

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

## **‘Culture’: a new attribute to studying rural livelihoods**

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### **Abstract**

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

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

### **Introduction**

Our living world is rapidly transforming and globalization has become an inevitable process. We all have become members of the 'global village'. We all are tended to share the global economy, global society, global political structure, global environment and global culture of course. Therefore, life has become absolutely 'exciting' for many people as this 'global' process is not equally benefiting for all at each and every corner of this world. Development is defined and redefined as a western process and also integrated with the western mythology

that distorts the *imagination and vision of the majority of the people, through imposing 'global values, norms and simply the 'global culture'*. To put it rather differently, *all 'other' world views are devalued and dismissed as 'primitive', 'backward' and 'irrational' or 'native'* (Tucker, 1999); traditional values, knowledge and customs have become irrelevant for human progress and therefore the development process has become value free phenomenon. The conceptual and theoretical heritage of western tradition has disallowed us to inquire deep into the relationship between culture and development, as modernization theorists taught us that 'development is about eliminating traditional culture' defining development as the domain of the 'economic' guided by objective inquiry in which culture accrues no significant role (Hennayake, 2006).

Development as a practical and concept has been steeped in optimism. The defense of local cultural values and cultural diversity (see(Escobar, 2000, Esteva and Prakash, 1998),(UNESCO, 1972, UNESCO, 2001, UNESCO, 2003) in development is centralized and a broad agenda is now formulating to proclaim 'what is an appropriate or inappropriate culture in development context'? Going beyond the traditional criticisms, development is now shown to be a pervasive 'cultural discourse' with profound consequences of the production of social reality in the so-called Third World(Escobar, 2000). For example, as Tucker (1999) notices, development is not a 'natural process', although it has been accorded such a status in the mythology of Western beliefs. It is a 'set' of practices and beliefs that has been woven into the fabric of Western culture and is specific to it (Esteva and Prakash, 1998, Tucker, 1999). Therefore, development was-and continues to be for most part-a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic process that treat people and cultures as abstract concepts. As (Escobar, 1995) notices, the current development is not *a cultural process*; it is a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some '*badly needed*' goods to a '*target*' population (Escobar 1995). The dependency theory, as the first major Third World challenge to Europe-centered discourse (Tucker, 1999, p 12) has also failed to address the cultural dimension of domination. This is a crucial omission as cultural diversity is central to any understanding of the relations of power and to any strategy of resistance or dependency reversal. Esteva and Prakash (1998) posit that, 'as people of the outskirts', the periphery, the margins, they were forced to adopt the centers established by others' (1998:288). As Chambers elaborates further, the current development is a *movement along gradients from peripheral or last towards core of first, and through the spread of core condition into peripheries* (1998:9). Such process legitimizes the socio-economic security through simplification and rejection of 'others' values and knowledge through the assimilation of the western rationality. The modernization theory sees the traditional cultures as something that modernization acts upon usually by breaking and even destroying cultural traditions of the Third World societies (Schech and Haggis, 2000, Escobar, 1997, Tucker, 1999); the ways of speaking, celebrating, their beliefs, techniques, art forms and values. Hence the processes of modernization are therefore placed in opposition to traditional culture

(Schech and Haggis 2000:37). In development studies culture has tended to be regarded as something of an '*epiphenomenon*', or secondary in importance to the all important economic and political dimensions (Tucker, 1997 and Schech & Haggis, 2000). But, the economic and social transformation of the society is inseparable from the production and reproduction of meanings, symbols and knowledge that are, cultural reproductions.

This paper is an attempt to testify the values of traditional culture in relation to rural development and sustainability. In trying to understand and elaborate the importance and the rationality of the traditional culture in development process, this paper suggests the potentiality of traditional culture as a resource for making livelihoods of rural people. Therefore this paper recognizes traditional culture in relation to livelihoods building and livelihoods resilience based on the initial works of the authors' doctoral study. The paper recognizes the complex intricacy of traditional culture in relation to building livelihoods assets (social capital, human capital, physical capital, natural capital and financial capital), livelihoods resilience (response to livelihoods vulnerability) and livelihoods sustainability (social, economical, institutional and environmental).

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) emerged in the late 1990s and it is identified as a holistic paradigm and focused on people's needs, assets/resources, partnership, participation and sustainability. This approach has been seen as a remedy for many of the deficiencies encountered in the earlier 'top-down' development approaches and soon became popular among many of the development agencies and practitioners. However, the approach has also been criticized for the following reasons:

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

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

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

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

Livelihood is seen as a highly complex and all-encompassing concept which, is not restricted to the ecological or to the economic or productive aspects of life (de Hann & Zoomer 2003). (WCED, 1987) for example, provides a detailed explanation based on the concept of Sustainable Livelihood Security'. In this context, livelihood refers to *adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs...a household may be able to gain sustainable livelihood security in many ways-through ownership of land, livestock or trees; rights to grazing, fishing, hunting or gathering; through stable employment with adequate remuneration; or through varied repertoires of activities ( 1987 p 2-5) .* Wallmann (1984) (in (deHann and Zoomers, 2005) articulates livelihoods in a descriptive way. According to Wallmann, *livelihood is never just a matter of searching shelter, money and food. It is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships and affirmation of personal significance ...and group identity. The tasks of meeting obligations, of security, identity and status are crucial to livelihood as bread and shelter (p 32).* But, this is not to say that livelihood is not a matter of material well-being; but rather that it also includes non-material aspect of well-being as well. Bebbington (1999) for example, provides a holistic meaning of livelihood; a livelihood encompasses income, both cash and in kind, as well as the social institutions (kin, family, and village), gender relations, and property rights required to support and to sustain a given standard of living. A livelihood also includes access to and the benefits derived from social and public services provided by the state such as education, health services, roads, water supplies and so on ( 1999 p 2022). Therefore, the understanding of sustainable livelihoods is holistic and meaningful, when it meets social, economic, cultural and spiritual needs of all members of a community, human, non-human, present and future-and safeguards cultural and biological diversity.

## **Matter of Culture?**

The wider role of cultural and historical contexts in livelihoods analysis has been questioned notably by (Bebbington, 1999 )and other researchers including(Cahn, 2002, Glavovic et al., 2002), Adato and Dick (2002) and Muhia (2000). In the conventional livelihood approach culture is referred to mean various institutions, polices and transforming structures that shape and govern people's accessibility to different types of livelihoods assets and livelihoods opportunities<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, culture is recognized as a humanly devised constraint and often a vulnerable fact that determines human interactions (North 1993). The SL approach developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for example, places culture in the vulnerability context and implies culture as something which cause of livelihoods vulnerability. (Carswell, 2000) for example, has referred caste as a part of culture to determine the livelihoods diversification undertaking a study in Southern Ethiopia. As this study reveals people are unlikely to be potters, tanners and blacksmiths which are socially defined livelihood activities if they were not born into that particular caste group. In this case, Carswell refers culture as a crucial determinant of livelihoods choices. (Hussein and Nelson, 1998) also discuss 'culture' in relation to livelihoods diversification in Mali, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia; in these cases diversification has identified as a strategy for *cultural expression* and formation of a separate identity for the community. Ellis, (2000) discusses the concept of culture in relation to 'social capital' and subsumes the idea of 'belief systems, class, caste and ethnicity and kin'. These are stressed as essential components to be considered in attaining future security of livelihoods at individuals and households level.

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

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

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

As we are aware, rural livelihoods system constitutes diverse economic, social and cultural ‘universe’ wherein rural families are bound to make their living. People acquire livelihoods in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of success according to their access to resources and employment and how they deal with pressures arising from social, economic and environmental changes. These livelihood strategies depend on the basic materials and social, tangible and intangible assets which possess the rural complexity and heterogeneity. As (WorldBank, 2003) notices, rural people have the modest portfolio of livelihood assets that can help to bring them out of poverty and insecurity. It has been recognized that, traditional social capital, culture and history, human capital, and indigenous knowledge and know-how as resources, which may have different opportunities to pursue various livelihoods (WorldBank, 2003). As Chambers (1998) emphasizes, people construct and contrive a living using their knowledge, skills and creativity. They may be acquired within the household, passed on from generation to generation as indigenous and traditional technical knowledge, or through apprenticeship or through innovation and experiments. Therefore, traditional customs, rituals, knowledge, skills, beliefs and value systems which, is collectively termed as ‘culture’, is an embedded element in rural lifestyles and indeed has greater influences on livelihoods choices and resource accessibility. On other hand, culture and economic performances are also interlinked and economic activities are not exempted from the influences of local symbols and meanings. As (Munjeri., 2004; Murray, 2001) notices, the intangible culture (Chapter 3) is the way of life and the vital sources of an identity for many communities that is deeply rooted in history. But, these had for a long been an ignored concept in livelihoods concerns, since they are in simple formats.

Bernstein (1992) notices, the image of farming for example represents the stability of rural society, and immobility of its inhabitants; it conveys a notion like rural people being ‘tied to

the land'. Paddy farming is defined as a cultural activity among the Asian people. For example, Sinhalese paddy farming system is a metonymical representation of the *wewa* (lake) and the *yaya* (paddy field); the *wewa* (tank) the *dagaba* (pagoda) and the *gama* (village) and *pansala* (village temple) are the most culturally valued symbolical expression of the 'prosperity' of the Sri Lankan community. This is not the case only with farming culture. The 'pastoral' societies of Africa and 'sea culture'<sup>ii</sup> of the Pacific people for instance, are also cultural artifacts of livelihood systems. For example (Adriansen, 2006) notices, among the Senegalese Fulani people 'cattle' are the most culturally valued resource; they herd cattle to 'survive' or 'to feed Fulani families'. (Adriansen, 2006) put this in more poetic way, cattle for Fulani is..... *because I'm Fulani....a Fulani without cattle are like a woman without jewels.....Cattle are gold for the Fulani...Cattle are the honour of the Fulani...*In this aspect 'cattle' refers to represent the "cultural capital" among the Fulani and this does not appear to be changing even though the ways to acquire this capital have been diversified (Adriansen 2006: 223). In this pastoral mentality, cattle are treated as a wealthy object and a source of Fulani's prestige (see de Hann 2000 Adriansen and Nielsen 2002 and Bayer 1999 also).

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

Sustainable livelihood approach requires creative ways of acquiring local sustainability and tools are need to be created and adapted as fit community needs, rather than forcing communities to fit with whatever tool is in vogue. Developing such strategies needs respects for the values and knowledge, the 'understanding of understanding' ((Marschke & Berkes, 2005). (Folke et al., 2003), and Berkes & Seixas (2005), suggest a 'cultural resilience' as a crucial phenomenon in rural sustainability. (Folke et al., 2003) notice three fundamental characteristics, which living strategies are obviously made up of; 1. 'Learning to live with change and uncertainty', 2. 'Nurturing learning and 3. Adapting' and 'creating opportunities for self organization'<sup>iii</sup>. However, the traditional cultures and their linkages for example, may seem to be irrelevant to a development practitioner of this century, and they will often be

interested on modern 'livelihoods strategies'. But, peoples' value systems may influence to make all the differences for the people who are seeking balance their economic livelihoods.

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

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

asserts that ‘the knowledge of rural people has a comparative strength with what is local and observable by eye, changes over time, and matters to people’. It has been undervalued and neglected. But recognizing and empowering it should not lead an opposite neglect of scientific knowledge...the key is to know whether, where and how the two knowledge can be combined, with modern science as servant not master, and serving not those who are central, rich and powerful, but those who are peripheral, poor and weak, so that all gain’ (1997:205); rural people’s traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge are complementary in their strengths and weaknesses. Combined they may achieve what neither would alone (Chambers 1983:75).

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

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

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<sup>iii</sup> For example, see as Terer et al (2004) notice living ‘harmony’ with the ‘flooding regime’, seasonal changes and patterns of Tana River, Pokomo and Wardei communities manage their livelihood resources. The local people had vast knowledge on wetland ecosystems especially on their ecological changes. This was particularly noted by their intentions to adopt new practice to earn their livelihoods Terer et al (2004: 12)

<sup>iv</sup> See especially sections Section 2.4 (DFID 1999) and section 4.11 in (DFID 2000)