Community development in sustainable livelihoods approaches – an introduction

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Abstract This article introduces sustainable livelihoods approaches, explaining what they are and how they have emerged. It examines how different organizations have taken up a sustainable livelihoods approach, and considers whether in so doing they have drawn on community development thinking and practice. It is found that community development is largely absent from sustainable livelihoods thinking and contended that part of the reason lies with the locally situated character of community development practice, which makes it difficult for externally driven sustainable livelihoods interventions to systematically incorporate community-level methods and practices. More fundamentally, sustainable livelihoods approaches embody a technocratic development drive, which is at odds with the principles, ethos and values that underpin much community development work.

The rise of sustainable livelihoods approaches

In the 1990s and 2000s overseas development assistance has increasingly been directed towards an agenda for poverty reduction, as expressed in the millennium development goals to halve extreme poverty and increase well-being globally by 2015 (www.developmentgoals.org). Towards these ends, development agencies and national governments have generated or adopted a range of tools and strategies for designing development interventions, including sustainable livelihoods approaches, direct budgetary support, governance and rights-based approaches.

Sustainable livelihoods approaches have evolved from changing perspectives on poverty, participation and sustainable development (Sen, 1981; Swift, 1989; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Moser, 1998). In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development used the term ‘sustainable livelihoods’ in discussions on resource ownership, basic needs, and rural livelihood security (WCED, 1987; Conroy and Litvinoff, 1988). The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development located sustainable
livelihoods as a means of linking socioeconomic and environmental concerns. Both forums were important for moving international concern with environmental issues towards a focus on people and their livelihood activities, and placing these concerns within a policy framework for sustainable development.

By the late 1990s, the idea of sustainable livelihoods had consolidated into an approach, or a number of very similar approaches, developed and/or implemented by intergovernmental organizations (e.g. the United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Food Programme), bilateral donors (e.g. the British Department for International Development), non-governmental organizations (e.g. Development Alternatives in India, CARE International, Oxfam), and research institutes (e.g. the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Winnipeg, the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex and the Overseas Development Institute in London).

From a donor perspective, a sustainable livelihoods approach acts as an operational tool to assist work on poverty reduction (Alterelli and Carloni, 2000). These approaches are underpinned by an ‘asset-vulnerability approach’ to understanding poverty.¹ They seek to bring together the lessons of best practice in development with a set of guiding principles supported by an analytical framework, which acts as a tool to analyse issues and target interventions. The guiding principles are common to the different organizations that work with a sustainable livelihoods approach, although frameworks and methods differ (Carney et al., 1999).

Although some organizations have tailored their own definitions, many draw on a concept of livelihood as ‘the means of gaining a living, including livelihood capabilities, tangible assets and intangible assets’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992, p. 9). Added to this is a sustainability dimension: ‘a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base’ (Scoones, 1998, p. 5).

To briefly explain, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework has four main

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¹ An ‘asset-vulnerability approach’ is shorthand for a particular way of conceptualizing poverty and vulnerability. In the 1980s, criticisms were generated against definitions of poverty based solely on consumption or income levels, which are the basis of poverty line measures. This new thinking on poverty led to an interest in vulnerability, and its counterpart, security, associated with better understanding of seasonality and of the impacts of shocks, notably drought. This pointed to the importance of assets as buffers, and to social relations, alongside non-monetary aspects of poverty such as powerlessness, isolation and people’s own experiences of poverty (Maxwell, 1999). These and other innovations have been incorporated into sustainable livelihoods approaches.
components. First, people are conceived of living within a vulnerability context in which they are exposed to risks, through sudden shocks, trends over time and seasonal change. Second, people have a number of capital assets, which they draw upon to make their livelihoods: these include social capital (social networks and relationships of trust), natural capital (natural resource stocks), financial capital (savings, income, credit), physical capital (transport, shelter, water, energy, communications) and human capital (skills, knowledge, labour). These five capital assets are put together to form an ‘asset pentagon’, which is used to assess people’s overall asset base. Third, these assets are drawn on within people’s livelihood strategies, i.e. choices and activities through which people seek to generate a living or positive livelihood outcomes. Fourth, policies, institutions and processes are held to shape people’s access to assets and livelihood activities, as well as the vulnerability context in which they live. It is here that linkages can be made between livelihood activities taking place at the micro-level and the meso- or macro-level institutional and policy contexts.

According to the donor community, sustainable livelihoods approaches typify a shift in development practice from needs-based, resource-centred solutions to a focus on people and their capacity to initiate and sustain positive change (Carney, 1998; Alterelli and Carloni, 2000). As a concept, sustainable livelihoods is held to provide a more rounded picture of the complexities of living and surviving in poor communities than understandings based on measures of income, consumption and employment. In rural contexts, it is also held to shift attention from a focus on agrarian change to consideration of livelihood diversity, an issue of increasing significance in scholarly research (e.g. Davies, 1996; Goodman and Watts, 1997; Long, 1997) and rural development policy (Ashley and Maxwell, 2001).

Sustainable livelihood approaches: Perspectives on community development

Before we proceed, we need to explain what we mean by community development. This is not a straightforward matter because community development has changed radically over time, and implies different ideas and practices in different regional contexts. In the community development approach of the 1950s to early 1970s the focus was on poverty alleviation at the community level largely within the context of existing social and economic structures. This meant that priorities and actions within communities tended to be defined by outsiders rather than by local people and

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2 This description is of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework used by DFID, which has been widely adopted.
involved no real transfer of power or resources. The approach was often top-down and bureaucratic, and participation was generally interpreted as an efficient or effective way of achieving a particular national development goal (Dore and Mars, 1981).

The shortcomings of this approach led to a shift in thinking to the analysis of the socioeconomic and political structures responsible for poverty. A new emphasis on community participation tended to emphasize the importance of activist involvement in development by or on behalf of the poor. It was held that engaging the poor in a dialogue about power, inequality and oppression would empower people to take radical collective action (Midgley, forthcoming). Growing from this thinking was an emphasis on people’s participation, empowerment and participatory learning approaches, which continues to dominate community development practice. Unlike the earlier community development model, local people define their community, and participation is a process relating to including the hitherto excluded. This bottom-up approach is directly linked to determining interventions: it is said that priorities and action are decided by local people themselves rather than by outsiders. Issues relating to power and control are explicitly addressed, without community participation being based upon finding universal solutions to problems. The emphasis is on social transformation in which poor people define who will be involved and what the goals will be. In the process, people collectively develop the confidence and skills to alter their situation for the better.

In professional practice, there has been a consistent emphasis on principles and the need to examine practice in progress, rather than to strengthen or indeed to develop conceptual models and planning strategies (Clarke et al., 2002). Almost by definition, community development means working at the grass-roots level, not for instance focusing on the policy level (unlike sustainable livelihoods approaches). Even the more focused attempts at linking community-level initiatives to broader policy processes such as the government-backed urban regeneration schemes in the UK do not necessarily produce or build on conceptual frameworks for change. The pragmatism and diversity of current community development practice perhaps explains the difficulty of being categorical about how and where it has influenced sustainable livelihoods planning and practice. However, like sustainable livelihoods approaches, community development addresses a number of important questions about poverty and the role of poor people. These questions include: who defines community and by extension who the poor are – local people or outside professionals? Is the involvement of local

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3 Susan Loughhead, Department for International Development, personal communication, September 2002.
people a means of meeting an objective or part of a process of poverty reduction through social transformation? How are decisions made about priorities and actions, and who makes these decisions? These questions are underpinned by much broader themes of power, power relations, knowledge issues, people’s agency and values. How these issues are dealt with says much about the differences and commonalities of community development practice and sustainable livelihoods approaches.

In the following sections we explore the links between sustainable livelihoods approaches and community development by providing a brief overview of the use of a sustainable livelihoods approach by three different organizations. The way a sustainable livelihoods approach has been taken up by each organization unsurprisingly reflects their mandates, values, institutional cultures and programmatic areas. To highlight similarities and contrasts we have chosen three types of organization as examples: they are the British Department for International Development, a bilateral donor; the United Nations Development Programme, an intergovernmental institution and CARE International, an international NGO. Although several organizations work with a livelihoods approach, we would emphasize that the Department for International Development has played a strong influencing role, whether through secondment of expert staff to other organizations, or funding for research or development projects.

**The UK Department for International Development (DFID)**

In 1997, DFID made a decision to transform its natural resources section into the Rural Livelihoods and Environment Division. This was a major change in direction, and it helps to explain why DFID has played such a prominent role in spearheading use of a sustainable livelihoods approach (Carney 1998; Scoones, 1998; Ashley and Carney, 1999; Ellis, 2000). DFID now has a large website devoted to sustainable livelihoods issues, which includes documents, information on current events, links to organizations, and feedback on practical actions (www.livelihoods.org). A search of the website suggests that community development is a label used when practical actions and capacity building are advocated, but is not an area given systematic attention or incorporated into policy or programme design. The one main exception is in relation to community forestry programmes where engagement with communities and developing targeted community development practices, such as user groups, predated sustainable livelihood approaches by some years (Gilmour and Fisher, 1991; Hobley, 1996; DFID Nepal, 2000). Within this sector, the emerging sustainable livelihood approaches built on

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4 In 2003, DFID restructured, and the Rural Livelihoods and Environment Division no longer exists with sustainable livelihoods apparently having been mainstreamed across the organization.
and extended the well-established community development approach generated through programme practice (e.g. AusAid, 2002).

The DFID funded livelihoods website (www.livelihoods.org) provides electronic Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets, which seek to capture the DFID position succinctly (DFID, 2000). Both the terms ‘community’ and ‘community development’ are notable by the infrequency of their use. Within the Guidance Sheets, community emerges as a level for and the context of intervention. Hence references to the ‘community-level’ and ‘social groups within a community’ to whom interventions are addressed (DFID, 2000, 2.3.1/2.3.2). In this emphasis on levels and context, we see that the group mobilization favoured in sustainable livelihoods practice reflects and reinforces a dominant development discourse, which promotes group mobilization as the vehicle for change regardless of the social dynamics underpinning group formation in any given context.

Proceeding with the Guidance Sheets, a section termed ‘Policy Reform’ (DFID, 2002, 5.1) focuses on the concepts, methods and tools needed to design and manage development interventions that promote pro-poor policies and institutions. Implicitly, this section reveals marked differences with a community development approach. ‘Policies, institutions, and processes’ are held to provide the context within which individual and household livelihood strategies take place. This shifts the focus from development through community actions and mobilization to a much broader perspective linked to institutional relationships. What may constitute community becomes broken down into classes of institutions (familial, communal, social, collective, governance, etc.) and social categories (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.). The alternative to community development becomes ‘investment in the management of change, a strategy that focuses on the process, or the means by which pro-poor policy and institutional reforms can be brought about’ (5.3).

Some doubt has been raised as to whether the essentially managerial and structural perspective embodied in the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is enough in itself for analysing and addressing power and power relations (Moser and Norton, 2001); for conceptualizing human agency, experience and conflicts over values (Arce, 2001); or for understanding the highly fluid, organic ways in which people’s livelihoods shape and are shaped by local institutional practices and relationships (Cleaver, 2002; Adato and Meinzen-Dick, 2002). Each of these features is important for understanding community-level dynamics and how people respond to external interventions. At the level of practice, embracing and incorporating different methodologies and tools in programme design and intervention (see www.livelihoods.org, for examples) at least in part addresses limitations in the Approach.

There appears to be a significant gap between the DFID Sustainable
Livelihoods Approach and community-level practice. Reference to communities, or the drawing of community-level ideas connected to participation, cannot be equated with a carefully considered community development strategy or community development practice, nor does it engage with and reflect the complexity, diversity and dynamic nature of micro-level community mobilization and institutional formation.

CARE International
A number of non-governmental organizations also work with a sustainable livelihoods approach. They include CARE International and Oxfam (see Hocking, this issue; Neefjes, 2000; Ashley and Carney, 1999). To varying degrees, each has been influenced by DFID. Even so, given the central role non-governmental organizations have played in community development activities over the last twenty years, one would certainly expect to find a contrast to the DFID and UNDP approaches.

CARE started to use a sustainable livelihoods approach in the mid- to late 1990s at the same time as DFID, so it can be assumed that a process of ‘mutual influencing’ has taken place. Its initial ideas were very similar to DFID’s approach, but it has now moved towards what is termed the Household Livelihood Security Framework. Today, CARE’s livelihoods programming is linked with action planning, participatory rapid appraisal methodologies and, increasingly, a rights-based approach (Hussein, 2002). The Household Livelihood Security model places the vulnerable household at the centre and then analyses how household members access resources, which members control them and how assets are used to reduce the impact of shocks. Use of this model and its recent move towards integration with rights-based approaches, is in keeping with the organization’s emphasis placed on community mobilization and empowerment (Drinkwater and Rusinow, 1999; see also www.coreinternational.org.uk/resource_centre/livelihoods).

Community dynamics, development and participation are much more visible in development activities involving livelihoods work undertaken by CARE when compared both with DFID and UNDP. However, although a sustainable livelihoods approach is linked to community development and has been useful for informing policy debates and strategic planning processes, some difficulties have been experienced in imposing a ‘headquarters driven’ approach on country offices and in institutionalizing the skills needed to use the approach.

We would suggest part of the difficulty with mainstreaming the sustainable livelihoods analytical approach into operational practice lies in the multiple layering of successive approaches experienced in many NGOs or development projects (as suggested by Rew, this issue). Less recent approaches such as gender planning are rarely totally discarded but remain
in some guise or another. Thus, while a sustainable livelihoods approach holds the potential for providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing interventions in the short term, it does not necessarily reduce the complexity and burdens of organizing a range of linked activities. As such, it becomes an add-on and the expected translation of the sustainable livelihood analytical approach into on-the-ground actions is mediated through existing priorities, organizational values and norms. ‘Tried and tested’ community-level practices of the organization remain in place – pre-planned and interventionist – without necessarily being subject to revision or adaptation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Compared to the examples of both DFID and CARE, UNDP is an interesting case. In the late 1990s, it showed a high level of commitment to the approach which included opening a Sustainable Livelihoods Unit to promote sustainable livelihoods as one of its five corporate mandates and close liaison with FAO, DFID and other donors to promote sustainable livelihood issues (Alterelli and Carloni, 2000). However, within UNDP, sustainable livelihoods has now largely been overtaken and sidelined by a focus on governance issues. Nevertheless, UNDP’s website still holds a large amount of information concerning sustainable livelihoods approaches (www.undp-sl.org). A section on frequently asked questions distinguishes sustainable livelihoods from community development by stating ‘community development does not tend to have broad outreach or impacts on policy, thereby isolating efforts from broader macro processes’. In contrast, a sustainable livelihoods approach ‘is different in linking localised participatory approaches to livelihood analysis with macro-level policy’. This refers to a commonly cited difference between community development and sustainable livelihoods approaches, namely that the latter situate micro-level analysis and actions within a broader policy and institutional context.

UNDP developed tools to facilitate the implementation of sustainable livelihoods programmes, including a manual for participatory assessment and planning, a programme support document template for sustainable livelihoods and a discussion paper on how indicators of sustainable livelihoods can be developed (Hoon, Singh and Wannmali 1997; UNDP, 1999). Discussions on the micro-level components of sustainable livelihoods initiatives implicitly draw on thinking common to community development; insofar as the community is a central locus for understanding livelihood strategies and for conducting assessment of community strengths and assets. In addition, participation is stressed as a key dimension of a sustainable livelihoods approach. Because UNDP has moved away from emphasis on sustainable livelihoods, it is difficult to make judgements regarding the
direction sustainable livelihoods would have taken in relation to community development. However, the fact that sustainable livelihoods is no longer so popular is interesting in itself, and raises questions about the sustainability of the approach in other organizations – is it here to stay or simply a passing fashion?

Uncovering community development

Reflecting on this brief overview of sustainable livelihoods approaches, what is most striking to us is the apparent absence of community development thinking and practice in sustainable livelihoods approaches, even though connections to community development can be found, especially in an NGO perspective like that of CARE. One has the impression that the two approaches have developed in parallel.

At the time of writing, many organizations have been using a sustainable livelihoods approach for five or more years, as described by a growing body of literature (see for example www.livelihoods.org.uk; Wamali, 1999; Turton, 2000). With implementation has come a focus on tools and methods that complement (e.g. participatory poverty assessments) or strengthen (e.g. policy analysis tools) the approach. As suggested, notably absent from discussions is consideration of the relevance or usefulness of community development tools and practices for transforming sustainable livelihoods approaches into actions on the ground. Considering the magpie-like tendency of sustainable livelihoods approaches to expropriate methods and practices under the rubric of ‘building on good practice’, community development’s absence from the debate appears surprising.

A significant reason for this may be that ‘community development’ as an approach is not fashionable in the international development circles that have been prominent in promoting a sustainable livelihoods approach. The idea of working with ‘communities’ in itself can generate a negative reaction because the concept is considered too crude a unit of analysis to encompass the nature of relationships experienced by people within and outside a locality (Cohen, 1985; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Such reactions have caused the notion of community development to be overtaken or replaced by other concepts – for example, empowerment, people’s participation and stakeholder decision-making – each associated with particular tools and methodologies. Oakley’s (1998) use of the term ‘community-level development’ is insightful in this respect. Indeed it provides a useful way of distinguishing between historically loaded and somewhat discredited community development, which grew up after the Second World War (see Arce, this issue), and current micro-level approaches, theory, and practice.

The wide range of contemporary community-level concepts reflects the
heterogeneity of community level development practices around the world, which, while often using a similar language – mobilization, linkages for change, partnerships, cooperation, etc. – may be entirely dissimilar (Campfens, 1997). Even though in the last few years there may have been a common focus on processes of empowerment, negotiation and transformation (Oakley, 2001; Kaufman and Alfonso, 1997), the locally situated character of community development practice makes it difficult for externally driven sustainable livelihoods approaches to systematically incorporate community-level methods and practices. Perhaps more fundamentally, the normative frameworks of analysis that sustainable livelihoods approaches embody, which are so obviously embedded in northern technocratic discourses, tend to focus on the technical nature of development (Moser and Norton, 2001, p. 7), ignoring or rejecting the transformative aspirations, values, and principles, underpinning much current community-level development practice. As Midgeley argues (forthcoming, 2003), although today donor agencies are more attuned to ideas about participation and empowerment, when such ideas conflict with technocratic decisions and the desire for particular outcomes, community development can be politically sidelined.

**Sustainable livelihoods and community development: Where are the links?**

Where does this leave us? Do sustainable livelihoods approaches have something to contribute to community development? Or indeed, can sustainable livelihoods learn from community development? Are the two approaches so different they are incompatible? Contributors to this Special Issue are divided and often passionate in their arguments. The debate generated we hope goes one step towards answering these questions. Taken together, the articles also highlight the theoretical and practical strengths and weaknesses of sustainable livelihoods approaches when considered in the light of community development (for further discussions see Hinshelwood 2001; Cleaver 2002; Adato and Meinzen-Dick 2002; Bebbington 1999; Moser and Norton 2001; Bradbear, Fisher and Jackson, 2002).

To conclude, we wish to raise a number of questions that highlight a range of issues touched on by contributors, with a bearing on consideration of the relationship between sustainable livelihoods approaches and community development.

First, it has been stated – and much repeated – that sustainable livelihoods approaches focus on people and on people’s strengths (Carney, 1998; DFID 2000; Alterelli and Carloni, 2000). The emphasis given to ‘a people focus’ is at least in part due to the fact that sustainable livelihoods approaches have
developed in rural development contexts where natural resource management has traditionally been divided into separate sectors where the focus is on resource management. Adopting a livelihoods approach involved a critical shift from saying ‘how do we plan for forests, agriculture or fisheries, etc.’, to saying ‘how do we plan for people’s livelihoods (in a participatory manner)’. On the face of it, having a ‘people-focus’ could be an important commonality with community development. However, we can ask is this in fact a smokescreen for an approach that actually does little to recognize people’s experiences and livelihood realities as a fundamental starting point? Has the language of an ‘asset-vulnerability’ poverty model used in sustainable livelihoods approaches, beguiled us into thinking that the focus is on people, without reflection on how this poverty model has been transformed within sustainable livelihoods approaches? Has a strong emphasis on the concept of capital assets (rather than vulnerability) and on transformations of these assets through livelihood strategies to strengthen livelihood security, meant we risk missing the human agency, practices and social organization underpinning both people’s livelihoods and community development?

Second, the question of how to draw on local knowledge is an important issue for community development and central to participatory thinking. Within a sustainable livelihoods approach, knowledge is located within the compartmentalized category of ‘human capital’ in which it is seen as a ‘building block’ for the utilization of other forms of capital. This raises the question of whether a sustainable livelihoods approach can contribute to an understanding of knowledge interfaces and the way different forms of knowledge come together, with the potential to generate conflict as well as consensus (Arce and Fisher, 2003)? Or whether the notion of human capital is too limited for understanding people’s world views and experiences, upon which any form of community development must be based?

This takes us to a third question, also connected to the notion of capital assets, which has been placed in such a central position within a sustainable livelihoods approach: to what extent do the different notions of capital asset, exchange value and use value lead us to assume an increasingly simplistic and lineal or monothematic understanding of sustainable livelihoods and social change?

Fourth, in terms of more practical issues, can an ongoing and critical engagement with the sustainable livelihoods approach by experienced community development practitioners lead to a more nuanced interpretation of local political, social and cultural realities than would otherwise be the case if these practitioners were not involved? Is the language of ‘sustainable livelihoods’ too oriented towards planned social change in developing countries, limiting its use in European and other contexts? Can the process
of turning externally planned interventions into actions that matter on the
ground help redress significant limitations of sustainable livelihoods
approaches as regards uncovering and confronting the power relations
integral to local realities?

Fifth, sustainable livelihoods approaches emphasize micro–macro links
and the broad environmental factors shaping people’s lives. Does this offer
opportunities for community-level practice to develop broader points of
entry, engagement and activity than might otherwise be the case?

Sixth, can a sustainable livelihoods approach act as a platform to bring
people together around the community development table? By offering a
common language, framework and set of principles, do sustainable liveli-
hoods approaches provide a political space in which community-level prac-
titioners can engage with hitherto ‘remote’ actors such as business
representatives or technically oriented experts? Or in contrast, does the
jargon and assumptions of a sustainable livelihoods approach act to exclude
non-development actors from genuine engagement?

We cannot hope to answer these questions in their entirety within this
Special Issue but the contributors – each with different viewpoints and con-
tributions to make – provide a good starting point for what we can only
hope will be an ongoing, productive and critical debate.

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