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Livelihoods Research: Transcending Boundaries of Time and Space*

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There are two key questions in livelihoods research. How should we do it? What is it for? On the first question, disparate methods may be broadly grouped into two approaches: those that 'look around' at a moment of time (the circumspective approach) and those that seek to reconstruct change over time (the retrospective approach). All livelihoods research should incorporate both approaches. On the second question, recent livelihoods research has been mainly directed to more effective 'policy-making' for the future (the prospective approach). Conventionally, a phase of investigation and analysis is followed by a phase of production of 'policy' outputs. An alternative 'process' approach, based on explicit efforts to integrate the terms of reference of the research throughout its life with the political context in which it is carried out, potentially offers a more effective way of defining appropriate strategies of public intervention, although it is very difficult to achieve this in practice. This article discusses some practical examples of livelihoods research that, while recognising the importance of longitudinal work, are based on combinations of established methods such as large- or small-scale sample surveys and varieties of 'participatory' research. I suggest that, while valuable, these methods may not be adequate, in themselves, to comprehend diverse livelihoods that straddle the boundaries between different geographical spaces or conventionally discrete economic sectors. My own experience of livelihoods research in the Free State through the 1990s leads me to identify the 'dispersed intensive' method of micro-level investigation as essential in some circumstances and potentially useful in other circumstances, both by contrast with, and as a complement to, the established methods. I define and illustrate the dispersed intensive method through a series of case studies drawn from that experience. For research into changing livelihoods to be illuminating and useful, however, it is of course essential to define the structural, historical and institutional elements of its macro-context.

Livelihoods Research and Public Intervention

There has been a rapid proliferation of livelihoods research during the last decade, especially in the second half of the 1990s. For example, in Britain, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex has collaborated with the UK government’s Department for International Development to launch a major research and policy initiative connecting livelihoods research with poverty reduction objectives.¹ The Overseas Development Institute in London has published a series of Sustainable Livelihoods Working Papers and Natural Resource Perspectives briefings.² In the Netherlands, a

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1 See www.livelihoods.org. For the IDS research programme on Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa, see www.ids.ac.uk/ids/env/sapubs.html.
2 See www.odi.org.uk/publications.
mass of country case studies was carried out in sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s under the auspices of the De-Agrarianization and Rural Employment Project based in the Afrika-studiecentrum at the University of Leiden. Many other pertinent or more specific references appear in the articles in this special issue.

I welcome, of course, both the more central institutional recognition of the importance of livelihoods research and the effort to use understanding of diverse livelihoods in the past and the present to work out more effective practical action for the future. The key questions are, in my view, how livelihoods research is carried out and what it is for. This article is intended to offer a selective review of different approaches and methods, with some commentary on the combinations of methods that are appropriate in different circumstances and also on the ways in which research findings may be practically applied. These turn out to be closely inter-connected.

In order to introduce the argument, I distinguish three different approaches to livelihoods research, respectively identified as the circumspective, the retrospective and the prospective. How is each approach realised? What is each approach for? The circumspective (‘looking around’) approach concentrates on the empirical investigation of combinations of modes of livelihood at one moment of time, with ‘the present’ being typically construed as embracing six months or one year prior to the moment of investigation. It may be carried through by a combination of surveys, one-off interviews and various ‘participatory’ techniques. Its key objective is to open up questions about the relationships between different socio-economic activities. The retrospective (‘looking back’) approach involves pushing to the limits of their potential various methods of understanding the changes that have taken place over a much longer timescale. Central to its effective application is the serious pursuit of longitudinal comparison. In principle, the most effective methods of achieving this, in the strict sense, are panel studies or repeated cross-sectional studies of the ‘same’ population over time. In many poor countries, however, the institutional and social conditions of control over studies of this kind do not exist. Alternatively, longitudinal comparison may be achieved in a loose (or ‘primitive’) sense by reconstructing significant change through the approximately complementary use of different surveys carried out at different points in time for different purposes, or the denser and inevitably more haphazard, as well as statistically insignificant, use of intersecting life-histories. The key objective of the retrospective approach is the analysis of household or family trajectories of accumulation or impoverishment over time and of particular matrices of vulnerability.

We repeatedly discover, unsurprisingly, that trajectories of change for individuals or households in one social class are related to trajectories of change for individuals or households in other social classes. In other words, while the declared preoccupation of policy may be how to achieve a reduction of poverty, the use of livelihoods research to analyse the causes of and the experience of poverty specifically requires attention to the livelihoods of people who are not poor as well as to those of people who are poor. This implies an understanding of poverty in structural or relational terms, in order to achieve an appropriate emphasis, which is otherwise often deficient, on the social relations and the inequalities of power that heavily influence the respective trajectories of the better-off and the poor. Thus, in so far as livelihoods research is directed to the diagnosis of the causes of poverty, the circumstances of poverty and the reasons for poverty should be understood through detailed analysis of social relations in a particular historical context.

3 See www.asc.leidenuniv.nl.
5 An exemplary text in this respect is H. Bernstein, B. Crow and H. Johnson (eds), Rural Livelihoods: Crises and Responses (Oxford, Oxford University Press for the Open University, 1992).
This may be achieved within an analytical framework most simply described as the political economy of change.

The prospective (‘looking forward’) approach concentrates on the distillation of past experience into future policy. It therefore places much emphasis on project monitoring and evaluation, on analysing the success or failure of past policies, on influencing official and other mind-sets, and on specific practical interventions. Its key objectives in the field of livelihoods research might be described as the building of alternative conceptual frameworks for facilitating opportunities for improving livelihoods, and more effective planning and coordination across sectoral boundaries such as those of conventional economic analysis (agriculture, industry, formal, informal, etc) or of government departments with nominally discrete responsibilities. This approach, of course, is identified by development ‘practitioners’ as the most important of the three approaches.

It is self-evident that some combination of the circumspective and the retrospective approaches is necessary to achieve a better understanding of changing livelihoods over time. It remains highly problematic – in view firstly of the insufficiently recognised need for a structural or relational view of poverty, and secondly of the naïveté of the presumption that people in powerful positions make better policy for the poor and then implement it to achieve poverty reduction – how to convert this better understanding into more effective strategies of intervention. It is constructive to recognise this difficulty both as real and as fundamentally political. This raises the vital question of the relationship between research and ‘policy-making’. In default of a more complex view, academics commonly presume a crudely linear relationship, by which observation of a problem leads to the commission of research, and the findings of the research are fed into better policy-making and thence significantly influence implementation of the better policy. This is the conventional mode in which academic research projects are conceived and carried out. By default, this mode often fails to take account of a series of important questions about the political context in which ‘policy’ is made. Who makes policy? How is it made? For what purposes? For whose benefit? With what outcomes? What are the disparate and often conflicting political interests at stake? Repeated and explicit reflection on such questions should be an integral feature of livelihoods research, indeed of all development research, from its inception.

Such reflection forces a view of the relationship between research and ‘policy-making’ as very much more complex than implied in the crudely linear view identified above. An analogy may be drawn with the distinction between the ‘blueprint’ and the ‘process’ definition of development projects. The conventional ‘blueprint’ approach is one in which outsiders, for the most part, investigate a problem and then recommend action to ‘policy-makers’, who transpose such recommendations into development ‘projects’ with a life span prescribed in advance and approved expenditure that must be accounted for to donors. A ‘process’ approach, by contrast, implies a ‘rolling engagement’, at every stage, between those responsible for carrying out research and those who assume responsibility for strategies of public intervention, at many different levels and in many different ways. A ‘process’ approach also implies the opportunity and the need to learn from mistakes, and indeed to change strategic direction, during the life of the project. One premise of such an approach is that the structural, historical and institutional macro-context of the research should itself be used to define, in a continuously explicit political sense, the possibilities and the limits of strategic intervention from outside, ‘from below’ or ‘from above’. Another premise is that the ‘community’ within which research is undertaken, both in the narrow sense of who is interviewed or otherwise investigated and in the broader sense of whose interests are at stake, should be actively involved in the definition of the terms of reference.
of such research, the development of a particular combination of methods and the practical application of the findings.\(^6\)

For many reasons, most of them thoroughly familiar to practitioners, a ‘rolling engagement’ between those who carry out research and those who influence public policy is immensely difficult to achieve in practice. For this reason, whether livelihoods research is carried out on a small scale by individuals or on a large scale by international consortia of partners from both rich and poor countries, researchers who aspire to influence public policy face a particular challenge in their efforts to combine intellectual honesty, political realism and practical modesty. A third premise of the potential effectiveness of such a ‘rolling engagement’, in addition to the two indicated above, is the recognition that professional judgements from the ‘outside’ of a particular context cannot be usefully separated from political judgements from the ‘inside’. The point may be illustrated with reference to the qualifier ‘sustainable’ in the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) paradigm that is now strongly entrenched in official discourse.\(^7\) There can be no dispute over the desirability in principle that the livelihoods of poor people should be ‘sustainable’. However, in spite of its rhetoric of ‘participation’ and its sponsorship of apparently responsible strategies of research for poverty reduction,\(^8\) the paradigm itself begs two important questions. First, who defines ‘sustainability’, and for whom or of what? Second, by what criteria, and over what time-scale, is it defined?

These questions are essentially political and cannot be determined ‘in advance’, so to speak, of the resolution of public policy. It is difficult enough, for example, for environmental planners to define the approved extraction rates that would or would not allow a particular population of fish to reproduce itself over time. Estimates of fishing quotas that may be allowed for the future, quite apart from the political question of agreement over these, must depend on reasonably accurate measurement of the extent to which, and the ways in which, particular populations have been depleted over time, and also on some degree of control over the many variables that influence this outcome. It is evidently very difficult to separate the ‘scientific’ evidence on sustainability or otherwise of the fish population from the political arguments over whose livelihoods are affected, and in what ways, in the short term and the long term, by the imposition of quotas or legislation on approved fishing methods.

By analogy, how much more difficult is it to discern in practice whether human livelihoods that are characterised by their diversity – and also, perhaps, by their increasing diversification over time, in a context of yawning chasms of socio-economic inequality and of the absence of control over massive shocks such as civil strife, drought and structural unemployment – are sustainable in the future? It is not within the scope of this article to review the history of dedicated intellectual engagement either more generally with working out what is meant by ‘sustainable’ development or more narrowly and more recently with the evolution of a framework for investigating ‘sustainable’ livelihoods.\(^9\) It is clear, however, that research and ‘policy-making’ formally intended to promote ‘sustainable’ livelihoods cannot realistically be disconnected from political arguments about whose

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6 This is a strongly recurrent theme, of course, in the work of Robert Chambers and others. See, for example, R. Chambers, Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last (London, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997).
8 For example, the ‘vertical transect’ methodology of Khanya, a consultancy based in Bloemfontein, South Africa, that has committed much of its recent work to developing the applications of a livelihoods framework in the context of poverty reduction strategies. See Khanya, ‘Guidelines for Undertaking a Regional/National Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Study’ (London, Department for International Development, 2000). See also www.khanya-mrc.co.za.
9 See, for example, the useful discussion in F. Ellis, Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 124–131, and references therein.
livelihoods, and under what conditions, are to be sustained. We cannot know now, on the basis of present observation of past experience, what sorts of livelihoods – and for whom – are going to be sustainable in the future. Credible research on sustainable livelihoods would involve serious empirical investigation over a sufficiently long time-period to qualify as ‘longitudinal’, in a strict or in a loose sense, and would probably discover livelihood trajectories that have proved ‘sustainable’ over that time-period for certain individuals or households or socio-economic strata that are better-off, and the particular reasons for this. These trajectories are unlikely to have been experienced by the very poor, and cannot therefore be replicated for them. We should therefore be extremely sensitive to the high probability that strategies that worked for the better-off in the past will not work for the very poor in the future. We should also be extremely sensitive to local criteria of sustainability, to local experience of disparate trajectories of change over time and to local political capacity to influence strategies of intervention.

A specific lesson, perhaps, is that the adjectival qualifier ‘sustainable’ may usefully be dropped from the official discourse relating to Sustainable Livelihoods, on the grounds that it is confusing. Firstly, criteria of ‘sustainability’ are routinely incompatible with one another. Secondly, there is a significant – and hazy – disjunction between what has proved sustainable in the past (for whom?) and what might prove sustainable in the future (for whom?). A more general lesson is that critical attention to the politics of ‘policy-making’ – or, rather more broadly, to the politics of the determination of strategies of public intervention – is a necessary condition of the effectiveness of research nominally directed at improving the livelihoods of poor people.

Methods Combined (1): Sample Surveys and ‘Participatory’ Techniques

Three examples of the combination of different methods of livelihoods research are discussed here. The first, a case study of three villages in northern Tanzania in the late 1990s, concentrated on the circumspective approach, through a combination of small-scale surveys and ‘participatory’ methods. The second, a comparative study of inter-generational change in parts of Nepal and north-eastern India, with a focus on changes that took place between the 1970s and the 1990s, was much more explicitly retrospective in its approach. The third example, repeated sample surveys of poverty undertaken in Lesotho by the same research organisation through the 1990s, converted a series of cross-sectional (circumspective) investigations, in effect, into a longitudinal (retrospective) analysis of trends of poverty over time, qualified in the most recent of the series by a complementary, and partly conflicting, ‘participatory’ perspective.

Disparate Livelihood Strategies

Frank Ellis, an agricultural economist at the University of East Anglia, is an important contributor to recent thinking on livelihoods, diversity and vulnerability, through influential articles and his recent book *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries*. In Part I of this book, he develops in detail a framework of analysis similar to that of the official SL approach, and in Part III he elaborates the combination of survey and participatory methods that, in his view, opens up the possibility of a better understanding of rural livelihoods.

He outlines a critique of large-scale income surveys, on largely familiar grounds, with reference to studies undertaken in Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania in particular, and concludes that they are of very limited use in understanding changes in rural livelihoods over time. Smaller-scale sample surveys relating to particular communities or regional populations are of rather more use. He also advocates various different PRA methods (key informants, semi-structured interviews, informal group discussions, focus group discussions, Venn diagrams, etc) ‘for discovering, quite quickly, the mediating processes within which livelihood strategies are adopted’, relating to social relations, institutions and organisations. He then offers a useful summary of the typical characteristics of different field methods, under the headings of large-scale sample surveys, small-scale sample surveys, semi-structured or participatory enquiry, and case studies.12

Ellis illustrates the practical application of these disparate methods through a case study carried out in three villages in northern Tanzania in 1997. An experimental combination of methods was applied, guided by ‘considerations of cost-effectiveness and timeliness in obtaining policy-useful research results’.13 The methods were: semi-structured focus-group discussions, for a ‘broad brush’ background on assets and access and activities; a participatory wealth-ranking exercise, to distinguish the poorest from the better-off; and a sample survey of household demography and remittance income, farm incomes, non-farm income sources and household assets, to provide quantitative information to support that distinction. Thirty households were interviewed in depth in each of three villages.

The focus-group discussions concentrated on trends of change over the previous ten years, in respect of diverse livelihood activities, and the participants’ judgements of whether life had improved or worsened over the period. The importance of coffee had declined drastically, while that of dairy production had significantly increased. Since the exercise was pitched at the village level, however, it did not allow effective analysis of differences between the strategies of the poor and the better-off. The wealth-ranking exercise produced a different percentage distribution for each village of households identified as low-income, middle-income and high-income respectively. For the purpose of the sample survey, the 90 households were distributed equally across the three income classes, which were thus unequally represented in the exercise as a whole. Statistical analysis of the results applied weights to overcome this unequal representation. Income data were found to correspond reasonably accurately with the results of the wealth-ranking exercise.

Some of the key findings were as follows. Mean household income portfolios, largely consistent with the findings of the focus-group discussions, suggested a stronger policy emphasis on dairying as an important source of income in the region. The proportional contribution of farm and non-farm income sources varied significantly with the relative remoteness of the village concerned, and also between income groups, with higher relative income from farming being found amongst the low-income households. A livelihood diversity index was developed for each household in the sample, but its utility was unclear since it offered little insight beyond that derived from the construction of a mean income portfolio.

Typologies of livelihood strategies were also derived from the survey results, by degree of specialisation and by income-groups. Higher-income households were found to have a higher proportion of their income derived from a single source. The households were ‘mapped’ according to the relative robustness of income contributions derived from each mode of livelihood. Radial graphs were produced to show the relative importance, for the different income-groups, of various strategies of ‘mixing’ different livelihood activities.

12 Ellis, Rural Livelihoods, pp. 196–197.
13 Ellis, Rural Livelihoods, p. 200.
The conclusion here was that the combined use of radial graphs and detailed tables offer a valuable means of interpreting income data distinguished by income strata or by village, subject however to the specific disadvantage that ‘the main casualty of this trade-off [between specificity and typology of income sources] is the ability to convey diversity of income sources when similar sources are grouped together in order to construct typologies’. It emerged from this type of analysis that ‘quite a large proportion of households in both high- and low-income groups depend principally on non-farm income sources, yet they are in separate income-wealth classes, and have quite different material standards of living’. Finally, selected household assets (household size, access to electricity, land area, educational level of head of household, number of milk cattle) were plotted by income-wealth groups, using unweighted and weighted data, respectively.

In summary, the focus-group discussions were useful for ‘describing the broad community context of rural livelihoods, and identifying key trends and emerging constraints. Wealth-ranking was helpful in distinguishing the poor from the better-off. ‘The lesson learnt is that a structured and selective combination of participatory techniques, that focuses consciously on the livelihood context and strategies of the rural poor, can go quite far in discovering policy-relevant livelihood characteristics.’ As for the small-scale sample survey, it was efficiently carried out, and a variety of analytical techniques were adopted, but ‘the devising of livelihood typologies based on the majority contributor to total incomes was more successful than either income portfolios or diversity indices for the purpose of distinguishing critical aspects of livelihood strategies’.

Livelihood Trajectories

The explicit research aim of the ESCOR-funded project on Long-Term Change and Livelihoods, initiated by the Overseas Development Group (ODG) at the University of East Anglia, was to describe and explain trajectories of change for individuals and groups over time, through fieldwork in 1996–1997 in fifteen villages in Western Nepal and two villages in West Bengal and Bihar. The comparative base for the work in Nepal was a sample survey of 667 rural households in Western Nepal carried out by the ODG in 1974–1975, for which both the primary materials and a rich analytical output remained directly available. The team drew on other survey work undertaken in the mid-1970s to support the comparative longitudinal work in the other two areas.

The notion of livelihood trajectories is central to this particular project, and should, in my view, be central to all livelihoods research. The team traces the notion through the different development paradigms of the 1970s and the 1980s.

Livelihoods and well-being are increasingly conceptualized as partly the outcome of negotiations and bargaining between individuals with unequal power within households. Considerations of gender have been most important here, but age-related differences which affect levels of well-being of individuals within the household are seen to have important policy implications too. Many have drawn attention to the importance for livelihoods of the extra-household networks of relationships which characterise most rural areas.16

14 Ellis, Rural Livelihoods, p. 221.
15 Ellis, Rural Livelihoods, p. 227.
A livelihood trajectory is a path through time, and refers to ‘the consequences of the changing ways in which individuals construct a livelihood over time’. Thus, individual life-histories assume a significant place in the methodology for achieving a better understanding of livelihood trajectories. According to the team, an exploration of livelihood trajectories generally can provide ‘insights into the changing welfare and capabilities’ of individuals and of groups. It can ‘illuminate the process of change by revealing the ways in which negotiation, bargaining and struggle can alter circumstances’. It makes it possible to ‘bridge the supposed micro–macro divide by a process of aggregation upwards from the lives of individuals’. It combines insights, in a seriously inter-disciplinary spirit, from the many different paradigms prevalent in development studies. On the third point above, ‘progressive aggregation admittedly moves away from the rich and revealing, life-as-lived from day to day embeddedness of [Livelihood Trajectories], but increasingly makes possible generalization and structural explanation as one moves upwards from households to local communities, districts, regions and states’. Livelihoods analysis ‘starts from daily lives and experiences’ but moves on ‘to explore not only “how people make history” but also the constraints that limit their functioning and capabilities’.17

This project was explicitly ‘longitudinal’ in pursuit of its principal objectives, although not – for the most part – in the strict sense of following up the same individuals over time. Such research, while fraught with methodological problems, is potentially very valuable because of the time-scale of comparison. It is also highly unusual in practice, largely because of the massive wastage incurred through the familiar phenomenon of ‘loss of institutional memory’ over much shorter periods of time than the two decades considered here. A particular virtue of the article cited is its explicit discussion of these methodological problems: for example, the difficulties of replication of the original sample(s) against the need for random sampling of population(s) 20 years later; the ‘gain’ of pursuing ‘original’ households against the ‘loss’ of a demographically unrepresentative range of households, etc. In the Nepalese case, the team found only about 40 per cent of the original 1974–1975 respondents were still living in 1996–1997. However, without access to reliable baseline studies in West Bengal and Bihar that suited the particular purposes of the study, the team had to adopt ‘a more opportunistic and eclectic construction’ of livelihood trajectories, through the use of various studies carried out at different times and for very different purposes. Several critical questions emerged, which it is clearly important to consider in other circumstances of similar difficulty. First, are relevant secondary data freely available? Second, is the quality of the secondary data sufficient to make it worthwhile planning a repetition of the survey in the same location? Third, is the coverage of issues in available secondary data-sets sufficiently broad to suit the purposes of livelihoods research? Fourth, what is an acceptable time-period over which to map livelihood trajectories? The span of a generation was considered appropriate here.

The team used a variety of research techniques, such as village mapping, wealth-ranking, formal randomised sample household surveys and life-histories. They also experienced a major – and familiar – tension between quantitative and qualitative techniques. For example, two different surveys of the ‘same’ population, undertaken at different points in time, may be used to infer a ‘gradual, smooth transition between two equilibria’, and controls may be applied relating to inflation, etc. The qualitative method, by contrast, may be concerned to map a ‘much more uneven, uncertain process’ of change between the two points in time, involving shifts in the local evaluation of what sort of change is important.

17 Bagchi et al., pp. 457–458.
and desirable.\textsuperscript{18} ‘The quantitative data provided the basis for showing what and emphasizing what was representative, while the qualitative was able to reveal how and why and to highlight differences and variety within the range of human experiences in the areas studied – experiences that could help explain, problematize, and contextualize differences and changes in average values of variables from the quantitative survey.’\textsuperscript{19}

**Repeated Cross-sections**

Sechaba Consultants are ‘a Lesotho-based, independent research company committed to presenting the socio-economic experience and concerns of local people in the development process’. They carried out a series of poverty studies in Lesotho through the 1990s, which now constitute a valuable longitudinal series, not in the strict or narrow sense of having followed the same ‘households’ over that time period but in the looser sense that similar or comparable questions were asked in 1991, 1994 and 1999–2000 of households sampled from the same areas.\textsuperscript{20} In the case of the most recent study, the survey was of 3,280 households in 130 villages and urban areas scattered across the country. The 1999–2000 work partly builds on their earlier work, in order to achieve comparability of conclusions concerning trends and patterns of poverty (Phase I), and also adopts a sustainable livelihoods model adapted from that of CARE International,\textsuperscript{21} which was explicitly committed to facilitating the expression of the views and priorities of Basotho themselves (Phase II). They reflect throughout the report, in an explicit and constructive way, on the tensions that arose out of the combination of the two paradigms: a large-scale household questionnaire survey (Phase I) with a participatory livelihoods analysis (Phase II) reflecting the categories produced by, and the experiences emphasised by, respondents.\textsuperscript{22}

From the results of the large-scale household survey they created quantitative variables within the terms of reference of the livelihoods framework adopted, relating (1) to household assets; (2) to shocks and stresses; (3) to household activities or, in their terminology, livelihood choices; and (4) to household well-being. One recurrent source of tension, however, was that it was very difficult to apply local definitions of well-being in a standardised way for the country as a whole. They therefore applied two different definitions, and strove consistently to avoid confusion between the two. One definition, applied in Phase I analysis, was an ‘empirical, synthetic definition’ of well-being categories, based on the division of the sample into five quintiles, such that – by definition – the numbers in each ‘category’ were the same. The other definition, derived from Phase II analysis of the broad categories identified by Basotho (the very poor, the poor, the average and the better-off), necessarily produced sub-groups of quite different sizes.\textsuperscript{23}

The advantage of the methodology applied in Phase I was comparability of research findings with the 1991 and 1994 surveys. The 1999–2000 work confirmed, for example, that deep poverty continued to be concentrated in remote mountain areas, and also identified a

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\textsuperscript{18} Bagchi et al., ‘Conceptual and Methodological Challenges’, p. 460.

\textsuperscript{19} Bagchi et al., ‘Conceptual and Methodological Challenges’, p. 461.


\textsuperscript{22} S. D. Turner et al. [Turner, with contributions by R. Calder, J. Gay, J. Iredale, C. Mbizule and M. Mohatla], *Livelihoods in Lesotho* (Maseru, CARE Lesotho, 2001).

\textsuperscript{23} Turner et al., *Livelihoods in Lesotho*, p. 70.
new form of poverty prevalent amongst the poorest people in urban areas. Examination of macro-trends relating to the decline of formal employment both in South Africa and in Lesotho through the 1990s helped to interpret the survey findings relating to the declining proportion of households in all quintiles with a member in wage employment. The methodology applied in Phase II generated a very different emphasis – by comparison with prevalent diagnoses of Lesotho as a ‘basket-case’ requiring massive external intervention to relieve poverty – on the practical ingenuity and considerable achievements of ordinary people in striving to overcome their worsening socio-economic predicament. The analysis did reveal, however, an apparently disproportionate weight still attached to agriculture as a livelihood strategy; an inappropriate faith in job-creation as a route out of poverty; and a certainly misplaced attribution to ‘government’ of the responsibility for solving the problems of the poor. The ‘strategic vision’ developed by Sechaba placed an emphasis for purposes of practical policy on two vital forms of support: the need to facilitate people’s own efforts to enhance their livelihoods, particularly in the western and northern lowlands and foothills; and the need to ensure improved safety-net provision, particularly in remote mountainous areas and for the urban poor. All policy interventions, however, had to be predicated on a ‘coordinated and effective response’ to the massive crisis of HIV/AIDS.24

Methods Combined (2): ‘Multiple Livelihoods’ in Qwaqwa

The Multiple Livelihoods and Social Change project (1998–2001, hereafter MLSC) had three objectives: to analyse socio-economic differentiation in two densely populated but relatively remote (former ‘homeland’) areas of South Africa, Qwaqwa in the north-eastern Free State and Madibogo in the Central District of North-West Province; to identify the intervening socio-economic, political and institutional variables that affect efforts to alleviate poverty through improved livelihood opportunities; and to develop a distinctive combination of methods for the study of multiple household livelihoods as they change over time, and for relating changes at the micro-level to changes at the macro-level.25 I here outline the background to the Qwaqwa study, based on fieldwork by Rachel Slater, who reports on some of its results elsewhere in this issue. The Madibogo work was carried out by Elizabeth Francis, some of whose findings are also analysed in this issue of the Journal of Southern African Studies.

In Qwaqwa, we identified the macro-level frameworks for the purpose of the research as changes in regional and local labour markets through the late 1980s and the 1990s and political and institutional changes during the 1990s. Our interpretation of the ‘macro-level’ in practice, however, had to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes initiated and implemented at national level, for example in relation to policies of land reform, which were the responsibility of the Department of Land Affairs (DLA);26 at provincial level, for example the re-structuring of the provincial Departments of Agriculture and of the various ‘development’ agencies associated with the erstwhile African ‘homelands’; and at local level, for example the emergence of new local government and other institutional structures.

24 Turner et al., Livelihoods in Lesotho, p. x.
26 The DLA has an office in each province but these offices are accountable to the national DLA and are not formally part of the respective provincial governments.
responsible – in coordination with national and provincial governments – for the provision of services. We envisaged that investigation at these levels would take two principal forms. First, secondary statistical and other material would be systematically accumulated on trends of employment and unemployment in the region of study, on budget dispositions of the provincial governments, on strategic development priorities at national, provincial and local levels, in so far as they had been clearly defined, and on specific development projects within the areas of study – their objectives, their achievements and their failures. Secondly, a series of detailed and intensive interviews would be undertaken with officials of relevant government departments, with senior and junior officers of parastatal development agencies, with representatives of locally active NGOs and CBOs (Community-Based Organisations), and with prominent local politicians and activists. These interviews concentrated on their experience of institutional change, the impact of political pressure at various levels, the problems of conflict and coordination between different development agencies in nominal partnership, and their assessment of socio-economic trends discernible from statistical evidence over specific time-periods.

At the micro-level, our investigation concentrated on the multiple livelihood strategies of households as these had changed over time. Neither combinations of livelihoods that apply within households at any one time (yielded by the circumspective approach) nor changes in these combinations that have taken place over time (yielded by the retrospective approach) are readily susceptible to reconstruction through conventional large-scale survey techniques, for several reasons. First, the circumstances of individual ‘households’ are typically recorded through single interviews with the household head or another significant adult, who is actively involved in only some, and not all, of the diverse economic activities that comprise the household livelihood at any one time. Secondly, analysis of the relationships between different activities cannot be derived from crude estimates of aggregate household income or from a summary of household assets. One inference was that an understanding both of combinations of household economic activities at any one time and changes in those combinations that have taken place over time is most likely to emerge from detailed interviews with various different adults in any one household, and with members of other households with whom they are significantly engaged, in one way or another. Another inference was that intensive and repeated interviews of the kind associated with the recording of life-histories are more appropriate for this purpose than one-off interviews with relative strangers whose connections with one another, both within households and between households, are rendered anonymous through coding and merely statistical analysis of the kind associated with large-scale household surveys.27

Our project pursued a series of questions relating to livelihoods in Qwaqwa itself. What forms of employment have been accessible to men on the one hand and to women on the other? How have these changed over time? What has been the balance of their experience, respectively, in distant labour markets, as migrants, and in local labour markets, as daily commuters? In what other forms of economic activity have household members been engaged? What are the connections between one mode of livelihood and another? How have these connections changed over time? What are the critical factors that have facilitated access to employment opportunities? Conversely, what factors have inhibited such access? To what extent have households been dependent on pensions? How pervasive has been the experience of structural unemployment for the youth, both men and women? How have all these factors influenced inter-generational relationships and the dynamics of household formation, consolidation and dissolution?

There were two opportunities for crude longitudinal comparison. One arose out of my own study in 1980 of the detailed socio-economic circumstances of a few households in different ‘closer settlements’ in Qwaqwa. In January 1998, nearly eighteen years later, during a brief exploratory visit for the research project described here, I traced several of these households again, and recorded the changes they reported over this period.28 ‘Snap-shots’ of the same households at different points in time offer a very useful perspective on change, that is complementary on the one hand to synchronic survey information and, on the other hand, to individual life histories traced through time.

Otherwise, a team from the University of Cape Town had carried out about 250 household interviews in aggregate, at various times in the early 1980s, the mid-1980s and the late 1980s.29 This work opened up the possibility, despite practical difficulties in tracing more than a relatively small proportion of the primary materials, of a comparative longitudinal study of mobility and change through the last two decades in the lives of the members of particular households in Qwaqwa. As it turned out, we were able to recover such evidence only to a very limited extent. Of the approximately 250 households interviewed in that period, we were able to negotiate direct access only to the primary materials accumulated by Isak Niehaus in respect of his work on labour histories in Phuthaditjhaba in 1984–1985. There were 33 ‘household’ interviews, of which 21 had an address or site number specified; and 50 individual ‘labour history’ interviews, of which 30 had an address or site number specified. In the fifteen years that had elapsed since these interviews were recorded, many households would have moved, expanded, fragmented or dispersed: elderly persons would have died; individuals who were recorded as ‘children’ in the mid-1980s, even if they were still traceable within Qwaqwa, would have ‘married’ and established their own households independent of their natal households. In the event, eighteen respondents from Niehaus’ research were found fifteen years later and interviewed again to identify changes since 1984–1985 and to try and link household-level changes to macro-level socio-economic shifts. This element of longitudinal study, very crude and limited as it was, provided both some valuable information about changing livelihoods and an opportunity to triangulate the results of the life history interviews.30

In another way, however, we could open up our capacity to undertake longitudinal work substantially beyond the limited sense of the phrase outlined above, to embrace what Buck, Ermisch and Jenkins identify as a ‘retrospective’ study: interviews carried out at one moment only, whose emphasis is on reconstruction of key moments, events, decisions, changes of trajectory, etc in the lives of individuals.31 We were interested in the divergent trajectories of men and women, respectively; and in the systematic study both of intra-household relations and of extra-household relations as they changed over time. Detailed

retrospective life-history interviews were carried out with all adult members of households. By definition, this is very labour-intensive work; and for this reason we were confined to relatively small numbers of households. We also envisaged the identification of ‘clusters’ of households that were related to one another in a variety of ways (kinship, working contracts, mutual help, etc), often across the boundaries between geographically or politically discrete areas; and the adventitious lateral extension of such clusters by reference to the exploration of complementary modes of livelihood.

The strongest practical implication of this method of longitudinal study is that we were able to concentrate on the density and inter-connectedness of social relations, both within households and between households – inevitably, however, at the expense of representative-ness of the populations to which the households belonged. Nevertheless, limited quantitative generalisation about the differential experience of men and women in the labour market, for example, and of changes over time in this respect and in other respects, emerged from aggregate analysis of the several clusters identified in each region of study. In addition, Slater undertook a series of small-scale synchronic household surveys in each of the four different areas of ‘greater’ Qwaqwa that we defined for the purposes of the project, and in several discrete areas of Qwaqwa (the old ‘homeland’) itself, to establish a common comparative baseline of household demography and relationships.

The ‘Dispersed Intensive’ Method: Case Studies in the Free State, 1990s

This summary outline of different research projects, highly selective as it is, gives some indication of the complementary use of diverse methods of livelihood research in practice, on a relatively small scale. It also raises a question of general importance. Just as household livelihoods themselves straddle the boundaries between conventionally discrete economic sectors (industry/agriculture, formal employment/informal economic activity) and often the boundaries between conventionally discrete geographical spaces (urban/rural), so livelihoods research must transcend local ‘communities’ in order to comprehend both intrahousehold relationships and significant inter-household social relationships as these change over time. Both forms of relationship may be geographically ‘stretched’ over considerable physical distances. Neither form is readily susceptible to proper investigation through the conventional methods either of household survey work carried out within specified communities or of ‘participatory’ workshops confined to such communities. This immediately begs the question of an appropriate trade-off between work in one ‘community’ that purports in one way or another to be representative of that community, and work of a more dispersed but intensive kind that seeks to investigate at first hand disparate economic activities, and the relationships between them, which together comprise any one household livelihood but which often ‘stretch’ far beyond the physical boundaries of the ‘community’.

A vital part of the effectiveness of this kind of work, which I refer to as the ‘dispersed intensive’ method, is following up the same individuals and families at different points in time, scattered as they often are in different places, with repeated (small-scale) household surveys to plot demographic turnover and the trajectories of individuals’ experience. It could not, however, be claimed in any serious sense to be ‘participatory’.

Case Study 1: Tweespruit
Structural unemployment on white-owned commercial farms

In the early 1990s, in the eastern Free State, I sought to analyse the predicament of a rapidly expanding but politically neglected constituency: ex-farmworkers and their families concentrated in the new shack peripheries of small towns throughout the highveld region. Despite
the forces of political transformation that opened up the vote to these people for the first time in their lives in April 1994, it was the forces of drought and economic recession, of capital intensification and positive real interest, that had shaped, and often diminished, their life-chances on farms. A common experience of the older men was redundancy as farmworkers. An increasingly common experience of the younger men was redundancy as migrant mine labourers. Women of both generations had come to depend on irregular or seasonal farm, garden or domestic work. Together, they were evicted in massive numbers from the white-owned countryside. They are concentrated in relocation slums such as Qwaqwa, described above, and Botshabelo, a huge town established in 1979 on the south side of the main road between Bloemfontein, the provincial capital, and the Lesotho border to the east. Since the repeal of the pass laws in 1986, they also moved in large numbers to the edges of Bloemfontein itself and the edges of the many small towns that service farmers throughout the highveld maize triangle. The macro-context of the following observations is therefore the shift of large numbers of people from farms to towns of various sizes in the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.32

Many ex-farmworkers and their families are uneducated and ill-placed to adjust to the challenge of making a living in an urban environment. Their prospects are grim. Formal sector or stable employment is hopelessly beyond the reach of very many of the youth. Inevitably, they prey on pensioners; they live by their wits from one day to the next; and they hone their skills as best they may in disparate nooks and crannies of the second economy. Energies are committed to pursuing tenuous scraps of opportunity; to negotiating routine bureaucratic obstructions; to sustaining, against the odds, the fragile threads of family integrity. The hunger and the ennui of everyday life that sap these energies on the margins of South Africa’s small towns pose a crucial test of the government’s political credibility in the years to come.

Individual stories encapsulate these themes.33 More generally, the experience of displacement from farms reveals two strategic and interrelated contradictions in the process of rural transformation in the early 1990s. First, efforts to secure better livelihoods for some farmworkers and their families induced redundancy – and its inevitably corollary, displacement – for many others. As farmers contemplated a future without the formal infrastructure of white supremacy, they anticipated political pressure to improve wages and conditions for farmworkers, and to make security of employment less dependent on their own arbitrary goodwill. Accordingly, they seriously ‘rationalised’ their labour forces. Secondly, this displacement from farms implied loss of livestock: that is, final dispossession of the capital resources with which otherwise, as new opportunities for small-scale farming began to open up, some people who aspired to farm and who had experience of farming, albeit as wage labourers only, might have begun to realise their ambition. It is an irony of the early 1990s that this final drama of socio-economic dispossession was being played out in some regions, repeatedly but privately, alongside the public drama of political emancipation.

These facts of demographic dislocation raise distinctive methodological difficulties in respect of investigating, at the micro-level, the reasons for, and the specific impact of, structural unemployment on farms. I faced the problem that, if I identified particular farms for detailed study of the phenomenon, because structural unemployment is manifested in the demographic dispersal of those affected to urban centres, it was in practice very difficult to start from one farm-base and then endeavour to find people who had a history of

32 This macro-context is outlined in C. Murray, ‘Structural Unemployment, Small Towns and Agrarian Change in South Africa’, African Affairs, 94, 374 (January, 1995), pp. 5–22; and further elaborated in a forthcoming book arising out of the MLSC project.
33 See case studies in Murray, ‘Structural Unemployment’.
employment on that farm but who had already been physically dispersed elsewhere. Conversely, a rapid survey of the shack population of any one small town would throw up people who had been employed respectively on many different farms in the area. Such a study could not usefully be undertaken on any one farm, for two reasons. The first was that white farmers were often reluctant, in the highly volatile circumstances of political transition in the early to mid-1990s, to allow a foreigner to interview farmworkers and their families who were resident on their farms. The second was that, by definition, such farmworkers as could still be found on farms had not yet experienced redundancy.

The problems were thus twofold, expressed in general terms. How could I find ex-farmworkers who had ‘belonged’ to particular farms? And how could I find the farmers in question, the former bosses of the ex-farmworkers, some of whom had already left their farms, and were thus ex-farmers? The solution in practice was to follow up, in a doggedly persistent but inevitably haphazard way, the extensive individual networks that linked particular ex-farmworkers to one another, physically scattered as they often were, and to particular (ex-)farmers. The detailed case studies that I was able to pursue reflect a chance encounter with a significant number of ex-farm households in Tweespruit New Location (an adjunct of Borwa, the old location) who had indeed been evicted from the same farm, a circumstance that allowed a density of detailed investigation of a network of people distributed between Borwa (Tweespruit), Thaba Nchu urban and rural, and Botshabelo. A particular marital link opened up access to a small network of people still resident on another farm, who had already lost their jobs, faced imminent eviction in 1993–1994, were duly evicted in 1994–1995 and physically dispersed between Borwa and Botshabelo.

The value of the ‘dispersed intensive’ method in these circumstances was that it became possible to interpret, albeit through very highly labour-intensive fieldwork, the experience and the causes of structural unemployment on any one farm from a variety of points of view: that of the farmer or ex-farmer and those of ex-farmworkers. They were complementary, in respect of the understanding that opened up, while significantly divergent in tone and substance from one another. The one route of investigation opened up an understanding of the structural pressures and trends of change that influenced farm-owners’ decisions. The other route opened up an understanding of the particular circumstances of many former farmworkers’ bitter experience of the simultaneous loss of their homes and their jobs. The disadvantage of the method is also obvious: that the cost of such intricate detail and of such labour-intensity of fieldwork is the loss of any pretence to achieve a statistically representative sample either of (ex-)farmers or of ex-farmworkers. It was possible to carry out small-scale surveys of the inhabitants of the shack peripheries of small towns, which could be used to generalise about the livelihood predicaments of ex-farmworkers and their families after eviction from farms, but this method alone would have been of very limited use in exploring the causes of mass structural unemployment on the farms.

Case Study 2: Balaclava
Investigating the use of African-owned land

Another focus of my investigation of Free State livelihoods during the 1990s was land that had been privately owned by Africans for more than a century. The Thaba Nchu district, situated half-way between the provincial capital of Bloemfontein and the Lesotho border, is the only district in the province in which Africans did own land, formally, in the period from the late nineteenth century to 1991, when the racially discriminatory Land Acts were

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34 Murray, 'Structural Unemployment'.
In respect of its complex transmission through the twentieth century, its successive sub-division and its present diversity of occupation and use, this brief study of Balaclava farm, in the south-east of Thaba Nchu district, illustrates the importance of the distinction between land-owners and farmers and also demonstrates, in this context as in others, that those who work the land are not ‘farmers’ in a sense that implies full-time commitment to farming or even a substantial proportion of their income derived from farming. Rather, they are highly mobile bureaucrats or businessmen who conduct farming operations from a distance and employ people at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy to live in remote places to supervise their livestock. For their part, most owners are the surviving descendants of the Barolong ‘gentry’ in Thaba Nchu, who had a stronger record of mortgaging their land to educate their sons and daughters than of farming it themselves.

The ‘deep’ history of the original African-owned farm, of which Balaclava was a later sub-division, reveals that approximately two-thirds was alienated to white ownership early in the twentieth century; two-thirds of the remaining one-third was sold to the South African Native Trust in the 1930s to relieve family debt; and thus only one-ninth of the original farm remained in private black ownership thereafter. That one-ninth was sub-divided into four portions, respectively (two of 84 ha each, two of 42 ha each), all of them much too small to constitute a family livelihood. In order to discover the disparate interests involved in the use of such small pieces of land I found it necessary to find and interview non-farming land-owners in Thaba Nchu town, absentee tenant ‘farmers’ in Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo who were really businessmen, and impoverished employees on the land in question whose duties were the immediate supervision of livestock but who were not themselves responsible for the management of farming operations. Each of the ‘farmers’ whose activities on the land I recorded in my field diaries was primarily dependent in the mid-1990s on a source of income other than farming: respectively, a brick-making enterprise in Thaba Nchu, selling building materials and coal in Botshabelo, state employment as an agricultural official, and running a supermarket in Botshabelo. With one exception, none of them owned the land he worked, and none was living on the land he worked. There was a high turnover of transient resident employees, many of them from Lesotho. These were the easiest persons to find and interview, since their principal responsibilities to supervise livestock tied their daily lives to the respective portions of the farm. But they were not well-informed about the other, disparate and often distant, livelihood activities of their employers, the tenants; and often they could only give me the haziest guidance about how to trace the land-owners, some of whom lived in Thaba Nchu town and others further afield. These non-working owners derived a small and precarious rental income from their property.

For an even partially comprehensive understanding of the complexity of land use in this context, it was therefore necessary both to drive a ‘vertical’ shaft through the socio-economic hierarchy and also to pursue ‘horizontal’ networks of individuals who had an interest of one kind or another in the land in question. Meanwhile, it was also apparent in the mid-1990s that significant amounts of African-owned land in the Thaba Nchu district were leased to white farmers from outside the district who were relatively well-endowed with capital resources but who found it barely profitable, because of its neglected condition, to work such land even at the reduced rents that it commanded. Thus, in an attempt to

36 The ‘deep’ history of the farm is outlined in Murray, ‘Changing Livelihoods’, pp. 136–139.
generalise about the use of land that fell into this category, it was also necessary to pursue some of the white farmers concerned for their views on the feasibility of renting land in this way. This practice on the part of black land-owners of leasing land to white farmers was, of course, inimical to the spirit of a land reform programme intended to open up opportunities for black farmers. The owners in question merely sought to maximise the financial advantage to be gained from their own more or less tenuous grip on their land, subject as it often was to the claims of mortgage-lenders. There was no ‘community’ in these circumstances that could be surveyed at all, nor were there sufficient numbers of residents in any one place to ‘participate’ in answering the key research questions.

**Case Study 3: Liefdefontein**  
An off-farm aspirant ‘farmer’

The Botshabelo farms are a strip of state-owned land to the west and south of Botshabelo. They were, in effect, a ‘test case’ of the redistribution element of the land reform programme.  

Thirty-one of them were allocated through a complex and protracted process of consultation by the regional office of the DLA, and most of the beneficiaries have now been granted title. I have previously outlined the history of this allocation process, and I have followed two of the farms concerned through the 1990s: Diepwater and Liefdefontein. The following brief account of Liefdefontein traces changes since November 1996. At that time, there were three potential purchasers of the land: Ntebaleng Molelekoa and her elder sister Nthabiseng Nchake, both residents of Botshabelo, and both informal sellers of cooked food and household goods in the town; and Margaret Rakgogo, matron of an old people’s home in Botshabelo, who proved very uncertain about her participation in the venture. Four men were living on the farm: they were employees of the three potential purchasers, none of whom was living on the farm, and of the other absentee stockowner.

In November 1998, two years later, I could find no one on the farm at all. Purchase by the two sisters Nthabiseng Nchake and Ntebaleng Molelekoa was nevertheless imminent, according to an official of the regional office of the DLA. Margaret Rakgogo had withdrawn from the scheme. The immediate financial implication of this was that, while the two purchasers would together qualify for R32,000 through the state’s household grant under the redistribution programme, they would need to borrow the balance of R13,000 outstanding of the purchase price of R45,000 approved as a result of the latest valuation in December 1997.

By January 2000, purchase had still not taken place. All such transfers were frozen in early 2000 by a new Minister of Land Affairs appointed after the 1999 general election. I was told at Liefdefontein that there were three prospective partners in the purchase: Ntebaleng Molelekoa, as before; and two men, one of whom was unemployed but owned 29 cattle. It is unlikely, however, that the second and third had any status other than that of informal occupiers who rented part-use of the farm from Ntebaleng Molelekoa. The first

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39 The amount was increased from R15,000 to R16,000 in October 1998.
two, both living in the K section of Botshabelo, employed one man on the farm to look after their cattle, while his wife supervised the geese and ducks and chickens that cluttered the yard. The third man, also resident in the K section, employed another man to look after his beasts. The perennial problem of water supply had not yet been solved.40

By November 2001, there had been further turnover of residents on the farm. The two employees had both left, and two others were living there: one was working for a new informal tenant, with 17 beasts including calves; the other was Ntebaleng Molelekoa’s younger brother, who ‘just looks after everything’ on the farm for Ntebaleng. He said that both his sisters were still involved in the purchase, with the newcomer also. I found Ntebaleng herself at home in the K section, with her daughter. They had a shack adjoining the house, where they reared young chicks that were clustering for warmth around a powerful electric light. Ntebaleng no longer sold food informally in the Botshabelo market; she had instead been employed for two years in a Taiwanese-owned sewing factory in the industrial area, at a normal wage of R225 per fortnight for a ‘standard’ shift. She looked exhausted: she frequently worked shifts, including overtime, from 0800 to 2000 hours. She explained that her sister only remained in the farm enterprise on account of the state grant of R16,000; and that she paid her younger brother R100 a month with food to look after the farm. Her informal sub-tenant, the other man with livestock on the land, who owned 13 beasts, was supposed to pay R10 per head per month, every six months, but ‘he gives trouble’ (oa sokodisa), by which she meant it was difficult in practice to extract this money from him. She wanted to invest in rearing pigs on the farm, but her children – her daughter, articulate in English, wanted to finish Matric – refused to move there.41 A DLA official, commenting on her situation, explained that without a title-deed she could not enforce a contract relating to sub-letting, and that the sub-tenant probably knew that. The title-deed, however, was imminent, and – although he was well aware that Ntebaleng was employed in the sewing factory – he noted that she still seemed keen to pursue a farming enterprise. The institutional framework within which purchase would take place had changed significantly, however. Under a new policy introduced in August 2001, ‘Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development’ (LRAD),42 while the purchase price remained at R45,000, the prospective purchasers qualified for a grant of R89,000 on the basis of their joint assets of R50,600. For this reason, despite the strategic thrust of LRAD working in favour of better-off prospective farmers, Ntebaleng was lucky that the transfer of Liendefontein had been delayed.43

In these circumstances, analysis of a ‘farming’ enterprise within the context of the redistribution element of the South African land reform programme depended on the tracking of disparate potential purchasers over time, none of whom I ever found on the farm; brief conversations with successive transient employees on the farm, whose knowledge of the particular conditions of purchase, and even of the identities of the purchasers, was hazy; and occasional interviews with the regional official responsible for the Botshabelo scheme as a whole and for liaison between the DLA and would-be purchasers, who clarified ‘from above’ the changing institutional context of such purchase over time. It was obvious, in this particular case and in others also, that the everyday life-circumstances of the most persistent and committed of these aspirant ‘farmers’ differed sharply from the

40 Interview, David Tsheliso Ntshasa, Liendefontein, 13 January 2000.
41 Interview, Ntebaleng Molelekoa, Botshabelo, 18 November 2001.
42 The focus of LRAD is on conditions for the emergence of full-time black commercial farmers. See ‘Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development’ (Pretoria, Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 2001); and C. Mingo, ‘The 2002 Land Affairs Budget: is Land Reform on Track?’ (IDASA, Budget Information Service, February 2002).
circumstances officially envisaged, by which purchasers would become full-time farmers resident on their land. Rather, while transfer was about to take place after the lapse of six years since initial application, the realisation of a viable farming project was still a long way off, despite the apparently improved financial incentives. The principal applicant struggled in exhausting and notoriously low-waged employment in the industrial site of Botshabelo, committed more than ‘full-time’, in practice, to an activity quite different from farming.

The central point here is that in all three case studies, and in many other socio-economic ‘sites’ in the region, a practical investigation of changing livelihoods over time, in relation to the complexity of land-use on particular farms, or to the trajectories of individual households and families, could not be adequately undertaken amongst people resident on the land in question or in any one ‘community’ that could be identified for this purpose. In the case of the white-owned Tweespruit farm, it is striking that none of the many people – including ex-farmworkers and their relatives and the erstwhile farm-owner and his relatives – who told me stories about life on the farm and about the circumstances of eviction from it, were resident on the farm at the time of interview. Yet such stories are vital to any attempt to generalise about the shifting trajectories of experience of ex-farmworkers and their families. While pensions are a very important resource for the elderly and their immediate dependants, poverty is especially rampant in the middle and younger generations, now concentrated on the margins of small towns throughout the Free State – they are over-crowded, heavily under-employed and often bitter about their socio-economic predicament in the ‘new’ South Africa. In the case of the African-owned farm, Balaclava, it was impossible to discover the driving forces of part-livelihoods on the farm without pursuing a number of disparate owners and tenants in different places, whose activities were distributed across various socio-economic ‘spaces’ in the region. In the case of the state-owned farm available under the land reform redistribution programme, Liedefontein, a long and tenacious struggle by an aspirant farmer, a woman, to achieve title to land and to embark on a ‘farming’ enterprise was conducted wholly off-farm, in the sense that she was initially a self-employed small-scale entrepreneur in a large relocation town and later a more than full-time wage-worker in a local industry notorious for its exploitative practices. Activities on the farm itself were routinely sub-contracted to those even worse-off than herself.

I have previously noted that a significant cost of the ‘dispersed intensive’ method is the loss of any claim for statistical representativeness. For this reason, above all, elaboration of the method here is not an argument for the substitution of well-directed quantitative methods by micro-intensive qualitative methods. Rather, in its modest form, it is an argument that, in some circumstances, such methods are a valuable complement to established methods such as large-scale, or more probably small-scale, household surveys. In a more assertive form, the argument is that conventional survey research on livelihoods undertaken in specific geographically defined ‘communities’ needs to be complemented precisely by micro-intensive qualitative methods if a proper understanding of diversity, inequality and trajectories of change is to emerge.44

There is a crucial qualification, however, that applies to all livelihoods research. While it is essentially carried out at the micro-level, that of ‘households’ and ‘communities’, a pre-condition of the interest or usefulness of such research is that its key questions are framed within a prior analysis at the regional or national level, and often at the international level also, of the political economy of change that is significant for the purpose. It is vitally

44 For a critique of conventional household survey research in the Free State, see Murray, ‘Changing Livelihoods’, pp. 118–122.
important, in other words, to define the structural, historical and institutional macro-context of such research, both to set the micro-level work in a proper context and to work towards a ‘rolling engagement’ of the kind envisaged in the first section of this article. This requires detailed attention to the shifting political and economic and institutional pressures at various different levels; statistical or graphical specification of the key trends of change; and strong analysis of the social relations of conflict and inequality over time. For example, the key elements of the macro-context of livelihoods research in the Free State in the 1990s, within which the micro-level case studies were framed, were, firstly, successive waves of structural unemployment in commercial agriculture and in the mining industry; secondly, mass relocation from the countryside to many small towns and some large towns; and, thirdly, rapidly changing political and institutional conditions of socio-economic opportunity and of state intervention.

Conclusions

There are, then, many different ways of carrying out livelihoods research in practice. The examples adduced here reflect various balances and combinations, and they should be interpreted in part in a climate of increasingly vigorous discussion of the complementarities and tensions between quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The study of northern Tanzanian villages reported by Ellis was dominated by a variety of circumspective methods – mainly small-scale sample surveys and disparate ‘participatory’ techniques – supplemented by some retrospective depth through focus-group activity. It developed a number of analytical techniques for the exploration of livelihood strategies, with explicit commentary on the comparative usefulness of each technique. The study of livelihood trajectories in Nepal and north-eastern India was much more deliberately retrospective in character, drawing on longitudinal research in both a strict sense and in a loose sense, varying in different areas with the availability of relevant information from studies undertaken a generation previously. It drew upon relatively large-scale survey materials and a variety of ‘participatory’ methods, and also attached weight to detailed life-history interviews. The repeated cross-sectional studies of poverty in Lesotho in the 1990s, in effect, converted successive relatively large-scale synchronic surveys into a valuable longitudinal series, and illustrated, in analysis arising out of the most recent of the surveys, some of the conflicts arising out of attempts to combine ‘participatory’ with survey research. The MLSC research project in Qwaqwa, South Africa, reflected an explicit effort to ‘situate’ both circumspective investigation of the connections between disparate household activities in the present and retrospective investigation of changing livelihood trajectories in the past within the context of a more macro-level analysis of socio-economic trends of change and of shifting political and institutional constraints and opportunities.

The detailed case-studies undertaken in other parts of the Free State Province illustrate circumstances in which it was not possible to identify ‘communities’ for the specific purposes of the research and in which, correspondingly, the ‘dispersed intensive’ method proved valuable, albeit highly labour-intensive. Its potential value otherwise depends largely, of course, on the specific research questions posed and on the extent to which such circumstances of the relative absence of ‘community’ are replicated elsewhere. The South African political economy, and to a lesser extent that of the southern African region as a whole, is perhaps distinctive – but by no means exclusive – in its production and reproduction of such circumstances. Firstly, the long history of migrant labour over large

45 See, for example, the very valuable contributions arising out of a workshop at Cornell University in March 2001 [www.people.cornell.edu/pages/sk145/papers/QQZ.pdf].
distances within the working lives of very many individuals throws up opportunities for retrospectively ‘connecting’ sending and receiving areas in the planning and the conduct of research, while also posing large challenges to achieving such connection in practice. Secondly, the dismal history of mass forced relocation is an expression both of important general trends of change such as increasing structural unemployment and of more specific social engineering by the *apartheid* state, viciously misconceived and misdirected as it was. Thirdly, the complexities arising out of the combination of these features of the South African political economy imply the likelihood both that household livelihoods are ‘stretched’ across significant spatial boundaries and that important trajectories of change in the histories of many families are ‘rooted’ in a number of different places.

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