



Can the sustainable livelihoods approach improve the design and implementation of projects to enhance access to natural resources for the poor?

Pari Baumann

The importance of access to natural resources (ANR) for the livelihood strategies of the poor is an accepted premise of international development policy. However project performance around ANR has been widely recognised as unsatisfactory and how to improve their performance has been the subject of much debate. With the renewed international commitment to poverty reduction, there has been a concerted effort to improve the approach taken to ANR projects. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) emerged partly as a result of this rethinking of ANR projects and has since become a shared point of reference and organizing framework for many development agencies. This briefing note evaluates the contribution of the SLA to the design and implementation of projects to improve ANR.

The complex environment of ANR projects

The approach to poverty and livelihoods issues in relation to natural resource access has changed significantly in the last decade. This changed approach is in part an attempt to grapple with the increasing complexity of poverty-environment linkages. The rural poor are heavily dependent on a declining natural resource base over which they have insecure rights, and often live in areas of low resource productivity and high ecological vulnerability. This fact is generally accepted; however understanding the strategies of the rural poor to cope with these constraints and the institutional environment in which choices are made is increasingly difficult.

Clearly the diversification of rural livelihoods has become more than just a complement to essentially agricultural rural livelihoods. Globalisation (of markets, regulations, technology etc) increasingly links the rural poor to processes over which they have no control. Coping with uncertainty and risk seems to be one of the main explanatory factors for livelihood decisions taken by the rural poor. Complex institutional dynamics influence the terms on which the rural poor access natural resources. Even the community, once a secure starting point for projects on natural resources, is increasingly recognised as an imperfect term for the dynamic web of social networks which link groups of people.

What has the policy response been to these complex realities? On the one hand there has been a renewed international focus on poverty reduction and access to natural resources for the poor is recognised as being of central importance in the new poverty agenda. However the rapid pace of change described above has left policy-makers without a clear narrative for rural development. It is generally accepted that agriculture alone does not have the capacity to be the engine of rural growth and that a broader multi-sectoral approach to rural development is needed that

builds on local empowerment, risk mitigation and social protection. Planning mechanisms for national development strategies such as Poverty Reduction Strategies have made concerted efforts to mainstream environmental issues. However how to design projects that reconcile the participatory, people-centred, multi-sector processes that have been isolated as important with respect to access to natural resources (ANR) issues, with the logistical constraints of development planning, remains a key policy concern. This briefing note evaluates the contribution of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) to the design of projects to improve ANR.¹

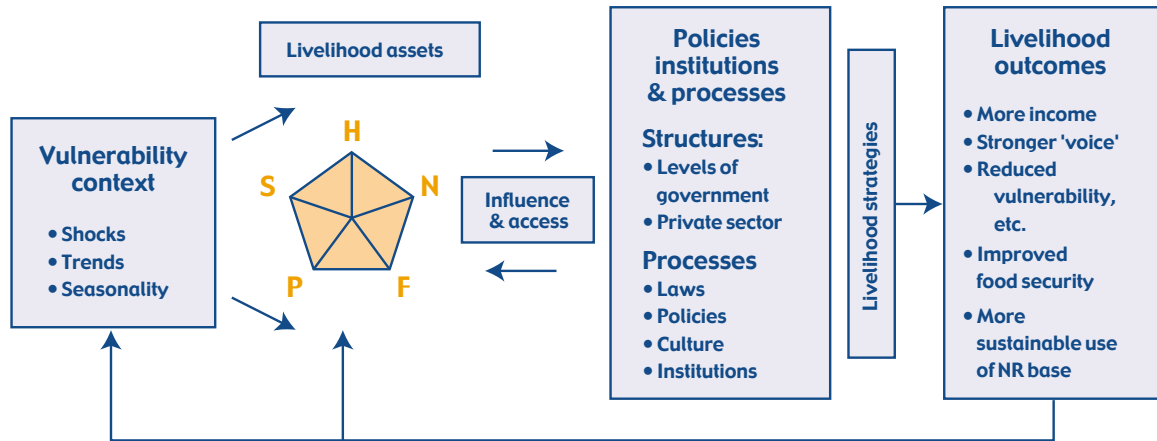
The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The SLA has emerged and has evolved with the objective of providing a pragmatic means to make sense of increasing rural complexity and to identify people-centred development interventions. The SLA has been developed by development practitioners within donor, research and NGO institutions. It does not claim to be a new paradigm but to embody a commitment to poverty eradication based on accumulated lessons for best practice development interventions.

So what is the SLA? In a nutshell, the SLA is a set of principles and a framework for analysis, which strives to keep people central in development analysis and intervention, in order to improve the effectiveness of development assistance. The principles (see box 1) support approaches that are responsive and participatory whilst recognising that macro-level structures and processes influence and often constrain local livelihood options. The analytical framework (see figure 1) recognises the complexity of local livelihoods and looks beyond disciplines and sectors to focus on the assets that people have and the wider context that influences how these can be used.

¹ This briefing note considers the practical and organisational strength of the SLA; another briefing note will examine the effectiveness of the SLA as an analytical framework. Readers unfamiliar with the SLA might like to consult the Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets (DfID 2000) available at www.livelihoods.org

FIGURE 1. DFID SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK



The SLA has been adopted by policy-makers mainly out of a practical concern that the immediate focus of much development activity was either on resources and facilities (water, land, clinics etc), or on structures that provide services (ministries, NGOs etc) rather than the people themselves. The SLA in this context seems to provide an approach with which to navigate such sectoral and organizational divides and move towards an integrated development policy.

However the SLA is only accumulated best practice and not a magic wand; in fact the SLA does not offer new tools nor methods for development practice. What then is the value-added of the SLA to ANR project design and implementation? The following sections consider this question by looking first at project/programme design and then at project/programme implementation.

The SLA and Project Design

The broad consensus from the application of the SLA approach is that it has helped to focus projects on key interactions in local livelihood strategies, and so has indeed contributed towards an improved understanding of development constraints and opportunities related to ANR. The analytical framework has supported an understanding of ANR problems in their wider context and so helped in 'thinking through' the chain of causality from programme activities to a change in livelihoods. In doing so it has helped establish priorities for action as well as relevant entry-points (box 2). The SLA principles have improved ANR projects in changing the process through which projects are designed, as well as keeping the objectives focused on poverty reduction. The main *benefits* of applying SLA to ANR issues are that it:²

- Encourages a broad analysis of development problems;
- Shifts focus onto livelihood outcomes rather than project objectives and onto the full-range of project impacts and not just cash and physical outputs;

BOX 1. SLA PRINCIPLES

- **People-centred:** 'focusing on what matters to people'.
- **Responsive and participatory:** 'poor people themselves must be key actors'.
- **Multi-level:** 'the micro-level informs the development of policy' and 'macro-level structures and processes support people'.
- **Conducted in partnership:** 'with both the public and the private sector'.
- **Sustainable:** 'economic, institutional, social and environmental sustainability'.
- **Dynamic:** 'recognise dynamic nature of livelihood strategies, respond flexibly, and develop long-term commitments'.

BOX 2. IDENTIFYING AND PRIORITISING ENTRY-POINTS

The Dfid DELIVERI project in Indonesia is an example of an SL-type project with a single sector entry point, but which worked on several levels within that sector. It aimed to make existing livestock services more client-centered and responsive to the poor and started work on this objective at the sub-district and community level. Experiences gained from piloting new approaches at the village level were used to press for changes at the village level and above. By bringing decision-makers from the provincial level face to face with beneficiaries in pilot villages, the project was able to lobby effectively for policy and institutional change.

- Provides a tool for learning about the complex local impacts of ANR projects;
- Provides a common organizing framework and language for practitioners from different backgrounds;
- Has shifted the sector specific focus of many ANR projects to include alternative interventions that support the livelihoods of the poor;
- Provides a check-list for the development of a comprehensive livelihoods baseline;

² See Baumann, P. 2002. Improving access to natural resources for the rural poor: a critical analysis of central concepts and emerging trends from a sustainable livelihoods perspective. FAO LSP Working Paper.

- Enables a more realistic prediction of potential outcomes and impacts of projects;
- Encourages a more participatory approach to be taken; and
- Maintains a focus on both long and short-term development strategies.

The case study experience also reveals a broad commonality in the *constraints* experienced and the shortcomings of the SLA identified. It is all very well to have acknowledged the diversity of rural livelihoods; the shifting, complex, contingent web of relations that constitute institutions; the interaction of social, political and economic forces across all levels; and the importance of including a temporal and dynamic perspective; but then what? Researchers and practitioners have come across the following main difficulties in using the SLA for project design:

- SLA is time and money consuming;
- It requires multi-disciplinary teams and specialist SL training;
- It is difficult to quantify information on capital assets gathered through SL and so difficult to gain a comparative assessment of ANR issues;
- The SLA can lead to the compilation of enormous 'wish-lists' of project activities; and
- The SLA is poor in addressing issues of power and politics.

The SLA and Project Implementation

Whereas the consensus is probably that the SLA has improved project design for ANR, the effectiveness of the SLA as a tool for project implementation is less established. At the macro-level the SLA has been used to help integrate poverty and environment issues into national level planning frameworks. The contribution to project implementation has been mostly indirect in that the SLA has been used to modify existing programmes and projects. For instance, the SLA has been important for ensuring a livelihoods and pro-poor focus even in sectoral natural resource projects. The analogy of an 'acupuncture approach' has been used in this connection: holistic diagnosis of the problem but the treatment is specific and focused.³

The SLA has also been effective in mainstreaming poverty alleviation and the environment by supporting their inclusion in national sectoral policies and related budgets. The SLA has been useful at the macro-level for providing an inclusive process through which development specialists can think beyond conventional sectoral or disciplinary boundaries (box 3).

The SLA has also been used to monitor and evaluate existing ANR projects and to recommend changes in implementation that would enable an improved pro-poor focus. In this case the existing information basis and project structures provide SLA with an in-road with which to tackle multi-dimensional issues. Running existing processes, policies and projects through the 'SL lens' is

BOX 3. PROJECT DESIGN IN A TRANSITION COUNTRY

Livestock are one of the main capital assets of Kyrgyz rural communities and deeply integrated into the cultural, social, economic and political fabric of society. Abundant pastures and a tradition of pastoralism – both production and subsistence oriented – as well as a lack of alternatives, make livestock production an obvious focus of development efforts. However the rapidly changing institutional and social structure of a country in transition, as well as the vulnerability of the livestock sector to economic, seasonal and political shocks, calls for sophistication in analysis of development constraints and sensitivity in designing interventions. The SL framework proved to be a very useful tool for exploring these ideas with local partners. Because the Soviet model had been centrally planned and highly sectoral, local partners had no framework with which to conceptualise complex development processes. The SLA provided an easy to explain and comprehensive framework that could be used both to explain the theory, to plan the studies and then to design interventions.

perhaps one of the most frequent practical applications of the SLA. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that doing so provides useful insights into how the implementation process can be improved for achieving pro-poor objectives.

The value-added of the SLA for project implementation identified so far has been indirect: in check-lists for inclusion of issues, criteria for success, means for monitoring and evaluation, etc. All of these are related to existing programmes and projects at all levels. The fact that the indirect use of the SLA is easier to identify than direct uses is linked to a key weakness of the SLA for project implementation. There are in fact very few SLA projects because ultimately projects have to operate in national and donor level planning contexts which are slow to change. Partly this is because projects have to be managed by a single department to be effective. Hence sectoral approaches are still the planning norm, especially with respect to natural resources. Attempts at inter-departmental cooperation for wider poverty alleviation objectives related to ANR have been fraught with administrative difficulties.

Another major explanation for the limitations of the SLA for project implementation is that projects aimed at empowering the poor are likely to meet not only administrative but also political resistance at all levels. Despite the many principles that underpin the SLA, there are none that can guide practitioners in what to do if pro-poor project planning meets resistance. In particular, by being open to all manner of institutional linkages, and 'win-win' solutions to development problems, the SLA avoids taking a political position. Whilst useful at one level, this provides no benchmark for action or prioritization and glosses over the fact that options and choices are usually not institutional and technical matters, but political ones.

³ See Ashley, C. & Carney, D. 2002. Sustainable livelihoods: lessons from early experience. DfID.

Summary and Significance

The review identifies benefits that SLA brings to both project design and implementation, though it suggests that the benefits are currently more apparent in the former than the latter. However the following challenges remain an obstacle for improving the effectiveness of the SLA for both project stages:

- **Unpacking policies, institutions and processes** The SLA is still a long way from providing a comprehensive analysis of how Policies, Institutions and Processes (PIPs) work and hence from recommending strategies to change and improve them.
- **Changing the way organizations work** Following through the implications of the SLA would mean that institutions have to change and instigating changes in policies, institutions and processes often requires acting to change the way that organizations work.

Can the SLA improve the design and implementation of ANR projects? Despite the critical review of the practical effectiveness of the SLA the answer is yes. The SLA has certainly been effective in promoting people-centred approaches to ANR in both project design and implementation. It is important to contextualize the two challenges mentioned above in terms of wider change processes in development planning. The SLA has been part of an analytical and policy process that seeks to dispel environmental and development narratives and grapple directly with complexity. This is progressive but inevitably it means that there are few guidelines to follow in development practice. This is not in itself negative and indeed it would be surprising if the SLA did not complicate the project process.

Secondly, the economic, political and social cost of changing institutions, policies and processes is one of the major challenges of development. Whilst the SLA does eventually have to justify its claim to be practical, the difficulty of the process is again something that is inevitable. The effectiveness of the SLA in supporting this process through changing the way in which projects are implemented has to be judged in a longer time-frame.

Finally, the contribution of the SLA in promoting pro-poor objectives in ANR should be contextualized within the wider context of development approaches. There is a clear 'value-added' in its combination of framework and principles. However for some issues it is best combined with other approaches to be most effective.

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. It is important therefore to bear these other approaches in mind and to consider that the SLA may need to further draw on these approaches in order to achieve both its analytical and practical objectives.

For example, and with reference to the issues of power and rights raised above, some of the most consistent and constructive criticism of the SLA has come from rights-based approaches (RBA). These are rooted in international law and concerned with the protection of claims that have been legitimised by social structures and norms. The RBA suggests that one practical way forward is to consider the rights to which the poor are entitled by international law. These provide focus points for the analysis of the factors that influence livelihoods and entitlements such as social and political contestation over rights; entry points for practical action; and benchmarks for non-partisan political positions on priorities.

Further, the SLA is an evolving approach and has so far responded well to criticism. A 2001 seminar on the value of the SLA for an exploration of Rural Poverty and ANR issues asked 48 practitioners from diverse backgrounds to compare positive and negative aspects of the SLA in 1999 and 2001. They concluded that in 1999 the SLA:

- Provided a focus on the policy environment;
- Provided policy makers with a common language for development; and
- Made for more people-focused policy.

However, it was also felt that the SLA had limited use at the national level and many of the factors represented in the PIPs box were felt to be overly complex.

By 2001, after two more years of practice and adaptation, the practitioners felt that the SLA had matured so that it:

- Could be applied at a national level;
- Was complementary to Poverty Reduction Strategies;
- Provided a reality check for macro approaches in aid; and
- Improved policy links for projects.

This assessment reveals that the SLA has responded well to constructive criticism and that there has been a concerted attempt by practitioners to contribute towards its development as a practice-oriented approach (see www.livelihoods.org).

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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.