

# 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 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/cad/dppc/GTP/goodbye.html>

## 3. The changing format of development interventions

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*This briefing paper reports on research exploring ten detailed case studies of livelihoods-oriented interventions operating in Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda and Lesotho. As a proxy for best practice, these interventions were analysed through an audit of sustainable livelihood 'principles'. This revealed general lessons about both 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

- Projects can retain a useful role as locations of learning-by-doing, providing they 'fit' their operations more closely to existing capacity, systems and resourcing streams, so that lessons learnt are relevant more widely.
- They should not become isolated islands of resource operating independently of the local institutional environment. 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.
- Donor-funded parallel structures and NGO projects in particular must account for their legitimacy and impact in an increasingly self-critical way.
- The issue of power relationships is important - integrated interventions should not seek to dominate the institutions which they are assisting, but to facilitate incremental capacity-building in relation to specific purposes.
- Sector support and direct budget support potentially offer efficiency savings and may be more effective at delivering development in the longer term. However they do not replace the need for projects as learning opportunities.
- This, however, depends on the evolution of effective partnerships between donors and government, and there are many unanswered questions about power and control in these processes and about their cost-effectiveness.

### Background

The research study Goodbye to Projects evolved from consideration of two distinct but complementary trends, the growing disquiet over the effectiveness of projects in delivering development, and the increasing interest in sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) as a means of addressing the needs of poor people. This briefing paper looks at the first of these issues and investigates whether we should indeed be saying "Goodbye to Projects" and looking to alternative formats of intervention to support development.

Projects and programmes have been the primary mechanism for development assistance throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Starting initially with infrastructure and other capital-intensive (blueprint) projects intended to support economic growth, the focus shifted through the 70s to projects meeting basic needs and then in the following two decades to process projects of institution-building and human development. Whilst this was accompanied by increasing interest in other development activities such as policy analysis and public sector restructuring through structural adjustment programmes,

projects continued to be the favoured vehicle for aid funding, partly because the project format facilitated the strict financial control thought necessary for the proper accountability of public funds by donors.

Projects and programmes share the same basic characteristic of time-bound investment to produce assets. The terms are often used interchangeably, as they are in many of the case studies investigated in this research. Programmes, however, tend to be larger in scale and less precise in detail. They generally comprise several components, each of which constitutes a project in its own right, and which may be very different in nature. Together the components contribute to shared objectives, which may best be expressed at the goal level of the logical framework.

Disillusion with projects and programmes in development has grown over recent years on counts of both effectiveness and efficiency. Whilst there have been undoubted successes, both at the project level and in more general developmental terms, there is still a widespread belief that projects overall have not been effective in delivering development.

Donors and others have therefore been looking for different strategies and mechanisms to support development. Strategies have focussed particularly at the level of policy analysis and advice, on the assumption that improvements in the policy environment are more important than finance in the development process. In terms of funding mechanisms, donors and recipients are showing increasing interest in larger-scale procedures, either through Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAPs) or Direct Budgetary Support (DBS).

### **The ‘Goodbye to Projects?’ study.**

The research carried out under Goodbye to Projects focused on projects and programmes, as these are still the common forms of development intervention in practice. DBS is a new approach and too large in scope to be investigated within the relatively constrained resources of this study. SWAPs also tend to be large-scale undertakings, which need considerable resources for a thorough investigation, especially to compare several of them. The case studies covered the health, community-based planning, agriculture and natural resource sectors. Of the ten cases, six were projects (according to the definition given above), three were programmes and one, PMA, was a multi-sectoral strategy with many characteristics of a SWAP. Summary details of the case studies are given in box 1.

#### **Box 1 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 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

## **Emerging Findings**

Whilst the number of case studies is small, and no universally applicable prescriptions can be drawn from them, a number of common lessons emerge from those cases that seem to have been relatively successful in their impact.

### *Funding mechanisms*

This is an area of particular importance, since projects provide a convenient mechanism for aid transfer for both donors and recipient governments. However, this convenience brings its own dangers, in separating out the project from important complementary activities and processes. Moreover projects have defined life spans, which are often of relatively short duration, so that there is insufficient time to establish and support key developmental processes. Funding mechanisms are also a very direct representation of power relationships. Key lessons in relation to funding mechanisms emerging from our analysis of the case studies include:

- Interventions should link to government financial systems for long-term sustainability.
- Funding should leverage local resources in a meaningful way, so ensuring local commitment. In some cases (eg CBP) fewer resources can actually be more effective, as it encourages commitment by partners.
- The case studies show that sustained impacts require nurturing through long-term support. This is true particularly in interventions that stimulate processes of institutional restructuring.

### *Capacity-building processes*

Capacity-building is taking an increasing role in development interventions, across all sectors. Projects reflect this trend, and many projects have significant capacity-building components or else have capacity-building as their main focus. Key lessons for capacity-building include:

- That effective capacity-building is not simply concerned with the provision of training but about building knowledge and capacity to take action through learning by doing;
- There is a fine line between capacity-building and undermining capacity through overloading or diversion – it is therefore essential to link to existing processes;
- The greatest increases in capacity shown in the case studies appear to emanate from processes of reflexive peer learning and review.

### *Design*

A significant part of the debate over the differences and relative importance of blue-print and process projects is focussed on the phases of planning and design. The importance of appropriate mechanisms for participation and for flexibility to allow for changes to take place as planning proceeds is now well recognised, particularly in relation to process projects. The analysis of Goodbye to Projects suggests that sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLA) can make particular contributions in this respect:

- Case studies indicate that SLA can add value in design by encouraging designers to think holistically. Holistic analysis of livelihoods, institutions and the external context is required at all levels, both nationally and internationally and can assist us to be creative in addressing the priorities of poor people more effectively;
- The aim must be to create a learning process within the intervention.
- The design must include consideration 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.

### *Implementation*

Most of the case studies were in the phase of implementation (one was completed, and one had only recently started). It was therefore possible to derive some general lessons for implementation:

- The case studies suggest that interventions should consider the potential for a range of different implementing agents (through partnerships), rather than trying to implement all activities internally;
- Creative negotiation of power relationships in partnerships is essential. Successful partnership involves seeking synergy between different partners' mandates as a starting point for action;
- However participation by CBOs and beneficiaries needs to be thought through carefully in order to avoid overloading or diverting them. Care must be taken to actually increase the capacity of partners and participants, rather than just increasing their responsibilities and duties;
- Case study interventions demonstrate the need for flexible timescales in order to stimulate effective learning processes; Longer timeframes for intervention provide more opportunity to develop partnerships, institutionalise systems and assess impact;
- The case studies also show that sustainable impact is more likely when implementation is integrated with existing governmental funding and planning cycles;

- The importance of politicians in driving processes forward was visible in certain of the case studies. The importance of dealing with political as well as executive institutions must not be underestimated.
- The use of parallel institutional structures established by interventions can actually weaken existing capacity.

#### *Monitoring and evaluation*

It is widely acknowledged that monitoring and evaluation is a problematic area for all types of development assistance. Whilst projects perhaps lend themselves in theory more easily to these processes than some other formats, nevertheless the practice remains difficult and often unsatisfactory.

- The case studies in this research suggest a need for more emphasis on M&E as the reflexive part of action learning;
- Interventions with a more sustainable impact work towards a single system of reporting based on existing systems, rather than multiple or complex reporting procedures.
- Where possible, the outputs of M&E processes should be available in local languages.
- Evaluation by beneficiaries, in these case studies, was limited to consultation. Participatory feedback mechanisms (involving beneficiaries and front-line staff) need to be built into systems, but these take time to develop.

#### *Tools and skills*

Many of the tools and skills for project development are well-known and much discussed. They include such techniques as the logical framework (itself the subject of considerable debate and controversy), stakeholder analysis, various approaches to participatory assessment, and a range of analytical methods and models. The analysis of Goodbye to Projects indicates that new skills and tools are needed for effective interventions:

- Improved reflective, analytical and critical abilities to understand livelihood strategies and related economic, social, environmental impacts and assumptions.
- Less formality and more flexibility about the use of specific tools and reporting requirements (such as logical frameworks) and more openness to different tools and types of information and M&E.
- Effective skills for: listening and learning; working in partnership; understanding power dynamics; negotiating with others; facilitation of process, cross-cultural team building.

### **Overall conclusions**

Whilst attention to these key lessons and findings should result in more effective projects, and better development resulting from them, two dominant themes emerge from the analysis overall. The first of these themes is the importance of **power and power relationships**. Projects have proved themselves to be a convenient mechanism for aid transfer because they enable close control of outputs and resources and thus facilitate accountability, both for the donor and the recipient government. However, with close control comes increased power, and donors' control of funds and expenditure has inevitably translated, in many circumstances, to control over the whole development process which the project is supporting. The findings of Goodbye to Projects indicates that all partners need to rethink the issue of power and power relationships, particularly in relation to addressing the needs of the poorest and excluded. The goals of participation and empowerment are not easily achieved under project formats which vest key decision-making power in the hands of project funders and implementers.

The second dominant theme is the need for **integrating actions** with the external environment and other development partners. Development is increasingly seen to be a complex and diverse process in which projects and other interventions can play only a part. The more successful cases studied under Goodbye to Projects were able to integrate effectively with their external environment and wider processes, and were able to build successful and strong partnerships, mobilising resources in the process. The project format, with its clearly defined structure and objectives, does not lend itself to this type of co-operation and integration, unless specific measures are taken to do so. Even then, difficulties may arise during implementation if activities evolve in parallel to mainstream development processes.

SWAPs and perhaps direct budgetary support potentially offer a way out of some these dilemmas and certainly offer efficiency savings by reducing transaction costs. However, the limited evidence from the Goodbye to Projects study indicates that SWAPs themselves may face similar challenges in addressing problems of design, power relationships, ownership and integration. For all formats of development intervention (project/programme/SWAP/DBS) SLAs can help by focussing on the key issues in supporting the livelihoods of the poor. If these key issues are addressed, then projects certainly continue to have an important role in development in the appropriate circumstances.

#### Reference:

Franks T. et al (2004) *Goodbye to projects? The Institutional Impact of Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches on Development Interventions*. Bradford Centre for International Development, Bradford University