Introduction

In the 1990s, the analysis of poverty in Africa became susceptible to a livelihood approach, with an actor-oriented perspective of putting people at the centre and pointing out their agency in order to explore opportunities and to cope with constraints. It was opposed to earlier structural perspectives concerned with the poverty of dependence and neo-Marxist approaches that depicted the poor as victims of societal constraints. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that the livelihood approach can be set aside as another adherent of the Washington Consensus, with its neo-liberal focus on the regulation of market forces, free choice and individual responsibility. This paper acknowledges that originally the livelihood approach tended to downplay structural constraints especially issues of power, but more recently these issues have been better addressed. However, what remains prominent is the focus of the livelihood approach on agency, i.e. the recognition that Africans create their own history and take an avid interest in their own world of lived experience.

The origin of modern livelihood policy studies can be traced to Chambers and Conway (1992: 9–12), who saw livelihood as the means of gaining a living, including livelihood capabilities, tangible assets, such as stores and resources, and intangible assets, such as claims and access. The first section of this article shows that the approach’s popularity is partly due to its enactment by policy circles but also to its roots in various scientific disciplines. Subsequent sections discuss two issues, namely issues of power and multi-local dynamics, which merit particular attention if the approach is to contribute to the understanding of contemporary African livelihoods. In so doing, this article also sets the agenda for future research.
The livelihood approach: modern articulations and disciplinary roots

An actor-oriented perspective challenged the structural perspective on African development of neo-Marxist studies in the 1970s and 1980s for various reasons. First of all, it could not come to terms with the diverging responses of African peasants to the dominant capitalist mode of production. Moreover, studies in peripheral capitalism got caught in a functionalist impasse because they suffered from a continuous obligation to prove the dominance of the capitalist mode of production over non-capitalist modes by the extraction of surplus value through labour and commodities. Also, and despite their wealth of empirical studies, French economic anthropology found difficulties when attempting to make the Marxist concept of mode of production operational in the context of local African communities organized upon the basis of kinship. Thus, the structuralist idea of dominance and surplus extraction proved too schematic when confronted with the deviating behaviour of those thought to be exploited.

In actor-oriented studies a micro-orientation became predominant with a focus upon local households, which was also considered as a convenient unit for the collection of empirical data. As a consequence, various types of household studies appeared in the 1980s. ‘New household economics’, as opposed to earlier ‘peasant economics’—which regarded peasants as passive victims of capitalist exploitation and state dominance—focused instead upon labour, land allocation and income strategies, using micro-economic modelling as an explanatory tool. ‘Survival studies’, more sociologically inspired, were mainly interested in the micro-social behaviour of poor people in coping with and surviving different types of crises, such as falls in prices, droughts and famines. In those days, both droughts and Structural Adjustment Programmes afflicted Africa. Therefore many of these studies came to rather pessimistic findings, indicating the increased impoverishment of African households, despite their appreciation of people’s initiative and actions.

At the beginning of the 1990s more optimistic ‘livelihood studies’ were undertaken which focused on how people organize their lives rather than on impoverishment itself. One may simply say that, in their optimism, these livelihood studies are an expression of the Zeitgeist, but from an inside perspective one could argue that the swing