

HOW THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK CAN CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT.

Where are we going?

Miriam Murambadoro
Sustainable Social Ecological Systems
Natural Resources and Environment
CSIR
PO Box 395
Pretoria
0001
Tel: 012 841 3391
Email: mmurambadoro@csir.co.za

ABSTRACT

The South African constitution seeks to secure ecological sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development. It is important to understand how society makes use of natural resources in order to seek ways to advance sustainable use of natural resources while promoting social development. Environmental assessment and management needs to embrace approaches aimed at sustainable social development of society such as the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). The concept of sustainable livelihoods has its roots in the UN Conference on Environment and Development (1987) which called for development to integrate all aspects of human livelihoods and the means that people use to obtain them. The SLA provides a manner in which to improve understanding of the livelihoods of poor people in terms of their assets and capabilities, as well as, the policies, institutions and processes that enhance or inhibit their access to capital whilst increasing or decreasing their vulnerability. The SLA also examines the risks, shocks and stresses and how households cope with them and adapt to long term changes that affect their livelihoods. Households make use of different assets and capabilities to carry out a number of activities to sustain their livelihood and this all contributes to sustainable development. Livelihoods strategies are deemed sustainable or vulnerable depending on their ability to withstand shocks or stresses. This paper investigates how the SLA can be used when planning new development activities (e.g. biofuels) and in assessing the contribution that existing activities have made to sustaining livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

The South African constitution's Bill of Rights Section 24 and NEMA (Act 107 1998) provide the platform for environmental management to focus on people and their needs and to serve their physical, psychological, developmental, cultural and social interests equitably. They seek to secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting acceptable economic and social development. EIA is one of the tools used by environmental managers to protect the environment but is often criticised by some who see it as an obstructive process that keeps people in poverty rather than one that ensures future generations' resource security (Weaver, nd). EIA faces the challenge of having to protect the environment while contributing to poverty

alleviation and employment creation. A large proportion of the population in Africa rely heavily on the diminishing natural resources and have a great need to diversify their livelihood options (ibid). One view is that it may be important to understand how society makes use of natural resources in order to seek ways to advance sustainable use of natural resources while promoting social development. Environmental assessment and management therefore needs to embrace approaches aimed at sustainable social development such as the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). The SLA provides a framework for improving understanding of the livelihoods of poor people. This is based on appreciating their assets and capabilities, as well as, the policies, institutions and processes that enhance or inhibit their access to capital whilst increasing or decreasing their vulnerability. This paper aims to contribute to options for the way forward in environmental management by exploring the application of the sustainable livelihoods approach to environmental management.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The sustainable livelihoods approach provides a conceptual framework for understanding the causes of poverty by analyzing the relationships between the germane factors at micro, intermediate macro levels, and prioritizing interventions (Meinzen-Dick and Adato, 2001). The approach is not a panacea but it provides a way of thinking about the livelihoods of the poor that will stimulate debate and reflection on the different factors that affect livelihoods, the way they interact and their relative importance within a particular setting. The challenge for environmental management is that for many poor people the desire to satisfy basic social needs often overrides the basic environmental considerations. In a study in the high density suburb of Chitungwiza in Zimbabwe, I found that the poorest of the poor survived by cutting down trees for firewood from near by forests and selling it to other residents.¹ For these people the most important thing was to put food on their table rather than effects of deforestation or even the risk of being arrested for cutting down trees. The approach therefore can guide researchers and practitioners in rural (and urban) development and poverty reduction as it looks at the sustainability of the activities, assets and capabilities of the poor. The approach does not just look at the sectoral barriers but includes the context in which people live. It goes beyond the external standards to include self perceptions by local communities on who are the poor and what poverty means by taking into account what the people value (Narayan-Parker *et al*, 2000). The SLA also goes beyond those who are poor today and considers those who are vulnerable and likely to be tomorrow's poor (Ibid: 3).

A sustainable livelihood can be defined as one that comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. Livelihoods should be broadly seen as the range of assets and activities used as a means of living. There are debates surrounding the adjective qualifier "sustainable". Murray (2002:493) posits that strategies or policies that have proved to be sustainable in the past might not be sustainable in the future and that it would be naivety to assume that people in power always make policies for the poor aimed at poverty reduction. For purposes of this paper, a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from shocks and stresses and maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, whilst not undermining natural resources (DFID, 1999). Figure 1 illustrates the sustainable livelihoods framework and its components.

¹ This was for my Masters dissertation that looked at the local causes and dynamics of urban food insecurity

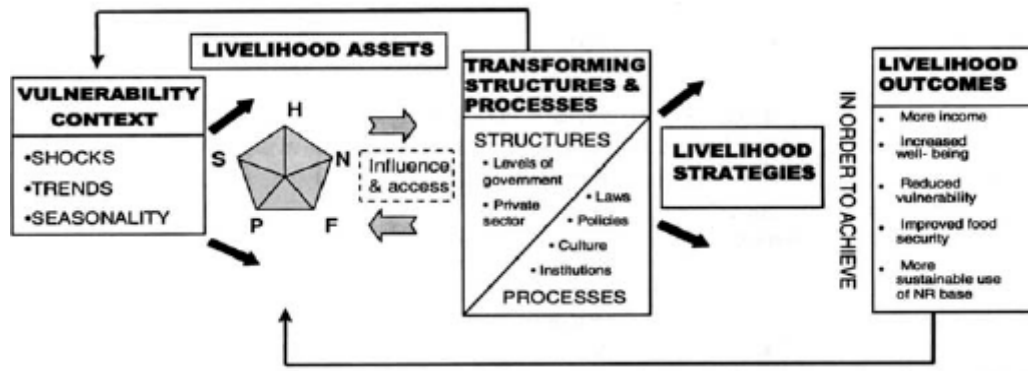


Figure 1: The DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Cahn, 2002)

The three key components to the livelihood framework are capabilities, assets and activities (de Satge, 2002). These are all influenced by the vulnerability context in which people exist and this includes the trends in population growth, national and international economics, shocks or events such as health problems, earthquakes and seasonal vulnerability of prices. The vulnerability context also influences how people cope and adapt to shocks and stresses (Cahn, 2002). Assets can be tangible and non tangible, these are commonly identified as capital. These assets can be physical capital, human capital, social capital, financial capital and natural capital². The term capital in this framework refers to a stock that can be stored, accumulated, exchanged or depleted and put to work to generate a flow of income or other benefits (Rakodi and Nkurinziza, 2005). Capabilities are resources and skills that people possess, can develop, mobilize and access which allow them to or inhibit them from having more/less control over their livelihood. Households regardless of their wealth status make use of their assets and capabilities to carry out a number of activities to sustain their livelihood. There are however some households that have assets but lack the capability to use them to their advantage.

To strengthen the household livelihood security there is need to assess and link the micro situation (household) and the macro condition (De Satge, 2002). The external environment is dynamic thus one needs to appreciate the complex pressures that influence the household livelihood strategies. Murray (2002) suggests that there is need to define the structural, historical and institutional factors that exist in the macro scale in order to understand the household (micro level). These are referred to as structures and processes whereby the former refers to formal structures such as governmental organisations such as formal laws, regulations. The latter refers to informal rules (includes culture) that determine or change access to capital assets within a livelihood.

The sustainable livelihoods approach has been criticised for being too micro/household focused. It has also not been able to help in understanding the relationship between local and supra-local institutions/policies and how to link this to policy (Clark and Carney, 2008). Another critique is the way that the framework depicts the relationships between the factors - the problem with this is that by representing the reality and complexity of a livelihood system in a simple and logical way, you tend to lose the relative importance of some factors and the relationships between the factors (Cahn, 2002). The SLA approach aims to work across sectors but in reality most government institutions and organisations work and are funded separately therefore it is not easy to have cross sectoral development (Carney, 1999; Singh & Gilman, 1999). There has been criticism over its failure to provide guidance on how to incorporate gender, tradition and culture but with the evolution of the approach these aspects are being included for example in the Pacific Sustainable livelihoods (Cahn, 2002). The approach has been criticised by others who see it as being too complex, over ambitious and its inability to give sufficient practical guidance on the way forward

² The Pacific SLA includes traditional capital (Cahn, 2002).

(Carney, 1999:5). However the approach is not a blueprint on rural development or poverty alleviation rather it is an analytical framework which seeks to guide the thinking behind development planning and intervention (Cahn, 2002).

Where Are We Going?

Sustainable social development should appreciate the main factors that affect poor people's livelihoods and the relationships between them. This would assist in the planning and implementation of more effective development interventions. Using the SLA as a tool one can get an understanding of the vulnerability context in which poor households operate in as well as the assets they draw on to support their livelihoods. Vulnerability context includes resource degradation or regeneration, economic indicators, employment opportunities, seasonality in resource availability, prices and agricultural production. The sustainable livelihoods approach is used because it starts off by identifying the existing assets and strategies available to the poor and from this it's possible to identify entry points for intervention.

The approach has been used by development agencies such as Oxfam, Danida, World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization. However the DFID used to promote SLA but has moved from using the SLA approach for a number of reasons but Clark and Carney (2008) note that the SLA can still be adapted to deal with the current problems such as the challenges that affect agricultural and natural resource productivity, and technical issues for example on ground water management, rural economy and fragile states. The New Zealand International Aid and Development Agency has also adopted this tool and noted that this approach is effective as it facilitates development that has significant sustainable impacts on poverty reduction (NZAID, 2007). Meinzen-Dick and Adato, (2001) note that there is need to understand people's livelihoods in order to develop integrated natural resource management practices that are best suited for the complex livelihoods strategies especially among the poor. Environmental science research therefore needs to embrace development tools such as the sustainable livelihoods approach to ensure sustainable social development.

New development initiatives such as the biofuel industry need to understand the rural livelihoods context to achieve rural development and poverty alleviation. The introduction of biofuels would impact on rural livelihoods assets such as land, water, food security, gender equality and health, therefore imposing this new development initiative without understanding the context in which this will occur will not be sustainable. Poverty is one of the most compelling challenges confronting humankind and the World Bank posits that policies targeted directly at the poor can barely thrive except if governments know who the poor are and how they respond to policies and to their environment (World Bank, 1990). The sustainable livelihoods approach is still evolving as strengths and weaknesses emerge and discussions continue. Like other tools, its success depends both on how well the approach captures the realities of life and how sensitively, inclusively and adeptly the approach is used in practice. Environmental management research should, in future try to incorporate the sustainable livelihoods approach. The approach understands the differences between groups of people and works with them in a way that is compatible with their current livelihood strategies, social environment and ability to adapt leading to sustainable social development.

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