

## From description to explanation: Using the Livelihoods as Intimate Government (LIG) approach



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### A B S T R A C T

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Two decades after their rapid rise to prominence, the place of livelihoods approaches in contemporary development conversations and programming is unclear. This status is in many ways deserved, as such approaches have often failed to deliver rigorous explanations of observed livelihoods decisions and outcomes. However, as development, humanitarian assistance, and climate change organizations refocus their efforts around the concepts of resilience and vulnerability, there is increasing demand for methods with the holism of livelihoods approaches. If livelihoods approaches are to fill this need, they must evolve to embrace explicit theories of livelihoods decision-making, and means of applying this theory to specific research and implementation challenges. This paper presents the Livelihoods as Intimate Government (LIG) approach as one such linking of theory and application. LIG captures a wider range of motivations for observed decisions and behaviors than possible under the more instrumental livelihoods approaches that currently dominate the scene, a critical need if we are to productively address complex questions of vulnerability and resilience. This article lays out the theory behind LIG and connects this theory to practice through a step-by-step manner with reference to livelihoods decisions in Ghana's Central Region, closing with a brief discussion of what LIG, and indeed revitalized livelihoods approaches more generally, can contribute to contemporary development and climate change research, policy, and implementation.

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### Introduction

Two decades after their rapid rise to prominence, the place of livelihoods approaches in contemporary development conversations and programming is unclear. Scoones' (2009: 173) "integrative, locally-embedded, cross-sectoral [work] informed by a deep field engagement and a commitment to action" is still found in the development studies literature. But in the world of development policy and implementation, this work is often eclipsed by that of other approaches, such as randomized control trials (RCTs) (for example, Banerjee & Duflo, 2009, 2011; Boisson, Schmidt, Berhanu, Gezahegn, & Clasen, 2009; Duflo & Kremer, 2003; Karlan & Appel, 2012; Karlan, Kutsoati, McMillan, & Udry, 2011; Karlan & Zinman, 2011).

Development donors' recent turn toward resilience and vulnerability (e.g. Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis, & Dercon, 2005; Lopez-Calva & Ortiz-Juarez, 2011; The World Bank, 2010; USAID, 2012a, 2012b) calls this relegation into question. While both vulnerability and resilience are contested terms in the

development, humanitarian assistance, and climate change communities (for example, Adger, 2006, 2000; Füssel, 2007; Janssen & Ostrom, 2006; Smit & Wandel, 2006), there is general agreement that understanding these concepts in locally-meaningful, programmable ways requires an embrace of complexity and multi-causality (if not indeterminate causality) via research that integrates different disciplinary perspectives and sources of data. RCTs are not appropriate tools for such research, for while they can rigorously identify treatment effects in narrowly-conceived interventions, the factors that shape individual and community resilience and vulnerability always engage multiple processes and factors in a manner that defies rigorous controlled experimentation. Further, RCTs lack an equally rigorous means of interpreting their data, often resulting in problematic explanations for observed patterns (see Barrett & Carter, 2010; Harrison, 2011 for a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the RCT in development). In short, livelihoods approaches remain the only broad framework of analysis that allows for the holistic investigations necessary to address issues of vulnerability and resilience at the heart of contemporary development discourse and practice.

This is not to uncritically praise livelihoods approaches and their use in development. Their uncertain status in the world of

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development policy and implementation is related to specific shortcomings, including a lack of engagement with economic globalization, especially as it relates to ongoing agrarian transformation in many parts of the Global South; a lack of attention to power and politics; a failure to appropriately engage with climate change and its impacts; and an absence of explicit theorization of decision-making that might lead to better understandings of pathways of impact (Carr, 2013; Carr & McCusker, 2009; De Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Knutsson & Ostwald, 2006; McCusker & Carr, 2006; Prowse, 2010; Scoones, 2009; Small, 2007). If livelihoods approaches are to be effective tools for informing locally-relevant, rigorous research and project design, they must evolve.

Such an evolution requires a theory of livelihoods decision-making that supports an explicit framework for understanding livelihoods decisions. However, it also requires a specific approach to gathering information that fits this theoretical framing, and a transparent process through which that information is interpreted. Building on just such a retheorization of livelihoods (Carr, 2013), this paper lays out the Livelihoods as Intimate Government (LIG) approach as one such means of gathering and interpreting livelihoods data. In this paper, I demonstrate that LIG is more than a theoretical contribution to the framing of livelihoods and livelihoods decision-making. It is also a concrete approach through which practitioners in the development studies and human dimensions of global change communities might apply such theory to the study of real-world situations. In its application to different individual and community negotiations of the challenges and opportunities presented at various intersections of social, structural, and material conditions in everyday life, LIG captures a wider range of motivations for observed decisions and behaviors than possible under the more instrumental livelihoods approaches that currently dominate the scene. Current efforts to pilot LIG in project design and evaluation by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID),<sup>1</sup> the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR),<sup>2</sup> and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre<sup>3</sup> speaks to the needs contemporary development, humanitarian assistance, and climate change organizations have for better understandings of livelihoods and livelihoods decisions as they seek to address the complex questions of vulnerability and resilience.

The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the conceptual contribution behind LIG translates into application. The paper begins with a general overview of livelihoods approaches in development. I then turn to a brief overview of the theory behind LIG, before laying out the approach itself. Each stage of the approach is illustrated with reference to LIG's initial development and application to the study of livelihoods decisions in Ghana's Central Region, demonstrating in a step-by-step manner the theoretical component addressed, data gathered, analyses undertaken, and information about livelihoods that was acquired through this approach. The paper closes with a brief discussion of what LIG, and indeed revitalized livelihoods approaches more generally, can contribute to contemporary development practice, ranging from policy debates to project design.

### Asset-based livelihoods approaches: method without theory

The history of livelihoods approaches has been well-documented elsewhere (De Haan & Zoomers, 2003; Hussein, 2002; Scoones, 2009; Small, 2007; Valdés-Rodríguez & Pérez-Vázquez, 2011). Relevant here is the path through which broad, multidisciplinary questions about how people live in particular places became the asset-based livelihoods approaches that dominated the literature and practice of livelihoods studies by the late 1990s. As Scoones (2009) notes, livelihoods studies emerged from a range of disciplines, including village studies, household studies, farming systems analysis, and political ecology (see also De Haan & Zoomers, 2005). These diverse fields integrated disparate data and perspectives through an inherently geographical focus on broad questions of how people live, and make a living, in particular places.<sup>4</sup> These studies were not, however, broad efforts to develop explanatory tools that could be applied without consideration of context.

This broad body of work began its transformation into an explanatory framework in the late 1990s. As Scoones (2009) and others (De Haan & Zoomers, 2003, 2005; Small, 2007) have noted, the turn to assets, and the framing of such assets as forms of capital, in livelihoods and livelihoods-related studies was an instrumental path taken during a political opportunity to reframe British development efforts around local needs and issues in the mid to late 1990s. This path had to speak to the dominance of economic thought in that institutional setting, and in development more broadly. Farrington (2001: 2) claims that in this process, livelihoods approaches really came to be three things: a set of principles, an analytic framework, and a development objective, and the distinctions between the three were often not clear. In practice, most livelihoods approaches were implemented as "an analytical structure for coming to grips with the complexity of livelihoods, understanding influences on poverty and identifying where interventions can best be made" (Farrington, Carney, Ashley, & Turton, 1999: 3).

It is as such an analytical structure that livelihoods approaches have been most commonly applied to questions of development and the human dimensions of global change. Whether used whole-cloth, or inspiring similar research approaches tailored to specific questions, sectors, or settings, livelihoods frameworks (e.g. Carney, 1998; Chambers & Conway, 1992; Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 1998) have been used to illuminate such issues as the changing pathways and trajectories of community and individual efforts to make a living (e.g. Reid & Vogel, 2006; Sallu, Twyman, & Stringer, 2010; Simtowe, 2010), the impact of conservation efforts on surrounding populations (e.g. Ashley & Hussein, 2000; Twyman, 2001), the impact of policy and services on rural communities (e.g. Attfield, Hattingh, & Matshabaphala, 2004; Brock, 1999; Ellis & Mdoe, 2003; Gilling, Jones, & Duncan, 2001; Goldman et al., 2000), the potential for introducing new livelihoods activities into communities (e.g. Ahmed, Allison, & Muir, 2008; Hilson & Banchirigah, 2009), and the use of weather and climate information by rural farmers to address climate variability and change (e.g. Roncoli, Ingram, & Kirshen, 2001; Ziervogel & Calder, 2003).

While livelihoods approaches provide analytical structure to a range of research and application needs, there is nothing inherent to them that enables the *explanation* of observed livelihoods decisions and outcomes that might inform the planning of development interventions because these frameworks lack an underlying theory of livelihoods: in short, asset-based approaches lack an *explicit* theory of how livelihoods decisions are made and why (Carr, 2013). This is not to say that asset-based livelihoods approaches

<sup>1</sup> LIG is currently employed as part of a USAID-commissioned assessment of the *Direction Nationale de la Météorologie's* agrometeorological advisory program: see <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/CCR-ClimateServicesFactSheet.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> CGIAR's efforts to design climate services for farmers in Kaffrine, Senegal use LIG as a project design and evaluation tool: see <http://ccaafs.cgiar.org/blog/developing-methodology-evaluate-climate-services-farmers#U0BY361dXmQ>.

<sup>3</sup> LIG is a core part of the Climate Centre's efforts to understand the potential role of early warnings for disaster mitigation and long-term climate adaptation in Kazungula District, Zambia.

<sup>4</sup> It is therefore of little surprise that geographers and the geographic literature dominate the study of livelihoods and the development of livelihoods approaches.

lack theory. As I have noted elsewhere (Carr, 2013), those employing asset-based approaches usually explain the activities and outcomes they observed through an unstated, unexamined assumption that the principal, if not exclusive, motivation for livelihoods decisions is the maximization of the material return on one's livelihoods activities (see, for example, the discussion of sustainable livelihoods approaches in Farrington et al., 1999). Such framings push the social and structural aspects of livelihoods strategies and outcomes to the margins of analysis. The appropriateness of such reductionist framings of self-interest and rationality is rarely evaluated with reference to the people whose behavior is being explained. When used in this manner, livelihoods approaches implicitly shifted from organizational frameworks to explanatory frameworks for observed behaviors. The result is a set of frameworks that can organize and describe a broad range of activities and outcomes, but lack the theoretical foundations necessary for the rigorous explanation of that which had been observed. These reductionist framings produce a limited return on the added time, expense, and complexity that livelihoods analysis adds to program and project design, contributing to their declining popularity after the turn of the 21st Century.

With the rising attention given to issues of vulnerability and resilience by numerous donors, the sort of holistic, integrative research that was the initial focus of livelihoods approaches has returned to relevance in donor-level discussions of development programming and project design. This focus comes at a time where the favored tool of development donors, the RCT, is poorly equipped to address such research and data needs.<sup>5</sup> RCTs are, by design, narrowly-focused on one aspect of how people live in particular places, when issues of resilience and vulnerability are about suites of activities and decisions, and the way they interact. In short, development policy and programming needs tools to rigorously explain the holistic character of vulnerability and resilience if they are to implement interventions that address the challenges of vulnerable populations.

The LIG approach is one means of filling this gap. Following recent efforts to retheorize the motivations behind livelihoods decisions and strategies away from assets and their maximization (e.g. Arce, 2003; Bebbington, 1999; De Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Jakimow, 2012; King, 2011; McSweeney, 2004) and toward, for example, the governance of people and things to bring about particular goals and outcomes (Carr, 2011, 2013; Carr & McCusker, 2009), this article lays out a livelihoods approach that is explicitly tied to a locally-appropriate theoretical framing of how livelihoods decisions are made. This effort links method to theory in a manner that makes analytic assumptions explicit and testable, focuses analytical efforts on understanding the local framing of livelihoods decisions and strategies, and therefore allows for rigorous understandings of livelihoods outcomes that can be used to inform the design and evaluation of development interventions.

### LIG: summary of the theoretical approach

The principal contribution of the LIG approach is twofold. First, it explicitly theorizes the motivations behind livelihoods decisions, and therefore the causes of observed livelihoods outcomes, in a manner that moves beyond universal assumptions about material motivations. Second, it links that theorization to a systematic methodological approach aimed at obtaining the information necessary to build the rigorous understandings of livelihoods decisions and outcomes needed by development donors and

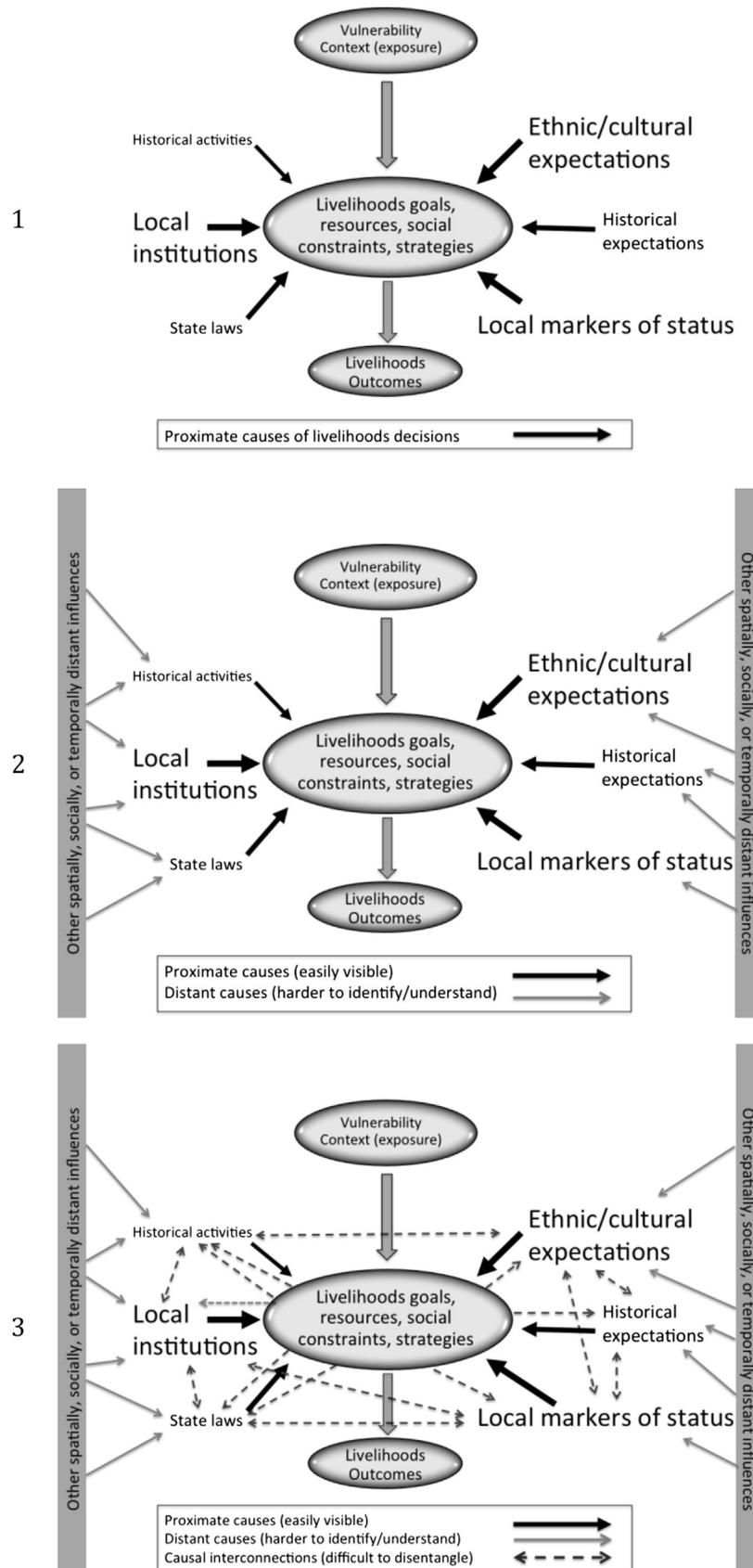
implementers. In this section, I briefly discuss the theoretical framework behind LIG. The rest of the paper is dedicated to laying out the methodological approach associated with this framework.

Any effort to understand how people live in particular places engages a tremendously complex question. Observed behaviors have complex causes that are often difficult to discern. For example, farmers choose to plant crops through consideration of the local environment, their personal experiences, local markets, and local expectations of their gender, income status, and other social roles, among other influences. Each of these causes, in turn, has its own causes: the local environment is influenced by emissions and activities taking place around the world, local markets for agricultural products are shaped by global commodities markets, and gender roles are shaped by historical expectations at scales ranging from the household and community to ethnicity and nationality. Adding to the complexity, under any particular livelihood there are winners and losers, those who benefit more than others from these activities, which begs the question of why the losers under a given strategy continue to participate in that strategy (Carr, 2008a). These causes and outcomes influence one another, making ultimate causality for particular actions and events indeterminate. At the same time, people negotiate this complexity every day, charting a path through these factors and forces as they make a living. Therefore, the goal of this approach is to understand *how* they chart this course, as their perceptions of these factors and forces will shape their current and future decisions and actions (Fig. 1).

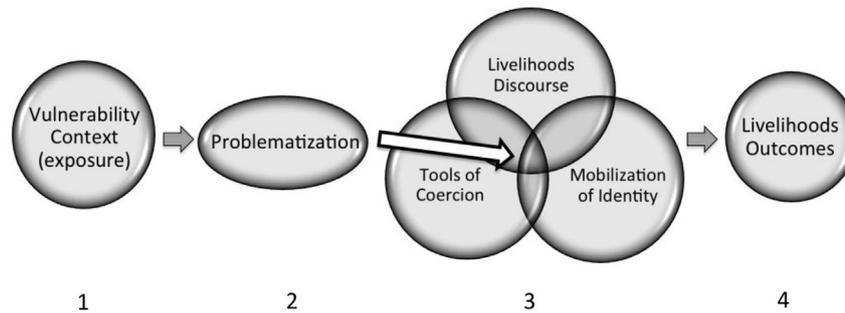
The LIG approach frames livelihoods as forms of what Agrawal (2005) calls "intimate government" (for extended discussion, see Carr, 2013), where livelihoods are efforts to achieve a range of individual, household, and community goals (including, but not limited, to material goals) achieved through the mobilization of many actors' desires, aspirations or interests. This is not to frame livelihoods strategies as means of forcing members of a community or household to behave in a particular manner. Instead, livelihoods strategies are framings of the world and one's place in it that reconcile particular social roles and livelihoods outcomes with individual self-interest, broadly conceived. The LIG approach frames this reconciliation through the intersection of three spheres of everyday life: discourses of livelihoods, tools of coercion, and the mobilization of identity (Fig. 2). Under LIG, discourses of livelihoods are the language and actions that reflect different actors' perceptions of the vulnerability context and the appropriate means of managing it in their everyday lives as they seek to achieve particular goals (income, empowerment, happiness, etc.). Tools of coercion are the locally legitimate institutional and social means by which some in a community or household can alter or affect the behaviors and choices of others. Identity references the roles and responsibilities associated with different subject positions within communities or households, such as those associated with men and women. LIG focuses on the mobilization of identity not because identities are produced by livelihoods strategies. Instead, identities are referenced as explanations for "appropriate" livelihoods roles and decisions that bring forth the self-interest of the individual. These three spheres overlap significantly, but in different ways for different people in different situations. Through everyday life practices that bring these three spheres together, these discourses, tools of coercion, and identities become 'social facts' (Gidwani, 2001: 79) that define fields of possible action and thought. These fields of thought are what we must understand to explain observed livelihoods decisions and outcomes.

Because livelihoods decisions bring together a range of factors, from social considerations to concerns for income or access to needed resources, the approach presented here does not explain observed behaviors and outcomes through the a priori privileging any particular goal. Instead, the LIG approach requires the

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that RCTs, like asset-based livelihoods approaches, generally operate without explicit theorization of the decisions and activities they are observing.



**Fig. 1.** The complexity of livelihoods decision-making. #1 illustrates the causes behind observed decisions captured by most livelihoods frameworks. #2 illustrates the wider range of factors shaping observed decisions that become visible through political economic/political ecological analysis that nests particular places in wider networks of economic, environment, and politics. Relatively few applications of livelihoods frameworks approach this level of complexity, and those that do tend to consider the impacts of markets on particular livelihoods and places. #3 illustrates the complex web of factors, local and extralocal, and the ways in which these factors play off of one another at multiple scales, different times, and in different situations. The LIG approach charts an analytic path through this level of complexity.



**Fig. 2.** Conceptual diagram of the LIG approach. To summarize: 1) Identifying current challenges to human well-being and livelihoods outcomes 2) often reveals moments in which the logic and legitimacy of livelihoods strategies are called into question by participants in those livelihoods 3) providing a point of entry to the nexus of livelihoods strategy formation 4) which becomes the basis for interpreting livelihoods outcomes. **Note:** this diagram (and this approach) are meant to explain livelihoods decision-making, and therefore it does not address the obvious feedback loops between observed outcomes and all other steps in the approach.

investigator to establish which ends carry weight in a particular context or decision, and to step back and ask the general question that originally inspired the livelihoods approach: how do people live in this place? Within such a framing, cases of livelihoods decision-making in which various social factors trump the desire to seek greater material return no longer stand out as idiosyncratic outliers (see, for example, Carr, 2008a). Instead, they become analytically intelligible, enabling greater purchase on local decision-making and livelihoods pathways than possible under more instrumental livelihoods approaches.

### Implementing the approach

Implementing the LIG approach requires engaging with highly politicized decision-making. Direct questions via interviews and focus groups are therefore not necessarily the best means of drawing out these decisions and their motivations. Instead, the approach relies on the identification and analytical resolution of contradictions in local narratives of everyday life, where different members of the community, household, or other livelihoods-relevant social units disagree about particular aspects of livelihoods (i.e. who plays what role, how to access key livelihoods resources, who makes decisions about particular activities) or where observed behaviors contradict claims put forth in interviews and focus groups. The approach is therefore highly interpretive, but rests on explicit and testable assumptions about behaviors and decisions.

Each step of the approach discussed below is illustrated with examples from the development and application of LIG to the study of livelihoods under global change in Ghana's Central Region. The initial development of the approach took place in May and June of 2004. The author and his research assistant conducted semi-structured interviews with 57 residents of two nearby villages (28 men and 29 women, representing 34 households), using the approach described below. For details related to the data and findings of this research and that of subsequent field seasons, please see Carr, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013.

#### Getting started: the vulnerability context

The LIG approach begins with the establishment of the vulnerability context. As in other livelihoods approaches, under LIG the vulnerability context is the various economic, environmental, social, and political trends that might affect local livelihoods, the shocks that might occur in each of these realms, and the seasonality of the local environment and economy (Carr, 2013, p. 79). The investigator begins by conducting a desk study of these issues in the area under investigation. Appropriate sources for this desk study include:

- *Existing studies of the livelihoods of the area*, or at least those practiced by other members of the same ethnicity. These are unlikely to be comprehensive, but information on such subjects as common crops, access to land, inheritance, gender roles, and key markets provides a basic structure for further inquiry.
- *Existing literature on the climate and environment of the study area*. Most climate and a good deal of biogeographic research is conducted at a scale much larger than that of a household or community. However, there are numerous databases of climate trends and patterns that will contain broad characterizations of the climate and ecology of the study area. Again, such information provides a basic foundation for further inquiry.
- *Studies of market trends and forces relevant to local livelihoods*. While the literature may not speak directly to the study area, understanding the national and regional context into which this community or household fits is a key to understanding their livelihoods decisions because national-scale conditions shape local markets and the availability of livelihoods assets.

Unlike in other livelihoods approaches, the vulnerability context in LIG is not seen as the stage upon which livelihoods play out, and to which livelihoods respond. Instead, this is a first step, a foundation from which to begin investigating a given community or household's livelihoods.

#### Box 1

##### The vulnerability context – Ghana's Central Region

In the villages of Dominase and Ponkrum, located in Ghana's Central Region, the vulnerability context was difficult to establish. There were no previous studies of livelihoods, or baseline/panel surveys of the area, on which to base an assessment of the vulnerability context. Instead, the vulnerability context had to be established from more general information, such as long-term climate trends for the area in which these villages are located (available from the International Research Institute for Climate and Society and from the Ghana Meteorological Service) and broader reporting on market trends for key cash crops like oil palm and cocoa. It was deepened through exploration of archival records that provided hints as to the long-term emphases in livelihoods. Drawing on these resources, it became clear that the vulnerability context included variable patterns and amounts of precipitation, connection to an unstable regional and national economy, and weak transportation infrastructure that limited access to nonfarm livelihoods activities for residents.

### *Identifying contradictions: talking about livelihoods and the vulnerability context*

Once the investigator has established an initial understanding of the vulnerability context, the LIG approach shifts to community engagement. The goal of this phase of the research is threefold. First, we seek to better understand livelihoods in the community and/or household – who does what work, when, and why? This effort will help to flesh out the general understandings reached in the desk study, producing a more detailed, locally-appropriate understanding of the vulnerability context, grounding the information on general trends and seasonality in the desk study in the particular situation of the community as experienced by its members.

Second, this engagement presents a first opportunity to identify contradictions: between community and individual narratives of the vulnerability context and the desk study, and between the claims of different members of the community and/or household. The goal here is not to point out such contradictions and resolve them immediately, but to use them to understand the different perceptions that different members of the community/household have of their vulnerability context and the ways in which they live in that context. It is not important that community/household members be “correct” in their assessment of environmental and economic events and trends, but that the investigator identifies and records apparent discrepancies between particular accounts of the vulnerability context and the desk study. Nor is it important if one group of people in the community/household have a “more accurate” understanding of the vulnerability context. People do not respond to actual amounts of rainfall, changes in vegetation, or shifts in markets as much as they respond to their *perceptions* of these and other aspects of the vulnerability context. Therefore, these perceptions provide a point of entry into the fields of possible action and through that produce observed livelihoods behavior and outcomes.

Third, these different perceptions delineate groups within the community that experience the same vulnerability context, and indeed the same place, in different ways. The investigator should be looking for systematic discrepancies, where particular members of households or the community exhibit similar understandings of the vulnerability context that are distinct from other members of the community/household and/or are distinct from the desk study of the vulnerability context. This information helps to establish the different groups that, due to their different experiences and perceptions of the vulnerability context, have to be independently explored in further investigations. Further, it refines the investigator’s understanding of the vulnerability context, specifically by shifting the focus of investigation from *the vulnerability context* to *the many different experiences of the vulnerability context* that exist in the community or household in question. This initial engagement will make clear the different perceptions of vulnerability and its sources for different members of the community, opening the door for exploration of the constitution and maintenance of these different perceptions under the livelihoods of the community/household. Finally, in understanding how these perceptions are created and maintained, the investigator will also determine the factors that most greatly influence livelihoods decision-making (proximate causes), and in so doing establish the appropriate scale of analysis for understanding livelihoods decision-making. For example, if farmers’ crop selection decisions are shaped both by local gender roles and market prices influenced by global commodities markets, analysis will consider both of these factors, rather than taking an exclusively

large-scale, structural explanatory framework that largely ignores the local constitution of social roles, or adopting explanations that focus on local social factors, and only account for larger structural issues in their local pricing manifestations. By framing the scale of analysis *through the research* (as opposed to before the field research begins), the LIG approach presents an opportunity to improve the ways in which livelihoods research engage with economic globalization, agrarian transformation, or climate change.

Before concluding this phase of the research, the investigator should develop:

- A list of as many livelihoods activities as can be identified in the community or region under investigation.
- A clear sense of who undertakes each of these activities – for example, men and/or women?
- The principal reasons people give for undertaking each activity in their livelihoods.
- A list of the stressors and opportunities people perceive in their daily lives.
- A clear understanding of how people understand the relationship between these stressors and opportunities and their lives and livelihoods.
- A set of social groupings that reflect shared livelihoods activities and rationales, exposure to stressors, and access to opportunities.
- One or more situations where the claims of one group about some aspect of the above contradict the claims of one or more other groups.

The investigator can employ a range of methods during this phase of the LIG approach, from community meetings to focus groups to individual interviews. Community meetings and focus groups are efficient means of inventorying livelihoods activities, understanding the broad roles and responsibilities associated with different members of the community, and deepening understandings of the vulnerability context. However, the dynamics of group interviews and meetings often stifle marginal viewpoints, making it difficult to identify the relevant intra-community social cleavages, such as gender, age, income, and ethnicity, around which to build later analysis. Therefore, the investigator should use meetings not only for data collection, but also as a point of entry into the set of identities around which different livelihoods roles, responsibilities, and perceptions cohere. Group dynamics, such as who speaks and does not speak in focus groups or community meetings, or topics that when raised in these settings generate significant debate and dissent, present opportunities to identify different cleavages within the community. This effort should be followed by conversations and solo interviews with representatives of silenced or dissenting groups to identify alternative perspectives, roles, and responsibilities. In the course of these interviews and conversations, the investigator should be looking for representations of the vulnerability context, livelihoods activities, and social expectations that are shared within particular groups and distinct from those of other groups, as they will signal the social cleavages relevant to livelihoods decision-making and outcomes in the population. Therefore, no matter what other methods are employed, the investigator will have to undertake some interviews or informal conversations with several community members to ensure their activities, concerns, and roles are both understood and represented in the information used to organize the community for further research.

**Box 2**

## Identifying contradictions – Ghana's Central Region

In Dominase and Ponkrum, fieldwork started with extended conversations about the history of the communities and local livelihoods with a wide range of community members. These conversations highlighted the importance of agriculture and non-farm employment (NFE) to local livelihoods, as well as the importance of changing transportation linkages to those attempting to hold NFE. These conversations revealed that different members of households were undertaking different agricultural and NFE activities to manage the uncertain local environment and economy, manifest in uncertain seasonal precipitation and unstable national and local markets for consumer goods. For example, in some households women were producing for subsistence while men were producing for market sale. However, when questioned about the use of the proceeds of these activities, a contradiction emerged. Men claimed to have their own incomes, as well as a household income over which they had final say. Women contested this claim, arguing that local land tenure rules made their farms and farm incomes their own. When directly questioned about this, men agreed that their wives controlled their own farms, but still claimed control over a household income. The different livelihoods roles played by men and women in different households did not change these contradictory claims. Unraveling how men and women in the same household could reference a shared understanding of the same institution (land tenure) yet argue for completely different framings of the household income became the point of access to livelihoods decision-making in these villages.

At the same time, the different claims of men and women defined a key social cleavage to address in further analysis. When discussing livelihoods roles, responsibilities, and goals, the consistency of women's responses across households whether women emphasized subsistence or market sale in their agricultural strategy suggested the need to explore how these gender differences were maintained across different household livelihoods strategies. Thus, the intersection of the gender and the particular livelihoods strategy individuals lived under defined groups with different experiences of the vulnerability context. Finally, because access to land in these villages comes through the male head of household, it was clear that female-headed households were going to be uniquely challenged in these villages.

## Relevant Social Groupings: Ghana's Central Region

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Men in market-oriented households   | Men in market/subsistence households   |
| Women in market oriented households | Women in market/subsistence households |
| Women heading households            |  |

livelihoods decision-making at the community and household level. First, they help to identify the relevant social groupings that produce/result in different vulnerabilities and livelihoods outcomes in the community and household. Second, they provide points of entry for the exploration of three realms that, when aligned, produce observed livelihoods decisions and outcomes: livelihoods discourses, the mobilization of identity, and tools of coercion. I explore each in turn below.

- Livelihoods discourses

Livelihoods discourses are the ways in which people understand, talk about, and act with reference to life in their vulnerability context. This includes the rationales people provide for selecting particular livelihoods activities, the reasons they give for not taking on other activities and opportunities that might be available in the area, and the decisions and outcomes that result from this reasoning. These perceptions are heavily shaped by the language and terms used to talk about the vulnerability context, local livelihoods activities, and the roles people play in those activities. Initial community engagement usually provides a good deal of information on this subject. At this stage of the research, the investigator should now intensively interview a sample of individuals from each social group that s/he identified during the initial engagement. The goal is to develop an understanding of how each group perceives the vulnerability context, why those distinct perceptions exist, and how these perceptions shape individual decisions to play the livelihoods roles they do. This last question is particularly important when working with groups that are clearly less advantaged (or even disadvantaged) by the dominant livelihoods strategies in the community or household.

Investigation of livelihoods discourses within a community or household will likely touch upon the other two key areas of inquiry, mobilization of identity and tools of coercion. Where the investigation of livelihoods discourses ventures into these areas, the investigator should pay careful attention to these overlaps and be sure to draw out relationships as much as possible.

In this component of the LIG approach, the investigator seeks to understand:

- The distinct activities, rationales for those activities, and explanations for why other activities are not undertaken, for each social grouping identified in the *Identifying Contradictions* phase of the research
- The different challenges and opportunities to which these activities respond
- The activities that are clearly acceptable and unacceptable for members of that group
- For activities that are *sometimes* appropriate or inappropriate for members of that group, the conditions under which that activity becomes appropriate (i.e. marital status, seasonality, etc.)

Example points of entry for this conversation:

- Exploring contradictions between members of a particular group's perceptions of the vulnerability context versus the perceptions of others in the community,
- Exploring why the interviewee engages in activities that appear to be confined to their group, with particular attention to the social benefits the individual might gain from participation.
- Exploring why the interviewee does not engage in activities that appear to exclude their group/identity, paying particular attention to the social costs they might incur if they were to engage in these other activities.
- Exploring the perceived use and value of particular crops versus those observed in other groups/identities

*Constructing decision-making: livelihoods discourses, coercion, and identity*

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the contradictions and differences of opinion that emerge between different groups during the initial community engagement provide a means of entry into the core of

When examining discourses of livelihoods, participant observation is a very useful tool. It allows the investigator to move beyond simply asking questions to cross-check answers to those questions through observation. In another implementation of LIG in Senegal, the primary field investigator asked farmers about their planting habits. After many interviews, the rainy season started, and the observed actions of a number of farmers did not align with their interview responses. When he questioned them about this inconsistency, a much richer conversation about the logic of planting emerged as individual farmers explained the discrepancy between their “ideal” pattern of planting (which they described in the interview) and the one they undertook that year (the observed behavior).

### Box 3

#### Livelihoods discourses – Ghana’s Central Region

In Dominase and Ponkrum, the different livelihoods roles of men and women became clear in both the crops they planted, the reasons for planting those crops, and the uses to which they put their farm incomes. No matter the household livelihoods strategy, men always dominated the planting of lucrative tree crops. In households where men farmed for market sale and women for subsistence consumption, men and women would view *the same crop* as having different uses aligned with their particular production role. In all households, women used their farm labor to meet the subsistence needs of the household before addressing their own needs and goals. In households where women farmed for subsistence, the vast bulk of their production clearly went to this purpose. In households where women farmed for market sale, they used the vast majority of their farm incomes to meet the subsistence needs of the household. Men were, in all cases, focused on earning cash incomes that they then used to meet various expenses and material needs of the household. In these monogamous households, these two strategies reflected two means of addressing the economic and environmental uncertainty of the local environment and economy in consistent manners across the genders. Some households focused on raising as much money as possible to meet their needs and address any shocks that might emerge, while others focused on mixing cash and subsistence production to hedge against market and environmental shocks. In all cases, men focused on cash income and larger needs of the household, while women met the subsistence needs of the household.

In female-headed households, the lack of a male head prevented the gender differentiation of livelihoods roles. Women heading these houses produced for both subsistence and market sale.

The exploration of livelihoods discourses in Dominase and Ponkrum yielded an interesting outcome. In houses where women farmed for subsistence, it became clear that just a few surplus tenths of a hectare of farmland allowed them to produce a surplus beyond the subsistence needs of the household, which they quickly sold and leveraged into significant non-farm activities that raised their earnings to near-parity with their husbands. Yet women who did this were never able to do so for two straight years. What was holding them back?

#### •Tools of coercion

While exploring the interviewee’s livelihoods discourse will help to explain why he or she undertakes particular activities, discourses do not determine individual actions or decisions. Instead, we must also consider if and how certain decisions and actions are coerced. Coercion can range from the threat of physical violence, such as in cases of domestic violence, to the existence of institutions such as land tenure rules that groups and individuals control over the amount of land farmed by each person in a given household. While men might control access to land, and therefore have a means of coercing their wives to plant certain crops or certain amounts of crop, the investigator cannot assume that only some in a given household or community are subject to coercion. For example, while men might have means of shaping their wives’ agricultural practices via their control over access to land, they generally use this tool in response to social expectations of how much land their wives *should* farm (an issue that brings together *discourses of livelihoods* and a particular *mobilization of identity*). It is entirely possible that a man might wish to encourage his wife to raise crops traditionally limited to men in order to improve the overall income of the household. If, however, doing so violates the expectations of individual roles and responsibilities at this particular intersection of livelihoods discourses and identity roles and responsibilities, such action might call his social status into question. In such a situation, the man may act to prevent his wife from farming these crops, even if it means accepting less income and less access to resources that might improve the well-being of the household. In such situations, the man is himself subject to coercion, even as he coerces his wife. Coercion is highly political and sensitive, and therefore is best approached obliquely unless the topic is raised by the interviewee. When exploring the tools of coercion that further shape individual decisions and actions, the investigator should be looking for points of overlap, where particular roles and responsibilities, or particular ways of talking about livelihoods and the vulnerability context align with or contradict various tools of coercion. This aspect of the LIG approach opens an interrogation of power in local livelihoods, a critical contribution to existing livelihoods approaches that often do not approach or address power relations in their analysis.

In this component of the LIG approach, the investigator seeks to understand:

- From the perspective of each social group, the rewards for taking “expected” or “acceptable” livelihoods decisions, and the consequences of taking on different activities than those deemed “acceptable” under existing discourses of livelihoods.
- The means by which the choices and actions of individuals and groups in the household or community are enabled and constrained, and who has the ability to enable or constrain activities for whom.
- A clear understanding of who controls the resources or social relations that might be mobilized as consequences or rewards/opportunities.

Example points of entry for this conversation:

- How do you access the resources you need to make a living? Who grants this access?
- What would happen if you started planting a crop or conducting a livelihoods activity associated with a different group in the community?
- Who makes decisions about money/livelihoods in your household? Why do they make these decisions?
- What would happen to someone who tried to ignore or contradict these decisions?

The tools of coercion are often very sensitive subjects, both for those who wield them, and for those upon whom these tools are employed. One-on-one interviews are generally the most effective way to elicit information on this subject, and even in interviews it is often best to approach the issue obliquely and through triangulation with other forms of information. Because interviewees may be uncomfortable talking directly about their situations with regard to the tools of coercion, interview responses will often reflect normative claims common to all members of the community, when the actual practices of the individual are more complex and transgress some of these norms. Therefore, in building an understanding of the tools of coercion at work in a particular community or livelihoods strategy, participant observation is a particularly important tool for validating claims about access to resources and the activities in which individuals do and do not participate. For example, women may claim that only men cultivate a particular crop, but visits to their farms might uncover that they grow very small amounts at the margins of their fields. Discussing why they grow a “man’s crop”, and why they do so at the margins of their fields, will lend nuance and depth to the understanding of the social and spatial circumstances under which this gendered line can be crossed, and thus nuance to the investigator’s understanding of coercion and its role in livelihoods decisions.

#### Box 4

##### Tools of coercion – Ghana’s Central Region

In attempting to understand both why women did not farm tree crops, and why women who produced marketable surpluses could not sustain them, conversations with men and women in Dominase and Ponkrum turned to land tenure. In these villages, households obtain land through the clan lineage of the male head. The male head then distributes land between himself and his wife (and any other adult members of the household who might be farming). Once distributed, however, control over the land rests with the person farming it, from what to plant to what to do with the proceeds. Thus, in these villages, households are social units housing two (or more) autonomous agricultural producers. Yet women chose not to plant tree crops, were focusing their production on subsistence, and seemed to be unable to sustain agricultural surpluses. In conversations exploring these outcomes, it became clear that men’s control over access to land shaped at least two of them. Women’s uncertain tenure meant investment in tree crops, however lucrative, was unwise. Most interestingly, however, it became clear that it was not women who were unable to sustain agricultural surpluses, but their husbands who were constraining their wives’ production to the minimum plot size necessary to meet the subsistence needs of the household without any real surplus. In data that spanned three years, it was clear that women who produced a surplus in one year had their farm size, marketable surplus, and therefore capital for NFE, curtailed in the next year. The motivation behind this was purely social: in these villages, and in Akan society more broadly, men who earn less than their wives lose status and respect. This, in turn, had a material ramification for the household, for a less-respected man might end up being given less land for his household, impacting the well-being of all members of the household. This provided a disincentive for women to press men for more land or complain when their farm sizes were curtailed. It also provided an important point of entry into the mobilization of identity in these livelihoods.

#### • Mobilization of identity

The exploration of livelihoods discourses and tools of coercion will touch upon the different livelihoods roles that people play in a particular community or household. These different roles might relate to gender, age, ethnicity, income, or even the particular livelihoods strategy that informs a particular interviewee’s perceptions and actions. The discussion of coercion will likely reinforce these different roles and responsibilities. However, discourses and coercion cannot explain why those who lose under a given livelihoods strategy continue to participate (Carr, 2008a). Discourses and tools of coercion are effective only insofar as those who engage with them view them as legitimate. A key means of legitimizing livelihoods discourses and tools of coercion is to mobilize identity roles in the household and community – that is, to tie various discursive framings of how to make a living, and the tools of coercion and their use, to particular identity roles that are generally understood and accepted at the community and household levels. Linking livelihoods roles, vulnerabilities, and outcomes to identities can legitimize the persistent inequalities that emerge under particular livelihoods strategies. Further, it can legitimize the use of coercion to ensure compliance with identity and livelihoods expectations, such that even those who lose under a given strategy continue to participate. Here, then, the LIG approach goes deeper into issues of power relations, examining how power goes beyond mere coercion into the realm of self-interest, thus more fully exploring the fields of possible action and thought that shape livelihoods decision-making.

The investigator should be looking for points of overlap between various identity roles and their expectations with the interviewee’s livelihoods activities, and the tools of coercion to which they are subject (or which they are able to use to shape the actions of others).

In this component of the LIG approach, the investigator seeks to understand:

- The roles, rights, and responsibilities (both in livelihoods, and within their social context more broadly) of each social group identified in the *Identifying Contradictions* phase of the research.
- The scale at which those roles, rights, and responsibilities take shape (i.e. a community expectation versus one at the scale of a particular ethnicity or a particular nationality) to understand the degree to which livelihoods mobilize or shape such expectations.
- The degree to which those assigned particular roles, rights, and responsibilities accept or contest them.

Example points of entry for this conversation:

- What are the characteristics of the social role with which the interviewee is most associated? For example, what are the characteristics of a good woman in this community? A good wife? A good man? A good husband?
- What sorts of activities is the interviewee *responsible for* in his/her household and community (this should emphasize responsibility, to capture activities that the interviewee feels bound to conduct).
- Exploring how particular livelihoods activities and other responsibilities of the interviewee fit into the characteristics of the interviewee (i.e., how do women’s livelihoods activities and household duties help them fit into the role of a good woman/wife?).

As with the investigation of livelihoods discourses, participant observation is critical to understanding how identity informs livelihoods decisions. One means of establishing this is by observing

those who deviate from the normative social roles that are part of the field of acceptable thought and action informing livelihoods decisions. Where individuals deviate, explorations of the consequences and opportunities that emerge from such deviation will result in a richer understanding of how identity is mobilized to produce livelihoods decisions and outcomes.

#### Box 5

##### Mobilization of identity – Ghana’s Central Region

Once it was clear that men were constraining their wives’ production, and that their wives were aware of this practice, the question became why women continued to go along with these livelihoods strategies. After all, under local land tenure rules they were not obligated to plant particular crops or use their incomes for particular purposes. However, interview data and participant observation made it clear that women always used their labor or income to meet the subsistence needs of the household. Further, they were aware that making these choices limited their surplus incomes, making them dependent on their husbands and less able to meet their own non-subsistence needs. To understand these outcomes, I asked men and women to define their gender roles in terms of the characteristics of a good man/husband and good woman/wife. Women’s roles were clearly defined as caring for the household before themselves. To do otherwise risked being labeled a bad woman/wife, or to be treated as a child instead of as an adult, not only by men but by other women in the village, as well as relatives in other communities. Men were expected to earn enough money to meet household needs and to be in control of their households. One means of demonstrating the achievement of this role was to earn the money needed by the household, and to earn more than one’s wife. Men who earned less than their wives were subject to ridicule and were likely to lose status in their communities and clan lineages, potentially restricting access to farmland. Thus, even a man who wanted to give his wife more land and improve her income could not do so, as this would likely diminish his status and compromise his entire household’s future access to farmland. Thus, the two livelihoods strategies in these villages consistently mobilized the same gender roles to legitimize the different roles of men and women in addressing the vulnerability context, and the ways in which men ensured that women played their role without challenging men for control of the household.

#### • Analysis

As interviews proceed, the investigator should seek to build a coherent picture of individual motivations, opportunities, and constraints from their understanding of how these three broad realms of everyday life and livelihoods intersect in particular livelihoods decisions. For example, s/he should be looking for overlap between an interviewee’s understanding of how to make a living, including the activities he or she should be undertaking, the ways in which they feel compelled to take up these activities, and how those activities fit into their expectations for themselves or others in the community. In this way, analysis is not a distinct component/activity within the LIG approach, but instead is an ongoing process of identifying these overlaps (or discontinuities). In this process, new questions will emerge, both for the interviewee at hand, and to revisit with previous interviewees.

It is unlikely that any account of livelihoods decision-making will be comprehensive or completely coherent. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the motivations for particular decisions are many and often difficult to trace or discern. The LIG approach, while embracing the partiality of explanation inherent to engagement with complex systems such as livelihoods, aims to establish validity in several ways that permeate the research process. The first of these is through repeated interviewing that follows an evolving set of questions. As discussed above, interviews should follow topics where the interviewee takes them, and the investigator should modify his/her questions to take into account these new topics. When the investigator no longer identifies new topics or questions, and the answers to his/her questions become routine with no new information, he or she will have achieved what grounded theory calls theoretical saturation, and can stop interviewing members of that social grouping (for discussion of grounded theory as a qualitative method, see Barbour, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Second, LIG inherently triangulates data from different sources, such as interviewee interviews, desk-based research, and observed behaviors, presenting another opportunity to evaluate the claims and representations of those with whom we work. Finally, at the end of the field research, the investigator should, when possible, undertake a final verification effort by presenting his/her findings and understandings to focus groups comprised of the different social groupings investigated in the course of the study. The investigator should explain his or her interpretation of livelihoods decision-making in that group, and get as much feedback as possible from the group on that interpretation while remaining aware of group sensibilities, never naming individuals or discussing individual problems, and using caution when raising sensitive topics like domestic violence. Further the analysis should be presented without judgment – the purpose is not to correct behaviors, but to understand them.

In conversation with these groups, the investigator will engage in a process that both refines their understanding of livelihoods decision-making, and likely informs community members about aspects of their decision-making that, when framed in terms of an outsiders’ findings, may serve as catalysts for changes or different behaviors that produce more of the outcomes each group sees as desirable. In this stage, then, the LIG approach takes on an aspect of action research, though the pursuit of larger action goals is outside the scope of the approach, this final stage can be used as a springboard into other action research approaches where appropriate.

#### Box 6

##### Analysis – Ghana’s Central Region

As the previous boxes discussing livelihoods discourses, tools of coercion, and mobilization of identity suggest, there were several points of connection and overlap between these arenas. For example, the fact that women did not plant tree crops first only made sense in the context of land tenure (a tool of coercion). This coercive tool, however, was only legitimized by the mobilization of gender roles in which “good” women were expected to provide subsistence labor and production for their households. This set of connections also served to better frame men’s decisions to limit their wives’ incomes by constraining their access to land. Drawing out the various moments in which discourses of livelihoods, tools of coercion, and mobilization of identity intersected presented a series of decisions and outcomes reflecting the same broad logic, even though that logic was

implemented in different ways in different households (in terms of women's production for market sale or subsistence). Livelihoods strategies were means of managing (governing) an uncertain local environment and economy in a manner that reinforced men's control over their households, but did so in a manner that spoke to and mobilized women's self-interest to maintain the legitimacy of these strategies and their outcomes.

This framing of livelihoods decision-making allowed for a return to the original contradiction that provided the point of entry to livelihoods decision-making in Dominase and Ponkrum. In interviews which were corroborated by observations, men and women were asked to describe how they spent their incomes. Men's expenses were a mix of personal purchases (such as alcohol or batteries for a radio they kept for themselves) and purchases for the household (roofing sheets, farming tools, seeds). Women's expenses contained relatively few personal purchases, and surprisingly contained a very large number of expenses that men and women (in separate interviews and conversations) had characterized as men's expenses, such as school fees and costs (about 40% of women's total expenses). When questioned about this odd pattern, both men and women noted that men had what amounted to a right to withhold money from the household if they were unhappy with their wives. The transgressions that might trigger such behavior could be very minor, such as cooking a bad meal. When such income was withheld, women generally had to step in with their own resources to pay for the "men's responsibilities" that went unfunded. As a result, men were able to mobilize parts of their wives' incomes indirectly, and without technically contradicting local land tenure and income rules. In short, there was a *de facto* household income over which men had control, at least indirectly.

As this logic became clear, focus groups of each critical social grouping were convened to cross-check the project findings. Women who farmed for subsistence, women who farmed for market sale, husbands whose wives farmed for subsistence, and husbands whose wives farmed for market sale were consulted independently to clarify, challenge, and validate these findings. These groups yielded fascinating information. For example, in all married households women were not happy about their husband's withholding of income, and resisted in their own ways (such as refusing to cook for their husbands, or even withholding sex). They did not, however, change their agricultural strategies or other livelihoods activities to build their personal incomes or autonomy. In the course of conversation, it became clear that to do so would transgress their expectations of livelihoods and gender roles, and possibly enable others in their husband's clan lineage to use land tenure to further limit their incomes. Thus, the focus group further confirmed the larger logic of livelihoods decision-making that informed women's actions and outcomes.

## Conclusion

Development policy and implementation are passing through a transformative period, with poor countries graduating to middle-income status, the emerging reality of a "new bottom billion" found in these middle income countries (Kanbur & Sumner, 2011; Sumner, 2010, 2012), and a growing recognition that change is

taking place in the Global South with limited correlation to the traditional targets of aid and development programming (e.g. Kenny, 2011). At the same time, the challenge of climate change is, for many, manifest now in increasing climate variability (IPCC, 2012). The shift to a focus on vulnerability and resilience allows development to focus on shoring up the foundations upon which local, indigenous innovations have taken place and will flourish in the future. Vulnerability and resilience are complex concepts, and donors and researchers require points of entry through which to engage them in policy, program, and project design. Reconstructed, explicitly theorized livelihoods approaches can serve as such a lens.

Livelihoods approaches such as LIG are critical for understanding the complex worlds that the Global Poor negotiate in their everyday lives, the reasons why they conduct that negotiation in the way they do, and therefore the ways in which development donors and implementers might productively collaborate with the world's most vulnerable people to address the challenges they face and maximize their future opportunities. Narrowly focused research approaches, such as RCTs, are not equipped to answer the complex questions of resilience and vulnerability that have risen to prominence in the development discourse. An explicitly theorized, rigorously executed livelihoods approach such as described above can engage this complexity in a manner that explains observed decisions and outcomes. Such explanation is critical if we are to inform questions of intervention design at the project level in particular places, and therefore project level monitoring and evaluation efforts.

However the utility of the LIG approach is not limited to the scale of the project (and the community or household); it can be a means of informing policy at much larger scales. For example, explanations of livelihoods decision-making founded on the LIG approach can be used to interpret existing large data sets, such as panel surveys or other large-scale data collections. Often such datasets can demonstrate patterns of association between people, behaviors, and outcomes, but cannot rigorously interpret those patterns (see, for example, Carr's, (2008b) effort to correct Doss' (2002) misreading of gendered crops in the 1991–92 Ghana Living Standards Survey). The LIG approach provides an opportunity to access and understand representative decision-making processes that produced those patterns, and therefore explain the causes and importance of any patterns in a manner grounded in empirical evidence. By offering interpretive clarity to those using these large datasets, users of the LIG approach can guide the rapid scaling their findings beyond the household or community. Thus, the LIG approach can, in the right places, become a policy tool that coherently links rigorous, locally-appropriate explanation to policy questions of sectoral emphasis as well as the design and initiation of new initiatives. Such tools are critical if development is to engage productively with the new world that we make alongside the global poor each day.

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