



Access to natural resources has been a constant theme in debates on poverty alleviation strategies. In the last decade, with the renewed international commitment to poverty reduction, there have been significant theoretical and practical advances in the way poverty - environment linkages are considered in mainstream development policy. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) emerged partly as a result of this rethinking of poverty-environment linkages and has since become a driving force in its evolution. This briefing-note evaluates what the SLA has contributed towards an understanding of poverty, vulnerability and livelihood issues related to access to natural resources (ANR).

Changing Perspectives on Poverty-Environment Linkages

International development policy has long ago come to a consensus that environment-poverty linkages are critical in determining development outcomes. Poor people in developing countries are particularly dependent on natural resources and ecosystem services for their livelihoods. Increasingly the poor live in areas of high ecological vulnerability and relatively low levels of resource productivity.

The position of the poor at such ecological margins, as well as a low level of access and rights over productive natural resources, is a major factor contributing to rural poverty. These are generally accepted facts; the debate and uncertainty has revolved around the linkages between poverty, vulnerability, livelihoods and access to natural resources.

Several factors and trends over the last decade have contributed to increasing uncertainty about the nature of poverty-environment linkages.

First, there are some new trends captured in empirical research. The picture that is emerging is of an increasingly complex rural reality, with globalization and diversification affecting the livelihood strategies of the rural poor and their access to natural resources on an unprecedented scale.

Secondly, there is an increasing recognition that institutions, including those involving access to natural resources (ANR), are more complex and open to negotiation and contestation than had previously been appreciated.

Finally, partly as a result of this new empirical evidence, previous explanatory starting points in the poverty-environment discourse are being rejected as either too simplistic or factually inaccurate. Table 1 summarizes some of the current thinking related to ANR.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA)¹

The SLA, which has been developed by donors, research institutes and NGOs, does not claim to be a new development paradigm but to be based on evolving thinking about poverty reduction. The SLA is intended to provide a comprehensive and practice-oriented framework to understand complex local realities. The sustainable livelihoods framework (see figure 1) presents the main factors that affect people's livelihoods and typical relationships between these.

In particular, the framework provides a check-list of important issues and sketches out the way these link to each other. The SLA draws attention to core influences and processes and emphasizes the multiple interactions between the various factors that affect livelihoods. But what does the SLA bring to an understanding of the complex issues surrounding poverty and ANR linkages? The following sections will consider this question by looking in some detail at how the framework can be applied to an analysis of poverty-environment linkages.

The Vulnerability Context

The rural poor have always been exposed to a certain amount of risk and employed complex livelihood strategies in anticipation of ecological and seasonal variations. However it is generally accepted that the scope of uncertainty and risk today has an unprecedented influence on the livelihood strategies of the rural poor. Increasingly these livelihood strategies are affected by global processes of change which the rural poor are unable to anticipate. Uncertainty and risk have therefore become central to an understanding of the livelihood options that are available to the rural poor.

¹ The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is both an approach to poverty reduction and a framework for the analysis of poverty. This briefing note considers the analytical strength of the SLA; a second briefing note will examine the more operative contribution of the SLA as an approach to development. Readers unfamiliar with the SLA might like to consult the following background information: The Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets (DfID 2000) available at www.livelihoods.org

How can these linkages between uncertainty, risk and livelihood strategies be conceptualised? The SLA provides a means forward through the concept of the ‘vulnerability context’ which describes the trends, shocks and seasonality over which people have limited or no control, but which nevertheless affect people’s livelihoods and the wider availability of assets. The following are the three aspects of the vulnerability context identified in the SL framework:

- Shocks; such as natural shocks, economic shocks, and conflict;
- Trends; such as population, resource, economic and technological trends;
- Seasonality; such as in prices, employment opportunities and food availability.

The vulnerability context draws attention to the complex of influences that are out of local control yet directly or indirectly responsible for many of the hardships faced by the poor. These forces are often mutually reinforcing in that the vulnerability of livelihood strategies means people are unable to cope with stresses when they occur, unable to manipulate their environment to reduce stress in the future, and unable to benefit from positive trends.

The forces that come into play as a consequence of the vulnerability context are often described as forming a ‘vicious circle’; particularly in relation to natural resource management. Poverty and environmental degradation have long been considered as linked in a downward and mutually reinforcing cycle: poverty causes environmental degradation, which in turn causes further poverty.

The vulnerability context in the SL framework provides a means for deconstructing this vicious circle. The separation of factors in the vulnerability context first of all draws attention to the fact that whilst some issues are totally outside of local control (such as a hurricane), others are at least slightly more predictable (economic trends). The links drawn to policies, institutions and processes call analytical attention to

measures that can be taken to reduce vulnerability. The links between the vulnerability context and people’s capital assets and livelihood strategies enables a consideration of which assets are most affected by the vulnerability context and how people can be supported to build up their livelihood assets and become more resilient to shocks, stresses and trends.

The Capital Asset Pentagon

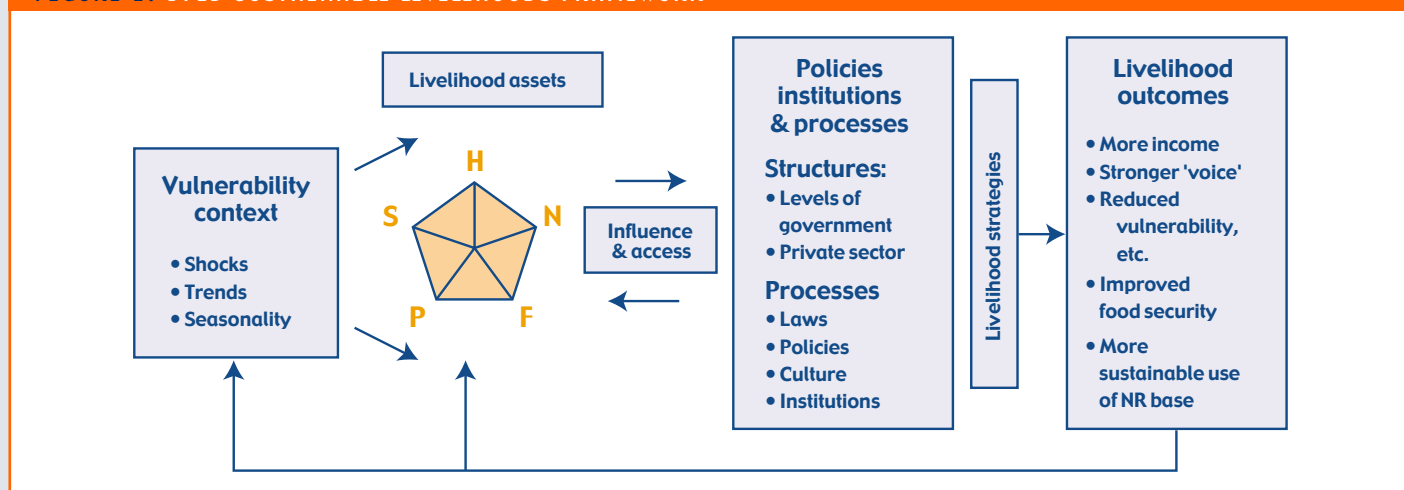
What role does access to natural resources play in the livelihood strategies of the rural poor? Access to cultivable land is the most important natural resource for rural development and key in determining the livelihood strategies of the rural poor. However, the future role of agriculture is one of the main unresolved issues in current rethinking of rural development policies. It is increasingly recognised in the policy debate that rural diversification is the norm rather than the exception as the rural poor seek substitutes for a shrinking natural resource base. Access to natural resources is therefore just one asset amongst many and has to be seen in conjunction with other assets in order to understand its importance in overall livelihood strategies.

The SLA provides a useful framework for understanding the role of access to natural resources in the livelihoods of the rural poor. The livelihood framework identifies five core capital assets: natural, social, human, physical and financial. People require a range of capitals to pursue their livelihood strategies and access to any particular category is likely to be limited for the poor. The concepts of asset substitution and trade-offs are central to an analysis of how capital assets are employed by the rural poor. For instance, at times a household may choose to forgo migration (financial capital) in order to protect long-term natural capital prospects (forest management). Most livelihood decisions involve over-consuming a particular capital asset

TABLE 1. EMERGING VIEWS ON ANR THEMES

Theme	Mainstream Views	Emerging Views
Resources	Material, economic, direct use-value, property	Also as symbolic, with meanings that are locally and historically embedded, and socially constructed
Livelihoods and resource management	Links between single resource and use (e.g. rangelands, forests, fisheries)	Multiple users; complex and diverse livelihood systems
Community	Local, specific user groups, homogenous, bounded	Multiple locations, diffuse, heterogenous, diverse, multiple social identities
Institutions	Static, rules, functionalist, formal	Social interaction and process, embedded in practice, struggles over meaning, formal and informal; interlinked with knowledge and power
Knowledge	Linear transfer; science as sole source of expertise	Multiple sources; plural and partial knowledges; negotiated understandings
Power and control	Transaction cost focus; elites; community leaders	Differentiated actors; conflict, bargaining, negotiation and power relations central
Property regimes	Common property resource as set of rules based on collective action outcomes; clear boundaries	Practice not rule-determined; strategic; tactical; overlapping rights and responsibilities; ambiguity; inconsistency; flexibility
Legal systems	Formal legislation	Law in practice; different systems co-existing
Governance	Separated levels – international, national, local	Multi-level governance approaches; fuzzy/messy interactions; local and global interconnected

FIGURE 1. DFID SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK



at some point, for example social capital (by drawing on but not reciprocating social relationships based on kinship and trust) and natural capital (intensive agriculture leading to soil degradation). Livelihood strategies are continuous attempts to modify and adjust these asset combinations in the pursuit of better outcomes.

Capital asset trade-off and substitution are useful concepts with which to come to grips with rural complexity. The framework posits these assets in the vulnerability context, acknowledging that assets are both destroyed and created as a result of trends, shocks and seasonality. Capital assets are also influenced by, and in turn influence, policies, institutions and processes. The focus on how assets are combined in particular vulnerability contexts and in relation to specific policies enables a practical focus on strategic questions for development interventions. For instance: to what extent can one type of asset (natural) be substituted for another (financial) in a particular context? Which capital assets are people least likely to trade or substitute? What are key local priorities in building-up capital assets?

The SLA recognises that capitals are not only the resources that people use in building livelihoods; they are assets that give them the capability to engage with the world and the *capability* to change the world – this part being implied in the ‘influence and access’ arrows linking local livelihoods to wider policies, institutions and processes.

The emphasis is therefore on building on local choices and enabling and empowering people to make livelihood decisions. This emphasis is linked to the appreciation that, notwithstanding the importance of material assets, poverty is also a state of ill-being and livelihood decisions are often based on subjective experiences of poverty.

The perspective provided by the SLA is very much in keeping with current thinking on access to natural resource issues which has focused on people’s strengths. Research from a livelihoods perspective has been at the forefront of a reconsideration of the constraints that the rural poor face. In essence, it has been pointed out that rural livelihoods should not be seen as agrarian livelihoods or

even as natural resource based livelihoods. Although natural resources and access to land remain a predominant source of rural income these have to be seen in wider perspective.

Policies, Institutions and Processes

There is a growing appreciation of the complexity of institutions and their importance in determining how the rural poor access natural resources (see table 1). At the macro-level ANR is increasingly influenced by a globalized environment in which conventions, laws and trade structures seek to regulate the terms of access to natural resources. At the micro-level, the community, once a starting point in discussions on ANR, is no longer an obviously useful term for the dynamic social networks which link groups of people and individuals. In terms of process, power relations have long been appreciated as important for understanding ANR. Institutions are therefore increasingly considered to include not only rules and regulations but also norms, routines, conventions, beliefs, age and gender.

Does the SLA provide a means with which to make sense of this complexity?² Policies, Institutions and Processes (hereafter PIPs) occupy a central place in the framework and their importance in determining the terms on which people follow livelihood strategies is clearly appreciated. The explicit mention of ‘processes’ enables a distinction to be drawn between formal organizational dynamics and the ‘softer’ ones, such as norms and routines, mentioned above. The importance of micro-macro linkages in shaping PIPs is also clearly incorporated into the structure of the framework through the influence and access arrows. Not only is it important to empower people to influence and access PIPs, but it is important to recognise that local livelihood strategies are constrained by macro-structures over which people may have little control.

The SLA has a further advantage in tackling the complexity of institutional issues related to ANR. The SLA does not prescribe the starting point for analysis and has

² The conceptualization of PIPs in the framework has been criticised for not dealing explicitly with issues of power and politics. This paper is focusing solely on the contribution of the SLA: critiques and debates of the framework can be found on the website above.

neither an implicit nor an explicit vision of the ‘community’. The SLA can be used to consider a particular ANR ‘scenario’ related to an individual, household or group, as appropriate. Whether or not the group is also a community, and if so how this is relevant for an understanding of ANR, is a question that can be addressed within that particular context.

Some communities – such as villages where there are large number of outmigrants – may be based mainly on physical location and social capital supported by financial capital from remittances. Other communities may be defined by common dependence on natural capital of a particular type and, as opposed to the example above, social capital may be depleted by diversification. In both cases the SLA provides a useful framework to understand the way in which PIPs interact with local capital assets to shape livelihood strategies and outcomes.

In sum, the centrality of the PIPs box in the framework reflects the current consensus that the creation of an enabling institutional environment is critical for changing the terms on which the rural poor can access natural resource.

Livelihood Strategies and Outcomes

Livelihood strategies is the overarching term used to denote the range and combination of activities and choices that people make and undertake in order to achieve their livelihood outcomes. The single most important factor in determining the success of livelihood strategies is probably access to sufficient capital assets, although the vulnerability context and the constraints and opportunities posed by wider institutional processes also play a critical role. The focus on livelihood strategies and outcomes, rather than the usual focus on objectives, places the emphasis on the importance of being ‘people-centred’ and understanding people’s perspectives. The choice of words also reflects a recognition that ‘sustainable development’ as such is not an objective at the individual or household level. The focus on strategies and outcomes reflects an appreciation that development is about trade-offs and choices at all levels.

Summary and Significance

The SLA has a close link to current thinking on ANR issues. Central importance is given to assets and entitlements yet it is recognized that the ways in which these can be employed have to be seen in a wider context.

BOX 1. RURAL PROLETARIANISATION IN THE ANDES

Non-viable agricultural units (depleted natural capital) do not necessarily lead to the end of rural livelihoods. A significant feature of some regional economies has been the growth of a rural proletariat working in non-traditional capitalist enterprises such as the agri-horti-floricultural sector. The wages enable people to maintain a rural residence (social capital). The important intervention here may not be building-up natural capital but considering how to increase livelihood security through wage labour. Relevant interventions may be improved legislation on skills training and control of health hazards.

The framework presents the main factors that affect people’s livelihoods and the typical relationships between these. It thereby enables a ‘triangulation’ of analysis related to a given ANR scenario by allowing the issue to be seen from many different perspectives. The framework is also inherently practical and positive in its focus on working on the capabilities and assets that people have at their disposal.

The SLA, as mentioned at the outset, does not claim to be a new paradigm but to be based on evolving thinking drawn from other analytical approaches as well as practical experience. The other analytical approaches include, amongst others, the entitlements approach, participatory rural appraisal and survival strategy frameworks, all of which can be said to fall within the ‘livelihoods’ approach in that they share the same broad features.

The value of the SLA is that it incorporates lessons from other approaches in a framework that combines analysis and practice. Although the ideas are not necessarily new the approach has ‘come of age’ in a receptive policy environment and has been championed through development organizations. The fact that there is a visual representation of the approach has undoubtedly contributed enormously to its rapid adoption. The framework is also more practically focused than previous livelihoods approaches and more cross-sectoral than approaches such as farming systems. There is therefore arguably more of a shared starting point and conceptual framework than there has ever been before for development planning. The relevance of the SLA will lie ultimately in how well it manages to achieve its objectives of understanding and then assisting to transform the livelihoods of the rural poor.

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS



Livelihood Support Programme (LSP)

An inter-departmental programme for improving support for enhancing livelihoods of the poor. Through the **Livelihood Support Programme (LSP)**, FAO seeks to improve the impact of its interventions at the country level through the effective application of Sustainable Livelihood (SL) approaches. This work is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DfID). Email: lsp@fao.org

Access to natural resources sub-programme

Access by the poor to natural resources, including land, forests, water, fisheries and wildlife, is essential for sustainable poverty reduction. The sub-programme focuses on building stakeholder capacity to improve poor people’s access to natural resources.