

## **Abstract**

This paper critically examines the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) in the context of broader development debates, using a literature review as a tool to explore the origins, concepts and uses of the ‘approach’. Whilst the concept of sustainable livelihoods is valuable in advancing our understanding the complexity and embedded nature of people’s lives, sustainable livelihoods frameworks and principles are too simplistic to offer many answers. This paper argues that the idea of net sustainable livelihoods has much to offer the current discourse on rights and governance but that this is in danger of being diluted by its conceptualisation as a new ‘approach’ to managing development interventions.

## **1 Introduction**

The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) is characterised by DFID (2000a) as an improved way of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities of development, that will better meet the needs of the poor, both at project and policy level. The approach can be discussed on three different levels: as a set of principles, as an analytical framework, or as an overall developmental objective (Farrington 2001). This paper uses a literature review as a tool to explore the conceptual origins and pragmatic implementation of this approach. It begins with a consideration of the literature relating to the three levels, characterised by Farrington (2001) and links them to broader development debates, in order to examine some of the unanswered questions and assumptions within the current framing of SLA discourse.

## **2 An objective**

As a starting point much of the SLA literature adapts Chambers and Conway's (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).

In their paper Chambers and Conway (1992) discuss not just the complexity and diversity of individual livelihoods, but also the social and environmental sustainability of

livelihoods in general. They suggest a measure of 'net sustainable livelihoods', which encompasses 'the number of environmentally and socially sustainable livelihoods that provide a living in a context less their negative effects on the benefits on the benefits and sustainability of the totality of other livelihoods everywhere' (Chambers and Conway 1992,p.26).

The definition of livelihoods adopted by Carney (1998) and others suggests the need to understand the livelihood strategies and vulnerability of the poor as the starting point in a livelihoods analysis. Within this literature there appears to be an assumption that the poor behave as 'strategic managers' in negotiating their livelihoods outcomes, by selecting from a range of options available within a particular locality and context (Moser 1996, DFID 1999). However, it may not be helpful to view the poor in this way as it assumes that the poor always make 'rational' choices in the construction of their livelihoods. Instead, it is suggested that a broader view is required that takes account of the resources that people require in order to compose a livelihood (Beall 2001). Beall (2001) goes on to suggest that mechanisms for redistribution may be more critical for the alleviation of poverty than production and reproduction.

It could also be argued that extrapolating the idea of 'net sustainable livelihoods', to the global level, captures far more of the political trade-offs that would be entailed in the creation of sustainable livelihoods for all. As it is, the idea of sustainable livelihoods has been reduced to a more benign conception of the way in which individuals or households manage their resources. This view, however, makes it far easier to develop management theory and practice for changing livelihoods.

Bryceson (2000) argues that livelihoods analysis emerges from the responsiveness to neo-liberalism demonstrated by the livelihood strategies of African peasant societies. Indeed developing an understanding of the livelihood strategies of the poor is seen as key to supporting such strategies in order to alleviate poverty. De Haan (2000) uses a livelihoods lens through which to view migration, and argues that the holism of livelihoods theory enables us to achieve a better understanding of the contribution that migration can make to poverty reduction. A growing body of work by Frank Ellis considers the diversification strategies of rural households in developing countries. He argues that such households depend on a portfolio of income sources and activities. Poverty reduction strategies should therefore promote the opportunities of the poor to diversify such activities, through reform for good governance to create a facilitating and enabling environment (Ellis 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

Hussein and Nelson (1998) propose that livelihood strategies are constructed in three main ways: agricultural intensification, diversification and migration, and the key to understanding how the three intersect is an understanding of how institutional arrangements determine people's entitlements.

Common themes emerge from these works: that the poor make strategic choices according to their entitlements and access to resources as mediated by the parameters of institutional contexts. Therefore the poor are central to their own development, in DFID's words '*people - rather than the resources they use or the governments that serve them - are the priority concern*' (DFID 2000a, p.7). The focus appears to be centred on individuals' rights and responsibilities.

A broad commitment to the desirability of sustainable livelihoods can be found across a range of donor agencies: GTZ (Albert 2000), AusAID (2000), UNDP (Wanmali 1999b), EU (2000), Oxfam (Neefjes 2000), CARE (Frankenberger et al. 2000) and the World Bank (2000). Although with the recent change of administration in the US, USAID is not to engage specifically with sustainability as the meaning of it is said to be too unclear. (USAID 2001).

Operationalising the theory of livelihoods is an ongoing process. Much of the literature sets out normative aims/features of livelihoods interventions, but there is only a small (but rapidly growing) pool of experience on which to draw (DFID 2001, Turton 2000a, 2000b, World Bank 2000). As a way in to this body of work, we shall discuss the SLA as a framework and as a set of principles, which raise questions about the planning, monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

### **3 A framework**

Represented as a methodological framework the SLA is found to be a useful tool for livelihoods analysis. Details of the DFID framework (see figure 1) are much discussed in the literature (Carney 1998, Ashley and Carney 1999, Goldman 2000, Hobley 2000, Shankland 2000, Pasteur 2001a, 2001b). This framework uses the concept of capital assets as a central feature and considers how these are affected by the ‘vulnerability context’ in which they are derived, and by ‘transforming structures and processes’ (alternatively labelled ‘policies, institutions and processes’), to constitute ‘livelihoods strategies’ which lead to various ‘livelihoods outcomes’.

**Figure 1. Sustainable livelihoods framework in here.**

Other livelihoods frameworks have also been developed. The NGO CARE-International uses a livelihood framework based around the concept of 'household livelihood security'. The 'household' being used, in this case, as the main unit of analysis. (Frankenberger et al. 2000). Oxfam uses the concept of sustainable livelihoods but Neefjes (2000) explains that a framework is only employed at a strategic level and has been found less useful at the field level. He also stresses that such a framework should only be employed as a tool, and does not constitute an approach in itself. Carney et al, (1999) in a work that is in the process of being updated, compare and contrast the livelihoods approaches taken by DFID, CARE, Oxfam and UNDP.

There is a great deal of discussion concerning the DFID framework and how it should be employed in practice. However, there is some concern that methodological frameworks should not become over codified and institutionalised, and specifically that the DFID framework is insufficiently dynamic, in the sense that it fails to capture 'change' both external and internal to households. (Beall 2001, DFID/FAO 2000, Ellis 2000).

In addition, the following direct criticisms of the framework are made: that people are invisible, that it is unclear on how to analyse and measure capital assets, that it requires more recognition of socio-economic, historical and cultural factors, that it is insufficiently flexible, that the overall concept is ethnocentric and not easily translatable, that it is not sufficiently directed at alleviating poverty and that it offers no guidance on linking micro-macro levels or policy analysis (DFID/FAO, 2000).

Marzetti (2001) echoes some of these criticisms based on her experience of trying to use the SL framework in Brazil. She suggests that the 'policies, institutions and processes'

box is too full and is an area where potential action gets 'lost'. She found that the term 'social capital' could not be adequately translated into Portuguese and so was replaced by the 'ability to influence policy making'. In defence of the framework as a tool for thinking, it is worth remembering the point made by Neefjes (2000) that it is only a tool and therefore should be adapted as necessary by those who use it.

However, that said, even as a tool the framework has some problems. One of the major challenges for operationalising a sustainable livelihoods framework is how to compare and measure capital assets. The five types of capital asset that comprise a livelihood are financial, physical, natural, social, and human as viewed by the DFID framework (see figure 1) (Carney 1998; DFID 1999), but alternatives can be found in the literature. Moser (1996) in a study for the World Bank looked at how access to certain assets reduced the vulnerability of poor households. She identifies the following: labour, social, economic, infrastructure, housing, and household relations. Baumann and Subir (2001) suggest that political capital be given equal status with other capital assets. This would provide a basis for a more structured and rigorous analysis of power than the 'policies, institutions and processes' box of the SL framework. However, it could well be argued that a sound definition of social capital would necessarily include a consideration of power and political relationships.

Some also suggest that the SL framework is inoperable unless assets can be directly compared (Maqueen 2001). Bond and Mukherjee (2001) demonstrate an attempt to do this, using aggregated scores for different capital assets, from participatory assets ranking in Rajasthan. Davis (2001) offers an interesting case study of the rural poor in two provinces in Cameroon. She reviews the interactions of transport and livelihoods,

and explores the way in which transport-based livelihoods strategies, in addition to non-transport measures can decrease vulnerability. She uses the livelihoods framework in an attempt to quantify capital assets using a range of indicators, such as access to education and health care services, although she acknowledges that some of these are crude.

However, there are particular difficulties in defining, let alone measuring capital assets. In particular social capital may mediate access to other assets, and is not neutral. It is suggested that the potentially 'dark side' of social capital, such as the hijacking of participatory exercises by elites, is also often overlooked (Beall 1997, 2001, Fox 1997, Thin 2000).

Different institutions appear to value different forms of capital according to their own priorities. The World Bank (1997) appears to emphasise the importance of social capital for the development of economic capital. Fox (1997) argues that despite this emphasis World Bank projects have actually eroded local social capital. Bryceson (2000) and Ellis (1999) argue that it will be more productive, in terms of poverty reduction, to work on raising human capital. Whereas, Heller (1996) argues that the achievements of Kerala in raising levels of literacy and life expectancy are attributable to the production of two forms of social capital, through class mobilisation and state intervention. Pretty (1999) makes the important point that in addition to defining and measuring levels of capital, it is necessary to understand the linkages and trade-offs between them. He argues that sustainable systems would increase the capital base over time, and specifically examines the relationship between natural and social capital. He concludes that both can be easily run down but can be regenerated, although it is clear that social capital is a pre-requisite for sustainable, productive and long-term management of natural resources.

What is clear from the literature is that trying to quantify and even define capital assets is fraught with difficulties. Some even dispute the use of 'assets' as a unit of analysis. Beall (2001) feels that conceptualising assets in this way reduces them to neo-classical economic concepts. The breaking down of people's livelihoods in terms of assets may have only a superficial value. It tells us nothing of the relationships between assets, of how assets may change over a lifetime, or whether having high levels of one particular asset may compensate for low levels of another. Cleaver (2001) in her examination of livelihoods in the Usangu basin in Tanzania found that the materially wealthier people had relatively low levels of social capital (as defined by membership of societies/clubs). Do high levels of financial capital make social networks unimportant?

Within the DFID SL framework, capital assets are mediated through transforming structures and processes (policies, institutions and practices), sometimes referred to as the PIP box (Hobley 2001). What are referred to here are the organisational structures and institutions of state, NGOs and the private sector and the processes through which they transact with individuals. For Scoones (1998) sustainable livelihoods are about getting institutional and organisational settings right, and the framework should guide the questions to be asked towards achieving this end. Shankland (2000) argues that the vertical dimension of social capital needs to be recognised in order to connect livelihoods analysis with policy making. He identifies three key types of policy that would influence livelihoods: macroeconomic, regulatory and rights-based policy; governance reform; and organisational change. The impact of each of these on livelihoods would depend to an extent on the vertical relationships with the state and other organisations that people have. However, again this relationship is reduced to a

mechanistic definition: 'policy operates through specific institutions and organisations to influence people's choice of livelihoods strategies...' (Shankland 2000, p.13). Once again livelihoods are seen to be the product of rational choice. It is this underlying assumption that oversimplifies and renders harmless the idea of 'sustainable livelihoods'.

Emphasis is placed by some on improving governance through decentralisation of state power and on institutional and organisational change to increase accountability and transparency (DFID 1999, Goldman 1998, Hobley 2001). Hobley (2001) raises some crucial questions about what level of change is required by organisations in order to support SL interventions, and how such change should be supported. She asks what is the role of politics and political capital, of the state in relation to citizens, service delivery and the private sector. How can citizen empowerment and state responsiveness be increased, and what mechanisms are there for increasing choice?

However, it is suggested that the framework also needs to broaden institutional analysis beyond the governance, to include community and familial structures (Bingen 2000). Johnson (1997) examines how institutional arrangements can either discourage or encourage the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods and raises consideration of informal rules and norms and the importance of considering how policies are interpreted on the ground. Cleaver (2001) refers to a process of 'institutional bricolage', through which people create new institutions using elements of existing social and cultural arrangements, demonstrating the potential complexity of institutional reform.

One difficulty with the concept of governance, and indeed rights, is that in seeking universal standards, local sensitivities may be overlooked. Anani (1999) makes an interesting contribution in relation to this. He suggests that a place-based response is required to promote the sustainable governance of livelihoods, and he offers ‘indigenous organisational principles’ as a starting point.

#### **4 A set of principles**

Much discussion also takes place in the literature on the principles that constitute an underlying ethic of a sustainable livelihoods approach. They require that SLA interventions should be participatory, holistic, and dynamic; and that they should build macro-micro links, be sustainable, and people-centred (Carney 1998, Ashley and Carney 1999, DFID/FAO 2000, Carney et al. 1999). It should be emphasised that SL principles are not ‘set in stone’ and their evolution is a continuous process. Most recently it has been suggested that such principles might be split into two categories: normative and operational, and that the new principle of ‘empowerment’ be adopted. (Carney - forthcoming review of thinking on SL) Referring back to Marzetti’s (2001) attempt to translate the SLA into a Brazilian context, she found that new principles covering gender, rights and poverty were necessary.

There remains an unanswered question concerning what makes an intervention specifically a SL one. DFID (2001, 2002) offers case studies of interventions that are ‘SL approaches in practice’. What is noticeable is that not one of these interventions fulfils all the SL principles. Mostly they appear to be existing DFID interventions that have been repackaged around a livelihoods analysis.

What is generally agreed is that SLA principles will have implications for the management of development interventions and SLA interventions will necessarily be flexible, process-based and capable of learning (Pasteur 2001 - all, Hopley 2000).

## **5 Potential implications of adopting SL principles**

The principles of SLA are problematic. If we take participation as an example, the literature shows that participation may be interpreted in very different ways (Estrella and Gaventa 1998, Estrella 2000, Holland and Blackburn 1998).

DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets (DFID 2000) state that the aim is to have interventions in which beneficiaries are empowered to play a significant role in the design, monitoring and evaluation of interventions. This is the point at which there may be significant divergence between rhetoric and reality. Institutions may not be flexible enough to cater for the required dynamism and flexibility of fully participatory interventions (Guijt and Gaventa 1998, Guijt 2000).

There is also an ongoing tension between the value of increasing participation and the desire for scientific rigour, and in a similar vein between the need to generate rich locally specific data and universally comparable information for policy level analysis (Gaventa 2000, Carney 1998, Macqueen 2001).

Questions arise concerning who decides what level of participation is acceptable. In addition, organisations need to be prepared for the pitfalls of using participatory methods, in that they can be very time-consuming, it is too easy to set unrealistic targets and to underestimate the need for feedback and follow-up (Guijt and Gaventa 2000).

Advocates of participation as empowerment maintain that participatory methods can lead to local people managing their own projects, and forge positive change for the excluded using existing social structures and processes (Idawo 1995, Johnson and Wilson 2000). In addition, local people respond to the global context as well as a local one, so used in the right way participatory methods can actually allow micro-macro linkages to be addressed as a matter of course (Dwievedi 2001).

Of course, participation has been a fashionable development issue in recent times and the literature relating to its foundations and practices is diverse. Some commentators in Tanzania have suggested that in fact SLA is merely an extension of participatory methods (Kamuzora and Toner 2002). It appears that what constitutes a participatory ideal actually incorporates all the core principles of SLA. Baur and Kradi (2001) discuss the efforts needed to institutionalise participatory research in a public agricultural research organisation in Morocco. They identify that significant organisational shifts are required in order to move to a more holistic and dynamic view of innovation and from a technical, but politically naïve concept of participation to a concept more appropriate to plurality and the exercise of power in institutional development. There are obvious similarities between such a project and the SL 'tools' offered for organisational reform by Pasteur (2001) and Mayers (2001).

If we consider the policy-making arena, attempts to make it more participatory are being made. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are being employed by governments in order to shift policy in a more pro-poor direction. PPAs seek to understand poverty from the standpoint of the poor themselves and hence are people-centred (a SLA

principle), in that, they start from the premise that the poor understand their own poverty, value self-reliance and hold many answers to their situation (Brocklesby and Holland 1998). There may be a danger that in identifying the ‘poor’ as a coherent group in such a way is actually disempowering in terms of hindering endogenous movements for development (Rahman 1993). Cornwall (2000) examines the rise of terms such as ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’, and questions claims to ‘authenticity’ embodied in policy processes such as PPAs. This demonstrates that participation needs to extend beyond localised contributions to specific interventions; spaces need to be opened up for citizens to use their voice to ensure institutional responsiveness and accountability.

Participatory methods are often characterised as a panacea for previous eras of top-down interventions. However, some critiques are emerging. Contributors to a volume edited by Cooke and Kothari (2001) challenge the universal rhetoric of participation, which promises empowerment and appropriate development. They point out that how participation as practised by consultants and activists can actually lead to the unjust and illegitimate use of power. One particularly interesting comparison can be made between Hildyard et al’s contribution to Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Hobley (2000). Hildyard et al are very critical of the local forest management bodies that constitute participation by local people, claiming that they have been hijacked by certain groups. In contrast, Hobley’s (2000) report refers to the success of the same groups and how the structures described might be used as a model for participatory forest management.

It is important to recognise that consideration of participation in development is not a diversion from SL, as the more advanced discourse in this area actually covers many of

the SL principles: specifically that interventions should be people-centred, work in partnership and build micro-macro links. Hence a consideration of concurrent literature on participation is illuminating in relation to SLAs. It raises questions about the overall coherence of the SL ‘approach’. Is it a new approach at all or a cobbling together of the ‘best’ of current development practice?

Any one of the SLA principles might be related back into wider literature and it is useful to do so. It is particularly instructive to consider the treatment of ‘sustainability’ in the sustainable livelihoods approach. There is little direct analysis of sustainability within the literature beyond the re-iteration of Chambers’ (1992) definition, so there is some need to clarify the concept in relation to the management of interventions (Neefjes 2000). There is also a need to extend the debate about sustainability. Ansell (2000) raises an interesting question concerning the distinction between livelihoods and lifestyles and the implications that this has for sustainability. ‘Livelihoods’ has connotations about being focussed on basic needs, but as Ansell (2000) states people have aspirations to different lifestyles. This demonstrates a challenging point about the concept of ‘livelihoods’. The poverty-focus of sustainable livelihoods literature reflects the greater aim of global poverty reduction, but it produces an unfortunate side-effect, in that it appears to suggest that only the poor have ‘livelihoods’, which they try to sustain over their lifetimes, whilst the non-poor have lifestyles, which can evolve and alter over the course of their lives. A more complete discussion of sustainable livelihoods, as demonstrated by Chambers and Conway (1992) is unafraid to tackle this problem.

## **6 SLA interventions**

As a new tool for aid delivery, the use of the SLA is seen to require new indicators for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of interventions. There is considerable debate over what form these will take. Again the debate between the need for ‘scientific rigour’ and participation is a key issue.

Some suggest that it will be possible to dispense with formal indicators (Davies 1996), others that models should take their place (Hobley 2000). Roche offers an acronym for SLA indicators - Subjective, Participatory, Interpreted, Communicable, Empowering and Disaggregated. (SPICED) (Roche in Estrella, 2000).

The overall suggestion appears to be that there should not be a search for universal indicators but for ways of measuring and assessing the impact of interventions that can be shared and adapted to change (Lee-Smith 1997, Roche 1999).

Pinney et al (forthcoming) tested a framework for the identification of indicators based on the sustainable livelihoods approach to ascertain which indicators correlated best with farm success. Net farm income was used as a proxy for farm success. They specifically address the question of using external and local indicators, and found that locally derived and complex indicators gave the best results.

Applied using the framework and as a set of principles, the SLA has been found to be useful at all levels without attempting to cover ‘everything’ in a single intervention. Case studies have shown SLA principles and frameworks to be good analytical tools for identifying entry points and sequences for development interventions (Farrington, 2001).

They can be an excellent way to reveal locally specific detail, but not for generating universal solutions, although it is felt desirable for the principles to be applied generally (Ashley and Carney 1999, Ashley, 2000). In addition, Murray (2001) in a review of conceptual and methodological issues in livelihoods research sees the need to test SLA frameworks more rigorously in order to assess their ability to relate empirical micro-level data to structural, institutional and historical elements of the macro-context, in particular whether they are able to capture processes of differentiation, accumulation and impoverishment.

## **7 Evolving interventions - the end of the development project?**

It is important to frame this discussion of sustainable livelihoods approaches within the debate concerning mechanisms for the delivery of aid, which will have implications for the potential implementation of the approach

Old-fashioned technical transfer projects based on short timescales are likely to disappear in future, as they have been blamed for the failure of development in recent times (Bevan 2000, Mosley and Eeckhout 2000). Bevan (2000) argues that there must be a shift from projects to networking, information sharing and policy influence. If projects are to continue they will be ‘growth-poles’ (Bevan 2000) which will fulfil planning and budgetary functions but in flexible and participatory manner. The transition away from projects may not be straightforward. Catterson and Lindahl (1999) comment that phasing out of projects is complicated by a lack of financial sustainability of the supported institutions, which is caused by the level of technical ambition, organisational and financial skills, government expectations and donor replaceability, perverted project

incentive structures, lack of attention to cost-effectiveness during projects and the vested interests of stakeholders. Chambers et al. (2001) also note the shift in emphasis by aid agencies from projects and service delivery to a language of rights and governance. This move necessitates new skills to support new forms of intervention. Donors must move from being 'owners' to 'stakeholders', hence it will be necessary to transform the values of staff (Chambers 1997, Pasteur 2001f). A need to achieve consistency between personal behaviour, institutional norms and the new development agenda is seen to be vital, as the aid delivery mechanism shifts from projects to programmes, which are less confident about cause and effect, are transparent and accountable, where the language is less technical and more 'power' related, and where procedures are based around negotiated principles and procedures.

## **8 Sector wide approaches (SWAs) and direct budgetary support**

DFID country strategy papers demonstrate the shift away from project-based aid directly supporting recipient country government strategy (DFID 1999a, 1999b). That said, it is not certain that projects will disappear entirely. It is likely that they will continue to be used by both Governments and NGOs. It can be argued that projects keep donors in touch with ground level realities (Brown et al. 2001). In addition projects are thought to be a necessary mechanism for innovation, although some disagree as to the innovatory capacity of projects as they have to be designed along 'acceptable' lines in order to access funding (Vivian 1994).

Many other bilateral agencies show increasing support for sector assistance and away from projects. For example the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2001) states

that projects should only be used as a last resort. Therkildsen, Engberg-Pedersen and Boesen (1999) argue that this shift will not necessarily be the answer. They postulate that sector approaches tend towards blueprints for policy that neglect reality and possibly replace 'projectitis' with 'reformitis', which may actually reduce the capacity for government policy making and implementation. They propose that sector support should be approached through 'continuous experimentation' in which 'normative ideas' about policy making are minimised and existing capacities are accounted for. However, it is debateable whether policy can be made without normative ideas.

The sector approach obviously has limitations when it comes to taking a cross-sectoral action, and this is where the SLA could make a contribution to SWAps, Country Strategy Papers and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (Akroyd and Duncan 1998). SWAps more explicitly deal with the micro-macro linkages, which is said to be a weakness of the SLA (Brown et al. 2001).

SWAps have obvious advantages over projects, which limit their impact to 'islands', but they do need to be able to respond to diversity and to build in upward accountability (Norton 1998). It is suggested that donors accept a certain loss of control and promote the engagement of front-line staff as researchers and decision-makers (Norton and Bird 1998). The SLA could add to an analytical understanding of diversity and disaggregation of the poor. Participatory poverty assessments have also made progress in this area (Norton and Foster 2001).

## **9 Rights, governance and policy reform**

A major criticism of the SLA has been in its exclusion of power relationships, whilst significantly, much development debate of the current time is around the ideas of rights, governance and policy reform for the eradication of poverty (DFID, 2000c). At a national level this predicates the need for the reform of legal frameworks, policy and service delivery to respond to the needs, interests and rights of all. Rights-based approaches explicitly deal with power through the advocacy of a universal code of rights and entitlements for all. The theoretical bedrock for much rights-based work can be linked to Sen's (1999) conception of 'development as freedom'. Freedom is seen to be the ultimate goal of social and economic arrangements and the most efficient means of realising general welfare. However, Sen (1999) argues for the avoidance of development formulae and in favour of engagement with multiple outcomes and possibilities that include a reassessment of development as a mechanism for economic growth. Most recent work suggests a fusion between the idea of rights and the SLA to produce a 'livelihood rights approach'. This would follow the premise that rights matter and that the poor must be supported and empowered to claim their rights (Moser and Norton 2001).

## **10 Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to capture some of the major issues that emerge from a broad sweep of the literature dealing with sustainable livelihoods and the practical strategies for institutionalising ideas about livelihoods into organisational strategy and intervention planning.

It is evident that many questions remain unanswered about the practical complexities and contradictions of the sustainable livelihoods approach.

In clarifying where SLA fits with other new approaches to development it is necessary to consider it in relation to development theory. The continuing evolution of the approach will need to take into account ideas about what development means and what it is for.

The literature raises questions on many levels about the efficacy and continuing evolution of the sustainable livelihoods approach. It is clear that it has not been sufficiently tested. The SL framework and principles may be of value, particularly if they allow thinking to become more multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary.

Much work has been done on how to incorporate the idea of livelihoods into the delivery of aid. However, in common with participation, one of the most crucial aspects for investigation will be to analyse whether the rhetoric of new approaches is transformative in practice. It may be that underlying relationships remain unaltered in reality through personal and/or institutional resistance.

The SLA is not a new approach to development. The present literature is rather too silent at the conceptual level to offer a coherent 'approach' to development as a whole. The idea of sustainable livelihoods is undoubtedly important and particularly crucial is an improved understanding of the complexity of and the connections between livelihood strategies and contexts. To gain conceptual coherence it will be necessary to return to Chambers and Conway's (1992) discussion of net sustainable livelihoods and relate this to emerging discourse in terms of rights and governance; and resist the temptation to reduce the idea of 'sustainable livelihoods' to a managerialist model of rational choice.

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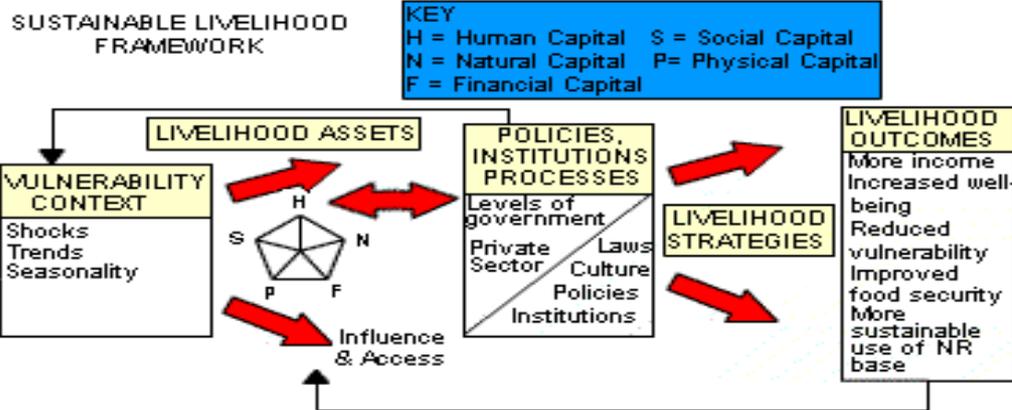
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Figure 1. Sustainable livelihoods framework



(Source: DFID 2000a)