Abstract

Considerable attention has been directed recently towards the role of culture in sustainable community development. Individuals and communities have their own values, meanings, customs and knowledge systems that affirm identity and diversity and play a key role in sustaining livelihoods. However, such features have been frequently ignored in development planning. This paper explores the importance of cultural values in attaining rural livelihood sustainability and draws upon field-based research in two villages close to the city of Kandy in central Sri Lanka. The research demonstrates that the sustainable livelihoods approach, whilst useful, does not adequately address traditional cultural values, and frequently perceives culture as a constraint in understanding livelihood opportunities and planning future development trajectories. The research demonstrates the significance of understanding the interface between culture, livelihood sustainability and community development.

Introduction

Development analysis has often assumed that culture and tradition inhibit entrepreneurship and constrain development interventions, and there has been a failure to appreciate the complex interaction between economic performance and culture (Jenkins, 2000). Too frequently, development practitioners have perceived cultural norms and traditions as being quite
separate from and unaffected by development values, suggesting that cultural diversity has no ‘economic importance’ (Throsby, 2001). Such perceptions have been reinforced by ‘Eurocentric’ development strategies that fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of values outside the materialistic–rational paradigm (Tucker, 1999). This kind of development has affected the lives of many communities whose hopes and imaginations are inseparable from the production and reproduction of meanings, symbols, customs and knowledge (Escobar, 1997; Tucker, 1999; Huntington, 2000; Loomis, 2000; North and Cameron, 2000; Radcliffe, 2006).

However, in recent years development has undergone something of a ‘cultural turn’, in which culture is belatedly being given greater significance as an integral factor in development processes and strategies (Harrison and Huntington, 2000). Increasingly, culture is being seen as a key resource and as a significant variable, which can influence the success of development interventions (Stephen, 1991; Rao and Walton, 2004). The conviction that ‘culture matters’ is increasingly pervasive in both the discourse and practice of development, but its treatment on an intuitive rather than an analytical level is ‘a deficiency in (development practitioners’) professional capacity, rather than . . . evidence that culture does not matter’ (Ruttan, 1988, in Jenkins, 2000). One of the most significant post-modern insights is that tradition or ‘pastness’ (Appadurai, 1981) is a valuable renewable resource. Human values that are embodied in tradition are not only the ‘scars of the past’, but also the ‘portents of the future’. As UNESCO has recognized:

... unless economic development has a cultural basis it can never lead to truly lasting development. Culture is ‘not’ something ‘to be taken into consideration’. It is fundamental . . .’ (UNESCO, 1995, p. 1)

For many rural researchers, the espousal of social constructionism represents a cultural turn that has deflected rural studies away from its fundamental core of concern for socio-economic change in rural space (Cloke, 2006). Chambers (1998) also argues for a ‘paradigm shift’ in criticizing what he calls normal professionalism and proposing a new professionalism, which reverses the power relations of conventional development paradigms. He suggests that development interventions should put the ‘last-in-first’ rather than the ‘first-in-last’, emphasizing the significance of rural realities, peoples’ values, knowledge, choices and perceptions. One of the dangers of the conventional development process, Chambers argues, is that it invalidates these realities and ignores the knowledge, customs, capabilities and ingenuities, which can play an invaluable role in attaining sustainable community development (Chambers, 1995, 1997).

In focusing on culture and development, this paper supports the livelihood perspective as a pragmatic approach under which cultural knowledge
and traditions can be explicitly treated as resources in the context of achieving sustainable community development. The paper demonstrates the extent to which these cultural complexities and rural lives are interconnected in terms of both livelihood choices and opportunities and in building up various livelihood assets in the shape of human, social, natural, financial and physical capital. The livelihood perspective facilitates a better understanding of how and where culture becomes central in development interventions and how culture is conceptualized and incorporated into the process of community development. As a result, it is suggested, development interventions can be more effective and beneficial to those people whose lives are being changed,

. . . . the role of cultural values and attitudes as obstacles to or facilitators of progress has been largely ignored by governments and aid agencies. Integrating values and attitude change into development policies, planning and programming is a promising way to ensure that in the next fifty years, the world does not relive the poverty and injustice that most poorer countries, and underachieving ethnic groups, have been mired in during the past half century . . . (Huntington, 2000, p. xxxiv).

**Conceptualizing culture**

Conceptualizing culture has proved to be a notoriously difficult task. Williams (1976) believes that ‘culture is one of the two or three most complicated words’ to define. Radcliffe (2006) suggests that culture is a ‘slippery’ and ambiguous concept, whereas Gerring and Barresi (2003) argue that culture is a concept that has plagued the Social Sciences for over a century (Gerring and Barresi, 2003). In fact, many Social Science disciplines configure culture as a ‘whole way of life’, but as Huntington (2000) suggests, ‘if culture includes everything, it explains nothing’ (2000, p. xv). Culture is a key concept for anthropologists who see the world as a ‘cultural mosaic’ of traditional cultures and inherited values (Nanda and Warms, 2007). The concept is also confusing in a development context, questioning whether culture is an aspect or means of ‘development’ (in a sense of material progress) or whether ‘culture’ is perhaps the ultimate aim of ‘development’ (UNESCO, 1995)?

To better understand culture, rural livelihoods and its relevance in community development, this paper distinguishes *intangible* – non-materialistic and non-observable elements of culture (e.g. values, customs, beliefs, networks and norms) and *tangible* – materialistic and observable aspects of culture (e.g. crafts, historical buildings, locations, heritage sites) (Throsby, 2001; UNESCO, 2003). The paper specifically focuses on ‘traditional culture’, addressing various structures, functions, ideologies and products that signify both tangible and intangible elements. A useful working definition is offered by Kroeber and Kluckholn:
Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of “traditional” ideas and especially their attached values (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1953, in Faulkner et al., 2006, p. xv–xvi).

In this context,

The key characteristic of traditional culture is the ‘generational-transformation’ of knowledge, beliefs, values, customs and norms. This is fundamental for preserving societal values for the future and strengthening a community’s sustainability and security.

In this sense, traditional culture denotes multiple perspectives that reflect values, beliefs, ideas and knowledge systems that societies use to experience their world in a mutually meaningful manner. In the context of development and community sustainability, traditional culture should be seen as flexible and supportive, rather than rigid and constraining.

Sustainable livelihoods, community development and culture

Almost by definition, community development means working at the grassroots level, rather than merely focusing on the policy level (Brocklesby and Fisher, 2003). In early approaches to community development from the 1950s to early 1970s, priorities and actions for particular communities tended to be defined by outsiders rather than by local people and involved no real transfer of power or resources. With increasing concern for local knowledge, peoples’ participation, empowerment and participatory learning (Chambers, 2005), the approaches have become more grassroots focused, with local people collectively developing confidence and skills to change their situation for the better (Potter et al., 2008). Since the 1990s, there has been a determined effort to gain a better understanding of rural livelihoods and to bring rural development strategies more in line with the actual aspirations and priorities of rural communities (Carney, 1998, 2002; Ellis, 1998; DFID, 2000a). The sustainable livelihood (SL) approach has helped to reveal dimensions of rural communities, which were hitherto inadequately understood (Figure 1).

Chambers and Conway (1991) conceptualize ‘livelihood’ as follows:

...Livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide SL.
opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits
to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long
term… (1991, p. 6).

The central objective of the livelihood approach is to build effective
methods to support people and communities in ways that are more mean-
ingful to their daily lives and needs (Appendini, 2001). Despite the numer-
ous strengths of the SL approach, which contrasts with ready-made
‘blueprint’ interventionist instruments, the neglect of cultural factors, and
the specific role of cultures and traditions in the context of achieving SLs,
is a serious shortcoming. Culture is frequently perceived as a rigid structure
that retards livelihood development opportunities. In this context, Bebbing-
ton (1999) argues for the importance of a wider conception of the resources
that rural people need to access in the process of composing a secure liveli-
hood, especially in a context where people’s livelihoods shift from being
directly based on natural resources, to livelihoods based on a range of
other assets including produced, human, natural, social and cultural
capital. Placing particular emphasis on livelihood ‘assets’, Bebbington clari-
fies the concept of livelihood as:

... a person’s assets, such as land, are not merely the means with which he
or she makes a living. They also give meaning to that person’s world.
Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods;
they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act. Assets should
not be understood only as things that allow survival, adaptation and
poverty alleviation, they are also the basis of an agent’s power to act and
to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use
and transformation of resource… . (1999, p. 2022)

With Bebbington’s focus on livelihood assets, together with Sen’s (1997)
concern with capability, there is considerable potential for expanding the
conventional SL framework to include culture and to recognize its positive

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Figure 1 The SL approach. Key: H, human capital; S, social capital; N, natural capital; P, physical
capital; F, financial capital. Source: Carney (2002)
role in building rural livelihoods systems. Apart from tangible or material assets (e.g. Figure 1: natural, financial and physical capital), unsurprisingly there are communities that exclusively rely on a variety of intangible assets, such as traditional knowledge, skills, traditional customs, practices, belief systems and social institutions to support their livelihoods (Schech and Haggis, 2000; Arizpe, 2004; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

Traditional or vernacular cultures are a resource for the survival and sustainability of rural communities. Traditional skills and knowledge inherited across generations have produced diverse livelihood portfolios in the form of artefacts (e.g. crafts) and various ritualistic performances (e.g. dance) which play a role in strengthening livelihood opportunities and self-development (see Stephen, 1991; Adriansen, 2006; Radcliffe, 2006). Regrettably, this has not been adequately reflected in development theory and practice, which have emphasized Western models, leading to a distortion of community hopes, imaginations and capabilities. The livelihood approach enables recognition of both tangible and intangible elements and emphasizes the crucial role of traditional culture in the context of livelihood development (Bebbington, 1999; Cahn, 2002; Glavovic, Scheyvens and Overton, 2002). Traditional culture should be regarded as a key resource for community development and the narratives of Kandyan villagers strongly support this proposition.

Sri Lanka – history, culture and people

Sri Lanka is an island state of 65,610 km², situated in the Indian Ocean to the south and east of the Indian sub-continent. Known as ‘the pearl of the Indian Ocean’, it is classified as a middle income country by United Nations Development Programme, ranked 93 out of 177 countries in terms of human development index (United Nations Development Programme, 2007/8). Despite over twenty years of secessionist civil conflict in the North-Eastern Province, the country has had some notable development achievements, including over 90 percent adult literacy and a life expectancy of seventy-four years (Table 1).

Sri Lanka has a rich historical and cultural heritage covering more than 2500 years, which is recorded in ancient legends and chronicles. For example, as the Mahavamsa (the great chronicle – or historical poem – of genealogy, legends and historical heritage of Sri Lanka) describes, the country’s Buddhist-Sinhalese kingdom started with ‘Vijaya’ (generally considered as the legendary colonizer and primogenitor of the Sinhalese group), who arrived from Northern India in 500 BC (Coomaraswami, 1956). Buddhism evolved with royal patronage as the highest ethical and philosophical expression of Sinhalese traditional culture and civilization.
<table>
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<th>Country group</th>
<th>Life expectancy</th>
<th>Adult literacy rate</th>
<th>Combined gross enrolment for primary, secondary and tertiary school</th>
<th>Real gross domestic product per capita adjusted for local price (USD)</th>
<th>Human development index</th>
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<td>90.7</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4390</td>
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<tr>
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<td>63</td>
<td>4775</td>
<td>0.679</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>89</td>
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<td>–</td>
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</tbody>
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*Source: United Nations Development Programme (2007/08).*
According to historical mythologies, the ‘Sinhalese were the chosen guardians of Buddhism’, and Sri Lanka is a ‘place of special sanctity for the Buddhist religion’ (deSilva, 1981, p. 4). After three centuries of colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, the country gained independence in February 1948.

The country’s population has a diverse ethnic composition, with 73.8 percent Sinhalese, 12.6 percent Sri Lankan Tamils, 7.2 percent Sri Lankan Moors, 5.5 percent Indian Tamils and 0.9 percent Burghers, Malay and others (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001). There are strong links between ethnicity and religion, with the Sinhalese being predominantly Buddhist, the Tamils predominantly Hindu and the Moors Muslim. The Sinhalese community is divided between up-country Sinhalese (the Kandyans) and low-country Sinhalese. The low-country Sinhalese primarily occupy the southern and western coastal regions, accounting for 62 percent of the total Sinhalese and 42.8 percent of the national population. Meanwhile, Kandyan Sinhalese constitute 38 percent of the total Sinhalese population and 25.8 percent of the national population.

**Kandy and the study villages**

Kandy city is an important administrative, commercial, cultural and historical centre located in the central highland region some 116 km from the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. The district comprises 20 district secretariats and 2987 villages. The total district population is 1,279,028 and 80 percent of the population is rural, 12 percent urban and 8 percent live in the plantation sector, including the migrant South Indian Tamil community who work in the tea plantations (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001). Kandy city was formerly the capital of the last Sinhalese kingdom and has had an illustrious history with an impressively rich cultural heritage. By the end of the eighteenth century, Kandy had become an influential cultural centre with its distinctive arts, architecture, crafts, dancing and music. All forms of artistic expression that are present in modern Sinhalese society owe their origin to, or have derived their inspiration from, Kandy (Coomaraswami, 1956; Dewaraja, 1988). As a result of its considerable cultural and historical significance, the city was declared a world cultural heritage site by UNESCO in 1988.

Field research was undertaken in two villages, Kiriwaula and Kalasirigama, located, respectively, in Udunuwara and Kundasala district secretariats, some 15 and 8 km from Kandy city (Figure 2). These two villages are typical of communities in the Kandyan region, in terms of the inextricable links between village livelihoods systems and the traditions and cultural practices, which have been followed by many generations.
Village people are conservative with regard to these practices and traditions and can often trace their ancestry back to their ancestors who served the Kandyan royalty.

There are about 250 families in Kiriwaula and the majority of the research participants had maintained a strong connection with the royal families and the ancestors who served the Kandyan King. Many respondents were commissioned to execute work specifically for the Temple of Tooth (where the most sacred Tooth Relic of Buddha is housed) and other sacred temples around Kandy. The majority specialize in producing traditional brassware, which enjoys immense prestige because of the close connection with temples and the royal palace.

There are about 100 families in Kalasirigama who mainly engage in performing arts, such as Kandyan dancing, drumming and ritual performances at temples, while a few families engage in mat-weaving. Respondents in Kalasirigama engaged in household level manufacture of drums, such as raban, geta-bera, dik-bera, davula and udakki. Their technology and skills have been transferred from generation to generation and they have established a monopoly, which has been unchallenged for many years. Each village is distinctive both culturally and economically (Yalman, 1967) and, in addition to culturally related craft work, respondents engaged in paddy farming, to provide food for their families, in which they are largely self-sufficient.
Both Kiriwaula and Kalasirigama provide a representative profile of the village communities in the Kandyan region and how livelihoods are closely connected with traditional culture. In the Kandyan villages, a wide range of different crafts are practised and there is specialization among families, such as silversmiths (badallu), stone cutters (galvaduvo), brass workers (lokuruwo), wood turners (liyana-vaduvo), jewellers (redikatayankarayo), painters (sittaru), tom-tom beaters and dancers. Such crafts are aligned with the ‘rajakariya’ or ‘royal duties’ that existed during the time of the Kandyan Kingdom and there is a strong relationship between caste and profession. The compulsory labour or ‘rajakariya’ – king’s work assigned by the social hierarchy was a condition for holding land and acquiring other revenue. Although caste is not formally functional today, it is still fundamental in understanding the livelihood strategies of village people. In these communities, there is a strong extended family system and a spirit of collaboration with shared values and customs across the generations (Coomaraswami, 1956; Thilakasiri, 1994). Craftsmen generally train young men of the same caste and traditions are perpetuated from one generation to another.

When selecting the research participants, factors such as age, type of livelihoods, gender and historical and ancestral relationships were significant factors. Both male and female participants were chosen for interview and the majority (70 percent) were elderly people in the fifty-five to eighty age group and with about thirty to forty years of experience in their particular industries. The diverse experiences of both male and female participants provided a rich collection of data illustrating the significance of traditional culture in the context of achieving secure livelihoods systems and sustainable community development.

Livelihoods, assets and the cultural context

..... We have been traditionally involved in this industry from generation to generation and we are very proud of this. Our skills, knowledge, customs and values are descended from our ancestors and are our livelihoods. We respect our ancestral knowledge and traditions ...

This villager in Kiriwaula has over thirty years experience as a brass worker and acquired his skills from working with his father and grandfather. He was pleased to be carrying on the family traditions and was satisfied with the quality of life for his family. Many families in both villages were generally proud of their traditions and were keen to maintain these and the associated skills. A drum maker in Kalasirigama commented:
people say that ‘bera-karayo’ – (tom-tom-beaters) are low-caste people and this is outdated! This is the ‘job’ inherited from my forefathers. I am not worried. I am proud of what I do. Some people don’t have respect for their past, their ancestors and our own traditions and cultures… being respectful helps us to make our living and preserve values and customs for the future…

Another respondent in the same village from a family specializing in Kandyan dancing commented:

we live with our own spirits. My great-grandfather was a famous Kandyan dancer, however some people believe this was an ‘underprivileged’ profession. People are judged by monetary wealth in today’s society. They do not understand the history and pride we have as Kandyan dancers. If we respect our ancestors and traditions we will be looked after…

These examples reveal the continuing significance of culture in present-day livelihoods and the fact that villagers’ livelihoods are intimately connected with their traditional skills and practices. The villagers are aware that their traditional activities are their main means of survival and that it would be difficult to break away from these. To these families, their craftsmanship, ancestral relationships, customs and cooperative spirit are all important, not only in maintaining their livelihoods, but also in recognizing and preserving their traditional culture. When respondents were asked what they understood by culture and how they recognize culture – sanskrutiya and traditional values – parani sampradayan, they associated their answers with particular objects and livelihood activities, or simply said it is what they ‘see’, ‘do’ and ‘experience’ in their everyday life. For example, one elderly woman in Kiriwaula asserted:

“Sanskrutiya” – culture is varying from place to place, and one person to another. It is about what we have practiced and experienced for a long time and what we associate with our lives. The things we value are not valued in the same way by others and vice versa…

Culture is perceived as a set of material objects and distinctive behaviours and practices that have been maintained over many generations. For example, as another participant in Kalasirigama explained:

…culture means everything; our values, beliefs, customs, knowledge, religion, our caste and even “what we do for living”! We do traditional craftworks and we have been following these for many generations. We learn everything from our forefathers and our knowledge belongs to our families and our “caste”. This is all about our traditions; we have to protect this knowledge for future generations, as it represents our values.
The above conceptualizations reveal complex and diverse aspects of culture. The traditional systems, which include beliefs, customs, values, norms and knowledge, are intrinsic to villagers’ lives and are highly significant in determining the accessibility to available assets. Five types of livelihood assets, including human (knowledge, skills, labour, health and education), social (social networks, relations, social institutions and organizations), physical (infrastructure – roads, water, electricity, sewerage, sanitation, secure shelter, market facilities and various productive assets, such as tools and equipments), natural (land, water, forests and minerals) and financial (savings, loans and inflow of income) capital are recognized as important in building SLs (Figure 1) (DFID, 2000b; Carney, 2002). These assets are not simply resources that communities utilize to build and sustain their livelihoods (DFID, 1999; Carney, 2002), but they also give them the capability to perform certain functions to meet their livelihood aspirations (Sen, 1981; Bebbington, 1999). This is clearly reflected in respondents’ comments. According to a female drum maker in Kalasirigama:

...our village is like our family. In our family we take care of each other. And we help and love each other. There is no jealousy or competition; we are always happy to see others’ progress, happiness and prosperity...

Our ancient customs and this traditional industry help us to keep that spirit...we never disrespect our cultural strengths...

A jewellery maker in Kiriwaula commented:

...We live today, thanks to my family’s relatives. Since my husband died, I have been running this business. I don’t want to give this up, because this is a family custom. I know it is hard, but my family helps. Our whole family has been working in this industry for a long time and they don’t want to break the family custom. Sometimes, they work at my workshop to help and, when needed, I borrow money from them...

It is clear that the social relations based on traditional kinship and networks between individuals, families and groups have played a key role in sustaining livelihoods. These networks involve interconnectedness that increases people’s trust and collective movements, and expands accessibility to wider institutions (such as political or civic bodies), memberships (which involves adherence to mutually agreed or commonly accepted rules, norms and sanctions), relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchanges (which facilitate cooperation, reduces transaction costs and provides the basis of informal safety nets among the poor) (Ahamed and Lipton, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Hussein and Nelson, 1998; McDowell and Hann, 1998; Carswell, 2000). These features are considered as important social resources for achieving livelihood security (Carney, 1998; Scoones, 1998), sustaining social organization and rationalizing actions. In the Kandyan villages, the
enduring strength of traditional culture, norms of cooperation and reciprocity are regarded as being more important for community development than finance or other resources. Such social resources also shape the communities’ accessibility to human capital. With regard to knowledge and skills, which is the major element in human capital (DFID, 1999, 2000a, b), there was a consensus among villagers that their considerable knowledge and skills originated from their ancestors. Compared with formal educational training (e.g. in schools and vocational training centres), villagers regarded ancestral knowledge as more important in pursuing their current livelihoods. The connectivity between human capital and traditional culture was articulated by a brass worker in Kiriwaula thus:

\[
\ldots \text{Our knowledge and skills are unattainable from anywhere; it is a part of our lives, passed from generation to generation. It is unique to us, and our sons are brought up in our own traditions in order to preserve our knowledge for future generations.} \ldots
\]

In addition to social and human capital, natural capital is also important for SLs. Secure ownership of land is foremost (Rakodi, 1999), since insecurity of tenure can seriously undermine livelihood sustainability. Field research in the Kandyan villages found that most land is handed down from generation to generation. There is no danger of losing land ownership unless land is sold outside the family, a practice which is contrary to traditional customs. In the case of all families in Kiriwaula village, for example, entitlement to land has been inherited from their forefathers. As Coomaraswami (1956) explains,

\[
\ldots \text{it is always assumed that title was contingent on the performances of ‘services’, or ‘rajakariya’, ranging from formal homage to laborious duties. The chain of duties and services which was there established, binding every class and every individual from the highest to the lowest rank in the society. The ‘rajakariya’ attached to land, not the person, and failure to perform ‘rajakariya’ rendered the land ‘purappadu’ (abandoned land), and a new claimant was liable to the service attached to the land. The land was often given by the king by way of grants called ‘sannas’} \ldots
\]

As explained by another female participant in Kalasirigama:

\[
\text{‘Our lands are inherited. We all have equal shares of the land. This was land granted by the king to our great grandfather for his excellence in craftwork. Today, buying land is impossible for many of us. Thanks to our ancestors and their craftsmanship, we have got a place to live’}
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Although land might be regarded as of less significance for craft-based livelihoods, it is nevertheless perceived as being ‘priceless’, since it has been handed down through generations and may represent royal patronage
that rewarded excellence in traditional craftsmanship. Therefore, land ownership and accessibility have been significantly shaped by the traditional rules and customs that are part of the Kandyan ancestry. For many craft-based families, their main concerns for owning land are to build a house and to show their pride in owning ancestral property. Ancestral properties are therefore an important indicator of the villagers’ prosperity.

A regular flow of financial capital is crucial for livelihood security. Financial capital is probably the most ‘versatile’, but the ‘least available’, asset for poor rural communities (DFID, 1999). Regular flows of money, and the availability and accessibility of other financial resources, such as remittances and local credit facilities (Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000), are important in creating an economically robust environment that can enable communities to strengthen their adaptability to livelihood changes. Data from field research revealed that for these communities informal social capital is often a more reliable and secure source of financial assistance than finance from formal institutions. As one villager in Kalasirigama explained:

\[\text{... We neither borrow nor lend if we don’t have a special connection or trust. Here we’ve known each other since birth. As we are engaged in this industry, we all know everyone’s requirements. If someone borrows money we know it will be paid back. They never cheat; because, we all have the same aspirations and values ...}\]

There seems to be a strong reliance on networks established with relatives, neighbours and friends, and it was often deemed unnecessary to make use of formal institutions to meet immediate financial requirements. Thus, financial management was dependent upon loyalty to their traditional industry and also on social networks and personal contacts maintained through the traditional systems. Strong social networks provide security for livelihoods and reduce their vulnerability to serious financial problems. As one female brass worker in Kiriwaula commented:

\[\text{... After my husband’s death, his family supported me to improve the industry. I have nothing saved in the bank... I get the family support...}\]

The SL approach stresses the importance of physical assets to strengthen people’s choices over livelihoods. An adequate infrastructure, notably marketing systems and transport networks, are important prerequisites for managing recurrent livelihood activities. Village respondents indicated that they are adequately supported by such physical assets, first because of their close proximity to the cities of Peradeniya and Kandy, and secondly, due to government assistance through development programmes that recognize the importance of traditional livelihoods and
craft industries. For example, Kalasirigama is one of the villages which has benefited from the village-awakening – Gam Udawa programme – initiated by the former government, which focused on infrastructure development and provision of secure shelter, technology, marketing facilities and development of community livelihoods. Villagers were generally satisfied that they had benefited from improved village infrastructure and market accessibility and financial assistance for livelihoods improvements.

**Rural development and community sustainability**

The villagers’ narratives revealed different aspects of their livelihoods, resources and assets and the significance of traditional culture in an everyday context. Overall, they were proud to be working in professions that have a long ancestry and enduring links with the Kandyan nobility and temple. The village-based research clearly demonstrated the connectivity between livelihoods and the local cultural context, since livelihoods are strongly influenced by established systems of traditional knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms, values and customs. Since cultural practices are embedded in their lives, it is important to see how culture relates to community development strategies. If development is about achieving broad-based and sustained change, then the cultural context is crucial to implementing the development process.

Kandyan villagers asserted that livelihoods are not exclusively about fulfilling basic needs, such as food and shelter, but also involve achieving other objectives, such as ensuring the continuity of traditional customs and knowledge across generations. As Toner (2003) argues, livelihoods are multi-sectoral and all aspects of life will affect livelihoods choices. Chambers and Conway (1991) recognize that many rural livelihoods are predetermined by accident of birth. Livelihoods are geographically and culturally predetermined and the inherent skills are disseminated among the community’s members, not only for their economic survival, but also to ensure their identity within the community.

As confirmed by many participants in both villages, traditional culture and livelihoods are inextricably linked, in that culture provides a common destiny based on collective customs, memories and values, and helps to mobilize and disseminate survival strategies among community members. The analytical potential and practical value of the SL approach can be enhanced by capturing aspects of people’s lives and explaining people’s decisions and choices, how things have been done in the past and the relationship between certain practices. The SL approach is capable of embracing rural realities, community values, interpretations
and priorities over livelihood choices, which are vital for sustainable community development. From a cultural perspective, livelihoods can be defined thus:

Rural livelihoods comprise numerous capabilities and assets that are defined by the local cultural and historical contexts of a particular community. People’s values, customs and traditional knowledge systems are constructively used to build and strengthen livelihood assets and to improve their accessibility. In vulnerable situations those values are crucial for strengthening resilience, by adapting and coping through the use of traditional skills and knowledge passed from generation to generation, which is also crucial to the sustainability of rural livelihoods systems.

In this sense, the livelihoods approach provides a meaningful framework that rationalizes all social, political, economic, cultural and historical aspects of life of all community members. This approach offers a pragmatic framework for harnessing all tangible and intangible resources for the present and future development of the community (Appadurai, 1981), while safeguarding cultural diversity. There is a recognition that a sense of ‘belonging’ to the community is as important as accomplishment and plays a key role in a community’s self-identity (Long, 1997; Appendini, 2001; Klamer, 2004; Radcliffe and Laurie, 2006). In this sense, livelihoods analysis should be expanded to include ‘cultural assets’ as explained in respondents’ narratives. These cultural factors may not have direct economic value, but are centrally important in community lives, choices, well-being and sustainability. As we have seen, cultural factors can have economic value as well, such as where assets are transformed into handicraft production or cultural activities.

In many rural settings, household labour, especially the women’s role, is vital in generating household income. To enhance household income, women may be forced to engage in the informal sector as domestic servants, labourers, laundresses, street sellers and other unskilled and petty traders (Moser, 1998). On the contrary, among Kandyan village respondents, women can be a privileged group in terms of their resource ownership and possession of skills and knowledge, which are comparable to their husbands. Thus, women play a key role in contributing to household income and preserving cultural traditions.

Villagers’ interpretations of livelihood assets reveal the extent to which local traditions and cultural values are connected with other livelihood assets and how culture mediates asset accessibility (see, for example, Bebbington, 1999). Community perceptions of livelihood assets also reflect their genuine strengths and capital endowments and how they
work towards converting these into livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000). Livelihood assets are augmented by informal associations, social networks, close-knit families and values of cooperation and reciprocity. As Putnam (1995) and Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993) recognize, there is a greater chance of achieving socio-economic development where long-established social networks exist and where mutual reciprocity and trust, based on family kinship and traditional customs, play a pivotal role. Local culture is also important in the dispersion of economic control and in increasing local autonomy, which are supported by community motivation and generational commitments towards preserving ancestral resources.

As these examples suggest, there are two main reasons for viewing traditional culture positively in the context of achieving sustainable community development. First, is the existence of traditional knowledge systems and skills, or as Jenkins (2000) claims, ‘primitive wisdom’. According to Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000, p. 1252), traditional knowledge is a ‘cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission’. These communities offer alternative knowledge and perspectives based on their traditionally developed practices of resource use. Secondly, and perhaps more persuasive, the perception of cultures and traditions is an established ‘system(s) of traditional values, beliefs, artefacts and art forms, which sustain their social organization and rationalize action’ (see, for example, Jenkins, 2000; Radcliffe, 2006). As Jenkins asserts (2000, p. 304), when considering culture as a system, the characteristics of self-preservation over time and dynamic inter-system relationships tend to have important implications. These include implications for local resource use (exploring new livelihoods assets); social organizations (ties, relationships and obligations tend to be more important than individualism in societies with strong traditional culture); external relations (dependence on outsider forces tends to be limited and locally developed resistance and resilience strategies may be encouraged by traditional cultures); and sustainability policy (a cultural component cannot be removed from its context without disrupting the set of relationships within which it is embedded, nor imported into another context without disrupting the new surroundings).

Chambers (1998) argues that poor rural people are generally more strategic, engaging in multiple enterprises and performing different tasks and roles at different seasons, whereas better-off people often rely on one major life support activity (1998, p. 11). He suggests that development practitioners often fail to appreciate the detailed knowledge and complexity of livelihood strategies among rural communities.
Although the existence of a strong traditional culture in rural communities does not necessarily guarantee either sustainability or economic vibrancy, such a cultural base can play a vital role in sustaining livelihoods and promoting future development. Increasing globalization is unleashing a new interest in cultural distinctiveness and opening up new opportunities for traditional communities to strengthen their survival strategies. By moving beyond the ‘near’ outside world of the locally dominant and culturally prejudiced mainstream society, traditional communities are finding new sources of political, economic and cultural support (Groenfeldt, 2003; Radcliffe and Laurie, 2006). Research in the Kandyan villages suggests that rather than harnessing traditional knowledge to facilitate preconceived development models, the renaissance of traditional epistemologies, values and ethics has enormous potential for sustaining rural communities, their livelihoods system and hence their sustainable well-being.

Acknowledging the significance of culture in the context of community development, and incorporating cultural values into development policy and practice, requires a clear understanding of the concept of culture. Such an understanding must go beyond merely a ‘structural’ perspective (culture as patterns of regularities – thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, meanings, attitudes, preferences, values and standards), which often sees culture as a barrier (Carney, 2002) to appreciating broader functional and ideological aspects (Throsby, 1999; Klamer, 2004; Faulkner et al., 2006). The functional aspect helps to understand ‘what culture serves’ to the community – survival skills, adaptive strategies, identity making, and how culture generates and strengthens economic flows. In a functional sense, culture can be connected with economic aspects and, hence, it is readily available as a ‘capital’ or an ‘asset’.

Throsby (2001) sees culture as a capital in an economic sense, and argues that like money, cultural inheritance can be translated into social resources and the cultural capital we accumulate from birth can be ‘spent’ to achieve ‘things’ that are considered culturally important. Bourdieu’s (1986) perception of cultural capital, which is described in three forms – embodied (e.g. values, norms and attitudes, knowledge), objectified (cultural goods, e.g. crafts, architecture, instruments) and institutionalized (educational credentials) – provides a valuable justification for seeing the integral role of culture in community sustainability (see Throsby, 1999). Bourdieu challenges the fallacy of culture and the simplification of culture in the development process and suggests giving it more importance.

As shown in the perspectives of Kandyan villages, culture essentially includes both tangible and intangible aspects and it is the latter that are
often missing in development strategies (UNESCO, 1995; Appadurai, 2004; Sen, 2004) – the diversity of shared ideas, practices and art forms, such as music, dancing and literature. As UNESCO admirably suggests, not only knowledge and skills, but also the traditional masters (e.g. performers, artisans and healers), are crucial elements in understanding the concept of culture, which might be incorporated into community development strategies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). It is suggested that ‘cultural capital’ must be an important consideration in community development interventions (Groenfeldt, 2003). Culture should be seen as a flexible resource that can offer innovative solutions to development problems. There is a danger of being unaware of the richness of cultural factors, and too often rural communities are marginalized as being ‘illiterate’, ‘non-professional’ and ‘backward peasants’ (Chambers, 1998; Escobar, 2000; Harrison and Huntington, 2000; Loomis, 2000).

Conclusion

The acceptance of traditional culture as a vital part in community sustainability and overall development processes represents a shift from a preoccupation with centralized, technically oriented development solutions of the past that failed to improve livelihoods for many rural communities (Agrawal, 1995). This shift can only be achieved when the significance of traditional culture has been recognized and incorporated into development strategies. Rural livelihoods and communities are sustainable when they can show resilience during stressful conditions, and enhance capabilities and assets, while providing livelihood opportunities for successive generations. Culture and cultural capital are important, but considerably neglected, aspects in ensuring SLs. Through exploring traditional culture in relation to a specific rural-livelihood context, this paper has shown how traditional culture can be viewed as an important resource and should be incorporated into discussions of sustainable community development. However, as Agrawal (1995) and Briggs (2008) argue, traditional/indigenous knowledge is often place specific and is therefore not easily transferable over geographical space. It is also important to recognize that traditional culture can be a distinctive asset of perhaps one or more small communities and it could be both difficult and inappropriate to generalize across a range of rural settings.

This paper has sought to demonstrate how traditional culture can play an important role in achieving community sustainability. We do not advocate an over-dependence on the traditional context, but recognizes the value of incorporating cultural factors into SL development processes, so that they are more in harmony with traditional values and local aspirations, while
prioritizing local needs and resource capacities. The SL approach is a valuable tool for appreciating both tangible and intangible aspects of community livelihoods, but there is a need for greater understanding and more emphasis on cultural capital that conceptualizes culture as an asset which can significantly strengthen sustainability.

Funding

The authors would like to acknowledge the support for this research given by the Ron Lister Endowment and the Otago University Scholarship Committee. They would also like to thank the communities in Kiriwaula and Kalasirigama for their participation in the research and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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