Sustainable livelihoods approaches: where next?

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THERE ARE NOW many case studies that demonstrate the value of adopting sustainable livelihoods approaches (SLAs) in a wide range of "development" contexts. However, evidence is also emerging of constraints that will need to be addressed if projects and programmes that take SLAs are to achieve their potential. In summarising the discussions from a recent series of DFID-supported seminars, this paper highlights practitioners' experiences of the obstacles and limitations to operationalising SLAs. Some simple recommendations are made for consolidating and disseminating the lessons from current experience with a view to making the approach more accessible, practical and effective.

In the last 5 years, development agencies such as FAO, CARE International, UNDP, Oxfam and DFID have shown increasing enthusiasm for Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLAs). Although it has taken time for field or practical experiences of implementing SLAs to be generated, there are now many case studies that demonstrate the value of adopting the principles espoused by SLAs in a range of contexts and across different sectors. DFID adopted and developed its own SLA as a result of the 1997 White Paper on International Development (DFID 1997), which committed DFID to 'policies and actions, which promote sustainable livelihoods'. Since then, it has invested considerable resources in promoting SLAs (e.g. www.livelihoods.org), and designing and implementing projects that are based on these approaches.

The Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT) has been directly involved with SL development, training and practice since 1999, both in association with DFID and with other partners. DFID commissioned CIDT to develop and run a series of seminars in UK during 2001-2002. They were planned around topical development themes and attracted over 370 participants from varying development backgrounds. From their own experiences, participants drew attention to issues that could affect successful design and implementation of projects and programmes that adopt SLAs. The case studies used during the seminars highlighted these limitations just as clearly as they reaffirmed participants' own views of the benefits of SLAs. This paper summarises the main points of the seminar discussions. Supporting information from case studies is provided in the boxes.

Outputs from seminar series

Benefits of taking a sustainable livelihoods approach

The DFID project, 'Sustainable Management of the Usangu Wetland and its Catchment' (www.usangu.org) has attempted to use a livelihoods approach to assist local stakeholders to develop sustainable management plan for the Rufiji Basin in SW Tanzania.
Franks, 2002

Participants felt that SLAs: 1) Helped formalise the principles of best practice; 2) Prompted an improved understanding of complex "development" situations and the potential impact of interventions; 3) Encouraged a focus on people's strengths and aspirations; 4) Supported processes of institutional and social change; 5) Encouraged interdisciplinary working; 6) Prompted an improved understanding of poverty; 7) Provided a common objective for project preparation and implementation teams; and 8) Encouraged a focus on project outcomes.

Gaps in the SLA concept and principles

The case studies reviewed during the Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising SLAs, indicated that there was a fundamental issue regarding targeting project interventions at the poorest.
(FAO 2000)

Participants felt that SLAs, in general, are not sufficiently explicit about poverty, nor were they necessarily pro-poor. It was also observed that there is no mention of gender and power relations within the SLA framework, nor is there reference to spatial or temporal scale. With specific reference to water and sanitation, participants felt the approach did not explicitly address the issues of equity and rights, or the moral difficulties these present when designing project or programme interventions.

Inflexibility within the programme and/or project cycle

By their nature, projects and programmes that adopt the principles of SLAs require flexibility and long-term commitment to design and implementation. Consequently participants felt that current funding horizons and planning/budget cycles are not compatible with SL-informed activities and the current value-for-money culture is not conducive to truly process-oriented working.

Working in a sectoral environment
Livelihoods, Governance and rural poverty reduction in Uganda
Rural families encounter a system of taxation that essentially cripples all levels of private enterprise, so that decentralised authority has become part of the problem of rural poverty rather than part of its solution.
Case study presented at the Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar: 'Governance and Livelihoods', 2001

SLAs are intrinsically cross-sectoral, and assume a joined-up view of government. Participants highlighted the reality of implementing projects and programmes in partnership with institutions that operate through often competing, sector-specific line departments. In this environment, cross-sectoral initiatives and interdisciplinary working can be difficult to sustain and it is often positively discouraged despite the enthusiasm of individual staff.

New strategies for development
At the Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising SLAs, participants agreed that using SLAs upstream may add value, if they are appropriately linked to micro-level ground-truthing. However, although it might be more cost effective to influence policy from the top, long-lasting change is more likely to be effected when it is driven from below.
(FAO 2000)

Agencies, such as DFID, are increasingly seeking to engage with development at higher levels, in the form of grants and budgetary support for partners to spend in line with their own priorities and procedures. Participants voiced concerns about the capacity and willingness of largely sector-focused, decentralising government bodies to adopt SLAs.

Need for communication and empowerment
Women staff of a project in Pakistan found that they had to spend twice as much time in [poorer] villages and made less "progress" than in wealthier villages. Since staff performance was evaluated on positive results, incentives were biased against working with the poor.
Case study presented at the Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising SLAs (FAO 2000)

SLAs place emphasis on improving communication channels between poor people and service providers by; improving the ability of the poor to articulate their livelihood priorities, and by improving the ability of service providers to access that information, respond to it and be accountable. Participants suggested that technical capacity and administrative and financial imperatives often restrict the ability of local government to take on these new roles. Strengthened and legitimised civil society organisations can help facilitate the process by which people, particularly the poor, can articulate their needs.

Raising expectations
SLAs work by focusing on what matters to people. Many participants had experienced difficulties when this had resulted in raising the expectations of stakeholders beyond the capabilities of the partner organisations or project/programme's ability to meet them.

Scale and the simplification of complex situations
Managing Karnataka's Scarce Water Resources
A Water Resources Audit showed that elites often captured resources, that village level institutions are created that are outside government, that there is little consideration of upstream/downstream equity or wider policy issues when village plans for water resources management are drawn up.
Case study presented at the Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar: 'Water and Livelihoods', 2001

One issue that arose from several of the case studies, and participants' own experiences was the inherent difficulty in linking macro-micro level policies with scale dependent realities. It was also suggested that the situation is made more complex by the seasonality of boundaries that define human activities, fluid livelihood networks (e.g. migration), overlapping responsibilities of traditional and official institutions, mismatch of official and geographical boundaries, etc. This makes it difficult to arrive at agreements between users about the rights and responsibilities needed to implement mechanisms for sharing costs and benefits at different scales.

Nepal's Rural Infrastructure Development Project (RIDP)
Despite superficial success, RIDP shows the lack of accountability of District institutions, and how readily those other than the intended beneficiaries can capture project benefits.
Case study presented at the Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar: 'Governance and Livelihoods', 2001

Governance
Participants also highlighted the issue that poor governance maintains power imbalances, which permit elites to continue to capture benefits. In addition, some governance arrangements make the poor poorer, for example, by destroying informal and traditional systems.

Monitoring and evaluation
The impact of water supply and sanitation provision on livelihoods
WaterAid's recent impact assessment demonstrates how interventions have empowered communities for collective action and increased self-esteem by enabling people to meet societal and cultural needs and expectations.
Case study presented at the Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar: 'Water and Livelihoods', 2001

Participants pointed out that more resources were needed if monitoring and evaluation frameworks are to be extended to consider the breadth of livelihood impacts. Comments arose about the difficulty in measuring livelihood outcomes (particularly social) and attributing them to specific project activities. Process indicators are difficult to measure and could prove impractical against current criteria for accountability used by funding agencies.

Language and a common understanding

It was suggested that most people unfamiliar with SLAs understand a 'livelihood' to be something intrinsically related to income generation and employment. There have also been difficulties in translating many of the concepts and terms into other languages.

Just another development paradigm?

Participants expressed concerns that the benefits of SLAs as a common-sense approach were being hampered by the way in which it was often promoted. Participants were also concerned that SLAs were being presented as the only way forward despite the fact that there are many other approaches that are equally deserving of attention.

Conclusions

Some simple additional conclusions can be drawn from the seminar discussions: 1) Many obstacles to operationalising SLAs are common to all "development" sectors; 2) It is not necessary to use the terminology currently associated with SLAs in order to take a 'livelihoods' approach to projects and programmes; 3) SLAs can encourage best (or better) practice but obviously cannot guarantee it; and, 4) SLAs demand different skill sets, such as those of conflict resolution, interdisciplinary working, adaptive management, participation, and so on. Finally, it is clear that there is both a need and a demand for simple and practical guidelines that will assist practitioners to use SLAs in the design and implementation of projects and programmes.

Reports and case studies from the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Seminar Series 2001-2002 are available from:http://www.livelihoods.org/info/training/2001_training.html.

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