

Sustainable Livelihoods Perspective in Social Work Education and Practice

Bindiya Narang and Zubair Meenai*

Abstract

In the wake of a globalized world and ever-changing social, economic, political and environmental circumstances, the challenges of addressing and sustaining development have become quite complex. A major implication of these changes is on the livelihoods of people, which have become increasingly fragile and insecure. The present development rhetoric and welfare policies thus focus on the livelihood concerns, way beyond the established understanding of human subsistence and poverty. In the prevailing scenario, the realm of social work is at crossroads, engaged in an assiduous struggle to rethink, evolve, adapt and overhaul its long-established paradigms of practice and education. The paper argues that the social work education in India needs to respond to these dynamic local as well as global realities and their implication on people's livelihoods. The practicum structure must attempt to cater to proficiency building in rational problem-solving strategies aimed at managing and combating the individual- and community-identified livelihood problems during fieldwork and site visits. It is contended that incorporating sustainable livelihoods perspective in social work will reinforce its interdisciplinary base and progressive orientation, rendering practice and interventions along with provision of social services more meaningful in existing times and ahead.

Keywords

livelihoods, sustainable development, social work education,
social work curriculum, social work practice

* Authors are affiliated to the Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, India. Email: bindiyababbar@yahoo.com

Introduction

Across all societies, people's lives orbit around planning for and practising diverse livelihoods. The livelihood strategies that people choose are influenced by a plethora of factors located in their specific social, cultural, political, economic and ecological context. In the wake of a globalized world and an ever-changing context, the livelihoods of people are significantly transforming, often becoming fragile, insecure and unsustainable. This livelihood vulnerability has been acknowledged to have serious repercussions on poverty, well-being and human development. In light of this, the current development rhetoric and welfare policies worldwide are headed to strengthen the disparate livelihoods endeavouring beyond the conventional dealing with human subsistence. In the complex reality created by the dialectics of global conceptualizations and local conditions, the realm of social work is at crossroads, engaged in a struggle to rethink, evolve, adapt and overhaul its long-established paradigms of education and practice models so as to effectively mediate the process of development.

Emanating from the idealist belief that the state could overcome and resolve social problems using science and universal knowledge as well as through public welfare provision (Offer, 2006), social work, as a profession and as a way of intervening in people's lives, has treaded a long way. The ideas of postmodernism and challenges posed by globalization raise questions about the dominance of any particular set of notions, both generally and in social work. The perspectives for practice have changed with the changing economic conditions and political ideologies, from charity and reform to welfare to development and recently to human rights. Social work practitioners are also looking for new paradigms that give greater precedence to social and community development within an ecological agenda that cares for the environment as well as people existing within it. The importance of integrating local concerns with the global awareness and reiterating the goals of social justice, equality and protection of human rights is gaining credence within the existing social work discourse. In consonance with the prevailing scenario, the paper draws attention to the concept of sustainable livelihoods and how livelihood issues affect people that social workers work with. It further delves into how social work curriculum, fieldwork, research studies and professional practice could

incorporate livelihood issues so as to effectively respond to the dynamic social realities of the contemporary world. It is contended that in the light of this perspective, social workers could certainly assist communities through the arduous task of sustaining development.

Sustainable Livelihoods: Concept and Perspective

Although a variety of explanations is offered in the literature on livelihoods, it is a highly contested concept. Consequently, governments, organizations and individuals have adopted it according to their own understanding (Cahn, 2002; DFID, 1999). However, the genesis of this concept can be traced back to the work of Chambers and Conway (1992), who sought to theoretically locate sustainable livelihoods within the actor-oriented approaches to development, the framework of environmental and social sustainability and the rhetoric of poverty reduction. Chambers introduced this thinking as a response to the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which had, for the first time, firmly put sustainable development on a global political agenda. In the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), it was conceded that sustainable livelihoods can serve as an integrating factor that allows policies to address development, sustainable resource management and poverty eradication simultaneously (UNDP, 1997). The 1995 World Summit for Social Development and the 1996 World Food Summit had also shared much of this analysis. Hence, the social and ecological costs of the conventional development models and the subsequent environment and development movements of the late 1980s and 1990s gave rise to the need for sustainable development paradigm. Since then, the sustainable livelihoods perspective has an overarching discursive influence in both national and international policy circles.

Chambers and Conway (1992) provided a definition of sustainable livelihoods, relating it to the assets that are used by the poor to withstand shocks and stresses including the three concepts of capabilities, equity and sustainability. Capabilities in this context refer to a person's or a household's ability to cope with stresses and shocks as well as to find and make use of livelihood opportunities. Assets refer to the basic material and social resources that people have in their possession. Activities indicate the ways

in which capabilities and assets are combined to achieve livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 1998). In accord, Ashley and Carney (1998) illustrated that the significance of the concept of sustainable livelihoods is borne by the desire to empower the capacity of people to earn income that meets their current and future economic and social needs and minimizes their vulnerability to external stresses and shocks. In addition, Scoones (1998) cautioned that an inequitable access to livelihood opportunities leads to income disparity and widespread poverty coupled with environmental degradation, social unrest and political instability.

There is pertinent literature to suggest that sustainable livelihoods perspective helps to enlist objectives, scope and priorities for development, based on the core principles of people-centred, participatory and sustainable activities. While Krantz (2001) applauded it as a more reasoned and holistic approach to poverty eradication and pro-poor development, Ludi and Slater (2007) called it a distinct perspective on understanding the lived reality of people. They concurred that it can be used to analyse how interventions tackle the non-material dimensions of poverty and contribute to strengthening a household's asset portfolio, thus enhancing their livelihood options and well-being. Additionally, many of the early reviews suggested that this approach was particularly useful for: the systematic and holistic analysis of poverty; providing an informed view of development opportunities, challenges and impacts; and placing people at the centre of development work (Ashley and Carney, 1999). The sustainable livelihoods approaches have also led to: improving understanding of poor people's lives; the constraints facing them, and inter-group differences; increasing inter sectoral, collaborative and interdisciplinary community development research and work; and creating increased links between micro-, meso- and macro-level considerations in poverty and development discourse (Carney, 2002; Hussein, 2002). Ellis and Biggs (2001) remarked that all these characteristics make it consistent with the bottom-up approach to development.

Sustainable Livelihoods Perspective in Social Work Education

Social work is a people-centred discipline that recognizes the complexity of interactions between human beings and their environment. It extensively draws on the theories of human development and behaviour, and social

systems to analyse complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational, social and cultural changes (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2000). Being a professional branch of education dealing with the needs of the society, it is imperative for social work to incorporate the changing social conditions and their ramifications along with the significant theoretical and practical advances in the mainstream development concerns in its curriculum. It is noteworthy that much of the extensive debate over development has turned around the question of how poverty, vulnerability, livelihoods and access to resources are linked. Chambers and Conway (1992) have argued that conventional idea to development, which is linked to production thinking (i.e. producing food), employment thinking (i.e. having jobs or creating new workplaces) and poverty-line thinking (i.e. measuring incomes or consumption), does not depict the social realities and wrongly perceives the real problem because the society is complex and diverse. Also, it has been recognized that a broader multisectoral approach to development that builds on local empowerment, risk mitigation and social protection is needed. In this context, the conventional models which have guided the study of environment and development in social work, based on notions of equilibrium and predictability, fail to hold up. Thus, it becomes very important for students of social work to understand the complex rural and urban reality, how vulnerable people sustain their livelihoods in an uncertain ever-changing world scenario and what institutional arrangements mediate their access to resources.

Fieldwork, which is an integral part of social work education, also needs an orientation towards livelihoods perspective. The supervised and evaluated on-field practicum or the training process that students undertake along with classroom teaching provides them with an indispensable opportunity to apply theoretical methods of the discipline and to deal effectively with human beings in different social situations (Kapoor, 1961). Through fieldwork, students are helped to develop a holistic understanding of the issues, the problems, the situations, the causative factors and possible strategies of intervention for solving the problems affecting the well-being of people. It is here that sustainable livelihoods perspective holds ground by offering a unique starting point for an integrated analysis of complex, highly dynamic contexts. Baumann (2000) also remarked that this approach

is not intended to provide a sophisticated model for theoretical analysis, but one oriented towards a comprehensive and practically focused understanding of ground realities. Fieldwork being the hallmark of social work, awareness of diverse communities, working with individual service users, offering services during disasters, the skill of using research, advocacy and evidence-based practice, using participatory livelihoods assessment and planning towards social transformation and livelihoods innovation are most important. This will help the social work students in enhancing their professional capacities in terms of the requisite skills that can be applied to strengthen their engagement in managing livelihood-related projects effectively in future.

Furthermore, it is significant to appreciate the need for such interdisciplinary perspectives to inform research studies in social work. Livelihood frameworks have often been used by social science researchers to document and analyse the processes by which individuals and households utilize their resources and opportunities to make a living in particular socio-economic and biophysical contexts (Scoones, 1998; Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; de Haan and Zoomers, 2005). According to Solesbury (2003), the livelihood framework is a tool that helps to define the scope of, and provides the analytical basis for, livelihoods analysis by identifying the main factors affecting livelihoods and the relationships between them. The basic elements of most livelihoods frameworks (Schafer, 2002) are livelihood resources, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. It is pertinent to note that access to creation, transfer and accumulation of assets is a key element in generating sustainable livelihoods. The welfare generating potential of livelihood assets further depends on their interaction with the context in which people live and the livelihood strategies they pursue. The contextual features like history, macroeconomic conditions, demography and climatic conditions as well as transforming structures like policies, laws, institutions and cultural processes can enhance or thwart a household's access to adequate livelihood. Sustainable livelihoods perspective is thus an ideal entry point for participatory approaches to inquiry, providing a way to discern people's livelihood outcomes and the manner in which these are impacted by development interventions, all of which are pursued as social work research.

Sustainable Livelihoods Perspective in Professional Social Work Practice

Professional social work practice involves the dynamic processes of engagement, assessments, evidence-based interventions, advocacy and evaluating programme outcomes at multiple levels with the major goal of promoting social and economic justice. Social workers have the requisite acquaintance to practise with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. They play an important role in operationalizing development interventions by constantly engaging with individuals and communities as clients, deploying their knowledge, skills and expertise for the benefit of people requiring their services. They are distinctively qualified to prevent crisis and ensuring the well-being of people by counselling individuals, families and communities in a variety of settings like schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, senior citizens' centres, prisons, military, corporations and policy-making bodies, and in numerous public and private welfare agencies/ organizations. It has been emphasized that adhering to the principles of human rights and social justice, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments (IFSW, 2000). The multivariate societal challenges like poverty, discrimination, substance abuse, domestic violence, physical illness, unemployment, educational problems, disability and mental illness are frequently addressed through social work professional practice. Warren (1991) suggests that social work strategies should form the basis for local-level decision-making in matters related to agriculture, health care, food, education, natural-resource management and a host of other activities across both rural and urban communities. This warrants social work to step forward from curative practice-based remedial social work to the rights-based approach, empowerment methodologies, social action and social policy efforts.

Assessing the impact, performance and sustainability of the policies, programmes and projects is an indispensable task rested with the social workers placed at national governments, civil society organizations (CSOs) and international development agencies. The current shift in thinking and action towards a more people-centred, human development paradigm has necessitated a concurrent reorientation of social welfare policies and programmes. The sustainable livelihoods approach has much to contribute at the level of policy since its main goals are reducing poverty and identifying

the constraints to livelihood development (Carney, 1998). A comprehensive knowledge of livelihoods perspective will provide social workers a contextualized understanding of the interaction between policies and livelihoods and the need to identify the particular impacts of policy on different poor and vulnerable groups. Cahn (2002) also noted that this perspective can be used as a tool for planning interventions and reviewing and evaluating projects, research, policy analysis and development. It is through this lens that the social workers can draw connections between micro-level ground realities and macro-level policies. Hinshelwood (2003) affirmed that the critical and creative adaptation of this approach by trained and experienced community development professionals will make it a priceless conceptual toolkit and useful addition at any stage of almost any development project. Hence, social work practitioners can support people's access to assets and help ensure that critical policies, institutions and processes are responsive to the needs of the poor.

Sustainable livelihoods approach has also become a shared point of reference and an organizing framework for many development agencies (Baumann, 2002), where social workers extensively find employment and get placed. A number of studies suggest that the most intensive and frequent use of this approach has been in relation to poverty reduction and rural development in several international organizations such as Oxfam, the Society for International Development (SID), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), CARE International and the Department for International Development (DFID). These agencies have used this perspective in the design and delivery of their relief and development work. Reports on these applications have also been widely published (Turton, 2000; DFID, 2001; Hussein, 2002; Carney, 2002). Besides, this approach has also been applied to different sectors like natural resource management, fishing development (Baumann, 2000; Allison and Ellis, 2001), tourism development (Simpson, 2007; Tao and Wall, 2009) and disaster management (Cannon et al., 2003; Longley and Maxwell, 2003), which are also the domains of professional social work practice.

Conclusion

The current events and trends occurring across the world offer a compelling evidence of the demand for new approaches to social work education and practice internationally. From the challenging domestic social problems to the pressing global concerns like poverty, disparity, human rights violations, health pandemics, war and conflict situations, it is imperative for social workers to acquire new levels of understanding and new models of practice so as to effectively address livelihoods dysfunction at micro, mezzo and macro levels. At micro levels, the social workers address problems of individuals so as to enhance their social functioning. However, for macro-level practice, the social work professionals of today must have a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between poverty and environmental sustainability together with the social development model of policy and practice. They further need to be skilled to assist in international and national humanitarian efforts so as to meet interests of a complex, diverse and divided world. In tandem with the current development discourse, the social workers are required to be aware of strategies to maximize the welfare of the vast population of vulnerable and marginalized groups, who mainly are hitherto excluded from the processes and benefits of developmental initiatives. The policy arena is also a significant pitch for social work action and practice. Social workers reclaiming the responsibility and power of policy practice can make important contributions to client lives, organizations, communities and the nation in achieving new levels of social and economic justice. As the front-line providers of social services, they can offer valuable insights into the implementation and impact of development programmes aimed at enhancing livelihood security.

In crux, a meticulous acquisition of knowledge related to people's livelihoods and training in offering constructive practical solutions to livelihood concerns is increasingly important for all social work practitioners to meet the needs of the diverse people the profession represents. It is contended that incorporating sustainable livelihoods perspective in social work will strengthen its interdisciplinary base and progressive orientation, rendering practice and interventions along with provision of social services more meaningful in both present and future.

References

- Allison, E.H., & Ellis, F. (2001). The livelihoods approach and management of small-scale fisheries. *Marine Policy*, 25(5), 377-388.
- Ashley, C., & Carney, D. (1999) Sustainable livelihoods: Lessons from early experience. Retrieved from <http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0902/DOC7388.pdf>
- Baumann, P. (2000). Sustainable livelihoods and political capital: Arguments and evidence from decentralisation and natural resource management in India. Working Paper 136, Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
- Cahn, M. (2002). Sustainable livelihoods approach: Concept and practice. Paper presented at the 3rd Biennial Conference of the International Development Studies Network of Aotearoa, New Zealand, Massey University. Retrieved from http://www.devnet.org.nz/conf2002/papers/Cahn_Miranda.pdf
- Cannon, T., Twigg, J., & Rowell, J. (2003). Social vulnerability, sustainable livelihoods and disasters. London: Department for International Development (DFID). Retrieved from mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/6964.
- Carney, D. (2002). Sustainable livelihoods approaches: Progress and possibilities for change. London: Department for International Development (DFID).
- Carney, D. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: What contribution can we make? Department for International Development: London. Retrieved from povertyandconservation.info/en/biblio/b2064.
- Chambers, R., & Conway, G.R. (1992). Sustainable rural livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century. Discussion Paper 296. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
- de Haan, L., & Zoomers, A. (2005). Exploring the frontier of livelihoods research. *Development and Change*, 36(1), 27-47.
- DFID (Department for International Development) (2001). Meeting the challenge of poverty in urban Areas. London: Department for International Development.
- DFID (Department for International Development). (1999). Sustainable livelihoods and poverty elimination. London: Department for International Development.
- Ellis, F. (2000). *Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, F., & Biggs, S. (2001). Evolving themes in rural development: 1950s-2000s. *Development and Policy Review*, 19(4), 437-448.

- Hinshelwood, E. (2003). Making friends with the sustainable livelihoods framework. *Community Development Journal*, 38(3), 243-254.
- Hussein, K. (2002). Food security: Rights, livelihoods and the world summit-five years later. *Social Policy and Administration*, 36(6), 626-647.
- IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers). (2000). Retrieved from <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html>
- Kapoor, J.M. (1961). The role of field work in modern social work education. *The Indian Journal of Social Work* 22(2), 113-119.
- Krantz, L. (2001). The sustainable livelihood approach to poverty reduction: An introduction. Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).
- Longley, C., & Maxwell, D. (2003). Livelihoods, chronic conflict and humanitarian response: a synthesis of current practice. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Ludi, E., & Slater, R. (2007). Using the sustainable livelihoods framework to understand and tackle poverty. Retrieved from http://www.poverty-wellbeing.net/en/Home/Themes/Livelihood_Approaches/Tailored_Resources
- Offer, J. (2006). *An intellectual history of British social policy: Idealism versus Non-Idealism*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.
- Schafer, J. (2002). Supporting livelihoods in situations of chronic conflict and political instability: Overview of conceptual issues (Working Paper 183). London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- Scoones, I. 1998. Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis. Working Paper 72. Institute of Development Studies. Brighton: University of Sussex.
- Simpson, M. C. (2007). An integrated approach to assess the impacts of tourism on community development and sustainable livelihoods. *Community Development Journal*, 44(2), 186-208.
- Solesbury, W. (2003) Sustainable livelihoods: A case study of the evolution of DFID policy. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Tao, T.C.H., & Wall, G. (2009). Tourism as a sustainable livelihood strategy. *Tourism Management*, 30, 90-98.
- Turton, C. (2000) Sustainable livelihoods and project design in India. Working Paper 127. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- UNDP. (1997). Productive employment and poverty eradication: How can livelihoods be more sustainable. New York: UNDP Bureau for Policy and Programme Support

- Warren, D.M. (1991). Using indigenous knowledge in agricultural development. World Bank Discussion Paper No. 127. Washington D.C: The World Bank.
- WCED (World Commission on Environment and Development). (1987) *Our common future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.