Are Cultural Traditions Real “Assets” For Rural People? An Analysis from A Livelihood Perspective

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Abstract—It is argued that rural development planning best precede when there is an effective dialogue with local people about their values, traditions, identities and knowledge. Among the rural communities, cultural traditions that have been preserved for generations are important in attaining various aspects of their desirable objectives. This paper is an attempt to explore the potential wealth and capabilities of culture, and to examine the extent to which such cultural traditions can be regarded as an ‘asset’ in the context of achieving sustainability of rural livelihoods. The paper draws its evidences from few rural villages in central Sri Lanka, where culture and livelihoods are significantly interconnected. While admitting some weak and negative aspects of culture that actually impede human progress, the paper argues that cultural traditions carry enormous potentials for sustaining people’s lives. Grassroots cultural traditions should also be explored, respected, appreciated and integrated with the development planning.

Keywords—culture, tradition, cultural capital, livelihood, Kandy, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

People have impressive dignity and great respect towards their own cultural traditions and value systems. It is surprising to see the outstanding talent and dedications of these people to protect their traditions, in which they strongly believe. Sadly some of the precious traditions and their capabilities are unnoticed. Cultural traditions represent peoples’ ‘identity’ and show how they translate their long-standing customs and traditional knowledge into their surviving strategy (a village key informant). How people translate their cultural traditions into their hopes, self-esteem and simply into their ‘way of life’? Individuals and communities have their own values, meanings, customs and knowledge that affirm their identity and diversity and, play a significant role in their everyday lives. Considerable attention has been recently directed towards the cultural perspective and, a number of authors have suggested the significance of ‘prioritizing’ cultural values in development processes (e.g. Rao and Walton 2004; Harrison and Huntington 2000; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Schech and Haggis 2000). Radcliffe (2006) for example, examines how, why, where and when culture becomes relevant and effective in a development context.

Development ideologies are departing from quantitative to qualitative paradigms by acknowledging that development is a process that engages with local people and their knowledge and cultural values. Thus, despite the material growth, the satisfaction of people’s cultural aspirations while respecting their customs, knowledge, and cultural freedom is vital in fulfilling desirable progress in every society. Current development approaches, which are based on the ‘western models’ have difficulties in imagining ‘other’ cultures, ‘other’ ways of thinking, and forms of rationality and, ‘other’ ways of life (Tucker 1999). This paper argues that there is a need for an advanced understanding of the wealth of ‘other’ cultural values, which reinforce communities’ independence, sovereignty and identity. By adopting a livelihood aspect the paper demonstrates where and why cultural traditions are significant and how they are connected with people’s lives, and draws upon a field-based research in rural villages in the Kandyan region in Sri Lanka. This paper argues that there are greater potentials in considering cultural traditions as a ‘productive asset’ rather than a hindrance or an impediment for communities’ well-being. In line with these thoughts, the paper first provides an overview of culture, and how it has been discussed within development literature. Then, the paper explains the significance of culture in relation to rural livelihood context, following an introduction to Sri Lanka, the study villages, its communities, and their socio-cultural background. Villagers’ perceptions of cultural traditions and its significance in relating to everyday livelihoods will be analyzed next, in order to bring cultural traditions into an operational level. Then, the paper shows the essential of a cohesive and integrated concept of cultural capital, in order to accommodate cultural traditions as a valuable ‘asset’, by presenting a framework based on the fieldwork findings. Distinctiveness of cultural capital in the Kandyan context will be discussed next, followed by an assessment of the extent to which cultural traditions can be regarded as a ‘real’ asset in the context of rural livelihoods.

II. CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

First, it is worthy to examine how culture has been defined, and used within development and livelihood literature. Based on a comprehensive review on culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) defines that: “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; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action" (in Baldwin et al., 2006:8). Anthropology, defines culture as: “the complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society” (Nanda and Warms 2007:86). UNESCO, as the pioneering agency that works towards safeguarding cultural values and diversity, articulates culture in different perspectives. UNESCO (2003:2) for example, defines intangible culture as: “…practices, expressions, knowledge, skills, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events and traditional craftsmanship”. Tangible culture constitutes something which is perceptible by touching or ‘having a physical existence’ (Throsby 2001), and may be a monument, group of buildings, or a site with historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological values (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; UNESCO, 2003).

But, development has been regarded as a process which has no ‘cultural’ context, and can take place ‘anywhere’ irrespective of its relevancy, validity and effectiveness (e.g. Tucker 1999; Escobar 1995; Radcliffe 2006; Rao and Walton 2004; Harrison and Huntington 2001). Development process is often interpreted through a modernized perspective that implies copying ‘western’ experience and importing it through often inappropriate development interventions in poor countries. Explaining ‘what went wrong’ in the development approaches of post-1945, Hennayake (2006:37) clarifies that the problem is “not one of neglecting culture, but one of privileging a ‘particular’ culture”. According to Scheck and Haggis (2000:2) culture is “something development acts upon” and, Hennayake (2006:26) notices that modernization theories have constructed a necessary relationship between “traditions and underdevelopment” and “modern and development”. Specifically, traditional cultures, as Jenkins (2000:302) interprets are at best, “a way of preserving the past as a scarce and non-renewable resource and, at worst, as impediments to desirable progress”. Nevertheless, Wijesekera (1956:18) argues that every culture does possess in its own way, strengths and weaknesses; the manner andmethod of fusing the positive factor of one culture with the negative of another determines the result in articulation or rejection. Thus, as Ganguly (1977) explains every culture has preserved many noble elements to humanity. The old and new must both be attuned to the good of humanity. It would therefore be dangerous to allow the traditional cultures to die out since their inherent potentialities for the good of society cannot yet be evaluated. Therefore, Development processes should place a greater emphasis on the distinctiveness of local cultural traditions and, be sensitive to geographical and cultural specificity, which involves fullparticipation of local communities and prioritizes cultural values, traditions and identities.

III. Why Culture in Rural Livelihood Context?

Livelihoods to Chambers and Conway (1991:6), comprise the “capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living”, and for de Haan and Zoomers (2003:32) it “is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships and affirmation of personal significance… and group identity”. Rural communities establish livelihoods in a variety of ways with varying degrees of success, according to their levels of accessibility to diverse resources/assets, and how they deal with the pressures arising from external changes. They instinctively make the most of their beliefs, customs, traditional knowledge, religious and spiritual elements and other creative sources to meet build livelihood portfolios. As Chambers and Conway describe, “many livelihoods are less singular and largely predetermined by accident of birth and therefore livelihoods are ascriptive” (1991:6); and, ‘inherited livelihoods’ are fundamentally determined by the capabilities of people and existing resources - tangible and intangible – with the latter essentially representing the values and customs that are traditionally embodied in their societies. The image of rural farming communities, for example, represents the stability of a rural society and the immobility of its inhabitants, with their inherent values, whilst conveying a notion of rural people being ‘tied to the land’ (Bernstein et al., 1992). In Sri Lanka, paddy farming is considered as a ‘cultural practice’ (Tennakoon 1988), that portrays the prosperity and sustainability of traditional village communities. Pastoral societies in many African countries (e.g. Patterson 2000; Njoh 2006), and Andean communities in Latin American context (Stephen 1991; Radcliffe 2006; Radcliffe and Laurie 2006), portray their livelihood systems as ‘cultural artifacts’. Writing about the Fulani people of Senegal, Adriansen and Nielsen (2002) and Adriansen (2006), for example, describe their ‘cattle culture’ by defining cattle as ‘cultural capital’ of the Senegalese, and cattle are treated as a wealth object, and a source of prestige and cultural identity. Artisans’ livelihoods which reflect self-expression and inner desires through various crafts, are one of the dominant economic activities among many rural communities in South Asian countries (Pye 1988) .Thus there are tangible reasons to argue that rural economies can derive significant benefits if cultural traditions are adequately supported, and traditional knowledge, social capital, historical relations and customs are incorporated in to livelihoods initiatives. Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) is an influential framework in centralizing people, their capabilities and values in development. It emerged as a branch of alternative paradigm (Ellis and Biggs 2001), and established through several major international forums and extensive works by, DFID, IDS and ODI (Carney 1998) (Figure 1).
One of the criticisms of the existing SL approach is that, its simplistic representation of the reality and complexity of livelihood systems has ignored the relative importance of a crucial aspect like, culture and, its relationship with other sectors like vulnerability context, assets and livelihood outcomes etc.,(Figure 1), (Bebbington 1999; Cahn 2002; Glavovic et al., 2002; Toner 2003). The livelihood approach focuses mainly on tangible resources (livelihood assets) and barely discusses culture, referring to various institutions and structures that shape and govern communities’ accessibility to available assets and livelihood choices. In this sense, culture is considered a ‘humanly devised constraint’ or the ‘rules of game’ (North 1990) that controls human interactions and resource entitlement. Culture is only a topic related to social capital. This inadequate consideration of the cultural aspect over-simplifies not only people, but also their genuine capacities, and thus, the complexity and diversity of resource entitlement and livelihood opportunities. In fact, according to Pinder (2009), the absence of culture in livelihood analysis is serious if the SLA approach is to be considered holistic and, if it is to continue to be valid for sound development.

Considering the above issues, this paper argues that the livelihood perspective is a pragmatic and effective approach under which cultural traditions can be explicitly treated as a ‘resource’ – cultural capital. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that this paper does not attempt to proclaim the ‘supremacy’ of cultural traditions, but more to make a convincing case for their richness and what response we might make to incorporate them effectively with rural livelihood interventions. The paper situates its whole understanding of cultural traditions under the concept of cultural capital, and stresses the significance of such a new concept to embrace all productive roles that culture plays in any grassroots community. The paper suggests sensible ways to incorporate cultural capital with other livelihood assets such as; social, human, physical, natural and financial capital (see DFID 1999; Carney1998), and provides a useful framework for rural development analysis and livelihood intervention.

IV. INTRODUCTION TO SRILANKA, RURAL KANDYAN VILLAGES, ITS CULTURE, SOCIETY AND PEOPLE

Sri Lanka is an island of 65,610 sq km, located in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka has a rich historical and cultural heritage covering more than 2,500 years, which is recorded in ancient legends and chronicles. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in 307BC from India, and evolved with royal patronage. The Buddhist-Sinhalese civilization came under attack during 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 (DCS 2001). 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 in the country, 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.

The study villages are located in Kandy, which is an important administrative, commercial, cultural and historical centre located in the central region some 116 km from the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. The total district population is 1,279,028 and 80 percent of the population is rural. Kandy city was formerly the capital of the last Sinhalese kingdom, known as Senkadagalapura and, has had an illustrious history with an impressively rich cultural heritage. According to Dewaraja (1988), by the end of the 8th century, Kandy had become an influential cultural centre with its distinctive arts, architecture, crafts, dancing and music. Due to its considerable cultural and historical significance, the city was declared a world cultural heritage site by UNESCO in 1988.

Field research was undertaken in three villages, namely Kiriwaula, Talagune and Kalasirigama located respectively in Udunuwara, Uda-Dumbar, and Kundasala District Secretariats (Figure 2). These villages are typical of communities, in terms of the inextricable links between livelihoods systems and the cultural traditions that have been followed by many generations. The villages are Sinhalese-speaking, Buddhist and mainly composed on Govigama and Navadanno groups. Their livelihoods are primarily based on traditional craft industries and paddy...
cultivation. Village people are described as conservative with regard to these practices and traditions, and can often trace their ancestry back to their ancestors who served the Kandyan royalty (Brow 1999; Thilakasiri 1994; Coomaraswamy 1956).

Figure 2: Locations of the study villages

The majority of the research participants had maintained a strong connection with the ancient royal families and the legendary ancestors who were rewarded for the master in traditional craftsmanship. Many respondents were commissioned to undertake different tasks, specifically for Dalanda Máligawa and other sacred temples around Kandy (see Seneviratne 1978). Within these villages, a wide range of different crafts are practiced as silversmiths, brass-workers, wood-turners, jewellers, painters, weavers, tom-tom beaters and dancers. These craft works are aligned with the ancient rajakariya’ system (Coomaraswamy 1956), and there is a strong relationship between caste and profession (Seneviratne 1978; Gunasekera 1994). Many of the craft families in these villages can trace their ancestry from the early artisans, worked under the rajakariya system. Some families engage in performing arts such as Kandyan dancing, drumming and ritual performances at temples, while some are engaged with traditional Dumbera weaving in Talagune. Villagers in Kalasirigama engage in household level manufacture of drums such as raban, geta-bera, dik-bera, davula and udakki. Kirivuula has acquired renown as an area specialising in the manufacture of traditional brassware and silver and gold jewellery. Their craft skills and traditional knowledge have been transferred from generation to generation and they have established a monopoly which has been unchallenged for many years.

V. OPERATIONALISING CULTURAL TRADITIONS THROUGH RURAL LIVELIHOODS

In order to bring cultural traditions into an operational level, recognition and understanding of culture in different aspects is important. In this regard the respondents’ perspectives on ‘what they mean by culture’, and, uses of cultural traditions in relation to their everyday livelihood activities will be analyzed. As explained the majority of villagers are descendants of reputable and prestigious craft families and the majority belong to navandanno caste group, and involve with family industries for generations. One older informant explained the origin of his family industry, by asserting that; “We belong to navandanno kulaya (caste), and are descendants of the well-known Devendra Mulachari family. Our ancestry tells us ‘who we are’, ‘where we are from’ and ‘what our values, customs and knowledge are’. We are proud of ‘what we have’”. According to a drum-maker, nowadays, people think that berakarayo (drummers) are adu-kula minissu (low-caste people); kulaya (caste) is not a matter to me, because we keep our precious traditions alive. This industry represents all our traditional values, customs, beliefs and knowledge and – ‘everything’ in our lives’. Kulaya (caste) is one of the underlying factors in villagers’ interpretations, and believe that they are entitled to ‘protect’ what they regard as valuable traditions for the future. Even though caste and class are regarded as unimportant in present day Kandyan society, many respondents explained their livelihoods by referring to ancient caste system. In these village context, caste is referred to as an ideology – identity - and also as a system of social stratification, to

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5There are strong links between ethnicity and religion, with the Sinhalese being predominantly Buddhist, the Tamils predominantly Hindu, and the Moors Muslim.

6In historical Sri Lankan society, caste was an important factor. But Sri Lankan caste system differs significantly from the Indian caste system (see Coomaraswamy 1956) Govigama and Navadannon are two prominent caste groups, and Govigama, represents the ‘farmer aristocracy’, which is the highest rank of Sri Lanka’s caste system. Navadannon represents the ‘artists’ caste that includes various groups of artists representing traditional craft guilds. (For a detail description of Sri Lankan caste system see – Ryan, B. (1953) Caste in modern Ceylon, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press).

7Dalanda Máligawa, the Temple of Tooth in Kandy, where the most sacred Tooth Relic of Buddha is housed

8The system of rajakariya or ‘royal-duties’ existed during 15th – 17th centuries and it was based on the caste system, with each caste being obliged to perform a specific service as a condition of tenure.

9In the context of present day Kandyan communities, caste and class are not regarded as important issues. In this study, therefore, these issues are not given the prominence that might be afforded to

Source: Author
describe a person’s status, power and economic position ‘positively’, or simply as a group possessing differential caste and class in other situations. In this livelihood context the idea of caste/class is regarded positively as a ‘social honour and prestige’ of these communities, rather than as an ideology that stratifies the society based on the notions of purity – impurity. There is no such notion of purity in the Sinhalese caste system. (Silva et al, 2009:35).

degrees of ‘social honour’ and ‘prestige’ (see Brow 1999). A skillful traditional jewellery maker understands his livelihood as a ‘source of learning and teaching of traditional knowledge and customs, by declaring: “I found this industry to be a good source of ‘learning’ about pāramperika damuna (traditional knowledge). It ‘guides’ our lives and helps transmit our precious sixth-virith (customs) to future generations”. In this context, his livelihood choice was not merely because it was a family tradition, or its money making capacity, but also because of his respect for traditional resources. He also believes that traditions maintained from the past are vital in guiding their lives and providing them with the skills and strategies to adjust their lives in present day society. Thus, there is a consensus among respondents that their present livelihoods help them to experience the wealth of cultural traditions. These villagers often referred to traditional industries to represent their social status and cultural ‘heritage’, which has been received from the ‘past’. They interpret culture by referring to ‘what they see and experience’ in their lives and, Kroober and Kluckhohn (1952 in Faulkner et. al, 2006:30) summarize this as a ‘structure’, which encapsulates all “socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns” or the “way of life” (2006:35) people. It is evident that culture is not merely a structure or a ‘set’ of values and norms, but is rather a ‘source’ that meets some purpose or end. The respondents’ views reveal ‘what cultural traditions do, or accomplish ’, or as Baldwin, et. al., (2006) claim, ‘how culture helps people to solve their problems’. Villagers located their interpretations of culture in the services and needs- the ‘functions’- provided by their traditional knowledge and customs. They identified cultural traditions as a great source that reinforces secure asset entitlement and accessibility to physical, social, human and financial capital. Social capital, which consists of “rules, norms, obligations, mutual reciprocity and trust” (Narayan and Pritchett, 1997:50) for example, considerably determines by the ‘inherent values and family customs’ of these communities. As declared by one female respondent: “our néadayo (relatives) and ahala-pahala aya (neighbours) are a great spirit for me. We all are helping each other during difficult times. We have practised that quality for a long time”. As a long-established custom, the village people and family members extend their wholehearted co-operation in the performance of various tasks. This occurs simply because the values, norms, customs and attitudes attach to their society. This co-operative spirit is an exemplary feature that cements not only family ties, but also village solidarity (see Jeannotte 2003). When considered as a whole, in every village context there is a consensus among respondents that most of their knowledge and skills originated from their ancestors. In terms of quality and quantity, traditional knowledge is more effective and useful, particularly with their current livelihood activities. For example, as clarified by a respondent: “our damama (knowledge) is práyogikai (practical), and not recorded anywhere. We have been practising these skills from the beginning”. They believe that the knowledge they use today are not that different from those used by their predecessors, and neither formal education nor training is required in maintaining their current livelihoods. In contrary, as clarified by a young village respondent: “...no doubt that traditional knowledge is a great asset. But we can’t rely on this alone. We should also have extra knowledge to adjust our lives”. Briggs (2008:109) for example, reminds that (indigenous) traditional knowledge is differentiated within communities and place-specific and it can become productive for only a small group of powerful individuals. In this particular context, traditional knowledge is capable of giving ‘meaning’ to what people do, power to act and govern peoples’ own needs and aspirations as well. Village respondents were also convinced that their traditional knowledge, family customs and long-standing experiences are vital in adopting different livelihood strategies during vulnerable situations. Their views showed the ability of translating ‘cultural diversity’ into ‘livelihood opportunities’. As explained by a village key informant: “unlike others, these people can survive with their ‘inborn’ talents. They have proven that their knowledge and skills are practical and appropriate for anytime. Whatever happens, their inherited skills are not affected”. Thus, their livelihoods are ‘culturally resilience’ that demonstrates an “active resistance to external changes through the protection of traditional practices” (Fortier 2009:163). These adaptations are distinctive as they have not changed the ‘traditional ways of life’ of these communities. This is in line with the argument that cultural significance in livelihood resilience means moving beyond a ‘negative’ mentality of culture to embrace the values cultural traditions. The existence of culture-based adaptive strategies is a strong indication of how local people are connected with their embedded values and traditions. Thus cultural traditions are vibrant resources which enable the community to pursue robust livelihood strategies which are characterized as Glavovic et. al., (2002) assert, by ‘different layers of resilience’

Thus, in a livelihood context, analysis of culture must go further in enquiring how cultural traditions influence people’s livelihood choices, decision-making over resource ownership and accessibility, representation, identity making, social relations, and overall livelihood sustainability; how culture ‘facilitates’ resource accessibility rather than ‘controls’ resource ownership. According to the Kandyan examples, cultural traditions guarantee a secure framework for social trust, moral economies and sense of place, reciprocity and co-operation in exchange works and a complementary relation between the individual and the group. Local people are aware of their ‘own’ values and, as clarified by one villager; “our culture and traditional values are ‘living’ and vital for the continuation of our society”.
Hence, the reasons for claiming culture in a capital sense are not hard to justify through the Kandyan communities, and as further suggested by one villager, “we must understand our culture and traditions as a vatinā sampathak (precious resource) that supplies the nerve and the urge for our survival”. Kandyan communities have retained management of local traditions and value systems, and they have been able to make social and economic gains considerably, while maintaining dynamics and resilient cultural identities. However, analyzing cultural traditions as ‘capital’ – in the sense of a general purpose resource, is rather challenging. As revealed from the examples, every element of culture may not always be effective and positive in a livelihood context, and thus an attempt to integrate them all would be senseless and indeed difficult. It should also be emphasized that cultural values are relative to the individuals within their own socio-cultural context and (UNFPA 2008) and, whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depends on the utility of culture. As identified by some authors (Eames 2006; Ellis 2001) the weak version of culture (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, and class) could be counted as an obstruction in advancing people’s livelihood choices (also see Sen and Grown 1987; Momsen 2004). Culture, in such a weak and rigid sense, represents communities that are highly “hierarchical and intolerant of external threat and internal diversity” (Eames 2006:19). However, it is certainly possible to pay adequate attention to particular cultural attributes that are ‘stronger’ and positive, along with taking into account all the characteristics and qualifications revealed from the village examples. If cultural traditions and value systems are recognized to be diverse, varied and interactive, and “if the importance of culture is integrated with rival sources of influence, then culture can be positive and constructive” (Sen 2004:44) both, in the context of livelihood sustainability and social and economic development processes.

VI. WHAT IS CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE LIVELIHOOD CONTEXT?

The term ‘capital’ refers to accumulated wealth that may be used to produce more wealth or better outcomes (Narayan and Pritchett 1997). By adopting the concept of cultural capital, the study asserts that culture is an asset that helps in gaining better outcomes and sustaining livelihoods of any community through its accumulated cultural wealth and capacities; it is also necessary to include the ideas of creativity, innovation, ideologies, history, traditions, values and rituals. There are some important approaches towards cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1986; Throsby 2001; 2003); but they are lacking in grassroots focus and are weakly linked to livelihoods analyses.

In this paper cultural capital means the ‘wealth created through celebrating and investing in cultural histories, heritage, values, knowledge, traditions, rituals and ideologies’ of communities. In order to define culture as a livelihood asset, the study enquires into the fundamental elements/attributes that are core to cultural capital, based on the field research findings. These criteria may vary according to their significance in different societies, in terms of people’s engagement with cultural activities and benefits received from their cultural values. However, at issue is whether the criteria are relevant to the purported aims of a particular community or society – in this case, in achieving ‘livelihood sustainability’.

It was clear from the Kandyan examples that people have different perceptions about cultural traditions and value systems accordingly, the way they ‘engage’ and ‘benefit’ from culture. For example, as clarified by a skillful silversmith: “people call me the son of Rajaguru Muhandiram, which makes me proud. I continue this páramparika karmānthe (traditional industry) to keep my identity and to show my decendancy”. On contrary to that according to one traditional drum-maker: “modern society undervalues our páramparika rakiyā (traditional livelihoods). People think that money gives everything, and have nothing to do with your sampradāyan (traditions)”. Therefore, it is meaningful to consider the ‘relative’ usefulness of particular cultural entities in different societies/communities that are ‘genuinely’ useful in the context of achieving livelihood sustainability. As we have seen through the examples, cultural capital can be established in the Kandyan context by considering the roles of cultural traditions in relation to people’s livelihood choices/determinants, asset entitlement and accessibility and livelihood resilience and livelihood sustainability (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Roles of cultural traditions in the Kandyan livelihood context

According to figure 3, the outer rectangle (A) represents the rural livelihood system in the villages being studied. Circles B, C and D represent the three main aspects of rural
livelihoods. The space occupied by the three circles at the centre and falls within circle E, represents cultural capital, which includes all inherited values, knowledge, traditions and ingenuities that have been maintained and transmitted across generations in the village communities. Circles B, C and D occupy ‘most’, but not all of circle E, meaning village livelihoods are significantly influenced by cultural traditions and value system, particularly in determining livelihood opportunities, asset accessibility, ownership and livelihood resilience. There are some spaces closer to circle E [a, b, c], which do not fall within circles B, C and B. This means that livelihoods may not ‘always’ be facilitated or influenced by cultural traditions, or perhaps there may be some ‘negative’ influences of culture on livelihood sustainability. As revealed from some examples, some elements of cultural traditions such as, caste and rigid family customs are not always supportive and reinforcing for livelihood security. In some instances there is no significant encouragement from family traditions and traditional knowledge for creative endeavour or experimentation and, thus livelihood security. As one respondent asserted: “We thought that this páramparika karmánte (traditional industry) will be secure forever. But, it isn’t, today we can’t rely on this industry alone. We would be happy to find another way, which is really hard”.

However, according to the majority of village respondents, the cultural capital stock (circle E), is fundamental for determining their livelihood opportunities. Both tangible and intangible cultures are vital for fulfilling both material and non-material objectives in their lives. Thus, the fundamental elements of cultural capital in the livelihood context should include inherited ingenuities, customs, values, ideologies, rituals and knowledge systems. In this sense, cultural traditions are distinctive, as an asset mostly associated with ‘traditional values’, which clearly represents both tangible and intangible aspects of culture. It includes ‘cultural heritage’ that represents aesthetic, spiritual, historical, symbolic and authentic expressions of people (see Throsby 2001); ‘cultural identities’, which are a ‘treasure of self-fulfilment’ (UNESCO 1982); and more importantly the ‘living practices’, traditions and knowledge, which are vigilant preserved and transmitted across generations. Thus, the findings in the Kandyan villages confirm that culture and traditions are ‘living assets’, which are “necessary to maintain essential life-support systems” of communities (see Chieiesura and de Groot 2003:222).

VII. DISTINCTIVENESS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE LIVELIHOOD CONTEXT

The research in the Kandyan villages demonstrates that cultural capital is distinctive in many aspects. Cultural capital influences other livelihood assets such as, physical, human, social and monetary assets, which enables the inclusion of all dimensions in the capital asset base of a community. This is further clarified through a statement given by a village key informant: “These people have special obligations to their traditions. Social relationships, mutual support and uses of resources are mostly conditioned by their family customs”.

This notion of cultural capital expands beyond Bourdieu’s (1986) suggestions. As Kingston (2001:89) denotes, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is not a “general resource available and valuable to ‘everyone’ in a society, and it largely represents only the property of the ‘elite’ groups”. As further describes, “Bourdieuian argument insists that the evaluative criteria are socially biased, despite their ‘natural’, taken-for-granted status” (2001:89). The concept has been used to emphasize the importance of distinctive aesthetic taste and knowledge in reinforcing social ‘boundaries’ (Ostrower 1998), and social ‘exclusion’ (Kingston 2001). In contrast, as evident from the Kandyan examples, cultural capital is a valuable asset that gives them relative autonomy by generating greater productive stock and flows for sustaining village livelihoods. It provides a cohesive framework for elevating grassroots communities through social inclusion, equality and social security. It enables different forms of action and resistance, which are empowering and, as explained by one respondent: “We can take all the decisions we want; because we are the ‘masters’ of our industry. We all have competitive strengths and knowledge”. The cultural capital that is identified within Kandyan villages can be used as a ‘representative’ asset of everyone in these communities. As was revealed through respondents’ views, such as, “we are born to work for the Temple”; “these skills are in ‘our blood’”; “We are not apprentices”, cultural traditions and craftsmanship are ‘natural’ phenomena inherited from their forebears. Thus, cultural capital as seen in the rural livelihood context can be clearly distinguished from Bourdieu’s reference to ‘high culture’ [culture of an ‘elite’, such as aristocracy or intelligentsia – ‘dominant class’] . As revealed from the field-based research in the Kandyan villages, every member in the communities has specific connections and obligations to their cultural traditions which have been transmitted through generations. In this sense, cultural capital also responds to Sen (1985) , by prioritizing the ‘genuine capabilities’ of people, and to Chambers (1998) , by putting the ‘last first’, instead, of the ‘first last’. In the Kandyan context, cultural capital takes significant consideration of traditional values, dignity and moral well-being of all, not just ‘elites’, and thus is a “strategic site for the production of consensus”, which is critical in empowering rural people (Appadurai 2004:65).

Cultural capital in livelihood analysis, and the concept defined by Throsby (1999, 2001), may have some things in common. Throsby (2001) gives some initial thoughts to capitalizing culture within livelihood context. Yet, there are some difficulties in bringing his suggestions directly into livelihood analyses as its general applicability is problematic and uncertain particularly in the livelihood context. Throsby’s concept of cultural capital is purely an economic interpretation, which is based on the economic valuation of ‘cultural industries’, or the ‘cultural sector’ of the economy (see Throsby 2006, for example). His idea is limited to the observations of material culture - the goods and services produced by the ‘cultural sector’ or the ‘cultural industries’ in an economy, in the belief that they have all the characteristics of capital assets (Throsby 1999:3 and see
Hutter and Throsby 2009). Although Throsby (2001) argues for the significance of intangible values that are exclusive to the embedded values of the ‘material culture’, (e.g. cultural heritage). His interpretation does not recognize opportunities, diversity, adaptive capacities, traditional knowledge and enduring customs of ‘grassroots communities’, and how such values ‘shape’ their way of life. The proposed cultural capital is more centralized on ‘people’ and their ‘genuine’ capacities, values, traditions and knowledge systems; it focuses more on the grassroots, rather than the macro level, and is more ‘developmentally’ oriented than ‘growth’ oriented. Clarifying a misunderstanding of culture that often occurs during development planning, one key informant asserted that: “These people do not demand lokû déval (things that are difficult to supply). They only expect a little caring and respect to their traditions and values preserved for generations, because they depend on them for their survival”.

Thus, in a livelihood aspect, cultural capital is more flexible and understandable and, enhances the effective freedom of the people involved to pursue whatever they have reason to value and alternative ways of living, in contrast to narrowly focused economic development (UNESCO1995). As we saw, cultural capital encompasses ‘intangible values’, more than what we can see and touch materially in museums and galleries, and also makes people ‘who’ and ‘what they are today’. The examples discussed in here affirmed that cultural capital undeniably creates and protects alternative ways of living and encourages creativity, experimentation and diversity, the very essentials of human development. Since cultural traditions are a ‘naturally’ given asset, and it is more concerned about intangible aspects of culture, which are less directly ascribable, but are critical for the well-being and sustainability of livelihoods (UNESCO 2003). Due to this character, cultural capital is distinct in its diversity and ability to increase the production and efficiency of other livelihood assets as well. And also, unique in averting risk and increasing livelihood security and self-reliance, which

11 Ostrower (1998) argues that in Bourdieu’s theory, the ‘dominant class’ as a whole is richer in economic and cultural capital than are members of other classes. The dominant class itself, however, is divided into two segments relating to economic capital (e.g. business managers) and cultural capital (e.g. intellectuals).


14 See for example, Shockley (2004), Rana (2000) and Strange (1999) in Throsby (2006). They have used the concept of cultural capital within economic analysis of developed economies, are unattainable directly from other livelihood assets. Thus, as Jenkins (2000:306) asserts, the diversity of cultural traditions increases the “probability that human societies develop without undermining their economic, social or environmental capital bases”. According to villagers’ experiences, there is no natural decline of the values of cultural traditions, as with some other assets like natural and physical assets (see Robison et. al., 2002), which makes cultural capital unique. Most of the physical assets (e.g. fossil fuel, minerals) are declining though some are renewable through natural process (e.g. forests, fresh water) (Throsby 2001). On the contrary, cultural capital that refers to a particular community is ‘place-based’, non-replaceable, and there is ‘no’ natural decline. Culture is alive and abundant, and its productivity can be augmented ‘only’ through regular consumption (or use) of and engagement with culture. This was clearly articulated by one elderly villager in Kirivaula: “…if we really want to preserve our precious culture we have to use and engage with our traditions; we should experience and live with them”.

Unlike many other forms of capital, cultural assets can be maintained efficiently through ‘intra-generational transformation’. Throsby (2001:56) describes this as “the right of the present generation to fairness in access to cultural resources”. This was clarified by a respondent in Embekke by saying: “We take these knowledge and skills from generation to generation, because that is the ‘only’ way we know to preserve them”. Cultural capital can be regenerated and preserved ‘only’ by maintaining its ‘original’ characteristics - the ‘uniqueness’ - and by passing these on to future generations (UNESCO 2003). In the Kandyen villages, cultural values are eternal and their consumptions as a ‘capital asset’ depends on the support and the conditions of these societies and their willingness to accept.

VIII. ARE CULTURAL TRADITIONS REAL ‘ASSETS’?

Cultural capital should be used with “some degree of precision and in a comparable manner to other capital assets; if not, it will have little value, when applied as an analytical construct” (Castle 1998:623) in other livelihood contexts. To assess the validity of cultural traditions as a form of capital, and to give wider applicability, this section discusses some of the widely shared ‘capital-like properties’ (Robison et al., 2002) of cultural traditions, together with some examples from the villages.

As articulated through the previous examples, both tangible and intangible culture generate different flows of services and products for final consumption, by combining with other inputs, which is similar in character to other capital assets (see Robison et al., 2002). Traditional craft products (e.g. brassware, silverware, drums and Kandyan jewellery) for example are ‘cultural products’ generate through intangible cultural values. Cultural values allow the taking of different resources and showing how they can be combined with other resources to produce different outcomes. Thus, like physical capital formation for example, investment in ‘intangible’ culture may augment the existing cultural capital stock in a particular society (Throsby 2001). Examples also showed how cultural capital is created through various ‘functions’ or the services provided by enduring traditions of village communities and, as further clarified by a key informant: “Cultural spirit of these societies reinforces through the various processes that
these communities maintain for generations. Their craft works are one such activity that forms a strong cultural identity among them”. Therefore, as “physical capital is created by changes in different materials to form tools that facilitate production” (Coleman 1988:100), cultural capital is also created mainly by changes in ‘intangible’ resources enabling people to respond in new ways. Like many other forms of asset, cultural capital is both convertible (Bourdieu 1986; Robison et al., 2002) and can be used for ‘other purposes’ (Coleman 1988). Traditional norms, customs and kinship patterns of these communities are used for ‘other purposes’ such as collective movements/achievements, i.e. attam (labour networks), and shramadāna (village development campaigns), which are effective in securing asset accessibility and ownership during difficult situations. In addition to that, and according to another village key informant: “These people are highly regarded and honoured due to their high standard of workmanship. It is a privilege they deserve, due to their talent and reputation”. As was seen in the examples, informal social capital, which is based on traditional obligations and family customs, are useful in sustaining local markets, raw-material supply - physical capital, and regulating household income sources. Hence, like money, cultural inheritance can be converted into social resources and, the cultural values these people accumulated from their birth, are ‘spent’ to meet different needs at different time. Therefore in a livelihood context, cultural assets are complementary to other forms of capital and enhance productivity and efficiency by reducing transaction costs. Cultural traditions as an asset has some properties identical to ‘common property resources’ (CPR), which are mostly associated with natural capital, i.e. forests, irrigation, pastures and physical capitals, i.e. community buildings (Throsby 2001). Some aspects of cultural capital represent ‘collective goods’, in the sense that they are not the ‘private property’ of those who benefit from them (see Coleman 1988). When they are owned by no one, and are used as open access resources. This is more obvious with tangible cultural assets, the Temple of the Tooth for example, which is a ‘cultural heritage’ site and a public religious place available for ‘open access’. As revealed during an informal conversation; “a huge crowd gathers here to participate and celebrate the Esala festival. People attend with great honour and believing the ‘spiritual power’ of Dālanda hāmudurawó. Kandy is a heritage city; people visit from all societies, depending on the degree of dependability and engagement of people with cultural traditions. Thus in a livelihood perspective, cultural capital is useful in providing useful information about the ‘cultural resources’ that available for particular communities; cultural values that underpin a community’s ways of life.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that cultural traditions are a dynamic phenomenon that encompasses peoples’ lifestyles and ways of living. Villagers perceptions indicate the way that cultural values influence them to choose their livelihood options similarly, and more positively, in ways which help them to understand and respect each other. In this particular setting cultural traditions are distinctive and unique, and provide infinite possibilities and choices for local communities. The paper convinces that a livelihood perspective is a pragmatic and effective approach under which cultural traditions can be recognized and treated as an ‘asset’. However, there may be some significant challenges when bringing cultural traditions into livelihood planning and the development process, since culture is a contested and diverse phenomenon that varies considerably both within and between places and societies. The significance of culture as a fundamental resource, or as this study proposes ‘culture as a type of capital’, may not be equally evident and valid for every community. A comprehensive understanding of the relationships between cultural traditions and livelihood systems both in and beyond Sri Lanka is vital for both successful and sustainable livelihoods and for future rural development planning. The challenge of this task is that culture, development, and indeed livelihoods, are highly value-laden concepts and pose great difficulties for policy makers and development planners in bringing them together. Thus, a closer assessment of the dynamic nature of cultural traditions, through community involvement and effective grassroots movements, which celebrate and engage with local cultural practices and well-represented cultural policies, is vital for future implementation.

X. NOTES


2 Department for International Development (DFID); Institute of Development Studies (IDS); Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in UK

3 For example, as the Mahavamsa (The great chronicle 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 (Coomaraswamy 1956).

4 In historical Sri Lankan society, caste was an important factor. But Sri Lankan caste system differs significantly from the Indian caste system (see Coomaraswamy 1956) Govigama and Navadannon are two prominent caste groups, and Govigama, represents the ‘farmer aristocracy’, which is the highest rank of Sri Lanka’s caste system. Navadanno represents the

15 See for example, De Graaf, Nan Dirk and Hendrik Derk Flap (1988), With a little help from my friends: Social resources as an explanation of occupational status and income in West Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, Social forces, 67: 452-472 over the place and enjoy its culture and beauty”. One person’s use of these artefacts may not diminish their availability for others and thus, in some aspects, cultural capital is non-rivalrous (see Throsby 2001) - for example, the use of heritage sites by one tour guide does not diminish opportunities for others. However the idea of cultural capital may vary in its strengths and significance in different
XI. Reference


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