

RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

THE LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK

In this article, the authors provide examples of how the livelihoods framework has been used in different ways to meet various objectives, and evaluate its use in these contexts.

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Detailed use of the livelihoods framework

Nouralla Ahmed used the livelihoods framework to guide data collection and analysis by a team of investigators in six villages in Sudan. For the data collection, a large range of participatory tools and methods were used. The research team used a different set of tools for each aspect of the livelihoods framework. For example, to chart the vulnerability context, time series, resource mapping and group discussions were used; for natural capital, resource maps and a transect walk were used. Each aspect of the livelihoods framework is detailed through topics and questions for discussion. An example on the methods for collection of data on human capital:

“To get data on this part starts with presenting experiences of the people and their achievements, the skills they have and those that are not present in the village. [...] In the same line, this is followed by process analysis for planning and for the implantation of building the village services. Steps taken in building a service, persons responsible, related costs, financial arrangements and constraints to be faced during different stages are identified. This also led to discussion on the level of community participation in building the services and in the benefits from the services and degree of exclusion from benefits by gender, age and other social groups.”

Such data gathering methods deliver a wealth of information, which needs to be structured for analysis and presentation. Nouralla's analysis documents were structured according to the components of the livelihoods framework.

For example, energy hardware was described under the physical assets component of the livelihoods framework, but when the access to energy services or the impacts of energy were considered, this involved several aspects of the livelihoods framework. Nouralla found that the description of an energy service may be spread over several boxes in the framework if an energy service can be delivered by different forms of energy. “[At] the household level, cooking by LPG means using physical capital no doubt, but when using animal dung, fuelwood or crop residues to cook are they physical or natural capital?” Nouralla concludes: “... analysis of energy within the framework has some difficulties and some of its energy components need redefining if they are to be placed correctly and without confusion.”

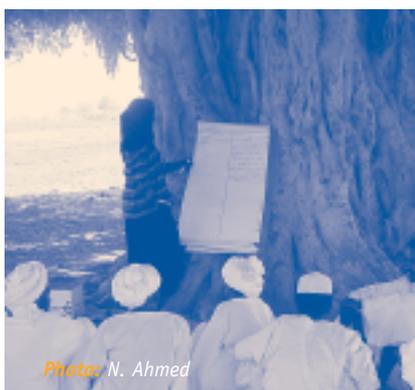


Photo: N. Ahmed

Nouralla notes that the framework does provide important insights into social impacts that would be overlooked using ‘business as normal’ project evaluation criteria such as efficient use of project resources and sustainable operation of technology. Project evaluation may

become more complex when using the livelihoods framework, as is shown in example below:

“In El Ga’a, the solar evaporator proved to be economically and environmentally a sound intervention. Fuelwood is no longer used, women are freed from tedious work, they are no longer working in unhealthy conditions and the cost of production is significantly reduced. But, women are also no longer controlling the production process; there are no direct financial gains for them and wage labour for them is no longer available. The process has become a man’s business. That makes it also difficult to objectively evaluate the livelihoods outcome. Is the achieved outcome from this intervention a positive or a negative one when the positive and negative outcomes cannot be directly weighted and compared?”

Although such explicit issues may complicate life for project implementation, this example shows that the livelihoods framework does provide a more complete insight into issues from the perspective of local people, including people whose interests might otherwise have remained invisible. Using the livelihoods framework forces researchers and project implementers to broaden their mindset and to make conscious rather than unconscious decisions.

Focused use of the livelihoods framework

Annemarije Kooijman also found that using the livelihoods framework broadened the scope of interest in her research. Initial data gathering for her research on the role of energy in poverty reduction through small enterprises was performed in sixteen villages and three towns in Uttaranchal, India in 2004. Because she wanted to contrast the situations of entrepreneurs in a number of different localities, the amount of data that could be gathered at each location was limited, and a strict selection of questions was necessary. Her experience was that “using the livelihoods framework opened my mind to aspects that I might not have thought of before, and so it initially led to more questions. Based on literature, I then made a preselection of topics essential for my research before starting to gather data. For the further refinement, I just narrowed down as I went along during

the fieldwork - as I observed that certain aspects were less influential than others (for instance, caste was not a major issue in the village communities I interviewed). Such an open and flexible approach was made possible through the use of semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The semi-structured interviews were based on a checklist of essential topics, and developed by asking triggering questions rather than closed questions. These open questions allowed respondents to give information according to their own priorities, and it also sometimes led to new topics that I then included in my checklist for successive interviews.”

In this research, the livelihoods framework is used primarily to investigate the perspective of entrepreneurs. Data gathering was therefore focused on the livelihoods assets relevant to entrepreneurs such as access to finance (financial assets) and knowledge of the market (human assets), and changes in these assets related to energy services. At the community level, a livelihoods analysis was performed somewhat superficially to gain insights into the position of the entrepreneur in the community.

For the analysis of the gathered data, Annemarije chose to structure her information using the livelihoods framework on two levels. On the first level, the livelihoods framework is used to describe the factors that have a major influence on the livelihoods of the communities of the interviewed entrepreneurs. On the second level, the framework is used to find causalities and linkages between livelihood outcomes of individual entrepreneurs and their livelihood assets, in particular to acquire insights into energy choices.

The above two different uses of the livelihoods framework show that one should not see the framework as something inflexible but as a guide that can be adjusted to reflect one's circumstances. This is certainly the view of Joy Clancy, based on her experiences with the livelihoods framework for a study of the role of energy in urban livelihoods. The study (funded by DFID KaR) was designed with three partner NGOs from the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil who had no previous experience of the liveli-

hoods framework. The framework was first used to develop the research proposal, and to determine which elements of the energy-poverty-gender nexus within each component of the framework should be addressed, along with appropriate data gathering analysis tools. However, the framework still had to be translated into a research protocol. “We worked on this in a participatory workshop. It soon became clear that we couldn't look at everything - so we decided to focus on enterprises”.

Four hypotheses were selected to test, two of which were strongly related to the assets components of the framework, and two to the livelihoods context. Indicators for the hypotheses were selected together with the appropriate data gathering and analytical tools. “Once this had been done, we cross-checked each indicator with the framework components, to ensure that all aspects had been incorporated in our research. I am certain without the livelihoods framework we would have forgotten about what was happening in the broader urban context which is an important factor in access to energy services. We would probably have focused on the technical aspects of access and neglected the political issues, such as privatisation and commercialisation. We would not have obtained such a holistic picture of the forces influencing energy in urban livelihoods”.

Concluding Remarks

The use of livelihoods in a qualitative research framework creates a depth of understanding that is new to the energy, enterprise and poverty linkages field of research. Especially for people who do not have training in the social sciences, the livelihoods framework is useful as it is easy to understand, and it forces the researcher to keep an open mind to aspects of life that are essential, but that are difficult to measure or grasp in a few simple predefined statements. However, it is up to the researcher or project developer to decide how broadly or narrowly to interpret the framework, and optimise use of the resources available for data gathering and analysis, so that all issues of relevance to the researcher are explained while taking into account the local perspective. In this, the researcher can be guided by the livelihoods framework.

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Photos: A. Kooijman