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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Expert Group Meeting on “Adopting the Sustainable Livelihoods  
Approach for Promoting Rural Development  
in the ESCWA Region”  
Beirut, 21-22 December 2009

**SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD APPROACHES  
THE FRAMEWORK, LESSONS LEARNT FORM PRACTICE  
AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

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For Promoting Rural Development in the ESCWA Region

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*Sustainable Livelihood Approaches*

*The framework, lessons learnt from practice and policy recommendations*

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## **Foreword**

The purpose of this document is to update participants on sustainable livelihood approaches (SLA) to rural development. It starts with a refresher on SLA and the associated conceptual framework for analysis drawing on the training material developed by the Department for International Development (DFID). It then explores the linkages of livelihood approaches to other development ideologies; the analysis follows by a section on lessons learnt from practice and implications for a policy environment supportive of sustainable livelihoods approaches.

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## I. Sustainable Livelihood Approaches

### I.1. Origins

Livelihoods thinking dates back to the work of Robert Chambers in the mid-1980s (further developed by Chambers, Conway and others in the early 1990s). Since that time a number of development agencies have adopted livelihoods concepts and made efforts to begin implementation. The term 'sustainable livelihood' came to prominence as a development concept in the early 1990s, drawing on advances in understanding of famine and food insecurity during the 1980s. Much of the literature takes an adaptation of Chambers and Conway's (1991) definition of livelihoods.

“A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks.”

CARE, UNDP, Oxfam and IISD were some of the early adopters of sustainable livelihoods methodologies. In the late 1990s the sustainable livelihoods approach gained momentum in the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) with investments in research, workshops and publications.

### I.2 What are Sustainable Livelihood Approaches?

Livelihoods approaches are a way of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities for development. They place people and their priorities at the centre of development. They focus poverty reduction interventions on empowering the poor to build on their own opportunities, supporting their access to assets, and developing an enabling policy and institutional environment.

Core to livelihoods approaches are a set of *principles* that underpin best practice in any development intervention:

- People-centred
- Responsive and participatory
- Multi-level
- Conducted in partnership
- Sustainable
- Dynamic

In addition to these principles, livelihoods approaches are based on a conceptual framework to aid analysis of the factors affecting peoples' livelihoods, including:

- the priorities that people define as their desired livelihood outcomes
- their access to social, human, physical, financial and natural capital or assets, and their ability to put these to productive use
- the different strategies they adopt (and how they use their assets) in pursuit of their priorities
- the policies, institutions and processes that shape their access to assets and opportunities
- the context in which they live, and factors affecting vulnerability to shocks and stresses.

The 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' (SLA) concept and framework adopted by DFID in the late 1990s (building on work by IDS, IISD, Oxfam and others) have been adapted by different organizations to suit a variety of contexts, issues, priorities and applications. This introduction section draws heavily on DFID SLA

materials. The SL approach shifts the focus from outputs to people and demands exploration of poor people's own priorities. It forces questioning of assumptions and consideration of the broader context, particularly macro-micro links. It also demands and facilitates cross-sectoral analysis. Although resulting projects and programmes may appear to be similar in form to 'conventional' projects or programmes, the links between development activity and poverty reduction – achieved through improving the sustainability of livelihoods – should be much clearer, and activities should therefore be more carefully tuned

## II. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework

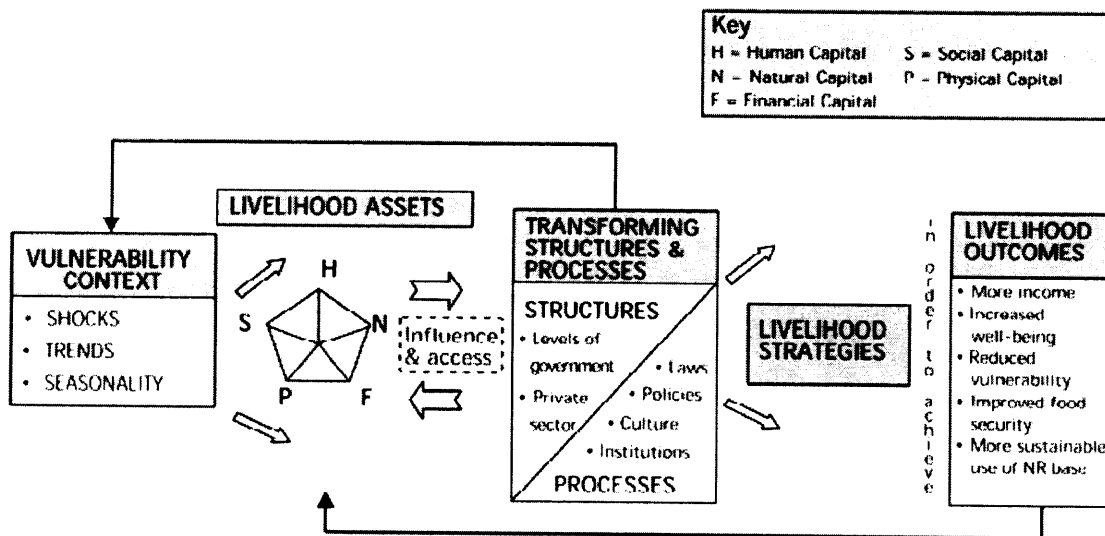
A specific livelihoods framework (Figure 1) has been developed to assist with implementation of sustainable livelihood methodologies. The livelihoods framework is a tool to improve our understanding of livelihoods, particularly the livelihoods of the poor. It presents the main factors that affect people's livelihoods, and typical relationships between these. It can be used in both planning new development activities and assessing the contribution to livelihood sustainability made by existing activities.

In particular, the framework:

- provides a checklist of important issues and sketches out the way these link to each other;
- draws attention to core influences and processes; and
- emphasizes the multiple interactions between the various factors which affect livelihoods.

The framework is centered on people. It does not work in a linear manner and does not try to present a model of reality. Its aim is to help stakeholders with different perspectives to engage in structured and coherent debate about the many factors that affect livelihoods, their relative importance and the way in which they interact. This, in turn, should help in the identification of appropriate entry points for support of livelihoods.

Figure 1. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



The framework shows how, in different contexts, sustainable livelihoods are achieved through access to a range of livelihood resources (natural, economic, human and social capitals) which are combined in the pursuit of different livelihood strategies (agricultural intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification and migration).

## II.1 Livelihood assets

People and their access to assets are at the heart of livelihoods approaches. In the original DFID framework, 5 categories of assets or capitals are identified, although subsequent adaptations have added others, such as political capital (power and capacity to influence decisions). The original 5 categories are:

- human capital: skills, knowledge, health and ability to work
- social capital: social resources, including informal networks, membership of formalized groups and relationships of trust that facilitate co-operation
- natural capital: natural resources such as land, soil, water, forests and fisheries
- physical capital: basic infrastructure, such as roads, water & sanitation, schools, ICT; and producer goods, including tools and equipment
- financial capital: financial resources including savings, credit, and income from employment, trade and remittances

Assets can be destroyed or created as a result of the trends, shocks and seasonal changes in the *vulnerability* context within which people live. *Policies, institutions and processes* can have a great influence on access to *assets* - creating them, determining access, and influencing rates of asset accumulation. Those with more assets are more likely to have greater livelihood options with which to pursue their goals and reduce poverty.

## II.2 Vulnerability context

The vulnerability context within which people pursue their livelihoods includes:

- trends: such as economic trends, resource trends
- shocks: such as conflict, economic shocks, health shocks and natural shocks such as earthquakes
- seasonality: seasonal fluctuations in prices, production, health, employment opportunities

These factors can have a direct impact on people's assets and the options available to them to pursue beneficial *livelihood strategies*. Shocks can destroy *assets* directly or force people to abandon or prematurely dispose of them as part of their coping strategies – for example selling off livestock in the face of drought or to pay for medical care. Not all trends are negative or cause increased vulnerability – for example new technologies, medical advances or positive economic trends can help improve people's livelihoods.

The vulnerability context of poor people's livelihoods is usually influenced by external factors outside their direct control and is dependent on wider *policies, institutions and processes*. To support people to be more resilient to the negative effects of trends, shocks and seasonality, development policy-makers and practitioners can support people's access to assets and help ensure that critical policies, institutions and processes are responsive to the needs of the poor.

## II.3 Livelihood strategies

Livelihood strategies are the combination of activities that people choose to undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals. They include productive activities, investment strategies and reproductive

choices. Livelihoods approaches try to understand the strategies pursued and the factors behind people's decisions; to reinforce the positive aspects of these strategies and mitigate against constraints.

The choice of strategies is a dynamic process in which people combine activities to meet their changing needs. For example, in farming households, activities are not necessarily confined to agriculture but often include non-farm activities in order to diversify income and meet household needs. *Migration*, whether seasonal or permanent, is one common livelihood strategy.

A major influence on people's choice of livelihood strategies is their access to *assets* and the *policies, institutions and processes* that affect their ability to use these assets to achieve positive *livelihood outcomes*.

People are often forced to compete for limited resources: fundamental to livelihoods approaches is the principle that development support aimed at improving the livelihood strategies of some should not disadvantage those of others now or in the future. *Social protection* programmes can support the extreme poor to achieve their own positive livelihoods outcomes in cases where they are unable to compete with those with greater access to assets.

#### **II.4 Policies, Institutions and Processes (PIPs)**

The Policies, Institutions and Processes (PIPs) element of the livelihoods framework covers the complex social, economic and political context within which people pursue their livelihoods strategies.

Policies, institutions and processes include the inter-related issues of:

- Social relations: the way in which gender, ethnicity, culture, history, religion and kinship affect the livelihoods of different groups within a community
- Social and political organization: decision-making processes, civic bodies, social rules and norms, democracy, leadership, power and authority, rent-seeking behavior
- Governance: the form and quality of government systems including structure, power, efficiency and effectiveness, rights and representation
- Service delivery: the effectiveness and responsiveness of state and private sector agencies engaged in delivery of services such as education, health, water and sanitation
- Resource access institutions: the social norms, customs and behaviors (or 'rules of the game') that define people's access to resources
- Policy and policy processes: the processes by which policy and legislation is determined and implemented and their effects on people's livelihoods

PIPs operate at global, national, regional, district and local levels. Key to understanding their impact on local livelihoods is an analysis of the operation, or absence, of links between micro, meso and macro levels.

Given its complexity, there have been several attempts to 'unpack the PIPs box' to improve understanding of the institutional context, including exploring the links between rights-based and livelihoods approaches, and trying to sharpen our comprehension of the role of governance in sustainable livelihoods. Different organisations have found their own ways to understand the PIPs box and apply that understanding to their policy and programmes: some include political capital as an additional *asset*; some put *gender* at the centre of the framework; others argue that an in-depth understanding of *market systems* is key to successful livelihoods support.

With the movement of development aid 'upstream' to focus on direct budget support, country-led development strategies, macro-economic growth and governance, livelihoods approaches can play an important



role in 'ground-truthing' - ensuring that policies, institutions and processes are informed by, and directly linked to, the complex reality of poor people's lives.

## **II.5 Livelihood outcomes**

Livelihood outcomes are the goals to which people aspire, the results of pursuing their *livelihood strategies*. Livelihoods approaches stress the importance of understanding and supporting poor people's efforts to achieve these goals.

Examples of livelihoods outcomes might include:

- increased income
- reduced vulnerability
- increased well-being
- improved food security
- more sustainable use of natural resources
- Livelihoods outcomes are important because they help us understand:
- the results of peoples' livelihoods strategies in a particular context
- why people pursue particular strategies and what their priorities are
- how people are likely to respond to new opportunities or constraints

## **III. Links to other rural development approaches**

The livelihoods approach entered an already crowded conceptual and operational landscape for development. Understanding the links between different approaches is essential, both to avoid confusion and to improve the scope for collaboration with colleagues and partners who come from a different starting point. This section briefly outlines links at the level of broad approaches to development (participatory development, sector wide approaches and integrated rural development).

### **III.1 Sustainable livelihoods and rights-based approaches**

Rights-based approaches to development take as their foundation the need to promote and protect human rights (those rights that have been recognized by the global community and are protected by international legal instruments). These include economic, social and cultural as well as civil and political rights, all of which are interdependent. Running through the rights-based approach are concerns with empowerment and participation, and with the elimination of discrimination on any grounds (race, language, gender, religion, etc.).

Rights-based and sustainable livelihoods approaches are complementary perspectives that seek to achieve many of the same goals (for example, empowerment of the most vulnerable and a strengthened capacity of the poor to achieve secure livelihoods). The primary focus of the rights perspective is on linkages between public institutions and civil society and, particularly, on how to increase the accountability of public institutions to all citizens. The livelihoods approach recognizes the importance of these links and of enhancing accountability, though it takes as its starting point a need to understand the livelihoods of poor people in context. From this starting point it then tries to identify the specific constraints which prevent the realization.

### **III.2 Participatory development**

The livelihoods approach will not be effective unless operationalised in a participatory manner by people who are skilled in social analysis and who share an overall commitment to poverty elimination. The approach incorporates and builds upon existing participatory methodologies

- It promotes people's achievement of their own livelihood objectives. There is no prejudgment about what these are – they must be 'established' through participatory activities.
- It builds upon people's strengths. Again, this is only possible if participatory methodologies are used to establish who has access to which types of capital and how this is affected by the institutional, social and organizational environment.
- It seeks to understand, through participatory analysis, the effects of macro policies upon livelihoods.
- Indicators of impact are expected to be negotiated with local people. This idea of 'negotiation' goes well beyond minimal ideas of participation as consultation.

### **III.3 Sector-wide approaches**

Livelihoods and sector-wide approaches are broadly complementary; each should gain from recognizing the strengths of the other. Livelihoods analysis lays a heavy emphasis on understanding the structures and processes that condition people's access to assets and their choice of livelihood strategies. Where the major constraint is poor performance by government agencies at a sectoral level, then sector wide support programmes will be highly appropriate. This is especially the case for government-dominated areas such as health and education.

Sector programmes themselves will be enriched if they build on the information gathered in livelihoods analysis. This will help those involved to perceive the interactions between different sectors and the importance of developing inter-sectoral links in order to maximize impact at a livelihood level (the benchmark for performance). It will also encourage public sector institutions to recognize the many different players in the development process, creating pressure within the sector planning process to open up the dialogue beyond government, to innovate and to incorporate best practice from existing project-level activities.

Livelihoods approaches and the support activities which derive from them should also gain from the lessons learnt and the objectives pursued in sector approaches. These include:

- the importance of ensuring domestic government ownership of the development process;
- the need to base all support on best-practice public management principles (i.e. not to extend the role of government to inappropriate activities and to stress the importance of developing capacity in areas such as financial management and budgeting); and
- the value of co-ordination between different donors (and the steps required to achieve this).

### **III.4 Integrated rural development**

One of the early 'criticisms' that has been leveled at the livelihoods approach is that it is too similar to the failed integrated rural development (IRD) approaches of the 1970s. It is easy to see where this reflection is coming from; the two approaches share much in common. But the sustainable livelihoods approach endeavors to build upon the strengths of IRD (especially the recognition of the need for broad-based support in rural areas) without falling into the traps that caused IRD's downfall. In particular, the livelihoods approach does not aim to establish integrated programmes in rural areas. While recognizing the importance to rural poverty reduction of a wide range of factors it will target just a few core areas (with the help of thorough analysis of existing livelihoods and a bottom-up planning process) so that activities remain manageable. The livelihoods approach will also address macro level and institutional factors where these are a major constraint. IRD, by contrast was

forced to operate within a hostile macro-economic and institutional environment, dominated and often heavily distorted by government.

#### **IV. Lessons learnt from Practice**

##### **IV.1 Reviews of SL approaches and relevant conclusions**

This section is based on a series of reviews undertaken mainly by DFID in 1999, 2002 and 2008 on experiences from the use of livelihood approaches to rural development. The first review was done in by Ashaley and Carney (1999) to appraise early experiences in the use of SLA approaches and came to the following conclusions:

- Holistic SL analysis can provide an invaluable basis for design, but should lead to focused entry points. Projects guided by SL approaches may be anchored in a single sector, but the contribution to livelihoods and links with initiatives in other sectors should be clear.
- SL approaches can be used in any sector and as a common language for cross-sectoral teamwork.
- Partners are likely to be sectoral ministries. Their ability to embrace the holism of SL may be limited. SL approaches can, nevertheless, encourage a focus on livelihood impacts, not sectoral outputs, and help build cross-sectoral links.
- Use of SL approaches does not necessarily ensure that sustainability is addressed. Environmental, social, economic and institutional aspects of sustainability all need to be addressed, and negotiated among stakeholders.
- Any organization adopting SL approaches is bound to face internal challenges. It will be important to review internal institutional procedures to ensure compatibility with SL. Staff will require support to develop new skills and to learn by doing.

Carney (2002) reviewed the diverse uses and users of SLA. She found that the approach has been successfully used, often with pertinent adaptations, at international, national, regional and local levels; for research, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and policy development; and to move beyond sectoral concerns to address livelihood issues which cross-sectoral and institutional boundaries.

She also found that attention should centers on:

- addressing the implications of the approach for institutional and organizational change
- developing the approach to fill some gaps, particularly regarding rights and power issues including gender; and deepening the analysis of market issues.
- Increasing the effectiveness of SL approaches as a means to poverty reduction involves continuing flexibility and innovation, and in particular:
  - maintaining high levels of critical thinking in analysis; avoiding using the approach as a blueprint; and prioritizing the sharing of ideas
  - actively maintaining a clear poverty reduction focus and a strong emphasis on people-centered development; and always thinking through to actual livelihood impacts on poor people.

A more recent review of DFID's experience with sustainable livelihoods was done by Clark and Carney (2008). They found that SL approaches can be used in the identification of development priorities and new activities. They can also be usefully applied to reviews of current activities that were not designed with SL principles in mind, helping to identify problems such as an undue focus on physical outputs (e.g. trees, roads, wells) or sectoral objectives (e.g. revenues, markets), at the expense of a broader focus on livelihood improvement and poverty reduction. Within projects/programmes, they can be used to sharpen the focus of monitoring and evaluation systems and in the development of log frames.

Overall SL approaches are most useful as an analytical tool. They provide a way to order information and understand not only the nature of poverty but also the links between different aspects of people's livelihoods. In this way they help users to understand complex and changing situations. They broaden the policy dialogue and assist in identifying the relevance of programmes as well as where key constraints and opportunities lie.

SLAs have the potential to add value:

- SLAs can improve the quality of entry points. Taking a holistic approach to design can reveal entry points that more conventional approaches may miss.
  - SLAs can improve the relevance of interventions. SLAs can be more accurate in the way they design interventions and thus improve their effectiveness.
  - SLAs can improve the relevance of partners. By not being restricted to a single-sector entry point, SLAs open up opportunities for a range of partners.
  - They may change perceptions of hierarchies. Hierarchies are often a reflection of where we stand and how we view relationships. If this changes, the hierarchies may also appear to change, providing new insights into relationships between stakeholders.
- 
- Particular areas where SLA have been valuable include:
  - Understanding the dynamics of the trajectory out of 'social protection' to the production and promotion of more viable livelihoods, even for those with very few assets. SL can help identify the key differences between the poorest and other groups as well as being used to track changes over time.
- 
- Analysing complex trends such as climate change and conflict situations and linking these to practical action. In climate change adaptation work (as well as disaster risk reduction), a key objective is to strengthen people's overall resilience as the future becomes more uncertain. It is also important to work on using natural resources more effectively and diversifying economic activity, both areas that have been at the heart of SL thinking.
- 
- Providing a framework for understanding the current food crisis and how and why it affects different groups in different ways.

SL has also been very influential beyond DFID and has helped build cross-sectoral and cross-institutional dialogue as well as drawing in multiple stakeholders and heading off conflict. Perhaps the 'easiest' partner for those working in an SL mode has been local government, as local governments do tend to provide a range of services and be less sectoral than their national counterparts.

- Using SLAs further upstream may add even more value.

SLAs shift the focus from resources to people. SLAs are people focused and this encourages agencies to place their interests and needs at the centre of the development agenda.

## IV.2 Linking SL Principles to SL-supporting Actions

The key difficulty making an SL approach “work” has been how to move from a livelihoods analysis of a situation to determining the action-oriented specifics of actually doing something: what to do, where to do it, when to do it, how to do it, and very importantly, who to do it with.

SL principles provide criteria against which actions can be measured, but don't say which actions to take. The question is how a combination of livelihoods analysis and livelihoods principles can inform intelligent and effective action. *The answer is not always self-evident.*

Neely et al (2004) tried to answer this question by looking at the actions of successful projects to see how they approached the “operationalisation” problem. In a paper entitled “Do Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches Have a Positive Impact on the Rural Poor? Neely et al studied twelve case studies and found that while all of them applied SL principles, few set out specifically to implement a sustainable livelihoods approach per se. All cases reviewed demonstrated, to some degree, enhanced assets, improved governance (with multi-level linkages), a focus on livelihoods strategies for the poor, as well as being multi-sectoral, participatory, people-centered, process oriented with a degree of flexibility, and conducted in partnership.

The “bare essentials” toolkit for effective analysis, planning, and ultimate success appeared to include:

- a minimal essential set of principles
- a minimal essential understanding of the livelihoods situation
- a minimal essential set of “institutions” in the broader sense (farmer's groups, training, resources, etc)
- a sequence of sound entry points (only some of which will be evident from the beginning); examples of such entry points include:
  - easily assimilated technical improvements to hillside farming techniques which will reduce vulnerability
  - support to existing local credit institutions,
  - partnerships for the improvement of roads, improvements to local educational and health situations....
  - an openness to synergy, partnership, and reverberating energy.

In summary, the evidence gathered from exploring successful examples suggests that effective incorporation of the good principles of development associated with the SLAs are required to set the stage for reducing poverty. The analysis indicates that the SL principles addressing social inclusivity and environmental sustainability need to be kept more to the forefront. Using a livelihoods perspective along with a good developmental tool kit and appropriate sequencing can enhance the quality of a wide range of approaches to improve the lives of the rural poor. As Diana Carney points out, *‘the usefulness of the SL framework, as with any tool, is set by the user’* (2002:16)

## IV. 3. Revitalizing SLA

SLA was introduced into the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) policy in the late 1990s, and widely used by many organizations over the following years. The approach has since been overtaken by other approaches, such as the ‘human rights’, ‘governance’ and ‘making markets work for the poor’ frameworks. At an October 2008 seminar at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK, participants discussed whether and how Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) could be revitalized and returned to the forefront of development approaches. The seminar was hosted by the Livelihoods Connect Network.

The seminar came to the following conclusion: For SLA to resume its place in the forefront of development analysis, policy and programme design, and impact assessment, its advocates need to:

- show more forcefully how it has contributed to poverty reduction and sustainable development to date
- show how their achievements have moved beyond the micro-level to influence national policy – several participants at the workshop shared their experiences of this; these examples need to be better documented, collated and publicized
  - review the framework itself to see how it can incorporate broader trade issues and power relations
  - consider how SLA is relevant to the Millennium Development Goals and national frameworks such as Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS), for example through the use of SLA in Poverty and Social Impact Analysis and PRS monitoring and evaluation systems
  - consider how SLA can contribute to the ‘Aid Effectiveness’ agenda by highlighting and articulating poor peoples’ needs, and supporting accountability between donors and recipient governments in assessing progress towards the latter’s stated development goals.

## **V. SLA and current issues**

### **V.1 SLA and climate change**

Climate models are predicting a hotter, drier and less predictable climate in the ESCWA region which is already considered the world's most water-scarce and where, in many places, demand for water already outstrips supply. The legacy of conflict in the region undermines the ability of countries and communities to adapt to climate change. The history of hostility and mistrust greatly complicates efforts to collaborate over shared resources, to invest in more efficient water and energy use, to share new ways to adapt to climate change and to pursue truly multilateral action on climate change. Ultimately, climate change presents an even more serious challenge than it would otherwise.

Climate change itself poses real security concerns to the region such as:

- increased competition for scarce water resources, complicating peace agreements
- intensified food insecurity, thereby raising the stakes for the return or retention of occupied land
- hindering economic growth, worsening poverty and social instability
- destabilization could lead to forced migration and increased tensions over refugee populations
- increased militarization of strategic natural resources
- growing resentment and distrust of the West (as a result of perceived inertia).

Livelihoods approaches have been used extensively in work on climate change in a number of ways, including:

- helping analyze impacts, vulnerability and adaptation to climate change, often in contrast to top-down climate science, which tends to rely on modeling to predict impacts and develop more generalized adaptation measures
  - providing an important conceptual and practical basis to bring together work on poverty alleviation, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation
  - forming the basis of much of the on-the-ground vulnerability assessments undertaken in relation to climate change. These have been able to situate climatic factors within the context of vulnerability to a broader range of shocks and stresses.
  - Situating climate change adaptation within a broader understanding of assets and vulnerabilities has promoted adaptation as a dynamic and flexible process. Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, livelihoods approaches stress strategies that:
    - are appropriate to local contexts
    - are better able to respond to changing climatic conditions

- recognize vulnerable people's access to a range of assets, and how this access varies within and between households and communities, and between women and men.

## **V. 2 SLA and food security**

Food security is a global challenge. According to the World Bank (2009), the 2008 food crisis risks plunging a further 100 million people into poverty. The main causes of rising food prices are contested but generally said to include:

- high fuel and fertilizer costs
- poor weather conditions in some major grain exporting countries
- a rise in demand for food including from the expanding middle classes in India and China
- an increase in bio-fuel production reducing the amount of land allocated to food production.

However, even without the combination factors that have caused the 2008 food crisis, many poor people are affected by predictable seasonal cycles of hunger and food insecurity. The multidimensional nature of food security points to livelihoods approaches as a lens for aiding understanding of food security issues. Livelihoods approaches can provide a useful analytical framework because of their focus on:

- assessing risk, vulnerability and resilience.
- disaggregated analysis of issues and impacts on different groups.
- both local factors that affect people's lives and the wider institutional and policy environment.

## **VI. Policy recommendations**

### **VI. 1- ESCWA and livelihood approaches**

ESCWA is committed to the International Development Goals of poverty reduction and environmental conservation. Adopting the livelihoods approach to understanding poverty, and pursuing the livelihoods objectives above, is expected to make a direct contribution to achieving this aim. It will provide structure to debate and discourse and help ESCWA and its partners respond to poor people's views and their own understanding of poverty – both its income and non-income dimensions. Most important, it will facilitate the identification of practical priorities for action that are based on the views and interests of those concerned.

Through taking a wider and better informed view of the opportunities, constraints, objectives and interactions that characterize people's lives, it extends the 'menu' for ESCWA support to livelihood development. The analysis that the approach entails helps improve the targeting of that support and makes explicit the connections between different activities undertaken by ESCWA and its partners. The result is a more effective contribution to poverty elimination.

### **VI.2. Enabling policy environment**

SLAs provide an analytical framework and common language for understanding poverty, and thus the approach is a potentially effective means of focusing the policy process on the poor. In sum, by supporting and enhancing capabilities, rather than simply meeting needs, policy implementation with an SLA perspective can change the effective content of policy. However, this will require the development of effective channels of communication between poor households, particularly in rural areas, and central policy networks, for which appropriate institutions at the local, intermediate and national levels are essential.

The characteristics of the policy process that are consistent with and supportive of the SL approach are as follows:

- **Coherent approach to international policy and commitments**

Coordinated domestic policy has to be reinforced by the commitments and international policies to which both northern and southern governments agree to implement. This is important not only in order to have domestic and international policies pulling in the same direction, but also because in many important areas, such as trade policy, debt relief and conservation, SL-friendly domestic policy requires supportive international agreements.

- **Supportive development policy with clearly identified objectives.**

In an SL context, these should be stated in terms of improving access to assets, reducing vulnerability, enhancing economic growth, promoting environmental sustainability and fostering macroeconomic stability. There must be an overall development vision that is coherent and consistent and, from an SL perspective, which places SL objectives in the forefront. For the policy to have substance, the objectives must also be concrete and translatable into targets.

- **Coordination between institutions/sectors.**

Sustainable livelihoods do not divide easily into sectoral pigeonholes. A given household's livelihood strategies will usually be multisectoral and interdependent. Yet most policy formulation and implementation currently undertaken is done so on a sectoral basis. This places a heavy burden on the coordination process if a coherent approach to sustainable livelihoods is to be achieved. A review of the history of developing coordinated policy for food security shows the difficulties in integrating, for example, agriculture and health policy. The sectors that have to be coordinated for an SL approach are potentially much more numerous. Where there is a well-constructed multisectoral policy or plan, centered on SL or anti-poverty objectives, then effective use of public expenditure techniques can provide an appropriate mechanism for achieving a coordinated policy approach.

- ***Decentralization***

The process of delegating implementation and, eventually, the budgeting and planning of line ministries to a regional and local level allows for much greater awareness of and responsiveness to local conditions and, in theory at least, accountability to local populations. From a policy perspective this should introduce a much greater two-way flow of information. As yet, experience is rather limited, but this trend should give rise to policy processes that are much more supportive of an SL approach. Decentralization may allow for better coordination in policy implementation, and even in policy development, but much depends on the degree of autonomy and financial devolution given to the regional and district authorities.

- ***Good governance.***

This is central to the objectives of ownership and empowerment that are critical to the SL framework. Where governance is predictable and robust, livelihoods become less vulnerable.

- ***Enhancing partnerships.***

Two important aspects of partnerships are referred to here: a) the complementarity for advancing progress in a cost effective way with each partner working from their comparative advantage, and b) ownership by actors whose support is needed for success including building the capacity of civil society organizations



- ***Gender empowerment***

From an SL perspective, improving women's access and participation is an important and indeed integral part of the process of achieving sustainable livelihoods. Empowerment and participation of both genders is a primary objective and important element of the SL framework.

- ***Initial capitalization of the poor***

Many development interventions, by their very nature, exclude the poorest/most vulnerable groups, who do not possess the necessary physical, natural and financial asset base. In order to have positive impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable individuals/households/groups, it is necessary to 'recapitalize' those that have no disposable income or assets to invest in enterprise development. In other words, initial investments must be made to provide the very poor with a minimum asset base if they are to be brought back into the development process.

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