the trend towards including extra-local and meso or macro contextual relations in the analysis, and boost the applicability of the concept to the analysis of issues of local sustainable development in the framework of globalization (De & Zoomers, 2003: p. 353). In that way, it could help to strengthen the field of sustainable evaluation, where many evaluations that attempted to uncover the human causes of environmental degradation failed in simplistic and deterministic analysis, giving insufficient attention to the way in which people act as conscious agents to intervene in the world around them (Jones, 1999).

The environmental sector has not yet embraced an evaluation culture, so evaluations are still generally not public, unknown, and/or unused. Evaluation culture can be defined as the way of how evaluation is considered by key stakeholders in a particular context. It is also

a process of reality construction that allows these stakeholders to see and understand particular events, actions, objects or situations linked with evaluation in distinctive ways. While there are several factors that influence the development of an evaluation culture (Haarich, 2005; Toulemonde, 2000), the institutionalization of evaluation is usually identified as a critical one. Institutionalization is therefore a "routinization" of the action—expected if not required—to assess and can be measured in terms of its actual practice in the politico - administrative and wider, networks of public action (Varone & Jacob, 2004).

Although the existing mechanisms for evaluation offer useful alternatives for academics and practitioners, and the technical soundness of assessment is a cornerstone of credibility, the institutionalization of evaluation systems mainly requires decision-makers to understand and use the information produced, making evaluation part of a structured and well-established system (UNDP, 2009). The trend towards the institutionalization of evaluation has been seen as a formalization process based on lessons learned from practice. Boyle et al. (1999, p. 11) noted that the institutionalization of evaluation in public administration 'needs a number of years of sustained intervention … to arrive at a position where evaluation practice is a formal, recognized, and utilized part of the decision-making process of government and public organizations'.

The achievement of economic, social, environmental, intra and inter-generational goals of sustainable development demands an effective social order (governance) and coordinated actions at various levels (individual, organizational, community, regional, national, transnational) (Jamieson, 1998). However, the effective forms of governance of sustainable development are rarely universal and there is a big variation among different countries, regions, subsectors and so forth. A holistic understanding that the essence of sustainable development lies precisely at the interfaces and trade-offs between the often-conflicting objectives of economic and social development, and environmental protection is required (Lehtonen, 2004). It is the groundwork at the local level, which allows to link evidence from households and communities to policy makers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

[1] For a review describing the Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches of 15 different agencies (UNDP, FAO, Oxfam, Khanya, CARE, etc.) see Husseim (2002).

[2] A more extended discussion of the case study can be read in Rodríguez-Bilella and Tapella (2008).

[3] The study included a socio-economic household survey to a sample of 75% of the population of the four communities; a participatory rural appraisal workshop; and several open-interviews to different people of the communities. The main variables used to define the different livelihood strategies and type of settlers were applied to the household as a whole, and no particular consideration was given to different members role.

REFERENCES

Allison, E. H. (2003). Potential applications of a 'Sustainable livelihoods Approach' to management and policy development for European inshore fisheries. In P. Hart & M. Johnson (Eds.), Who owns the sea (pp. 53–99). Tjärnö.

Appendini, K., & Nuijten, M. (2002). The role of institutions in local contexts. CEPAL Review, 76, 69–86.

Arce, A. (2003). Value contestations in development interventions: Community development and sustainable livelihoods approach. Community Development Journal, 38, 199–212.

Arce, A., & Long, N. (2007). Forging a new antrhopology of development: Common ground and contentious issues. In T. Bierschenk, G. Blundo, Y. Jaffreé, & M. Tidjani Alou (Eds.), Une anthropologie entre rigueur et engagement: Essais autour de l'oeuvre de Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. Apad-Karthala.

Bebbington, A. (1999). Capitals and capabilities: A framework for analyzing peasant viability, rural livelihoods and poverty. World Development, 27, 2021–2044.

Bertaux, D. (1981). Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences. Sage Publications.

Biggs, S., & Matsaert, H. (1999). An actor-oriented approach for strengthening research and development capabilities in natural resource systems. Public Administration and Development, 19, 231–262.

Blumer, H. (1969). Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and methods. University of California Press.

Boyle, R., Lemaire, D., & Rist, R. C. (1999). Introduction. In R. Boyle & D. Lemaire (Eds.), Building effective evaluation capacity: Lessons from practice (pp. 1–22). Transaction Publishers.

Cannon, T., Twigg, J., & Rowell, J. (2003). Social vulnerability, sustainable livelihoods and disasters. DFID.

Chambers, R. (1994). Participatory rural appraisal (PRA): Challenges, potentials and paradigm. World Development, 22(10), 1437–1454.

Conway, G. R. (1987). The properties of agroecosystems. Agricultural Systems, 24, 95–117.

De Haan, L. (2000). Globalization, localization and sustainable livelihood. Sociologia Ruralis, 40, 339–365.

De Haan L. (2008). Livelihoods and globalization. Paper read at the international conference on research for development, Bern, Switzerland

De Haan, L., & Zoomers, A. (2003). Development geography at the crossroads of livelihood and globalisation. TESG Journal of Economic and Social Geography, 94, 350–362.

De Haan, L., & Zoomers, A. (2005). Exploring the frontier of livelihoods research. Development and Change, 36, 27–47.

de Vries, P. (2001). Governance and the construction of accountabilities and moralities in the Atlantic zone of Costa Rica: A case study of an examplary extensionist. In G. Verschoor & P. Hebinck (Eds.), Resonances and dissonances in development: Actors, networks and cultural repertoires. Royal Van Gorcum.

Ellis, F. (2000). Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries. Oxford University Press.

Farrington, J., Carney, D., Ashley, C., & Turton, C. (1999). Sustainable livelihoods in practice: Early applications of concepts in rural areas. Overseas Development Institute.

Fetterman, D. M., Kaftarian, S. J., & Wandersman, A. (Eds.). (1996). Empowerment evaluation: Knowledge and tools for self-assessment and accountability. Sage Publications.

Folke, C. T., Olsson, H. P., & Norberg, J. (2005). Adaptive governance of social-ecological systems. Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 30, 441–473. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.30.050504.144511

Goodwin M. (2003). Rural governance: A review of relevant literature. Paper read at the conference 'ESRC, countryside agency and DEFRA'. London

Haarich, S. N. (2005). Diferentes sistemas de evaluación de las políticas públicas en Europa: España, Alemania y los países del Este. *Revista Española de Control Externo*, 7(20), 61–87.

Hediger, W. (2006). Weak and strong sustainability, environmental conservation and economic growth. *Natural Resource Modeling*, 19, 359–394.

Herbert-Cheshire, L. (2000). Contemporary strategies for rural community development in Australia: A governmentality perspective. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16, 203–215.

Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Participation: From tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*. Zed Books.

Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 4, 1–23.

Husseim, K. (2002). *Livelihoods approaches compared: A multi-agency review of current practice*. DFID.

Jacobs, M. (1999). Sustainable development as a contested concept. In A. Dobson (Ed.), *Fairness andFuturity:Essays on environmental sustainability and social justice*. Oxford University Press.

Jamieson, D. (1998). Sustainability and beyond. *Ecological Economics*, 24, 183–192.

Jones, S. (1999). From meta-narratives to flexible frameworks: An actor level analyisis of land degradation in Highland Tanzania. *Global Environmental Change*, 9, 211–219.

Lehtonen, M. (2004). The environmental-social interface of sustainable development: Capabilities, social capital, institutions. *Ecological Economics*, 49, 199–214.

Little, J. (2001). New rural governance? *Progress in Human Geography*, 25, 97–102.

Liu, J., Dietz, T., Carpenter, S. R., Folke, C., Alberti, M., Redman, C. L., Schneider, S. H., Ostrom, E., Pell, A. N., Lubchenco, J., & Taylor, W. W. (2007). Coupled human and natural systems. *Ambio: A Journal of the Human Environment*, 36, 639–649.

Loevinsohn, M., & Gillespie, S. (2003). *HIV/AIDS, food security and rural livelihoods: Understanding and responding* (p. 157). IFPRI.

Long, N. (2001). *Development sociology: Actor perspectives*. Routledge.

Long, N., & Roberts, B. (1984). *Miners, peasants, and entrepreneurs*. Cambridge University Press.

Long, N., & van der Ploeg, J. D. (1994). Heterogeneity, actor, and structure: towards a reconstitution of the concept of structure. In D. Booth (Ed.), *Rethinking social development*. Longman Scientific and Technical.

Longley, C., & Maxwell, D. (2003). *Livelihoods, chronic conflict and humanitarian response: A synthesis of current practice*. Overseas Development Institute.

Mertens, D. M. (2009). *Transformative research and evaluation: The intersection of applied social research and program evaluation*. Guilford Press.

Mosse, D. (2004). Is good policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the ethnography of aid policy and practice. *Development and Change*, 35, 639–671.

Murdoch, J. (1997). The shifting territory of government: Some insights from the Rural White Paper. *Area*, 29, 109–118.

Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. The Guilford Press.

Poveda, C. A., & Lipsett, M. (2011). A review of sustainability assessment and sustainability/environmental rating systems and credit weighting tools. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 4(6), 36–55. https://doi.org/10.5539/jsd.v4n6p36

Reed M. S., & Dougill A. J. (2003). Facilitating grass-roots sustainable development through sustainability indicators: A Kalahari case study. In: *Proceedings of Frontiers 2: European Applications in Ecological Economics*. Tenerife, Canary Islands. pp: 1–19.

Rodríguez-Bilella, P. (2007). Governance, participation and empowerment: A non-prescriptive approach. In L. Cheshire, V. Higgins, & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *Rural governance: International perspectives*. Routledge.

Rodríguez-Bilella, P., & Tapella, E. (2008). Sustainable development in the context of new ruralities. The case of the biodiversity conservation project in Argentina. In H. Tiessen & J. W. Stewart (Eds.), *Applying ecological knowledge to land use decisions*. SCOPE-IAI-IICA.

Rose, N. (1996). Governing advanced liberal democracies. In A. Barry, T. Osborne, & N. Rose (Eds.), *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neoliberalism and rationalities of government*. UCL Press.

Scoones, I. (2009). Livelihoods perspectives and rural development. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, 171–196.

Scoones, I., & Wolmer, W. (2002). *Pathways of change in Africa: Crops, livestock and livelihoods in Mali, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe*. James Currey.

Scott, J. (1991). *Social network analysis*. Sage.

Tacoli, C. (1998). *Rural–urban linkages and sustainable rural livelihoods*. DFID.

Tapella, E., & Rodríguez-Bilella, P. (2008). *Assessing development interventions: Actor oriented and livelihood approaches*. Federico Caffè Centre.

Thomas-Slayter, B., & Sodikoff, G. (2003). Sustainable investments: women's contributions to natural resource management projects in Africa. In J. Rowlands (Ed.), *Development methods and approaches: Critical reflections*. Oxfam.

Toulemonde J. (2000). Evaluation culture(s) in Europe: Differences and convergence between National Practices *Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung* 3/2000:350-357. UNDP.

UNDP (2009). Proceedings. In: *International conference on National Evaluation Capacities*. UNDP, New York, p. 184.

Varone, F., & Jacob, S. (2004). Institutionnalisation de l'évaluation et Nouvelle Gestion Publique: un état des lieux comparatif. *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, 1(2), 271–292.

Webler T. (2008). Re-coupling human and natural systems for rural development and biodiversity conservation: A case study from southern India. Paper read at the 'Conference on Environmental Governance and Democracy. Yale University.

Yin, R. K. (1989). *Case study research*. Sage Publications.