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## **Making Livelihoods More Sustainable**

### **Abstract**

The concept of sustainable livelihoods (SL) has emerged over the last decade, with growing legitimisation through several major international fora including the WSSD in commitment 3. The sustainable livelihoods (SL) approach is an operational vehicle for sustainable human development, which offers both a policy and programming framework for poverty reduction in a sustainable manner. The concept, being eclectic in nature, has been interpreted in a number of different ways and the evolution of the SL concept is addressed in this paper. Governments, non-governmental organizations, donors and communities are currently applying the SL concept and various tools and methodologies have been developed for the design, implementation and evaluation of SL programmes at the country level. The paper also examines the constraints commonly faced in the implementation of the SL concept and ends with a discussion of recommendations for future action in the area of SL policy development and programming. The stage is now set for building on the growing momentum by UNDP, bilateral partners, development banks, foundations, research institutions, policy think-tanks and civil society organizations to make a global shift to a sustainable livelihoods approach for poverty reduction.

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### *Introduction*

Disturbing recent evidence confirms that despite more than half a century of development strategies, 100 countries have experienced economic decline or stagnation, the world has become more polarized in terms of global income distribution, and 1.3 billion people are living in poverty (Singh and Lawrence 1998). Set in this context the Commission for Social Development, in its 35th session, addressed productive employment and sustainable livelihoods as its priority theme. Specifically, the Commission considered the centrality of employment in policy making, as well as issues of improved access to infrastructure and productive resources, and work/employment quality. Each topic is given high priority in Chapter 3 of the Social Summit Programme of Action, and each is logically set in a framework of a cross-sectoral enabling environment for poverty eradication. At the center of the Commission's work is Commitment 3 of the Copenhagen Declaration “promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work” (UN 1995).

The issue of food security is also central to the impetus behind the development of the SL concept. It is now recognized that food security requires attention to a range of factors found in areas of poverty, which affect peoples ability to access assets, entitlements and ultimately, food (WCED 1987). The issues discussed above, together with the commitments made at global UN conferences discussed below, provide a clear mandate by and for the international community for the adoption of the sustainable livelihoods concept.

The purpose of this paper is to assess how the sustainable livelihoods concept has evolved and highlight progress made to date in policy development and programming. There is also a discussion of the challenges to be addressed by development organizations and governments in the promotion and implementation of programmes aimed at promoting improved and sustainable livelihoods especially among those living in poverty. The paper begins with a discussion of the mandate that the international community has set itself for SL set in the context of the UN global conferences. There follows an examination of the value added by the SL concept to policy and programming. Next the work carried out by the key development agencies in the application of the SL concept is discussed together with the obstacles that have constrained this process. The paper ends with a discussion of future requirements and recommendations.

### *The SL concept in the context of the global UN conferences*

Surfacing a decade ago in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, the idea of sustainable livelihoods began as an approach to maintain or enhance resource productivity, secure ownership of and access to assets, resources and income-earning activities as well as to ensure adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs. It was a reflection of the growing recognition that food security was not merely a problem of agricultural productivity but was a problem of poverty in all its multi faceted dimensions. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) moved the concept towards an action agenda especially in the context of Agenda 21, and advocated for the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as a

broad goal for poverty eradication focused on the poor who live in marginalised areas. Agenda 21 stated that sustainable livelihoods could serve as an integrating factor that allows policies to address development, sustainable resource management and poverty eradication simultaneously. The Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) at Beijing underscored the significance of linkages between sustainability, employment, social integration, gender and poverty eradication for policy and development programming.

An important contribution of the Social Summit was its emphasis on the interrelatedness of its main thematic elements (poverty, unemployment and social exclusion). These interdependencies are clarified in the second paragraph of the Introduction to the WSSD Programme of Action, which imply that employment and social integration are necessary conditions for poverty eradication policy. Though the WSSD did not spell out the specifics of how both full employment and sustainable livelihoods were related to each other it did clearly articulate employment as one of the means to achieve the goal of sustainable livelihoods.

#### *Clarifying the SL concept*

The ILO has addressed the issues of international definitions of 'employment', 'unemployment' and 'underemployment' at length and broadly in its statistical publications (ILO 1992). Standardization however of 'sustainable livelihoods' as a concept has received much less attention. Livelihoods is considered by some to provide a better descriptor than 'employment' for those living in poverty. But the implied distinction between 'livelihoods' for the poor, and 'jobs' for others more fortunate seems unacceptable, and so UNDP proposed that sustainable livelihoods can be an overarching normative goal for development programming, in which employment provides ONE, but not the only means of achieving the goal. Thus, from this perspective, employment is considered a subset of, and one of the means to achieve, sustainable livelihoods.

The reality is that livelihood systems comprise a complex and diverse set of economic, social and physical strategies. These strategies are realized through the activities, assets and entitlements by which individuals make a living. Sustainable livelihoods are derived from people's capacities to exercise choice, and to access opportunities and resources, and use them for their livelihoods in ways that do not foreclose options for others to make their living, either now, or in the future. The broad goal of poverty eradication is to develop individual, family and community capacities to improve their livelihood systems. To understand these systems, people's coping and adaptive strategies are important entry points for analysis. A sustainable livelihood system can only be understood and promoted if the matrix of interactions between policy, science and technology and investment/finance is approached in an integrated manner and used to augment what local people already do well and the assets to which they have access.

Household livelihood strategies will differ from rural to urban settings. Rural strategies often involve a variety of different household members in such activities as home gardening, exploiting common property resources, share-rearing livestock, family splitting, and stinting which remain largely unseen by professional interviewers and thus are difficult to measure through traditional surveys. Urban strategies may involve substantial transportation/travel back to rural areas of origin, and may involve complicated remittance aspects involving other family members. It is important to recognize that the SL agenda is not a rural agenda but addresses livelihood issues in both urban and rural areas.

Traditional anti-poverty endeavours have usually been conceived and implemented from the national level, using per capita income or consumption measures and manipulation of sectoral policies as points of departure. Little, if any, attention is paid to the manner in which (or where) people live, the resources (assets) used for pursuing livelihoods, or the human and financial costs associated with the implementation of national programme through a centralised bureaucracy. On the other hand, integrated rural development

schemes have, on the whole, managed to understand how men and women prioritise needs, exploit resources and offer solutions to their pressing problems. The missing link, however, has been an examination of how macro and sectoral policies affect the micro level livelihood options available to a particular community or individual.

Participatory development initiatives also remain isolated from broader economic processes while traditional anti-poverty programmes may overlook local disparities and power relations. There is also a difference between income generating activities, employment creation schemes and the SL concept. The former activities are sectoral in their goals, income and jobs respectively, while these are merely sub sets within the SL concept which acknowledges the complex nature of livelihoods systems. The SL approach, by using both participatory and policy (cross-sectoral) tools, highlights the inter-linkages between livelihood systems at the micro level and the macro policies which affect these livelihoods.

#### *The sustainable livelihood approach applied*

The transition from theory to the practice of SL is, by no means, an easy task. Building on the earlier relevant work, UNDP has developed a methodology (or approach) for the design, implementation and evaluation of SL programmes at the country level. The approach consists of a five step process described briefly below:

- A participatory assessment of the risks, assets, entitlements and indigenous knowledge base found in a particular community. These are usually manifested in the coping and adaptive strategies pursued by men and women. Coping strategies are often a short-term response to a specific shock such as drought. On the other hand, adaptive strategies entail a long-term change in behaviour patterns as a result of a shock or stress. Both have implications on the composition of the assets (i.e., depletion, regeneration) from which they are derived;

- Analysis of the macro, micro and sectoral policies, and governance arrangements which impinge on people's livelihood strategies.
- Assessment and determination of the potential contributions of modern science and technology that complement indigenous knowledge systems in order to improve livelihoods;
- Identification of social and economic investment mechanisms (i.e., microfinance, expenditures on health and education) that help or hinder existing livelihood strategies; and
- Making sure that the first four stages are integrated and interactive in real time.

An increasing group of donor and development organizations are engaged in developing and implementing a sustainable livelihoods approach to poverty reduction. These include: NGO's (e.g. Development Alternatives in India and CARE International); research institutes (e.g. the University of Sussex, the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Winnipeg, Canada) bilateral donors (e.g. the UK Department for International Development); and intergovernmental organizations such as UNDP which has been playing a lead role in this direction.

For the majority of development agencies, SL has only been adopted as a core theme and an approach in the last few years. This has meant the an important area of work continues to be in the mainstreaming and institutional capacity building of SL within these organizations. However, the combined effort of the institutions working in this area is leading to a steep learning curve for all involved.

Several tools and methodologies are already available for field use in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (including indicators) of SL programmes or for integrating the SL approach into ongoing programmes. There has also been increasing contact between these organizations which is helping to clarify and operationalize the SL concept as part of an overall global programme for poverty eradication.

The future assessment of SL programming development and policy needs to be continuously monitored to allow for learning and the identification and dissemination of best practices. Indicator development, monitoring, evaluation and learning will need to take place at all of the following levels: Specifically, the following indicators can be used to achieve this:

- inputs of resources SL policy and programming;
- outputs of tangible products and services which result from SL policy and programming;
- outcomes (extent to which outputs have been used);
- impact (extent to which peoples livelihoods have been changed)
- process (the process refers to the approach used in utilising the inputs to generate outputs, outcomes and impacts).

Within the UN, incorporation of the sustainable livelihoods concept into the Framework for the InterAgency Task Force (IATF) on Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods Country Reviews was a major step in operationalizing the SL concept in the work of the UN (Singh and Lawrence 1998). Ongoing country programming for anti-poverty strategies is another. Both have led in the direction of broadening the scope of earlier approaches to embrace better understanding of the problems most crucial to the livelihood systems of those living in poverty, in search of more participatory, community-based solutions with operational linkages to the framework of national policy.

The IATF Framework identified some of the key policy aspects of sustainable livelihoods such as accessibility and relevance of education/training systems especially for the poorest communities; focus on households as socioeconomic/ecological units; and the need to acknowledge and address the complexity of livelihood-sustaining activities in poor families. The extent to which each of the seven 'review' countries approached the concept varied of course with each country. Conclusions from the review emphasized that although the subject of employment policy is a national priority, and has been revisited many times, new quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions are provided by

the sustainable livelihoods concept. Recommendations include higher profile for sustainable human development policies, increased priority to social sector ministries, greater attention to patterns (not just rates) of growth, improved access (especially of girls) to basic education opportunities, and reassessment of existing social safety nets, all from the fresh perspective of sustainable livelihoods. More research is suggested on the informal sector, access to credit should be generally increased, and better organization is proposed of services to and for the informal sector.

### *Constraints to the Sustainable livelihoods approach*

There are two key constraints that arise in the implementation of the SL approach. The first is the underlying dichotomy of applying the cross sectoral SL approach in a sectoral world. In particular, it has been difficult engaging line ministries in governments in cross ministry activities. The second obstacle surrounds the difficulties faced in establishing the link between micro realities and macro policies. It is difficult working with development stakeholders who are used to working with local communities while essentially ignoring the meso and macro environment which impinges on the lives of these communities. A third, more technical challenge is the practical integration of strategic and technical approaches.

Some of the early lessons being learnt from work in the SL to date has been the level of advocacy needed to sensitize development practitioners. The concept, being eclectic in nature, has been interpreted in a number of different ways. While recognizing that diversity of opinion, there is a need to bound the concept in order to make it operational, to develop a common vocabulary, and foster a learning process. This has resulted in many an observation that SL initiatives are not truly participatory. While these criticisms may have merit, it is also prudent to provide more plausible and realistic explanations for this specific dilemma.

There have also been problems involved in ensuring that government's, civil society organizations and communities feel ownership over the SL process, this has not always

been evident in programme work at the micro level and mechanisms need to be identified and applied to ensure this ownership.

### *Next steps*

The policy challenge is to facilitate access to improved livelihood opportunities for all. This will require action by both development agencies and governments. To facilitate this process development agencies involved in the SL approach must develop broad learning networks which will allow for the exchange of SL experiences and the cross fertilization of ideas. One method to achieve this is through Communities of Practice (CoP's). A community of practice is a group of people who are informally bound together through a common sense of purpose, in this case the SL approach, and a real need to know what each other knows. CoPs are joint enterprises by their members. They are based on relationships of mutual engagement and have a shared set or repertoire of communal resources that members have developed over a period of time. They go beyond interest groups as they deal with shared practice(s) and not just broad interest. In addition they aim to contribute to concrete outcomes, which will not only manifest themselves through the activities and projects that the members are engaged in but also through shared communal artefacts (the repertoire), such as lessons learned and best practices. Members tell stories and receive feed back and they also explore ideas together, sometimes in the form of mini-projects. UNDP is looking into the establishment of CoP's not only to link development organisations and individuals working in SL but also local communities in developing countries engaged in SL programs ( local technology situations permitting).

Development organizations must be clearly committed to assisting countries with further developing and operationalizing sustainable livelihoods policies. Carrying these ideas forward will necessitate five interlocking future actions by key SL stakeholders:

- i) continued upstream policy assessment and advocacy for sustainable livelihoods approaches at national and international levels;
- ii) downstream, participatory and responsive programme action (including national and regional research) at country, municipal and community levels;

- iii) close examination of cross-sectoral implications of livelihood approaches for other aspects of human resources development, especially education systems;
- iv) continued refinement of the sustainable livelihoods concept (particularly indicators of enhanced livelihood sustainability) to inform and support operations and policy formulation; and
- v) resource mobilization and continued partnering between stakeholders in both public and private sectors to buttress and operationalize programmatic and policy interventions at country level.

The investment challenge at the macro level is to move to an investment led structural transformation approach beginning with reinvestment of domestically mobilised resources. At the micro level it is imperative to choose a mix of micro finance schemes appropriate to local circumstances which build on existing institutions and practices. Most importantly to SL is the need for a strategy which makes a bridge between such macro and micro approaches.

The technology challenge is more a question of 'how' rather than 'what'; specifically, how to bring out the best science and technology to the service of the poor in a fully participatory manner, while giving equal respect to local knowledge and technology.

Governments must also recognize the priorities for creating an empowering environment where the SL concept can be used most effectively to eradicate poverty. These priorities are political, economic and social. Politically, public participation and involvement in SL policy and programming is required at all levels to sensitize government agencies and officials to the SL concept and increase responsiveness and accountability in the implementation of the SL approach.

In terms of economic priorities, to promote sustainable livelihoods, government must decentralize power to local economies. Economic policy should be based on full-cost accounting which incorporates social and environmental costs and benefits. Trade agreements and tax policies should favor local needs over export marketing, encourage

sustainable production and consumption, and support renewable resource technologies. Such policies will support worker rights, debt relief, and local control over resources within a framework of broader responsibility to share and protect resources (Korten 1995).

The main social priority for the government is to ensure that the poorest communities are not discriminated against when it comes to appropriating assets. The government must ensure that legislation is such that marginalised communities have to access the education, health, investment and physical entitlements available to society as a whole.

### *Conclusion*

Sustainable livelihoods thinking and action in a participatory, systems manner therefore is a long-term vision that in the short-term requires capacity development, networking and collaboration on macro-micro linked cross-sectoral policy analysis, the design of development programmes, and a shift in implementation strategies. While countries and institutions have moved toward these changes to varying degrees, there is growing evidence of policies and programmes which support livelihoods and household security rather than the more limited job-creation schemes. The stage is now set for building on the growing momentum by UNDP, bilateral partners, development banks, foundations, research institutions, policy think-tanks and civil society organizations to make a global shift to a sustainable livelihoods approach for poverty reduction.

The occasion of Copenhagen plus five in the year 2000 should be used to take stock globally of the lessons being learned in this exacting new area of development thinking and practice and the approach should be invigorated through a renewed commitment to action.

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