

Adapted from:

Wiesmann, Urs (1998): Sustainable Regional Development in Rural Africa: Conceptual Framework and Case Studies from Kenya. Berne, Institute of Geography, University of Berne, pp:25-32.

Problems in selecting an appropriate theoretical framework

The requirement for an actor-oriented perspective raises the question of an appropriate theoretical framework which could enhance our understanding of activities and options open to local actors. Because it applies to human beings and human societies, this theoretical framework will not be explicative, operating according to rules that permit forecasts to be made with a certain degree of probability. Instead, it will consist of theoretical constructs which cannot be empirically proven right or wrong.¹ Therefore these theoretical constructs constitute a means of interpreting observable phenomena, such as human activities, rather than a means of providing causal explanation. This fundamental position (Stagl: 1993) implies that the validity of such theoretical constructs can be judged only to the extent that they allow meaningful interpretation of observable phenomena. Therefore, in searching for a theoretical framework to use in conjunction with the actor-oriented perspective we have postulated, we must address the question of 'meaningful interpretation'. Several criteria could be used to help define what meaningful interpretation is and thus to guide the selection of theoretical components used in a framework for the actor-oriented perspective. The following general criteria are frequently but usually implicitly applied in this regard:

- **An empirical criterion:** A theoretical component will be meaningful as part of a theoretical framework if it allows consideration of empirically observable phenomena and empirical methods.
- **A heuristic criterion:** A theoretical component will be meaningful in a theoretical framework if it allows formulation of new questions, hypotheses and empirical indicators.
- **An acceptance criterion:** A theoretical component will be meaningful if it finds acceptance within the scientific community, e.g. by adopting up-to-date terminology. This criterion abandons a pure focus on scientific constructs and addresses 'meaningful' within the social context and rules of the scientific communities.²
- **An applicability criterion:** A theoretical component will be meaningful if it can be used to develop recommendations for action by different actors. This criterion addresses the interface between the scientific community and society.
- **A goal-oriented criterion:** A theoretical component or pattern is meaningful if it allows interpretations which focus on political goals by addressing aspects of societies and actors related to these goals.
- **An ethical criterion:** A theoretical component will be meaningful if it is based on respect for the societies and the actors to which the theoretical framework applies.³ Respect in this context would mean taking account of the fundamental inexplicability of human beings.

In light of the topics to be considered from the actor-oriented perspective, it is clear that most of the above criteria will have to be taken into account and used in combination when selecting a theoretical framework from the virtually unlimited number of theories and approaches available in social sciences and economics.⁴ Aside from empirical and heuristic criteria, the goal-oriented criterion is especially important, because the actor-oriented perspective we have postulated is not only meant to explain single economic, social and ecological activities, but also to provide a framework of interpretation which clarifies the relations between these activities in the context of relevant development and environmental problems.

A further important criterion is the ethical one, which is significant because it addresses the concept of humanity implicit in contacts with particular groups of actors. This study is concerned with the interface between two cultures, as it applies a research approach thoroughly rooted in Western values to actors from a different cultural background. This makes the ethical criterion a particularly crucial one. If we further bear in mind that the history of research on societies in developing countries has been strongly characterised by implicit and even explicit cultural gaps inherent in studies of non-Western cultures conducted by Western researchers,⁵ it becomes clear that ethical criteria must play a major role in the selection of a theoretical framework of interpretation. The present study therefore takes a position which rejects one-dimensional and thus ultimately dehumanising explanatory and interpretative approaches⁶ as the sole theoretical reference point, even if they would appear to provide a good basis for empirical explanations.

Four components of a theory of action as an interpretative framework for an actor-oriented perspective

In light of the selection criteria discussed above, it will be appropriate to base our actor-oriented perspective on a theory of action. We shall see that this will allow us to consider the relations between the different activities of individual actors, and to examine the relations between local and external dynamics. Moreover, a theory of action will permit us to consider actors in a way which is based on the necessary respect and which does not ascribe human action to single influences or motives.

From the many constructs and approaches that have been developed in theories of action,⁷ we may identify several basic characteristics of a theory of action, which could serve as meta-theoretical guidelines for an actor-oriented perspective.⁸ These characteristics can be formulated as **four distinct theoretical components** which represent interrelated levels of aggregation:

The first and lowest of these aggregate levels is concerned with the concept of action as a dynamic combination of activity and its content of meaning. A second level addresses the combination of actions of an actor in terms of strategy of action. The third and fourth theoretical components go beyond the individual level by relating actions and strategies to the environment of actors in two different ways. The third component is concerned with activities in relation to dynamic conditions which influence activity, while the fourth component links the meaning of action to value systems and social norms.

At first we shall take a more thorough look at the role these four levels of aggregation play as components of a theory of action.

Concepts of 'action' and 'strategy of action' as the basis for an action theory position

We shall begin by discussing the two theoretical components which relate to concepts of 'action' and 'strategy of action' at the level of the individual actor.

- **First theoretical component: 'action' as a combination of activity and meaning**

The position of a theory of action makes a basic assumption about the concept of action: The action of a particular actor not only constitutes activity, but is a combination of activity and related meaning.⁹ It is important that no monocausal relation is assumed between meaning - or the aim of an action - and the activity that actually takes place. Rather, both aims and activities should be expected to change as part of an ongoing process of mutual adaptation. This process of adaptation can be understood in simple terms as the result of the tension that exists and develops between the aim of an action and the outcome of an action.¹⁰

This basic assumption about the concept of 'action' is of central importance in conceptual terms and also in relation to practical research, as it implies that the activities of individual actors can be regarded as rational in the sense that they relate and adjust to subjective meanings of action. This assumption of rationality - or meaningfulness - of activity applies not only to activities associated with individual decision-making processes but also to non-activities and ongoing practices.¹¹

- **Second theoretical component: 'strategy of action' as a combination of actions**

A second important basic assumption in the theory of action concerns the relations between the actions of an individual actor: A close connection between actions is postulated, both at the level of actual activities and at the level of meanings. The different activities of an individual actor thereby share the material and non-material resources at his or her disposal,¹² and form a **network of activities** which optimises resource use. At the same time, different aims taken together constitute a structure of meanings or aims, which positions and harmonises the different needs, wishes and visions of an actor. In accordance with the first basic assumption described above, there exists furthermore a dynamic link between the network of activities and the structure of **meanings or aims**. Resource use is thus optimised within the network of activities, in relation to the needs, wishes and visions expressed in the structure of meanings - and at the same time the structure of meanings or aims is modified and adapted depending on the outcomes of activities.

The total of all actions of an individual actor, which includes the dynamic relationship between the network of activities and the structure of meanings, can be designated as a **strategy of action** pursued by that actor. Use of the term 'strategy' emphasises a central implication for both research concepts and practice, i.e. that a certain activity or change in activity cannot be understood without taking account of how it is an integral part of the process of optimisation within the network of activities, and without relating the network of activities to the structure of meanings.¹³ Strategy furthermore implies that not only individual actions (see above) but also combinations of actions of an individual actor must be interpreted as rational, in the sense that processes of harmonisation are taking place within and between the network of activities and the structure of meanings.

This assumption of rationality can be further understood to mean that processes of harmonisation and optimisation in a strategy of action take place in accordance with certain fundamental rules or principles, thereby constituting a **rationale of action**. Two basic models of rationale of action are particularly relevant to the action theory discussion:¹⁴ One model assumes maximisation processes with reference to single aims, and the other postulates fulfilment of every single aim in the sense that none of them is completely unfulfilled. This brief description should make it clear that the selection of a basic model of rationale of action has a strong influence on how the potential for changes of action will be interpreted.¹⁵

Exposure to dynamic conditions of action and embedment in value systems, and social norms

The two components of a theory of action described so far are concerned with the individual or interpersonal level. They constitute the core of any action theory position. But actors' activities and strategies of action are also a function of their environment and social embedment in two different ways which can be described by the two theoretical components below:¹⁶

- **Third theoretical component: activities exposed to dynamic conditions of action**

Individual activities and their combination in a network of activities are not only a function of aims (see above), but also of factors in the actors' environment. Depending on the activity, these factors could include such things as market conditions, legal regulations, social controls,

technological capabilities, the availability and productivity of land, etc.¹⁷. These factors can be designated as **conditions of action**, and they play an important role in determining activities, whereby they relate to activities in two different ways: On the one hand, actors perceive these conditions in structural terms,¹⁸ weigh them in relation to each other, and interpret them in terms of the potentials they offer or the limitations they impose on activities. In combination with the structure of meanings (see above) they define the framework of decision-making for actors and thus constitute activities. On the other hand, these conditions can also have a direct effect on the results of activities, regardless of how they are initially perceived or interpreted when activities are being considered.¹⁹ However, perceptions and interpretations of the results of activities in turn influence the decision-making framework for further activities.

Although conditions of action can directly influence the outcome of activities, these considerations imply that **perception, valuation, and interpretation of dynamic conditions of action** play a central role in any attempt to understand either actors' activities or changes in these activities. Without entering into the broad theoretical discussion on the processes of perception and interpretation of conditions of action²⁰, it must be stated at this point that these processes cannot be understood purely at the individual level. On the contrary, they are strongly influenced by the particular sociocultural embedment of the actors, as every concrete social context contains specific social values and norms which regulate how these conditions are to be interpreted,²¹ and individual actors are at least partially bound to respect these rules.²²

One important characteristic of most of the conditions of action is that they are dynamic, i.e. they are subject to permanent change or undergo periodic or irregular variations. These **dynamics of the conditions** of action influence the outcomes of activity in ways which actors can only anticipate to a limited extent when contemplating activity. Perception, valuation, interpretation, and methods of coping with uncertainty about the outcomes of activities are therefore at the core of strategies of action. Hence, these strategies must strike a balance between adjustments of activities to the dynamics of conditions²³ and influences on the conditions of action in order to stabilise their dynamics.²⁴ The individual and social quest to develop strategies of action between these two poles can be seen as a creative process of adaptation and innovation. This process constitutes the basis of the indigenous development potential which is one of the key concerns of the postulated actor-oriented perspective.²⁵

As taking account of environmental issues in the context of development problems is one of the central aims of the actor-oriented perspective (see document 'The Relevance of an Actor-Oriented Perspective on Regional Development' in GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientations 1'), it must be pointed out that - according to the action theory position - **ecological aspects** must be regarded as among the dynamic conditions of action. In particular this means that ecological aspects, on the one hand, can have direct effects on the outcome of activities and may change as a result of activities, but, on the other hand, that their relevance to action is a function of patterns and processes of perception, valuation, and interpretation.

- **Fourth theoretical component: meanings as embedded in value systems and social norms**

Not only the aspect of activity in the concept of 'action' (see above), but also the aspect of meaning is rooted in, and dependent on, aspects of the environment of actors. This is addressed by the fourth component of our action theory position, which postulates that the meanings and aims of individual action are influenced by social values and norms. This implies that not only patterns and processes of perception, valuation and interpretation of conditions of action (see above) but also the actions themselves are shaped by the embedment of actors in their societal context. Social values and norms thus provide a

framework of orientation and rules for evaluating the meaningfulness of action. In other words, value systems and social norms determine the social **standard of evaluation** for particular actions, strategies of action, and outcomes of actions,²⁶ to which individual actors are bound to a certain degree. The resulting **interplay between individual and social notions of meanings** of action - in combination with the analogous interplay involved in valuation and interpretation of the dynamic conditions of action (see above) - is the central basis for processes of innovation, with regard to the activity component as well as the meaning component of action.

Because the action theory position links the meaning of action to processes shaped by value systems and social norms, questions arise about constituting, mediating and enforcing these values and norms. Without further examination of this point, it can be stated here that factors such as **social networks, social control, and social hierarchies** play a key role in the shaping of action, changes in action, and processes of innovation.

In conclusion, we can state that although actions and strategies of action are dependent on dynamic conditions of action and on social values and norms, the actors themselves do not react only to these influences. Rather, it is their embedment in social contexts and their exposure to dynamic conditions of action which defines the degrees of freedom within which they continuously optimise their specific strategies of action. This process of optimisation can be understood as a **creative act** which is characterised by the interplay between **action and reaction** and which relates to the activity component, as well as to the meaning component of action.

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¹ According to the scientific position of 'critical rationalism' (see Popper, 1979, Chalmers, 1986), no theory can be proven right, although it may be proven wrong under certain conditions.

² This wider perspective which goes beyond the level addressed by positions such as 'critical rationalism' is e.g. referred to by the concept of 'paradigm' (Kuhn, 1970 and 1974) or 'research programme' (Lakatos, 1974(a) and 1974(b)) - for a summarising discussion of these positions see e.g. Chalmers, 1986.

³ According to this criterion, a theory based on the principle of 'homo oeconomicus' will not be meaningful, although it might be according to the 'empirical' or the 'applicability' criterion. The criterion is also closely related to the discussion on responsibility by science (see e.g. Shea & Sitter (eds.), 1989).

⁴ See e.g. the discussions in Wiesmann, 1996, Sottas, 1992, Ellis, 1993, or Lachenmann, 1990.

⁵ Among others, Chambers, 1989, has given detailed attention to this strong division and its implications for research and development practice, and developed alternative empirical approaches as a result.

⁶ This refers especially to theories which reduce explanation of human activities to a single dominant motive. Two such theories - based on maximisation of profit and minimisation of risk - are discussed in Wiesmann (1998) or in the document 'Peasant Rationale of Action: Two Theoretical Approaches Important in Development Policy' (GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

⁷ We refer here mainly to Weichhart, 1980, 1987, 1989, Werlen, 1986, 1987, 1995(a), Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1987 (1992 in German), Bourdieu, 1980, Long, 1989, 1993, and Miesbach, 1991.

⁸ Reference to a meta theoretical framework is made here to emphasise that concrete theoretical elements can be linked with the basic theory of action, according to the topic and the particular actors being considered (see also Wiesmann, 1998 or the document 'Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy' in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

⁹ This basic assumption clearly distinguishes the theory of action from behavioural approaches, which have also played a significant role in human geography during the 60ies and 70ies.

¹⁰ In light of the theory of 'cognitive dissonance', this is a simplification, as a certain individually defined degree of tension is always maintained - or even must be maintained.

¹¹ This broadly defined concept of action, which also includes activities not being performed, offers the possibility of new approaches, particularly in relation to development involving rural populations. For example, it allows new interpretations of frequently recurring local resistance to proposed development measures (see e.g. Scott, 1985), thereby providing the basis for participatory modification of these measures (see e.g. Chambers, 1989, Scoones et al., 1994, or Schšnuth & Kievelitz, 1994)

¹² Access to information or secure social relationships could be given as examples of non-material resources.

¹³ In relation to rural populations this could be interpreted to mean that individual agricultural activities, and changes in these activities, cannot be meaningfully understood if they are not seen against the background of optimisation of resource use (e.g. labour), along with the remaining fields of activity pursued by an actor (e.g. non-agricultural activities or social activities) and their meaning (e.g. minimisation of existential and social risks). On this point, see Wiesmann (1998) or the document 'Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy' (GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

¹⁴ See Wiesmann, 1998 or the document 'Peasant rational of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy' in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1' where the two models are discussed in relation to peasantry.

¹⁵ For this reason, the contrast between these two basic models for interpreting rationales and strategies of action plays an important role in discussion of rural populations and their development potential. Application of these two models to discussions of development will thus be considered in greater detail in Wiesmann (1998) or the document 'Peasant rational of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy' (GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

¹⁶ Within the action theory position the range of concepts and terminologies relating to these particular components is considerably larger than that relating to 'action' and 'strategies of action'. The present study will not be concerned with this great variety. Rather, we shall briefly describe the position taken here which is guided by the topical questions relating to local and external development potentials (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document 'The relevance of an actor-oriented perspective on regional development' in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

¹⁷ This list could easily be expanded, and can only be made more precise in a specific context of action. Compare also Wiesmann, 1998 or the document 'The influence of dynamic conditions of action in transforming smallholder societies' in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 3'.

¹⁸ Compare e.g. Giddens, 1984.

¹⁹ A typical example is the influence of precipitation on agricultural yields which is - in principle - independent of the initial assessment of potential rainfall made by land users.

²⁰ See e.g. Tanner & Foppa, 1995. With reference to environmental perception see e.g. Ittelson, 1977.

²¹ This important aspect has been expressed by Bourdieu, 1980, quoted in Sottas, 1992, as 'habitus', a concept which describes how individual patterns of interpretation and action are socially conditioned in a non-deterministic way.

²² The differences between individual patterns of interpretation by single actors or categories of actors, and interpretation as a function of social norms provide a significant impulse for innovation in a specific social context. On the relation between action, knowledge and social representation see e.g. Von Cranach, 1992.

²³ Spreading risk among different spheres of action is one example of adaptation (see Wiesmann (1998) or the document 'Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy' (GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1').

²⁴ Here it must be pointed out that most of the conditions of action are almost completely if not entirely beyond the control of individual actors and local societies.

²⁵ In this context, the concept and term of 'margins of action', which is often used in discussions of development, must be understood as describing subjective spheres of options (see e.g. Foppa, 1995, and Tanner & Foppa, 1995)

²⁶ It is worthwhile here to call attention once again to the 'habitus' concept of Bourdieu, 1980, which describes the social and cultural conditioning of patterns of action.