

Sustainable Livelihoods explained in 5 minutes

Julie Jarman video transcript, 2017

If you think about sustainable livelihoods, it helps you to understand the world, how it fits together, and the day-to-day decisions that people make.

Sustainable livelihoods is thinking about how ordinary people on a day to day basis, create their livelihood through accessing a whole range of different things: money they need, friends, social goods, work, maybe they have a car, a house. But within that, people's livelihoods are actually incredibly fragile. Because we're all vulnerable to things that can happen to us; external shocks is what I call them.

The major ones like divorce, or being bereaved, which just throw your whole life, off course, but they're also very minor, what appear minor on the surface, like your cooker breaks down. If the cooker breaks down, that's a complete disaster, because you can't feed your kids. If you don't have much money, you can't afford to buy a new cooker, the only way you can get a new cooker is to go somewhere that's going to charge you excessive amounts of interest for that. So, you're going to pay way more than you can afford for the cooker.

But one of the things that's very interesting about the livelihoods framework or way of thinking is that it explains that most people make rational decisions about what they are doing with their lives.

And that there is often a payoff between increasing your financial assets, or your income and your social assets. So, for a lot of people who are managing in life, they may be on benefits, they may be on a very low income, they have time that they've invested in their communities, in their families, their friends, so that when things go wrong, they can be helped out. Maybe their mum is in hospital poorly, a neighbour or a friend can drive them to the hospital. Whereas if they didn't have that, it might be two or even three bus rides and take significant amount of time. But as soon as that person for example, in this case, let's say a single parent takes a job, they lose a lot of their social assets, which means that their flexibility for what they do and their support networks to fall back on and massively reduced. And that makes their livelihood very vulnerable.

So, they may be better off financially, because it only needs for one thing to go wrong. And the whole thing collapses around them.

So, I like to give an example. Me, I'm a middle class, single parent. When my daughter was young, if my mom became ill, I could negotiate to take time off work. My boss would be fine with that. If my mom was looking after my daughter, I could pay for somebody else to look after my daughter because I had enough money to do that. And I had a car so I could get in the car and go visit my mother in hospital and look after her.

Now if I'm a single parent that hasn't got that level of resource. And I'm taking a low paid job, let's say in a supermarket on a checkout till. And my mom's looking after my daughter while I work. And my mom gets ill and gets taken into hospital, I have two immediate problems. One, I need to find somebody else to look after my daughter in order to get to work. And two, I also need to look after my mom who's in hospital and needs me to be there.

So, one crisis has actually led to another I've got two crises, I can't afford to buy my way out of it. So, I can't pay someone else to do it. Because I've been working long hours in the supermarket on the checkout till I actually haven't had that quid pro quo relationship with my friends and neighbours. So, I don't have anybody that can look after my daughter for me. Maybe I've got someone for a couple of

hours. But in terms of a full shift at the supermarket, I haven't got it. I'm not in a very powerful position at work. So, I can't probably negotiate with my boss for significant compassionate leave. If I do get any leave, it's likely to be unpaid leave, which I can't afford. So, my life is now in crisis. Because I need someone to look after my daughter and I haven't got someone I need to try and keep a job going when I haven't got any childcare in place and a needs look after my mum.

So, something somewhere has to give, at that point I'm likely to give up the job because I'm going to prioritise my mother and my daughter over the job. The reason why all of that is interesting is because it's about the fact that people are making rational choices, and that there is a balance to be had between financial assets and social assets. And in terms of having a livelihood that makes sense for people social assets are often as important or equally important as the money, and it's really the social assets that stop you falling off the ladder all together. And the people who are the worst off in our society are those who have no social assets and no financial assets, and they're barely surviving at all.

Video available at: <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/sustainable-livelihoods-explained-in-5-minutes/>