CHAPTER 5

Beyond Livelihoods: Occupationality and Career Formation in African Artisanal Mining

Deborah Fahy Bryceson

Introduction

The livelihoods concept has been central to development thinking and projects in African countries for over twenty years. The examination of household livelihood diversity in relation to household assets has become a standard approach for rural and urban livelihood projects in many development agencies. These exercises have been supplemented with a proliferation of detailed academic studies of livelihood change in rural communities dotted throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, and a burgeoning number of Masters and PhD theses emanating from African and Western academia. However, few studies have attempted to review the findings and to question the approach’s utility in terms of what it has revealed. What is its theoretical contribution and track record in providing useful insights? How can the body of applied research it has spawned be assessed? What are the approach’s limitations? And indeed does it now, and will it in the future, have any relevance for researchers and development practitioners?

In this chapter, I consider how the livelihoods concept was conceived, look at its analytical accomplishments and investigate its utility to donors’ efforts to achieve poverty reduction. In critiquing its limitations, I introduce the concept of ‘occupationality’; I define this and discuss its potential to probe the decision-making dilemmas and moral underpinnings of livelihood diversification. Furthermore, it affords a means of tracing how livelihood diversification can eventually lead to work specialization. This transition is illustrated by a recent case study of Tanzanian artisanal gold miners. I will conclude by juxtaposing the livelihoods concept with the concept of ‘occupationality’ and career formation.

Rural Poverty Discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenging the World Bank Discourse

The goal of poverty alleviation has dominated development studies and donor agency work for decades. The World Bank’s World Development Report (WDR)
on poverty in 1990 was a trend-setting document in a burgeoning field of poverty research led by the World Bank and development economists who were intent on developing an array of poverty indicators and measures to monitor the effects of the implementation of structural adjustment programmes and economic liberalization (World Bank 1990). Meanwhile, many anthropologists and sociologists defended the utility of qualitative research over the positivist social science emphasis on quantitative analysis. The theme of the 2000/01 WDR (World Bank 2000a) was again poverty; this report was accompanied by another publication, entitled *Voices of the Poor*, based on the personal testimony of vast numbers of poor people around the world (World Bank 2000b).

Certain logical discrepancies surfaced when the World Bank’s conception of poverty was viewed alongside its neo-liberal policy agenda. The Bank’s efforts to expand global market liberalization were far more dominant and, in effect, sidetracked its poverty-reduction goals. The contradictory juxtaposing of market liberalization with poverty alleviation began to be explained in the 2008 WDR, which argued that certain rural smallholders could not compete in the world market and should therefore not only diversify away from agriculture, but leave their rural homes and migrate elsewhere to maximize their income-earning potential (World Bank 2008). This document was historic in terms of donor agency literature, breaking away as it did from a long line of colonial and post-colonial thinking, which stressed that poverty alleviation was best served by agricultural investment in rural smallholder peasant producers (Havnevik et al. 2007).

The following year the 2009 WDR report proceeded further, suggesting that uncompetitive rural producers should seek to move to more productive regions and urban areas, where levels of productivity are deemed to be higher (World Bank 2009). In essence, the 2009 report attempts to reconcile global market liberalization with labour displacement and poverty alleviation along the theme of the poor physically distancing themselves from poverty. Narayan et al.’s (2009) supplement to the 2009 WDR – entitled *Moving Out of Poverty* – cites qualitative interviews with large numbers of migrants. Highlighting migration success stories, this document is a landmark in donor thinking, since previously urban migration was seen as counterproductive, rather than as capable of absorbing labour.

But clearly, there is a danger in confusing movement with the idea of improvement and opportunity. Movement may just as likely be downward degradation as upward economic success. The World Bank discourse continually skirts around the fundamental problem of global labour displacement of peasantries and others engaged in manual labour, glibly shifting the issue from what they do to where they do it. The inference is that they will find work in the right place, which may entail migration.