

# **Efficacy of Sustainable Livelihood Approach as a Tool for Measuring Socioeconomic Condition as Compared to Other Tools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The idea of sustainable development approach (SLA) is ascribed to Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway at length in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The economists argued for shaping the 'capabilities, activities' based on material and social resources, for the poor to maintaining means of living. The sustainable development approach further argues for a capacity to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, and also enhancing the future capacity without deflating the natural resource base. The objective of the present paper is to look into the relative analysis of sustainable development approach with other approaches such as right-based approaches, participatory poverty assessments, and integrated rural development approaches.

**Key Words :** Rural development, Approach, Poverty eradication, Livelihood

## **INTRODUCTION**

The sustainable livelihood approach to assess the socioeconomic condition of a place is an idea emerged over less than three decades between 1987 and 1997, from researchers who conceptualized both emergent theories and practice. The development of the approach is contributed by researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Sometimes they worked alone within their ambit of research or within the boundary of a village or community; sometimes they crossed the barrier and engaged with others through writings, discussions and collaborations. Important interactions seemed to have occurred in different time which gave a new impetus to the development of Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. The approach reached its pinnacle due to the ever depleting nature of natural resources on which the livelihoods of rural folks depend heavily.

Measuring the socioeconomic condition of the rural poor is very important as most of the Central as well as State's schemes to eradicate poverty from the rural bases are based on this measurement. People wonder why the

desired aim of eradicating poverty from rural India could not be achieved despite several projects in that direction. One can readily infer that the reason may be either the flawed planning or bad implementation of plans. However, very few researchers viewed beyond this paradigm, they seldom look into the inherent weaknesses of the measurement tools and their prescribed methods to eradicate poverty. The present paper looks into the limitations of hitherto practiced right-based approaches, participatory poverty assessments, and integrated rural development approaches in eradicating poverty. The paper also looks into the genesis of 'Sustainable livelihood Approach' and its comparative analysis with other approaches aimed at the same direction.

### **Focus of the paper:**

The paper is an offshoot of a broader research study on livelihood of forest communities. Primarily, it is an outcome of my studies of various scholarly books, journals, research papers and articles as well as various government documents relating to poverty eradication approaches, Sustainable livelihood practices, the concept

of social exclusion, Forest communities' livelihood Options etc. I shall therefore use all those resources in this paper and present my own impression and observation arising out of those studies.

**Sustainable Livelihood Approach and its thrust areas:**

The notion of sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) is extensively accredited to Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The term 'livelihood' was eloquently described by the great economists as: "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 and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base." (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

Here livelihoods are not merely 'means of living' but also the possessions the community has on resources which generates livelihoods and their capability to use such resources. The other mote point in Chambers definition is inter-generational sustainability at the same time strength of combating/withstanding risks. The definition articulated by DFID - the UK based Department For International Development (DFID) is actually adopted from the definition given by Chambers, R and G. Conway ( DFID-1999: www.dfid.org).

Krishnaraj (2006) provides an explanation of livelihood which is understood to be more comprehensive as it tresses on the process of institution building and makes the institution a part of development program. He pointed out that "a more realistic assessment of poor peoples' livelihoods and the factors that shape them; building a policy and institutional environment that support poor peoples' livelihoods; support for development that builds on the strengths of poor people and provides them with opportunities to improve their livelihoods." The words 'institutional environment' focuses on the institution building. The two ready examples of such institutions that come to the mind are Panchayatee Raj system and its several arms and the Gram Shabha under forest rights Act. The above definition indicates that the livelihood issue is not a static one-time subject but a dynamic process. Thus it identifies how the question of sustainability is to be addressed. Maithreyi, therefore, emphasizes on the building of policy and institutional

environment and chalks out the concept of development that encompasses the poor people's livelihood as one of the important elements.

The definition of 'sustainable livelihood' articulated by international Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) states the term as: "the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) is a way to improve the understanding of the livelihoods of poor people. It draws on the main factors that affect poor people's livelihoods and the typical relationships between three factors. It can be used in planning new development activities and in assessing the contribution that existing activities have made to sustaining livelihoods"

In this definition two components immerges as most vital – (a) a structure that enables to understand the complexities of poverty and (b) a set of principles to guide plans, programs to address and overcome poverty. The SLA has 7 guiding principles that do not prescribe any uniform solution and method but looks for a solution that is flexible and adaptable to the diverse local conditions. The guiding principles are as under:

- Be people-centered.
- Be holistic.
- Be dynamic. SLA builds on peoples' dynamic nature of livelihoods and what influences them.
- Build on strength. SLA builds on peoples' perceived strengths and opportunities instead of focusing on the problems and need. It supports existing livelihood strategies.
- Promote micro-macro links. SLA examines the influence of policies and institutions on livelihood options and highlights the need for policies to be informed by insights from the local level and by the priorities of the poor.
- Encourage broad partnerships. SLA counts on broad partnerships drawing on both the public and private sector.
- Aim for sustainability. Sustainability is important if poverty reduction becomes a lifelong experience.

In the SLA framework, closest to the people at the centre are resources and livelihood assets on which they have access. These can include natural resources, technologies, their skills, knowledge and capacity, their health, access to education, sources of credit, or their networks of social support. The extent of these accesses is determined by the vulnerability context of the people. The access to these resources is also influenced by the prevailing social, institutional, and political environment

([www.ifad.org/sla](http://www.ifad.org/sla)).

The Brunt land Commission Report 1987, published by The World Commission on Environment and Development threw a new light on policy debates which materialized as a Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) letter on. The report resolutely placed the concept of sustainable development on the global political agenda. It defines sustainable development as:

“.....development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts : the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (Solesbury, 2003).

The most of the analysis of the report were well accepted in the first Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Programme 1990. This and subsequent reports addressed development in terms of individual or household health, education and well being, thus shifting the focus away from macro-economic bias of earlier thoughts on development. Several issues that subsequently came into the analysis of SLA were present in Brunt land’s Report. The focus on poor and their needs; importance on citizen’s participation, the emphasis on self reliance and sustainability; the ecological constraint all became powerful terms in the lexicon of international development policy and politics, particularly in the works of the UN’s 1992 Environment Conference in Rio, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development and the World Food Summit 1996 (Solesbury, 2003).

### **Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) and other poverty eradicating approaches:**

#### ***Right-based Approaches and SLA:***

The aim of right-based approach (RBA) to development is to ensure human rights for all. The rights may be classified as civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (e.g. right to health, education, shelter, land and livelihood). A rights perspective loosely links between political nonconformity and poverty and values the issues of social differentiations and social exclusion. RBAs are concerned with entitlements to basic services and livelihood for individual as well as for community. Thus, entitlements represent claims or demand that an individual or group can make to the state. RBAs emphasizes on the political empowerment which teach the community

to claim their legitimate rights.

There is a natural closeness between RBAs and SLAs because both are concerned with the inequality of access to rights and resources. The essential components of both the approaches are promoting empowerment, participation and accountability. RBAs ensure that the poor can enjoy their rights and SLAs emphasizes on the formulation of livelihood strategies. SLA can identify which rights are important for peoples’ livelihoods. It encourages a holistic analysis of the social and political context in which the rights are present or absent. SLA can help identifying or prioritizing entry point of the rights execution. SLA can suggest ways to improve all rights incrementally, rather than prioritizing one right over others ([www.dfid.org](http://www.dfid.org)).

#### ***Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) and SLAs:***

There are strong links between PPAs and SLAs. For counting the concern of the poor in the analysis of the poverty and developing strategies to tackle it, PPAs have been instrumental. PPAs in early days were mostly used to prepare particular broader documents like World Bank Country Poverty Assessment, UN Country Human Development Report. Like livelihood analysis, PPAs follow the traditions of participatory research and action. The two approaches share many things in common like importance on vulnerability to shocks and trends and on various kinds of assets. However, since both vary by context, it would be wise not to link the two in any given case (Ibid).

#### ***Sector-wide approaches and livelihoods approaches:***

Livelihood and Sector-wide approaches are complementary to each other. Livelihood analysis gives heavy importance on understanding the structures and processes that governs peoples’ access to assets and their choice of livelihood strategies. Whereas Sector-wide support programmes become appropriate when the major constraint is bad performance by a particular government agency or department (Ibid).

#### ***Integrated Rural Development (IRD) and livelihood approach:***

Livelihood approach had been criticized for its close links with the failed integrated rural development approaches of the 1970s. Though the two approaches share common things but the SLA endeavors to build upon the strength of IRD. Like IRD, SLA also recognizes

the need of a broad based support in rural areas. SLA gives emphasis on all poverty reduction factors but targets just a few core areas after thorough analysis of existing livelihoods. The livelihoods approach does not have the objective of creating integrated programs in rural areas. The livelihoods approach gives high degree of importance to macro level and institutional factors where there are major constraints. Whereas IRD was compelled to function in a holistic macro-economic and institutional environment (Ibid).

The livelihood approach is an idea emerged over less than a decade between 1987 and 1997, from researchers who conceptualized both emergent theories and practice. The development of the approach is contributed by researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Sometimes they worked alone within their ambit of research or within the boundary of a village or community; sometimes they crossed the barrier and engaged with others through writings, discussions and collaborations. Important interactions seemed to have occurred in different time which gave a new impetus to the development of Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. 4 such key interactions are: The emergence of SLA as a new paradigm in the early 1990s,

Its subsequent adoption by some development and research agencies, its political endorsement in the 1997 White Paper, and, the operationalization of SLA within DFID in the late 1990s ([www.dfid.org](http://www.dfid.org)).

### **Logics for choosing sustainable livelihood approach replacing other techniques:**

The paper presented by Chambers and Conway in IDS on 1992, explicitly recognized that the concept of livelihood was both reacting against and building on earlier thoughts. It reacted against many previous analyses on production, employment and income as a misfit to the complex and diverse realities of most rural life. It argued that sustainable livelihoods provide links between the concepts of capability, equity and sustainability. The paper also offered a framework for development thinking that was both normative and practical. Their concluding policy prescription was presented under three headings: Enhancing Capability, Improving Equity, and Increasing Social Sustainability. Finally they described their purpose of the paper and acknowledged that they have tried to open up and explore concepts, correlations and relationships to fit future needs (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

The Livelihood approach is seen as more people centric than the notion of 'employment' and 'poverty eradication'. It is important to possess means of living tested over time. This does not mean a particular way of earning livings but the availability of alternatives even in changing environments. The alternatives may appear sound today but might bring vulnerabilities to future livelihoods. The example of the distress of the cotton farmers of the country who are committing suicide due to excessive loans, repeated crop failure and, fall in market price; may be a fit case here. It is understood that the poverty is not a static destiny; it is an episodic phenomenon, people fall into it and comes out of it. The scholars think that the income measure of poverty is one dimensional and there are serious limitations and misgivings in the concept of poverty line. This approach often ignores overall development perspective that would enhance peoples' power to manage their livelihoods. (Krishnaraj, 2006).

Calorie requirement approach is based on many methodological assumptions. (Saith *et al.*, 2005; Agarwal *et al.*, 2004). The large regional variation of this country negates the meaningfulness of any national poverty line. Using 17 indicators Shaban and Bhole (2000) inferred that social transformation of rural India is possible through planned development by improvement in health, education, income, safe drinking water, sanitation, energy, housing, transport and communication. The regions that are developed had a high degree of co-linearity among the 17 indicators than others.

### **Conclusion:**

A future orientation to livelihoods research paves the ways of delicate differences as compared to economic calculations of farm viability. This future orientation to livelihoods also provides a more lucid picture as compared to economic calculations of the ability and willingness of different household groupings to invest in agriculture. By employing this approach, probability of identifying the groups that are suffering chronic poverty is enhanced. Finally, a future orientation to livelihoods helps to identify those institutional and structural conditions that adversely shape livelihoods, and as a result proper treatment can be opted. However, in the writings of the recent scholars' more emphasis is given on the role of determining resource allocations *i.e.* social as well as political inclusion. Through this explanatory narrowness enters the concept of social exclusion.

Social vulnerability and social exclusion are two significant parameters than only income or expenditure shortfalls. Resource based paradigm remained the focal point of economic theories Even today, when poverty has been described as a multidimensional phenomena, encompassing income, assets, education, health, dignity and voices, it is mainly understood in economic terms. The poor within this concept are believed to have no say or little voice in determining resource allocations and institutional arrangements within a society because they are poor, it is rarely thought they are poor because of lack of space in determining resource allocations and social arrangements (Kabeer, 2005). The ambiguity involved even in the interpretation of changes in consumption pattern is well debated. Considering all these inadequacy of different poverty eradication approaches, a livelihood based approached is best suited for a researcher who aspires to study rural socioeconomic conditions of people whose dependence on natural resources is high.

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