

CONCEPT PAPER ON UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH (SLA)

1 INTRODUCTION

The livelihoods approach originates in the development of richer understandings of the dimensions of poverty, such as the sustainable human development approach adopted by UNDP, and the concept of capitals and capabilities of Amartya Sen. In some quarters (notably FAO) this is now being referred to as people-centred development (PCD). In the definition used by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID):

*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.*

There are several elements of the approach which are relevant and can be applied in different ways. This section describes some of these key elements.

- The sustainable livelihoods framework, and its elements (see Figure 1);
- The sustainable livelihoods principles (see Box 1);
- Six governance issues at micro-meso-macro level, developed by Khanya in applying the SLA.

2 UNDERSTANDING KEY ELEMENTS OF THE APPROACH

2.1 Sustainable livelihoods framework

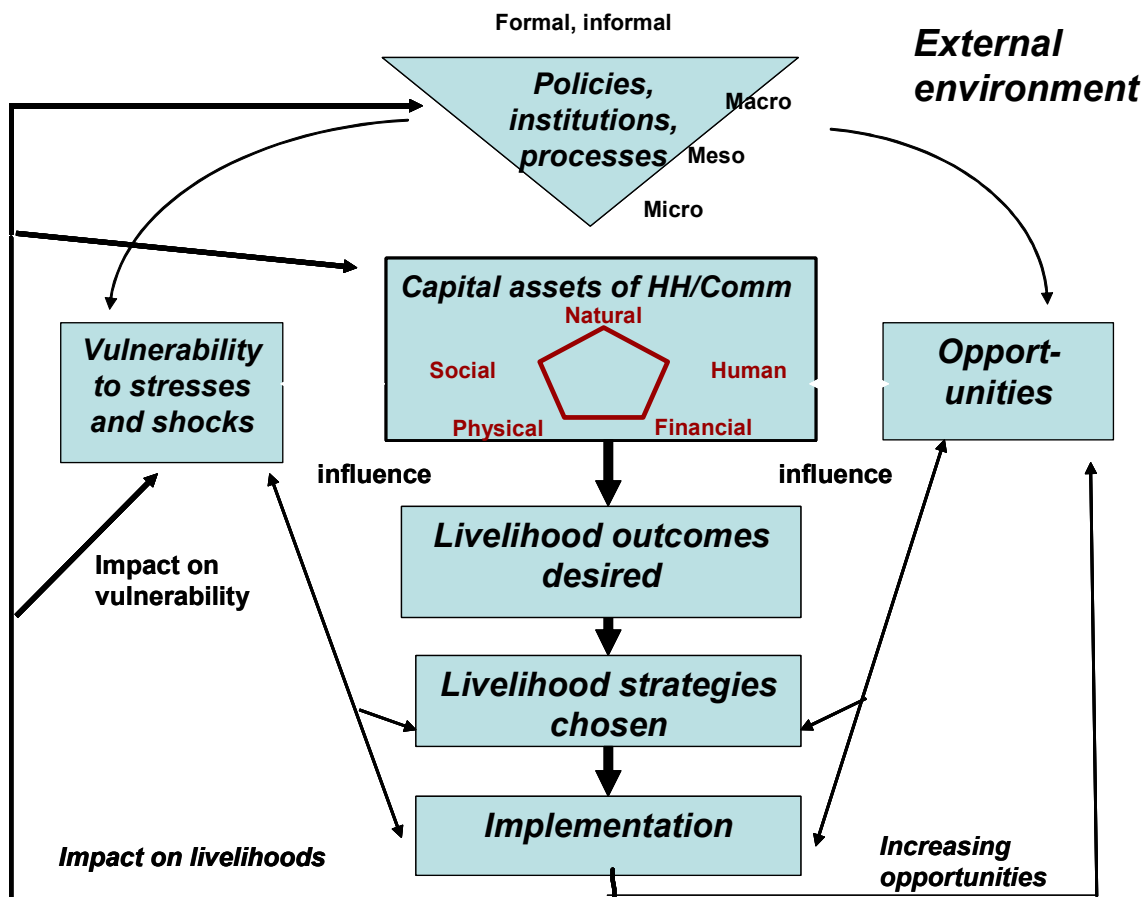
The framework (see Figure 1) provides a picture of the key elements in describing or understanding the issues affecting livelihoods in a household, community, region or country. This includes the concepts of:

- People's **assets or capitals** (natural, human, physical, financial, social¹);
- People's **vulnerabilities**, or susceptibilities to stresses and shocks (eg to vagaries of climate, conflict, crime etc);
- The **policies, institutions, processes and organisations** (PIP) which affect people (formal, informal, at different levels);
- The **outcomes** that people are looking for (which may be to increase the capitals, to reduce vulnerabilities, or others);
- The **livelihood strategies** people adopt to achieve these (which are affected by the PIP environment, vulnerabilities etc);
- The **opportunities** which people have to address the outcomes, which has proved very useful in planning (vulnerabilities=threats, capitals=strengths/weaknesses).

There are several implications of using this framework to help in understanding **where interventions may be needed**:

¹ And some would add political and spiritual. A useful distinction can be made between social based on trust, and political based on power. Khanya-aicdd also has divided human into two so that it is not so large: human capacity development, and safeguarding the human resource (health, nutrition, security, welfare).

Figure 1 Khanya-aicdd’s version of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



- We recognise the importance of human capabilities as central to the debate on poverty;
- We need to understand the different types of capital (or assets) that people have;
- We need to understand their vulnerabilities;
- We need to understand how policies, institutions and processes support or hinder their access to these capitals, or increase or diminish their vulnerabilities;
- We need to identify and build on the preferred outcomes of our people (and not decide them for them);
- We need to understand the livelihoods strategies they use and how they can be enhanced (and not assume what are the right strategies);
- We need to see who can assist to deliver these livelihood strategies, and how.

The SL Framework is particularly useful in providing a framework for:

- structuring, and analysing the development situation, how policies and services are affecting it;
- providing a holistic overview of how different elements in development are being addressed;
- evaluation of impacts.

For example rural development or poverty are very vague terms. The use of these elements of the SL Framework can provide a way of disaggregating these, which therefore makes them meaningful.

2.2 Sustainable livelihoods principles

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is a broader concept than the Framework. The Framework is a way of **understanding** what a livelihood is. The SLA is a broader concept of **how** we need to intervene in order to promote poverty eradication. It is thus very relevant in designing interventions.

The core to the approach is a set of **principles**, which are shown in Box 1. In general the principles are elements of best practice which are widely shared by development practitioners, and will not be discussed in further detail here. Two that are new are the focus on micro-macro links, and the emphasis on strengths-based approaches.

Box 1 Revised version of SL principles²

Normative SL principles

- **People-centred:** sustainable development and poverty elimination requires respect for human freedom and choice as well as an understanding of the differences between groups of people and the development of focused interventions;
- **Empowering:** support should result in increased voice, opportunities and well-being for people, including the poor;
- **Responsive and participatory:** people must be key actors in identifying and addressing their livelihood priorities, including the poor. Outsiders and organisations need processes that enable them to listen and respond to people's views;
- **Holistic:** we need to understand people's livelihoods and how these can be enhanced in a holistic way, which recognises the interrelationships between the different aspects of their lives, although actions arising from that understanding may be focused. For better-off people, income can purchase some other assets, for poor people, the set of assets is critical;
- **Sustainable:** there are four key dimensions to sustainability – economic, institutional, social and environmental sustainability. All are important – a balance must be found between them.

Operational SL principles

- **Strengths-based:** it is important to recognise and understand people's strengths, including those of poor people, and not just their problems. This is respectful and provides a platform on which livelihood strategies can be developed. It is also important to build on the strengths of organisations;
- **Multi-level (or micro-macro links):** sustainable development and poverty elimination is an enormous challenge that will only be overcome by working at multiple levels. Micro-level activity should inform the development of policy and an effective governance environment. Macro- and meso-level structures and processes should recognise micro realities and support people to build upon their own strengths. Top-down strategic action as well as bottom-up participatory processes are required;
- **Conducted in partnership:** implementation of development requires using the strengths of different organisations, public and private, in the most effective way. Partnerships should include people and their organisations, including those for poor people. Partnerships should be transparent agreements based upon shared objectives.
- **Disaggregated:** it is vital to understand how the livelihoods of various disadvantaged groups differ – in terms of strengths, vulnerabilities and voice – and what effect this has. Stakeholder and gender analysis are key tools. This allows for targeted actions.
- **Long-term and flexible:** poverty reduction requires long-term commitments and a flexible approach to providing support, which can respond to emerging circumstances.

² Developed by Diana Carney in a review of progress with the SLA for the SLSO.

Micro-macro links are critical because one of the key development problems is the disconnect between policies and services and people's lives, particularly poor people and those who are socially excluded. This results in very little in the way of services actually reaching them. Table 1 explains the meaning of these levels. In order for micro-macro links to be addressed:

- policies need to be based on a good understanding of the reality of services at meso and micro levels, the situation with people's livelihoods (micro), and how interventions can assist (meso and macro);
- best practice in work on institutions (often meso level), needs to be based on an understanding of people's livelihoods (micro), and the policy environment (macro). Where the latter is not helpful, it must also seek to influence the policy environment, otherwise it risks irrelevance;
- best practice in work at micro level (typically by NGOs) must be properly linked into the local organisations (meso level), and seek to influence policy (macro level) if they are not to remain islands of excellence in a sea of poverty.

Table 1 Micro-meso-macro levels

Level	Function	Unit in the UK / South Africa
Micro	Community level - where people live	Community, parish / Ward
Lower meso	Lowest level of management of services	District, Borough / Local municipality
Upper meso	Intermediate level, which provides support to and supervision of the lower meso	County, Region/ District, Province
Macro	Policy level	Region, Country/ Province, Region

Strengths-based approaches are also very important in a number of ways:

- They are respectful of poor people, recognising that they are juggling very limited resources, and do have skills – this is empowering in itself;
- This is very important if interventions are likely to succeed. Starting from where people are strong is much more likely to be successful than starting where they have no resources or capacity;
- The same approach should be used in planning, starting from the strengths and the opportunities available to a community;
- Also in working with institutional reform, it is easier to start working on change processes where organisations and individuals have some capacity than where they have very limited capacity.

The principles can be applied in a number of ways:

- In looking at how organisations work internally and with their partners (practising what we preach);
- In understanding how policies and services operate;
- In designing projects and programmes;
- In monitoring projects or programmes;
- In evaluating programmes and understanding what has worked and why.

2.3 Understanding the PIP box (policies, institutions and processes)

We work in organisations which are affected by policies, institutions, processes. It is important therefore to have a better understanding of this aspect in relation to SLs. In addition, the SL principles are in fact mostly governance principles about how to operate. This points to the importance of understanding the governance situation. In the SL framework this is shown by a simple box (or triangle) but in fact covers a wide variety of subjects that may all be happening at different levels from community to international:

- Policies – formal (such as laws) and informal (such as customs);
- Institutions (rules of the game, traditional, markets etc);
- Organisations operating at different levels, public, private, and civil society;
- Services being provided by different organisations.

3 APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES - 6 KEY GOVERNANCE ISSUES FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

In order to simplify a picture of what needs to be done, Khanya-aicdd developed this set of 6 key governance issues which are required if a SLA or people-centred development are to be achieved. These provide a picture of what a working micro-macro system might look like:

Box 2 6 Key Governance Issues developed by Khanya-aicdd

Empowering communities - Micro (community) level

- Are people active and involved in managing their own development (claiming their rights and exercising their responsibilities) (and what about poor people)?
- Is there a responsive, active and accessible network of local service providers (community-based, private sector or government)

Empowering local government and district services - Meso (local government) level

- At local government level (lower meso) are services facilitated, provided or promoted effectively and responsively, coordinated and held accountable?
- At upper meso level, is the county/region supportive and supervising the level below?

Realigning the centre - Macro (National) level

- Is the centre providing strategic direction, redistribution and oversight, and how responsive is this to micro and meso-level realities and inputs?
- Are international institutions and processes helping to promote the capacity of nation states to take on the strategic roles to eradicate poverty?

If we don't improve the micro-meso link - our attempts at poverty reduction are bound to fail.

4 APPLYING THE GOVERNANCE ISSUES

These 6 principles guide Khanya-aicdd's work, and relate closely to the community-driven development approach. Khanya-aicdd has developed a suite of work based on these:

Empowering communities

- people active and involved – our **community-based management** practice, as well as **community-based planning**
- responsive, active and accessible network of local service providers – our work on **community-based workers**, part of our **decentralised services practice**

Empowering local government and district services and Realigning the centre

- relate to our **decentralised services practice**, as well as our **development planning practice**

So 3 of our practices relate to making the application of the SL principles through CDD a reality:

- promoting **decentralisation and decentralised services**
- promoting participatory and strategic **development planning** approaches
- promoting **community-based management**

5 PROJECTS DEVELOPING THE SLA

Facilitating lesson-learning around implementation of the Sustainable Coastal Livelihoods Programme, (2004-5), *Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, South Africa.*

Training in SLA for Sustainable Coastal Livelihoods Programme (2004), *Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, South Africa.*

Facilitation of design workshop for Food Security and Livelihoods Recovery Programme (2004), *DFID Zimbabwe*

Assistance to State Co-ordinators in the use of Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in Nigeria (2002) *DFID, Nigeria*

Design of Livelihoods Recovery Project (2002), *CARE, Lesotho*

Social Capital in the context of Sustainable Livelihoods in South Africa (2002), *Human Sciences Research Council*

Part of a consortium working on the project: Goodbye to Projects? The Institutional Impact of a Livelihood Approach on Projects and Project Cycle Management. (2001-4). *DFID, London.*

Training on Sustainable Livelihoods, PRA and PLA Concepts, Tools and Methods (2001). *BRIMP project, Botswana.*

Facilitation of a Training Workshop on Sustainable Livelihoods, PRA and PLA Concepts, Tools and Methods (2000), *Mpumalanga Province*

Facilitating development and subsequent implementation of a poverty eradication strategy for the Free State (1998-2000). *Department of Social Welfare/Free State Government, Free State, South Africa.*

Development of Guidelines for Botswana Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Programme (2000), *Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Botswana.*

Evaluation of UNDP's Global Sustainable Livelihoods Programme, including case studies in Malawi, Egypt and South Africa (2000), *Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP.*

Facilitation of World Bank Workshops on Poverty Eradication (1999 & 2000). *World Bank, Washington.*

Design of sustainable livelihoods project for Northern Province, South Africa (1999). *Northern Province/UNDP.*

Facilitation of National Workshop to Develop a Sustainable Livelihoods Programme for Botswana (1999). *Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Botswana.*

Research into policies and institutions supporting sustainable rural livelihoods in Zimbabwe and development of national strategy to support SRLs (1999), *Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, Zimbabwe.*

Research into policies and institutions supporting sustainable rural livelihoods in the Zambia and development of national strategy to support SRLs (1999). *Ministry of Community Development and Social Services/Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, Zambia.*

One of 10 members of Sustainable Livelihoods Support Group (1999-2002), *DFID London*

Research into Policies and Institutions supporting sustainable rural livelihoods in the Eastern Cape and Development of Provincial Strategy (1998). *Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture and Land Affairs, South Africa.*

Commissioned paper on Decentralisation and Sustainable Rural Livelihoods for DFID Conference on Sustainable Rural Livelihoods – what role should we play, (1998), *DFID.*