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Stabilizing and Improving Livelihoods in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FCAS) – the Search for Frameworks and Evidence

J. Farrington *

ABSTRACT

Interventions to support livelihoods in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FCAS) are seen by many as subsidiary to the primary (relief-based) imperative to save lives. For others, FCAS interventions remain “stuck” for too long in relief mode, and the potential to get back into support for livelihoods is lost. This paper examines how livelihoods models, initially used in development, not relief, contexts, have been adapted to suit FCAS, and asks what evidence we have on how livelihoods have changed under FCAS and why. It also asks how far efforts to support livelihoods in FCAS have been effective. To provide effective livelihoods support is complex, requiring understanding of how people link into distant opportunities outside the FCAS, how they perceive and respond to risk, and how their livelihoods are affected by power relations, by restrictions on the movement of people and goods, and by reduced capacity to enforce the rule of law in relation to e.g. contracts and the ownership of and access to resources.

Introduction

In its broadest sense, a livelihood ‘comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims, and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

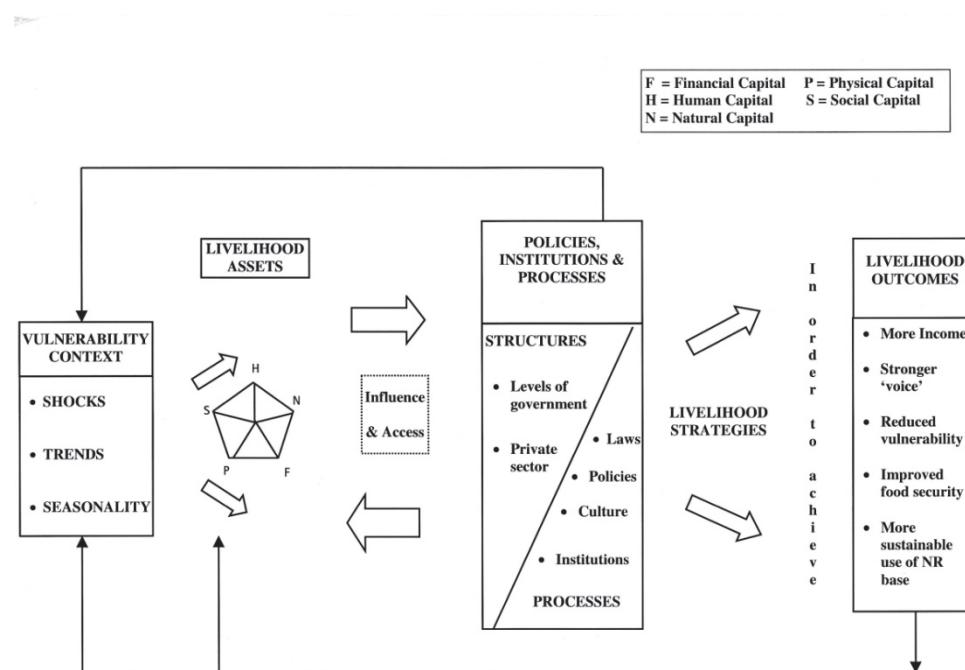
One of the more widely-used livelihoods frameworks is that promoted by DFID (Carney, 1998) (see Figure 1) which embodies the following principles:

- people’s livelihoods are not static but dynamic, and are made up by drawing on the assets which they either own or can access, including natural, physical, financial, social and human

* Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute, London.

- how and how far households can achieve desired livelihood outcomes depends on the mediating influence of the politics, institutions and processes
- it also depends on the risks and vulnerabilities they face
- part of the outcome achieved goes to meet household consumption needs, and other parts may be (re-)invested to strengthen assets

Figure 1: Sustainable livelihoods framework



Longley and Maxwell (2003) argue that household-level livelihoods are context- and time-specific, so that the question is not one of whether agencies can design interventions to suit all combinations of livelihood within a give area (which in any case are likely to become rapidly outdated), but whether they are able to apply appropriate livelihood approaches.

These assess the principal opportunities and constraints to improved livelihoods at different levels (household, neighbourhood/village; district/municipality or national) and can be used in designing interventions accordingly. They can thus incorporate a number of different activities, from the provision of inputs at grassroots level to advocacy work at national or even international level.

A Livelihoods Approach

- aims to be participatory, as context, objectives, and staff capacity allow
- will incorporate monitoring, impact assessment and course-corrections
- will have the capacity to incorporate both 'relief' and 'developmental' modes of operation, saving lives in the short term and building resilience and permitting improved livelihood outcomes in the longer term.

In the FCAS context, Longley and Maxwell (2003) have argued that "development context" livelihood frameworks are inadequate: first, their vulnerability context relates more to climatic, economic or political shocks and stresses rather than to the structures and impacts of power relations; second, temporal dimensions, whilst recognized, are not sufficiently incorporated into the analysis. For instance, how far are livelihood strategies responsive to changing context? Do people periodically re-assess the risks and vulnerabilities they face, and modify strategies accordingly?

In addition, interventions in an FCAS context are expected not only to contribute to livelihoods, but also to a wider agenda of consolidating peace and stability.

The discussion of how far livelihoods approaches are relevant to FCAS contexts has stimulated a number of observations, among them:

- that livelihoods must be informed not only by conditions at household level, but also by broader understanding of the potential impact on livelihoods of changing conflict and political dynamics and agency interventions;
- that strategies are crucial for dealing with threats and vulnerability contexts if desired livelihood outcomes are to be achieved, and these can include avoidance (escaping the threat, e.g. by travelling at night) containment (living with the threat, e.g. paying militia for protection; travelling to the markets in groups) and confrontation (fighting back, e.g. through self-defence groups) Jaspars and O'Callaghan (2010);
- that desired livelihood outcomes are geared not only to accumulating assets but also to adaptation (e.g. to spread risks); to coping (*i.e.* to reduce the impacts of shocks e.g. by changing in the relative balance of assets); and to survival (to prevent destitution and death even if this requires the sale of some assets) (Devereux, 1999). Concepts of risk minimization, avoidance and spreading are important here;

- that social networks are crucial where formalized provisions (e.g. rule of law; property rights; contract enforcement) are absent (Pain, 2002), though Longley and Maxwell (2003), citing Richards (1996) argue that in Sierra Leone rebels deliberately damaged social networks through creating fear;
- that people have had livelihoods before, during and after the conflict, and that a prolonged emphasis on emergency relief (“saving lives”) may divert attention from decreasing vulnerabilities in order to establish a platform from which livelihoods can be improved. With this in mind, CARE (2003) has moved away from conventional “relief-development continuum” thinking, and towards a risk-management model which acknowledges the danger of “getting stuck” in long-term safety nets, but also the fact that many activities may be going on simultaneously, and possibly unrelatedly.

These observations have prompted a number of revisions to the original DFID framework: CARE, for instance, has promoted a risk-management framework. This acknowledges the shortcomings of “relief-development continuum” thinking, the need to reduce vulnerability and manage risk, the danger for agencies of getting stuck in long-term safety nets, and the fact that there may be many activities going on simultaneously without any overriding normative directionality.

However, the most detailed adaptation of the DFID framework for FCAS contexts is proposed by Collinson *et al.* (2002; 26 – see Figure 2 below) who give pre-eminence to the factors underlying the vulnerability context, and to the need for a fuller identification of different groups of social actors – not just low-income households, but also the better off, and the more powerful (including the military and paramilitaries, bandits, warlords etc.), and of the power relations among them.

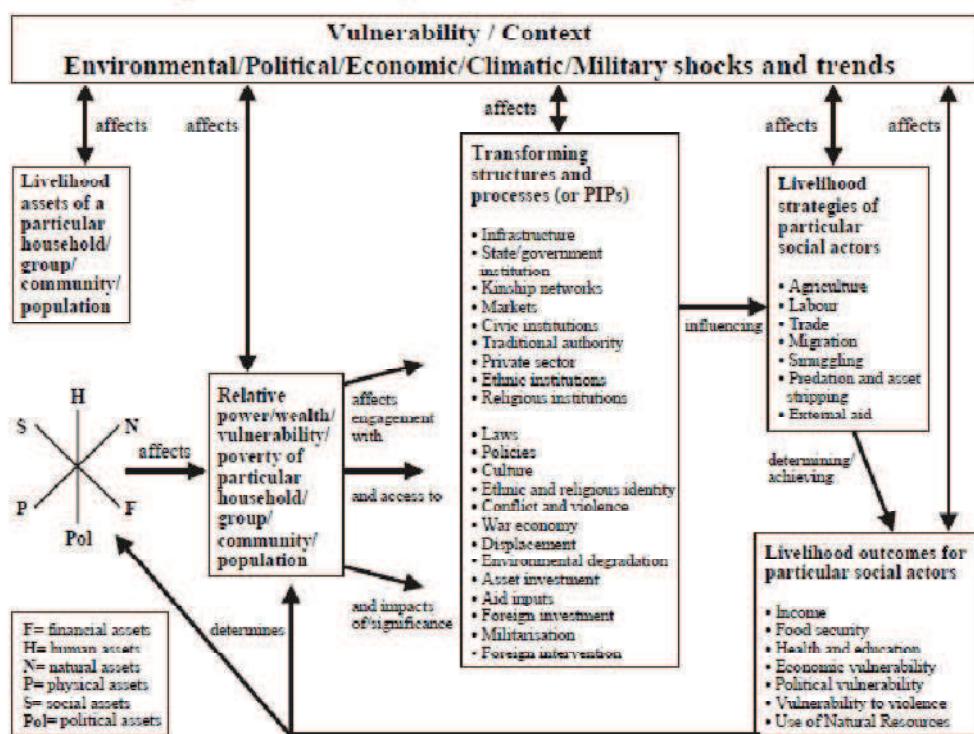
What is Known about the State of Livelihoods in FCAS?

From the revisions to “development context” livelihoods frameworks set out in section 1, it becomes clear that a livelihoods approach in FCAS contexts will have to ask a number of questions in addition to those normally asked in relation to livelihoods. These include:

- What do we know about pre-FCAS livelihoods? What are the prospects of (partial) return to these livelihoods for different socio-economic groups?
- What vulnerabilities do different types of households face, and in what kinds of ways? What do we know already about the ways in which they avoid, contain or confront different types of threat?

- How and how far are livelihood strategies geared towards accumulation, adaptation, coping and survival?
- How far has the political economy of livelihoods analysis been broadened and deepened in order to understand power relations?
- If greater understanding of risk, vulnerability and the political economy has been obtained in these ways, how far have these insights been applied to achieve an improved understanding of livelihoods?

Figure 2: Adaptation of the DFID Livelihoods Framework proposed by Collinson *et al.* (2002)



Source: Collinson *et al.* (2002: 26)

A small number of livelihoods studies over the last two decades enter into this kind of detail for specific geographical areas. These include:

- The study by Young *et al.* (2005) of Darfur region of Sudan. This has a comprehensive analysis of the agricultural and labor economy, including trade and migration routes, the contribution of remittances

to household income, the impact of political and military intervention on these routes, and the avoidance and coping strategies which people undertake;

- The study by Beall and Schutte (2006) of urban Afghanistan, highlighting the plight of informal settlements, weak access to services, costly coping strategies (especially to access water), the riskiness of informal employment, the limited economic role played by women, the limited prospects for diversifying livelihoods, the excessive extent to which extended family is called upon to “cushion” crises, and the limited extent to which poor households are involved in local decision-taking
- Pain’s (2002) study of Afghanistan shows how hardship draws peasant households into illegality: they are driven into poppy production for opium in order to obtain land in exchange for labour, which is the only productive resource they have. It also helps them to obtain access to credit. But the studies also indicate the importance of diversification of livelihoods, even though earnings opportunities from individual activities are limited.
- Seddon and Hussein (2002) note that the Maoist uprising in Nepal and the response by the security forces increased travel times, reduced the amount of food that could be carried and restricted access to forest and fodder resources. Longer migration periods meant that fewer men returned in time for the harvest. Alongside the market disruption and increased insecurity, there have also been positive changes, including some land redistribution, new barter systems benefiting certain groups, and an enhanced sense of community identity among some groups.

In addition to specific area-based studies of this kind, there are others which draw out sectoral or sub-sectoral lessons regarding one or other aspect of livelihoods. Seeds for agriculture provide an excellent example of this, with a number of studies by Sperling and others across Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia (Sperling *et al.*, 2008; McGuire and Sperling, 2011) which demonstrate that:

- With the exception of some “large seed” crops such as groundnut, the proportion of harvest needed for next year’s seed is generally well under 5%, so that even where production is drastically curtailed, this does not translate into a need for emergency provision of seed
- Disasters do not necessarily wipe out seed systems; farmers’ interaction with seed merchants tends to be robust and enduring
- Seed distribution projects are numerous (e.g. FAO alone managed 400 seed distribution projects in emergency and developmental contexts between 2003 and 2005) and widely assumed to be benign,

but they can be harmful if e.g. they are inappropriate to local conditions and farmers waste time and money in finding this out, or if they bring in new pathogens (diseases or weed seed), or if they wean farmers off markets into new dependencies on public sector organisations

McGuire and Sperling (2011) note that in response to findings of this kind, there has been some change in international agency practice. For instance, FAO/WFP in their Crop and Food Supply Assessment Missions, have dropped food security as a proxy for seed security and are assessing the latter separately, albeit in conjunction with food supply assessments, in order to identify any interactions.

Using an availability, access and utilisation framework for assessing seed systems, McGuire and Sperling (2011) argue that access is the strongest link between food and seed systems, the underlying problems including lack of funds, diminished social capital or poorly functioning markets. Sperling *et al.* (2007) had earlier noted that poorer farmers tend to use markets more, since larger farmers have the capacity to retain most of their seed on a regular basis. They also note that informal markets are important in both normal and stress periods.

Sperling *et al.* (2007) note that small traders are in a strong position to provide insights into the functioning of seed systems, such as change in the volume, quality, price and geographical source and composition of seed made available to them.

Seed systems are exceptional in that they represent a particularly well-researched area, with processes and insights which are likely to be common across FCAS. A number of other insights into how livelihoods change under FCAS can be drawn, in both rural and urban contexts, though perhaps with narrower and less robust validity. These suggest:

From Agriculture

- that water is scarce in many areas, and that donors favor the rehabilitation or expansion of irrigation works, though a danger is that this may lead increasingly to dependence by farmers on provision by the public sector. Also such assets are highly vulnerable to further disruption
- that livestock have advantages as a mobile asset, capable of taking themselves to market, but in FCAS this may cut both ways – allowing rapid liquidation of the asset where necessary, but also making it prone to theft

- that crop farming is likely to revert from market-orientation towards subsistence, as market access becomes more difficult, the inputs available to produce higher-value crops for market become less available, and the able-bodied move to alternatives such as migration. Also, subsistence products' high ratio of weight to value makes them a less tempting target for thieves.

From rural sectors outside agriculture

- Much non-agricultural activity, such as petty trading, or casual laboring on construction sites, is likely to be disrupted in FCAS.
- Common resources such as forest and wildlife are often appropriated by the powerful in FCAS, and there are reports that the poor have been denied access to forest products, firewood and fodder (Seddon and Hussein, 2002).

From urban contexts

- “Distress” movement from rural into urban areas, will put pressure on infrastructure there, but also on livelihood opportunities and wages.
- New arrivals are likely to create or join informal settlements. For these to access services is likely to be difficult until the settlements are regularized.

In general

- Livelihoods will be more constrained under FCAS as vulnerability increases and the range of opportunities is reduced. This is likely to impose additional financial costs (bribes etc) and/or additional social/personal costs (e.g. migration). In many cases livelihoods will also be more challenging in terms of personal security, dignity and legality.
- Migration is often long-established in areas before they became FCAS, but, in increasingly threatened situations, takes on particular significance, allowing the able-bodied (who might otherwise be forcibly recruited by one side or the other in conflict) to work outside the immediate FCAS and to send remittances to those remaining.
- In FCAS, wider vacillations (or entire shifts) occur in control over elements of the productive context – resources such as land, but also access to inputs, finance, markets. Some changes in control may be explicit; in other cases, they may be articulated via e.g. increased rent-seeking at different points in commodity chains. Emerging political philosophies may impose some shifts (such as replacement of private grain markets by state control, as in Burma).
- The breakdown of law and order which often accompanies the emergence of FCAS may diminish production and trade particularly

difficult, and restrict many aspects of livelihoods to small circles of trusted friends and relatives.

- Limitations on the movement of persons and goods which tend to be applied during FCAS will have much the same restrictive effect, as well as restricting migration. These may well be discriminatory in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender etc. The High Security Zones imposed by the government of Sri Lanka during the recent conflict severely disrupted livelihoods (Centre for Poverty Analysis, 2010).
- Where the geographical coverage of the FCAS is wide, the scope for identifying new livelihood options is likely to be limited, and vice-versa.
- Where the dominant perception among affected people is that the FCAS will be of long duration, the incentive to search locally for alternative livelihoods will be limited, and pressure to migrate out will rise.
- However, studies of non-crisis situations (e.g. Farrington *et al.*, 2006) suggest that the poorest decile or two of income distribution are likely to be left behind: they have neither the financial nor human capital, nor network of contacts to move out into new situations.
- New livelihoods are likely to be driven by blended motives of accumulation, adaptation, coping and survival. Where much has to be invested in building resilience, this may lead to the liquidation of productive assets in order to pay bribes, launch oneself into migratory livelihoods, etc.
- As FCAS create downward pressure on livelihoods, it is at least arguable (though not confirmed in the literature reviewed here) that many of those in the lower income deciles are likely to be drawn into a kind of “scavenging” diversification in which they can find no single activity to anchor their livelihoods, but have to scrape a living from the small amounts of productive work they can find across a large number of activities (see Farrington *et al.*, 2006 for a description of this phenomenon in India).

What is known about the Impact of Interventions in Livelihoods in FCAS?

From the foregoing, livelihoods interventions can be conceptualized on at least two levels:

First, specific responses to detailed livelihoods information: where detailed information on livelihoods exists, it may be possible to intervene in specific, targeted ways by, for instance, providing particular kinds of crop inputs or veterinary care for livestock. However, there are at least three

difficulties with this approach: one is that sufficiently detailed information on livelihoods will exist only in very few cases. Second, even where it does exist, it will quickly become out of date. A third problem is that agencies would probably not have the resources to interpret and respond to detailed livelihood information. The few examples found of this approach include the issuing of vouchers by CRS to purchase seed (Remington, 2002). However, the difficulties of this kind of approach are illustrated by numerous examples from the Sudan (Jones *et al.*, 2002) and from Kenya (Sperling, 2002) of how seed supplied in emergencies does not match local requirements and so has not been taken up.

Second, efforts to stimulate opportunities and remove constraints at a much higher level that would allow households to pursue improved livelihoods. For subsistence-type activities, this approach will work to ensure improved access to land, and to such “commons” as forest, grazing areas and water. Efforts to “regularize” access to resources and reduce risk may have unintended outcomes. For instance, in northern Uganda, official programs for the sedenterisation of pastoralists aimed to provide ensured access to water and grazing, as well as protecting herds from theft. However, it greatly reduced herders’ flexibility to cope by shifting cattle to new grazing areas in response to rainfall patterns (Uganda country paper).

For activities requiring engagement with the private sector – whether buying and selling agricultural or other products, selling labor, meeting consumption needs etc. – the approach will aim to strengthen relations between households and individuals on the one hand and the private sector on the other. This may involve direct support to businesses to re-establish themselves, though, as examples from the livestock trade in Sudan (Alinovi *et al.*, 2007) and from the seeds industry provided by Sperling and others make clear, business is remarkably resilient in the face of disorder. More commonly, the types of intervention it requires will include:

- Re-establishment of an orderly environment for “doing business”, including restoration of the rule of law, enforcement of property rights and contracts and reduction in corruption and extortion, including demands for bribes within business and between business and government, military or para-military organizations. The rebuilding of trust is important in many aspects of livelihoods, including business but also in rebuilding governance and social capital more generally. USAID has piloted committees to bring together business and community leaders in several conflict-affected countries, including Iraq and Serbia (USAID, 2008). In Mindanao in the Philippines, Oxfam linked improved access to information on the rights of IDPs to the building of dialogue and trust with local

administrations and the improvement of aquaculture and agriculture-based livelihoods (Jaspars and O'Callaghan, 2010)

- Removing restrictions on the free movement of people and goods, and on the provision of and access to services
- Making less coercive, exploitative, illegal or environmentally damaging the activities in which people engage during crisis, and/or helping them to move out of these altogether
- Promoting the post-conflict development of skills, which has helped to incorporate those such as ex-combatants who might otherwise remain “dividers” (Grossman *et al.*, 2009)
- Increasing and making more reliable the funds which people can access and then spend for consumption or investment purposes. Transfers of cash and food are widely practiced in FCAS and will have helped here, as also will public works programs, and microfinance, though the impact of microfinance is difficult to assess, given the range of risks and instabilities which will limit the productivity of small investments. Similarly, in Liberia, Oxfam used Emergency Market Mapping Analysis (EMMA) in the early weeks of a sudden onset crisis as a prelude to fuller livelihood assessment, but this pointed the way to increased cash transfers and support to markets, including local sourcing.

What is the Quality of Evidence?

Under discussion here are both the amount of evidence and its quality. From the literature available, the evidence is limited on how and how far interventions under FCAS support livelihoods. Whilst there is some literature on improvements to the wider conditions (rebuilding of trust) and some on specific issues such as skills building for ex-combatants, most of the remaining evidence is concentrated into two areas: first, the provision of cash or vouchers to those affected to allow them greater spending power in markets for consumer and investment goods. Second, and at sub-sectoral level, the evidence on how robust local seed markets are, how they can be stimulated (e.g. by issuing vouchers for seed purchase as in the CRS example above), and what measures are unlikely to work (such as flooding the local market with unsuitable varieties) is highly persuasive, and is now influencing the behavior of major players such as FAO. The quality of this literature is generally good, but, as is discussed below, the lack of a baseline prevents rigorous before/after comparisons.

There is undoubtedly further evidence on impacts to be found in the internal reports of governments and international agencies. These include periodic monitoring reports and end-of-project evaluations, which are not usually available in the public domain and so are not accessible via normal

literature searches. Even though the quality of this is likely to be variable, it may still provide valuable insights. There will additionally be much evidence of an anecdotal kind obtainable through the oral accounts of those directly involved.

However, this review has found no evidence of pre-crisis baseline studies (indeed, it would be virtually impossible to set these up unless a crisis could be predicted with confidence). This means that changes in livelihoods by comparison with the original situation are impossible to measure accurately. Similarly, there are only a limited number of studies of livelihoods during conflict, and even fewer have been conducted sequentially to allow change to be measured, though some assessment of change is possible via recall techniques.

There are important questions over the direction that future evidence-gathering should take on livelihoods in FCAS, the scope for interventions and the assessment of impacts. Full-scale livelihood assessments covering the scope indicated in Fig. 2 are expensive to undertake and, in rapidly evolving situations, will quickly become outdated. Their (repeated) use will have to be carefully justified. The alternative is to rely more on existing knowledge and on rapid assessment techniques of various kinds. These could include the following:

- Existing seed market studies which have a strong conceptual and empirical base, and allow some predictions of the behavior of farmers and traders under FCAS;
- Existing information on trade routes for e.g. livestock in the Sahel, and on the routes and periodicity of migrant labor. This may become outdated as crises progress, but may at least provide some insights into options for intervention;
- Existing information on commodity chains. Rural people's perceptions of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan as a means of obtaining access to land and credit provides one example;
- The unpublished work of ministries of agriculture and university departments may contain much information on aspects of livelihoods that gives pointers towards intervention;
- Traders (whether for inputs or outputs) are a useful source of information on the overall trends and spatial patterns of production, changes in product mix, access to productive resources, labor migration, restrictions on the movement of products and people, levels of credit availability and use, protection rackets and so on;
- Key informant interviews will help to answer some of the broader questions about overall levels of security, changing power structures,

corruption etc., allowing assessments to be made of the extent to which these impact on livelihoods.

What are the Main Research Gaps and Researchable Questions?

This review suggests that we know something of the ways in which livelihoods are affected by conflict, and something of the contribution that can typically be made to livelihood improvement by such measures as allowing free movement of people and goods, re-establishing the rule of law; improved access to productive assets (including credit), and investment in infrastructure.

In turn, findings of these kinds indicate areas in which interventions are likely to be productive, though care will have to be taken to adapt these to particular circumstances.

What we know much less about are the types of impact achieved through particular interventions, in relation to twin objectives of improving livelihoods and contributing to peace and stability. Experience so far suggests that further conventional literature searches are unlikely to be rewarding: they will not identify information held in internal agency monitoring and evaluation reports. Much careful work on a one-to-one basis with agencies will be needed in order to elicit and interpret performance information of this kind.

What set of general questions should we be asking in rapid assessment exercises, and of whom? The lack of baseline and the instability of livelihoods under FCAS are likely to pose significant challenges to monitoring and evaluation. Research could usefully address this “gap” by assessing different approaches to monitoring and evaluation, each with their specific data requirements, and identifying which typically offers acceptable combinations of accuracy and economy of effort for what kinds of context.

Independently-conducted rapid assessment exercises may help to illuminate the impacts of interventions, alongside within-agency assessments. These are likely to benefit from the same research into different approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

Gaps of this kind need to be filled if we are to move on from the current situation, characterized as it is by very limited evidence on how and why livelihoods change in FCAS, and what impacts interventions make – evidence which, at present, tends to become “received wisdom” despite its flimsiness.

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