

# GOODBYE TO PROJECTS? – THE INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACHES ON DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

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## OVERVIEW

These briefing papers aim to help policy-makers and practitioners in planning and managing development interventions that respond to evolving methodological approaches (such as sustainable livelihoods approaches) and questions over the effectiveness of different formats of interventions.

We focus on two main themes: the practical trade-offs required between operational and normative principles; and how to ensure that development interventions will have a sustainable impact.

The briefing papers include:

1. An overview,
2. The application of SLA principles,
3. The changing format of interventions,
4. Lessons for community-based planning interventions,
5. Lessons for rural livelihoods interventions,
6. Lessons for HIV/AIDS interventions.

'Goodbye to Projects?' is a collaborative project between the Bradford Centre for International Centre for Development (BCID), University of Bradford, with the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), Uganda; Khanya – managing rural change, South Africa; and Mzumbe University, Tanzania.

Project website:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/a/cad/dppc/GTP/goodbye.html>

## 1. An overview: Projects and Principles

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*This briefing paper reports on research exploring ten detailed case studies of livelihoods-oriented interventions operating in Tanzania, Lesotho, South Africa and Uganda. Analysing these interventions through an audit of sustainable livelihood 'principles' (as a proxy for best practice) revealed general lessons both about the practical opportunities and challenges for employing sustainable livelihoods approaches to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development interventions and also about the changing format of development interventions.*

### Principal Findings

- Sustainable livelihoods principles provide a useful **cross-checking framework** for thinking through development interventions in any format (project, programme, sector strategy or direct budgetary support). The use of these principles as a systematic audit of practice forces us to justify contradictions between intention and actual practice. Sustainable livelihoods approaches are not new but build on learning process, participatory and other approaches.
- Despite calls over the last two decades for the adoption of learning process approaches to development, this research shows that such a shift in practice remains largely constrained by donors' requirements to achieve defined outputs within a short time frame.
- There is evidence of projects playing a useful role in a learning process provided that they operate in an integrated way with existing policy, institutions and resource streams in the short to medium term and aim for environmental and social sustainability in the medium to long term.
- All development interventions (whether delivered through projects, programmes or larger-scale support) need to consider the balance of power between partners (donors, government, NGOs and private sector) and reflect on who controls and shapes the menu of developmental choices.

### Sustainable livelihoods thinking

Since 1998 'sustainable livelihoods approaches' (SLAs) have increasingly entered the development arena and are used by a range of organisations including the World Bank, FAO, UNDP, DFID, Oxfam and CARE (Hussein 2002).

SL thinking has been developed in three clear ways: as a concept, as a framework and as a set of principles for action (Farrington 2001). The concept of a 'sustainable livelihood' is based on a multidimensional understanding of people's lives. This recognises the different assets and entitlements that people hold in relation to the wider context of institutions, regulations and cultural norms. The concept forces us to address the complexity and integrated nature of livelihoods and directs attention towards people's vulnerability to external shocks and stresses as a starting point for action. Reducing people's vulnerability to such shocks and stresses would contribute to the long-term sustainability of livelihoods.

Livelihoods frameworks seek to illustrate the linkages between livelihoods, structuring processes and livelihoods strategies. Livelihoods are disaggregated in terms of assets e.g. financial, social, physical, natural and human assets in the DFID SL framework. SL

frameworks in general have been criticised for trying to codify complexity and to oversimplify the relationships between different assets (Toner 2003). However, livelihoods frameworks can be useful tools for thinking through the fit of development interventions both in people's lives and in wider institutional contexts.

The ethos behind sustainable livelihoods approaches has implications for how development interventions are designed, implemented and evaluated. The approaches have been developed into sets of principles (Box 1), building on earlier work by Carney (2002) and others. Such principles can be seen as reflecting the evolution of development practice, building on learning process approaches, which themselves resulted from dissatisfaction with the idea of development as a 'blueprint' (Bond and Hulme 1999).

#### **Box 1 SLA principles**

Data was collected and analysed for each case study in relation to the following principles:

- 1) Poor People as focus
- 2) Participation
- 3) Partnership
- 4) Holistic approach
- 5) Policy and institutional links
- 6) Building on strengths
- 7) Dynamism and flexibility
- 8) Accountability and responsiveness
- 9) Sustainability (economic, social, environmental and institutional)

These principles were adapted by the study team from earlier work by Carney (2002) and others.

### **The institutional challenge of adopting sustainable livelihoods approaches**

Selected case study interventions were examined in relation to the SLA principles in order to identify and clarify the challenges to the design, appraisal and implementation of development interventions. The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of general and country reviews on SL and development interventions. The second phase of the research was the compilation of detailed case studies of development interventions in Uganda, Tanzania and Southern Africa (Box 2). These case studies compare and contrast the implementation of a range of projects and programmes developed with a livelihoods orientation.

#### **Box 2 The Case studies**

##### *HIV/AIDS Interventions*

- **AIDS/STD programme:** This case explores the Ugandan government's strategy to combat the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS
- **SHARP (Sexual Health and Rights Programme):** a CARE South Africa & Lesotho project training peer educators to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS to target high-risk groups.

##### *Community-Based Planning Interventions*

- **Planning programme for district development within capacity 21 (Tanzakesho):** A UNDP project in Tanzania piloting a participatory planning methodology for the production of environmentally sustainable village plans.
- **Community-based planning project:** a DFID-funded, four-country action-research project covering South Africa, Uganda, Ghana and Zimbabwe exploring how an empowering participatory planning process can be integrated with the local government planning system.

##### *Agricultural/rural livelihood Interventions*

- **TEAM (Training for Environmental and Agricultural Management):** Implemented by CARE Lesotho, funded by NORAD and later by DFID, to develop an agricultural extension model based on farmer extension facilitators.
- **Agricultural Sector Programme Support:** A multi-faceted initiative financed by Danida in Tanzania, implemented by various government ministries with components including institutional support, smallholders irrigation, on-farm seed production, rock-phosphate research, private agriculture sector support and an environmental programme.
- **Magu District Livelihood and Food Security Project (MDLFSP):** A CARE Norge project aiming to decrease the vulnerability of 5000 households in Magu district, Tanzania, through a range of activities covering agricultural extension and strengthening community-based groups.
- **PMA (Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture):** PMA is multi-sectoral partnership between government, donors and NGOs. It seeks to reform all aspects of agriculture in Uganda, as well as including initiatives in complementary sectors.

##### *Natural resource interventions*

- **Sustainable Management of the Usangu Wetland and its Catchment (SMUWC):** A DFID-funded project in Tanzania aiming to improve the management of water and other natural resources in Usangu in order to improve the livelihoods of poor people and downstream users.
- **SCLP (Sustainable Coastal Livelihoods Programme) :** A programme funded by DFID South Africa and the South Africa Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism aiming to stimulate integrated and sectoral approaches to sustain and optimise the allocation of coastal resources

All the case studies in this research show a livelihoods-orientation in that they start from a stated commitment to improving people's livelihoods. Analysis of the data from the case studies identified strengths and contradictions in the current planning, implementation and evaluation of development interventions. This allowed us to understand some of the barriers to the success of interventions underpinned by a learning process approach.

Overall issues emerging from the research were:

- Attention to all SL principles is required for an intervention to have the potential to create sustainable impact. Principles are not just a checklist but provide a framework for the critical analysis of possible actions.
- Demand-led multi-sectoral approaches (such as an SLA) are complex and may lend themselves to participatory planning. They are less well suited to large sectoral interventions, where working bottom-up may lead to the loss of a bigger strategic picture and differential coverage of services.
- The concepts of 'ownership', 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'partnership' need to be worked through critically in relation to the exercise of power in all stakeholder relationships. These concepts are used pervasively in the case study interventions but their practice is little reflected upon.
- Livelihoods analysis (for instance using a livelihoods framework) may lead to an improved understanding of the complexity of ground-level realities but specific interventions should be carefully focused. Effective partnerships create synergies that enable multi-sectoral action rather than using a single "integrated" intervention to respond to all aspects of livelihoods.
- Intervention needs to 'fit' in two ways: into people's lives and into the wider institutional context of government, civil society and private enterprise.
- Active integration with existing systems should be sought through incremental and adaptive processes.
- Consideration of aspects of sustainability is essential to ensure an impact from interventions on people's livelihoods. Economic and institutional sustainability are vital in the short term but longer-term social and environmental consequences of intervention must be considered in all cases.

Many of the issues that emerged are common to much other work that has been undertaken on best development practice. Some of the specific issues and lessons for practical development management that emerge are:

#### **In design:**

- Holistic analysis of livelihoods, institutions and the external context is necessary at all levels, both nationally and internationally
- Consideration is required by development agencies of how to effectively identify and build on local strengths (and address weaknesses) to stimulate sustainable change but without seeking to control it;
- Effective design of interventions requires an understanding of power relationships and how the intervention will seek to address this to improve poor people's control over development.

#### **In implementation:**

- Care must be taken to actually increase the capacity of partners and participants, rather than just increasing their responsibilities and duties;
- Longer timeframes for intervention provide more opportunity to develop partnerships, institutionalise systems and assess impact;
- The use of parallel institutional structures established by interventions can weaken existing capacity;
- There is a need for the creative negotiation of power relationships in all partnerships. Successful partnership involves seeking synergy between different partners' mandates as a starting point for action.

## In monitoring and evaluation:

- Donors need to avoid overburdening partners with multiple or complex reporting procedures. Where possible, monitoring and evaluation processes should be integrated into existing information gathering and management systems, and be made available in local languages;
- Participatory feedback mechanisms (involving beneficiaries and front-line staff) need to be built into systems, but these take time to develop;

### The evolving format of development interventions: some challenges for the future

In bringing together the analysis of the case studies in this research two dominant themes emerge:

The first of these is the question of power. Through constructing a picture of an intervention in terms of SLA principles we see that power and governance relationships are the critical link in all processes, above all the relationships between communities, intermediary institutions and national organisations and processes. They structure which people have voice at the micro-level, how much room to manoeuvre partners enjoy, which policies are adopted at the macro level and whose interests they reflect. In most cases change to these relationships will have to be initiated by the dominant voices (the fund-bearers and agenda setters) who will need to question the assumptions on which their engagement is founded.

The second theme to emerge is the question of integrating action. It is clear from the case studies that significant impact cannot be made by an intervention unless it is sustainably integrated within the local institutional context. In most cases this refers to working directly with governmental structures and other local initiatives, building on and complementing what is already in place and working. Integrated interventions should not seek to dominate the institutions which they are supporting but must facilitate incremental capacity-building in relation to specific purposes which fit with the existing context. If this is successful the possibility of replication and upscaling are much more likely.

Through this research, it is apparent that projects can play a useful role as locations of learning-by-doing, and as a way of gaining understanding of local-level realities, provided that they 'fit' their operations more closely to existing capacity and resource streams, so that lessons learnt are relevant more widely. They need to link in to existing funding procedures, so that they are not established as isolated islands of resources whose impact is unsustainable when project funding ceases. In particular, institutional structures established by projects must account for their legitimacy and impact in an increasingly self-critical way.

Sector support and direct budget support potentially offer efficiency savings and *may be* more effective at delivering development in the longer term, but this will depend on the evolution of effective (and more equal) partnerships between donors and governments. There are many unanswered questions about power and control in these processes and about their cost-effectiveness.

Sustainable livelihoods approaches suggest that people should shape their own lives through flexible and dynamic processes of development. Whilst seeking to work with the full complexity of livelihoods, the interventions in our case studies in all formats display a striking uniformity of tools, language and theme. Our challenge now is to diversify the format of development interventions in line with the livelihoods principles to respond to the complexity and diversity of the peoples' lives.

## References

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