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Understanding influences in policy landscapes for sustainable coastal livelihoods

Dirk J. Steenbergen[a,*], Julian Clifton[b], Leontine E. Visser[c], Natasha Stacey[a], Andrew McWilliam[d]

[a] Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods (RIEL), Charles Darwin University, 1 Ellengowan Drive Casuarina, Darwin, NT 0909, Australia
[b] UWA School of Agriculture and Environment and the Oceans Institute, The University of Western Australia (UWA), 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia
[c] Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University (WU), Hollandseweg 1, 6706kN Wageningen, Netherlands
[d] School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Bullecourt Avenue, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring sustainability of livelihoods for communities residing in coastal environments of the Global South has gained considerable attention across policy making, practice and research fields. Livelihood enhancement programs commonly strategize around developing people's resilience by diversification of income and subsistence activities, but are criticised for inadequate appreciation of local contexts. This in part results from the application of theoretical approaches in practice which are informed disproportionately by dominant science-based narratives and utilised by actors in higher level political arenas. This leads to the prioritization of objectives that do not necessarily reflect local livelihood conditions. There is an urgent need to address the multiple challenges that limit the possibility for sustainable livelihoods in spatially and temporally dynamic environments. This paper presents an analysis of the policy landscape in which intervention strategies for sustainable coastal livelihoods emerge. It examines how livelihood improvement approaches take shape in the context of conservation, rural development, and regional resource governance. Drawing from analyses of broader regional policies and an extensive literature review, a conceptual framework is presented. It details various influences that can flow up or down multi-scaled governance structures to affect policy and management - from agenda-setting narratives of policy makers to the dynamic and changeable nature of livelihoods. Case studies from the Arafura and Timor Seas region are introduced to illustrate some of these trends. The discussion highlights challenges encountered in the pursuit of sustainability for coastal and marine-based livelihoods, and suggests directions for more effective long term policy, management and strategic interventions.

1. Introduction

Improving livelihoods for coastal resource-dependent communities is a prominent objective in conservation and development practice in the Global South [1], but achieving the dual objectives of social and ecological sustainability at the local scale remains a major challenge [2]. Livelihoods are widely understood to refer to 'the way people combine their capabilities, skills and knowledge with the assets at their disposal to create activities that will enable them to make a living' [3], p.12. Sustainable coastal livelihoods, more specifically, incorporates aspects of 'sustainability' and 'coastal environments'. The former implies that human interactions with environments deliver benefits for people, while equally enabling ecological functions to be maintained or improved over long time frames. The latter implies that there is significant local dependence on coastal resources and ecosystems for income and/or subsistence, often coupled with high levels of vulnerability [2,3].

As with cases of terrestrial livelihoods, relieving pressure on marine resources has come to involve suites of interventions by livelihood improvement projects that focus inter alia on improving income, food security, wellbeing and environmental quality [4–8]. There is consensus amongst experts [3,5,9,10] that contemporary interventionist practices towards livelihood improvement fall within a suite of three main approaches: (i) 'livelihood enhancement' involving the improvement of existing livelihood activities to make them more sustainable, (ii) 'livelihood diversification' involving the spread of dependence across different components of livelihood portfolios, and (iii) 'alternative livelihoods' involving the introduction of new strategies to meet income and subsistence needs.

Despite the conceptual advances in the understanding of liveli-

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: dirk.steenbergen@cdu.edu.au (D.J. Steenbergen), julian.clifton@uwa.edu.au (J. Clifton), leontine.visser@wur.nl (L.E. Visser), natasha.stacey@cdu.edu.au (N. Stacey), a.mcwilliam@westernsydney.edu.au (A. McWilliam).

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hoods, the translation of livelihood improvement policy into practice still falls critically short in achieving sustainable outcomes. Coastal communities' deep cultural values and their attachments to environment and local practices have, for example, proven to be highly influential in the choices people make to change or retain a livelihood focus [11,12]. However, strategies implemented under livelihood improvement projects still appear too incompatible with such values. The practical management of people's use of resources in coastal areas is also confounded by generic problems of weak or overlapping public administration, contested tenure and the ongoing marginalization of coastal resource user groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, groups of low socio-economic standing) [13,14]. There are many other external and global drivers of resource degradation which can complicate approaches to improving local livelihoods, including market-based forces that drive marine resource exploitation, environmental pollution and climate change, political shifts, and globalization (e.g. connectivity and mobility) [15,16]. Although addressing the complexities associated with local livelihoods has gained more currency in the last two decades, the historic trajectories of practice that led to this have varied widely in the rural development and conservation sectors.

Rural development approaches prior to the 1990s predominantly relied on economic interpretations of what constituted 'poverty', illustrated in what Chambers and Conway [17] critically referred to as the production, employment and poverty-line thinking. Neo-liberal economics principles have been instrumental in steering rural development strategies towards enhancing local entrepreneurial capacity to empower poor people [18], as reflected in, for example, early development rhetoric of global development agencies like the World Bank. These strategies, however, often yielded mixed results [19,20], whereby capital gains at household levels, were often overshadowed by processes of local marginalization and the loss of vital social capital. Since the 1990s, significant revisions in thinking about local livelihoods led to inclusion of broader social, cultural and political considerations, next to economically rational ones. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF), for example, integrates vulnerability contexts, functions and values of various forms of livelihood assets and impacts of transformative structures and processes into the understanding of livelihoods [21].

In conservation contexts, the high resource dependence of people living in, or around, what are identified as ecologically critical areas often warrants inclusion of livelihood considerations [4,22]. Livelihood improvement interventions in many of today's conservation projects cases are therefore typically designed by default to fit within resource management or protection measures such as marine protected areas (MPA), rather than, for example, prioritizing poverty alleviation.

All these approaches result from strong narratives in the political arenas that set local development agendas and direct poverty alleviation strategies [6,23]. Béné [24] uses the example of how the framing of marine reserves, as tools in different coastal resource management regimes (e.g. driven by conservation versus human development objectives), results in different forms of local support. He discusses how demands for resource use for economic development in coastal areas can be reconciled with resource protection interests for conservation through fisheries management approaches. This further illustrates the importance of understanding how intervention practices are framed.

The comparably few success stories to date that have resulted from the continuing investment into improving coastal livelihoods, indicates that, despite good intentions, there are significant flaws in the framing and execution of livelihood improvement practices. Much of the research on coastal livelihood intervention has focused on institutional aspects of how the 'fits' or 'misfits' between policy, management and local conditions lead to unexpected outcomes or outright failure [25–28]. Although the institutional underpinning of failure certainly deserves a central position in addressing the problem, as evident in the case studies included in this special issue, relatively little attention has focused on examining whether and why livelihood improvement interventions are misguided in their design and objectives in the first place. Moreover, a considerable body of work on social wellbeing in livelihood studies has done much to refine our understanding of the complex and dynamic socio-cultural contexts in which livelihoods are constructed [29–32]. However, even these studies often overlook the social, political and economic influences that affect processes by which policies are formulated and management interventions develop implementation strategies. Insights into these influences may give further guidance to why the challenges of 'getting things right' persist, despite the attention given to improving local livelihoods in both research and practice.

By developing an analytical framework that examines policy and management design processes in multi-scale governance structures, this paper aims to interrogate contemporary approaches for sustainable coastal livelihoods in developing country contexts. The case studies in this special issue demonstrate the applicability and relevance of the 'policy influence model' presented in this introductory paper. In doing so the paper seeks to stimulate a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between conservation narratives and the dynamics of local practice. It also highlight opportunities for better policy approaches which are more congruent with local contexts and cultural practice, are informed by relevant science, and measured for success along more appropriate parameters and timeframes.

Following an explanation of methodological approaches applied, the conceptual framework is presented around a model of policy influence that examines how sustainable coastal livelihood programs emerge as products of the influences at play in complex and dynamic policy landscapes. The series of case studies in the special issue is then introduced to help explain and illustrate the applicability of the model in a range of coastal scenarios. The following discussion identifies three contemporary policy failures; firstly, a disproportionate directional flow of influence in governance structures; secondly, a lack of responsive capacity in these structures to address contextual dynamics; and thirdly, the self-fulfilling validation of project outcomes. In the conclusion potential points are identified where policy and management may reconcile the relative dominance of certain streams of influence in order to better address pressures on coastal people's livelihoods and the sustainable health of their living environments.

2. Methods

The analysis builds on ongoing research by the authors and an extensive desktop review of livelihood and development approaches that drew from academic work, policy documents and reporting on intervention programs. The collection of empirical studies presented in the papers of the special issue goes on to provide reflective insights on different components of the conceptual model of policy influences. The case studies are derived from the northern Arafura and Timor Seas (ATS) region. They comprise Clifton and Foale's analysis of how conservation and development narratives drive policy and management across the broader region in Southeast Asia; a case study on economics of a transboundary sea cucumber fishery between Indonesia and Australia by Prescott et al.; a livelihood analysis of island communities in Timor Leste by Mills et al.; a study on the impacts of rapid livelihood transition in the Kei Islands of Indonesia by Steenbergen et al.; and Jaiteh et al.'s examination of the implications of livelihood shifts away from shark fishing for conservation across different governance jurisdictions in Indonesia. The great diversity of coastal and marine livelihood issues present in the northern regions of the ATS is illustrated in the case studies. Given this diversity, the case studies highlight the applicability of the findings to broader contexts of coastal policy and management where issues arise over the sustainability of coastal livelihoods. Moreover, the governance landscape of the ATS region reflects the character of landscape observed across broader coastal contexts in developing countries, particularly in terms of pressures of