



Caribbean sustainable livelihoods: the development of a concept

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to begin charting the discussion of sustainable livelihoods (SLs) towards the Caribbean. Its aim is to put this debate within a Caribbean context and start the process of building the theory that can be adequately applied to Caribbean economies. The end point of this paper, which should be the starting point of the discourse, would be the development of a working definition of the concept based on what constitutes life in the Caribbean. This paper begins the discourse on the development of a Caribbean specific definition of SLs. Many authors and organizations have defined the concept; however, some believe that the existing definitions are too theoretical. Given this, the Caribbean must find a common ground upon which this concept can become useful, as it is based on developing islands with many peculiarities.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper builds the definition by first, summarizing the Caribbean reality; second, by considering the reflections on the concept both internationally and regionally and finally, concluding with the definition of the concept.

Findings – Presently, the literature from the Caribbean region is still being developed. It is similar to that compiled internationally, particularly that of the Department for International Development (DFID), as DFID's methodology is most frequently used. However, emphasis has been placed on poverty, conservation and management of natural resources, governance, entitlements and capabilities and individual level development.

Originality/value – The concept highlights some Caribbean peculiarities and applies them to sustainable livelihoods. This definition can be applied to the determination of an index to access the quality of Caribbean livelihoods. It can be used by development practitioners in the determination of sustainable livelihood patterns.

Keywords Caribbean, Quality of life, Conservation, Governance, Sustainable livelihoods, Sustainability

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There have been many contributions to the concept of livelihoods and sustainable livelihoods (SLs). These definitions have come from various authors and organizations. The most basic and widely used definition was developed by Chambers and Conway (1992):

A livelihood has been viewed a means of gaining a living. A Livelihood is Sustainable when it can cope or recover from stress and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide SL opportunities for the next generation.

The concept of SL has been applied in many countries and regions, although some authors for instance, Carswell *et al.* (1997) (cited in University of professional Educators, 2006) believe that the definitions are unclear, narrow and add only to the theoretical body of knowledge. It is with this thought that Caribbean people must take and make this concept their own, if they wish to optimally use it. However, to date little work has been done with defining this concept within the Caribbean region: a region



that has developing third world economies, which could benefit from the careful and meaningful application of the concept.

The objective of this study is to begin charting the discussion of SL toward the Caribbean. Its aim is to put this debate within a Caribbean context and start the process of building the theory that can be adequately applied to Caribbean economies. The end point of this paper, which should be the starting point of the discourse, would be the development of a working definition of the concept based on what constitutes life in the Caribbean. This will be done by first giving a characterization of Caribbean economies, second by a review of the literature from both within and outside of the Caribbean region and conclude with the skeleton of the working definition of SL.

An overview of Caribbean economies

The process of building or determining a Caribbean-specific definition of the concept of SL requires a brief reflection of what constitutes a Caribbean economy:

The Caribbean islands fall into a class of economy and society that we call plantation economy and society; and that this type of economy and society constitutes a subordinate system. Politically the system lacks community support; economically it is an appendage of a metropolitan economy and therefore has no internal dynamic for accumulation, technological change and taste formation. Socially, it is stratified by reference to metropolitan criteria which serves to rank the metropolitan values and attributes higher than those of the colonial hinterland; and to the extent that people are imported willy nilly from different spheres and at different times, segments of race, religion and culture emerge side by side (Best, 1973/2009).

According to Best and Levitt (2009) there are four clear historical stages in the economic development of the Caribbean: the garrison economy (before the sugar plantation), pure plantation economy (sugar and slavery), plantation economy modified (sugar and free labor with domestic agriculture) and plantation economy further modified (organized labor with industrialization). The plantation economy is as organized as a total institution based on a hinterland economy that developed one sector. It is virtually a closed economy with respect to other activities. Each plantation has a resident workforce, resources are concentrated on the direct production of a staple and few linkages are created. A few backward linkages are created within the hinterland and limited forward linkages.

St Cyr (1991/2005) believed that the distinguishing features of the Caribbean are cultural. He quoted Charles Wagley saying that the characteristics of the plantation have dominated the economy, society and government passing on to the people its distinct cultural flavour. He looked at the work of Best and Levitt and based his analysis on colonies of settlement and colonies of exploitation. St Cyr (1991/2005) said:

The uniqueness of the Caribbean however derives from the fact that whereas, like colonies of settlements, it has been cleared of its native population, this was not replaced by European Settlers, but by a system of highly capitalized market oriented agricultural production based on European Enterprise Plantation organization and imported (African, Indian, Chinese and Polynesian) labour which characteristics taken together mark off Caribbean type economies and societies as a distinct group in the general type of systems.

Beckford (1972/2005) stated that within these plantation systems there are distortions in the use of available resources and this has resulted in the impoverishment of the society:

We are dealing with an economy in which resources are not fully employed and where perfectly competitive systems do not exist, there will be product and price distortions which

complicate the calculus. In all plantations these distortions are likely to be quite excessive. Monopsony in the labour market, imperfections in the capital market driving from the metropolitan connections and monopoly of land are characteristic on the factor side of the picture, intra-company transfers, government intervention and international commodity agreements create distortions on the product side.

The social and economic costs of these distortions can still be seen even though Caribbean economies are evolving and continue to evolve. For instance, Table I shows the incidence of poverty within the selected Caribbean countries. The highest incidence of poverty can be seen in Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis and St Vincent and the Grenadines with 37.7, 30.5 and 30.2 percent, respectively, of the population being below the poverty line. The indigence levels for Caribbean islands seen to be much lower, with the lowest being 1 percent in St Kitts and Nevis. The Gini coefficient, however, continues to be relatively large, averaging 0.40, showing high levels of inequality.

Table II shows unemployment rates for selected Caribbean countries. Trinidad and Tobago has had declining unemployment rates from 2000 to 2008. In 2009 there

Country	Year CPA conducted	(%) of population below poverty line	(%) of population below indigence line	Poverty gap	FGT P2 severity	Gini coefficient
Antigua and Barbuda	2005/2006	18.3	2.7			
Barbados	1997	13.9	–	na	na	0.39
Belize	2009	25.5	15.8	11	5	0.42
Grenada	2007/2008	37.7	2.4	10.13	4.03	0.37
Dominica	2008/2009	28.8	3.1	8.9	4	0.44
Guyana	1999	35	19	12.4	na	
Jamaica ^a	2009	16.5	na	na	na	0.38
St Kitts and Nevis	2007/2008	30.5	1	2.5	0.9	na
St Lucia ^(R)	2005/2006	28.8	1.6	9	4.1	0.42
St Vincent and the Grenadines ^(R)	2007/2008	30.2	2.9	7.5	3	0.40
Trinidad and Tobago	2005	16.7	8.3	na	na	na

Table I.
Poverty indicators for selected Caribbean countries

Note: ^aTaken from the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions for 2008 and 2009
Source: Poverty assessments done by Kiari Consultants for the CDB

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Bahamas	–	6.9	9.1	10.8	10.2	10.2	7.6	7.9	8.7	14.2
Barbados	9.2	9.9	10.3	11.0	9.8	9.1	8.7	7.4	8.1	10.0
Belize	11.1	9.1	10.0	12.9	11.6	11.0	9.4	8.5	8.2	13.1
Jamaica	15.5	15.0	14.2	11.4	11.7	11.3	10.3	9.8	10.6	11.4
Suriname	14.0	14.0	10.0	7.0	8.4	11.2	12.1	–	–	–
Trinidad and Tobago	12.2	10.8	10.4	10.5	8.4	8.0	6.2	5.6	4.6	5.3

Table II.
Unemployment (rates) percentage 2000-2009

Source: UN ECLAC (2010)

was a marginal increase of 0.7 percent. Barbados has had incremental increases up to 2003, decreases up to 2007 and increases into 2008/2009. Unemployment rates in Jamaica declined until 2007 began to increase like Barbados in 2008/2009.

Unemployment rates in smaller Caribbean islands tend to be a bit higher if they do not linger around the same figures. For example, St Vincent and the Grenadines has 18.79 percent, Grenada 24.9 percent, Dominica 14 percent and St Lucia 13 percent[1]. From this brief overview, the reality which necessitates the use of the SL concept becomes more apparent.

Definition: livelihood and SL[2]

The definition of livelihood and its link to SL has been discussed extensively since the 1980s. It was first introduced by the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development where the idea began as:

[...] an approach to maintain or enhance resource productivity, secure ownership of and access to assets, resources and income-earning activities as well as to ensure adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs. It was a reflection of the growing recognition that food security was not merely a problem of agricultural productivity but was a problem of poverty in all its multi faceted dimensions (Singh and Gilman, 2000, 2002).

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development initiated the first expansion in the context of Agenda 21. The achievement of SL was seen as a broad goal for poverty eradication, which should focus on the poor living in marginalized areas:

Agenda 21 stated that SL could serve as an integrating factor that allows policies to address development, sustainable resource management and poverty eradication simultaneously (Singh and Gilman, 2000, 2002).

As such, many authors have contributed to the definition(s) which has evolved today. The most basic, well known and widely accepted definition of a livelihood and as such SL was developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) (University of Professional Educators, 2006; Cahn Miranda, 2003):

A livelihood in its simplest sense is a means of gaining a living. A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide SL opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term.

For them capabilities, equity and sustainability are combined in the concept of SL[3]. They believed that there are many initial determinants of a livelihood strategy. They can be determined by birth or chosen during one's life, less singular or even predetermined. For them, a livelihood begins its formation once the main elements of the individual's reality are found and named, and its structure unraveled. They believed that a livelihood can also be at hierarchal levels within the household – persons sharing the same cooking space. However, they pointed out there would be some differences in well-being within the household. In their structure of the household, a livelihood had four categories: first, people (their livelihood capabilities), second, activities (what they do), third, “assets” (tangible and intangible, “which provide material and social means”) and fourth, “gains or outputs” (what they do) (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

Of these four, the most complex is the portfolio of tangible and intangible assets. These are separated into stores and resources as tangible, and claims and access as intangible.

Modified versions of this definition have been generally adopted, with few variations from authors and organizations. The variations stems from differences in interpretation:

Some use it to describe a tool: a framework is used as a checklist of issues and a way of structuring analysis. At the other extreme, some treat it as an operational objective and see their mission as improving the sustainability of livelihoods. Some value it as a set of principles that can be applied in almost any situation, but others view it as a call for specific SL projects or SL programmes. Many view it as an approach to development, combining various of the elements above (Ashley and Carney, 1999).

Carney's (1998)[4] definition is much the same as Chambers and Conway (1992) with the exception that it emphasizes the intergenerational component. Ashley and Carney (1999)[5] saw it as a mode of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities for development, in order to enhance progress in poverty elimination. Scoones (1998)[6], focussed on not undermining the natural resource base. Farrington *et al.* (1999) (see footnote 6) focussed on both of these issues. Soussan *et al.* (2003) like Scoones (1998) focussed on resources and more so natural resources. The link made was poverty to natural resources usage. They saw the concept of livelihood as being dynamic, complex, influenced by external forces and made through conscious choice. Ellis (2000) (cited in University of Professional Educator, 2006) emphasized access to assets and highlighted the activities that are impacted by social relations and institutions: gender, class, kin and belief systems. Radoki (2002)[7] saw it as dependent on income from employment and remuneration from assets and entitlements. Messer and Townsley (2003) stated that a livelihood is basically the means that a household uses to achieve its well-being and sustain it. Wallman (1984) (cited in University of Professional Educators, 2006) saw a livelihood as an umbrella concept, which suggests that social life is layered and that these layers overlap: both in the way people talk about them and the way they should be analyzed. Singh and Titi (1994)[8] saw SL as incorporating the idea of change and uncertainty and is located analytically in the concept of a socio-ecological system[9]. They saw SL as people's capacities to: "generate and maintain their means of living, enhance their wellbeing and that of future generations." Krantz (2001) believed that the concept of SL is an attempt to go beyond the traditional definitions and approaches to poverty eradication. These initial approaches focussed on certain aspects or manifestations of poverty, e.g. low income and did not consider issues such as vulnerability and social exclusion. Therefore, for him SL is an expansion of poverty to include vulnerability and social exclusion at best. Carswell *et al.* (1997) cited in Scoones (1998) points out:

[...] definitions of sustainable livelihoods are often unclear, inconsistent and relatively narrow. Without clarification, there is a risk of simply adding to a conceptual muddle [...].

Scoones (1998) resultantly retracted to the definition outlined by Chambers and Conway (1992) to develop the needed clarity. For him, the definition could be disaggregated into different sub-components. Each component is directed to wider literature with the possibility of assessing the outcome. Five key elements can be recognized. A livelihood is based on linking concerns over work and employment, with poverty reduction and broader issues of adequacy, security, well-being and capability, sustainability based on the resilience of livelihoods and the natural resource base on

which, in part, they depend. Scoones (1998) believed that SL was based on the creation of working days, poverty reduction, well-being and capabilities, livelihood adaptation, vulnerability and natural resource base sustainability.

Caribbean contribution to SLs [10]

It must be stated from the onset that promoting livelihoods in the Caribbean was not the initial mindset of the former colonial masters:

Earlier, we argued that inherent in the plantation system is the tendency toward monopolization of land by plantation owners as a device to deprive the majority of people access to an independent livelihood and therefore to ensure the plantation of labour supplies (Beckford, 1972/2005).

However, having gained or been given independence[11] in the late twentieth century, development and by extension livelihoods then became an issue to the freed and indentured people. Many attempts were made at putting together development models. These include Arthur Lewis in 1950, Lloyd Best in 1968 and George Beckford in 1972, bringing forwards inward looking strategies of import substitution as well as outward looking strategies such as the export growth model (Singh, 1999). The challenge now is to where to start the debate of the meaning of the SL concept.

At present, there are a number of institutions who are working with this concept namely the Caribbean Natural Resource Institute (CANARI), The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods, The Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (CERMES), the Sustainable Economic Development Unit (SEDU) of the University of the West Indies, United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC) and the Caribbean Environment Health Institute (CEHI), to name a few. Each of these will be looked at briefly[12].

CANARI

CANARI's has worked with the concept since 2002[13] and this has enabled them to produce many publications. When the concept is used, it is in conjunction with poverty alleviation, conservation: marine-protected areas, coral reefs, extractive livelihoods, coastal living and managing partnership. Their work on livelihoods has been divided into forest and livelihoods; and coastal and marine governance and livelihoods (CANARI Official Website). However, there is no explicit definition for the term.

The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods

This organization, has been working within the area of SLs since 1995 in Trinidad and Tobago. Their mission is based on helping Caribbean people better manage the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend. They view SLs as a pragmatic approach for alleviating poverty and natural resource degradation locally and internationally (The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods Official Website). They believe that:

Communities can achieve sustainable livelihoods if their capacity is developed to meet their physical and social needs, while not significantly degrading the quantity or quality of natural resources on which they or others depend (The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods Official Website).

For them desired livelihood outcomes will include:

[...] increased human capital (skills, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, labour ability and good health), better social capital (relationships of trust and reciprocity, groups, and networks), improved physical capital (basic infrastructure), more financial capital, improved natural capital (forests, water, land, fish, energy resources and minerals), reduced vulnerability and improved food security (The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods Official Website).

CERMES[14]

CERMES utilizes the definition and approach of Department for International Development (DFID) (1999)[15].

SEDU

Pantin *et al.* (2004)[16] used Singh and Lawrence (1999) definition as their starting point: a livelihood being the “combination of assets, activities and entitlements which enable people to make a living.” They saw SL it as a micro-level synonym for sustainable development. They were looking at the critique to sustainable development and thought that the analysis needed to be disaggregated to highlight the human impact of development. They were of the view that SL shifts the focus from aggregate economic output to people. A livelihood can therefore be described as:

The engagement in a number of activities, which at times neither require a formal agreement nor are limited to a particular trade. This differs from a job since it may not involve money, is self directing and not based on income derived from jobs (Pantin *et al.*, 2004).

For them a SL was based on assets, activities and entitlements:

Activities – recognizing that the root of all human development and economic growth is livelihoods, not just jobs, but the wide and diverse range of activities people pursue to make their living in the formal or the informal sector. Assets are the resources upon which people base their livelihoods including Natural/biological, Social and political, Human, Physical. Entitlements: the human social and economic rights of an individual. Sen has identified: Trade based entitlements; Production based entitlements, Owner entitlements, Inheritance and transfer entitlements (Pantin *et al.*, 2004).

UN ECLAC

ECLAC as well uses DFID (1999) definition and methodology[17].

CEHI[18]

CEHI focusses on environmental health of the Caribbean region. Much of their work is the provision of clean and clear water, watershed management, use of chemicals, waste management enhancing resilience, flooding and coastal clean up (CEHI Official Website). Their focus on enhancing capabilities, but no explicit definition has been stated.

Conclusion

The term livelihood and thus SL, for the Caribbean is one that is still being developed. Some institutions and practitioners have begun to carve the concept, while others have opted to use of the definition and methodology of DFID. However, all of the institutions have endeavored to apply the concept. Therefore, any conclusion drawn is a mixture of interpretation from the use of the concept combined with that which was explicitly stated.

This combination of explicit and implicit contributions to SL focusses on assets, activities and entitlements or ways to journey out of poverty, conservation and management of natural resources, breaking down and individualizing sustainable development, institutions, governance and of course DFID's definition. All of the Caribbean definitions can be placed into what is being described internationally. However, the Caribbean institutions and practitioners have emphasized poverty and natural resource conservation.

Based on these definitional considerations I propose that SL in the Caribbean should begin from the starting point of Pantin *et al.* (2004): a synonym for sustainable

development. It should bring development to the level of the individual. Additionally, due to our reality and much of the concerns implied by its use, the definition should include poverty, conservation and management of natural resources and governance. However, the definition should deviate from the international definitions to bring the Caribbean reality more so to the forefront. It should include some of the elements outlined by Best and Levitt, Beckford, Lewis and other development practitioners. It should be fusing the existing paradigm with development of the individual. This, therefore, requires giving particular attention to culture. St Cyr (1991/2005) outlined the peculiarities of Caribbean culture and its ability to penetrate and affect the lives of everyone: from government to individual. This would then take the Caribbean SL definition away from simply focussing on a set of developing islands that has issues surrounding nonfunctional institutions, being heavily impacted by the metropole, lack of financial resources, etc., but it would highlight issues including race and gender relations and its impact on capabilities, the great level of influence by the metropole and so on.

I propose, therefore, that SL in the Caribbean is tantamount to development through the eyes of the individual. It is the individual's effort and ability to participate in activities to sustain him given their capabilities, based on their entitlements, surviving culture and deficiencies in governance, financing and resources but still being able to succeed without hampering the success of another now and in the future.

Notes

1. These figures were taken from the latest poverty assessments for the various countries conducted by Kiari Consultants for the Caribbean Development Bank.
2. This section constitutes definitions not developed by Caribbean authors with the exception of Naresh Singh who is from the Caribbean but in 2010 worked for the Canadian International Development Agency.
3. "Capabilities were seen both an end and means of livelihoods. A livelihood therefore provides the support for the enhancement and exercise of capabilities (an end); and capabilities (a means) enable a livelihood to be gained. Equity is both an end and a means: any minimum definition of equity must include adequate and decent livelihoods. Sustainability, too, is both end and means; sustainable stewardship of resources is a value (or end) in itself; and it provides conditions (a means) for livelihoods to be sustained for future generations."
4. Cited in Soussan *et al.* (2003).
5. These two persons helped to develop the Department for International Development (DFID) definition.
6. Quoted in Cahn (2003).
7. Cited in Buechler (2004).
8. Cited in Singh (1996).
9. A socio-ecological system is the space in which political, cultural, religious, social, economic, biological and geo-physical factors of an environment simultaneously interact with and in combination with each other to produce a variety of functions, processes and products, which shape the way a community makes its living in a given ecozone.
10. This section will outline contributions by Caribbean institutions and development practitioners.
11. A topic debated by Caribbean authors.

12. The summaries provided would be based on the web sites and publications from the web sites of these institutions.
13. According to CANARI's web site publication listing.
14. http://cermes.cavehill.uwi.edu/webdata_cermes.pl?cgifunction=form&fid=1138803479&query=all_search
15. This is evidenced by Cooke *et al.* (2007).
16. The only set of development practitioners who would have applied this concept to the Caribbean separate and apart from Naresh Singh.
17. This was seen in UN ECLAC (2011).
18. This institution was included because Naresh Singh, a livelihood practitioner was the executive director for several years prior to 2001.

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