

Publication

Merging capabilities and livelihoods: analyzing the use of biological resources to improve well-being

JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

ID 3180463

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Year 2015

Title Merging capabilities and livelihoods: analyzing the use of biological resources to improve well-being

Journal Ecology and Society

Volume 20

Number 2

Pages / Article-Number 20

Especially poor people in developing countries depend on biological resources to manage their livelihoods and to generate income. Because these resources are usually public goods, their use is often subjected to what is known as the tragedy of the commons, potentially leading to resource depletion, environmental degradation, and loss of biodiversity, which consequently undermines the availability and capacity of resources to contribute to residents' well-being in the long run. We suggest addressing this typical sustainability issue from a new angle. Against the backdrop of identifiable shortcomings within two popular analytic approaches, the capability approach (CA) and the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA), we argue for an improved sustainability framework for analyzing the issue in question. Although we view the CA as encompassing our core ideas regarding human well-being, we propose to enrich it by merging it with the SLA to more adequately include social and environmental capital. To test the framework's usefulness, we apply it to a case study on the use of medicinal and aromatic plants in the rural livelihood context of Nepal. Thereby, we reveal not only that the creation of capabilities is strongly dependent on the set of capital assets available, particularly in the form of natural capital, but also that the framework provides new perspectives: What matters is developing livelihood strategies that increase people's opportunity spaces rather than focusing only on those that compensate for missing capabilities or enable people to cope with shocks and vulnerability.

Publisher Resilience Alliance

ISSN/ISBN 1708-3087 ; 1195-5449

URL <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol20/iss2/art20/>

edoc-URL <http://edoc.unibas.ch/55459/>

Full Text on edoc Available;

Digital Object Identifier DOI 10.5751/ES-07405-200220

ISI-Number WOS:000357622800014

Document type (ISI) Article