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## Brief No 12 · Rural Livelihood Systems

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### 1. Introduction

Brief No 13 presents the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF). This Note emphasises the power of a recent adaptation of the SLF that enables analysis and explanation of decision making by individuals and households, for example on how assets between household members are allocated, or what leads individuals or households to pursue a specific livelihood strategy.

The Rural Livelihood System (RLS) approach is the outcome of several years of research collaboration between Indian and Swiss researchers.<sup>1</sup> It was originally developed to enable a better understanding of people's perception of the meaning of sustainable natural resource management. It became evident that farming communities in different regions had developed highly culture- and location-specific perceptions of sustainable natural resource management. But it also became clear that management of natural resources represents just one, albeit important, element of a much wider concern of farm communities for sustainable livelihoods. One important lesson of the RLS research project was thus to shift the emphasis of sustainability away from a single focus, such as working towards sustainable soil or water management, to a much more holistic – and complex – exploration of sustainability encompassing the entire livelihood of rural land users (Baumgartner and Högger, 2004).

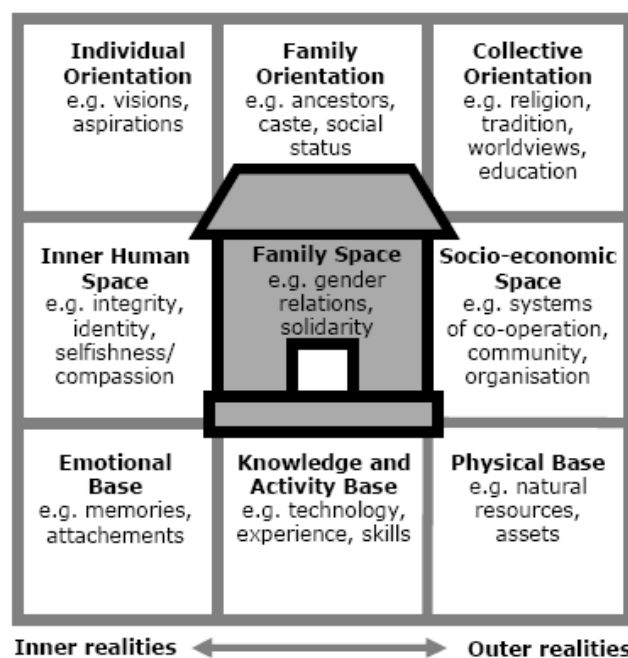
When researchers started to inquire about the local meaning of sustainability, they realised that farmers in Gujarat, India, captured their notion of a sustainable livelihood with "keeping the house(-hold) going". This illustrates concerns for sustainable livelihoods, which includes sources of income but calls for a broader understanding of the factors, forces and efforts that influence whether or not a livelihood is sustainable.

<sup>1</sup> Research partners involved ISEC – Institute for Social and Economic Change (Bangalore, Karnataka); IRMA – Institute for Rural Management (Anand, Gujarat), SAMPARC, a Bangalore based NGO and the NADEL (Postgraduate Studies on Development at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, ETH Zurich).

### 2. Elements of a RLS framework

To capture the holistic understanding of sustainability, the RLS researchers used a combination of a (rural) house as a metaphor for livelihoods and the nine-squared mandala as a symbol of wholeness and a centred universe (Figure 1). The mandala describes both material and non-material realities and symbolises connections between the micro and the macro cosmos.

Figure 1: The RLS Mandala as a heuristic tool for analysing livelihoods



(Source: NADEL, 2007)

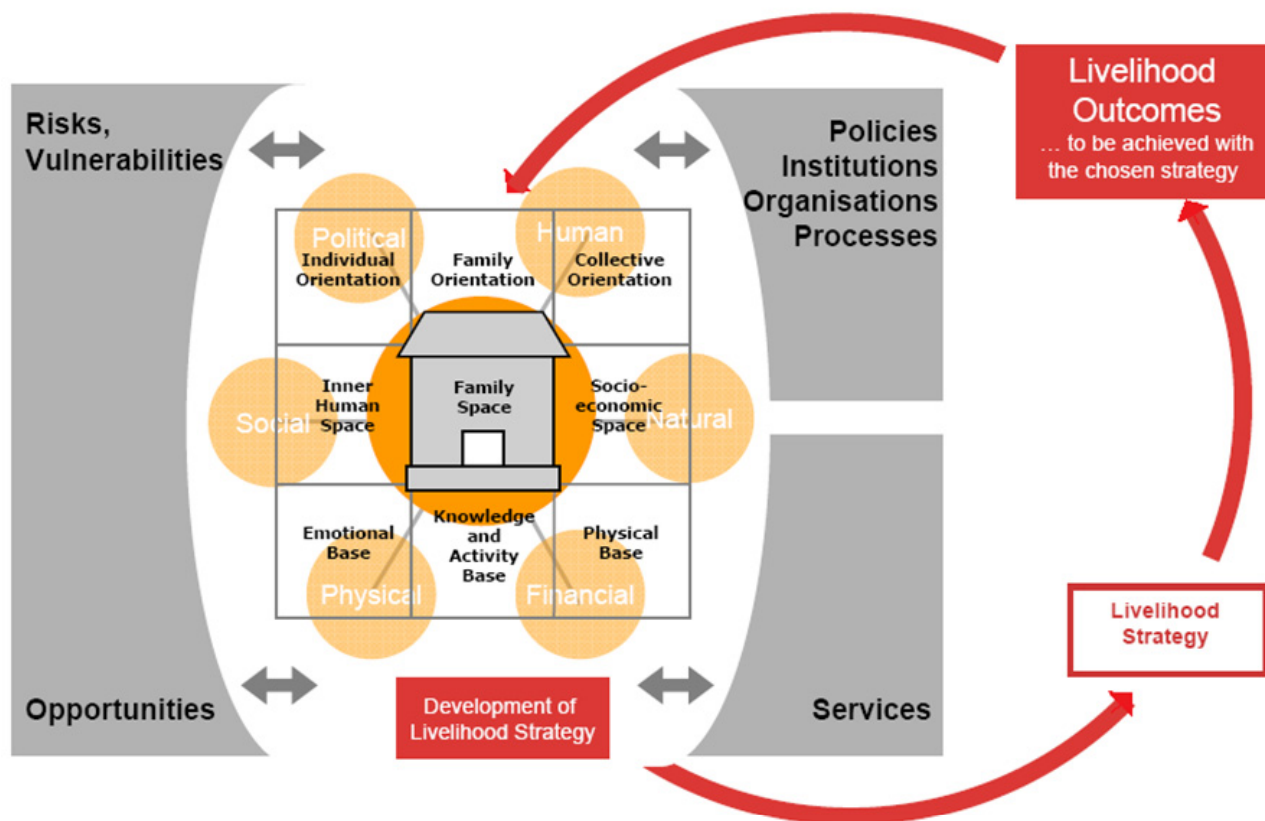
The house in the centre of the nine-squared mandala represents the household or family itself. The mandala is composed of a foundation – representing the material and non-material **resource base** of a livelihood. The walls separate the three 'spaces' – inner human space, family space and socioeconomic space. Finally, the roof represents three **orientations** of a livelihood, which is

composed of the individual orientation, the family orientation and the collective orientation.

The RLS offers a heuristic tool or a framework not only for exploring and understanding the material aspects of livelihood strategies, but also to draw our attention to

immaterial aspects, such as worldviews, spiritual orientations and other reasoning that guides people in developing livelihood strategies to achieve livelihood outcomes. It draws specific attention to the decision-making process where strategies evolve.

**Figure 2: Framework for assessing core and context of livelihood systems**



(Source: NADEL, 2007)

To capture the diverse factors and forces influencing individuals or households in pursuing their livelihood strategies, the RLS framework replaces the portfolio of livelihood assets – financial, physical, natural, social, human and political – which forms the core in the more traditional SLF, with the nine-squared mandala. It combines this with the other elements constituting the SLF: the risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities on the one hand, and the services and policies, institutions, organisations and processes on the other hand (see Figure 2 and Briefing Note 13).

The RLS approach to livelihoods encompasses the same core principles as the SLF developed first by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID):

- People are at the centre of development.
- Individuals and households are embedded in a specific context made up of exposure to risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities, to services and to policies, institutions, organisations, processes and structures (PIOPS) (see Figure 2).
- It focuses on people's strengths rather than on their needs. People are seen as having agency, assets

and capabilities and using them to pursue their own livelihood goals.

- It is holistic and supports multi-level analysis, and therefore programming, which recognises the multiple influences on people and that people pursue multiple strategies to secure their livelihood, resulting in highly diverse livelihood outcomes. As such, it helps us also to establish the links between the macro-level policy environment and micro-level realities.
- A holistic analysis of poverty does not imply a similarly holistic programming of development interventions.

The RLS approach puts great emphasis on gender relations, especially within a household. Increasingly, households are considered as arenas wherein different members have different, possibly conflicting, preferences. Thus, negotiations on how to allocate assets, for example, become necessary (Premchander and Menon, 2006). Negotiation power is not equally distributed among household members; men and women, older and younger members have different positions and roles within a household and power is differently distributed. Understanding how a household

allocates its assets or embarks on specific livelihood activities thus necessitates an understanding of such negotiations or decision-making processes. The RLS helps with this by drawing attention to different – and at times conflicting – orientations. However, similar to the SLF, it lacks a clear reference to power relations, which are very often crucial in driving and maintaining poverty.

### 3. What does the RLS add to the SLF

Central to the RLS is its understanding that decision making in view of pursuing a specific livelihood strategy is influenced by all nine squares of the mandala or, in other words, by 'inner' and 'outer' realities (Figure 1). Development interventions supporting specific livelihood outcomes will influence all nine squares. Interventions towards improving the knowledge base, for example by supporting households to adopt new income-generating activities, can lead to changing power relations within a household, changing social position of households within a socioeconomic collective or changing individual aspirations. On the other hand, certain interventions might not lead to the desired outcome because of social norms rooted in the collective orientation.

#### **Box 1: One reason why female-headed households in Ethiopia are often poorer than male-headed**

Preparing land with an ox-drawn plough is the norm in many parts of the Ethiopian Highlands. Because of religious taboos, women are not allowed to plough. Even if a female-headed household owns its own oxen, male family members, relatives or neighbours have to do the ploughing. If there are no male family members in the household or relatives who would do the work for free, women are forced to enter into disadvantageous sharecropping arrangements, whereby they have to surrender up to 50% of the yield. The taboo prohibiting women from ploughing land is dictated by religious beliefs and worldviews.

If we asked only the 'what' question, we would end up with the most obvious intervention – providing women with a productive asset. This, however, would not help much, unless socio-cultural norms were also addressed. To understand these, we would have to ask why women are not allowed to plough. And finally, by asking how this could be changed so that women can use their assets more productively, we would propose working with women and men to empower them so that they can question discriminating rules. This might be a more successful, albeit long-term, intervention.

The RLS mandala offers a heuristic tool for exploring and understanding the worldviews and reasoning that guide people in developing livelihood strategies to achieve livelihood outcomes. It also assists in deciding between intervention options, which is likely to be assisted by a greater awareness and understanding of how groups' and individuals' worldviews and aspirations guide livelihood choices and related decisions (Box 1).

The SLF, in contrast, is conceptually strong in analysing the different capitals or assets (natural, physical,

financial, social, human and political) of a household and the embeddedness of an individual or a household in a wider economic and socio-political context. By exploring a portfolio of assets and understanding occupational diversification or cropping patterns, we mainly capture the 'outer realities' of a livelihood. When we move from asking '*what*' to inquiring '*why*' and '*how*', we approach elements of 'inner realities' of livelihoods. These are intangible and encompass individual and collective values and orientations such as people's aspirations for integrity, family orientation, religion or worldviews.

### 4. Conclusion

Understanding life-worlds, worldviews, (inner) perspectives and visions of individuals and households helps to enable a better understanding of their decision-making process that leads them to prefer certain livelihood strategies over others. It also helps to explain why households are forced to engage in certain livelihoods or unfavourable relationships with patrons or other powerful actors in the society. The targeting of development interventions can be improved by better understanding the inner and outer factors and forces that influence whether or not a livelihood is sustainable.

The RLS framework supports a holistic analysis of a poverty context. This does not, however, imply that interventions for poverty reduction must be similarly holistic. Using the RLS framework can provide the platform for selecting the most appropriate entry point for poverty reduction (NADEL, 2007):

1. Promoting and implementing poverty-oriented policies and pro-poor institutional change (e.g. pro-poor agricultural growth);
2. Improving services and access to services for the poor (e.g. legal advice, social protection measures);
3. Improving coping capacities of poor people by enhancing their capabilities (e.g. support poor people to develop household strategies such as income diversification);
4. Facilitating access to existing opportunities (e.g. for increasing income or enhancing status);
5. Reducing vulnerability and exposure to risks (e.g. by preventing or mitigating risks and reducing threats).

#### References:

- Baumgartner R. und R. Högger (eds) (2004) *In Search of Sustainable Livelihood, Managing Resources and Change*. New Delhi: Sage; London: Thousand Oaks.
- Premchander, S. and R. Menon (2006) 'Engendering Development: Challenges and Opportunities for Mainstreaming Gender in Development Policy'. In: Premchander, S. and C. Mueller (eds) *Gender and Sustainable Development: Case Studies from the NCCR North-South*. Perspectives of the Swiss NCCR North-South, University of Bern. Vol. 2. Bern: Geographica Bernensia.
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