Revitalising sustainable livelihoods approaches

At an October 2008 seminar at the Institute of Development Studies, in the UK, participants discussed whether and how sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) could be revitalised and returned to the forefront of development approaches. The seminar was hosted by the Livelihoods Connect Network.

SLA was introduced into the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) policy in the late 1990s, and widely used by many organisations over the following five years. The approach has since been overtaken by other approaches, such as the ‘human rights’, ‘governance’ and ‘making markets work for the poor’ frameworks.

Reasons for SLA’s apparent demise centre on its assumed relevance to only micro-level projects, and its inability to deal with issues beyond the local economy, such as national development and international trade. This is largely due to confusion between the SL framework (a complicated diagram with lots of boxes and lines!), and the SL principles (which focus on participatory and holistic development).

The SL framework does have its limitations:

- It needs to be supplemented with an analysis of power in order to draw out gender inequalities and social exclusionary factors.
- The framework’s so-called ‘Policy, Institutions and Processes’, or PIPs, box requires extension for a deeper analysis of governance issues.
- The framework is good for data collection and analysing peoples’ assets but it does not necessarily lead to conclusions for programme design, or draw out links between micro-level findings, national policy frameworks and macro-economic issues – for example, using it as a tool in a local community would probably not reveal much about the impact of the current food crisis on the country’s development plans, and even if it did, there would be no mechanism for taking that data to the higher level.

The SL principles, however, continue to be valid for global development: they are simply the principles of good, sound development. The features of SLA have been somewhat lost, however, as donors and recipient countries now focus their attention on achieving the principles set out in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Funding mechanisms now centre on supporting national frameworks and reducing aid for micro-level interventions.

For SLA to resume its place in the forefront of development analysis, policy and programme design, and impact assessment, its advocates need to:

- show more forcefully how it has contributed to poverty reduction and sustainable development to date
- show how their achievements have moved beyond the micro-level to influence national policy – several participants at the workshop shared their experiences of this; these examples need to be better documented, collated and publicised
- review the framework itself to see how it can incorporate broader trade issues and power relations
- consider how SLA is relevant to the Millennium Development Goals and national frameworks such as Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS), for example, through the use of SLA in Poverty and Social Impact Analysis and PRS monitoring and evaluation systems
- consider how SLA can contribute to the ‘Aid Effectiveness’ agenda by highlighting and articulating poor peoples’ needs, and supporting accountability between donors and recipient governments in assessing progress towards the latter’s stated development goals.

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More information on livelihoods approaches can be found on the Livelihoods Connect website: www.livelihoods.org

To join the seminar series online discussions visit: http://community.eldis.org/sla
Household by household
SLA

The last decade has produced a number of approaches to poverty reduction. These include the rights-based approach, the governance approach, the microfinance approach, and the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). All promised more than they delivered but it was SLA that lost popularity most quickly.

Other approaches
The rights-based approach tends to declare a desirable outcome ‘a right’ and works to persuade poor people to demand their rights. This approach has made less progress than anticipated in improving health and education of the poorest people and, for millions of people, the ‘right’ to even a “dollar-a-day” livelihood is not a possibility.

The governance approach is based on the premise that ‘good’ governance is the foundation of development and often advocates government-to-government grants and technical assistance. How changes in the performance of ministries can be assured is unclear, however. Huge grants are made, policies are formulated, consultancy companies go, but little changes.

The microfinance approach believes that poor people can finance their own development at commercial interest rates. This approach is attractive because it is cheap and fits a latent idea that people should help themselves. The ‘rich world’ parallel programme would be to issue school dropouts with credit cards in the hope that they will start a business. Micro-loans, like credit cards, can help people make big purchases or meet huge expenses like dowry payments but can hurt household finances, as well as help, and rarely transform a family’s life prospects.

The potential of SLA
The perceived problems with the livelihoods approach and why it fell out of fashion in the UK Development for International Development (DFID) are more difficult to summarise. In the October 2008 seminar hosted by the Livelihoods Connect Network, one presenter argued that while the livelihoods approach has produced ‘high quality, highly nuanced and highly localised work’ it has not contributed to solving the ‘big questions’, such as the international food crisis and climate change.

SLA can, however, help solve the ‘big questions’. In Bangladesh about three million households make up the ‘extreme poor’. Economic growth will lift many out of poverty over coming decades but many others will need to be helped, household by household, in a targeted, nuanced and localised way.

The real problem with SLA is that it costs real money. Assisting a household out of extreme poverty in Bangladesh, sustainably and inter-generationally, costs up to £1,000. This is higher than other approaches that also promise poverty reduction. But donors need to be sure that these other approaches, whose impacts are difficult to measure, really reach the poorest and transform their lives and livelihoods.

Understandably, bureaucrats and researchers look for answers and policies that can change whole societies. Unfortunately, these transformational approaches rarely deliver for the extreme poor. Instead, DFID should dedicate a significant portion of its portfolio to the tested, and measurable livelihoods approach. Working household by household, village by village, slum by slum, it would be possible to reach those three million households over ten years without waiting for unproven solutions. Now that would be an answer to a ‘big question’.

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Linking SLA to policymaking in China

China faces enormous challenges in rural areas. Peasants comprise the overwhelming majority of the country’s impoverished. Poverty alleviation and the advancement of rural life in this highly diversified transitional society require multiple approaches.

At the Center for Integrated Agricultural Development (CIAD), at the China Agricultural University, sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) are considered a possible solution for influencing policymaking in the agricultural sector. CIAD is involved in research, higher education, training and consultancy in rural development. Since the late 1990s, CIAD has incorporated participatory development approaches and SLA into its major programmes. Initially it was included in teaching courses, such as Advanced Development Studies and Seminars of Development Management, to provide future professionals with an understanding of the fundamental framework and principles.

Enriched knowledge, to suit various local contexts, has been successively generated in various action research activities and in practice. In CIAD more than 20 theses and dissertations have been written using SLA as the research framework. The Participatory Village Development Programme of the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office, for which CIAD is the primary policy consultant,

for the macro-level analysis of issues such as large-scale labour migration and macro-economics. As China’s rural development advances, the focus is gradually moving beyond infrastructure to secure and sustainable livelihoods. ‘Livelihoods-Focusing’ was officially put forward as a guiding principle for national development for the first time in 2007, during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, there remains greater potential for education, research, knowledge generation and advocacy on sustainable livelihoods approaches.

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Dai minority women in Yunnan Province, China, herd their water buffalo. The animals are essential to livelihoods, being major assets, sources of fuel, plough-pullers and an occasional food source.

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Whatever happened to SLA within DFID?

From 1998-2002, The UK Department for International Development (DFID) emphasised the development and application of sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA). Giving meaning and substance to SLA was both challenging and inclusive; it reinvigorated the rural development group in DFID and significantly influenced the wider development community.

Only DFID, however, SLA was controversial, although the initial concept was adopted through the 1997 White Paper on International Development, and many partner organisations responded enthusiastically. A particular concern was whether SLA could contribute to higher level policy dialogue and formulation, notably the first generation of Poverty Research Strategy Papers.

Following restructuring in 2002-3, DFID’s outlook – and the emphasis of international development more widely – changed. The focus shifted to securing transformation at a national scale and providing greater support for domestic budgetary processes. SLA, which was closely – but not necessarily accurately – associated with a smaller-scale project approach, fell out of favour. However:

- SLA is still explicitly used and valued in a number of DFID programmes, including the Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh watershed management programmes, the Nepal Livelihoods and Forestry Programme, and the Bangladesh Chars Livelihoods Programme. SLA has also informed the design of the new Rural Development Programme in Tajikistan.
- With DFID support, SLA has guided Ethiopia’s national debate over graduation from social protection and the links between social protection and growth. Asset levels and the ability to withstand shocks are central to Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme.
- Elements of SLA are still employed by DFID partners and non-governmental organisations that DFID funds. To make progress on SLA within DFID, its advocates need to:
  - build on concrete achievements and lessons from practice
  - develop a simple narrative for livelihoods approaches and link this to other modes of working and DFID’s corporate objectives
  - review how SLA can be adapted to contribute to current development challenges, including the food crisis, fragile states, economic growth and making markets work for the poor
  - address perceived weaknesses of SLA, such as limited analysis of policy processes, ecological sustainability, gender and power relations.

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‘Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches – What have we learnt?: A review of DFID’s experience with Sustainable Livelihoods’, ESRC Research Seminar Paper, by Jane Clark and Diana Carney, 2008
www.eldis.org/go/topics/dossiers/livelihoods&id=41798&type=Document

Livelihoods approaches are a powerful tool for practice

Despite demonstrable benefits, the rapid ascendancy of sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) in the mid to late 1990s was followed by their quick demise among some donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development agencies, as a result of internal politics and other factors.

In practice, although SLA appears to be off the agenda for some donors, they are alive among some NGOs, such as CARE, for instance in sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh. These NGO workers point to the benefit of a framework that links micro-level household issues of assets and needs, to macro-level issues of resources, controls and governance.

Development and emergency practice should concern people first: to borrow a phrase from Robert Chambers, the question, ‘Whose reality counts?’ must be asked first when thinking about meaningful development interventions. Livelihoods approaches are important for linking development approaches and understandings, including vulnerability, needs, assets, disasters and development, governance and rights-based approaches.

SLA explores how people meet basic needs and build up assets, and importantly, how those assets are used in two ways: as the engine for livelihood strategies; and as a ‘buffer’ for reducing vulnerability to shocks and stresses. At Oxford Brookes University’s Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP), in the UK, livelihoods approaches underpin the Masters degree.

- SLA is used more as a ‘route map’ than as an operational tool; it describes how things are, rather than tells people what to do.
- SLA forces researchers and development practitioners to look at people rather than projects. Session one therefore asks ‘what is poverty?’ rather than ‘what is development?’
- Subsequent sessions always relate back to how people attempt to improve their livelihoods, overcome shocks and stresses, tackle discrimination, move in and out of vulnerability, and so on.
- Students are taught, for example, that disasters and development are related issues. At the household level, they are a consequence of weak and/or mismanaged assets (in terms lack of access relating to governance and so on), which serves as a powerful starting point for deciding what to do.

In preparation for the SLA event, researcher Diana Carney, a Livelihoods specialist, stated, ‘We should be clear about what we want livelihoods to do for us.’ Those that criticise livelihoods approaches point to their breadth – livelihoods can be almost anything. But, that is precisely the point. SLA provides a model for navigating messy reality, and for layering on to that the range of development and emergency interventions, always with people at the centre. That in itself is more than enough for any piece of thinking.

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Khanya-aicdd’s application of SLA in Southern Africa

In the last decade the South Africa-based organisation, Khanya-aicdd, has applied, implemented and contextualised the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) and across Africa. For example, Khanya have taken the ‘Policies, Institutions and Processes’ (PIPs) of the SL Framework and distilled six governance indicators at micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

Governance indicators
Empowered communities at micro (community) level
- people are active and involved in managing their own development, claiming their rights and exercising their responsibilities
- a network of responsive, active and accessible services, whether community-based, private sector or provided by government.

Strengthened management of services at district and local government (meso) level
- at local government (lower meso) level, services are facilitated, provided or promoted effectively, and in a co-ordinated manner, and implementers are held accountable
- at the provincial/regional (upper meso) level, support and supervision are provided to the levels below, as well as to strategic regional planning.

Re-aligned centre - macro (national, regional and global) level
- the centre provides strategic direction, redistribution and oversight, and is responsive to micro- and meso-level realities and inputs
- international institutions and processes help to promote the capacity of nation states to take on strategic roles to eradicate poverty, and to be responsive to micro- and meso-level realities.

Application at different stages of the project cycle
In addition to the governance principles, Khanya-aicdd has made SLA practical and applicable at all stages of the project cycle. In analysis and planning SLA has been used:
- to structure the Poverty Eradication Strategy for the Free State Province, South Africa
- in the Integrated Development Plan for Mangaung, within the Free State Province
- to develop the methodology for Community-based Planning, using people’s preferred livelihood outcomes as the core basis for prioritisation and applying disaggregated livelihoods analysis for different social groups.

In programme design Khanya-aicdd has used SLA on the:
- National Forestry Plan in Uganda
- Sustainable Coastal Livelihoods Programme in South Africa
- Botswana Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Programme
- Mozambique Agricultural Rural Livelihoods Programme.

SLA has also been used to evaluate the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme in the 21 poorest areas of South Africa. Here it has helped broaden the concept of livelihoods beyond welfare and income generation to a wide variety of interventions that support the range of assets people use for their livelihoods strategies.

Lessons learnt include:
- Community-based planning can improve planning processes but effective co-ordinated planning requires a funding mechanism at local government level that provides incentives for participation and implementation, for example, through a district/municipal development grant.
- Community-based worker systems where services, such as home-based care, are provided by community members, are accessible, cost one-third of traditional government systems, and are particularly applicable for services that are needed frequently, are not technically complex, and that do not have economies of scale.

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