

Symbolic and social dimensions in the economic production of seaweed

Abstract

Based on the thesis of 'deagrarianisation' of farming economies, work on sustainable rural livelihoods (SRL) has successfully captured the agency of rural producers as they diversify their livelihoods to minimise risk. SRL captures a complex interplay of local and global factors, as well as the synergies emanating from natural (environmental), economic and social capital that underpin diversification. The framework has been found useful for analyses of change in coastal, marine-based livelihoods. However, agency at the local level implies equal power to accept and reject development interventions. The way groups diversify or use the options open to them depends as much on access to resources (the means), as on how that access is interpreted (the meaning), and the latter dimension is a creative (unpredictable) one. New introduced forms of economic activities, in this case seaweed farming, can be assigned meaning by participants that were unanticipated by change agents. Livelihood diversification through seaweed cultivation on Banggi island off Kudat, northern Sabah (East Malaysia) is not attained by economic factors alone but also by the meaning attached to the activity.