

Putting livelihoods thinking into practice: implications for development management

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Abstract

The failure of 'blueprint' development interventions to deliver substantive improvements in poverty reduction has been well recognised over the last twenty years. Process approaches seek to overcome the rigidity and top-down operation of much aid-funded intervention. Sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) are one of the latest additions to this family of approaches. As a theoretical framework and as a set of principles for guiding intervention, sustainable livelihoods thinking has implications for development management. Drawing on research exploring the application of sustainable livelihoods principles in ten development interventions, this paper considers how these principles have evolved from continuing debates surrounding process and people-centred (bottom-up) approaches to development management. This research suggests that whilst these principles can improve the impact made by interventions, the effective application of sustainable livelihoods and other process approaches are fundamentally restricted by unbalanced power relationships between development partners.

Introduction

The quest to find mechanisms for the creation of sustainable livelihoods (SLs) has become mainstreamed in the work of many development organisations. Consequently a number of 'sustainable livelihoods approaches' to the design, management and evaluation of such interventions have entered development practice and are utilised by a range of organisations including the World Bank, FAO, UNDP, DFID, Oxfam and CARE (Hussein 2002). These approaches are based on a multidimensional understanding of people's livelihoods. Livelihoods are comprised of tangible (land, cash, cows) and intangible assets (social relationships) on which people can draw. How they are able to use such assets is mediated by a matrix of institutions, regulations and cultural norms. A number of conceptual frameworks are offered for thinking through livelihoods. Many development agencies also propose sets of recommendations for practical actions to create sustainable livelihoods. The concept of 'livelihoods' attempts to capture the complexity of ways of living as opposed to the narrower concept of 'employment' (Arce 2003), whereas specific SL principles evolved from debates over the need to create people-centred and learning processes in development. Conventional 'blue-print' approaches to management have been recognised for over twenty years as being ineffective in achieving socio-economic development goals (Bond and Hulme 1999; Rondinelli 1993; Thomas 1996). In response process approaches were seen as being a possible solution to the rigidity of the conventional approach. Essentially a process approach is an organic approach to development management combining beneficiary participation and management flexibility linked through processes of learning (Bond and Hulme 1999).

This paper examines SL principles in relation to process approaches. Building on the analysis offered by Bond and Hulme (1999) the discussion draws on empirical experience of livelihoods-oriented development interventions, in order to identify the challenges and limitations of such approaches. Ten case studies from East and Southern Africa were considered as part of the 'Goodbye to projects?' research project¹. Covering a variety of scale, agency and format the case studies all took a livelihoods-orientation, in that they tried to respond to the multidimensional nature of poverty.

Whilst many claims are made regarding the value of SLAs and process approaches, more generally, this research shows that there continue to be organisational and institutional barriers to their full implementation. The conclusion highlights some of the changes required in the way that development interventions are designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated, in order to overcome such barriers. It also emphasises that the simplistic treatment of the power relationship between donors and recipients in the aid/intervention relationship prevents the full realisation of SLA principles (Toner 2003a).

Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches

Discussion of sustainable livelihoods has evolved in three clear ways: as a normative goal, as a framework for conceptual and as a set of principles for action (Bryceson 2000; Ellis 2000; Ellis and Mdoe 2003; Farrington 2001). Seen as a part of a wider paradigm shift (Hall and Midgley 2004; Shepherd 1998), the different SLAs are based on a multidimensional understanding of people's lives, which recognises the different assets and entitlements that people hold in the wider context of institutions, regulations and cultural norms. An understanding of the complexity and integrated nature of livelihoods allows for a better understanding of vulnerability to external shocks and stresses.

As a starting point much of the SLA literature adapts (Chambers and Conway 1992) definition of a sustainable livelihood.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets 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' (Ashley and Carney 1999; Carney 1998).

A number of livelihoods frameworks illustrate this conceptual thinking (Hussein 2002). One of the most common is that developed by DFID (DFID 1999), which views

livelihoods as being the outcome of choices people make when drawing on their stocks of 'capital assets' (divided into categories of human, natural, social, physical and financial assets). 'Policies, institutions and practices' shape the extent to which people are able to draw on or develop particular capital assets in order to sustain a livelihood. The interaction of capital assets with the limits and opportunities afforded by particular sets of policies, institutions and practices is expressed as livelihoods strategies and in turn lead to livelihoods outcomes. For some both the concept and framework for sustainable livelihoods are new in their explicit recognition that livelihoods are multi-sectoral; that all aspects of people's lives will impact on the livelihoods choices that they make; and that livelihoods are embedded within specific institutional contexts. Proponents of SLAs argue that this understanding will lead to the development of institutions and interventions that can better respond to the needs of the poor (Carney 2002; Toner 2004).

Sustainable livelihoods principles are put forward as the basis for putting SLAs into practice. Table 1 describes the principles used in the Goodbye to Projects? Research. This particular formulation was adapted from Carney (2002:p14-15), but it is clear the principles of SLA in general have their foundations in 'learning process approaches'(Bond and Hulme 1999; Hulme 1995). Thus the evolution of sustainable livelihoods approaches can also be seen as a continuation of the debate surrounding the most effective format for and management of development intervention. It is suggested that SLAs have a potential role to play in improving the poverty focus of development assistance in whatever format - project, programme or policy support (Akroyd and Duncan 1998). In addition, substantial discussion has been given to the idea of getting institutions right for pro-poor development and sustainable livelihoods thinking complements debates on decentralisation and good governance (Carney 2002).

Recent critiques suggest that SLA is overly technocratic in both theory and practice and therefore at odds with desires to stimulate community driven development (Arce 2003; Brocklesby and Fisher 2003). This is a contradiction of the claims on which the SL principles are based: specifically that people are the starting point for development and that sustainable livelihoods will be created by working from their strengths. We would argue that the SLAs adopted by development agencies are actually a product of the

increasing emphasis on community-driven and civil society approaches to development, but importantly, also part of the on-going dialogue between development actors on the most effective format for development assistance (Tembo 2003; World Bank 2002).

Table 1 Sustainable Livelihoods Principles

Poor as focus	Successful interventions start with a complex understanding of poverty and individual livelihoods and ensure that the poor are the central focus of the objectives of intervention.
Participation	Successful interventions aim to empower stakeholders to play an active role in intervention and service provision. They recognise and try to minimise barriers to participation, but show an awareness of its practical limits.
Partnership	Successful interventions work in partnership with other development partners but try to minimise the control and influence exerted by more powerful partners.
Holistic Approach	Successful interventions seek to respond holistically to livelihoods through cross-sectoral synergies but without addressing 'everything' through a single intervention.
Policy and Institutional Linkages	Successful interventions must build on linkages with policy processes and institutions to avoid replication and ensure sustainable impact. Linkages should connect the micro, meso and macro levels and ensure learning and information sharing at all levels
Building on Strengths	Successful interventions recognise that needs and problems can be tackled through working with existing strengths
Dynamism and Flexibility (Learning)	Successful interventions need to learn and adapt from their experience. They recognise that time and organisational constraints can decrease effective learning.
Accountability and Responsiveness	Successful interventions should be accountable and responsive to a wide range of stakeholders, particularly the poor to which they are directed.
Sustainability	Sustainability should be sought on four levels: Financial: so that systems can continue without support from external funding sources Institutional: through integration with existing institutions Environmental: to maximise the sustainable use of natural resources and minimise waste and pollution Social: to minimise social exclusion and complement the local cultural context.

Source: Goodbye to Projects? study (Franks et al. 2004)

Process approaches and SL principles

The blueprint vs. process debate grew out of a concern with the limitations of projects as vehicles for development assistance. Conventional 'blue-print' projects, in which the objectives and activities were carefully planned in advance, were too structured to allow for meaningful participation by beneficiaries in planning their own development. In addition they were not flexible enough to allow for differing and complex responses, and too influenced by donor priorities and funding constraints (Gow and Morss 1988). (Hulme 1995) categorises those who argue against the 'scientific-rational' basis for intervention as seeking an 'exit' from the existing conventions of project management. The 'exit' that is sought is the adoption and recognition of process and the complexity of instigating social and economic transformation. The 'exit' sought was the adoption and recognition of process and the complexity of instigating social and economic transformation.

Participatory approaches, asset-based approaches (such as sustainable livelihoods) and community-driven development have evolved from this tension (Bond and Hulme 1999; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Korten 1980; Korten 1988). The recognition of value in the agency of the poor began with the NGOs and encompassed a radical and political agenda for social transformation. Now fully mainstreamed, albeit re-interpreted and partially implemented, by the multilateral development banks, national governments and donor agencies, community-driven development, facilitated by a coalition of state, market and civil society, is set to offer hitherto elusive development gains (Hall and Midgley 2004).

Goodbye to Projects? – applying an SL-grounded audit to development interventions

The research study 'Goodbye to Projects?' grew out of the increasing interest in sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) and growing disillusionment with projects as mechanisms for addressing the development needs of poor people. Its aim was to

investigate the implication of the adoption of SLA on the management of development interventions, and in particular on the future of development projects. The underpinning research questions were:

- How are elements of the sustainable livelihoods principles being applied in practice?
- What are the problems and challenges for managing livelihoods-oriented development intervention?

The research was carried out by a partnership of development institutions in the UK, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda over the period 2001-03, with funding from DFID. It was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of reviews of the use of sustainable livelihoods approaches and the format of development interventions generally in Southern Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The second phase comprised the selection and detailed analysis of ten case studies, four each in Tanzania and Southern Africa, and two in Uganda (Table 2). The case studies were chosen to represent a range of scales of development assistance in three broad sectors (HIV/AIDS, community based planning, agriculture/natural resources). They varied from a small-scale localised project in HIV/AIDS implemented by an international NGO to large-scale public programmes providing support to the agricultural sector. Nine of the interventions studied were in project or programme format, the tenth was a multi-sectoral strategy with central government funding. We classified all interventions as being livelihoods-oriented, that is, they began with a broad understanding of the multiple influences on peoples' lives and their vulnerability to shocks and stresses.

Table 2 Case Studies of Livelihoods-oriented development interventions

Case Study	Country	Purpose	Format
Ugandan AIDS/STD programme (Muhumuza 2003a)	Uganda	Explores the Ugandan government's strategy to combat the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS	Programme
Sexual Health and Rights Programme (SHARP) (Tamasane and Marumo 2003)	Lesotho	CARE South Africa & Lesotho project training peer educators to target high-risk groups to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS	Project
Planning programme for district development within capacity 21 (Tanzakesho) (Toner and Kamuzora 2003)	Tanzania	UNDP project piloting a participatory planning methodology for the production of environmentally sustainable village plans.	Project
Community-based planning project (CBP) (Toner 2003b)	South Africa	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.	Project
Training for Environmental and Agricultural Management (TEAM) (Marumo et al. 2003)	Lesotho	Implemented by CARE Lesotho, funded by NORAD and later DFID, to develop an agricultural extension model based on farmer extension facilitators.	Project
Agricultural Sector Programme Support (ASPS) (Kamuzora 2003a)	Tanzania	Financed by Danida, 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.	Programme
Sustainable Management of the Usangu Wetland Catchment project (SMUWC) (Franks 2003)	Tanzania	DFID-funded project 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.	Project
Magu District Livelihood and Food Security Project (Magu)(Kamuzora 2003b)	Tanzania	CARE Norge project aiming to decrease the vulnerability of 5000 households in Magu district, through a range of activities covering agricultural extension and strengthening community groups.	Project
Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA) (Muhumuza 2003b)	Uganda	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.	Multi-sectoral strategy
Sustainable Coastal Livelihoods Programme (SCLP) (Tamasane 2003)	South Africa	Programme funded by DFID and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism developing integrated sectoral approaches to optimise the allocation of coastal resources.	Programme

A similar pattern of data collection and analysis was followed for each of the case studies. It comprised an initial period of reconnaissance and review of documentation, followed by a programme of semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders. The key information covered the following issues: the description and key events of the intervention; an assessment of its impact to the extent possible; an SL-grounded audit; its critical features. The SL-grounded audit comprised a series of in-depth questions concerning the design and implementation of the intervention based on the sustainable livelihoods principles outlined in table 1.

Each of the case studies was assessed against these principles. A comparison of the assessments suggests some general lessons, both in relation to the application of SLA, and to the future format of development projects.

All the case studies in this research show a livelihoods-orientation in that they start from a commitment to improving people's livelihoods. This does not mean they are all taking a 'sustainable livelihoods approach'. However, by analysing each case study in relation to a range of SLA principles it is possible to identify strengths and weaknesses in the current planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions. In this respect, this research does not aim to identify the novelty of SLA itself but to understand its applicability as a unified framework of best practice.

The continuing barriers to the application of SLA and process approaches

In this article, we apply the analysis made through the ten case studies to the elements of a 'process approach' as identified by the Bond and Hulme synthesis. The reason for this is to look more specifically at the lessons for development management from livelihoods-oriented intervention and to identify continuing barriers to the effective application of process approaches.

Flexible and Phased implementation

Start small and expand

Whilst the majority of case studies in this research began by piloting participatory methodologies or techniques, only the Community Based Planning project (CBP) focused on ensuring that the methodology chosen was fully integrated with existing institutional structures through a specific strategy to start small and then expand. The methodologies and systems piloted in many of the other case studies, such as TEAM or Tanzankesho are large-scale, resource-heavy and have potentially limited sustainability beyond the life of the intervention.

Long time frames

Many of the case studies in this research were projects with a 2-3 year cycle, but actually operated over longer periods through follow-up phases and extensions. Extensions were contingent on the accessing of funds for each phase. It is apparent that short timeframes offer little incentive for development agencies to assess outcomes for beneficiaries rather than simply measuring intervention outputs. This creates a barrier to the possibilities of developing flexible and strategically-phased interventions. For example, the development of SHARP from earlier projects is rather haphazard. Longer timeframes as evidenced by the Agricultural Sector Programme Support (ASPS) provide more opportunity to develop partnerships, institutionalise systems and assess impact.

Experimentation

Many of the case studies were experimenting with new methodologies, techniques and approaches and faced problems in scaling up. However, rather than stimulating a diversity of approach, all case studies demonstrate a uniformity of language, for instance in the focus on beneficiary 'ownership' or 'empowerment'. This suggests, despite assertions to the contrary, that the parameters for intervention remain determined by donors and policy-makers and are not driven from the bottom up.

Action Learning

Although most of the interventions studied were flexible in terms of revising their day-to-day activities, NGO-led projects appeared to be constrained from more strategic action learning by the short timeframes of each phase, as discussed above. The potential for

action learning is certainly greater in more flexible intervention with better integration in the existing institutional context. For instance the design of ASPS with two phases over eight years demonstrates the benefits of a long time frame in allowing flexibility for the development and institutionalisation of participatory decision-making processes.

Learning from experience

Embracing error

Embracing error remains a significant problem for development agents. The vast majority of documentation studied during this research highlighted the positive aspects of any project or programme. Whilst some did acknowledge ‘challenges’ to implementation, none of the interventions appeared to reflect systematically on their weaknesses and assumptions. For example, the Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA) assumed that the private sector in Uganda could provide agricultural extension services as direct service provision by the government was withdrawn. This is now seen to be a significant weakness in the strategy, yet there was only a limited willingness to consider the fundamental shortcomings emerging as PMA was pushed into implementation.

Links between implementation and planning

Most of the interventions in this research demonstrate a conventional link between planning and implementation, in that planning is done in a manner shaped by the need to access donor funds for implementation. This does not fit the process model in which plans and implementation emerge concurrently from the interaction between managers/enablers and participants. For instance all interventions show evidence of improvement of day-to-day activities, but there was a very limited ability to improve understanding of the cause and effect linkage between activities and outcomes/specific objectives and therefore the improvement of future planning.

Be effective, become efficient and then expand

As noted above, whilst many interventions start with a pilot phase, the following activities seem to take one of two forms. There is either a headlong rush to scale-up, as shown in the PMA where political pressures forced the programme to be rolled out without the benefit of lessons from pilot districts, or there is inertia caused by insufficient integration of the

pilot systems with existing resource and planning cycles, as demonstrated in Tanzakesho or APSP. Only CBP could be described as making iterative improvements of small intervention as it tested its meso-planning methodology on a small but realistic scale before scaling up or being replicated.

Use appropriate technologies

Significantly the majority of the interventions undertook to use both appropriate and environmentally-beneficial/neutral technologies. This was an explicit feature of TEAM, SCLP, Magu, and Tanzakesho. The evidence of uptake of many of the technologies, such as fuel-efficient stoves is still questionable but a widespread agreement amongst development partners is apparent in the promotion of such technologies.

Beneficiary participation

Bond & Hulme (1999) regret that rigorous development of process approaches has been constrained by an overemphasis on beneficiary participation at the expense of other aspects such as 'learning from errors'. This is certainly supported by this research, which found all interventions asserting uniformly positive claims about the effectiveness and appropriateness of participation.

In problem analysis

Participation in problem analysis was done through consultative exercises with beneficiaries at the micro-level in all case studies with participatory rural appraisal and focus groups being the tools most commonly used. Livelihoods analysis (using for instance a livelihoods framework) was undertaken in several of the case studies (CBP, SCLP, PMA, TEAM, Magu) and was seen to lead to an improved holistic understanding of people's lives. However, it was notable that some of these interventions experienced problems of efficacy and potential dilution of impact in trying to respond to all aspects of livelihoods. For example, TEAM was diverted from its key objectives of improving the livelihoods of the poorest farmers to promoting a more commercial essential oils enterprise.

In planning and decision-making

Participation in planning and decision-making was generally restricted to consultation with potential beneficiary groups, most often through the processes mentioned above. Beneficiaries on the whole had very little direct control in planning and decision-making processes of any of the interventions.

In resource mobilisation

Participation by beneficiaries in the mobilisation of labour was widely used by the interventions examined in this study. For instance, in Tanzakesho the implementation of micro-projects were conditional on a proportional input of labour/resources from the village that formulated it. This is entirely consistent both with bottom-up approaches and the normative goal of building on people's strengths.

In monitoring & evaluation

With regard to day-to-day monitoring of intervention, the case studies show that monitoring systems tend to be constructed in order to meet donor requirements and expectations. Donor monitoring requirements were often pre-defined through the use of logical frameworks (and other planning tools) and were reported quarterly in most cases. Evaluatory processes appear to be more tailored to meet the specific management needs of the intervention with respect to learning from actions taken and assessing the satisfaction of partners and beneficiaries.

Some attempts were shown in the case studies to establish participatory (and more qualitative) M&E systems involving beneficiaries. In the majority of cases information flows are upwards from the micro to the macro level and there is limited top-down accountability to beneficiaries. Several of the case studies tried to use participatory feedback and drive the process from the bottom upwards but experienced problems in institutionalising systems and feedback and participation by the ultimate beneficiaries was fairly limited. An important constraint was limitations on the time (and inclination) of people to attend meetings and feedback sessions. However, those people involved directly in implementation of an intervention often asked for more feedback and discussion.

In empowering beneficiaries

Most of the case studies were targeted at the poor and vulnerable. However they were able to show little evidence of efficacy, although TEAM and Magu did indicate levels of participation from certain social groups as categorised by the interventions. The majority of case studies showed weak engagement with the idea of social sustainability and a narrow range of methodologies with which to explore it. SCLP excluded vulnerable groups through the government tender procedures that place emphasis on formal business plans. As a result, projects within SCLP were awarded to local business people with support from the implementing agencies.

The dangers that participatory methods can reinforce social exclusion, strengthen dominant voices and simplify relationships were not recognised in any of the case studies. In Tanzakesho it was said that the PRA planning process enabled one village to identify and 'repatriate' a number of witches.

CBP ensured that the livelihoods of disadvantaged groups were analysed separately in the planning process, and their preferred outcomes and key risks/vulnerabilities were included for prioritisation. However there was no guarantee that these would be selected in the overall community prioritisation, although an evaluation indicated that the plans did represent the needs of the disadvantaged. Increasing social sustainability is a long-term and iterative process. If community-based planning processes begin to truly reflect the demands of those currently excluded the development agenda may begin to be shaped very differently.

Institutional support

Political Support

Political support for intervention aims and processes is important. This is demonstrated clearly in the case studies from Uganda (the PMA and the HIV/AIDS Programme), which both attracted political support from the highest level. This political support is seen by as being a significant factor in the reduction of HIV/AIDS transmission in Uganda. By contrast, the problems in working with local government experienced by the Training for

Environmental Management project (TEAM) in Lesotho and the Magu project in Tanzania also indicate the importance of working with local political interests.

Devolved authority

Devolution and decentralisation are key components of the current development discourse and the more recent interventions in this study show the increasing attention being paid to this. Community-based planning interventions such as CBP and Tanzakesho by definition attempt to devolve authority over decision-making and both interventions complement existing governmental strategies. The PMA was also designed to devolve decision-making processes over the selection of agricultural extension services to farmers' forums. In this case the outcomes were undermined by the narrow representation in such forums and the overall tension between balancing locally specific need and wider strategic action.

Use of permanent institutions

Interventions need to fit in two ways: into people's lives, and into the wider institutional context of government, civil society and private enterprise. The case studies in this research that worked with permanent institutions showed the greater potential for sustainable impact from their intervention. By contrast, the use of parallel structures established by interventions can weaken existing capacity and cause particular problem with regards to institutional sustainability. This weakness was observed in the three case studies implemented by NGOs. Interventions must also be careful that they understand the capacity and function of existing organisations with which they are working, and avoid diverting or subverting their activities. For example, SHARP in Lesotho sought to work through local NGOs to encourage income generation activities and to provide home-based care but there was some evidence that this was diverting these NGOs from their existing functions.

Local level capacity-building

Whilst all of the interventions claim to be building local-level capacity in particular groups of beneficiaries, many actually limit the sustainability of the systems that they establish as they exist as islands of resource in environments of resource scarcity. This places the interventions in powerful positions, which in turn can weaken the capacity of local government and partners to operate effectively. This was observed in Magu, SHARP and

TEAM. However, this is also true, to some degree, of the more programmatic interventions such as Tanzakesho, SCLP, ASPS and PMA.

Organisational change

The interventions that sought to work by building on existing organisations and institutions necessarily stimulate processes of organisational change. For instance by working directly with local government, both CBP and Tanzakesho reinvigorated cross-sectoral working in developing more socially-inclusive planning mechanisms.

Facilitating beneficiary organisation

Facilitating beneficiary organisations is a component of many interventions in this study, for example SHARP sought to develop and support existing CBOs, Magu sought to use indigenous organisations to deliver agricultural extension methodologies, and Tanzakesho and CBP seek to empower local community bodies to influence resource allocation processes. However, there were concerns that this use of existing organisations may be diversionary.

Programme management

This is the area where SLA discourse gives the least guidance but where the greatest numbers of questions remain. Hence the contextualisation of the SLA with process approaches may help us in planning action.

Well-qualified and motivated leadership

Evidence from the case studies shows the importance of champions in maintaining impact of intervention. Core team members in Tanzakesho were vital to the momentum of the planning programme. The project management in CBP were also said to be an important catalyst in driving forward the piloting of the planning processes.

New professionalism

The language used to describe these interventions consistently refers to stakeholders and beneficiary empowerment which suggests a new professionalism (Chambers 1993), however in practice control of intervention parameters remains in the hands of donors in most cases.

Variety of short-term technical assistance

Most of the interventions studied employed consultants on a short-term basis. The only intervention to reflect on the nature of this was Tanzakesho, which found that the employment of local nationals was most effective on short-term consultancy assignments.

Long-term technical assistance in a facilitating role

Whilst many of the interventions studied retain a 'traditional' project management structure, the newer and more strategic programmes operate with long-term assistance in as a facilitating role. A particular question arises here concerning the role of donor advisors in programmes. The exact role of advisors within ministries (for example, the DFID advisors within the PMA secretariat) is often unclear, in terms of their capacity-building and supervisory role.

Project management unit with a flexible, informal approach

The evidence from this research indicates that projects can best facilitate a sustainable impact when management units are closely integrated with existing organisations and institutions as discussed above.

Inter-organisational co-ordination

All interventions in this research used interorganisational co-ordination to attempt to build on the existing skills and capacities of individual staff within local communities, local government and national ministries, although only two of the ten case studies can be said to build on strengths at all levels. The question that the case studies do not sufficiently answer is whether the use of existing institutions and staff actually results in increased capacity or whether it is done simply to reduce staffing costs. In some cases, individuals become overloaded with additional duties or diverted from original duties. For example, the core team in Tanzakesho focused a disproportionate share of their time on pilot villages at the expense of non-pilot villages.

The case studies showed a range of partnerships according to the classification adopted for the Goodbye to Projects? study (Franks et al. 2004). The type of partnerships employed by the interventions appears to correlate with their format and scope. The projects showed

stronger direction from project management (with the exception of CBP) whereas programmes and larger-scale strategies by necessity had to work in a more coordinated way with other partners.

Critical barriers to the adoption of process approaches

In bringing together the analysis of the case studies in this research with Bond and Hulme's (1999) synthesis of process approaches, two dominant themes emerge in relation to the shape of current development intervention.

The first of these is the question of power. Through constructing a picture of an intervention in terms of SLA principles and process approaches we see that power relationships are the critical link in most processes. They structure which people have voice at the micro-level, how much room to manoeuvre partners enjoy and which policies are adopted at the macro level. In most cases change to the status quo will have to be initiated by the dominant voices (the fund-bearers and agenda setters) who will need to question the assumptions and boundaries on which their engagement is founded. Therefore concepts of 'ownership', 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'partnership' need to be worked through critically in relation to the exercise of power in all stakeholder relationships.

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. Again the power dimension is important - integrated interventions cannot seek to dominate the institutions with which they are associated but must instead facilitate incremental capacity-building in relation to specific purposes.

Through this research, it is clear that projects can retain a useful role, as locations of learning-by-doing, providing they 'fit' their operations more closely to existing capacity and resourcing streams, so that lessons learnt are relevant more widely. They cannot continue as isolated islands of resource with 'partnerships' that might be characterised

only as communication networks. Donor-funded parallel structures and NGO projects in particular 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 (equal) partnerships between donors and government. There are many unanswered questions about the power and control in these processes and about their cost-effectiveness. It appears that currently the theory is better than the practice, as shown by the problems with PMA.

As (Hood 2000) argues ‘effectiveness will depend on the extent to which ideas and beliefs of the participants match the institutional structure of any control system’, and it is this cultural disjuncture that may be the cause of the limitations observed in these case studies. As we have discussed in this article, process approaches and SLAs share many common themes in their promotion of such principles as partnership, participation and flexibility, yet actual practice remains rooted in the hierarchical and bureaucratic needs of the stronger donor institutions. Hood’s point also underlines our finding in relation to the need to seek institutional fit for external interventions. Awareness of this need is well-developed amongst practitioners but again practice remains constrained, particularly for NGOs, through short-time frames and project-based funding.

Conclusion

By locating the SLA as part of a wider discourse on the need for adopting process approaches and examining the application of livelihoods-oriented development interventions, our research shows that the adoption of a SLA usefully directs attention to aspects of beneficiary participation, partnership formation and sustainability of impact.

This analysis shows a gap in the SLA principles in terms of guidance on everyday management dilemmas. Specifically, this refers to insufficient consideration of aspects of normal bureaucracy and professionalism, as well as organisational barriers to effectively learning from error.

More broadly in relation to aid effectiveness, the case studies from this research indicate that donor practices, specifically control over time frames, control of language (agenda-setting), supervisory reporting requirements and conditionality distorts power relationships between development partners. This in turn leads to an over concentration on participation, and sustainability problems in partnerships caused by inadequate attention to effective and long-term capacity building.

We suggest that the underlying values of the policy-makers and shapers must match the institutional structures of the systems in place for development management, for the potential of process-based approaches in general, and sustainable livelihoods approaches in particular, to be fully realised.

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Notes

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