

## **Gross National Happiness: A New Paradigm**

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### **Abstract**

*With the criticisms for top-down philosophy, development policies are now claimed to be culturally sensitive, people centered, flexible, dynamic and multi-sectoral. Today, people's values, customs, beliefs and traditional knowledge systems collectively named as 'culture' is increasingly recognised as significant, and highly prioritised as vital sources, particularly for grassroots development. The Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) emerged in the 1990s as an alternative path to address grassroots problems, giving more opportunities to centralise people, their values and capabilities. The approach was declared as a holistic and comprehensive framework to address poverty and wellbeing, both in rural and urban contexts. But, it has also been criticised widely due to the lack of cultural and historical consideration, market and gender relations, and asset measurements.*

*This paper is built upon one of those critiques. The paper inquires into the role of traditional culture in building sustainable livelihoods in rural context. The inadequate attention of cultural aspect in livelihood context is a serious concern, as people's values, customs, beliefs and traditional knowledge directly influence the choice of livelihood strategies. According to the present livelihood analyses, culture is an impediment for livelihood sustainability and refers to something that causes 'livelihood vulnerability'. As far as people are centered both in the development process and livelihood analysis, their values, customs, knowledge, traditions and beliefs, should also be at the centre. At the same time, culture should be a soft and permeable concept rather than deterministic and rigorous.*

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## **Introduction**

Our living world is rapidly transforming and globalisation has become an inevitable process. We all have become members of the 'global village'. We all share the global economy, global society, global political structure, global environment and global culture. Therefore, life has become "absolutely exciting" for many people as this 'global' process is not equally benefiting for all at each and every corner of this world. Development is defined and redefined as a Western process and also integrated with the Western mythology that distorts the imagination and vision of the majority of the people, through imposing 'global values, norms and simply the 'global culture'. To put it rather differently, all 'other' world views are devalued and dismissed as 'primitive', 'backward' and 'irrational', or 'native' (Tucker, 1999); traditional values, knowledge and customs have become irrelevant for human progress and therefore the development process has become a value-free phenomenon. The conceptual and theoretical heritage of Western tradition has disallowed us to inquire into the relationship between culture and development, as modernisation theorists taught us that "development is about eliminating traditional culture", defining development as the domain of the 'economic' guided by objective inquiry in which culture accrues no significant role (Hennayake, 2006).

Development as a practice and concept has been steeped in optimism. The defence of local cultural values and cultural diversity (see: Escobar, 2000; Esteva and Prakash, 1998; and UNESCO, 1972, 2001, and 2003) in development is centralised; a broad agenda is now being formulated to proclaim: "What is an appropriate or inappropriate culture in development context?" Going beyond the traditional criticisms, development is now shown to be a pervasive 'cultural discourse' with profound consequences of the production of social reality in the so-called Third World (Escobar, 2000). For example, as Tucker (1999) notices, development is not a "natural process", although it has been accorded such a status in the mythology of Western beliefs. It is a "set" of practices and beliefs that has been woven into the fabric of Western culture and is specific to it (Esteva and Prakash, 1998, Tucker, 1999). Therefore, development was – and continues

to be for most part – a top-down, ethnocentric and technocratic process treating people and cultures as abstract concepts. As (Escobar, 1995) notices, current development is not “a cultural process”; it is a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some “badly needed” goods to a “target” population (Escobar 1995). The dependency theory, as the first major Third World challenge to Europe-centred discourse (Tucker, 1999, p. 12) has also failed to address the cultural dimension of domination. This is a crucial omission as cultural diversity is central to any understanding of the relations of power and to any strategy of resistance or dependency reversal. Esteva and Prakash (1998) posit that, “as people of the outskirts, the periphery, the margins, they were forced to adopt the centres established by others” (1998, p.288). As Chambers elaborates further, the current development is a “movement along gradients from peripheral or last towards core of first, and through the spread of core condition into peripheries” (1998, p.9). Such a process legitimises the socio-economic security through simplification and rejection of others’ values and knowledge through the assimilation of Western rationality. The modernisation theory sees traditional cultures as something that modernisation acts upon usually by breaking and even destroying cultural traditions of Third World societies, including their ways of speaking, celebrating, their beliefs, techniques, art forms and values (Schech and Haggis, 2000; Escobar, 1997; Tucker, 1999). Hence, the processes of modernisation are placed in opposition to traditional culture (Schech and Haggis 2000, p.37). In development studies, culture has tended to be regarded as something of an ‘epiphenomenon’, or secondary in importance to the all important economic and political dimensions (Tucker, 1997 and Schech & Haggis, 2000). But, the economic and social transformation of the society is inseparable from the production and reproduction of meanings, symbols and knowledge that are cultural reproductions.

This paper is an attempt to testify for the values of traditional culture in relation to rural development and sustainability. In trying to understand and elaborate the importance and the rationality of traditional culture in the development process, this paper suggests the potentiality of traditional culture as a resource

for making livelihoods of rural people. Therefore, this paper recognises traditional culture in relation to livelihoods-building and livelihoods resilience based on the initial works of the authors' doctoral study. The paper recognises the complex intricacy of traditional culture in relation to building livelihoods assets (social capital, human capital, physical capital, natural capital and financial capital), livelihoods resilience (response to livelihoods vulnerability) and livelihoods sustainability (social, economic, institutional and environmental). The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) emerged in the late 1990s and is a holistic paradigm that focuses on people's needs, assets/resources, partnership, participation and sustainability. This approach has been seen as a remedy for many of the deficiencies encountered in the earlier 'top-down' development approaches and soon became popular among many of the development agencies and practitioners. However, the approach has also been criticised for the following reasons:

- people are invisible,
- explanations on how to analyse and measure capital assets are inadequate,
- recognition of socio-economic, historical and cultural factors is lacking,
- flexibility is insufficient,
- it is an ethnocentric notion and there are difficulties in translation,
- directions for alleviating poverty are poor, and,
- guidance on linking micro-macro levels and policy analysis is inadequate.

This paper addresses the importance of culture and historical factors in building rural livelihood systems, particularly emphasising the role of traditional culture in the livelihoods context. Cultural attributes have become an increasingly noteworthy new perspective of the development discourse, with a focus on local cultural values, norms, beliefs and knowledge systems. The conventional livelihoods analysis does not address the imperatives of cultural values adequately; instead it recognises culture as something which causes livelihoods vulnerability, or simply as a barrier for human progress.

Therefore, this paper specifically investigates traditional culture in a positive perspective in relation to the aforesaid functions in a rural livelihoods system.

### **What is the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA)?**

The Sustainable livelihoods approach has evolved from the changing perspectives on poverty, participation and sustainable development (Swift, 1989; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Moser, 1998; Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999; and DFID, 2000). The idea of sustainable livelihoods is a composite of the discussions on resource ownership, basic needs, and rural livelihood security (WCED, 1987) and by the late 1990s it had consolidated into an approach (Brocklesby and Fisher, 2003). As an approach SLA mainly focuses on the assets that poor people use and the strategies that they employ to making a living – rather than focusing on their needs (Farrington, 2002); the approach’s major concern is that which people have, rather than what they don’t have. As an analytical framework, it shows how sustainable livelihoods are achieved in different contexts, through access to a range of livelihood resources that are combined in the pursuit of different livelihood strategies (Scoones, 1998).

Livelihood is seen as a highly complex and all-encompassing concept which is not restricted to the ecological or to the economic or productive aspects of life (de Hann & Zoomer 2003). WCED (1987) for example, provides a detailed explanation based on the concept of Sustainable Livelihood Security. In this context, livelihood refers to “adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs...a household may be able to gain sustainable livelihood security in many ways-through ownership of land, livestock or trees; rights to grazing, fishing, hunting or gathering; through stable employment with adequate remuneration; or through varied repertoires of activities” (WCED, 1987 p. 2-5). Wallmann (1984, in deHann and Zoomers, 2005) articulates livelihoods in a descriptive way. According to Wallmann:

(L)ivelihood is never just a matter of searching shelter, money and food. It is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships and affirmation of personal significance ...and group identity. The tasks of meeting obligations, of security,

identity and status are crucial to livelihood as bread and shelter” (p.32).

But, this is not to say that livelihood is not a matter of material wellbeing, but rather that it also includes a non-material aspect of wellbeing as well. Bebbington (1999) for example, provides a holistic meaning of livelihood; a livelihood encompasses income, both cash and in kind, as well as the social institutions (kin, family, and village), gender relations, and property rights required to support and to sustain a given standard of living. A livelihood also includes access to and the benefits derived from social and public services provided by the state such as education, health services, roads, water supplies and so on (1999, p.2022). Therefore, the understanding of sustainable livelihoods is holistic and meaningful, when it meets social, economic, cultural and spiritual needs of all members of a community, human, non-human, present and future—and safeguards cultural and biological diversity.

### **Matter of culture?**

The wider role of cultural and historical contexts in livelihoods analysis has been questioned notably by Bebbington (1999) and other researchers including Cahn (2002), Glavovic et al, (2002), Adato and Dick (2002) and Muhia (2000). In the conventional livelihood approach culture is referred to mean various institutions, policies and transforming structures that shape and govern people’s accessibility to different types of livelihoods assets and livelihoods opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, culture is recognised as a humanly devised constraint and often a vulnerable fact that determines human interactions (North, 1993). The SL approach developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for example, places culture in the vulnerability context and implies culture as something which cause of livelihoods vulnerability. Carswell (2000) for example, has referred to caste as a part of culture to determine the livelihoods diversification

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<sup>1</sup> See Scoones (1998), Carney (1998), Carswell (1997), North (1993), UNDP et al. In livelihood context, institutions are described as a set of rules of the game of society which always determine people’s choices and resource accessibility (Moser 1999).

undertaking a study in Southern Ethiopia. As this study reveals people are unlikely to be potters, tanners and blacksmiths which are socially defined livelihood activities if they were not born into that particular caste group. In this case, Carswell refers to culture as a crucial determinant of livelihoods choices. (Hussein and Nelson, 1998) also discuss 'culture' in relation to livelihoods diversification in Mali, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia; in these cases diversification has been identified as a strategy for cultural expression and formation of a separate identity for the community. Ellis (2000) discusses the concept of culture in relation to social capital and subsumes the idea of "belief systems, class, caste and ethnicity and kin". These are stressed as essential components to be considered in attaining the future security of livelihoods at individual and household levels.

However, as with Bebbington (1999, 2000), Cahn (2000), and Glavovic et al (2002), I also found that culture receives a scant attention in those livelihood discussions. The limitation of cultural aspect in current livelihoods analysis is a serious issue, as the sustainable livelihood approach has been declared as a 'holistic' paradigm. It is straightforward that holistic is a combination of both material and non-material elements; it is a whole made up of interdependent parts. Indeed, the development process is now concerned about social values, customs and traditions (Landes, 2000; Rao and Walton, 2004) as preconditions for human progress. As livelihood approach provides itself the holism focuses on people regardless of sector, geographical space or level, it prioritises people's own definitions and perceptions of constraints and problems and it aspires to provide a way of thinking about livelihoods that is manageable and that helps improve development effectiveness. However, as far as culture is seen as negative, rejecting customary practices, beliefs, mind, emotions and spiritual elements, social values could not be an integral part of the development process. Spiritual and cultural aspects are essential in determining livelihoods opportunities and choices and therefore building and shaping community's livelihoods portfolios as well. Bebbington (1999) suggests culture as an imperative remedy in building livelihoods resilience as well. He stresses the importance of cultural perspective in analysing every phase of livelihoods concerns particularly in rural context. He questions

about culture emphasizing the stronger connectivity between place and reproduction of cultural practices. Bebbington cites, “through fostering certain forms of cultural identity maintenance and particular patterns of interactions, cultural practices enable, inspire and indeed empower; they are another important ‘input’ to livelihood production and poverty alleviation” (1999, p.2034). Therefore, ‘cultural practices’ are seen as valued for the meaningfulness of rural residence and importantly, its capability of forming action and resistance that the other types of capital would not alone make possible. For Glavovic et al (2002), thoughts of culture are highly influential. They question about the wider role of culture in developing ‘social capital’ and livelihoods building. As Glavovic et al (2002) assert, social capital is said to be one of the strongest livelihood assets that people have to combat threats of their survival and wellbeing. Many of the definitions of social capital (Robison et al, 2002; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1995; Putnam et al, 1993; Berkes and Folke, 1992; Berkes and Folke, 1998) do not give sufficient recognition to the role of diversity, innovation and competition in development.

### **Proposal – Culture is a resource?**

As we are aware, a rural livelihoods system constitutes a diverse economic, social and cultural ‘universe’ wherein rural families are bound to make their living. People acquire livelihoods in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of success according to their access to resources and employment and how they deal with pressures arising from social, economic and environmental changes. These livelihood strategies depend on the basic materials and social, tangible and intangible assets which possess rural complexity and heterogeneity. As the World Bank (2003) notices, rural people have the modest portfolio of livelihood assets that can help to bring them out of poverty and insecurity. It has been recognised that traditional social capital, culture and history, human capital, and indigenous knowledge and know-how are resources, which may provide different opportunities to pursue various livelihoods (World Bank, 2003). As Chambers (1998) emphasises, people construct and contrive a living using their knowledge, skills and creativity. They may be acquired within the household, passed on from generation to generation as indigenous and traditional

technical knowledge, or through apprenticeship, or through innovation and experiments. Therefore, traditional customs, rituals, knowledge, skills, beliefs and value systems – collectively termed as ‘culture’ – are an embedded element in rural lifestyles and indeed have greater influences on livelihoods choices and resource accessibility. On other hand, culture and economic performance are also interlinked and economic activities are not exempted from the influences of local symbols and meanings. As Munjeri (2004) and Murray (2001) notice, intangible culture is the way of life and the vital sources of an identity for many communities that is deeply rooted in history.

As Bernstein (1992) notices, the image of farming for example represents the stability of rural society, and the immobility of its inhabitants; it conveys a notion like rural people being “tied to the land”. Paddy farming is defined as a cultural activity among the Asian people. For example, the Sinhalese paddy farming system is a metonymical representation of the *wewa* (lake) and the *yaya* (paddy field); the *wewa* (tank) the *dagaba* (pagoda) and the *gama* (village) and *pansala* (village temple) are the most culturally valued symbolic expressions of ‘prosperity’ of the Sri Lankan community. This is not the case only with farming culture. The pastoral societies of Africa and sea culture<sup>2</sup> of the Pacific people for instance, are also cultural artefacts of livelihood systems. For example Adriansen (2006) notices, among the Senegalese Fulani people that cattle are the most culturally valued resource; they herd cattle to “survive” or “to feed Fulani families”. Adriansen (2006) put this in more poetic way, cattle for Fulani is “because I’m Fulani....a Fulani without cattle are like a woman without jewels.....Cattle are gold for the Fulani...Cattle are the honour of the Fulani.” In this aspect ‘cattle’ represents the cultural capital among the Fulani, and this does not appear to be changing even though the ways to acquire this capital have been diversified (Adriansen 2006, p.223). In this pastoral mentality, cattle are

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<sup>2</sup> Livelihood patterns, opportunities and livelihood choices are highly determined by their ocean traditions, skills, behavioural patterns, belief systems and customs. Survival skills and local knowledge attained within family units have been passed over generations as native technical knowledge or through apprenticeship, or more formally through education or extension services, or through experiments and innovations.

treated as a wealthy object and a source of a Fulani's prestige (see: de Hann, 2000; Adriansen and Nielsen, 2002; and Bayer, 1999).

Prioritising the local cultural context would be more reliable in understanding claims and demands of the poorer communities and in designing appropriate strategies for them. Groenfeldt (2003) engages in a fair assessment of the importance of 'cultural values' in future development presenting four case studies; the Maori vision (see: Hingangaroa, 2000; and Loomis, 2000), Bhutan "Gross National Happiness" (Center for Bhutan Studies, 1999) and Menominee culture (see: Davis, 2000; and Groenfeldt 2003, p.926). These cases explain the success of culture in safeguarding distinctive core values against the rising tide of Westernisation. Helping to ease traditional societies into the modern era requires careful consideration and a deep respect for local cultures and customs. The promotion and development of effective and sustainable livelihood strategies require an attention to the local cultural diversity and resource complexity. Local people can ensure their own survivals by meeting their basic needs, but not in such a way as not to degrade natural resource base upon which they depend (Chambers, 1998; Chambers & Conway, 1992).

The sustainable livelihood approach requires creative ways of acquiring local sustainability and tools are need to be created and adapted as fit community needs, rather than forcing communities to fit with whatever tool is in vogue. Developing such strategies requires respect for values and knowledge, the "understanding of understanding" (Marschke & Berkes, 2005). Folke et al (2003), and Berkes & Seixas (2005), suggest 'cultural resilience' as a crucial phenomenon in rural sustainability. Folke et al (2003) notice three fundamental characteristics, which living strategies are obviously made up of:

1. Learning to live with change and uncertainty,
2. Nurturing learning, and
3. Adapting and creating opportunities for self organisation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Terer et al (2004); notice living 'harmony' with the 'flooding regime', seasonal changes and patterns of how Tana River,

However, the traditional cultures and their linkages for example may seem irrelevant to a development practitioner of this century, and they will often be more interested on modern 'livelihoods strategies'. But, peoples' value systems may be enough of an influence to make all the difference for the people who are seeking balanced economic livelihoods.

The cultural aspect need not be considered the 'retarding' factor for the livelihood analysis when considering the institutional contexts of local communities. As in livelihood discussions, policy and institutional environment always supports multiple livelihoods strategies and promotes equitable access to competitive markets for all (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1998b; Scoones, 1998). But, placing culture as an institution, DIFD asserts that "institutions can restrict people's choice of livelihood strategies" (DFID, 1999, 2000). This controversy encourages further investigation whether culture can be always destructive as an institution or whether it can be constructive in terms of building livelihoods and strengthening community's wellbeing? Indeed the whole idea of culture can be viewed constructively by understanding the "way things are done" in the context that we particularly examine. I believe that this works well if local culture is taken as a *soft* and *permeable* cluster, rather than its *deterministic* prospect as used by others (e.g.: DFID, 1999 and 2000; Carney, 1998 and 2000; and Carswel, 1999). To work this effectively the whole 'package' of transforming structures and processes, or as in the current livelihood discussion, the PIPs context, needs to be unpacked to liberate culture from its negative form. A positive view of local cultural institutions always gives a meaningful participation to local community. L. J. deHann (2000) for example, refers to social inclusion as an indication of sustainability. To ensure participation and empowerment of local communities, it is important to develop local leadership as a means of drawing on local resources and initiatives.

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Pokomo and Wardei communities manage their livelihood resources. The local people had vast knowledge on wetland ecosystems especially on their ecological changes. This was particularly noted by their intentions to adopt new practice to earn their livelihoods (Terer et al, 2004. p.12).

Overton et al (1999) refer to the concept of 'sustainable culture' to build trust, interdependency and participation, which can also be important to the quality of people's lives as material concerns. Norton (1992) also examines the linkages between natural and cultural diversity in relation to developing sustainable livelihoods strategies. The protection of natural systems and natural processes is cited as essential to flourishing local cultures which is integral to sustainable livelihoods. According to Costanza et al (2000), Daily (1997), and Folke et al (2003), human prospect is fundamentally dependent on retaining the integrity and adaptive capacity of natural systems. It provides a continuous flow of living resources. The inseparability of the natural and human dimension of the livelihoods system is perhaps obvious in traditional rural societies. For example, Berkes and Folke (1992 and 1998) and Allison and Ellis (2001) propose culture as a separate entity for attaining local sustainability stressing the importance of 'traditional ecological knowledge'. They rely on the accumulation of knowledge from experiences shared through a common culture and integrated management practices with moral and spiritual belief systems which, in turn, have co-evolved in the context of the particular ecological setting (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Gadgil et al, 1993). According to Terer et al (2004) and Allison and Badjeck (2004), traditional knowledge is not static, but accumulates, erodes and changes like any other tradition. Chambers (1997) also asserts that,

the knowledge of rural people has a comparative strength with what is local and observable by eye, changes over time, and matters to people. It has been undervalued and neglected. But recognizing and empowering it should not lead to an opposite neglect of scientific knowledge; the key is to know whether, where and how the two knowledges can be combined, with modern science as servant not master, and serving not those who are central, rich and powerful, but those who are peripheral, poor and weak, so that all gain (1997, p.205).

Rural people's traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge are complementary in their strengths and weaknesses. Combined they may achieve what neither could alone (Chambers, 1983. p.75).

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