

**“Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches:
Engaging with SL or just best development practice?”**

Catherine Allen¹ and Omar Sattaur²
Paper presented at Bradford Workshop, 29 – 30 May 2002

Abstract

Over the last few years, there has been increasing enthusiasm for using and developing Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLAs) amongst development agencies, such as Oxfam, CARE International, UNDP and DFID. These approaches are being used in a variety of project and programme contexts, and must be bought into and understood by a huge variety of people and work at many levels. DFID has invested considerable resources into promoting SLAs, and designing and implementing projects that are based on these approaches.

There are now many case studies that demonstrate the value of adopting SLAs. As part of an ongoing process of promoting SLAs, and of sharing the learning resulting from their practice, DFID commissioned CIDT to organise a series of seminars in the UK between October 2001 and March 2002 which attracted participants of varying development backgrounds and expertise. These seminars were planned around development themes and focused on the potential value of SL approaches to these different areas of development practice, such as governance, rural poverty, private sector and enterprise development, urban poverty and so on. The seminars featured relevant case studies so as to provide the context for participants to explore the relevance of SL approaches to their work.

During the course of the seminar series, participants identified constraints and concerns regarding the operationalisation of SLAs that cut across all sectors. Many of these issues have recurred in previous discussions on the utility of SLAs. They included:

- *Flexibility in programme and project cycle management*
- *Managing expectations*
- *Holistic working in a sectoral environment*
- *Language*
- *Monitoring and evaluation*
- *Capacity*
- *Practicality*

This paper lists the benefits of taking SLAs and constraints as identified by participants. It summarises discussions that took place during the seminars and makes some suggestions for steps that could be taken to mitigate the impact of the obstacles identified. One clear conclusion from the seminars was the need to consolidate the lessons from current experience and concentrate on making the approach more accessible, practical and effective.

¹ Senior Lecturer, Centre for International Development and Training, University of Wolverhampton, Gorway Road, Walsall, WS1 3BD. C.R.Allen@wlv.ac.uk

² Freelance Journalist, Nithen Lodge, 39 Manchester Road, Buxton, Derbyshire, SK17 6SR. omarsattaur@onetel.net.uk

Introduction

Sustainable livelihoods approaches have their roots in the work of Conway and Chambers (Conway 1985, Chambers 1992). In the context of poverty eradication, they attempt to conceptualise best development practice into a set of principles concerned with:

- Focusing on poor people's priorities
- Being responsive and participatory in addressing poverty issues
- Adopting a holistic view of the causes of poverty
- Acknowledging the need to enter into partnerships with all sectors of society in order to effectively reduce poverty
- Ensuring that interventions are sustainable economically, institutionally, socially and environmentally.
- Recognising that people's livelihood strategies are dynamic and attempts to address poverty must be flexible enough to cope with dynamism

Sustainable Livelihoods thinking has grown from applications in natural resource management to encompass a broad range of sectors. Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLAs) integrate well-established ways of working and focus on policy as well as field level work. These approaches are being used in a variety of project and programme contexts (DFID 2001¹), and must therefore be bought into and understood by a huge variety of people and work at many levels.

There has been increasing enthusiasm amongst development agencies for using and developing SLAs. Oxfam (Neefjes 1999), CARE International (Drinkwater and Rusinow, 1999), UNDP and DFID (Carney 1999) have each found merit in SL thinking and have developed their own approach based on the same principles. DFID adopted and developed its version as a result of the 1997 White Paper on International Development which committed DFID to 'policies and actions, which promote sustainable livelihoods' (DFID 1997).

DFID has invested considerable resources into promoting SLAs (for example, the website www.livelihoods.org), and designing and implementing projects that are based on these approaches. The Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office (SLSO) has helped to further learning and development of SLAs both within DFID and between development agencies and professionals. The Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT) has been directly involved with SL development, training and practice since 1999, both in association with DIFD and with other partners (Dearden et al 2002). CIDT was commissioned to develop and run a series of Consultants Fora in 2000 (Allison 2000), and a further series of seminars in 2001-2002 (ref the seminar reports 2002).

There are now many case studies that demonstrate the value of adopting the principles espoused by SLAs. Some of these case studies provided the context for participants of the 2001-2002 seminar series to explore the relevance of SLAs to their work. The seminar series, held in UK between

"Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches: Engaging with SL or just best development practice?"
Paper presented at Bradford Workshop, 29 – 30 May 2002
Catherine Allen and Omar Sattaur

October 2001 to March 2002 was planned around development themes such as governance, rural poverty, private sector and enterprise development urban poverty and natural resource management and attracted over 370 participants from varying development backgrounds and expertise including:

- Independent consultants
- Private sector personnel
- DFID Advisors
- Professionals from research centres and institutions
- INGO and NGO workers
- Government partners
- Personnel from other donor and development agencies

Practitioners' ability to engage with and implement SLAs varies according to their experience and understanding of the development process and the institutional factors they encounter or can influence. From their own experiences, seminar participants drew attention to constraints to the operationalisation of SLAs that cut across all sectors. As might be expected, many of the same concerns emerged during the Consultants Fora in 2000 (Allison 2000), and in other events that CIDT has contributed to (Dearden et al 2002).

The following paper summarises participant's discussions during the 2001-2002 seminar series and, to a lesser extent, that of the fora held in 2000. The issues presented here are the summarised views of participants at these events, and not those of DFID.

What are the benefits of taking a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach?

The perceived benefits of taking a Livelihoods Approach, as expressed during the seminar series and fora, have remained consistent since DFID adopted SLAs. If anything, they have become more refined as experience of their utility increases. Case studies helped participants focus on the practicalities of adopting SLAs; and they took these issues further during their discussions. The main issues are listed below:

- (i) *Formalising the principles of best practice*
Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches formalise existing principles by bringing together the best of a variety of development approaches that have been tried and tested over the years. SLAs prompt development professionals to focus on poor people and to adopt participatory approaches in order to understand their needs and increase their voice in the development process.
- (ii) *Understanding complexity, impact and outcomes*
Participants believed that SLAs offered a good way of understanding the complexity of peoples livelihoods. They encourage development activities to shift away from purely sectoral concerns to focus on people's strengths and aspirations.

The framework can provide a useful 'route map' to asking pertinent questions about the actors and interactions within development initiatives and the likelihood of that initiative achieving positive outcomes for stakeholders. They

Rice-Fish programme in Bangladesh: Do livelihoods approaches change everything? – A further phase of this programme adopted a livelihoods perspective that resulted in a change in focus at 'Goal' level from technology delivery and improved livelihoods to building social capital and human capital for broader livelihood gains. The programme also engaged in capacity building of project NGOs, increased emphasis on advocacy at local levels, involved partners in strategy and included livelihoods monitoring in project M&E. This demonstrates that it is possible to broaden a programme from a narrow entry point, and that a livelihoods goal is more than just window dressing.

include an appreciation of how international and national policies and regulations influence the choices that poor people make. By emphasising the perspective of local people, as well as that of external experts, the approach focuses attention on relationships between development actors, their interactions and how these help or hinder livelihood outcomes.

SLAs can help to analyse the 'fit' between government policy and ground reality, and the likelihood of strategies actually delivering policy that addresses poor people's priority concerns.

(iii) *Encouraging flexibility*

Operationalising SLAs require greater flexibility in project and programme process, towards more sustainable delivery and process issues. They also raise the possibility of projects moving into areas that were previously inaccessible to them. Through their inherent breadth of vision, SLAs use entry points (even purely technological ones) as a means of engaging with the broader context. There is a greater acknowledgement of the variety of actors at different levels, and trends affecting livelihoods.

(iv) *Supporting new development initiatives*

Many participants felt that SLAs could establish a link between economic growth and pro-poor policies. Developing pro-poor strategies is likely to involve mapping institutional links and requires local champions at all levels of the negotiation process. It was felt that SLAs were likely to be more operational at decentralised levels of government and that they can support the change process. Much has already been achieved through decentralisation and use of NGOs as a channel for development funds, for example.

(v) *Inter-disciplinary working*

Participants agreed that SLAs encourage sectors to work together. They facilitate the sharing of different perspectives on poverty and its causes. Many felt it to be a useful tool for reaching and influencing people who begin with a different mindset or way of working. SLAs are also provoking debate between advocates of other approaches.

What are the perceived obstacles for SLAs?

The most interesting outcomes of the seminar series, were the key challenges and limitations that participants identified. Worryingly, these points appear not to have varied over time. They can be found in discussions at the Consultants Fora in 2000, and in several of the international training courses/workshops conducted by CIDT over the past year. The seminar case studies also supported these issues just as clearly as they reaffirmed participants own views of the benefits of SLAs (see above).

1. Implications for interventions:

(i) *Missing links; Poverty, power relations, gender, the environment and human rights*

Many participants felt that SLAs were insufficiently explicit about poverty and power relations. Although SLAs encourage a more realistic appreciation of the political context, poor governance

Nepal's Rural Infrastructure Development Project (RIDP) – Despite superficial success, RIDP shows the lack of accountability of District institutions, and how readily project benefits can be captured by those other than the intended beneficiaries. The fundamental lesson is that such problems are inevitable when project designs assume that stakeholders naturally cooperate together and behave altruistically. Clearer and more realistic institutional arrangements are required, which include robust safeguards and identifiable incentives for stakeholders to act in keeping with project's agreed objectives.

maintains power imbalances, which permit elites to continue to capture benefits at the expense of the poor. By encouraging a greater diversity of views, SLAs challenge existing power structures and raise the potential for conflict. Do SLAs ensure that benign rather than malign voices are heard? Some governance arrangements make the poor poorer, for example, by destroying informal and traditional systems.

“Gender appears neglected in the SLAs – certainly not tackled in any case studies” - Participant from Private Sector and Enterprise Development Seminar, 2001

Participants also observed that there was no mention of gender and human rights issues, or consideration of how to balance trade-offs. Some drew attention to areas in which SLAs would conflict with environmental concerns.

During the CIDT training courses in Brazil, participants decided to add some new principles to those already existing for DFIDs SLA which included consideration of gender, power relations and.....
(Marzetti 2001, Dearden et al 2002)

(ii) *Holistic working in a sectoral environment*

Do SLAs fit with normal government procedures? Participants questioned the sustainability of SLAs as they require holistic working in a largely sectoral environment. Most institutions do not encourage or support cross-sectoral initiatives, interdisciplinary working and participatory approaches.

(iii) *Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)*

The requirements of M&E are often dependent on scale and timeframe, i.e. who the results are for and against what criteria the outcomes are being judged. Comments arose about the difficulty in attributing livelihood outcomes to specific project activities. Process indicators are also difficult to measure and could prove impractical against current criteria for accountability. Outcomes reflected in changes in technical, social, political and natural resources follow different time-scales which requires increased flexibility in programme and project cycle management (PPCM).

(iv) *Language and translating the concepts*

There have been difficulties in translating many of the concepts and terms into other languages and cultures. For example, in Spanish the term 'sustainable livelihoods approach' becomes 'a sustainable way of life' - *medios de vida sostenible*. As this is quite a mouthful, it is common to drop any reference to sustainable, which further reduces the connection with the concept it is trying to describe. There is no direct translation available in Russian, either, so the term has become something like 'rural income generating and employment' - *Устойчивое жизнеобеспечение*. Success has been achieved where implementing institutions have sought to revisit the concepts from their own perspective and adapted SLAs to their specific context (Dearden et al 2002).

Confusion over meaning is not limited to other languages, but across disciplines. The analysis of assets and capabilities helps to move away from the restrictive interpretation of poverty as being mainly about income. However, most people unfamiliar with SLAs understand 'livelihood' as something related to income or employment. This is not to say that the term is unsuitable. This example simply highlights the importance of seeking a common understanding with partners and project/programme staff as quickly as possible.

(v) *Raising expectations*

SLAs work by focusing on what matters to people and acknowledging that multiple and dynamic strategies are adopted to secure livelihoods. By taking a holistic view of peoples priorities, there is a danger that peoples expectations are raised beyond the capabilities of the partner organisations or project/programme remit to meet them. Stakeholders need to be adequately sensitised and aware of the realities of the approach before a project or programme begins.

(vi) Oversimplification

Some participants raised concerns that SLAs oversimplify very complex realities, which are scale and time dependent.

Others drew attention to the danger of 'going through the motions' and ending up with dressed-up sectoral projects, or following a similar path to

that of the Integrated Rural Development Projects of the 1970s.

Managing Karnataka's Scarce Water

Resources – The Karnataka Watershed Development Project (KAWAD) follows many of the principles of SLAs, and has adopted SL-thinking in a pragmatic and realistic way. A Water Resources Audit (WRA) showed that elites often captured resources, that village level institutions are created that are outside government, that there is little consideration of upstream/downstream equity or wider policy issues when village plans for water resources management are drawn up. The presentation stressed the need for cross-sectoral livelihoods analysis in policy formation.

2. Implications for agencies:*(vii) Flexibility in project and programme management*

By their nature, projects and programmes that adopt SLAs require flexibility and long-term commitment to design and implementation in order to provide an enabling environment for the principles of holistic analysis and participation. This presents difficulties given the current donor planning and budget cycles. Current funding horizons are not necessarily compatible with SL-informed activities and accessing the needs of the chronically poor and marginalised will demand more resources. The bidding and value-for-money culture was also not considered to be conducive to truly process oriented working.

Many observed that there is a serious mismatch between government procedures, political agendas and SLAs, which have serious implications for the sustainability of SL interventions.

(viii) Capacity

All participants agreed that SLAs would only be as useful or limiting as those that use it. SLAs can encourage best (or better) practice but cannot guarantee it. SLAs demand different skill sets, such as those of conflict resolution, interdisciplinary working, adaptive management, participation, and so on. This has implications on recruitment and human resource development policies for aid agencies and other organisations that adopt SLAs. Strong political leadership is important in promoting change.

Participants suggested that more needed to be done to support NGOs, consultants, donors and partners in recipient countries. SLAs place emphasis on improving communication channels between poor people and service providers by; improving the ability of the poor to articulate their livelihood priorities, and by improving the ability of service

providers to access that information, respond to it and be accountable. Experiences showed that technical capacity and administrative and financial imperatives constrain the ability to take on these new roles. Strengthened and legitimised civil society organisations can enable people, particularly the poor, to articulate their needs.

(ix) *Scale*

Planning and resource allocation must take place at all levels. SLAs are intrinsically cross-sectoral, and assume a joined-up view of government from a demand perspective. There are inherent difficulties in linking macro-level policies with micro-level realities within current institutional environments. Most institutions do not encourage or support cross-sectoral initiatives, interdisciplinary working and participatory approaches.

(x) *Is it practical and accessible?*

It was felt that SLAs were often presented in a way that might be too intellectual, complex and off-putting. Participants at the seminars acknowledged the danger of 'SL jargon' and 'value-laden' language alienating some people. This was reinforced by perceptions recorded during the fora 2000 that SL approaches were something appropriated by academics, imposed on partners, and therefore potentially alienating.

"Paucity of 'good practice' case studies" Participant at the first Governance Seminar, 2002

"..there is a long way to go from concept to operation" Participant at the second Governance Seminar, 2001

"Greater discussion on how to implement these projects" Participant at the Water and Livelihoods Seminar, 2001

"Need better definition of approach and more on practical implementation at each level" Participant at the Rural Poverty seminar, 2001

Participants at the seminars asked if there were simple and practical guidelines on how to implement SLAs in the field under existing project and budget cycles, and what tools and approaches support implementation.

"SL – get rid of jargon. More southern participants please!" Participant at the Water and Livelihoods Seminar, 2001

- (xi) *Influence and the changing architecture of aid (operating within or outside government processes)*

Livelihoods, Governance and rural poverty reduction in Uganda

– There are contradictions between the goals of decentralised rural taxation and Uganda's comprehensive framework for poverty reduction, comprising the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) and Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture. Rural families encounter a system of taxation that essentially cripples all levels of private enterprise, so that decentralised authority has become part of the problem of rural poverty rather than part of it's solution.

A further area of concern that emerged in later seminars was whether and how DFID might remain concerned with SLAs given the move towards sector-wide approaches and budgetary support. Agencies, such as DFID, are increasingly working through higher level 'partnerships'; in the form of grants or budgetary support for partners to spend in line with their own priorities and procedures. This raises concerns about the priorities and capacity of largely sector-focused

government bodies to adopt SLAs in their work without political support. How can the necessary linkages between different decision-making levels be strengthened without longer-term and consistent partnerships and sustained efforts to build capacity?

DFID and other agencies will have to maintain good relations with in-country and international partners if they wish to influence both governance and its impact on local development. Many questioned whether SLAs fit with current national and international agendas, or if countries truly consider that they will become 'richer' by focusing on the poor.

Participants warned that there are many other approaches to development and change management that are equally deserving of attention. They were concerned that SLAs were being presented as the only way forward.

- (xii) *Perceptions; how long is it likely to last?*

SLAs learn important lessons from past experiences and represent good development practice. Participants and presenters alike expressed concerns that the benefits of SLAs as a common sense approach to encourage best practice were being hampered by the evangelical way in which they were often put forward. Participants gave many examples of past strategies and approaches that were hailed as the answer to all problems and were then superseded, such as Integrated Rural Development. Participants observed that SLAs were not mainstream within DFID and were not the only approach to development.

Conclusions

None of the issues raised by participants during the fora or seminar series are new. Evidence to support them can be found from a variety of sources,

ranging from conversations in project and NGO offices to project documents and the case studies that were used for the seminar series. However, the seminar series has demonstrated that these obstacles are prevalent in all sectors because they relate to operationalising SLAs (i.e. the obstacles are non-sectoral). In comparing the discussions at the recent seminar series, with those of the Consultants Fora in 2000, and with similar events that CIDT has facilitated, it is clear that SLAs have moved forward a great deal and are continuing to prove their worth, but the obstacles have remained unchanged. If efforts are not made to address them in some way, will they be sufficient to prevent SLAs achieving their full potential in the long run? This is not a question that can be answered here, but hopefully this paper provides a stimulus for further discussion at all levels.

In the meantime, there are some simple recommendations that we feel able to make as a result of these experiences:

The way forward? Suggestions for mitigating some of these obstacles

- Meeting the demand for simple, practical and common sense information for field level practitioners on ways of putting the SL approaches into practice.
- Broadening the dialogue between development professionals to include other approaches, use of tools, and so on, through interactive events such as workshops, seminars and fora.
- Accessing and exchanging more of the lessons that are needed in order to address these issues. This should include experiences from new sources or those that are difficult to reach, e.g. local NGOs, project offices, partner governments, private sector. These organisations have a wealth of 'hands-on' practical experience but will require a different and more proactive approach, plus support in production of materials.
- Providing early hands-on support for in-country project partners and other practitioners in the form of open and reflective dialogue
- Develop experiential training on a project/programme needs basis, supported by good quality case studies and interactive training materials.

Supporting references and further reading

Farrington, J. (2001). "Sustainable livelihoods, rights and the new architecture of aid." *Natural Resource Perspectives*, No.69, June 2001. Overseas Development Institute, London.

Rhoades, R.E. (1999?). "Participatory Watershed Research and Management: Where the shadow falls". Gatekeeper 81. Gatekeeper Series, International Institute for Environment and Development, London.

Reports from DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar Series, 2001-2002. Available on-line from www.livelihoods.org

Moser, C.O.N. et al (2001). "To claim our rights: Livelihood security, human rights and sustainable development". Workshop paper from ODI Poverty and Public Policy Group (PPPG) workshop on Human Rights, Asset and Livelihood Security, and Sustainable Development.

Carney, D. et al (1999). "Livelihoods approaches compared: A brief comparison of the livelihoods approaches of the UK DFID, CARE, Oxfam and the UNDP". November 1999, DFID.

Langdon, K. J. (1999). "Sustainable livelihoods: in search of meaning". October 1999. MPhil Thesis.....

Dearden, P. et al (2002). "Sustainable livelihood approaches: from the framework to the field". May 2002. Workshop paper for Supporting Livelihoods, Evolving Institutions, 29-30 May, University of Bradford.

Alison, G. Report from DFID Sustainable Livelihoods For a, 2000. Centre for International Development and Training, University of Wolverhampton.

Chambers, R. (1992). Sustainable rural livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st century. *IDS Discussion Paper 296. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies*

Conway, G. (1985). Agroecosystem analysis. *Agricultural Administration, No.20*

Neefjes, K. (1999). Oxfam GB and sustainable livelihoods: lessons from learning. *Based on papers presented at the DFID Natural Resource Advisers Conference*

Drinkwater, M. and Rusinow, T. (1999). Application of CARE's livelihoods approach. *Paper presented at the DFID Natural Resource Advisers Conference*

Carney, D. (1999). Livelihoods approaches compared. *London: Department for International Development*

Carney, D. (2001). Sustainable livelihoods approaches: progress and possibilities for change. *Forthcoming Publication*

DFID (1997). Eliminating world poverty: a challenge for the 21st century. *White Paper on International Development. London: DFID*

DFID (2001¹). Sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets. *London: DFID*

DFID (2001²). Poverty: Bridging the Gap. Guidance notes. *London: DFID*

"Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches: Engaging with SL or just best development practice?"
Paper presented at Bradford Workshop, 29 – 30 May 2002
Catherine Allen and Omar Sattaur