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SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN PRACTICE: EARLY APPLICATIONS OF CONCEPTS IN RURAL AREAS

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What is poverty – and how it can best be addressed – are central questions at conceptual and practical levels in international development. Increased donor commitment to tackling poverty has made the search for answers more urgent. This paper outlines a new approach to poverty alleviation – sustainable livelihoods – setting out its basic concepts and drawing lessons from early experience. The approach is being pursued by, amongst others, the UK Department for International Development

Policy conclusions

Early experience in implementing a sustainable livelihoods approach suggests that it:

- helps to bring together different perspectives on poverty and integrate the contributions to eliminating that poverty different skills and sectors can make, in for instance designing projects and programmes, sector analysis and monitoring;
- makes explicit the choices and possible trade-offs in planning and executing different development activities;
- helps to identify the underlying constraints to improved livelihoods and the means of overcoming these;
- helps to link improved micro-level understanding of poverty into policy and institutional change processes.

Practical difficulties remain in:

- understanding how conflict over access to resources impinges on livelihood choices, and what can be done to address this;
- developing cost effective modes of livelihood analysis that ensure that the needs of the poorest are prioritised;
- identifying appropriate in-country partners, and developing collaborative approaches to understanding the complexity of poverty and integrating that understanding into a common livelihoods frame;
- understanding how, in practice, to handle trade-offs, for instance between

local pressures (e.g. for increased short-term income or better infrastructure) and wider concerns about resource sustainability and national-level policy considerations.

PART A – Concepts

Recent concepts addressing poverty

Poverty has most commonly been assessed against income or consumption criteria. In this interpretation, a person is poor only if his/her income level is below the defined poverty line, or if consumption falls below a stipulated minimum.

However, when the poor themselves are asked what poverty means to them, income is only one of a range of aspects which they highlight (Chambers, 1987). Others include: a sense of insecurity or vulnerability; lack of a sense of voice vis-à-vis other members of their household, community or government; and levels of health, literacy, education, and access to assets, many of which are influenced by the scope and quality of service delivery.

Dissatisfaction with the income/consumption model gave rise to basic needs perspectives which go far beyond income, and include the need for basic health and education, clean water and other services which are required to prevent people from falling into poverty. More recently, poverty has been defined in terms of the absence of basic capabilities to meet these physical needs, but also to achieve goals of participating in the life of the community and influencing decision-taking.

A sustainable livelihoods (SL) approach draws on this improved understanding of poverty, but also on other streams of analysis, relating for instance to households, gender, governance and farming systems, bringing together relevant concepts to allow poverty to be understood more holistically.

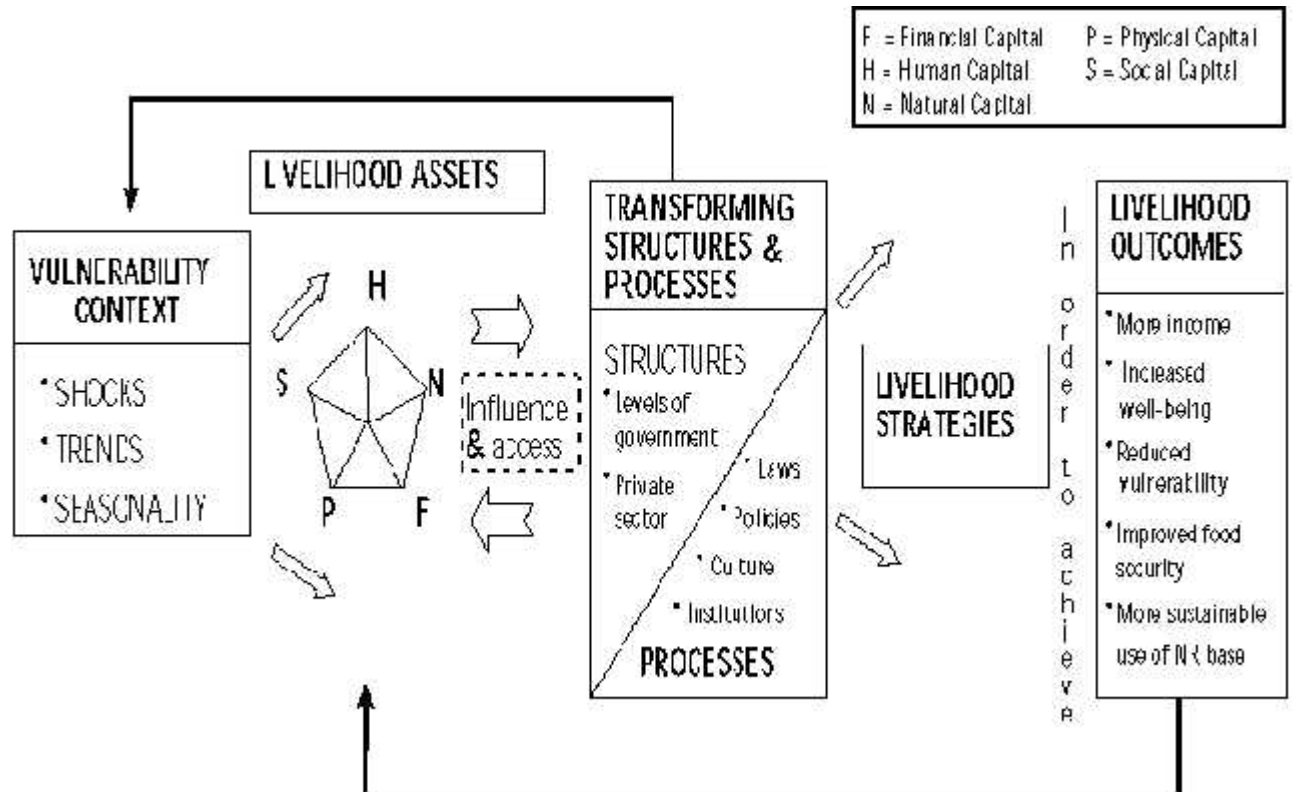
The DFID sustainable livelihoods approach¹

The 1997 UK Government White Paper on International Development committed the UK to the International Development Target of reducing by one-half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. As one measure towards achieving this, DFID consulted widely in order to increase its understanding of the nature of poverty and how it might be addressed. One of the outcomes of this consultation was a sustainable livelihoods framework (Figure 1).

The framework is an analytical device for improved understanding of livelihoods and poverty. The SL approach based on this framework supports poverty eradication by making enhancement of poor people's livelihoods a central goal of development efforts. In this context, a livelihood '... comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base' (adapted from Scoones, 1998).

This paper reviews early experience in using an SL approach in practical settings. Much, but not all, of this discussion relates to DFID supported projects and programmes.

Figure 1 The DFID sustainable livelihoods framework



The SL framework

The livelihoods framework (Figure 1) is not intended to depict reality in any specific setting. It is, rather, intended as an analytical structure for coming to grips with the complexity of livelihoods, understanding influences on poverty and identifying where interventions can best be made. The assumption is that people pursue a range of livelihood outcomes (health, income, reduced vulnerability, etc.) by drawing on a range of assets to pursue a variety of activities. The activities they adopt and the way they reinvest in asset-building are driven in part by their own preferences and priorities. However, they are also influenced by the types of vulnerability, including shocks (such as drought), overall trends (in, for instance, resource stocks) and seasonal variations. Options are also determined by the structures (such as the roles of government or of the private sector) and processes (such as institutional, policy and cultural factors) which people face. In aggregate, these conditions determine their access to assets and livelihood opportunities, and the way in which these can be converted into outcomes. In this way, poverty, and the opportunities to escape from it, depend on all of the above.

The framework identifies five types of capital asset which people can build up and/or draw upon: human, natural, financial, social and physical. These assets constitute livelihood building blocks. To a limited extent they can be substituted for each other. Thus, the poor may draw on social capital such as family or neighbourhood security mechanisms at times when financial capital is in short supply.

Within this context, people are likely to pursue multiple activities and outcomes. They may, for instance, depend on their own farming, on selling their labour locally, or on migration, all within the same year. Outcomes will not be simply monetary, nor even tangible in all cases. They may include, for instance, a sense of being empowered to make wider, or clearer, choices. Generic types of livelihood outcome are given in the right-hand box of Figure 1.

In reality, the processes described here are not so neatly 'cut and dried': just as poverty is a dynamic process, with largely unpredictable changes in context, constraints and opportunities, so also are household strategies and activities. For instance, a household's long-term strategy may be to reduce its vulnerability to drought, and reducing rainwater run-off from farmland may be one set of activities within this strategy. However, some of the necessary labour may be diverted in response to new migration opportunities, or some of the capital needed may be diverted to respond to a medical crisis. In practice, an SL approach is therefore essentially concerned with the dynamic and, at times, iterative nature of livelihood strategies. Simple 'snapshots' of activities can be illuminating, but only against this more complex reality.

Core concepts

SL concepts are necessarily flexible in application, but are based on certain core principles, including:

A focus on people

A livelihoods approach puts people at the centre of development. This is equally important at macro levels (e.g. in relation to economic reform) as it is at the micro or community level (where it may already be well embedded). This means that practical applications of SL concepts:

- start with an analysis of people's livelihoods and how these have been changing over time;
- fully involve people and support them in achieving their own livelihood goals;
- focus on the impact of different policy and institutional arrangements on people's livelihoods; and,
- seek to influence these arrangements so they promote the agenda of the poor.

Holism

SL concepts allow the identification of livelihood-related opportunities and constraints regardless of where these occur:

- it is non-sectoral and applicable across social groups;
- it recognises multiple influences on people, and seeks to understand the relationships between these influences;
- it recognises multiple actors (from the private sector to national ministries, from community-based organisations to newly emerging decentralised government bodies);
- it acknowledges the multiple livelihood strategies that people adopt to secure their livelihoods;
- it seeks to achieve multiple livelihood outcomes, to be determined and negotiated by people themselves.

As with Integrated Rural Development Programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, ideas on where external interventions can best be made are formed holistically. But by contrast, the implementation of these need not be multi-sectoral: SL approaches recognise that support can best be initiated in response to particular opportunities or needs, even within sub-sectors or within small areas, and then gradually expanded. Examples in Part B highlight the importance of sequencing, but this does not imply that expansion must be linear.

Macro-micro links

People's assets and aspirations form one pillar of an SL approach, and efforts to gather information on these – for instance, through participatory poverty assessments – are necessarily micro in orientation. However, many factors that affect livelihoods have distinctly macro characteristics.

For instance, natural capital may be threatened by flash-flooding, which will be influenced by the design and implementation of policies to prevent deforestation further upstream; access to financial capital will be influenced by policies towards credit and the rural banking sector more generally; vulnerability may increase or decrease depending on, for instance, on how well emergency feeding and employment schemes are designed and implemented. A thorough SL analysis seeks to understand what such policies are, why they operate well or poorly in practice, and then to identify how the structures and processes through which they function can be improved.

Box 1 Recent experiences in implementing SL approaches

- **Project design** In Western Orissa, an SL approach was used in re-thinking and broadening earlier DFID project ideas.
- **Programme design** In Pakistan and Zambia, DFID used an SL approach to define the broad parameters of rural development programmes and identify appropriate entry points.
- **Project review and impact assessment** The Africa Wildlife Foundation assessed the economic and livelihood impacts of wildlife enterprises in Kenya. This moved beyond financial analysis, and sought to understand long-term developmental impact
- **Programme review** A review of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) in Namibia sought to synthesise information on livelihood strategies, how they affect people's participation in CBNRM and how CBNRM can best 'fit' with livelihoods.
- **Assessment of sectors – tourism and wildlife** A review of varying impacts of tourism on rural livelihoods in Namibia compared people, enterprises and provinces, to identify how livelihood impacts could be enhanced. In a different project, similar analysis was conducted for wildlife enterprises.

Sustainability and trade-offs

There is a long tradition of considering sustainability narrowly within the context of natural resource management. This is reflected in the International Development

Targets, which maintain that preservation or replenishment of natural resources should be the aim. A wider view is that sustainability is achieved when overall stocks of physical capital (in whatever combination) are maintained. This can allow, for instance, for losses in biodiversity as modern crop varieties are introduced.

In a yet broader view, sustainability relates not just to natural resources, nor to stocks of physical capital. For specific activities to be maintained, the institutions underpinning them – whether traditional, governmental or commercial – need to be sustained. This would imply, for instance, that state subsidies or any other intervention in response to market failure should be sustainable. But even this does not fully capture ‘sustainability’ for, as we have argued, portfolios of activities shift in response to people’s capacity to generate new activities in response to needs and opportunities. This capacity depends on the vulnerability, assets, structures and processes in Figure 1. Individually, these will wax and wane, but the platform that they provide in combination must be stable or rising if people’s capacity to generate new activities is to be sustainable.

As people develop their capacity to switch among activities, they may, as argued above, substitute one type of capital for another. The feasibility or acceptability of interchanging types of capital will depend on the context in which people live (e.g. the types of shocks and trends that they are likely to face, the reliability of markets and institutions, etc.). They may also face wider tensions, including those between:

- maximising short-term income or guarding against vulnerability, and responding to concerns about longer-term environmental sustainability; and between
- the achievement of individual, household or community livelihood objectives and the desirability of not compromising livelihood opportunities open to others.

The SL approach recognises these trade-offs, but does not yet suggest how they might be resolved. In any event, solutions will be context-specific and much more practical experience is required before general guidelines can be defined.

PART B – Recent experience²

This section does not claim to present a comprehensive overview of the numerous SL-based initiatives currently under way. Nor can it claim to cover the full range of potential strengths and weaknesses of an SL approach. Nevertheless, the examples provide insights into the different ways SL approaches can be used, and the strengths and difficulties of using it in practice. We have grouped them into five types, mainly by their use in the project/programme cycle (Box 1).

1. Use in project design

As in several other cases, resource conflict was found to limit the livelihood options immediately available to the poor in the Western Orissa Rural Livelihoods Project (Box 2). The livelihoods were less dependent on natural resources (NR) than expected, partly because the poor had such limited access to these resources. An SL approach helped to identify how to empower the poor to break existing cycles of impoverishment, by strengthening their access to capital assets, and by working at

policy and institutional levels to strengthen the capacity of the public sector, local government and NGOs jointly to design and implement poverty-focused programmes. It also indicated how interventions should be sequenced.

Box 2 Resource conflict: Sequencing interventions

An early and important insight obtained via SL perspectives in Orissa was that the focus districts had moderately good natural resource (NR) endowments, and yet had levels of per capita income among the lowest in the country. This prompted assessment of the role of local moneylenders and merchants in controlling access to NR. They also controlled input and output markets, and monopolised access to external resources such as opportunities for seasonal migratory employment.

This imbalance in access opportunities made it likely that the better-off would capture the lion's share of benefits generated by any NR-based intervention, such as microwatershed rehabilitation. An early decision in project preparation, therefore, was to prioritise opportunities to strengthen the livelihoods of the poor in areas less likely to be contested, and so enhance their capability to assert their requirements and rights in relation to the more contested areas that might subsequently be supported.

In the Orissa context, this resulted in decisions to postpone major land-based investments (which had been the initial focus of the project) and prioritise instead support for the rehabilitation of domestic water supplies, backyard vegetable production, and seasonal migration.

2. Use in programme design

In both Pakistan and Zambia, DFID used SL approaches to design new programmes. The aim was to develop these around the central concept of rural poverty, but promote links with individual sector initiatives, as well as with wider macroeconomic and social processes. In northern Zambia, a series of field visits constituted the major effort. These followed largely from an earlier proposal for a feeder road project which had been found inappropriate. Poverty assessments identified food security and access to health care as major concerns of the poor. Major constraints to alleviating poverty lay in elite domination of access to resources and in limited access by the poor to public services.

In the Pakistan case, a review of existing documents helped to identify major constraints, again rooted in power relations and the marginalisation of the poor from access to virtually all capital resources, but especially land. It also provided the preliminary strategic dimensions of a programme (including support for activities outside the traditional arenas of conflict) and helped identify entry points (geographical, institutional and thematic). A subsequent scoping mission took forward these early ideas. The strengths and weaknesses of using an SL approach in programme design are summarised in Box 3.

It is important to recognise that design teams rarely start with a blank sheet of paper. There are generally important initiatives already on the ground; these should not be ignored. In any case, SL approaches should not be seen as an effort to fill in every part of a blank sheet. But they do encourage explicit identification of how issues not

tackled within a given programme will be addressed, and by whom (an individual donor can, after all, only focus on a limited number of entry points).

Box 3 Programme design in Pakistan and Zambia

On the positive side, the SL approach:

- provided a basis for a coherent poverty-focused programme;
- helped in setting up a platform for policy linkages;
- drew in the findings of a wide range of experience from development projects and from policy (and other) research;
- provided a common goal for technical specialists to work towards in place of sectoral or disciplinary interests.

Remaining difficulties included:

- the lack of any obvious institutional partner willing to champion anti-poverty programmes;
- the pervasiveness of discrimination against the poor, making it likely that – without high-level political commitment – initiatives, even in apparently uncontested arenas, will be challenged or dominated by the better-off;
- potential tensions with those (including politicians and some aid administrators) whose preference is for discrete, new projects that have high public relations value.

3. Project review and impact assessment

The SL approach has been used in a Kenyan NGO project on wildlife enterprises for monitoring and evaluation, as distinct from design. This has helped to highlight less tangible livelihood issues, and identify necessary course-corrections (Box 4).

Many impacts on livelihoods were unquantifiable, and dependent on the subjective assessments of the individuals concerned. Nevertheless, the reviews allowed assessment of:

- the main types of positive and negative impacts – including those (e.g. on access to assets) that are difficult to quantify;
- how well interventions ‘fit’ with livelihoods and how they can be modified to fit better;
- how and why participation worked (or did not work), and why the poor at times found it difficult to participate.

Box 4 Using SL concepts for project reviews: A livelihood analysis of butterfly farming in Kenya

An internal review of a Kenyan butterfly-farming project in 1997 asked farmers how much they earned from butterflies and from agriculture. The former was a high percentage of the latter, and the positive impacts of butterfly-farming seemed incontrovertible. The analysis of livelihood impacts in 1998 was much more finely textured, identifying improvements in income and support to household strategies of

diversification, but less improvement in security because earnings were unpredictable and the activity is risky (more so than other local activities because the nature of risk and variation are less understood by farmers). The high level of risk explains low participation among poorer farmers. Project impacts were assessed in relation to all elements of the livelihood framework. This highlighted positive and negative affects on assets, and two other advantages: the low trade-off with other activities, and increased access of butterfly farmers to external institutions, such as the Forest Department.

4. Review of a programme In Namibia, appraisals in the early 1990s of the potential for a Community-Based Natural Resource Management Programme (CBNRM) focused mainly on institution-building and the legal rights required for cash incomes to be generated. By 1997, field staff had gained insights into livelihood issues affecting, and affected by CBNRM, while agricultural staff had accumulated complementary information on agricultural strategies, through Farming Systems Research and surveys. Their insights were then drawn together to identify:

- how CBNRM activities affected the livelihoods of different stakeholders;
- how and why their interest and participation differed;
- how CBNRM activities could be made more effective in supporting SL, particularly those of the poor.

For the more secure households, the main issues were how CBNRM affected their livestock herds (via predation, exclusion from grazing, and/or enhanced common property resource management) and whether they had access to new tourism jobs. For poorer households, access to small amounts of income, elephant damage to crops, and continued access to wildlife/tourism areas for harvesting plant resources were the critical issues. A large minority faced a considerable seasonal cash shortage, so even small amounts of CBNRM income (e.g. from a bed-night levy) could help meet food needs or school bills if timed correctly. The analysis highlighted that minimising costs to livelihoods was as important as maximising benefits.

5. Assessing sectors: Tourism and wildlife

In Namibia, SL analysis has been used to assess the tourism sector. The approach recognises that tourism impacts on many aspects of livelihoods, and puts these as the priority concern. By contrast, conventional analyses of tourism tend to focus on macro-economic benefits, or environmental impacts, or negative social consequences.

Fieldwork with communities combined with financial analysis led to identification of a vast array of positive and negative impacts. SL perspectives were used for pulling the results together. The findings indicate that:

- livelihood concerns vary between people and places, but go well beyond cash income, so donor/NGO strategies of maximising local revenue through tourism are inadequate; coping with drought, access to grazing and veld foods, and maintaining local control were key issues;
- different types of tourism enterprise have quite different livelihood impacts;

- much can be done to enhance livelihood impacts of tourism; given the chance, people will adapt tourism to meet their livelihood concerns, so the important principle is to ensure local participation in planning; for the poor an expansion of informal sales and casual labour opportunities is more important than formal sector employment;
- livelihoods approaches can be informative at the international level, where tourism analysis has been dominated by macro-economic and conservation perspectives.

Also in Namibia, the Wildlife Integration for Livelihood Diversification (WILD) project used a wide range of participatory techniques to assess how different project options affected, or were affected by people's livelihood choices.

Some emerging issues

1. Integrating SL and other approaches and methods

The SL framework cannot be used in isolation as a tool to design projects. It is essentially an integrating device, helping to form and bring together the perspectives which contribute to a people-centred SL approach. As we have argued, this approach relies on certain principles, but is in part opportunistic and context-specific, relying on integration with other approaches and methods, and with other development initiatives, as the context requires. Considerable time and skill are needed to use SL perspectives in this way. One facet of the SL framework is that it helps to indicate where existing methods and techniques should be focused, and to draw out from these the implications for the livelihoods of the poor.

In these ways, the SL framework does not replace other approaches but builds on them. Experience has demonstrated the need to use other tools. For instance, stakeholder analysis is particularly important as, in principle, livelihood analysis can apply to anyone, whether poor or not.

The review referred to in Box 4 drew together several techniques. Commercial analysis showed that the enterprise was not viable in the long term, but that local incomes were significant. Stakeholder analysis identified the characteristics of those included and excluded, while several participatory rural appraisal PRA tools and a previous household survey were used for the analysis of impacts on livelihoods.

In certain contexts, rights-based and SL perspectives are complementary. It is often relatively easy to compile a picture of issues relating to economic, political, cultural, social and civil rights and the linkages between public institutions and civil society at the central level. It is less easy to identify the specific constraints that prevent the realisation of people's rights at the local level and undermine their livelihood strategies. A clear example is provided by weak rights to NR assets in the India, Pakistan and Zambia cases.

2. Identifying partners, and cross-sectoral work

An SL approach requires holistic, people-centred perspectives as a basis for understanding the complexity and diversity characterising the livelihood strategies of the poor. Many potential users of SL approaches come from specific disciplines and sectors. This does not make it impossible to implement SL approaches, but it does

place a strong premium on the ability of multidisciplinary teams to work together. Some (usually informal) ‘partnership analysis’ is generally needed. The choice of partner organisation or department will often depend as much on the enthusiasm and orientation of individuals as on specific mandate. In some countries, departments (such as rural development) having an appropriately broad mandate are weaker than those (such as agriculture) which are narrowly sector-based.

One of the main strengths of an SL approach identified by practitioners so far is that it facilitates cross-sectoral collaboration by providing a common framework. Several principles of the SL approach are not ‘new’ – as argued in Part A, they are lessons that have been learnt in different sectors over recent decades. The SL approach does not seek to invent these anew, but has the potential to integrate and share them across sectors.

3. Learning processes and working with partners

Learning processes are important to promote on at least two levels: first, the teams using the approach need an initial familiarisation and learning period, where necessary devising simplified versions of the framework for local presentation. This can usefully be followed by periodic opportunities to ‘take stock’, examining the scope and direction of findings against the framework.

Second, funding approval marks the end of formal project preparation and, often, some slackening in the pace of learning. Inevitably, however, a ‘process’ approach implies that project details need to be filled in as more evidence becomes available. In the same way, changes over time in the opportunities and constraints influencing the livelihood options of the poor need to be mapped and course corrections incorporated. Concern to support district-level authorities’ responsiveness to people’s needs in the Zambia case led to a proposal to establish multidisciplinary Listening Teams. In the Orissa case, concerns to identify the livelihood needs of the most vulnerable, initiate social organisation and capacity building, and facilitate negotiation of their resource rights led to the establishment of Livelihood Support Teams, comprising government and NGO staff, and individuals from Orissa and beyond.

Iterative approaches to project design and implementation of this kind can only work if funding agencies can cope with the demands of greater flexibility. These include potential incompatibilities with budget cycle management and logframes, and a need for largely qualitative performance indicators. Much progress is still needed in these areas.

4. Managing micro-macro links

Poverty elimination is not only a matter of supporting local-level initiatives in response to needs and opportunities which the poor perceive. Many facets of their situation which they may perceive as ‘fixed’ (such as, for instance, weak provision of health and education services) may, in fact, be amenable to change. In principle, the holistic nature of SL analysis lends itself to identification of priority areas for policy intervention or improvement. In practice, however, windows of opportunity for influencing policy may be transient, and will vary substantially from one setting to another. Those wishing to exploit opportunities for policy leverage will, therefore, have to develop location-specific tactics for doing so, informed in part by examples of

success or failure from elsewhere, and by a small number of general principles (Box 5).

Box 5 SL and policy dialogue - illustrations from India

Policy dialogue implies a productive debate sustained over a period of time, based on a shared view of what the role of the state should ideally be, what it should be in specific contexts of market failure, and what overall priority it should attach to poverty elimination. In parallel with its support for rural livelihoods projects in India, DFID has been engaging in policy dialogue with government agencies at national, state and local levels. At central level, for instance, DFID has supported a review of the implementation of new watershed guidelines and the design of a field manual intended to strengthen a range of procedures, including monitoring and evaluation. In Orissa, a number of changes to State-level legislation concerning access to, and sale of, minor forest products are being considered. Yet other crucial areas of policy, such as that relating to NR access, remain difficult to change.

5. Creating change through empowerment?

A critical conclusion from those using SL approaches in India was that SL approaches may help in understanding problems, such as power relations, but they do not necessarily make them any easier to change. In other words, aspects of the intellectual coherence which the SL approach enjoys in the abstract are challenged in the real world, not least by the pervasive political marginalisation of the poor and the distorted power relations which restrict their access to capital assets. The need to cope with the contested nature of resource access reinforced the perception in almost all cases that livelihoods analysis and the design of interventions needs to be part of a process of learning, reflection and course correction. For some, it raises the question of whether the needs of the poor might be met more quickly and more fully through political struggle than through dealings with the bureaucracy.

From an incrementalist perspective, it is clear that progress achievable by the poor under inegalitarian structures and processes will be severely constrained unless there is high-level commitment to increase the capacity of the poor to determine their own future, and there are procedures in place to guarantee these. Improvements of this kind have to be embedded in the fabric of society – the poor themselves need a kind of ‘political capital’ in order to achieve their cause. The opportunities for external agents such as donors to increase this capital may be limited. Nevertheless, even slender opportunities can bring some advantage, and the need for empowerment must underpin donors’ thinking if these opportunities are not to be missed.

6. Measuring results

Interventions that aim to support the livelihoods of the poor are likely to be multi-faceted and in some respects geared to qualitative change. This poses particular difficulties for performance assessment.

How will we know whether livelihoods have been improved, particularly given the qualitative, subjective and often transient nature of some aspects of livelihoods? For instance, it is difficult to assess levels of, or changes in, social capital or vulnerability. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that livelihood security is a matter of

perception, which can change easily without any change in tangible outcomes. Yet the pressures in development agencies are towards quantifiable evidence of progress – particularly in the light of the widely accepted international poverty eradication targets. Experience so far suggests that a range of PRA-type and conventional tools are needed for assessing changes in livelihoods, but that the trade-off will remain: SL approaches are more realistic in the complexity they depict, but less amenable to quantification than, for example, money-based approaches to poverty.

Conclusions

To its potential critics, an SL approach may appear excessively micro-focused, time-consuming and complex, with only limited value-adding. It does not obviate the need for existing methods and tools, and yet requires investment of time and resources to implement wider perspectives and achieve a degree of synergy among existing initiatives. It can be regarded as useful in the abstract but difficult in practice because of: the complexity of conducting livelihood analysis; the difficulty of sharing a complex tool with partners; the reality that even if poor people do not live in sectors, professional partners do, particularly those in government; the long time-frame needed to make a difference to livelihoods; and the fact that qualitative results will be very difficult to assess.

Experience reviewed here suggests that some of these are indeed limitations of the approach: compromises are needed in working with single sector partners, trade-offs between responsiveness to the needs of the poor and quantifiability of impact will remain. However, ways are being sought to: share the approach with partners, using simplified versions at the outset; to explore how to integrate SL approaches with other tools; and develop indicators. There are certainly no complete answers to these challenges yet.

However, experience to date also highlights several strengths of an SL approach. Perhaps the most positive lesson is the unanimous view from the evidence here that an SL approach does provide a useful framework for understanding the nature of poverty and how interventions can be better tailored to enhance livelihoods. Experience shows that it can be used at all stages in the planning cycle and applied to projects, programmes and sectors. It can improve the design of interventions in several ways: by identifying what information is needed for making sound decisions; identifying different livelihood interests between stakeholders (particularly poor groups) that need to be taken into account; emphasising links between the local and policy levels; and enhancing cross-sectoral coordination.

Those long experienced in poverty analysis may argue – no doubt correctly – that, used sensitively, existing skills are adequate to achieve these benefits, since an SL approach builds on lessons already learned in other sectors. But this argument misses the point: most of those concerned with project design are accustomed to using a particular resource or sector as the point of departure, not to putting people and the issues of most concern to them at the centre of analysis, nor to drawing on best practice in other sectors. In this sense, the SL approach provides all with a common framework and reduces the prospect that any one discipline or sector will dominate. So long as it is regarded only as an ‘approach’ and not a panacea, it has the potential to enhance the search for poverty-focused solutions across the sectors.

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Endnotes

¹This section draws on Carney, D. (ed.) (1998) and DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets. See www.ids.ac.uk/livelihoods

²This section draws on the seven cases (see Box 1) discussed at the ODI Workshop on the 15th of February 1999. For details of the presentations, see www.odi.org.uk/

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