

Sustainable Livelihoods: Lessons Learned from Global Programme Experience

The following is a brief synopsis of some of the lessons we have learned from the design and implementation of sustainable livelihood (SL) programmes at the country level. As such, these insights may not be new and often resemble problems/constraints common to many other development initiatives. For example, the need to have nationals intimately involved in the planning and implementation process is an issue that has been identified as critical to “ownership”. Yet, we still see a disproportionate reliance on external “experts” at the expense of developing the capacities of national.

One solution to this particular problem is to have long term partnership building based on iterative team building exercises between “insiders” and “outsiders” revolving around concrete products or processes (in this case, how to design a SL programme). This particular strategy has been quite successful in several countries (South Africa, Yemen, Egypt) among teams/steering committees responsible for national/regional programme formulation and implementation

A second point has been the time-frame for programme design and implementation. In each country where SL programmes exist, the preparatory process has taken at least one year. While this seems extraordinarily long, it is warranted. Introducing and explaining the concept of SL (or integrated programming) to stakeholders is a time consuming exercise. The processes of consensus-building, negotiation and agreement are based on trust and generating trust and cooperation among organizations/departments/individuals who do not normally have opportunity to share their experiences, let alone work together. Thus, adequate time is needed to ensure that all actors are comfortable in their respective roles.

With the above as a backdrop, we go on to illustrate some specifics related to SL programme design and implementation. We attempt to go from general lessons to specific ones and how particular countries have met challenges. This document should be viewed as companion to other SL materials produced by UNDP (in particular the Global Programme Document and Concept Note).

1. The level of implementation of SL programmes is generally at the district-level where participatory analysis takes place at two inter-related levels: the household and the community level. Intra-household analysis, while part of the SL methodology, has in a few specific cases not been uniformly adopted. This means that gender issues appear to be ignored and are not an integral part of the overall process. Some gender concerns are captured in the participatory analysis through disaggregated information on adaptive and coping behaviour among men and women.

There are many plausible reasons for continuing concern. The first may be an issue of time and the burden of conducting surveys on a selected community. A second reason is that there are no qualified persons who can undertake a gender analysis (participatory or otherwise) in the various SL steps. Irrespective of the case, greater

attention needs to be placed on this issue and recruitment of partners who will implement the programme will need to be gender aware and able to undertake gender analyses for SL.

2. Involving the gamut of local organizations, alongside key government ministries and donor organizations, in the planning and implementation process cannot be emphasized enough. By this we mean organizations at the community level (i.e., CBOs, VDCs), intermediary bodies such as NGOs, NGO networks, federated organizations (i.e., carpenters, trade unions) and the like. By opening up the planning process, a broad range of stakeholders are involved and gain ownership over the overall effort. While this is not necessarily a new issue, it has oftentimes been overlooked, assumed to have taken place, or not given sufficient attention. Some positive byproducts are greater interaction between civil society and state actors, and shared decision-making on district development priorities.

While we have learned that stakeholder participation is necessary in the SL process at the country level, it is not sufficient. Participation needs to be coupled with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including their capacity to manage development processes. This is particularly important with regards to which organizations (or individuals) have a role and responsibility for decision-making, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, resource allocation and so forth. The ultimate aim to have a better understanding, through negotiation, of the interests, ability and commitment of stakeholders who participate in an initiative. The result is an improved working relationship among partners and transparency of decision-making.

This is not to say that the consultation process is without problems. Oftentimes, CBO representatives are brought to the planning table with the best intentions. Given the top-down nature of planning processes, however, little responsibility and decision-making authority is given to them, thereby limiting their interest and support of the planning and implementation process.

3. The issues of “empowerment” and “ownership” have yet to be completely resolved. In the case of the latter, local government (i.e., District) will have greater ownership of the SL process given that it is to be part and parcel of their District Planning Process. With regards to communities, however, the question remains open-ended. The empowerment question comes at two levels. The first is an “empowered” local government structure that can use the SL approach without it being externally driven (although this is possibly also a criterion for “ownership”). The second, and equally important level is the community. Presumably, having members from the community be part of the facilitation/assessment team responsible for the design of SL programmes gives rise to a channel for articulating community priorities and needs. Hence an “empowered” and unified community voice.

The litmus test, however, is how this “voice” can be tabled on the agenda of the VDC and upward. Civic education could be a potential avenue to be further explored. Nevertheless, and based on experience worldwide, people’s empowerment is more a

result of bureaucratic reorientation and institutionalization of participatory culture in government bodies than allowing villagers to formulate their own community action plans (see point 4).

4. A fourth observation from our experience is the urgent need to develop sustained capacities and learning within government (both central and decentralized), UNDP and CSOs for SL planning. In the past, the policy decision has been to organize one, or a series of training workshops and field activities. These have tended to be one-off activities with little follow-up or institutionalization within a broader organizational culture. Training, alone, will not transform organizations that are based on vertical authority structures, risk-averse and punish experimentation. Re-orientation for people-centred development in general and SL in particular can only be strengthened if the organization can: (a) identify organizational policies and practices which require significant modification or improvement; (b) conceptualize a new, more dynamic participatory approach that can be tested, *initially*, on a small-scale basis; (c) analyze and integrate lessons learned from experimentation that can be applied widely throughout the organization; and (d) develop capacities throughout the organization to institutionalize the appropriate changes into the agency's routines.
5. A related issue to SL programming is the predicament of the concept being one which is cross-sectoral in nature and having to deal with the fact that programme country governments are organized by line ministries, each with their own budgets, workplans, strategies and capacities. It has been difficult to bring these different ministries together to work on SL issues as well as the problem as to where within existing government structures a SL programme will actually be housed. The experience from Malawi has shown that differences between ministries are somewhat diminished at the district level, where it is essential that cooperation take place if decentralization and decentralized planning is to be successful. This being said, however, it is equally clear that "politics" plays a large part in deciding which ministry takes the lead. In most cases, we have seen the Ministry of Local Government (or Administration) as the lead agency.
6. There remain a number of tools developed that need to be piloted/tested. In particular, the development of SL indicators has to be undertaken at the country level. Such an endeavour requires both time and resources that were not available during the PA phase. A related issue is the need to link SL work that may go on at the micro (local) level with poverty initiatives at the macro level. Specifically, with regards to defining, mapping and monitoring poverty at the national level and the development of national anti-poverty strategies, there is demand from COs to have an integrated policy and programme package that can address both macro and micro concerns simultaneously.
7. Participatory and gender analysis methodologies form the basis of the community-level work in Sustainable Livelihoods. Particularly useful have been seasonal agricultural calendars, gender resource and control matrices and livelihood analyses. Applications in Malawi illustrated the importance of using these tools within a systems understanding with strategies and assets squarely in focus. For example,

participatory mapping techniques may show differences in roles, activities and control over resources but they may not necessarily illustrate differences in strategies both within and between households in a community. Also, participatory applications have tended to focus on environmental and economic issues.

An assets-based approach to using these tools also includes social capital and the trade-offs between environmental, economic and socio-cultural. The starting point is how people cope and deal with shocks and stresses which are captured well using time-lines. Some examples of strategies in the Malawi case-study were: men and women's time contributions to community projects; national songs and ceremonies; community strategies in dealing with violence; choice of less-profitable drought tolerant crops.

The added-value is how these coping strategies can be enhanced with changes in investment, policy or institutional arrangements. For example, in operationalizing the action plans SL is supporting neighbourhood watch programs and drought-resistance maize production. Methodologies would help to understand what times of year, in what forms and which individuals in the households save in order to support responsive programmes.

Challenges remain. A participatory exercise at the community level, while promoting civic participation of their ideas, results in information that is difficult to speak to policy and programming. It is important to understand potential gaps that may exist between action plans and relevant policy and programming information. These gaps can be addressed by a separate team or level analysis which seeks to revisit the action plans in light of policy. The other option is to ensure that there are members of each team which have the capacity to design into the process policy relevancy.

8. While the specific community experiences clearly highlight the cross-sectoral nature of strategies and correspondingly the vicious cycles of poverty, policy and programming using a systems approach proves to be more challenging. One example in the Michinji District in Malawi was the issue of men leaving for urban areas four times a year to sell their tobacco. Because there are only three auction centres nationally, the men sometimes travel great distances. While the sales only last one day or two, they usually stay away for one month or so, frequenting bars and seeking the company of women often returning with very little money from the tobacco sales. This behaviour has implications for food security, women's burden during the absence and as a result of the loss of income and the spreading and diseases.

The example presents ideas for cross-sectoral policy links. Clearly, strategies for HIV/health support and food security must compliment health education and awareness building with strategies for reducing men's need to migrate. A preliminary sub-sector analysis of the tobacco sector and preliminary discussion with the Tobacco Association of Malawi was conducted to investigate opportunities for buying more directly from farmers and decentralizing the market system. It is possible that support

for changes in the marketing system may have a ripple effect horizontally across sectors and vertically from micro-level activities to macro-level policy.

Malawi and Zimbabwe had two interesting methods for ensuring cross-sectoral dialogue. In Malawi, following the community action plans, representatives in the Country Office are gathering multi-stakeholders for dialogue on how best to support the action plans. Given that most of the focal areas are sectorally based such as Natural Resource Management and Enterprise Development, they have decided on an innovative way of stretching their sectors. Upon compilation of their respective lists of participants, they are passing these lists to each of the other focal areas for their feedback. If there are cross-cutting issues, one focal area may recommend inclusion of other participants or institutions. Zimbabwe chooses an even more decentralized route holding monthly national poverty forums where sectoral and cross-sectoral non-governmental organizations and government bodies come together to revisit key cross-cutting issues.

9. SL supports local governance by working to ensure that local governments are responsive and inclusive and by actively facilitating community participation in policy dialogue. How COs determine appropriate entry points depend on capacities and decision-making channels of existing government structures and/or non-governmental organizations. Malawi presents interesting challenges for democratization considering the country has only recently moved to a multi-party government system. Particularly given that the district planning process was the entry point for the SL program, it is a challenge to promote community mobilization and participation in a context that has not until 1992 had the terms “multi-party” or “democratic” even in the vocabulary of local dialects.

We have to pay careful attention to the adaptations in the conceptual and methodological framework which are necessary given various governance systems. Documenting these adaptations, particularly the factors we consider central to this analysis is valuable for other country-level analysis. Another key issue raised was that for many decentralization and capacity development of government officials is not enough. Typically, district planning councils are not well-represented by women; therefore, complimentary mechanisms may need to be established to ensure their appropriate representation and participation. There was a healthy debate as to whether gender-training of these men would be enough or whether there should be a minimum number of women represented in these bodies.

10. Assets are not exclusively found in communities. It became apparent throughout the country experiences that a number of participatory methodologies and planning approaches have been borrowed from other agencies including the World Bank Social Asset Programme, GTZ ZOPP, Training for Transformation among others. How we draw on the strengths of these initiatives and minimize overlap was identified repeatedly as an issue which countries have handled in different ways. Zimbabwe, Swaziland and currently Malawi are establishing national centres for participatory development. The Malawi Governance and Development Management programme

also commissioned a published inventory of existing institutions and individuals involved in participatory development including methodologies used and publications. Both of these types of initiatives are recognized as important means of building on existing efforts toward institutionalizing national participatory processes. The SL Unit in NY will be working closely with the Centres to gain a logistical understanding of strategies for managing multi-stakeholder communication, disseminating information and ensuring shared ownership both in decision-making and financial contributions.

11. Each country approaches Sustainable Livelihoods in different forms and through different processes. It was generally agreed that a template for Sustainable Livelihoods is mainly useful to provide a guideline for key issues and questions. The particular form that the SL programme takes must be endemic to national circumstances. For instance, Zimbabwe's focus on the monthly poverty forums seeks collaboration with NGOs through capacity building in participatory development for grassroots initiatives. Malawi has been working to build the capacity for participatory livelihood analysis of government officials in the district planning process while enhancing decentralization measures. In Madagascar, community action plans are formulated after and in response to district and regional plans to ensure that funding priorities are clear. The challenge of integrating an SL approach into existing programming as more difficult given its integrative nature was raised repeatedly.
12. Given the bases of the SL approach are the intangible and qualitative goals of broad-based multi-stakeholder cooperation, capacity development and civic participation, monitoring indicators must focus on processes rather than products. Nevertheless, monitoring and evaluation is essential to both improve on existing programmes as well as to show value-added. Some of the indicators identified in a SADC working group for monitoring included: representativeness of multi-stakeholders; timeliness and quality of networking activities; networking links that might not have otherwise been made; transparency and local ownership in decision-making and financial contributions; accessibility and outreach of methodologies used; sustainability or national institutionalization of participatory processes.
13. Working towards sustainable livelihoods means promoting dialogue and facilitating horizontal and vertical linkages that might otherwise not have been made. In order to ensure that these processes become institutionalized, they must be much more than participatory exercises in the community. It is important that multi-level and direction communication flows are promoted in every aspect of an SL programme from COs to HQ. For example, the Malawi Country Office has provided guidance on revising the participatory planning process to be more gender-aware. Zimbabwe and Swaziland provided feedback and changes to the overall monitoring process and indicators based on their experience. SL is also working on establishing a web-based help desk which will act as a forum for both capturing key lessons learned in the field and feeding these lessons back to other Country Offices grappling with conceptual and methodological questions and concerns.

Frequently Asked Questions about SL

How is SL different than community development, integrated rural development and employment generation or income generating schemes?

Community development does not tend to have broad outreach or impacts on policy, thereby isolating efforts from broader macro processes. Integrated rural development made links cross-sectorally but tended to lack a participatory focus. Similarly, employment and income-generating schemes focus on job-creation, often short-term, while SL considers long-term sustainability as well as assets and entitlements beyond income. SL is different in linking localized participatory approaches to livelihood analysis with macro-level policy.

How does the process begin?

For UNDP, the programming cycle is the initial entry point for promoting SL. UNDP indicates its interest and comparative advantage in the SL approach through its Advisory Notes. Policy makers are then engaged at an early stage to consider a sustainable livelihoods framework as the basis for CCFs. If there is broad agreement on pursuing a SL programme, specific priority areas will have to be identified, along with potential partners for the design and implementation process. Other entry points could include on-going programmes of partner governments (i.e., Five Year Plans) and CSOs.

What is the level of implementation and unit of analysis?

The level of implementation is generally at the district-level where analysis takes place at two inter-related levels: the household and the community level. Gender issues figure prominently, through intra-household analysis, given that men and women will have different asset portfolios and livelihood strategies. Household and community level information is subsequently used for policy-level advocacy and programme formulation.

How are partners chosen for implementation?

Partners for implementation are chosen based on the particular circumstances of the country. Generally, partners include a combination of government, other UN system agencies and non-governmental organizations. Where organizations or institutions have demonstrated a capacity to facilitate participatory livelihood analyses, they provide a useful entry point. Otherwise, capacity development in implementing these processes may be required.

Can SL have national impact? How do you scale up from the local level? National impact can be achieved through;

Policy action at the national level which is informed by the local livelihood reality. This is achieved by identifying the typologies of different livelihood systems in the country and working with samples of these. Alternatively, national impact is

achieved by working up from village development councils through district and provincial levels to national levels. The interface between different levels of local government and appropriate civil society representation is key. a combination of these approaches will produce the best results.

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