

# ASPIRATIONS AS COMPLEMENTARY ENTRY POINTS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Kai Mausch** is Senior Economist at the Center for International Forestry Research - World Agroforestry. He joined in 2018 after having worked for more than 8 years at ICRISAT in Malawi and Kenya. Kai has over 15 years of experience in working on rural development from the agricultural and the non-agricultural perspective.

Currently focusing on household aspirations to improve the understanding of how these can be better supported through projects. His extensive work on the understanding of technology adoption and barriers along the process is feeding valuable insights into the broader aspirational perspective. While the majority of his work is located in Eastern Africa, his projects also cover other African regions as well as Asia, Latin America and Europe.

**Dave Harris** has spent more than 40 years working to improve the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers in developing countries, initially for DFID in India, Botswana and Saint Lucia, then at Bangor University, UK, and most recently for the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Kenya and the World Agroforestry Centre. He is currently an Honorary Lecturer at Bangor University and a Senior Research Associate with CIFOR-ICRAF. Originally a developer of improved farming technologies, since 2012 Dave has been trying to better understand the limitations on making a decent living from a small farm and the drivers of rural smallholder households' attempts to increase their incomes and wellbeing. Recent work has highlighted the complex ways in which society interacts with individuals and groups to form aspirations and expectations. This interaction has important consequences for sustainable development as smallholder rural households juggle on-farm and off-farm opportunities and their aspirations influence the relative degree of enthusiasm and commitment to each.

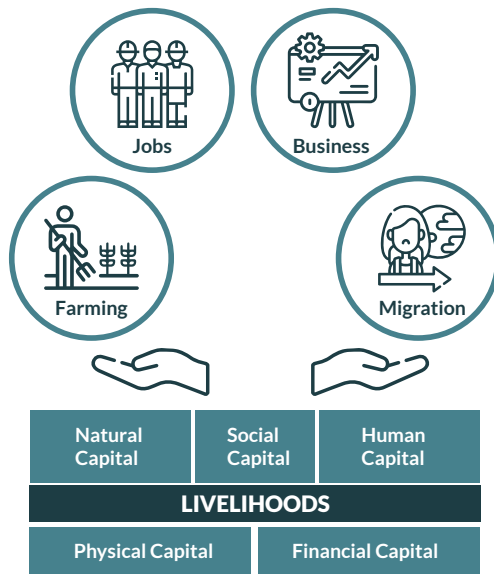


## INTRODUCTION – THE CHALLENGE IN AGRICULTURE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Despite decades of rural development programs, rural poverty is still one of the biggest challenges throughout Africa. With most rural households being involved with farming, agricultural technology development and promotion have been the most common entry points for raising rural incomes. More recently, increased concern about the production of sufficient amounts of food for the growing populations in countries facing food security challenges has further increased the focus on enhancing agricultural production. Advances in technology development have been made and a recent study found that investments by the CGIAR (a global agricultural research partnership) have generated a 10:1 return (Alston et al, 2020).

However, these investments and benefits have not been sufficient to meet the challenges as improved technologies tend not to reach the poorest households. Similarly, Nature (2020) in their editorial on CERES 2030 emphasize that food system investments in general do not address smallholder issues. One likely reason is that the livelihoods of rural smallholder households in developing countries are diverse and rarely rely solely on farming (see Figure 1).

With increasing reliance on income sources other than from farming, particularly for small farms (Harris, 2019), investment decisions are complex and involve trade-offs between multiple livelihood activities. Earlier research found that not all those who farm may want to be farmers (Verkaart et al. 2018). It has been argued that peoples' aspirations are likely to play an important role in decisions to invest time, money and effort (Mausch et al. 2018). Standard methods do not facilitate understanding of these complex, intangible concepts.

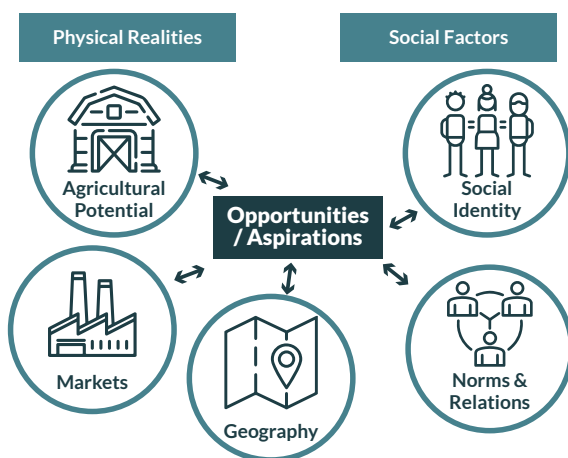


*Figure 1: Rural Households tend to juggle mixed livelihoods*

## WHAT WE WERE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND USING SENSEMAKER

The income composition of rural smallholder households is highly complex and changes over time. Often, which of the multiple income sources is the main driver of behaviour and which, if any, are supplemental is unclear. With agriculture as our main interest, this begs the question: what types of technology are people looking for to fulfil their farming needs? If they aspire to make a living from agriculture but have to supplement this with other businesses or wage income, they are more likely to look for high-value, profitable options that would allow them to upgrade their farming and perhaps phase out supplementary incomes - Dorward et al. (2009) dubbed this ‘stepping up’. Other households may see farming as a safety net while they are trying to establish their futures outside agriculture –in Dorward et al’s (2009) concept “stepping out” of agriculture. These people would more likely be looking for technologies that require little investment and effort so that they can focus on their aspirations outside farming. These dynamics and the trade-offs

involved are complex. Triads were an interesting tool to ask directly about underlying trade-offs between different influences and drivers of future visions. Aspirations are shaped by preferences, but people's "opportunity window" further influences them and moderates their decisions. The opportunity window is a combination of physical realities that affect farming potential and market access and social dynamics such as gender, age or norms that frame desirable lifestyles (see figure 2).



*Figure 2: Opportunities and aspirations moderated by the opportunity window*

Both aspirations and the opportunity window will implicitly affect life choices. However, these concepts are not normally directly verbalised or explicitly considered when making decisions. This adds further complexity when researchers attempt to understand them.

Direct questioning often biases results when respondents, consciously or unconsciously, try to 'game' the situation, perhaps hoping for benefits such as free fertilizer or seed if they provide answers that they believe the researchers desire. Attempts to use choice experiments have also highlighted that concepts such as aspirations or livelihood strategies are too abstract and can't be specified concretely enough to allow their application (Mangham et

al. 2009). Stories or short narratives, in response to a neutral, open prompting question, appeared to be more appropriate for identifying underlying sentiments without biasing the results towards researcher interest, in this case agriculture.

## WHAT WE FOUND

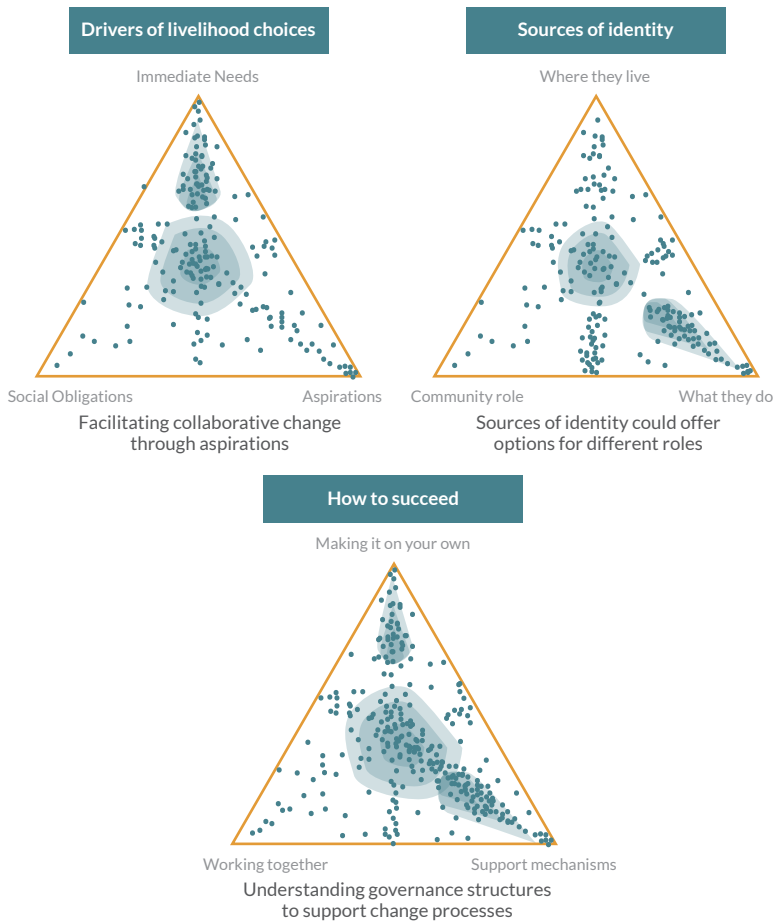
The results of this work with SenseMaker were published in a Special Issue of the European Journal of Development Research (*Rural aspirations in Africa – livelihood decisions and rural development trajectories*). The papers in that Special Issue used a variety of methods and tools, representing different disciplinary approaches. The overview (Mausch, Harris and Revilla Diez, 2021) highlights the different potential entry points for eliciting aspirations that can take a “bottom up” or “top down” form. It is not only target groups who have aspirations; other development actors (including governments and civil society institutions) also have visions for change in their target regions and aspirations for their futures.

Mausch et al. (2021), using the SenseMaker approach, focused specifically on aspirations and their influence on income portfolios across three sites differing in their agricultural potential and in the range of available off-farm opportunities in rural Kenya. Their analysis highlights the importance of the perceived opportunity space in the formation of aspirations. Here, the pursuit of aspirations is often hindered by immediate needs. When, for example, school fees have to be paid or the family has to be fed, the pursuit of new endeavours can be restricted by inherent risks. Yet within regions with apparently similar opportunities and personal preconditions, great heterogeneity of aspirations exists and highlights that aspirations are affected by more than just current realities. In particular, the notion that rural households that are engaged in farming are, by default, receptive to new agricultural technologies is being challenged here. In response to the prompt “Imagine your life in 10 years’ time, tell a story about how you got to that point from this present day”, only 65% of the respondents shared narratives involving agriculture.

Within the same population, La Rue et al. (2021) shed light on the sub-group of young people and their general interest in farming futures. Their work emphasises that standard approaches often fail to capture the prevalence, and importance, of mixed livelihoods. Using open prompts revealed that the tendency of the young to look for opportunities outside agriculture does not imply their complete abandonment of farming. Their rural roots appear relatively strong and urban migration is less attractive than has often been argued. Offering young people diverse options within rural areas would, in many cases, support their aspirations.

Urban migration currently implies an imbalance as there are social restrictions on who can pursue this opportunity. As Crossland et al. (2021) show using focus group discussions to deepen SenseMaker generated insights for a sample from Makueni county in Kenya, women face social norms that tie them to the rural areas whereas many men migrate to urban areas to supplement household incomes. This, however, results in women increasingly becoming *de facto* farm managers with greater freedom to make their own farming decisions and pursue their own aspirations within that (externally restricted) opportunity space. This increased agency of women also translates into greater confidence in reaching their aspired futures. Their views and ideas are, therefore, becoming more important for the design and roll out of agricultural support systems.

The implications of actors' aspirations for the effectiveness of extension services are the focus of Dilley et al. (2021). After analysing the farming aspirations of residents of Meru county in Kenya, extension workers and private sector technology providers were interviewed to understand if, and how, aspirations feature in their approaches. Extension agents appear cognisant of externally-designed development programs that do not account for local aspirations. Their daily work in turn is made more difficult as farmers' requirements are not met. The more explicit incorporation of these local voices in future project design and focus could significantly improve extension outcomes. Tools such as SenseMaker could support this design process to ensure stakeholder representation and a more explicit focus on heterogeneity.



*Figure 3: Entry points for development planning.*

For this to be successful, projects may need to rethink their definition of success and acknowledge that any agricultural solutions will only serve some rural people while others demand different products. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate the dynamics of aspirations as they are deeply embedded in local realities and may well also vary across different times of the year (e.g., pre- and post- harvest) and between years. Identifying and engaging with aspirations could provide a better understanding of the drivers that matter to those who farm. Wider development planning could benefit from the incorporation of aspiration-based considerations (see Figure 3 for examples).

## SENSEMAKER AS A TOOL IN THIS CASE

The publication of our results alongside other studies using different approaches offers insights on the niche SenseMaker occupies and how its combination with other methods provides an even richer picture. New approaches to targeting interventions could emerge and any inhibiting factors identified could be addressed to broaden opportunities and aspirations and support their achievement.

SenseMaker is one tool for using narratives as a diagnostic option and it has the advantage that it can be implemented regularly at large scale and with relatively low cost per interview. In the context of our interest in rural development, we think that its emphasis on probing an individual's motives and behaviours is well suited to the study of intra-household dynamics. Previous studies, including our own, have made the standard assumption that the household is the decision-making unit, something that we no longer believe to be the case. Properly designed and implemented it is able to reduce researcher bias, minimise gaming and provide new viewpoints on topics. On their own, however, SenseMaker results do not appear to be sufficiently actionable for most people and should be combined with other survey methods to provide the broad data required for planning.

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