

Rethinking the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework: An Indigenous Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), a widely used analytical tool originating from development studies, aims to identify livelihoods dynamics and suggest solutions for marginalized populations. In this article we argue that a fixed asset model defined within the sustainable livelihoods framework limits adequate understanding of Indigenous culture and livelihoods and therefore fails to acknowledge the historical power imbalances. By making a critical analysis of the term “capital” used in the sustainable livelihoods framework, we argue that for an ethical understanding of development politics, the sustainable livelihoods framework should be supple and accord with a culturally appropriate analysis, definition and terms. This paper presented its argument based on *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin* Cree Nation’s perspective on sustainable livelihoods and relationships.

Introduction

The association of resource-led development with topics such as capitalism, strategies of the colonial state, the rise of transnational market economies, neo-liberal policies of ecological, cultural genocide and corporate control over local resources is not a new phenomenon (Shiva, 2002; Escobar, 1995; Harvey, 2003). From Marxism to contemporary Indigenous studies literature, the exploitation of natural resources and its disastrous impact over the culture and livelihoods of marginalized population has been documented (Marx, 1976 [1867]; Churchill, 1983; Waldram, 1988; Escobar, 1995; Shiva, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Kulchyski, 2005; Kulchyski, 2013; Coulthard, 2014; Kamal et al., 2015).

Emerging studies in social and environmental science show that Indigenous communities, living in resourceful countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, America are experiencing socioeconomic and cultural challenges within the newly reformed resource-led world order, often more than the third world countries and non-Indigenous population, due

to state surveillance and unsupportive colonial regulations (Escobar, 1995; Hall & Patrinos, 2010; Gilberthorpe & Hilson, 2014).

Livelihood discourse connected with resource-led development not only expresses concerns over the damaging environmental and socioeconomic consequences but also finds its major analytical tool, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) insufficient to study structural discrimination (Davies, White, Wright, Maru & LaFlamme, 2008; Daskon, 2008; Scoon, 2009; Sakdapolrak, 2014; Wilshusen, 2014). SLF is linked with top down western development agenda, often promoting a narrow analysis of the term “capital” (ibid). Within this context our concern is to examine how successfully livelihoods studies can be used in a development-led framework while analyzing Indigenous livelihood challenges.

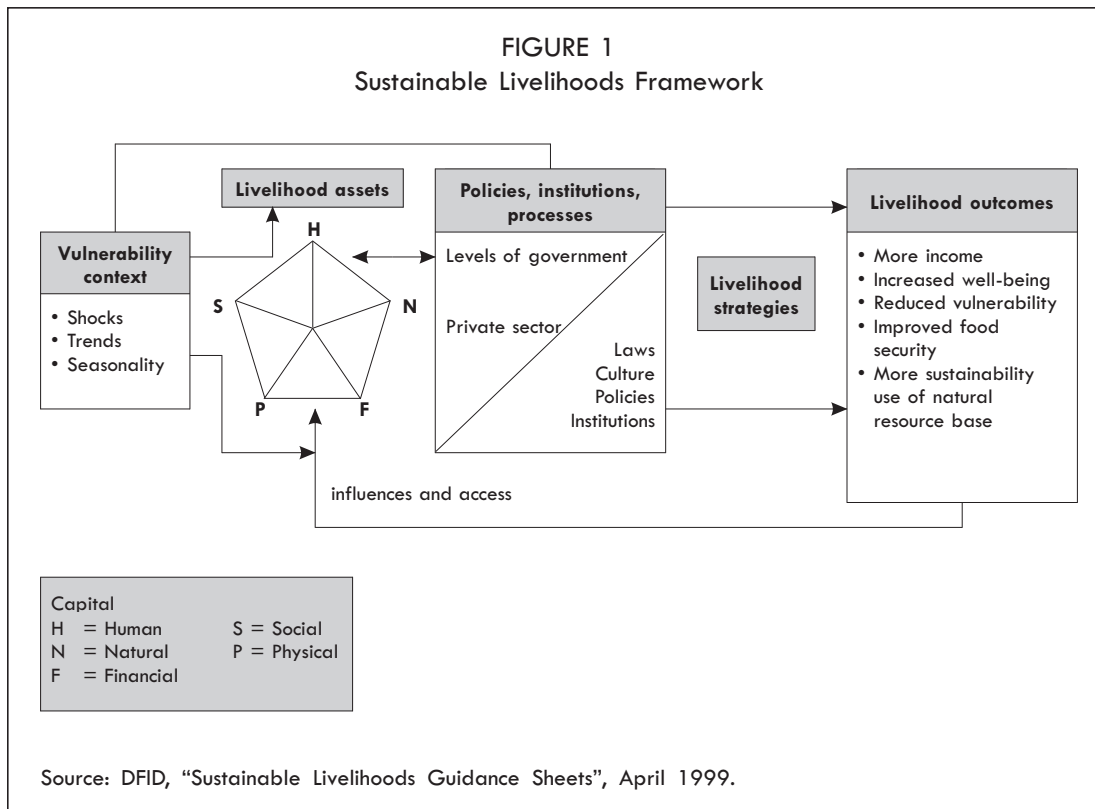
By sharing the story of *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin* Cree Nation (OPCN), an Indigenous community situated in remote northern Manitoba, Canada and its local food program *Ithinto Mechisowin* Program (IMP) we explore the ways in which Indigenous perspectives can contribute to livelihoods analysis. Indigenous culture in Canada embeds livelihoods and well-being with peoples’ deep relationship with the land (Adelson, 2000; Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2008; Hart, 2010; Simpson, 2011; Kamal et al., 2015). This relationship is being disrupted Canada-wide by resource-led industrial projects such as mining and hydroelectric dams within areas specified by the government for traditional land use, without proper consultation or adequate and meaningful compensation or mitigation plan (Waldram, 1988; Hoffman, 2008; Kulchyski, 2013; Kamal, Thompson, Linklater & Ithinto Mechisowin Program, 2014; Kamal et al., 2015). We argue that for an ethical understanding of development politics, livelihood studies related to Indigenous communities should take a bottom up approach, be simple and variable in its analysis, not use a fixed framework and provide culturally appropriate meaning of “asset”/“capitals.”

To make these claims the first section of the article will discuss the concept of capital used in livelihood studies. Following this, the article will share the significance of Indigenous worldviews. Next, it will describe methodology and community history. Later, elaboration on how OPCN’s collective cultural practices can contribute to livelihood studies will be presented. The concluding section will summarize our argument.

Capital in the Context of SLF

From its origin the term capital is linked with “a material holding or monetary fund” (Williams, 1976, p. 51). German sociologist Karl Marx defined capital in relation to “capitalism”, an economic system that magnify natural resource exploitation by using capital to monopolize, control production price and manipulate wage-labour relation (Marx, 1976 [1867]). Marxist understanding of capital paved ways for in-depth analysis on capital and its relationship with capitalism in resource-led economy in different disciplines. However, in livelihood studies, the understanding and functionality of the term “capital” has remained inadequate (Scoon, 2009; Wilshusen, 2014; Sakdapolrak, 2014). The concept is contested and being reviewed by contemporary scholars, particularly in the application of the SLF analysis (ibid).

The notion of capital was introduced in livelihood and development studies through World Bank’s (WB) report “*Expanding the Measure of Wealth*” (World Bank, 1997; Wilshusen, 2014, p. 133). The report suggested that people’s sustainable development could be assessed “based on relative endowment of four capitals: produced, human, natural and social” (World Bank, 1997, p. v; Wilshusen, 2014, p. 133). The interpretation emphasized on



capitalist accumulation on resources rather than meaningful sustainability (Bebbington, 1999; Wilshusen, 2014). Reasonably it is argued that the WB played a role of manufacturing information/knowledge to benefit development-led capitalism (Esteva, 1992; Goldman, 2005; Wilshusen, 2014). The plan was to bring in a major shift in the language and mode of capitalist growth to maintain a continuously homogenous and linear reality of the world in which the developed West was authorized to plan, exploit and decide for the "underdeveloped" (Sachs, 1992, p. 2; Esteva, 1992, p. 16). As Trinh (1989) said, "the concept that is currently named 'development' has gone through six stages of metamorphosis since late antiquity. The perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the 'native', and the underdeveloped" (p. 54).

This argument attests how the camouflaging and manipulative nature of capital feeds on the "other" and the fact that WB's problematic involvement in development was actually, an investment of capitalist endeavour.

The WB's Department of International Development and Institute of Development Studies (DFID) in Sussex designed the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) as a key analytical tool of livelihood studies (Brockiesby & Fisher, 2003; Scoon, 2009; Sakdapolrak, 2014). SLF was introduced to measure assets/capitals (social, physical, natural, human and financial), adaptive strategies and technologies to mend asset insecurity in the livelihood of marginalized population (Chambers & Conway, 1992). In some studies, culture is also considered as one of the capitals (Davies et al., 2008; Daskon & Mcgregor, 2012; Wilshusen,

TABLE 1
Capitals in Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

Capitals/Assets	Definition of Resources	Some Examples
Natural	Supplies of natural resources	Fisheries, land, gas, minerals.
Physical	Man-made resources	School, office space, library, etc.
Human	Knowledge, skills gained by training, education	Gardening, farming, hunting, fishing, reading, writing, etc.
Economic/financial	Monetary supplies	Money, saving bonds, credits, etc.
Social	Network of trust and reciprocity in a social group	Community safe walk group, women's rights groups, community coops, community kitchen, etc.
Cultural	Everyday practices and communitarian interactions that shapes identity	Rituals, celebrations based on class, race, gender, ethnicity and religion.

Source: Inspired by Davies et al., 2008; Sakdapolrak, 2014; Wilshusen, 2014.

2014). Table 1 summarizes definitions of capitals according to SLF and provides few examples of their use in livelihood activities.

In SLF, livelihood is perceived as “the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living” (Chambers & Conway, 1992, p. 7). SLF suggests that a livelihood is sustainable “when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resources base” (ibid). The assets or capitals, which refer to stock of resources, is explained as “input”, through a pentagon shape model and used to measure availability of assets and enhance livelihood strategies of people as outcomes (DFID, 1997; DFID, 1999; DFID, 2000a; DFID, 2000b; DFID, 2000c; DFID, 2000d; Chamber & Conway, 1992; Brockiesby & Fisher, 2003; Davis et al. 2008; Scoon, 2009; Wilshusen, 2014). Analysis of cross-sectoral policies to improve livelihoods of the affected population is also a part of SLF analysis (Chamber, 2005).

Despite its wide application in development studies, SLF has been criticized for its limitations in mainstream research (Davis et al., 2008; Daskon, 2008; Scoon, 2009; Wilshusen, 2014, Sakdapolrak, 2014, Kamal, et al., 2014). An elaborate discussion on the topic is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we will discuss some key points from the asset model.

At the early stage of SLF, peoples’ livelihoods were analyzed through diagrams, charts or graphs, or guidance sheets (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2011). In a technical analysis “measurable” (for example, physical, financial) and “non-measurable” (for example, social or cultural) capitals are kept on the same list (ibid). This gave an “illusionary equivalency” to all kinds of capitals and hence reduces the potential of an in depth analysis of historical and structural power relationships (Wilshusen, 2014, p. 138).

The asset model is marked for being narrowly focused and unelaborated (Daskon, 2008; Scoon, 2009; Sakdapolrak, 2014, p. 21). It is argued that the simplified and static

analysis of asset pentagon by DFID shifts focus from people and sidelines disputes around the contested role of capital in the society (Sakdapolrak, 2014; Wilshusen, 2014). It limits livelihoods discussions in the “territory of economic analysis” (Scoon, 2009, p. 177), defines capital as a monetary object rather than an exploitative course of development (Harvey, 2010).

Additionally, livelihood comprises of both material and non-material characteristics of well-being (Bebbington, 1999; Daskon, 2008; Sakdapolrak, 2014). As Bebbington (1999) said, assets can mean “hermeneutic” and “emancipatory” action through which people can define their unique way of living and resist against socially embedded power structures (p. 2022). Daskon (2008) argues that for a deep understanding of sustainable livelihoods, “social, economic, cultural and spiritual needs of all members of a community, human, non-human, present and future” and safeguarding their “cultural and biological diversity” are essential (p. 172). A holistic perception of livelihood can be acquired by local understanding/nuance of the livelihood and asset requirement, without which a community is gravely misunderstood.

Indigenous Worldview and Indigenous Livelihoods

From an Indigenous worldview, sustainable livelihoods are viewed in terms of relationships emphasizing “the resource base, ecosystem services, people and other species” and “not just an efficient allocation of resources over time, but also a fair distribution of resources and opportunities between the current generation and between present and future generations” (Milne, Tregidga & Walton, 2004, p. 6).

Indigenous perception of livelihoods tend to rest on a sense of egalitarianism where all factors (physical, natural, economic, social, and human) in the sustainability wheel are perceived in the form of one bond or relationship (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000). This relationship exists between the physical environment and Indigenous knowledge where sustainability and a balanced ecosystem are shared responsibilities of all living beings (individual, community, animal, land, water, air, fire) (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000). People acting in accordance with cultural worldviews and values is key to maintaining a healthy livelihood and community.

Livelihood, for Indigenous people is more than subsistence economy; it involves the explicit cultural integration between nature and people, a respectful bond based on interdependency (Adelson, 2000; Hart, 2010; Simpson, 2011). For example, the Cree notion of sustainable well-being is defined by the term *mino-pimatisiwin* which means good life (Hart, 2002). It is an understanding based on sharing and tied with reciprocity with nature, balance, growth, and spirituality — some asset components that guide Cree community and individuals towards sustainable, healthy and healing lifecycle (ibid, 105). Any injustice related to this system, thus, is injustice to the people, their community and “upon Creation itself” (Mcgregor, 2009, p. 28 quoted in Connelly, Markey & Roseland, 2011, p. 43). This takes the Indigenous perception of sustainable livelihoods beyond the classical notion of asset and capital defined in SLF.

With the growing acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous worldviews, the need for incorporating cultural viewpoints of livelihoods is more important than ever. Studies concerning Indigenous well-being, sovereignty, culture and livelihoods in Canada are unfolding alarming sustenance crises which need immediate attention (Frasera et al., 2006; Capistrano & Charles, 2012; Thompson et al., 2011; Thompson, Kamal, Wiebe &

Alam, 2012; Thompson & Ballard, 2013; Kamal et al., 2014; Parlee, 2015). However, it is important to realize that the gap in SLF will not be fulfilled until cultural integration in Indigenous livelihoods is meaningfully infused in such studies. Moreover, as Wilshusen (2014) said, any form of capital associated with human livelihoods must challenge the dual nature of the term, essentially because of its ties with capitalist resource-led economy (p. 140).

Methodology

The study with OPCN is guided by Indigenous research methodology. Indigenous research methodology is founded on “relational accountability” and collective, collaborative way of acquiring knowledge (Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2008; Hart, 2010, p. 9). Through relational accountability, there is an acknowledgment that relationships exist between researchers and participants, but also to the land, water and beyond. Simpson provides five stages of Indigenous research: collaboration, consensual decision-making, apprenticeship with Elders and seeking out community experts and learning by doing (Simpson, 2000, pp. 173–177). While conducting this study we have followed these steps.

Historically, Indigenous ways of knowing have been affronted and side lined by western scientific research (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Hart, 2010). In contemporary academia, ethical and scholarly rights to Indigenous research are most often established through OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) principles (Schnarch, 2004). Participatory research is an integral part of livelihood studies (Scoon, 2009, p. 172). However, the idea of ethical participatory research is debated and has been labelled as “tyrannical” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Brock, 2002; Scoon, 2009). Indigenous research frameworks can enrich the integration of participatory research in livelihood studies.

The study with OPCN was conducted using an Indigenous research methodology and led by OCAP. One of the objectives of the project was to collaborate with OPCN and to learn from their program and community while creating a local food harvesting and food sharing program to support their *mino-pimatisiwin*, or “good life.” The fieldwork was conducted from 2012–2014. During the entire fieldwork period, the project was supervised, led and operated by community Elders and food champions, and a steering committee that was formed for consensual decision-making.

The program provides training on traditional food harvesting and preparation skills. The Elders share stories while teaching youth, thus promoting intergenerational knowledge. Harvested food is shared with low-income families, Elders and diabetes patients once a week. The study was a collaborative initiative between University of Manitoba and OPCN and was part of Asfia Kamal’s doctoral research. Knowledge gathered for this paper came out of five years of relationship building with OPCN Elders, adults and youth and participation in traditional food harvesting activities.

Community History

OPCN, a remote northern Manitoba Indigenous reserve community, suffered severe flooding caused by the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the region (Waldram, 1988; Hoffman, 2008; Kamal et al., 2014; Kamal et al., 2015) The flooding resulted in relocation of the community, disassociation from land-based culture, reduced access to wild food, unemployment, inadequate housing and health services (Thompson et al., 2011; Kamal et

FIGURE 2
Study Location, OPCN



Source: Kamal et al., 2014, p. 144.

al., 2014; Kamal et al. 2015). Poverty, health crisis, food insecurity are major issues in the community (ibid). Despite these challenges, OPCN continues to practice their land-based culture by passing on knowledge to the youth (Kamal et al., 2014; Kamal et al., 2015). In order to do so, they have been participating in land-based activities through seasonal traditional gatherings. In 2013, a community-based food-harvesting program called *Ithinto Mechisowin* Program (IMP), which means food from the land, was created. The program was envisioned and planned solely by OPCN. It started with the in-kind support from community members and community based organizations and later received some funding from non-governmental organizations (ibid).

OPCN's Livelihoods Perspective

It has been argued, specifically for food studies, that using traditional languages helps present a more complete story of the experiences of a community (Power, 2008). OPCN's way of living revolves around four major concepts, presented in this paper in their Cree language. They are; *Kistihdiminowok*, which means the foundation of relationship is respect. The concept describes a practice in the community that all living and natural beings are related to each other based on how they respect each other. *Okanatawewoh* is the second concept that indicates the major principle of understanding that a respectful relationship includes taking care of Mother Nature. The word refers to someone who responsibly cares for nature. The third concept is *wichihituwin* which explains the idea of resources in the community. The meaning of the word is something that is used to help another being in the community. This explains what people should do to maintain a respectful relationship, and demonstrates the value of caring for and helping others. *Wichihituwin* could be used to describe a number of things, from food to labour to a library or a book. This connotes the culture of being well collectively by the practice of sharing. *Pasekonekewin* is the word that refers to the outcome of the relationship. The word means taking someone by the hand and supporting him/her to stand. The outcome brings strength that helps people to sustain their challenges. Together, these four concepts define *Kakiesipimatisihk* which means "the way we live," or culture. In an ideal situation OPCN would like to have governance that is based on these understandings. Table 2 shows how IMP activities are enhancing livelihood relationship in OPCN.

Rethinking the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The sustainable livelihoods practised through IMP is a process of well-being through relationships — personal, interpersonal, and collective. The only factor or "capital" that matters in the livelihood process is relationship — how the relationship with the world is viewed and how people are taking care of this relationship. Importantly, despite being regarded as having a livelihood disorder and acute poverty, OPCN has dared to start a community initiative with no mention of material capital. As IMP advisor Elder Vivian Moose said, "we need a promise to come together for our future and a name in Cree" (personal communication, 2012).

Certainly, this brings the question of whether Indigenous people are denying the idea of using money for progress. The answer is no. However, they do not place excessive growth and economic advancement as the most essential part of their lives. OPCN people do not care that people are empowered by having enough of the material capitals, but rather what their relationship with the capitals is. Elder Vivian's statement attests to the fact that OPCN's notion of well-being is effective and meaningful only when the economic empowerment contributes to the cultural integrity, peoplehood and self-determination (Corntassel, 2012). Hence, even the metaphorical association of the term capital to assess their livelihoods can be foreign and disempowering for them.

If we replace the term capital with the term relationship we bring about all possible answers to the livelihood wheel — relationships with society (community, land, water, animals), relationships with humans (how people use their labour for collective being), relationships with money (what role money is playing to keep the cultural practices) and relationships with nature (how relationships with nature is tied with food, friendship, families and health of nature). Indeed, as Anderson (2000) notes: "We exist because of and for

TABLE 2
Enhancing Livelihood Relationship with IMP

OPCN worldview	Concepts in Cree	Relationship	Elaboration	IMP's contribution to livelihoods relationship
Kakiesipimatisihk The way we live, culture of sharing	Kistihdiminowok <i>Respecting each other</i>	Relationship defined for individual	Individuals use of land and water and food and act towards community need	Bringing in community individuals in the program activities as trainer, volunteer and participants.
	Okanatawewoh <i>Taking care of Mother nature</i>	Relationship between a community and nature	Sustainable concept of conservation which means land, water, animals are part of the community	IMP has created a policy that is based on OPCN worldview — for example, harvest what you need and responsibly
	Wichihituwin <i>Something that helps another person</i>	Relationship between community, individuals and non-human	Purpose of money, food, labour, office space, book, social support, water, tree, medicine is validated when it is shared to help the other	IMP is contributing to the common culture of sharing. The hunting, fishing, berry picking activities strengthening bond between youth, elders and adults. As a community the IMP office has become a space of social gathering over food and traditional activities.
	Pasekonekewin <i>Taking someone by the hand and supporting him or her to stand</i>	Relationship between community, youth and knowledge	Purpose of relationship is to achieve good life and share knowledge with youth by teaching them why the <i>wichihituwin</i> concept is needed in a community	Low income families, Elders, single parents, diabetes patients are having access to healthy traditional food, which paves way for physical and mental healing.

the relationships we hold with everything around us” (p.46). The creation of IMP is the outcome of these relationships, reproduced knowledge that is helping them to heal from existing crises and shock.

OPCN's language in everyday life works as a metaphor that influences people's thoughts and actions. It helps to shape their worldview. For example, during a traditional food preparation workshop in IMP, OPCN food champion Hilda Dysart shared that the Cree word for medicinal Labrador tea is *Mawkopatikwa* which means something to keep forever. If this information were analysed by mainstream livelihoods research considering *Mawkopatikwa* as “natural capital”, it would not explain the significance of the name of the medicine, nor why it has thrived for centuries as a medicine or the severity of loss that occurs when these medicines and other traditional food are flooded by hydroelectric dam

construction. Establishment of IMP program is reproducing traditional knowledge providing opportunities for relationship.

Contextually, Indigenous livelihood factors should be identified based on their wellbeing perspective: which part of relationship is keeping them well, which relationships are creating barriers to their well-being and most importantly, those relationships that are nourishing their self-determination in the midst of what OPCN people consider to be such social, cultural, political, economic and environmental challenges. The emphasis should be in the process of gaining strength for livelihoods instead of the deficit and crisis aspect. Process is critical to the understanding of Indigenous knowledge and is necessary in understanding Indigenous research. This means SLF should be remodelled and used for assessing livelihoods and changing policies to benefit sustainable, thriving and culturally rich people instead of “maximizing the benefit of the poor, hungry and vulnerable” (Simmons, 2007, p. 29).

For a methodology to be essential to Indigenous communities it must be relevant and meaningful rather than a definition composed of technical terms unrelated and unexplained to the people whose life is being analyzed. Hart (2010) has argued that Indigenous research values must include, in part, “Indigenous control over research, which can be demonstrated by having Indigenous people developing, approving, and implementing the research” (p.9). For example, while discussing sustainable livelihoods through IMP, OPCN people have used the tree as a metaphor to explain their roots, livelihoods and collective wellbeing, with the insight of IMP woven into this paper as a relation and an author.

Conclusion

Although SLF analysis is gradually getting its much-needed tone from contemporary scholars (Scoon, 2009; Wilshusen, 2014; Sakdapolrak, 2014), in many studies the analysis continues to fixate with the asset pentagon, a “formula/checklist” that fails to address the impact of capitalism in the social order (Wilshusen, 2014). OPCN’s case study attests to the loose extension of the term capital with any livelihoods factors (social, cultural, physical, human, financial or natural) an illusionary projection of empowerment.

Throughout the article we have tried to emphasize that Indigenous livelihood is engraved in cultural practices, sovereignty and self-determination (Corntassel, 2008; Kamal et al. 2015). For Indigenous peoples, livelihood is sustainable when cultural practices are performed in a sovereign land and the livelihood methods are self-determined. OPCN started IMP without little outside “capital” and started to work towards their self-determined needs using existing and new relationships in the community. IMP has paved ways for livelihoods capability beyond capitalist aspirations, even within modern state regimes. This highlights the strength of culturally relevant participatory studies based on Indigenous relationships and sense of community.

Finally, our discussion reasserts the importance of enriching the body of literature that can invest in the methods of applying SLF for cultural integration of thoughts and making room for ethical, participatory and nonlinear approach. This process is crucial particularly in the era of contemporary colonialism as Indigenous views of sustainability and Indigenous knowledges are continually denied at the international level, with Indigenous sovereignty and cultural rights overshadowed by the state regulations (Corntassel, 2014; Kamal et al. 2015). The lacunae in the Millennium Development Goals and discriminatory modern treaties for Indigenous peoples at the state level are some examples in this context (Corntassel,

2014, p. 69). There is a need, and moreover, a great opportunity for Indigenous research and worldviews to contribute to livelihood analysis as presented by community, and in particular through traditional languages. It is here, that research on livelihood studies should shift and be part of the “decolonization” process (Settee, 2013; Absolon, 2010; Kovach, 2005; Smith, 1999).

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