

Concept Paper

Disabilities and Livelihoods: Rethinking a Conceptual Framework

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Abstract: Livelihoods, or the means to secure the necessities of life, shape how we live as individuals, families and communities, and our sense of well-being. While discussions of livelihoods have influenced academic discussions and government actions in international development over the past 25 years, few have discussed the implications of a livelihoods approach for people with disabilities in the context of global Northern societies. This paper argues that by using a livelihoods approach, we can recognize the multiple and, at times, conflicting ways that people with disabilities sustain themselves and secure the necessities of life. A livelihoods approach recognizes the agency of individuals, including those with disabilities, in the context of their relationships in households, families and communities, while also identifying the systemic barriers, inequalities and opportunities that shape livelihood choices. Using this approach, we argue, will enable a better understanding of how people with disabilities both survive and thrive, the diverse livelihood choices they make and the implications these choices have for policy decisions.

Keywords: livelihoods; disabilities; work; labour; right to work; right to not work; global Northern societies

1. Introduction

[W]e define livelihoods as the ability to support oneself now and in the future. People's livelihoods are founded on the underlying condition that their basic needs are met. . . . Income, work and basic needs together form the core elements of livelihoods. Jobs are central as they are the main source of income for most people. [1] (p. 32)

Livelihood, however, goes beyond these basic necessities to encompass the dignity of people's lives The livelihood approach recognizes that persons with disabilities have capabilities, including for reducing risk and vulnerability, and exercising their voice. Furthermore, within the context of their lives and communities, there are resources and opportunities. It is this lived experience within a community context that plays an important role in determining the quality of life of persons with disabilities. [2] (p. 9)

A livelihoods approach has at its core a preoccupation with wanting to understand 'how different people in different places live' [3], and how and why people make the choices that they do. [4] (p. 1)

Livelihoods, or the means to secure the necessities of life, shape how we live as individuals, families and communities, and our sense of well-being. While discussions of livelihoods have influenced academic discussions and government actions in international development over the past 25 years [5–7],

few, if any, have discussed the implications of a livelihoods approach for people with disabilities [8,9] in the context of global Northern societies.

This paper argues that by using a livelihoods approach, we can recognize the multiple and, at times, conflicting ways that people with disabilities sustain themselves and secure the necessities of life. As the quotes above illustrate, a livelihoods approach recognizes the agency of individuals, including those with disabilities, in the context of their relationships in households, families and communities, while also identifying the systemic barriers, inequalities and opportunities that shape livelihood choices. Using this approach, we argue, will enable a better understanding of how people with disabilities both survive and thrive, the diverse livelihood choices they make and the implications these choices have for policy decisions. Even though this discussion will be founded primarily upon framing discourses on livelihoods in the global North, where need arises, we will make reference to literature from context of the global South for illustrative purposes.

2. Background

Around the world, and when using every measure of poverty, people with disabilities are more likely to live with poverty [10]. While traditional indicators suggest income is the most significant for understanding poverty, more recent multi-dimensional poverty indicators, including education, employment, food security, health among others, recognize greater complexity of poverty and that different aspects of poverty may be different in varying countries [11,12].

For decades the global community has known that poverty and disability are integrally related and mutually constituting with poverty causing disability and disability causing poverty. Yeo and Moore [13] argue this comes about because of the systemic institutional, environmental and attitudinal barriers people with disabilities face in their daily lives, which in turn results in social exclusion and lack of participation in their communities and society. In every region of the world, people with disabilities have significantly lower rates of employment (on average 36%) than people without disabilities (on average 60%) [10]. Women with disabilities are even less likely to be employed than both men with disabilities and people without disabilities. Many people with disabilities work in the informal sector, in micro-finance or are self-employed [14]. People with disabilities are more likely to be in food-insecure households, with more women with disabilities than men with disabilities experiencing food insecurity [10]. In addition, we know that for people with disabilities and their households, poverty is exacerbated by the costs associated with disabilities. Two households with the same level of income may not have the same standard of living as a result of the costs of disabilities including transportation, personal assistance, assistive devices etc. [10].

Despite the high correlation between poverty and disability, social protection programs around the world, which have been developed to address poverty, do not address the needs of people with disabilities [15,16]. Even in programs targeted to people with disabilities in both the global South and global North, barriers, such as a lack of information or support and inaccessibility, limit access to these programs [10].

We know much less about disabled peoples' participation in other forms of livelihood and how these affect their experiences with poverty. Several authors address disabled people's involvement in begging in the global South [17–20], and at least one study addresses panhandling and people with mental health disabilities in Canada [21]. Some authors have begun to explore health inequities among informal recyclers [22], although they do not make the link to the disabilities literature. Some attention has been given to the challenges of arts and artistry as a form of livelihood for people with disabilities [23–25]. We know very little about people with disabilities' experiences with caregiving, bartering, hunting, trapping or berry-picking as forms of livelihood.

Despite these significant gaps in our knowledge, most governmental, transnational and corporate attention has been focused on addressing employment or work among people with disabilities. For example, the International Labour Organization's Global Business and Disability Network (<http://www.businessanddisability.org/>), with transnational corporations such as IBM and L'Oreal,

works for disability inclusion in business activities. This is an important initiative for addressing the employment gap between people with and without disabilities. Yet there is often a slippage in public and policy discourses in which supporting employment initiatives is portrayed as the only way to ensure sustainable livelihoods for people with disabilities. The OECD quote at the beginning of this paper, drawn from their 2015 State of the World's Livelihoods report, reinforces this portrayal of employment as the primary vehicle for secure livelihoods.

There has been long-standing recognition of the right to work in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the particular rights of people with disabilities through the International Labour Organization's 1955 Recommendation no. 99 on Vocational Rehabilitation (Disabled) [26]. Yet it is with the 2006 adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), that the rights of people with disabilities to work are most clearly articulated. "States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities" [27]. The CRPD asserts not only the equal right to work, but the understanding of work as freely chosen, and introduces the idea of inclusive labour markets and work places. This shifts the focus from the individual's ability to obtain work to the societal responsibility for inclusive labour markets and work environments. These policy frameworks do not, however, recognize or address the backdrop of a global neoliberal capitalist economy and its implications for the work and livelihoods of people with disabilities.

In the following sections, we discuss the conceptual underpinnings of the notion of work that are shaped by ableist assumptions. We also discuss the particular ways that the neoliberal global economy shapes, creates and supports ableism in work experiences of workers and disabled people. We explore the development of a livelihoods approach and ask how it can be used to address the plight of people with disabilities in the context of neoliberal capitalism.

3. Labour, Work and Beyond Work

This section invites readers to step back from the contemporary analytical framework of both development and disability studies and look at the origin of the concept of labour through the lens of political thought. The study shows that work as employment operationalized by the cash nexus is an embedded concept that emerged with the momentous transformation of the Western world from an agrarian-based to an industrial-based economy that started in the late 17th century. Labour as such is coeval with human existence; whereas work as employment is not. The point of departure is the modern period in the history of Western political thought.

Although humans as living creatures whose need is first and foremost survival was not a new idea when the English thinker John Locke published the *Two Treatises of Government* in 1690, he was arguably the first to make labour the focal point of human activity as dictated by the need for survival. Perhaps even more importantly, in chapter five of the *Second Treatise*, "On Property," Locke argued that labour validates the individual claim to ownership of property, which in turns lays the foundation of a secure life. As Locke famously said,

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every *man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature [that is, a state of human existence without any political authority] hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. [28] (sec. 27, emphases added)*

Locke was also credited for making acquisition through labour a rational act by noting that no one should acquire more than what one needs to survive by stipulating that every acquired object should be consumed before it becomes spoiled. Accordingly, there is sufficient provision in nature for all to survive. At this stage of human development, sustenance is not a zero-sum game whereby

some are left with nothing. Yet as the origin of property develops in this well-studied chapter, Locke added to the picture a critical turning point, which was the “invention of money” [28] (sec. 48). Money takes the act of acquisition for the sole purpose of sustenance into a totally different level of activity—accumulation—since money does not spoil.

As astutely observed by the Canadian political theorist, C. B. Macpherson, Locke’s theory of property consolidated the very idea of possessive individualism, which set the stage for the 18th century to follow—the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism [29]. By the time Karl Marx came along to write his critique of capitalism in the nineteenth century, being human remains fundamentally the same—the need to stay alive with labour as the activity that sustains the need. Yet Marx goes further by claiming that labour is at the very core of being. In Marx’s words,

For labor, *life activity, productive life* itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need—The need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character. [30] (p. 31, emphases in original)

With the development of capitalism, however, labour became for first time in human history a commodity, which Marx called “labour power” that the worker sells to the capitalist for money [31] (p. 8). Accordingly, “wages are the amount of money which the capitalist pays for a certain period of work or for a certain amount of work” [31] (p. 8). Marx’s critique of labour as “labour power” is relentless: “... this life activity [the worker] sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. ... He works so that he may keep alive. He does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another” [31] (p. 9).

Such then is what contemporary society refers to as “work.” It is a paid activity that is vital to one’s survival—not just basic necessities but much more; without which one cannot realistically claim a place in today’s globalized world where the market reigns. Indeed, to become a worker, one starts by placing oneself on the job market. The value of oneself is measured by the amount of money one makes, which is in turn determined by the basic exchange principles of supply and demand. Marx’s analysis of labour as a commodity is important not only because it is central to his critique of capitalism as dehumanizing by transforming what should have been a life enhancing activity into a life degrading one. It also points to a specific understanding of productivity, namely, labour that can generate profit for those who own the labour but not for those who sell theirs. Labour as commodity, that is work, leaves no space for labour as a quintessentially interactive process that generates connectivity between humans and the space around them, including the natural, the material and of course the social.

Moreover, labour as commodity, as with all other commodities, is regulated by the principle of fair exchange. If you are well paid, you deserve it. Likewise, if you do not get paid, you deserve it. There is no room for distributive justice such that those who are not able to sell their labour are simply left behind with limited recourse to secure subsistence or none at all. It is in this context that the early twentieth century economist, Karl Polanyi, set out to reclaim the economy as the realm of activities that are undertaken by humans to ensure that the basic needs of life are met in society and the individuals within it [32]. Leo J. De Haan credited Polanyi as the historical source of the contemporary livelihood approach in development studies [7] (p. 348). This attribution is with good reason as Polanyi astutely maintained that the starting point for rethinking the modern economy is the recognition that the market economy is only one way of organizing the human economy [32] (pp. xiv-xvii). As such, its viability should not be determined by market values but rather by human values that enable humans to thrive, not to wither. Stated differently, the origin of economy is about facilitating livelihood for all without the precondition of productivity defined by exchange values in the market that transforms labour into a commodity to be bought and sold. As noted by Polanyi in his posthumously published monograph, “man’s material livelihood should be subjected to total reconsideration” [32] (p. xliii).

This survey of the intellectual lineage of the concept of labour facilitates a critical perspective on work as a distinct form of human activity invented by capitalism for the purpose of accumulation

rather than sustenance. For the first time in human history, the world is divided between those who are able to sell their labour to the capitalists and those who are not. The human toll that this division levied on society was obvious to Marx even during the early years of capitalism as a transnational phenomenon and reiterated by Polanyi only half a century later with a renewed call to reorganize the economy away from the market. Instead, the twentieth century delivered neoliberalism.

4. Neoliberalism, Work and Ableism

Neoliberalism as an ideology [33], and a neoliberal capitalist global political economy, have emerged since the end of the Second World War. As early as the 1970s neoliberal principles and practices were widely used by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the global South, although in the global North, it was not until the fall of the communist bloc in the 1990s that consolidated the triumph of capitalism. With their conviction that the economy is most productive with minimalist state intervention, neoliberals began the political agenda of trimming down the state in aspects of governance. Neoliberalism is especially significant for people with disabilities for several reasons—the embedded presumption of individual capability that structures out people with disabilities, the resulting ruptures of caring relationships and commodification of disability and disability-related services, and the presence of neo-liberal ableism.

Stienstra [34] argues that the dynamics of neo-liberal globalization are premised on a hyper-liberalism that distinguishes those who are ‘capable’ and independent from those who are ‘not-capable’ or who relies on others for the attainment of their capabilities. Clearly people with disabilities fall in the latter category. This hyper-liberalism reflects Macpherson’s possessive individualism discussed earlier. Some have called this compulsory able-bodiedness [35]. Stienstra goes further to suggest that

only those who are ‘able’ or who can function independently [can] be part of the public sphere. Those who are ‘not-able’ or dependent are kept in the private sphere, notably with family and in the household. With the restructuring in the process of neo-liberal economics and globalization, we see that those who are valorized as ‘able’ or independent are increasingly found in the private/corporate sector. We see a decrease in the responsibility of the public to facilitate ‘ability’ and a rejection by the corporate/private of the need to take responsibility to address differences in ability. What globalization continues to do is to reduce the collective capacity to redefine ‘ability’ and to leave that in the hands of families and charities, and both of these are gendered feminine. [34] (p. 117)

As we discuss in the previous section, this ableist link between capability and production is a key part of capitalism and does much to frame how we understand disability and work. Puar [36,37] argues further that neoliberal capitalism disrupts disability and instead introduces debility. The pursuit of profit that is particular to neoliberal capitalism creates debility, or the impairment or loss or lack of certain bodily abilities [38], through the slow depletion of particular groups of people.

The focus on individual abilities in neoliberalism, however, goes beyond individual productivity and ruptures and commodifies relationships of support that experiences with disability often require. Using stories of women with disabilities in India, Chaudry [35] illustrates that disabled women were excluded from the microfinance approach because they did not necessarily fit within the structures and functions of the traditional household in India, and may not have or be perceived as having the assets necessary for microfinance. As disabled women they were circumscribed to the family/private sphere, but they were not able to receive the value from participation in that sphere because they were not able to contribute to marriage, caregiving or other productive work. This tension disrupted their contributions to households as well as the perceptions of their value.

Neo-liberalism has also disrupted models of care and support. Models of care, such as Independent Living, community care, home care, and self-care, have been “reformulated to suit neoliberal goals for labour flexibilization, funding cuts, and individual responsibility over collective interests and actions” [39] (p. 971). A similar disruption takes place among some Indigenous family caregivers in

Canada, when the government offered to pay for institutionalization of a disabled child rather than support care by his family member. “In the case of Jeremy Meawasige of Pictou Landing First Nations, his mother provided his care. When she was unable to provide it, the community provided care, but their care used up 80% of the total budget for the community. The federal government refused to cover these costs and offered to cover the costs of institutionalization” [40] (p. 642). This illustrates both the rejection of family care as well as a reliance on so-called ‘expert’ treatment for disabilities, where expertise is defined and linked to education as well as a monetary exchange for service.

This compulsory able-bodiedness in neo-liberalism, also described as neo-liberal ableism [41], suggests that in order for disabled people to survive, let alone thrive, in neo-liberal circumstances they need to embrace ableism. Thus:

- (1) if you are prepared to work hard then you are in;
- (2) don’t forget now: we are all in this together as workers and consumers; and
- (3) in these austere times we will get ourselves ‘back on our feet’—Work will set us free [41] (p. 982).

How neo-liberalism addresses disability has significance for a discussion of work and the role of both the state and corporations in addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment. It suggests that societies need to rely on employers to make changes for inclusive workplaces and on governments to incentivize employers in the global North [42] or support self-employment through microfinance and other initiatives in the global South [35]. Both create tensions given that limiting state involvement is a key component of neoliberalism. In the global North, we can see some push-back on what is portrayed as increasing demands for disability benefits in the workplace: “The fast increase in G20 advanced countries in the number of disability benefit claims because of mental health problems, often at a relatively young age, is the added challenge that makes disability policies a moving target for policy makers” [43] (p. 5).

As governments seek to limit their involvement in the economy, they frequently implement austerity policies, with significant impacts on disabled people. There is a remarkable similarity in the experiences of disabled people under austerity policies in the global North [44]. In these countries the employment rate of people with disabilities is low, as it is across the world [10], although in most global Northern countries there is a government system of income support or social protection that ensures some income for people with disabilities. When governments implement austerity measures, these support programs are often reduced and the definitions of who is disabled and eligible may be further limited to reduce the government’s role. For many, this comes by shifting income assistance programs to a work-related benefit system, thus requiring recipients to illustrate their inability to work in order to receive benefits. Chris Grover and Karen Soldatic [45] (p. 2) suggest that in the UK and Australia, “while the ‘disabled body’ has changed little, the systems and processes that classify them as being capable/incapable of working has undergone a radical shift to limit the number of people categorized as disabled”.

Tightening of eligibility for support programs can mean that disabled people are more likely to move into precarious jobs. “The restricting of disability benefits through tightening eligibility access is to move disabled people into part-time work, and place downward pressure on wage rates with the neoliberal labour market restructuring where low-wage part-time work has dominated” [45] (p. 13). Across the world, disabled people are more likely to be in the informal sector, and in precarious and part-time work [10].

Given the ableist foundations of neoliberalism, it is not surprising that people with disabilities experience disproportionately negative impacts from neoliberal structures and policies. Researchers have identified these impacts and can explain what happens to people with disabilities under neoliberalism. Yet using the lens of neoliberal capitalism explains only part of the story of what happens to women and men with disabilities—those parts caught within the frame of the values of neoliberalism including employment, individuals and independent capacity. Many women and men with disabilities survive and thrive outside and in spite of these values and structures. With its

foundations in households and communities, its assertion of the agency of people living in poverty, and its recognition of the power relations at the heart of choices people make, the livelihoods approach offers an alternative way to understand experiences of people with disabilities.

5. Historical Development of a Livelihoods Approach

Over the past three decades, livelihoods research has grown and developed, initially in rural development studies and widening to international development studies. Many authors credit the early thinking on a livelihoods approach to the environmental and sustainable development movements of the 1980s and 1990s as well as to the particular approach by Robert Chambers [3,7,46]. The Institute of Development Studies discussion paper by Chambers and Conway [5] offers the primary usage of the term sustainable livelihoods as:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base. [3,6]

This definition is widely recognized for its pivotal role in shaping what we understand as a livelihoods approach.

This approach became important in large part because policy makers in Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) adopted and promoted this approach [6,7,46]. In the 1997 White Paper on International Development committed to policies and actions to promote sustainable livelihoods and in 1999 the UK government released a series of guidance sheets which identified core concepts such as people-centered and holistic as well as component parts of the framework including the vulnerability context, livelihood assets, forms of capital, structures and livelihood strategies and outcomes. These are often presented in diagrammatic form as a systems diagram (see Figure 1). Over the years, most discussions of sustainable livelihoods include this description with little modification.

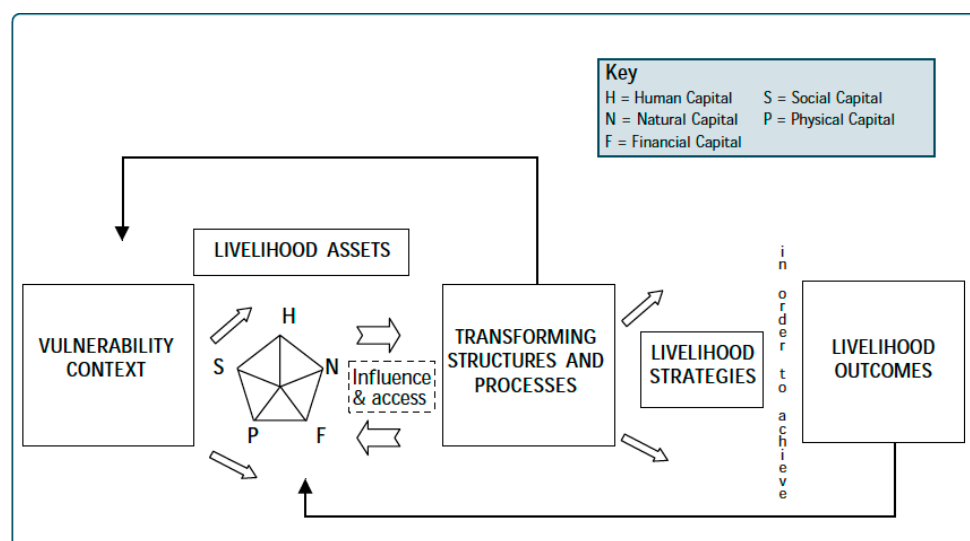


Figure 1. Sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF). Source: [6].

Some researchers argue that this approach is overly programmatic, ignores power relations and is too complicated to be useful [3,7]. Some critics suggest that its narrow focus on material assets and economics limits its applicability, while proponents counter that the narrow framework came as a result of who used it and how [4]. Despite its wide use as a policy approach in the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and multiple government development agencies, the sustainable livelihoods approach has lost some of its policy prominence. Interestingly in Canada, the approach

is gaining momentum among not-for-profit organizations as a way to use their programs to support participants' capacity to participate and engage in society [47,48].

6. Revitalizing a Livelihoods Approach in Research

While the livelihood approach as originally developed for both research and policymaking may no longer be as prominent as before, the approach continues to be widely used by researchers and organizations around the world [49]. Levine [4] offers one particularly insightful way of adopting a livelihoods approach in research, while addressing some of the critical gaps, including addressing power relations and identities. He begins by suggesting the most important thing to study are the experiences of people themselves, recognizing that they make choices, in particular contexts and constraints, and with livelihood outcomes. These individual choices also take place within the context of their households.

Levine [4] identifies three steps of gathering and analyzing data to recognize peoples' livelihoods: 1. Understanding what people are doing (or their livelihood strategies); 2. Asking what shapes livelihoods and 3. Understanding livelihood outcomes. He begins by noting there are two critical questions to answer in order to understand people's livelihood strategies: "what are (different) people doing to make a living? And *why* are they doing what they are doing?" [4] (p. 4). The 'why' question is especially important as asking it recognizes that people may have goals or objectives that enable particular strategies which, in turn, may be different from what they actually did. Understanding people's goals and strategies for their livelihoods helps researchers to identify and understand the choices or trade-offs that people make because of their circumstances, constraints or other factors. Levine suggests that while it is difficult for a researcher to get to the heart of reasons why participants may make certain choices, one way to do this is "by contrasting what people do with what they don't do—what could be described as looking for contrasts 'at the edges'" [4] (p. 6).

In terms of identifying what shapes livelihoods, Levine argues that the long-standing approach to explaining the context for livelihoods as evident in Figure 1 separates out three sets of explanations—the vulnerability context, assets, and policies, institutions and processes. These, he argues, "are artificial constructs, bringing together quite different kinds of forces" [4] (p. 8). As an alternative, and in line with the focus on people's experiences, Levine [4] argues that livelihoods research should "use people's decisions as reference points from which to understand the kinds of forces which shape them" [4] (p. 8). He offers some modifications to the traditional livelihoods map to reflect this approach as well as two additional factors that shape livelihood strategies and outcomes—perception and identities (see Figure 2). On the right side of the figure is the livelihood chain—from goals to outcomes. On the left side are the various influences that shape the livelihood choices people make—their identities, contexts, the policies and institutions, and their own assets and vulnerabilities. These reflect diverse power relationships. But livelihood choices are also made through the lens of perceptions—what people perceive are their contexts and risks as well as what their livelihood possibilities are. Levine has included each of these in Figure 2. This framework brings to life the livelihoods approach for use in research. With its attention to different people's experiences and choices in livelihoods as well as its recognition of the diverse power relations at play in shaping these choices, this approach offers a significant way forward for understanding and using a livelihoods approach in research by giving the experience of those under study their rightful place before any preconceived analytical framework is applied.

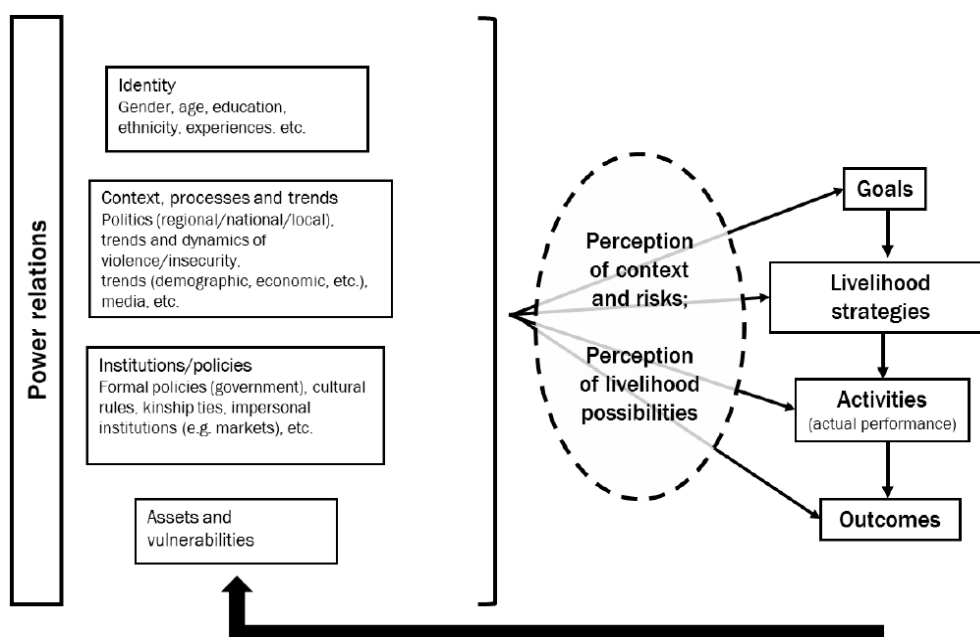


Figure 2. An operational map for research using a SLF. Source: [4].

7. Implications of a Livelihoods Approach for People with Disabilities

As mentioned earlier, little research has been done using a livelihoods approach to illustrate experiences and choices of people with disabilities. Most of the limited literature addresses the employment and income contexts of people with disabilities, although several studies discuss the usefulness of the sustainable livelihoods approach in the context of people with disabilities in the global South.

Among these studies is the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [2], which examines the livelihood experiences of people with disabilities in that region, recognizing that adequate livelihoods mean more than income and food and encompass the dignity of peoples' lives.

Livelihood promotion is not only to be based on the material needs of people, but also on factors such as equity and rights. The livelihoods approach recognizes that people with disabilities have capabilities, including for reducing risk and vulnerability, and exercising their voice. Furthermore, within the context of their lives and communities, there are resources and opportunities. It is this lived experience within a community that plays an important role in determining the quality of life of persons with disabilities. [2] (p. 9)

A similar report in India [50] drew on the traditional or sustainable livelihoods approach in general, but the study's focus was primarily on economic livelihood models that might be related to the Indian context including microfinance, vocational rehabilitation, skills training and entrepreneurship and self-employment.

In their overview of the literature on livelihoods and disabilities, Hanass-Hancock and Mitra [9] identify how the five areas of capital in the traditional or sustainable livelihoods framework: financial (economic), human (including health, education, work experience), social (friends, family, support systems), physical (infrastructure and services), and natural (clean water, population) shape the livelihood choices of people with disabilities. Much of the research (and policy) have focused on the first two areas—financial and human capital—recognizing that access to employment, income, education and health are significant barriers to sustainable livelihoods for people with disabilities, especially women with disabilities. Yet also critical to achieving sustainable livelihoods is recognizing the importance of social, physical and natural capital. When available, each of these areas can act as a

positive support; but they also hold particular barriers for people with disabilities. For example, access to social capital can mean being part of a community, with networks and relationships that lead to support and opportunities. But stigma and social exclusion can limit access to those relational supports. Access to physical capital, such as transportation or accessible buildings or information technology, are essential to social and economic inclusion. Without them, few disabled people can participate in sustainable livelihoods. Access to natural capital such as clean water or land is often a precursor to being able to access other supports and prevent or escape harmful situations. Hanass-Hancock and Mitra [9] (p. 141) suggest that “people with disabilities tend to be more often deprived in terms of livelihoods capitals, and thus tend to be more likely to face multiple livelihoods challenges”.

Adams et al. [51] offer a more complicated explanation of the livelihood challenges among people with disabilities. They compared the experiences of 189 youth with and without disabilities in South Africa, primarily in terms of their human and financial capital. They found that youth with disabilities were financially more stable than their non-disabled counterparts because they could access disability grants provided by the South African government, even though the unemployment rates were much higher for youth with disabilities. The youth with disabilities had fewer educational assets than their non-disabled counterparts primarily because of family attitudes and school buildings had not been made accessible. Even though the authors suggest they are only considering human and financial capital, their results illustrate the importance of the broader environment—both infrastructure such as schools as well as the identities and perceptions—that have a disabling impact on peoples’ abilities to contribute to and participate in their communities.

Srijuntrapun [52] uses the livelihoods approach to understand the experiences of people with visual impairments in Thailand. Drawing from their qualitative research, they argue that the traditional or sustainable livelihoods framework needs to include a sixth type of capital—attitude capital. This is similar to Levine’s argument [4] that a livelihood approach needs to address identities and perceptions—both how the person sees themselves and their context and how others perceive them. Levine [4] suggests these have been a neglected but important part of a livelihoods approach. Srijuntrapun [52] also suggests, from the experiences of people with visual impairments, that any discussion of livelihood outcomes should include social acceptance or inclusion.

These examples, though limited to countries in the global South, show that a livelihoods approach can enhance our understanding of how people with disabilities live by widening our gaze in concrete terms. By considering the choices that people with disabilities make, the strategies they employ to survive and thrive, and the barriers they meet that force them to adapt, we gain valuable insights. These bring into focus the experiences of people with disabilities in cultural and artistic contributions, caregiving, agriculture, barter, informal recycling and other strategies used to survive and thrive.

8. Conclusions

In this concluding section, we look at how a focus on livelihoods as an approach in research can enhance livelihoods as a normative concept. As such, livelihoods can serve as an alternative way to understand living in a world in which work as a positive value for all appears to be ubiquitous.

Despite years of rights-based activism, including around the right to work and inclusive workplaces, a significant employment gap remains between people with and without disabilities. As we note, under neoliberalism, the right to work has become a tool to justify less government support for those who are in fact not readily employable according to the market standard of productivity, with the result of making them take up precarious and informal employment, often the lowest paid and with the fewest protections. Grover and Piggott call this twist the imposition of “the obligation to work” [53] (p. 249). Under this obligation to work, it becomes impossible for the disabled people to not work. This precarious work may worsen their sense of agency and dignity, which is the exact opposite of what work is supposed to enhance while providing a stable income for the working person to live on.

Accordingly, there is an emerging position that argues for the right not to work. In contrast to Taylor [54], who first to put forth such a “right” on Marxist ground, Grover and Piggott [53] endorse a liberal conception of the good, which is used to support the position that everyone, disabled and non-disabled, should have the right to choose not to work when such choice is deemed to be desirable by the individual, not the state [53] (p. 250). It is, in short, the quintessential liberal value of individual freedom to choose.

There are a number of issues raised by postulating the right to not work to achieve equality for disabled people. In addition to the predictable neoliberal critique of such right as providing the breeding ground for parasitism, this position is highly problematic even within a liberal framework of social justice. What is being contested here is that the ubiquity of work as a norm cannot be effectively countered by arguing its reverse. Such a strategy had already been used by feminists to advance the place of women since the women’s movement of the 1960s in the Western world. As is well known, one concrete goal of the second wave of the women’s movement was the empowerment of women by affirming their right to work. This was considered ground-breaking because up until that point, the majority of middle- and upper-class women, once married, stayed home as wives and mothers on the assumption that these roles suit women better than a career in the working world. As more and more women joined the workforce, the affirmation of women’s rights turned its focus on what is essentially the right to not work by fighting for the supports needed to reflect women’s reproductive roles – from entitlement to maternity leave (paid or unpaid) and subsidized (direct and indirect) childcare for those who work, to access to certain benefits, such as tax credits for parents who choose to remain home with their children. Indeed, to the extent that the so-called working mothers are considered a norm today rather than an aberration, the affirmation of women’s right to work and not work represents a remarkable step toward achieving gender equality in less than half a century. Yet the income or pay gap between men and women all across the world is a reminder that gender equality remains an ongoing struggle.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of the income or pay gap, it is worth noting that the debate among researchers is not whether such a gap exists, but the extent of the gap and factors other than gender that can account for the gap [55–60]. Moreover, the gap appears to persist when intersectionality is considered. In Canada, for example, working age women with mild disabilities were reported in 2015 to have “a median income that was about three-quarters that of their male counterparts,” which was consistent with the gap between women and men without disabilities, while the gap was smaller among women and men with severe disabilities at about 90% [61] (pp. 17–18). As a group, however, women and men with more severe disabilities had income levels that “were roughly half that of women and men without disabilities” [61] (p. 17).

This example of a gendered income gap suggests that using specific rights to claim equality is problematic in situations where persistent systematic inequalities are unrecognized or unrecognizable without an alternative conceptual and/or normative framework. In this case, the right to (not) work is very much rooted in the liberal right-based discourse, and assumes the sanctity of the market economy. The analysis put forth in this paper suggests that by advocating the right to work, we are in effect perversely supporting an economic system in which productivity defined as profitability for some trumps livelihoods for all. In other words, to embrace the right to work as a positive and forward-looking cause for disabled people may ignore the structural barriers inherent in a global neoliberal capitalist economy. Likewise, to claim that one has the right to not work is to pitch the freedom to choose against a reality in which this freedom cannot be meaningfully exercised.

A livelihoods approach generates an alternative way of approaching the question of what people do in order to both sustain themselves and in ways that are sustainable by them. Underlying such an approach is a commitment to explore non-market oriented approaches to living one’s life. In the context of today’s globalization, this way of life is unlikely going to be affluent by the standards of market economy. But a livelihood approach allows for the possibility of recognizing those who live with what may be considered “the minimum” not as deprivation but as life-enhancing. To live a life of

mixed activities to ensure livelihood is not necessarily superior or inferior than those that are regulated by the market economy. Rather a livelihoods approach is to enable a way of life that is beyond the market, in which livelihoods for all is valued.

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