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Using livelihoods, wellbeing and poverty frameworks to understand the interrelationships between humans and nature

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This paper describes one section of the conceptual development of the HDN, a new IUCN initiative, the purpose of which is to generate new knowledge on the interrelationship between humans and nature, focusing on the use and reliance on ecosystem services and their contribution to local livelihoods and well-being. In this paper we examine poverty, social wellbeing and sustainable livelihoods frameworks with the purpose of generating an interdisciplinary framework for approaching, understanding and assessing the relationships between humans and nature. We identify the major overlaps and gaps among poverty, social wellbeing and sustainable livelihoods and build a new interdisciplinary framework that can be used in empirical analyses of the interactions and feedbacks between humans and nature. Our examination shows several factors that are frequently missing from analyses and require greater emphasis – direct and indirect contribution of ecosystem services, cultural norms and values, and subjective assessments of material and non-material dimensions. Further, people must have a role in identifying the dimensions that are important for them to live well and to fulfil their desires and aspirations. Disaggregated analyses, focusing at the individual rather than household level, should be used to provide valuable information about intra-household distributional issues and ensure gender sensitivity. Analyses of contextual factors influencing the opportunities and constraints are also critical, and help to answer the questions of why people are poor, why they have (or do not have) access to resources. There is little empirical evidence regarding the ways in which ecosystem services contribute to well-being or poverty alleviation, and there is a poor understanding of the interrelationships, and the interactions and feedbacks between them. This new framework will help researchers and analysts overcome gaps in our knowledge about the mechanisms by which ecosystem services can contribute to livelihoods and poverty alleviation.