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# The Political Economy of Migration Processes: An Agenda for Migration Research and Analysis

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## **Abstract**

This Working Paper proposes the development of an approach to researching and analysing migration processes that combines a livelihoods approach to exploring local-level migration dynamics with a relational political economy perspective that deepens understanding of the broader social, economic and political processes and interests interacting with migration at different levels (e.g. causing patterns of vulnerability or creating opportunities that encourage migration). This approach aims to address a number of important weaknesses in contemporary migration research, including a failure to analyse migration as an integral part of social and economic transformation processes (such as development and globalisation), inadequate attention to the precise causes, circumstances and consequences of people's movement, continuing reliance on overly-simplistic migration categories and dichotomies, and poor appreciation or understanding of the changing dynamics of migration processes over time (IMI, 2006).

Patterns and dynamics of migration are highly varied, complex and context-specific. Understanding these dynamics in specific contexts might be improved by exploring the interaction of local-level factors immediately influencing people's migration decisions and strategies (linked to livelihoods) with interacting political, economic and social factors and processes at different levels which affect the agency, vulnerability and/or opportunities of migrants (and associated non-migrants) during the migration process, and that shape migration outcomes. Differential and shifting power relations are crucial to understanding the interaction of migration strategies at the local level with political and economic processes and relationships affecting these strategies, since these are fundamental to understanding the interests and relative agency of individuals, households and other actors involved. The concept of *process* is also critical to the analysis, since the factors that affect people's migration options, strategies and outcomes are played out over time and can only be properly examined within a historical perspective.

**Keywords:** Migration theory, migration dynamics, livelihoods, political economy, power and agency.

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# 1. Introduction

As outlined by the International Migration Institute (IMI) in setting out its current research agenda,<sup>1</sup> the multi-layered, dynamic and complex nature of contemporary migration processes present a number of significant challenges for migration research.

These include:

- The relationship between patterns and processes of international migration and globalisation;
- The role of individual states and regions in migration processes;
- The nature of migratory behaviour at the micro-level and associated dynamics of community transformation, trans-national identity formation, and livelihoods;
- Complex and politicised policy processes.

Migration pathways and motivations are highly varied and dynamic, and thus highly resistant to generalisation. Simple categorisations and clear-cut dichotomies are inadequate or misleading.

Shortcomings in contemporary understanding of migration highlighted by IMI include:

- A common failure to analyse migration as an integral part of development and global transformation processes.
- Lack of attention to the process of migration itself – i.e. how people move and their experience of travelling.
- Lack of attention to the causes and consequences of migration in places and countries of origin.
- Continuing reliance on overly-simplistic categories and dichotomies to characterise migrants.
- Lack of attention to the changing dynamics of migration processes over time.

Improved understanding of migration will depend on the development of more comprehensive and fine-tuned theoretical and analytical approaches, suitable for investigating the evolution of entire migration processes across space and time, and suitable for developing a deeper understanding of the interaction of migration dynamics

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<sup>1</sup> [www.imi.ox.ac.uk](http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk)

with broader global transformation processes, and linking micro-level understanding of migration to macro-level trends (IMI, 2006).

This paper proposes the development of an approach to investigating migration processes that combines a livelihoods approach to analysing migration dynamics at the local level with a relational political economy perspective. This political economy perspective deepens understanding of the broader social, economic and political processes and interests interacting with migration and livelihoods at different levels (e.g. producing vulnerability or creating opportunities that encourage migration), and focuses attention on structures and relationships of relative agency and power that affect the dynamics of specific migration (and associated livelihood) processes. It is the *interaction* of local-level factors immediately influencing people's migration decisions and strategies (linked to livelihoods) with a range of political, economic and social factors and processes affecting the agency of migrants (and non-migrants) that ultimately shape migration outcomes within specific contexts. Differential and shifting power relations are therefore crucial to understanding the interaction of migration strategies at the local level with political and economic processes and interests affecting these strategies.

## **2. Background: approaches and challenges relevant to a micro political economy approach in migration research**

### ***2.1. Migration theories***

Economic theories of migration have reflected dominant models and theories of economic development and under-development (de Haas, 2008; Waddington and Sabates-Wheeler, 2003). Theories based on neo-classical economics treated migration as a component of rational markets tending towards equilibrium, driven by the (rational) economic decision-making of individual migrants and/or their households. The Harris-Todaro model, for example, explains rural-to-urban migration in terms of expected wage differentials between rural and urban areas (Harris and Todaro, 1970); 'push-pull' theories of international migration explain migration flows in terms of supply and demand for labour between sending and receiving areas; the New

Economics of Labour Migration literature focuses on migration decision-making at the micro level in terms of households seeking to maximise or protect household income and/or reduce consumption (e.g. Stark and Bloom, 1985). By contrast, neo-Marxist ‘historical-structural’ approaches developed within political economy (e.g. Frank, 1966; Baran, 1973) have viewed migrants not as free and rational economic actors operating within a benign and equalising market, but as workers whose movement is determined by the exploitative structures and processes of capitalist development and accumulation.

Critiques of economics-based theories have focused on the homogenising and reductionist view that they encourage: of migrants and their households as atomised economic decision-makers in more or less rational (labour) markets (over-emphasis on migrants’ economic agency); or of migrants as unwitting pawns in globalised systems of capital penetration, capitalist production and commercial extraction (over-emphasis on the structural economic determinants of migration). Either way, in the search for general theories to explain migration and its consequences, there has been a tendency to abstract “economic migration” from the highly diverse and dynamic political, social, cultural, institutional, historical and (indeed) economic contexts in which people move (Gold, 2005). As a consequence, these approaches have failed to provide generally applicable, predictive theories of migration that hold water in the real, complex world of human mobility, or that provide an adequate explanation of who is moving where and why. For example, push-pull theory ‘fails to explain why only some move, it doesn’t explain who those people are, why they choose to move when others remain, when they moved, to where and for which job’; micro neoclassical theories, meanwhile, ‘are weakened by the assumption that decision-makers have perfect knowledge about the costs and benefits of migration’ (McDowell and de Haan, 1997:9).

New approaches have challenged any attempt to understand migration on the basis of a single level of analysis or discrete factor such as income differentials or labour demand. They emphasise instead the inter-linkages between different migration streams; the importance of agency, autonomy, perceptions, cultural and historical factors and institutional constraints; the complex multi-level and trans-national nature of migration; and the importance of social groups and relationships – including migration networks –

for shaping migration dynamics and migration experiences, straddling migration 'sending', 'receiving' and 'transit' locations, and a range of actors within them (Gold, 2005). As noted by de Haas (2008), this shift reflected a broader rejection within the social sciences of 'grand' structuralist or functionalist theories, and a move towards more pluralist or hybrid approaches that attempt to bridge the divide between structure and agency in explanations of social processes.

Livelihoods studies of migration among poor populations have revealed the extent of migration as a crucial, long-standing and highly varied and dynamic livelihood strategy among many, if not most, rural communities in different parts of the world. Within this literature, migration is not examined in isolation, but as one of a range of livelihood strategies that might be available to households. While household agency and decision-making is central to the analysis, institutions, structures and processes are also seen as important in shaping livelihood opportunities, strategies and outcomes (cf., e.g., David, 1995; Deshingkar and Start, 2003; de Haan et al., 2000).

Migration network theories emphasise that migration is embedded in political, ethnic, familial and communal relationships, including complex social networks and relationships, that strengthen collective agency among migrants and their communities, and that influence and mediate the dynamic interaction between structure and agency in migration processes (Gold, 2005:4; Castles, 2008; de Haas, 2008).

Migration systems theories emphasise the dynamic social, cultural, economic and institutional impacts of migration at both the 'sending' and 'receiving' ends, with analyses seeking to incorporate both the causes and consequences of migration across entire migration processes and involving geographically dispersed 'transnational communities'. Migration systems are conceptualised as linking people over space and time in geographically dispersed (often trans-national) communities. Migrants exercise agency within these systems, but migration systems have the effect of 'structuring and clustering' migration geographically 'by encouraging migration along certain pathways and discouraging it along others' (de Haas, 2008:21, citing Mabogunje, 1970:12).

All of this represents a significant advance on the earlier reductionist, abstracted and deterministic economics-based models of migration. Migration network and systems

approaches have been particularly important for depicting the social and spatio-temporal complexity and dynamism of migration flows, and livelihoods-based studies have been very important for depicting the complex interaction between migration and other livelihood strategies at the local level, particularly within poor rural communities involved in seasonal, temporary and/or rural-urban migration.

However, it is arguable that in recent years, and as a consequence of the retreat from flawed explanatory models, a great deal more energy and resources have gone into *describing and documenting* contemporary migration and the varied institutions and networks associated with it than has gone into *analysing and explaining* the deeper causal and consequential dynamics of migration in different contexts and at different levels.

Moreover, this descriptive endeavour has often remained relatively narrow in focus. In the case of network studies, for example, there has been a tendency to research and illustrate empirically the importance of migrant networks without investigating their relative significance in relation to other factors affecting migration (de Haas, 2008: 20). Although livelihood frameworks generally include ‘transforming structures’, ‘mediating processes’, ‘institutions’ and ‘organisations’, there has been a tendency for migration livelihoods studies (like livelihoods studies more generally) to downplay these structural features and to focus on households’ livelihood assets and activities (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005:32-33).

What this large and growing volume of migration literature reveals, perhaps more than anything, is the extreme diversity and complexity in patterns of migration, as viewed both from places of origin and destination and within migration networks. As noted in the introduction, this diversity underlines the need for analytical approaches that can capture and cope with high degrees of variation at all levels. It adds further ammunition to critiques of any attempts to posit general, universalising theories of what drives migration and what its consequences are for the ‘receiving’ or ‘sending’ society / community, or for migrants themselves. The dynamics of migration are not determined simply by the ‘push’ of economic need and ‘pull’ of economic opportunity between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ locations or labour markets.

## ***2.2. The rationale for a political economy approach to migration analysis***

People's livelihood strategies and ways of coping with economic, political, social or environmental change – positive or negative (or both) – depend upon a broad range of factors, including location, relative wealth, security regimes, kinship structures and other informal institutions, the nature of local governance and social networks, and access to land, food, roads, markets, water and other resources. Changes and transformations at the macro and meso levels – such as those associated with structural adjustment or development, political crisis, conflict and/or environmental or health shocks and hazards – can transform local political economies, and cause communities to constantly adapt to the opportunities and constraints that these transformations bring. People adapt their behaviour and their livelihoods – including migration strategies – in order to survive or minimise risk (survival or coping strategies), or to capitalise on the opportunities to increase their economic position or welfare (accumulative strategies) (Bhatia and Goodhand et al., 2003; Collinson, 2003:5; Deshingkar and Start, 2003: 2).

Thus, specific patterns of migration are determined to a large extent by the particular interaction of individual or household livelihood strategies with a range of social, economic and political relationships, processes, institutions and structures that make up the (historical) context in which these strategies are pursued. Migration itself represents a key process through which many communities are connected to the wider political economy, and the nature of migration experiences and relationships for different households and communities may be crucial for determining whether this connection is, on balance, adverse or positive for their overall livelihoods and wellbeing at a particular point in time

As suggested by Kothari, the complex *interaction* of individual *agency* and *structures* within an *historical context* provides a useful overarching framework for understanding migration *processes*, i.e. why people migrate and the consequences of this movement. For example, how are households' experiences shaped by micro conditions in particular places and simultaneously by wider political and economic processes, such as land (re)-distribution and government policies? (Kothari, 2002:10). A range of motivational factors commonly reflect wider processes of economic, political and social change. Thus:



‘decisions influencing ‘voluntary’ migration are not made in an economic, political or social vacuum. Natural disasters, development initiatives, such as the building of dams and roads, and conflict and war also displace people and particularly affect those who are poor and tend to have minimal control over, or access to, the political and economic capital necessary to affect the decisions which impact on their lives and livelihoods. National and international emigration and immigration policies further constrain or encourage people’s decisions to move or stay. Decision-making does not only involve the migrants but also many others with whom they are connected and thus has wider implications and consequences than on the migrant alone’ (Kothari, 2002:9).

A particular migration stream is likely to include various migrants and/or groups of migrants moving with varying degrees of agency in different circumstances, in response to different causal dynamics, and often with very disparate outcomes in terms of their own welfare and the wider implications of the movement. In Afghanistan, Bhatia and Goodhand et al. report that even a single village commonly includes households profiting from migration, other households coping through migration, and some more vulnerable households surviving through migration but suffering a consequential depletion of their asset base (Bhatia et al., 2003). In a study of migration in rural West Bengal, Rafique, Massey and Rogaly found similarly that migration held very different meanings for different households, with landless households most likely to be engaging in migration to meet daily needs in the off season, whereas slightly better-off households were able to undertake migration in order to save or invest (Rafique, Massey and Rogaly, 2006:7). In Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, Deshingkar and Start report that, contrary to dominant perceptions of migration patterns, people migrating from poorer areas can be on positive ‘accumulation’ migration pathways while some migrating from better-endowed areas might be on coping pathways (e.g. due to local over-supply of labour due to land polarisation and mechanisation in wealthier areas); indeed, one person’s ‘coping’ strategy can be another person’s ‘accumulation’ strategy (Deshingkar and Start, 2003:vi,7). In discussing migration from Burkina Faso to other West African countries and to Europe, Black et al. (2006) note that while intercontinental migration is more likely to lead to accumulation by migrant households than continental migration, this is not necessarily the case: unsuccessful international migration can have very negative economic consequences for the migrants themselves and others in their households or community who have invested in migration in the hope of receiving remittances (Black et al., 2005).

Understanding how and why particular people or households opt for migration, or not, or are forced to move, and the implications of their movement at different levels and locations, depends on a fine-grained analysis of the political, economic and social structures and change processes operating or located at various levels (micro, meso, macro) that differentially affect, and result from, people's livelihoods and the distribution of power, vulnerability and opportunity within and between households, communities and groups over time. It also depends on analysis of the structure and dynamics of relative power and agency within specific migration or livelihood systems involved.

In order to capture the dynamic and transformative nature of migration and associated livelihood processes, it is essential to pay attention to both power structures and relations and actors' agency, and the interaction between them. Migrants' or households' ability to exercise power *to* pursue particular migration or other strategies can be understood in relation to the differential constraints and opportunities created by the power that people and groups exert *over* each other. These are shaped and mediated by a variety of social institutions, such as gender, class or ethnic identity. As argued by David Mosse, tracing the connections of power from broad political systems to individual subjectivities depends on considering the systemic processes, structural relationships *and* agency of different actors involved – and hence on examining 'the relationship between structural and voluntaristic expressions of power' (Mosse, 2007:8). The concept of *process* is also central: the relationships and interactions that cause people to migrate (or not) are played out over time, and can only be properly appreciated and analysed within a historical perspective.

### ***2.3. Related theoretical and analytical challenges within poverty research and livelihoods approaches***

The analytical challenges facing migration studies mirror, in many respects, similar challenges within mainstream poverty research, which, as John Harriss argues, 'has generally failed to address the dynamic, structural and relational factors that give rise to poverty' (Harriss, 2007:1). Thus, while there has been a huge amount of research into profiles of poverty and into 'poverty dynamics', looking, for example, at the implications of access to different capitals for individuals', households' or

communities' movements in and out of poverty, there has been comparatively little research into 'how and why it is that the distribution of factors measured and analysed in these profiles and dynamics of poverty are distributed in the way that they are through society' (ibid.:1).

Some international political economy analysis, such as world systems theory, is very much concerned with processes of capitalist exploitation, inequalities in international economic power relations, etc., yet has not sought to link directly down to the local level. Moreover, by restricting explanations of poverty to the structure and process of the economic system, these models fail to take account of the *social* mechanisms that perpetuate inequality and support relations of exploitation (Mosse, 2007:18). These approaches therefore provide limited insight into how the macro dynamics of the international capitalist system determine or affect, in complex ways, the real-life experiences of poor individuals, households and communities at the local level. In the Indian context, for example, poor people's immediate experience is likely to be of power exercised through informal systems of caste dominance, patronage or brokerage (ibid.:21).

The dominant liberal economic view of international development, meanwhile, views poverty as resulting primarily from poor people's marginalisation or exclusion from the benefits of the mainstream economy. Consequently, 'poverty is conceived in terms of marginality and exception rather than as a consequence of normal economic and political relations' (ibid.:2), or as 'a kind of social aberration rather than an aspect of the ways in which modern state and a market society function' (Harriss, 2007:6). It follows from this approach that strengthening poor communities' incorporation into the wider economy should help to overcome their poverty (through better access to roads, markets, micro-credit and other support for local enterprise, etc.). This, indeed, is the implicit logic that has underpinned much international development programming in recent decades. Andries du Toit contends, however, that 'often the problem is not that poor people have simply been excluded from particular institutions, resources or larger processes, but that they have been *included* on inequitable or invidious terms' (du Toit, 2005:16).

Partly as a reaction against Structural Adjustment Programmes and their emphasis on macroeconomic ‘solutions’ to underdevelopment and poverty, more ‘people-centred’ approaches to combating poverty emerged during the 1980s and 90s which took issue with unitary macroeconomic approaches and which stressed, by contrast, the diversity of poverty situations and the multidimensionality of poverty as a problem (Kaag et al., 2003:3). The focus shifted onto the characteristics, welfare and capabilities of the poor themselves – on features of poor households and their livelihoods, correlations of factors associated with their poverty, and the significance of crises and shocks to their welfare (ibid.:9). Less attention was given to the deeper structures and relationships that give rise to this poverty. Consequently, Harriss argues, ‘causes and effects are muddled up, and the characteristics of individuals or households that are associated / correlated with poverty [e.g. landlessness] are represented as causal’ (Harriss, 2007:5).

Livelihoods approaches, for example, concerned very much with the agency and capabilities of poor people, have focused attention on the ‘micro world’ of ‘lived experience’ – of families, networks and communities – and on households and other local actors (de Haan, 2005:9). Livelihoods frameworks (such as the ‘Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Framework developed by the UK’s Department for International Development) encourage analysis that is highly dynamic in many respects. This framework can reveal, for instance, the conversion of different livelihood ‘assets’ (such as land, waged income, education, social networks, etc.) into different livelihood outcomes, the inter-relationships between different assets and the multiple benefits generated by particular assets, or the transition of households in and out of poverty. However, with the emphasis on these systemic aspects of livelihoods, and in the absence of an explicit theory to analyse broader structural and transformational elements within the frameworks, a liberal presumption of benign markets and other positive institutions has tended to prevail, with consequently little attention paid to the relationships, structures and processes creating, reinforcing and/or resulting from poverty, inequality and vulnerability (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005:32-33; du Toit, 2005: 23; Collinson, 2003:13).

Maia Green criticises the depoliticised nature of most contemporary poverty studies, which, she argues:

‘tell us that people are hungry because of lack of access to food or that infant mortality is high because of poor health services .... [but] do not ... tell us why food cannot be accessed or why health services are inadequate .... The emphasis on poverty as the problem and the locus of analysis diverts attention from the social relations, local, national and international, which produce poverty as an attribute of people. Very often it is not among the poor that we should be looking for those relations which have contributed most to the poverty of others .... The poor are poor not because of ‘poverty’, but are poor because of other people’ (Green, 2005:38).

A better understanding of poverty, according to Mosse, would result from a ‘relational’ approach to analysing the problem, which views persistent poverty as the result of historically developed economic and political relations, and which emphasises the importance of social processes and relations of power (Mosse, 2007:1). Leo de Haan argues along similar lines, stressing that:

‘life is a power play, livelihood is political and poverty is not only the result of bad luck, ignorance or hazard but primarily the result of exclusion by others. ... ‘Structures of domination’ and ‘social relations and flows of surplus’ shape the way livelihood opportunities are perceived ... and can be successfully accessed or not’ (de Haan, 2005:8).

As discussed in the following section, migration analysis could gain a great deal from poverty and development-related research that is focused more explicitly on the analysis of the structures, social, political and economic processes and relationships and activities that give rise to and perpetuate poverty, vulnerability (and wealth, security and opportunity) and inequality. It would depend on close attention to actors’ *agency* and to changing social, political and economic *relationships* between actors, as well as to *structural factors* (economic and political) that can be demonstrated to produce inequality and poverty for some, and economic and other benefits for others.

### **3. Investigating the micro and macro political economy of migration: possible analytical approaches**

As noted in the introduction, the purpose of this paper is to propose an approach to investigating and understanding complex, changing and multi-level migration dynamics in particular migration contexts that combines a livelihoods approach to analysing migration dynamics at the local level with a political economy perspective concerned with the broader economic and political processes and interests interacting with

migration and livelihoods at different levels, and with relationships of relative agency and power within specific migration (and associated livelihood) processes. The aim is to begin developing an approach to analysing migration which is:

- *Contextually-specific.*
- *Explanatory* as well as *descriptive* in orientation.
- *Dynamic* – both in terms of time (diachronic) and in terms of interaction between actors, institutions and structures (synchronic).
- *Historically grounded.*
- *Actor-oriented.*
- Concerned with *agency* as well as *structure* within social, economic and political processes.
- Explicitly concerned with *linking* between *micro, meso* and *macro levels*.

### ***3.1. A ‘political economy of livelihoods’ approach***

By focusing attention on individuals and households and their actions and strategies at the local level, livelihoods approaches are extremely valuable for capturing the agency of (poor) people and for exploring the ways in which this agency plays out in livelihood processes as people use their assets to pursue diverse and complex livelihood strategies (including migration) to achieve a variety of livelihood outcomes. There is already a significant literature on migration and livelihoods, reflecting a growing recognition of the scale and significance of both internal and international migration for people’s livelihoods, particularly among poor communities (Hammond et al., 2005:10). Within this literature, migration is viewed predominantly as contributing positively to the achievement of secure livelihoods, and creating opportunities for poor people to escape poverty (Ellis, 2003).

However, as noted above, the emphasis within livelihoods research on agency at the household level has come at the price of much explicit engagement with issues of structure and process, or with power and wealth relationships at the micro and macro levels that interact with and impact upon people’s (individual and/or household) agency. Without this engagement, livelihoods studies have been weak in capturing (historical) processes of social and economic change or transformation – such as

accumulation, domination, exclusion, marginalisation, impoverishment or disempowerment – that play such a central part in determining or shaping the context and dynamics of people’s livelihoods, including their migration strategies.

Even at the local level, livelihood activities can engender processes of inclusion and exclusion in arenas of conflicting or co-operating actors (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005:34). Particularly in poor communities, economic vulnerability contributes to, and is exacerbated by ‘stressed, power-laden and conflictual’ social networks (du Toit, 2005:12). Livelihoods studies have tended not to explore how the agency of certain actors affects, directly or indirectly, the agency of others, or how particular ‘assets’ or ‘capitals’ can have different meanings or significance for different members of a household or community. There is a need to consider potential, sometimes negative, links or implications for certain groups, households or individuals resulting from others’ migration or other livelihood strategies.

For example, in situations of protracted conflict, crisis and displacement, such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Somalia, geographical dispersal or fragmentation of households and associated migration often represents a coping or survival strategy for the household as a whole, but can sometimes result in heightened vulnerability of certain household members. For example, elderly, sick or other non-migrant members may become more economically and/or socially vulnerable when depletion of household assets (e.g. loss of sons’ or daughters’ labour or care) is not compensated by reliable inflows of financial remittances. Those who have left may be exposed to violence, exploitation or other hardships (e.g. separation from children) during the process of migration or at the point of destination. In Darfur, following the closure of the national border between Sudan and Libya, many groups of prospective young labour migrants were absorbed instead into tribal militia and warring factions; according to one young Darfurian in Benghazi, ‘In Darfur we had three options: join the rebels, go to the camps or get out’ (Young et al., 2005:87). The consequence of more young men joining militias as a livelihood strategy is that other people’s lives and livelihoods are further threatened or destroyed, which in turn increases the risk of distress migration or forced displacement. In South Africa, Du Toit observes that the ‘social capital’ embodied in ‘care chains’ among poor communities in the Western Cape play an important role in sustaining many households and create benefits for

some household members, but the social roles and (sometimes violent) sanctions that enforce them are also part of what keeps many women poor (du Toit, 2005:13).

Understanding the competitive and sometimes destructive or impoverishing relationships between the livelihoods of different individuals, households and groups, and how these play out over time is essential for understanding how livelihood assets and strategies reflect and translate into power and wealth relations and, potentially, the systemic marginalisation and exclusion of particular people or groups. Livelihoods are not always 'sustainable' for all those affected, and one actors' agency is often the cause of another's subjugation. (Collinson, 2003:13). Livelihoods frameworks therefore need to be adapted and strengthened by integrating additional factors and questions that can provide a more systematic basis for relating the micro-dynamics of livelihood activities and outcomes (individual and household agency) with wider relationships, processes, structures and institutions that constitute the social, economic, political, and historical, context in which these livelihoods are pursued (cf. Figure 1). These wider factors interact with individuals' and households' agency at the local level (Collinson, 2003:13-14; Lautze and Raven-Roberts, 2006; de Haan and Zoomers, 2005), constraining and/or expanding it in different ways. Understanding this interaction requires critical analysis and explanation of the *nature* of the key relationships, processes, structures and institutions that are significant in a particular livelihoods context and that affect particular livelihoods processes.

Within the migration and livelihoods literature, Kothari (2002), and Deshingkar and Start (2003) propose 'social exclusion and livelihoods' approach 'to show why some groups of people have succeeded in entering accumulative migration pathways while others have been excluded' (Deshingkar and Start, 2003:vi). Uma Kothari suggests that:

'various forms and processes of exclusion produce different groups amongst the excluded. These groups are differentially compelled or excluded from adopting migration as a livelihood strategy. ... [T]he presence or absence of different forms of capital are both the cause and consequence of processes of exclusion and discrimination which limit or enable migration. It is the particular package of vulnerabilities which shape the extent to which people can or cannot move. However, it is also clear that a lack of capitals can both require and limit movements and that by acquiring capital, an individual can be in a position to stay put profitably. ... The chronically poor are often those who stay put or are left behind in an environment where others are migrating.'



In the Indian context, Deshingkar and Start observe that caste is an important determinant of who is excluded from positive migration streams: the disadvantage and social exclusion suffered by certain (lower caste) groups results in migration remaining a low-return coping activity rather than a high-return activity, as enjoyed by many higher-caste groups (Deshingkar and Start, 2002:5). By drawing attention to the differential assets, opportunities and potentially conflicting interests and diverse outcomes of different groups, this social exclusion and livelihoods approach goes part of the way towards addressing the key limitations of mainstream livelihoods analysis highlighted above.

However, 'social exclusion' is itself an imprecise and potentially oversimplifying concept, and could distract attention away from other important power and welfare dynamics affecting migration and other livelihood processes. Crucially, what the 'social exclusion' approach does not adequately consider is what deeper processes or structures account for the social exclusion that it is concerned with. Nor does it provide a basis for examining how certain forms of (adverse) *inclusion* in particular (possibly exploitative) migration or other livelihood processes or particular institutions might be a primary cause of *negative* (e.g. impoverishing, hazardous or marginalising) livelihood strategies or outcomes (including involuntary migration) (du Toit, 2005; Mosse, 2007; Green, 2005). The concept also implicitly encourages the view that inclusion in migration streams and associated processes and institutions is likely to be positive for the welfare of migrants and their households. There is a danger here of jumping to unwarranted conclusions, both about the significance or potential of migration in overcoming exclusion and disadvantage or reducing poverty among the migrants and households involved, and about the underlying causes of migration in different contexts.

Building directly on the 'relational' approach to chronic poverty research advocated by David Mosse (Mosse, 2007) and Andries du Toit and colleagues (du Toit, 2005; du Toit et al., 2005), a more powerful approach to analysing migration dynamics could be derived from combining livelihoods research and analysis with a 'relational' political economy approach that focuses attention directly on the dynamic relationships, processes and structures of relative power between different actors involved in migration or other livelihood processes. This would aim to trace and explain the

complex interaction of exclusionary and inclusionary processes and relationships between the many different actors, institutions and structures involved over time and at different levels – micro, meso and macro. This approach is not concerned so much with *whether* people are included or excluded in particular migration streams or other livelihood processes, but *how* they are included or excluded, and with what the *implications of these terms of inclusion or exclusion* are for their and others' welfare, for the dynamics of migration processes, and for wider social, economic and political structures and change processes.

Boxes 1 and 2 outline how this type of approach has illuminated understanding of the dynamics of migration, livelihoods and the local and wider political economy in the case of *adivasi* cultivators and seasonal labour migrants in India (Mosse, 2007) and poor rural communities in South Africa's Eastern Cape (du Toit et al., 2005). In the case of *adivasi* communities, labour migration often allows survival at the margins for the poorest, and has become the only means by which many agrarian livelihoods can be maintained (Mosse, 2007:17). Yet the *terms* of involvement in migration processes are far more advantageous for some than for others, and this is explained in part by pre-existing structural inequalities that migration processes often play a part in supporting and reproducing. Vulnerable migrants and successful recruiters and gang leaders, Mosse notes, 'are part of a chain of self-interest that in aggregate gives stability to a highly exploitative system generating mass chronic poverty'. It is not migration that causes chronic poverty, but rather the *social relationships of exploitation involved in migration processes* (ibid:29). Personal histories of suffering, survival, social mobility and migration within rural communities of the Eastern Cape in South Africa show how the poor households are adversely incorporated into the broader macro political economy (including through migration) *and* within a set of highly localised and unequal socio-economic relationships that provide both marginal opportunities for survival for the poorest and opportunities for better-off households to expand their economic base. Power relations are rooted in access to and claims over key resources (land, patronage, labour), and these, in turn, lead to particular households and groups being marginalised, disempowered and trapped in long term poverty (du Toit et al., 2005).

## BOX 1

An analysis of the local political economy, livelihoods and personal histories by du Toit, Skuse and Cousins (2005) in the Mount Frere area of South Africa's Eastern Cape region encompasses individual migration strategies, depicting these and other aspects of people's livelihoods as entirely embedded in the dynamics of relative advantage, disadvantage, marginalisation, coping and power within the poor communities concerned.

Although remote from the centres of South Africa's industrial and commercial economy, the deprivation and poverty of the area is explained to a large extent by a history of systematic underdevelopment of the black rural economy. This has left poor rural land-based livelihoods highly fragile and vulnerable and failed to provide adequate alternative forms of employment and livelihoods. In this context, migration to Cape Town and other distant urban locations represents a key link with the urban political economy, with many poor households heavily dependent on migrant members' remittances to cope and survive. Widespread job losses caused by declines in key sectors of the urban economy have negatively affected migrants from areas such as Mount Frere and their ability to remit to their relatives. The local political economy is also linked into the wider South African and global economies through the expansion of corporate capital into the area, such as through the Spar Supermarket which markets cheap bulk foodstuffs produced by the white commercial farming sector. The availability of cheap food in the supermarkets supports the survival of many poor households, but also undermines the viability of local agricultural livelihoods and, through the profits extracted by the supermarkets, represents a key process through which meagre economic resources of the local economy are transferred out to South Africa's economic centre.

Relationships of relative power and poverty among members of these poor communities mean that there is a local political and economic 'elite' that often guards and controls access to local resources, including the few local jobs that exist in the public or service sectors. The poorest households are adversely incorporated not only within the broader political economy but also within unequal socio-economic relationships at the local level. The local political economy simultaneously provides survival opportunities for the poorest whilst also providing opportunities for better-off households to maintain or improve their relative economic advantage. The significance of migration and other livelihood strategies for different households is determined to a great extent by the local processes and dynamics that benefit and empower some but trap others in chronic poverty.

Individual life histories and livelihood trajectories depicted in the study reveal these varied experiences and the complex social and economic dynamics and processes behind them. Du Toit et al. contrast the experiences of two households in the community, one of which has been able to enter into the local economic and political elite through economic migration and capital accumulation, while the migration and other livelihood strategies of the other (more typical) poor household have failed to provide a route out of chronic poverty and vulnerability. They observe that life histories of this kind highlight the importance of an ethnographic understanding of agency and changing power relations, which is reflected in the social mobility and class repositioning experienced by some, and the immobility and persistence of poverty experienced by others.

Elsie, the female head of the first household, had grown up in a very poor family. She had been cared for by her grandmother in her natal village after her father died and her mother had had to migrate to Port Elizabeth to find employment. When her grandmother died, Elsie's mother returned to the village to care for Elsie, where she managed to find a domestic job with a local shopkeeper. Although the family's continuing poverty led to Elsie's mother migrating once again (to Johannesburg), financial help from a local chief enabled Elsie to attend school and this subsequently enabled Elsie to undertake teacher-training and secure a relatively secure and lucrative teaching job in a nearby village. Elsie's story illustrates how intergenerational social and economic mobility can be possible for those able to access stable employment.

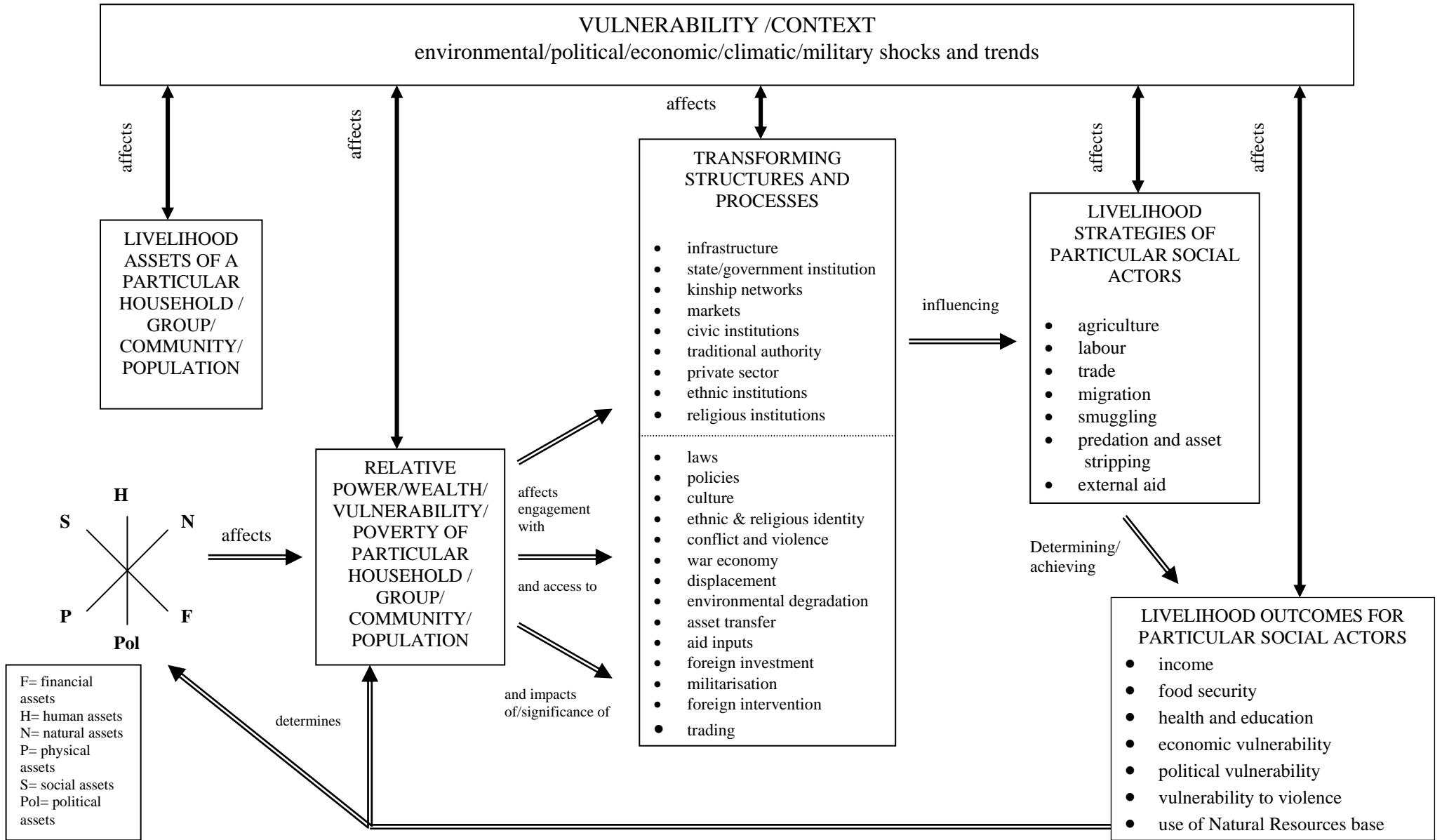
By contrast, the (more typical) experiences of a much poorer household reflects various processes

of impoverishment, exclusion and disempowering incorporation into the local and wider political economy and society, including failed migration strategies. This life history focuses on Patricia, the wife of a former migrant labourer. For twenty years, her husband had been working in Johannesburg and supported the household through regular remittances. He lost his job in the early 1990s as a result of the contraction of mining and other key economic sectors in South Africa, and he now works locally looking after livestock. Patricia has been unable to migrate to seek urban employment as a domestic worker because of she herself lacks help with child and other care needs within the household. With the household unable to rely on self-grown food, their survival depends on a complex web of local social, political and economic relationships and survivalist modes of reciprocity such as working for food and seeking gifts from neighbours. The household's chronic poverty and vulnerability is reinforced by their inability to pay school fees, which has left Patricia's children with very few options, given the lack of employment opportunities within the village or beyond. Patricia's daughter disappeared after migrating to Cape Town three years ago and Patricia fears that she is dead, representing a failure to effect a successful migration and improve a rural livelihood.

(du Toit, Skuse and Cousins, 2005)

There is no single all-encompassing approach to exploring and analysing the micro- and macro political economy of a particular context. It is necessary to draw flexibly on a number of frames of reference to help build up comprehensive picture of the political economy over time. International political economy provides theoretical and conceptual frameworks for analysing global or macro level economic processes, power relations, processes of exploitation and accumulation, and structures of inequality. Gender studies provide a rich source of theoretical work on social power relations which could substantially strengthen understanding of the significance of power relations in livelihood processes. This includes processes of empowerment and disempowerment, and of 'wielding and yielding' negotiation processes between different actors (de Haan, 2005; de Haan and Zoomers, 2005). Maia Green notes that anthropology has long perceived poverty as a consequence of relations between people, i.e. as a social relation, and that ethnographic studies can provide numerous insights into the local level dynamics of poverty and inequality and the significance or implications of caste, social exclusion, structural transformations, social constructions of property relations, and trans-national or global processes affecting these relations (Green, 2005:18). Andries du Toit argues similarly that anthropology and critical sociology provide the tools for investigating complex issues connected with the interactions between poverty, power relations, vulnerability and agency – i.e. for investigating the local political economy of poverty. Collinson's adaptation of a sustainable livelihoods framework for application in conflict situations highlights dynamic interactions between micro-, meso- and macro-level political economy dynamics (see Figure 1) (Collinson, 2003; see also Lautze & Raven-Roberts, 2006).

**Figure 1: Adapted Livelihoods Framework for Situations of Conflict and Political Instability (Collinson, ed., 2003)**



The type of 'fine-grained, critical sociology' advocated by du Toit depends on crossing intellectual and disciplinary boundaries between sociology, political economy, social history, political geography and anthropology (du Toit, 2005:4 & 11). The challenge, he argues, 'is not only to develop modes of analysis that link quantitative and qualitative, or to bridge the sterile opposition between macro-scale 'structural' analyses and nuanced exploration of agency on the 'micro-scale', but also to create space for debates that allow a qualitative sociology informed by critical theory and political economy, and an awareness of the dynamics of conflict, inequality and social processes within otherwise depoliticised and technicist discourses' (ibid., 2005:26). Within the migration literature, the call for inter-disciplinarity is echoed by Stephen Castles, who, in the context of migration / development relationships, argues for a much broader inter-disciplinary analysis of the development of social structures and relationships in the context of globalisation, and emphasises the need to improve understanding of the relationships between macro-, meso- and micro factors of change (Castles, 2008:9).

Whatever analytical lens is used, there are a number of significant methodological challenges and constraints associated with researching complex social, political and economic processes in any local or wider context. Particularly in poor and/or unstable or contested political environments, research and analysis may be hindered by a lack of reliable data and lack of good quality background research material to draw upon, particularly at the micro- and meso levels. The sensitivity of exploring particular social, political and economic issues will vary a great deal from place to place and over time. There is never a single 'right' understanding of any complex situation, and what information and data is available will vary a great deal in terms of scope, reliability and detail. What is clear, however, is that qualitative research will need to take priority, and that a variety of methods will need to be employed, ideally over a period of time, in order to build up a detailed picture of the dynamics and significance of migration for a particular community, group, or within a particular economic or other sector or process. These might include personal histories, informal observation, key informant and focus-group interviews, participatory resource mapping and timeline activities, community-level surveys, and analysis of a wide variety of background and 'grey' literature, particularly relating to the meso-, national and international-level political economy and history.

## BOX 2

David Mosse (2007) examines the local political economy of poor *adivasi* (tribal) cultivator and seasonal labour migrant livelihoods in India's border districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The high level of chronic poverty in tribal forested (/ deforested) regions has its roots in the long-term dispossession, exploitation and erosion of livelihoods among local *adivasi* groups by colonial forest regimes. Although usually explained in terms of the immediate factors and constraints associated with poverty, including land pressure and declining subsistence agriculture, remoteness from markets, poor education, unemployment, indebtedness and out-migration, Mosse points to continuing relationships and processes of dispossession, exploitation and inequality as the deeper causes of persistent poverty today.

This is reflected in the livelihoods of very poor, indebted subsistence farmers in the Bhil tribal region, where half of the adult population is typically absent for the half of the year, usually working as casual and seasonal labourers in urban construction sites. The context of this labour migration is one of deep structural inequality, casualised markets, collapsing rural livelihoods and absent formal labour welfare and social safety nets, all of which are factors associated with broader (including global) processes of development and economic and social change that are mediated by complex social, economic and political relationships and institutions at the local level. Continuing development in India's urban centres has been facilitated by these large scale flows of easily exploitable labour. The larger established builders and contractors, Mosse observes, tend to favour casual migrant labour recruited through brokerage and debt-dependence over the more independent labour available through urban daily labour markets.

The highly segmented nature of urban labour markets means that Bhil migrants are typically excluded from skilled work and employed instead in the lowest-paid and least secure positions as construction labourers. Their recruitment takes place through a multi-tier system of labour gang leaders and brokers (*mukkadams*), recruiter-supervisors and labour contractors that reproduces this segmentation and ensures that Bhil migrants follow well-defined and repeated routes from particular villages to particular urban work sites. The poorest migrants are acutely vulnerable to unemployment and are therefore highly dependent on these recruiters and gang leaders, who also arrange cash advances and shelter and other protection at work sites. The livelihoods of *mukkadams* – themselves usually successful migrants - depend, in turn, on their loyalty to employers and contractors.

The impoverishing aspects of the system are ill-perceived, Mosse argues, because they exist alongside aspects of the same system that, because of different structural conditions (landholding, education, influence, etc.) allows accumulation and upward mobility for some – such as from labourer to recruiter, skilled worker or contractor. Many better-off *adivasi* farmers are able to use migrant incomes to improve agriculture, and to invest in essential social networks. Moreover, for poorer farmers, migration often provides a crucial survival or coping strategy – indeed, for many, it is the only means of maintaining agrarian livelihoods. In this context, migrants are likely to prioritise securing work over protection from exploitation. Yet their adverse incorporation into the labour market means that they have little prospect of escaping from poverty and debt through labour migration. Most casual labour migrants experience very poor working conditions, social isolation, high levels of insecurity at work sites, little upward mobility, and chronic debt, including debt associated with cash advances from *mukkadams*. Those who are most exploited and have least power to protect their interests are families for whom migration is a defensive survival strategy – those trading their labour for cash to meet urgent food needs in the lean season, often migrating the furthest, for longest, under the worst conditions of deprivation and insecurity, with least reward, and who are most fully tied into relations of dependence and exploitation. In their home villages, long absences and dependence on distant patrons tends to erode migrants' local social capital, through, for example, their marginalisation from social networks through which credit, marriages or benefits from development projects are obtained.

(Mosse, 2007)

### ***3.2. 'Value chains' and analysis of the political economy of migration processes***

A major challenge for migration studies is to link what is observed at the local household and community livelihoods level in migrants' origin and destination locations to wider migration networks and processes.

One potentially useful way of linking micro- to macro factors and processes is to investigate how a variety of capitals important for people's local and/or migrant livelihoods and well-being are transmitted or transferred in different directions through specific migration relationships and related processes. Financial and other remittance flows, of course, are of key importance and are already usually incorporated into migration analysis at all levels. Other asset flows or resource transfers may be just as important for households (migrants' and non-migrants) and communities, such as:

- Transfer of human assets out of local agricultural production.
- Transfer of human assets into households or community through improved access to education.
- Transfer of social assets away from elderly and other vulnerable non-migrants within sending communities.
- Transfer of political assets into a community through links with a powerful and influential emigrant diaspora, or the possible inward transfer of education and skills (human assets) associated with return migration.

Patterns and flows in these transfers are likely to be very different for different households, communities and groups involved or affected.

It is important to look beyond asset flows associated directly with migrants and migrant networks or systems to the transfer of migration-related assets in the broader political economy. Money flowing into a particular community as remittances, for example, might subsequently flow out if the local food and other commercial markets are dominated by external firms. Transforming power relations among (migrant and non-migrant) individuals, households and groups in the context of specific migration experiences, processes or networks can be analysed in terms of changes and transfers



of political assets, and in terms of the dynamic relationships between political and other assets.

Value chain analysis, a framework developed originally within world systems theory, provides a useful approach to exploring the links and interaction between local livelihoods and specific migration networks, systems or processes, and associated asset flows and transfers (such as labour, land, money and ‘social’ capitals), and, importantly, for investigating relative power relations within these (cf. Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Gereffi, 1995; Raikes et al., 2000). Value chain analysis identifies power relations, governance structures and exchange relationships within commercial networks, from primary production / local level, through to consumption / international level. Of particular interest to political economy analysis is the identification of who controls flows (e.g. of particular commodities) and exchanges at particular levels. In a commercial context, a value chain may be predominantly controlled and driven by producers or by commercial intermediaries, or by buyers at the consumer end of the chain. Gereffi identifies four dimensions of global ‘commodity’ / value chains: the input-output structure of the chain, the territory it covers, its governance structure and the institutional framework. The governance structure includes notion of barriers to entry and coordination within the commodity chain, and distinguishes producer-driven from buyer-driven (and intermediary-driven) structures and processes. The institutional framework determines how key or ‘lead’ actors within the chain involve less powerful or subordinate actors through their control of market access or information, for example by monopolising export and marketing networks (Gereffi, 1995).

With some adaptation, all of these concepts are potentially applicable to the analysis of migration processes – particularly for analysing how migration strategies at the household or local level are linked into and structured by broader migration networks, systems or processes, and for identifying important power relations, governance structures and institutions within them:

- Like producer-driven commercial commodity chains, migrants themselves may exercise considerable agency and control within some migration

processes (e.g. international migration of rich entrepreneurs or certain highly skilled migrants).

- In others, individual migrants have little or no control and remain highly vulnerable to the exploitative interests of other actors involved (e.g. ‘survival’ or ‘coping’ migration of poor or destitute landless labourers, and various forms of ‘involuntary’ or ‘forced’ migration, such as that of child soldiers, trafficked sex workers, development-induced migration, flight from violence or persecution, slum clearance).
- In some migration processes, considerable power and control may be exercised by intermediaries – such as labour recruiters, gang leaders, brokers, powerful actors within trans-national migration networks, smugglers & traffickers – who influence very directly how and where and the circumstances of their migration.
- Some migration processes are clearly structured by a powerful institutional framework (e.g. strict and effective immigration controls, intra-community or intra-ethnic affiliations and networks, formal or informal recruitment networks); others may appear more fragmented (e.g. ‘mixed migration’ flows in West and North Africa).
- Some migration processes are controlled to a large extent by economic or other actors at the ‘receiving’ end (e.g. targeted recruitment of health personnel by public health services), others more by actors or constraints at the ‘sending’ end (e.g. Eastern Bloc emigration controls during the Cold War).

State actors, such as immigration control authorities, may be considered as particular actors among many others in the chain, exerting considerable control in some situations and less in others. Not all institutions of the same government – such as home affairs, foreign relations, development, trade and industry and health agencies or ministries, and local authorities – will necessarily be operating with the same set of interests or the same degree of control in any particular context or point in time.

As with certain commercial networks, many people will face barriers to entry or will be entirely excluded from particular migration processes, for example, because entry into the migration stream is highly segmented according to structural income, skill or

other differentials, and/or selective or restricted according to gender, age, ethnic group, nationality, skills, financial resources, etc. Because migration strategies at household and community level are often a matter for those who stay as much as for those who leave, non-migrants within communities affected by migration must be considered as key actors within migration streams, and thus included in the chain analysis.

#### **4. Pointers for research and analysis arising from a political economy approach to migration processes**

There are a number of potentially important and theoretically challenging insights that are generated by adopting a relational political economy perspective on migration processes.

1) Detailed qualitative research with a historical perspective, focused on specific households and local communities and discrete migration networks, systems or processes is likely to reveal more about the real (highly complex and varied) causes and consequences of migration than (present-focused) quantitative surveys and analyses.

2) Rather than viewing migrants (or non-migrants) simply as participating (or not) in particular migration streams and/or labour markets or other commercial or social networks, there is a need to consider the qualitative aspects of their incorporation in the local, national and international political economy and in specific migration-related markets and networks, and to explore this incorporation as a process with a dynamic time dimension:

- What are the patterns and dynamics of poverty, vulnerability, wealth and power within and across communities involved in migration, and what are the underlying causes of these (e.g. marginalisation from national development assistance, penetration of international commercial interests, discrimination, environmental factors, patterns of land ownership and/or competition for land and other resources, presence or absence of aid agencies, remittance flows, etc.)? How does this affect the relative agency and vulnerability of different

migrants (c.f. migration as positive choice / necessity for coping or survival / coerced, etc.)?

- How are migrants (and associated non-migrants) incorporated into migration streams or networks, labour markets, etc., and on what terms (exploitative or not / contributing positively to social capital or not, etc.)? How has this changed over time and in relation to other groups or factors?
- Who are the winners and losers in this incorporation? What power dynamics are involved?
- How are different communities' welfare and livelihoods and other actors in society (e.g. public institutions, corporations, etc.) affected in particular 'sending' and 'destination' locations by migrants' involvement in particular labour markets or commercial or other networks?
- How do migrants' (/households' / community's) involvement or incorporation in particular migration-related (labour/) markets and other networks reflect and/or interact with their broader relationships and interaction with the local, national and international political economy?

3) "Positive" or "negative" impacts of migration cannot be generalised in any meaningful way. As in all complex social processes, there is likely to be a dynamic distribution of different advantages and disadvantages accruing directly and indirectly to different actors in the communities and societies involved; these are likely to change over time, and will often be qualitative and subjective in nature and highly resistant to 'measurement'. In the case of the very poor *adivasi* migrants in India studied by Mosse, for example, migration has enabled vulnerable households to cope or survive in a context of extremely limited and/or dwindling livelihood options, and yet the dynamics of these migration processes play an important part in perpetuating or even deepening the poverty and vulnerability of many of those involved. Immigration of unskilled workers into rich countries may directly benefit particular employers but impose strains on (particular parts of) local public services at certain points in time or certain places.

As regards the relationship between migration and development, dominant opinion has shifted in recent years from a previously pessimistic stance to a more positive

view of the potential benefits of migration for development (Castles, 2008; DAC, 2006:53). A relational political economy approach would challenge both “negative” and “positive” camps, and encourage instead more nuanced appraisals reserved to particular migration processes or contexts. It would almost certainly reveal a very mixed, complex and changing picture of the benefits and costs of migration for different (groups of) migrants, non-migrants and other actors, structures and institutions involved or affected. It could therefore sensitise analysts and policy-makers to the potentially complex or counter-intuitive impacts or implications of particular policy measures (such as the indirect negative impacts that assisting ‘accumulating’ migrants could have on poorer migrant and non-migrant households or groups). It should direct analysts (and policy-makers) to ask more probing questions about precisely *how* certain migration processes might benefit *whom* in a particular migration and development context.

For example, much temporary, seasonal or circular ‘coping’ or ‘survival’ migration among the poorest of the rural poor is indicative of fragile or unsustainable rural livelihoods. By providing a basis for many poor households to survive or cope, temporary, seasonal and ‘circular’ migration may prevent or reduce more permanent forms of ‘rural-urban’ migration. It is not necessarily a route out of poverty, however, due to often exploitative labour and other economic and social relations involved and strained or limited social networks and capital that these migrants are able to draw on (in context of surplus rural labour, casualised urban labour markets, etc.). The principal impact on ‘development’ of this migration could be in providing a cheap source of exploitable labour for national & global capital based predominantly in urban centres. Other poor communities may benefit from the associated economic growth, making this migration-supported development ‘pro-poor’ for some, but not for many migrants involved, who provide unskilled labour for low wages in poor conditions and are often tied into debt and other relationships of dependency from which they can’t escape. These migrants have limited agency: migration for many is a necessity, rather than a choice, and often an impoverishing experience. Yet although it may play a role in reinforcing their relative poverty, migration may nevertheless help to prevent or delay the complete collapse of marginal rural livelihoods and reduce vulnerability to shocks.

4) In analysing the impacts and implications of migration involving a particular group or locality(s), it is likely to be instructive to explore processes of asset transfer between different actors involved, including migrants, their households, actors within wider migration networks, employers, etc. For example:

- Human assets – e.g. labour transferred from household to employer, or extracted through trafficking.
- Natural assets – e.g. land or other natural resources transferred to migrants in destination locations.
- Financial assets – e.g. remittances; debts paid through migrants' wages to smugglers or traffickers.
- Political assets – e.g. linked with migrant diaspora's engagement in national politics.
- Physical assets – e.g. remittance of construction materials, cars, consumer goods, etc.
- Social assets – e.g. care relationships and care chains disrupted by migration; migrant networks enabling access to employment.

Improved understanding of the significance of particular asset flows and transfers and the interactions and relationships between them should support improved understanding of the relative significance of migration and associated 'capital' flows for reducing (or increasing) migrants' and households' poverty, vulnerability or dependency / power or wealth. In the analysis of remittances, for example, analysis could consider whether money from migration tends to be recycled within the local 'sending' community (within / beyond households), or whether it is extracted out again through the penetration of local food and other markets by national or global companies / capital.

5) Different migration 'types' or categories could be distinguished at a general level according to dynamic and relational political economy concepts that capture the relative or constrained agency of different migrants and the qualitative nature of their involvement in migration processes. Possible categories could include, for example:

- ‘Survival’ / ‘coping’ migrants from chronically poor households or communities experiencing asset depletion / precarious asset maintenance and adversely incorporated into labour and other markets in which they have little agency.
- Unskilled / skilled migrants from poor rural or urban households or communities accumulating at low or modest levels and participating in labour and other markets on broadly disadvantaged terms but with some degree of agency and bargaining power.
- Moderately (or highly) skilled / moderately (or highly) endowed internal / international migrants experiencing asset depletion and adversely incorporated into labour and other markets in which they have little agency.
- Moderately (or highly) skilled / moderately (or highly) endowed internal / international migrants from rural / urban households or communities accumulating at low or modest levels and participating in labour and other markets on disadvantaged / advantaged terms with some degree of agency and bargaining power.
- Highly skilled / highly endowed internal / international migrants accumulating at high rates and incorporated into labour and other markets on highly advantageous terms with a high degree of agency.

Categories of this kind could be combined with more conventional migrant categories, such as seasonal / temporary / circular / rural-urban / internal / international / unskilled / skilled / legal / illegal / worker / family / forced / voluntary / involuntary, etc.

Distinctions based on political economy criteria may nuance conventional distinctions between different types of migrants in ways that have significance for how we understand, conceptualise and analyse the dynamics of migration. For example, many households and communities in a variety of migration contexts are engaged in both ‘internal’ and ‘international’ migration. The significance of different migration strategies and outcomes for the migrants, households or communities concerned is affected not only by whether migration is international or not, but also by the nature and circumstances of the migration experience – for example, whether it represents a

defensive survival strategy or a positive strategy for asset accumulation, whether migrants exercise individual agency in their migration decisions, and how people's strategies are affected by particular social relations, networks and institutions. Issues of distance, communication links, migration policies, border controls and migrant status are likely to feature as central factors in most situations of international migration, but they are not necessarily the most important factors affecting the actual causes, patterns and implications of people's mobility. Analysis of "worker" migration focused on role of labour markets or state policies on labour migration may not pay adequate attention to other crucially important institutions, such as family structure, land distribution, property relations, rural food markets and local brokerage.

6) The complex, dynamic and multi-layered nature of migration streams that these categories highlight suggests that only a comparatively complex and multi-layered mix of policy measures could hope to achieve desired impacts on any migration process. For example, where migration includes large numbers of 'survival' or 'coping' migrants, or where it can be demonstrated that migrants' movement is determined and controlled to a significant extent by identifiable and exploitative social and economic structures, actors and relationships – *and*, crucially, where policy is focused on the well-being of migrants and their communities, or on the protection of rural livelihoods and/or slowing permanent rural-urban migration – the mix of relevant policy might include measures to address the underlying vulnerability of the poorest households and/or the regulatory environment in which exploitative economic and other actors operate. These same migration streams might also include large numbers of 'accumulating' migrants whose livelihoods or strategies might either be jeopardised or supported by the same policies.

What is deemed 'appropriate' policy action is, of course, a highly political and contested question, reflecting differing views as to what policy should ultimately be seeking to achieve: improved well-being of vulnerable migrants and their households and communities? Reduced rates of rural-urban or international migration? Improved "development outcomes" (however defined) from migration streams? Maximisation of remittance flows? Different policy and other actors, of course, will be seeking varied, and sometimes conflicting, policy outcomes at different levels and in different contexts. Consequently, any migration stream is likely to be influenced (whether



intentionally or not) by highly dynamic interactions of policy objectives, measures and impacts that will vary considerably from one context to another and over time. By conceptualising or categorising migration streams on the basis of (micro-) political economy criteria, there is improved scope for analysing the differential and dynamic impacts of various or specific policies on particular migration streams or on specific sub-groups of migrants and non-migrants involved.

7) A political economy approach to categorising migration could provide a useful way into analysing so-called 'mixed migration' flows. One of the reasons that the phenomenon of mixed migration is so problematic for policy-makers and researchers is that the migration movements involved and associated networks are not clearly segmented according to conventional migration 'categories'. This reflects the complex institutional and political and economic dynamics at play, including, for example, the degree of power and control over people's movement that is exerted by non-state actors, including smugglers and traffickers who (unlike states' migration control institutions) are not concerned with which categories particular migrants belong to. The focus on migrants' relative agency in migration processes and the structure and dynamics of migration processes (mediated by social institutions and power relations) might help to shed light on commonalities and differences in the experiences, problems and outcomes for different migrants caught up in 'mixed flows', despite diversity in the original causes and initial dynamics of their migration.

As highlighted by Anthony Richmond's concept of 'reactive' migration, the agency of migrants whose initial movement was compelled for whatever reason – by violence and insecurity, fear of persecution, development projects, and/or as a survival strategy in response to an economic, environmental or other shock, or due to collapsed or destroyed livelihoods – is likely to be significantly constrained in various ways (Richmond, 1994). However, some refugees and internally displaced persons have a lot more control over their own destiny than others, and some certainly enjoy greater agency following their initial flight than many 'economic' migrants. Whether in the context of complex 'mixed flows' or in the context of more discrete migration processes or systems, what determines migrants' relative agency, and hence much about the circumstances, dynamics, experience and outcomes of their migration, is how their movement and welfare is affected by the particular social, economic,

political relational and institutional context in which it takes place, both at the micro- and macro levels. For example, where movement and welfare is supported or facilitated by humanitarian agencies and permissive state policies and institutions that protect certain rights (e.g. leave to enter, free movement, right to work), ‘compelled’ migrants are likely to enjoy greater degrees of agency and possibly better welfare than migrants moving in circumstances where fundamental rights are denied, and where exploitative relationships (e.g. with traffickers, labour recruiters, employers) dominate the dynamics of movement. As a consequence of the specific circumstances of their movement, migrants who initially lack agency may gain more power and control over time, while others may find themselves increasingly at the mercy of other actors and other interests.

8) Migration is highly embedded in a variety economic, social and political processes, structures and relations at micro (household and community) and wider levels. Its effects – for example on poverty – are therefore extremely difficult to isolate or measure (Deshingkar and Start, 2003:2). The embedded nature of migration also means that migration itself may not be the most important or significant issue from the point of view of the people involved. As reflected in much of the work on migration within livelihoods research, migration or mobility may be only one of a variety of strategies that people use to enhance their welfare or to cope or survive, and its relative importance compared to other strategies and factors affecting people’s lives may vary over time and may often be overshadowed by other factors affecting their lives. An actor-oriented approach may encourage a more holistic view of communities’ experiences and predicament which does not prioritise migration over other issues. The significance of migration for different migrants and their families / households may vary considerably even within a specific location.

9) Too narrow a focus on migration without closer investigation of its precise and relative significance for particular households / communities / sectors might lead to flawed assumptions about commonalities and similarities between different migration experiences or phenomena. Although they may *look* similar, we may not always be treating like with like when comparing different migration streams in terms of their causes or significance for the political economy in the sending and destination locations and at trans-national level.

For instance, while migration resulting from poverty is common to different areas and contexts, the underlying causes of poverty – and hence of the migration associated with it – can differ significantly from one situation to another (cf. Green, 2005:36-37). Du Toit et al. contrast the very different dynamics of poverty between three areas of South Africa's Cape, each of which has different implications for local migration dynamics. In one area (Mount Frere), severe biophysical constraints combine with lack of infrastructure development, poor returns on agricultural labour and a long history of capital penetration to create widespread and chronic poverty and vulnerability. In another area (Ceres), the agrarian economy is highly productive, but ownership of the economy is concentrated in the hands of a small, landed white elite; integration of this economy into global markets and increasing buyer control of agricultural commodity chains have resulted in extreme casualisation and insecurity in the agricultural labour market on which many of the poorest households depend. Meanwhile, in Cape Town's African suburbs, poverty is shaped at the local level by the 'racial and spatial geo-politics of the post-industrial metropolitan labour market' which emphasises high-skilled manufacturing and services and relegates the chronic poor, including recent migrants, to 'unsafe and crime-ridden peri-urban racial ghettos' (du Toit et al., 2005:11). Where poverty appears to play a major role in generating migration, it is only by explaining the dynamics and causes of poverty (rather than simply describing this poverty) that the causes of associated migration can be properly appreciated or tackled.

10) Examining migration and related processes and their causes and consequences within the context of local, national and international political economy may reveal dynamics and implications associated with migration that might otherwise be missed or downplayed. Richard Black and Mohamed Sessay's 1997 study of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees and their impact on land use and deforestation in three villages in Guinea, for instance, challenged the widely held view that rapid rates of deforestation had simply resulted from the increased demand for land caused by the arrival of large numbers of refugees. Historical examination of the development of the agricultural economy of the region, and of socio-political change in local communities revealed a more complex relationship between refugee arrivals and deforestation. Local farmers – keen to establish a claim over forest land in a context where indigenous rights of access appeared under threat, and keen to invest in production of

coffee and other cash crops (and encouraged to do so by government policy) – allowed refugees to clear forest land which they themselves later planted with coffee or cocoa or other cash crops. This study, they argue, ‘highlights the potential role of refugee farmers as a resource that is capable of being mobilized by both the state and local communities in a developing struggle for control over the land resources of the forest region’. Hence ‘the presence of refugees in an area is best viewed as a catalyst for more dynamic social relations, rather than as necessarily having one or other ‘environmental’ impact’ (Black and Sessay, 1997:605).

11) A relational political economy approach encourages an expanded range of issues to be investigated in the context of globalisation and its implications for migration. In addition to exploring the trans-national nature of migration networks, and the international economic, commercial and technological transformations that are facilitating particular forms of international migration, it encourages attention to how globalised capital and markets have penetrated and affected the livelihoods and communities of people involved in particular migration movements, and how this has created or influenced the local dynamics and significance of migration and other related survival, risk-reduction and welfare maximisation strategies. The relaxation of labour controls and standards associated with economic liberalisation – driven by the dynamics of global capitalism – has led to the progressive casualisation of labour markets, particularly in poorer countries. Start and Johnson observe that while freedom and flexibility in labour market institutions is arguably essential to the efficiency and flexibility of enterprise in a global economy, ‘the result has left many livelihoods increasingly divided, multiple and diverse, not to mention precarious and pauperised’ (Start and Johnson, 2004:9).

## **5. Conclusion**

Migration is a complex phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the structures, relationships and processes of micro- and macro political economies and in the dynamics of people’s livelihoods at the local level. Specific patterns of migration are therefore determined to a great extent by the dynamic interaction of individual or household livelihood strategies with a broad range of micro-, meso- and macro level

relationships, processes, institutions and structures that make up the social, economic, political and historical contexts in which migration takes place – such as wealth distribution and access to land and other resources, kinship structures, local and wider governance institutions, labour markets, social and commercial networks, state welfare and security regimes. The particular opportunities and constraints affecting people’s migration options, strategies, experiences and outcomes depend to a great extent on the differential distribution and changing dynamics of power, vulnerability, agency and opportunity within households, communities and the wider population.

This Working Paper proposes the development of an approach to researching and analysing migration processes that combines a livelihoods approach to analysing local-level migration dynamics with a relational political economy perspective that deepens understanding of the social, economic and political processes, interests and power dynamics interacting with migration at different levels (e.g. causing patterns of vulnerability or creating opportunities that encourage migration). Livelihoods approaches are extremely useful for capturing the agency and capabilities of migrants and their households at the local level, and for exploring the multi-dimensional dynamics of migration and related livelihood opportunities, strategies and outcomes within particular communities. However, migrants’ (or their households’) ability to exercise agency or ‘*power to*’ pursue particular migration strategies can only be properly understood in relation to the varying constraints and opportunities created by dynamic (and often competitive) social, economic and political relations and institutions through which people and groups exert ‘*power over*’ each other (Mosse, 2007). There is a need to consider the potential for competition, exploitation and unequal power dynamics between key actors in migration processes, and to explore how the relationships between these actors are shaped and mediated by a variety of social, economic and political structures, processes and institutions. ‘Relational’ political economy analysis centres directly on the relationships, processes and structures of relative power and agency between different actors involved. It also helps to trace and explain the interaction and implications of exclusionary and inclusionary processes and relationships over time and at different levels – micro, meso and macro.

There is no single approach to exploring and analysing the micro- and macro political economy of a particular context. It is necessary to adopt a historical and cross-disciplinary perspective, drawing flexibly on a number of frames of reference, including, potentially, international political economy, gender studies, anthropology, sociology, social history and political geography. 'Value chain analysis' provides a potentially useful framework to begin exploring the links and interaction between local livelihoods and specific migration networks, systems or processes, and, importantly, for investigating relative power relations and actors' agency within these. Migrants themselves may exercise considerable agency and control within some migration processes, whereas in others, individual migrants may be highly vulnerable to the exploitative interests of other actors. Intermediary actors (e.g. labour recruiters, brokers, smugglers) may have considerable power in some migration streams; others might be controlled more by state or other actors at the 'receiving' end. Any migration stream is likely to include various migrants or groups moving with varying degrees of agency in different circumstances and in response to different causal dynamics. Different actors within the migration 'chain' are likely to exert different forms of control at different levels and points in time.

A key objective of a livelihoods and relational political economy approach is to move beyond overly-deterministic economics-based models and theories of migration, and beyond ever-more detailed descriptions of migration processes, to seek improved evidence-based *explanations* for the causal and consequential dynamics of migration in different contexts and at different levels. While these dynamics are highly varied, complex and context-specific, variability and complexity need not lead to resignation as regards the prospects of developing useful theory (Castles, 2008:14). A livelihoods and political economy approach, incorporating close attention to the dynamics both of local livelihoods and of specific migration processes not only provides a robust theoretical and conceptual framework through which to address this complexity. Over time, it also has the potential to reveal common themes, problems and challenges in the midst of all the complexity. Common themes might emerge, for example, around issues such as the expansion of commercial markets into poor rural areas, the casualisation of urban labour markets, access to land and other resources, local and national governance, or environmental change. Rather than being imposed from the 'top-down' through pre-ordained and reductionist models of what drives migration,

these insights would emerge incrementally from the ‘bottom-up’ and from detailed research material relating to a wide range of migration processes and contexts.

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