

Sociology of Living Conditions

A mid-range approach to development studies

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Abstract

In face of the transition from modernity to contemporary society, sociological theories were presented with the challenge of approaching the current social transformations, by analyzing not only aspects related to possessions – material goods, the objective world – but also those related to the individual's perceptions about their own living conditions, in order to understand the social change. Aiming to respond to this challenge, the present article does not intend to create a new theory, but rather to bring to Sociology Amartya Sen's perspective of capabilities and the Livelihoods perspective developed by Ellis and Scoones, through a mid-range theory, namely the Sociology of Living Conditions (SLC), highlighting the multidimensionality of this approach to the analysis of development.

Keywords: Development. Sociology of living conditions. Capabilities. Livelihoods.

Social change and sociology

The various social transformations that took place throughout the process of modernisation of industrial and capitalist societies have become central to the work of social scientists, who felt it to be increasingly challenging to explain how these changes came to people's daily lives. This concern has been manifest in sociology, as illustrated by Engels' ([1845] 2008) traditional work on the precarious working conditions of factory workers, of women and children's labour, in the 19th and 20th centuries in England. Classical Sociology also studied how changes resulting from industrialization and urbanization processes and from capitalism impacted both the individuals' objective daily lives and the institutions.

For a long time, these works aimed to understand the cultural, social, political, and economic influences that "shaped" societies, and their analyses referred to issues such as conflicts between social classes, wealth distribution, capitalist economy, religious beliefs, the role of institutions, and social cohesion in a time of great structural transformations. In this context, studies about individuals' integration into the social division of labour were generally concerned with "having", and the social condition (or position) derived from it explained the social hierarchies or social differences. Therefore, it may be said that life conditions (LC) were measured through individuals' "attributes" such as: having (or not) a job, income, property, or social status, within a process of evolution of individuals in societies.

In fact, the concept of Living Conditions has never been strictly defined in the social sciences. According to Mattos (2007), there have been many attempts to normatively determine it. Literature in various domains of social studies indicates that the term emerged in the 1950s, and it first appeared in the media in 1964, during a speech of the president of the United States declaring that people's objectives could not be assessed by their bank balance, but rather by their quality of life.

It was only after the end of the Second World War, with the emergence of the Welfare State and increased access to consumer goods by families, that the study of LC was effectively introduced in the Social Sciences research agenda. These studies were, however, still very centred in economic aspects, defining the concept through indicators such as average income, gross domestic product, industrialization, technological development, etc. Nevertheless, these indicators did not provide an explanation for the reality of people's lives, bringing to light the need to examine development issues looking not only at economic growth, but also at the human factor, to understand how and why these financial "improvements" brought by the process of modernisation of societies did not directly affect the quality of individuals' living conditions.

In practice, it was necessary to understand the relation between having good economic conditions and, at the same time, precarious housing, health, or education conditions, which was yet to be explained by sociological theories of development. One of the major challenges to Social Sciences, according to Furtado (1964), was then to build dynamic models, which could express social change and were based on different factors affecting life, such as environmental, physical, financial, human, social, and political aspects, instead of a single determining element. We certainly do not aim, here, to redefine the object of study of Social Sciences. Our purpose is rather, as suggested by Fernandes (1974), to reconstruct knowledge, drawing on empirical research, data analysis, and specially the interpretation of results.

It is precisely for the necessity to understand the problems arising from the process of development that this article highlights the importance of Sociology of Living Conditions. This latter comprises a mid-range approach (Merton, 1967) that aims to analyze the LC of actors in situations of "non-development" or social vulnerability, based on a multidimensional empirical assessment that makes use of interpretative resources, built from a system of empirical reference, through the analytical reconstruction of reality.

This reference system is theoretically based on the more general conceptions of development described by Amartya Sen, and is methodologically based on *livelihoods* approach, focusing on living conditions and on the actors' representations about these conditions. To this aim, a theoretical and methodological framework was created, which allows SLC to identify the key mechanisms (Hawkes et al., 2015) limiting or increasing opportunities for individuals to achieve their desired lifestyle, highlighting the means of livelihood of human development, rather than its ends. These theoretical and methodological issues will be presented in the following sections.

Why a Sociology of Life Conditions?

The interest in looking beyond the theoretical and methodological orthodoxies has also become a challenge to both policy makers and those in charge of implementing development policies. More than knowing about health, education, or financial resources, it was also important to understand how individuals allow themselves to imagine, feel, and relate to others within and outside their own contexts.

In this sense, the human factor has acquired meaning and explanatory value to the debates around development (Costa Lima, 2008), encompassing objective and subjective needs, entitlements, resources, capabilities (Sen, 2008; 2010), and "life chances" (Dahrendorf, 1992). However, the political and theoretical emphasis on the actor/group has led, and still leads, to the arduous task of discussing the relation between improvement of living conditions and reduction of vulnerabilities, since betterment of LC for some shall not be a process that asserts the vulnerability of those who are not awarded the "gains" of development.

Such interest can be found in the works of Norman Long (2007), who suggests a social actor-oriented approach, and Peter De Vries (2007), who brings the notion of social representations for understanding why the development processes didn't result in quality of life. For these

authors, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the effects of interventions (either governmental or other) on people's concrete life, ultimately leading to overlook this subjective dimension, which is precisely where development works in the concreteness of its processes, since social change is invariably influenced by the groups. From a practical perspective, these notions are related to the psychology of actors, their consumption habits, their lifestyles, and their ways of perceiving reality.

Living conditions can be of an objective or subjective order, comprising dimensions such as material well-being, health, productivity, family relations, social relations, friendships, security, emotional well-being, etc. The objective dimension could be defined by culturally relevant measures of objective welfare; in other words, those related to material possessions. The subjective dimension, in turn, would represent the satisfaction provided by the other dimensions, and could be assessed through the importance people perceive in these (Cummins, 2000, p.35). As demonstrated by De Vries (2007) in his study of Andean communities in the Peruvian highlands, often the explanation for unsuccessful public policies or projects is that their formulation and implementation were conducted without considering the perceptions, desires, local and cultural characteristics of the beneficiaries.

In the same way, studies described in *La Calidad de Vida* (The Quality of Life), by Nussbaum and Sen (1996) sought to conceptualize LC by pointing out indicators that would enable to produce qualitative and quantitative sociological analyses on this perspective, while questioning what should be the representative criteria for measuring human development¹. According Kerstenetzky (2000), these studies are important because they allow to incorporate sociological dimensions of human reality that have not been considered by the normative theories of development.

¹ Freitas (2015, p. 47).

In an attempt to deal with this issue, several ways to analyze human development and LC have emerged, such as the sociological approach of living conditions. This approach seeks to expose the relationship between the measures of material possessions and to be someone, while also revealing how the external aspects are perceived in the phenomena of consciousness and influence individual and collective action. The purpose of this mid-range theoretical framework would be making a link between a) the major paradigms of development and the specific methodologies, and b) the empirical observations of living conditions (Merton, 1967).

Therefore, an analysis focused on development and LC is justified for helping to clarify the conceptual and practical confusion in the use of these terms by researchers, public or private organizations, institutions and governments, aiming as much to understand the ongoing social change, as to measure and assess development. This is also justified in social-historical terms since it is necessary to understand how and why major transformations in society have not actually resulted in better wealth distribution. The following section examines the two key approaches of the theoretical and practical framework proposed for the Sociology of Living Conditions.

The Capabilities and the Livelihoods: the framework of SLC

Development can be understood as a process of social change, which, from a practical and phenomenological point of view, implies improvement in living conditions and mitigation or change in conditions of vulnerability. In this perspective, living conditions are defined as the representation of combinations of things that a person is able to do or to perceive, through the association between objective and subjective aspects of life. Thus, the methodological question posed by SLC seeks to expose the relationship between what people own and how they perceive these resources broadly – an important aspect for the more general studies on development.

In this sense, we believe that Amartya Sen's perspective on development studies is relevant to Sociology of Living Conditions, since it recognizes actors' agency to cope with the hardships that prevent them from expanding their freedoms, and understands that such agency is conditioned by the social, political and economic opportunities available (or not) to transform their realities. Through the capabilities approach, Sen intended to show how development can be attained insofar as individuals have the freedom and the ability to choose (from a range of opportunities) to achieve the ends they desire.

According to Sen (1999), this is the most fruitful field for sociological analysis, especially for combining the appraisal of both people's concrete living conditions (objective approach) and their feelings of deprivation (subjective approach), since the access to material objects cannot be analyzed without reference to how people perceive it. Appraisals are based on the understanding of how people use the resources available to them and which determine their capacity to cope with and/or adapt to prevailing risks and problems, seeking to improve or maintain their LC. When such resources or abilities are lacking, downward mobility may occur in various aspects of life, since no access to basic resources (conditions of no substantive freedom) leads to feelings of abandonment, disappointment, and frustration, or in other words, a feeling of deprivation.

The sociological approach of Sen's perspective lies precisely in allowing the relativization of the living conditions of different actors living in a context of social deprivation. By means of the *capability approach* (CA) it is possible to find elements that allow multidimensional analysis of human development, considering not only what people own – their consumer goods, housing, or financial resources –, but also how they perceive the reality in which they live, how they relate to the other individuals in their group (family or community), their trust in institutions, etc.

These elements were identified by Sen as “instrumental freedoms”, “the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements

[resources/assets] contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thus to promoting development” (Sen, 2010, p. 57)². The author subdivides such freedoms in five dimensions: political freedoms (such as the right to vote), economic facilities (income, access to credit), social opportunities (education, health, employment), transparency guarantees (trust relations), and protective security (social benefits, access to infrastructure).

The combination of these freedoms forms a set of alternatives of realization that enhances actors’ capabilities to achieve certain ends – the capabilities set (Freitas, 2015). The linkage between these dimensions points to empirical and causal issues, which make the perspective of “freedom” to be consistent with the development process (Sen, 2010, p. 60-61).

However, although Amartya Sen has proposed to build an essential theoretical framework adequate to encompass all dimensions of human life, his work has not been exempt from criticism, particularly concerning the operationalization of such an important approach to the understanding of Development. One of the main criticisms against Sen concerns the difficulty to define what dimensions should be considered and what weight to assign (or not) to each one, as well as what should be the indicators of such dimensions. Seeking to solve these problems, SLC emphasizes both the livelihoods approach and the idea of diversification, since this approach allows us to understand and complement Sen’s concepts on development by means of the study of living conditions.

The *livelihoods perspective* first appeared in studies promoted by the Institute of Development Studies – IDS, involving both the environmental dimension, through assessing external impacts of one livelihood over others, and the social dimension, measuring the internal

² Amartya Sen also introduces the concepts of constitutive freedoms, vectors of functioning and other assessments to analyze the expansion of freedoms as development. For developing the framework of SCV, only the notion of instrumental freedoms was considered, due to methodological limitations to put together the whole approach of capabilities.

resistance of a livelihood to an external influence/pressure – or a crisis. According to Scoones (2015), this reflected discussion on the definition of poverty that was broadening to encompass more holistic perspectives on welfare and means of subsistence, which became known, through Frank Ellis's work, as livelihoods.

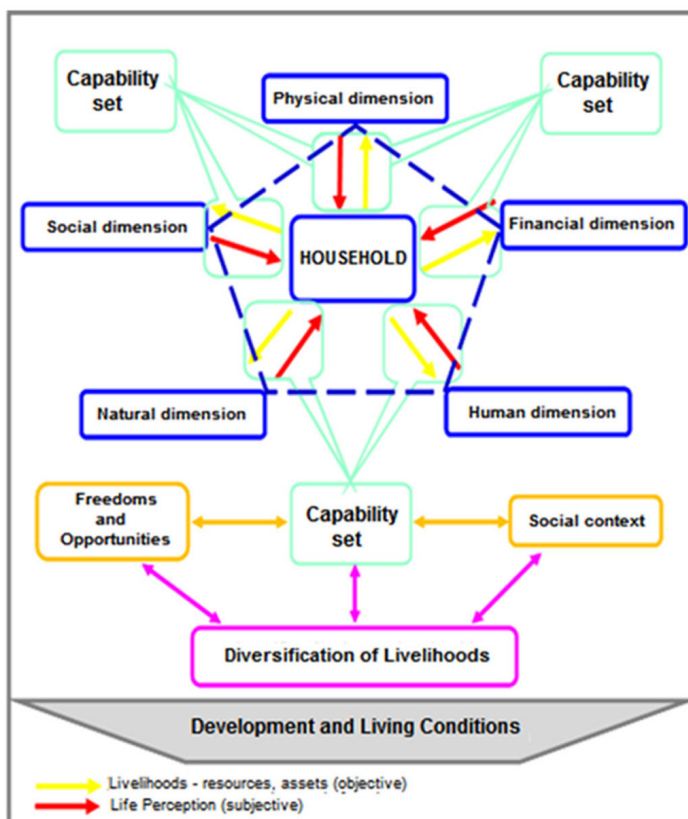
The notion of livelihoods used as a methodological tool, first proposed by Ellis (2000, p.30) and improved by Scoones (2009), enabled to analyze rural development in contexts of poverty and of individual and collective vulnerability. This analytical tool provided practical elements to operationalize Amartya Sen's capability approach into SLC. The convergence between Sen and theorists of livelihoods lies in the premise that the diversification of assets can expand capabilities (Scoones, 2015) as a way to achieve freedom of choice on a set of possibilities.

According to Schneider (2010), a wider range of opportunities and choices is critical for enabling actors to expand their capabilities by means of diversifying their economic, political, social, and environmental forms of organization. The more diverse these forms are, the greater the choices and strategies that may be established to face social risks and insecurity. It is precisely the expansion of this set of capabilities (Sen, 2010) that makes it possible for individuals to lead the lives they want, or to develop strategies to cope with different kinds of vulnerabilities, such as climate change, diseases, prices, lack of infrastructure, social and political insecurity, etc.

Based on these considerations, the concepts of instrumental freedoms (as defined in the capabilities approach) and of livelihoods (focused on the capitals) have been associated, giving rise to the theoretical and methodological framework of Sociology of Living Conditions. In this sense, the actors' material needs and the social opportunities available to them (SEN, 2010) express these multiple dimensions of human life, which have been defined as: financial, physical, human, social, and natural (Ellis, 2000) – all of these having the same importance or weight for SLC.

This equality of the capabilities sets (or dimensions) is represented in a pentagon-shaped graph, allowing to identify which “means” (related to *having* – objective) and “perceptions” (related to *being* – subjective) are in conditions of vulnerability and limit individuals’ ability to face adversity, and which of them enable individuals to expand the creation of strategies to seek better LC, or maintain a favorable situation for their development. The association between Sen’s Capabilities Approach and the Livelihoods perspective is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Theoretical and methodological framework



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

This framework presents the theoretical and methodological construction of Sociology of Living Conditions and outlines its main concepts. Empirically, this proposal puts together the dimensions of “having” and “being” as objective and subjective indicators based on the concepts of instrumental freedoms and capitals, associated with various studies on living conditions indicators³. Thus, we have:

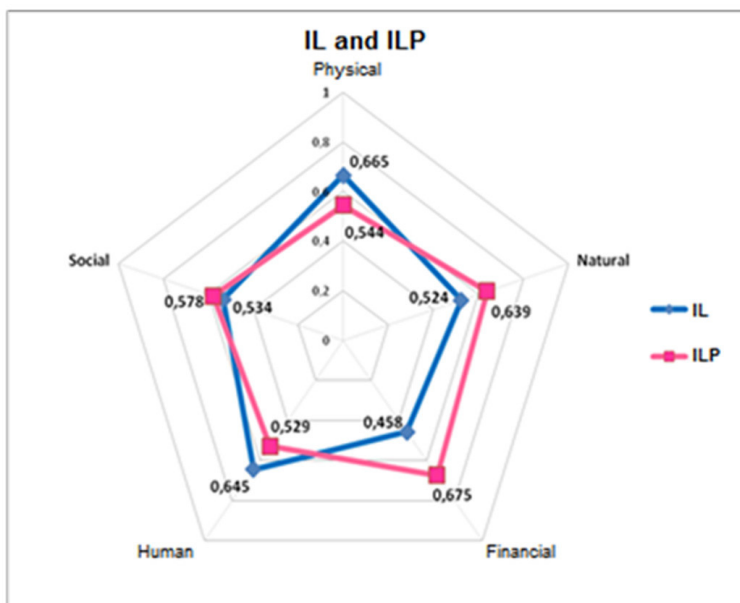
- a) The livelihoods (or *entitlements*) are expressed in the *capitals*, which are defined as: physical capital, financial capital, natural capital, human capital, and social capital (Ellis, 2000, p. 31) and represent the different instrumental freedoms.
- b) The yellow arrows characterize the means, resources, and assets and the red arrows represent the perceptions of these resources.

These definitions are heuristic constructs, since not every resource exploited by people as livelihood fits perfectly in these categorizations. However, while comprising a framework that seeks to explain living conditions, their practical application allows identifying vulnerabilities and potentials in each dimension, as pointed out by Freitas (2015) in her study on tobacco farming families, by using the construction of indexes for the analysis of the capabilities sets. The following Figure 2 shows the means and the perceptions of the 250 families studied, noting that the higher the capabilities set, the greater the possibility of creating strategies for diversification of livelihoods, thus overcoming a risk or vulnerability.

In general, living conditions are unbalanced for the tobacco-growing families, because the values of the financial, social and natural indexes pointed to a more precarious situation compared to other means. It is worth noting the difference observed between the Indexes of Livelihood and Indexes of Life Perception. For the sociological analysis of living conditions, the angles in these pentagons represent the means and perceptions of life, and explain, for example, that it is not enough to have extended financial and natural perceptions, when, at the same time,

³ For general indicators see Freitas, 2015, p. 47; indicators used in empirical research: Freitas, 2015, p. 102.

Figure 1 – Spiderweb of Livelihoods and Life Perceptions of Tobacco-Farming Families



Source: Freitas, 2015, p. 153.

the human and social ones are vulnerable. That is, living conditions are said to be better, or overall vulnerability lower, to the extent that the areas of the spider web for these capabilities sets (objective + subjective) are more harmonious.

Therefore, it is possible to identify groups by their degree of ownership of assets and their strategies for transformation/diversification when exposed to risks derived mainly from changes in the social, political and economic domains that interfere negatively in individual, family, or community living conditions. This means that, in order to promote better living conditions, it is necessary to know the capabilities of a certain individual/social group for dealing with the system of opportunities made available in the society by the State, or by the market. Given this,

we believe that the study of development by means of a Sociology of Living Conditions would benefit from the perspective of capabilities and livelihoods as a theoretical path to build a methodological mid-range approach aimed at identifying the human capabilities that enable to devise strategies for livelihood diversification, so that to promote development, or those that limit the choices of actors.

Considerations

The Sociology of Living Conditions must be defined according the ongoing changes, and deal with the risks and uncertainties in its various dimensions. Hence, SLC allows to understand the factors that produce the change, being those of an economic-environmental, socio-cultural, political-institutional, or ethical-moral nature, or else of any other dimension. The importance of this analysis lies in the possibility of capturing sociological dimensions of human reality, allowing to explain the social processes of development that cannot be considered solely by normative and developmental theories, nor by the anthropological ethnographies of individual cases.

Despite the limitations and operational difficulties, the capabilities and livelihoods approaches allow us to connect Amartya Sen's perspective to the sociological studies of living conditions. The framework presented here as a mid-range theory in human development studies can, presumably, be applied to different contexts of vulnerability. This opens the possibility of creating a research agenda in Social Sciences aimed to consolidate studies on the actual living conditions of people who face a modernization process that did not result in the expected human development.

The study of development with emphasis on the human variable enables a multidimensional analysis of living conditions, by considering both the objective aspects and the perception of the individuals/groups themselves. To this aim it is necessary to creatively associate different approaches, so that the contemporary sociological studies may admit the

dialogue between different epistemic fields in order to address current social problems, also involving the domains of sociology of development, rural studies, economics, and even recent studies on public policies.

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