

structures and processes through which sustainable livelihoods are achieved, a description of the relationships between variables and outcomes is somewhat limiting. For this reason, the framework outlined in Figure 1 has given particular emphasis to the study of institutions and organisations.

A broad definition of institutions, derived from the sociological and anthropological literature is taken here. This sees institutions as ‘regularised practices (or patterns of behaviour) structured by rules and norms of society which have persistent and widespread use’ (following Giddens 1979). Institutions may thus be both formal and informal, often fluid and ambiguous, and usually subject to multiple interpretations by different actors. Power relations are embedded within institutional forms, making contestation over institutional practices, rules and norms always important. Institutions are also dynamic, continually being shaped and reshaped over time. They are thus part of a process of social negotiation, rather than fixed ‘objects’ or ‘bounded social systems’. Institutions (in North’s terms the ‘rules of the game’) therefore are distinguished from organisations (the players) (North 1990), the interplay of both being important in the framework (Figure 1). According to Davies (1997: 24):

“institutions are the social cement which link stakeholders to access to capital of different kinds to the means of exercising power and so define the gateways through which they pass on the route to positive or negative [livelihood] adaptation”

So what?, you may ask. Why do institutions really matter for the policy and practice of development for sustainable livelihoods? A number of inter-related reasons can be forwarded:

- Understanding institutional processes allows the identification of restrictions/barriers and opportunities (or ‘gateways’) to sustainable livelihoods. Since formal and informal institutions (ranging from tenure regimes to labour sharing systems to market networks or credit arrangements) mediate access to livelihood resources and in turn affect the composition of portfolios of livelihood strategies, an understanding of institutions and organisations is therefore key to designing interventions which improve sustainable livelihood outcomes.
- An institutional approach sheds light on the social processes which underlie livelihood sustainability. Achieving sustainable livelihoods is not a deterministic affair; contestations, negotiations and trade-offs are evident at every turn. An insight into social relationships, their institutional forms (both formal and informal) and the power dynamics embedded in these, is therefore vital. Interventions in support of sustainable livelihoods therefore must be attuned to such complexity, if suitable institutional entry points are to be found.
- An approach which emphasises both formal and informal institutions and underlying rules and norms suggests a complex and ‘messy’ institutional matrix mediating the processes of livelihood change (cf. Leach et al 1997; Cousins 1997). For example, an analysis of an institutional matrix would look at which combinations of the wide range of informal and formal institutions and organisations operating at different levels – from within the household to the national (sometimes

international) level – particularly influence different people’s abilities to pursue combinations of different livelihood strategies, with what results for sustainable livelihood outcomes. Describing such an institutional matrix in any setting is, not surprisingly, far from an easy task. However, the recognition of such complexity allows scope for innovation in planned interventions at different levels, going beyond the conventional support for formal organisations or institutional mechanisms to look at combinations of formal and informal approaches.

the full range of differentiated and nuanced quantitative and qualitative information is to be amassed for the analysis, even a major field research effort may be insufficient to uncover all aspects of sustainable livelihoods in a given site.

But such exhaustive analysis may not be appropriate in all cases. The key for any intervention in support of sustainable livelihoods is to identify the institutional matrix which determines the major trade-offs (between, for example, types of ‘capital’, livelihood strategies and sustainable livelihood outcomes) for different groups of people and across a variety of sites and scales and so the variety of livelihood pathways available. In work of this sort the principle of ‘optimal ignorance’ must always be applied, seeking out only what is necessary to know in order for informed action to proceed. The framework discussed in this paper may help in such an investigation by acting as a simple checklist of issues to explore, prompting investigators to pursue key connections and linkages between the various elements. While it offers no predictive power, it hopefully encourages the right sort of questions to be asked.

The type of methods which may be used to answer such questions will necessarily be varied, and best used in combination. The range of conventional survey tools potentially can combine with appropriate qualitative methodologies and participatory rural appraisal techniques to form a ‘hybrid’ methodological the framework¹⁵. With such basic information on key trade-offs collected in a systematic and rigorous manner, an iterative and more participatory planning process may proceed, where different options can be discussed and intervention choices negotiated among different stakeholders (see below).