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## **OPTIMIZING THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH (SLA) TO POVERTY REDUCTION IN AFRICAN URBAN AREAS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Recent evidence confirms that despite more than half a century of development strategies, many countries have experienced economic decline and more than three quarters of the entire world urban population are living in poverty. The concept of sustainable livelihoods is one way to approach urban poverty reduction through the twin issues of human development and environmental improvement and management, using a participatory policy that recognizes working with the people, by the people, and for the people. Development practitioners find the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach very helpful as it enables them to focus on the livelihood options of the poor and develop pro-poor strategies. Its approach to urban poverty reduction is one that acknowledges that poverty is a condition of lack of access to physical rather than only a lack of finance. This paper has shown that the adequacy of, and access to physical capital in urban areas are needed, not only to enhance sustainable livelihoods, raise productivity, create jobs and wealth, but to promote sustainable development and environment improvement and management. Finally, it is recommended that stakeholders in urban governance should embrace capacity building in sustainable livelihoods approach for effective implementation of its principles and concepts.

**Keywords;** *Poverty, Sustainable Livelihoods, Sustainable Poverty Reduction, Urban Poverty Reduction, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, Sustainable Livelihoods Framework*

### **INTRODUCTION**

After decades of limited success in eliminating poverty, new ideas about development are emerging. Governments, National and International Agencies or Institutions have been revisiting development strategies and placing greater emphasis on the elimination or reduction of poverty, most especially in urban areas. Starting from the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), a new global poverty reduction initiative was evolved. In the new initiative, firstly, people are seen as the means and end of development. And secondly, there is persistent deterioration of the quality of life in developing countries, with the associated socio-economic implications. These make the need for a sustainable poverty reduction strategy mandatory on all stakeholders of development. Set in this new context, the UN Commission for Social Development in its 35<sup>th</sup> session addressed productive employment and sustainable livelihoods as its priority theme. Specification, it considered the issue of employment as well as the issue of improved access to infrastructure and productive resources as a set of framework for a cross-sectoral enabling environment for poverty reduction. At the centre of the commission's work is commitment 3 of the Copenhagen Declaration:

*"Promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and Work"(UN, 1995).*

This is the scenario of our urban areas and a panacea for urban poverty reduction, which is the main thrust of this paper.

### **THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH (SLA)**

The sustainable livelihoods concept surfaced in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The idea of sustainable livelihoods began as an approach to maintain or enhance resource productivity, secure ownership of, and access to assets, resources and income-earning activities as well as to secure adequate stocks and flow of cash to meet basic needs. The 1992 UNCED moved the concept towards an action agenda especially in the concept of Agenda 21, and advocated for the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as a broad goal for poverty eradication focused on the poor who live in marginalized areas. The SLA takes as its starting point not deprivation but the 'wealth of the poor' (UNDP 1998). In doing so it builds on the findings of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) (Carney 1998), and owes much to Chambers' work on participatory methodologies, which have been rooted in the rural context (Chambers 1997, Chambers and Conway 1992). Although initially the concept was rural in focus, it is becoming increasingly used in the urban context (Rakodi 1997, Moser 1998, Tacoli 1998, Beal and Kainji 1999).

The concept has received legitimacy over the last decade through acceptance, adoption and development by governments and international fora and agencies. DFID's 1999 Natural Resources Advisors' conference discussed early experience with implementing SLA to poverty reduction. Other agencies such as CARE International, Oxfam, and UNDP presented highlights of their own livelihoods work and drew out preliminary lessons about applying livelihoods approaches in practice. Each of the agencies has developed livelihood ideas, with different emphasis, although all share the same basic concern. For instance, while CARE places a particular stress on livelihoods at the households' level, and is concerned with "secure" rather than "sustainable livelihoods". Oxfam emphasizes the right to sustainable livelihoods. UNDP places a greater priority on the impact of technology and intervention at the level of 'adaptive strategies'. On its own part, DFID emphasizes on support to assets and improved access to them by the poor. The DFID's approach is adopted in this paper because access to assets in the urban context is the key to sustained urban poverty reduction. Livelihood systems, in the view of Rakodi (2002), comprise a complex and diverse set of economic, social and physical strategies that are realized through the activities, assets and entitlements by which individuals make a living. Sustainable livelihoods are derived from people's capacities to exercise choice, and to access opportunities and resources, and use them for their livelihoods in ways that do not foreclose options for others to make their living, either now or in the future (Norton and Foster, 2001). The dynamic processes of socio-economic and environmental change, which are usually a major element of urban areas, are

likely to have an impact on the opportunities and constraints faced by different groups in their access to assets and the construction of livelihood strategies. That is why a better understanding of the constraints and opportunities faced by different groups in gaining access to, and in managing their assets is an essential element of poverty reduction interventions.

The broad goal of poverty reduction is to develop individual, family and community capabilities to improve their livelihood systems. To understand these systems, people's coping and adaptive strategies are important entry points for analysis (Wratten 1995, Rakodi 1997). Such livelihood strategies are multifaceted as men and women draw on their assets (DFID 1998, UNDP 1999), which are both tangible and intangible entitlements (Moser 1998). Therefore a sustainable livelihoods system can only be understood and promoted if the matrix of interactions between policy, science and technology, and investment/ finance is approached in an integrated manner and used to augment what the people already do well and the assets to which they have access. The sustainable livelihoods approach is broad and encompassing. According to Norton and Foster (2001), it can, however be distilled to six objectives, as it aims to increase the sustainability of poor people's livelihoods through, among others, promoting better access to basic infrastructure, and support for multiple livelihoods strategies. The approach provides a holistic and cross- sectoral strategy to problem definition and analysis. That is why it aims to put people and the households in which they live at the centre of the development process, starting with their capacities and assets rather than with their problems. It is an important contribution to the conceptual framework that needs to be done to adopt livelihood ideas to the peculiarities of urban poverty and environmental development. The operational framework of the approach is based on a participatory process which brings together various actors, local government and municipal authorities as well as local communities in a process of decision-making, policy formulation and implementation. The participatory development is aimed at understanding how the people prioritize needs, exploit resources and offer solutions to their pressing problems. Therefore, the approach, by using both participatory and policy (cross-sectoral) tools, highlights the interlinkages between livelihood systems at the micro- level and the macro policies which affect these livelihoods. However, the sustainable livelihoods approach will achieve results if it is operationalized in a thoughtful way by people who are skilled in understanding both local priorities and the higher level factors (policies, governance structures, etc) that affect livelihoods.

### **THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK**

Experience has shown that for any development activity to be sustainable, people must actively participate in their own development. The SLA brings together the lessons of best practice in a set of principles supported by an analytical framework. It is a tool that aims to provide a 'road map' through the potential complexity of the SLA. Carney *et al* (1999) remark that it helps to show how the main factors that influence livelihoods relate to each other, as well as provide a structure and focus for thinking about systemic changes. The main component of DFID's sustainable livelihoods framework is captured diagrammatically below:



## SLA framework

At the centre of the framework are the assets on which households or individuals draw to build their livelihoods. These five assets are influenced by the context, which refers to the sources of insecurity to which poor people and their assets are vulnerable. Access to, and use of assets is influenced by policies, organizations and relationships between individuals and organizations. The strategies which individuals and households adopt produce outcomes, which are defined in terms of greater or less well-being. The value of the framework, according to Rakodi (2002) lies in its ability to capture key components and their interrelationships as a starting point for identifying critical analytical questions and potential leverage points where intervention might be appropriate. Though the livelihoods framework was developed largely in a rural development context (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1998), its use is growing in popularity in the urban sphere (UNDP, 2000; Rakodi, 2002; Liloyd-Jones 2002). The sustainable livelihoods framework has been develop to help understand and analyze the livelihoods of the poor. It is also useful in assessing the effectiveness of existing efforts to reduce poverty (Moser, 1998; DFID, 1999b, 2001a; Bebbington, 1999). Like all frameworks, it is a simplification, and so, the full diversity and richness of livelihoods can be understood only by qualitative and participatory analysis at a local level. On the role of the framework, Norton and Foster (2001) opine that it endeavors to provide a way of thinking about the livelihoods of poor people that will stimulate debate and reflection, thereby improving performance in poverty reduction. This means that within this context, the poor have access to certain assets or poverty reducing factors, which gain their meaningful and value through the prevailing physical, social, institutional and organizational environments.

## **URBAN POVERTY AND SLA**

Poverty in urban areas is much more complex than the visible problems of acute need in rural areas. There is no gain saying the fact that the urban poor live in diverse economic, social and political situations, facing different livelihood opportunities and different environmental conditions. Urban poverty may be caused by the process of transition from rural to urban, or smaller to larger city, or due to the specific environmental conditions in any particular urban residential area (Ogwuche, 2005). In other words, urban poverty is considered generally, often, with a spatial meaning, rather than one related to other characteristics, such as low income, unmet food need or lack of political voice (Wratten, 1995; Tacoli, 1998; Beall and Kainji, 2000; Hardoy *et al*, 2001; Hulme *et al*, 2002; Satterthwaite, 2002; Mitlin, 2003).

UNEP (2002) in its review of African environment declares that urban growth in Nigeria exceeds the capacities of municipalities to improve adequate environmental infrastructure and social services. It also observes that lack of, and/or inadequacy of all these services results to the widespread poverty and poor living conditions in Nigeria's urban areas. The review also indicates that the rapid urban growth, complicated by poor urban planning and control of land-use, lack of financial resources and inadequate investment in environmental management have led to the proliferation of urban slums in Nigeria. Insofar as livelihoods research is directed to the diagnoses of the causes of poverty, the circumstance of poverty and the reasons for poverty should be understood through detailed spatial analyses in a particular geographical context. This implies a spatial view of poverty. Spatial analysis implications for poverty in urban area is that poverty levels are likely to be related to a number of factors including availability, and access to physical capital (environmental infrastructure and social services), levels of commoditization in the market for basic needs and health costs of living in high density areas without adequate physical capital (Mitlin, 2003).

It is increasingly recognized that urban areas are engines of growth. They can perform efficiently as centres of production, transformation and trade as a result of their economies of scale. The availability of, and access to effective infrastructure and social services is an obvious and essential pre-requisite for urban poverty reduction. Meikle, (2002) deals extensively on the urban context and physical capital, and reiterates that the entitlements or rights to access the physical capital which the urban inhabitants can transform into basic necessities to secure livelihoods are determined by contextual factors of institutional structures and processes. This means that the livelihoods of the poor are determined predominantly by the social, economic, environmental and political contexts in which they live and the constraints and opportunities this location presents. In the face of these contexts, most people who live in urban areas are engaged in unremitting struggles to secure livelihoods. Two points are central to an understanding of such struggles. The first point is that the circumstances of poverty and the reasons for poverty have to be understood through detailed analysis of spatial and social selections in a particular geographic context. The second point is that the modes of livelihoods that typically prevail both within households

and between households are highly diverse. Urban livelihoods, on which this paper concentrates, may derive a part-livelihood from a variety of other activities, more or less informal. Urban poverty can thus be seen as a web in which once caught, it becomes difficult to extricate oneself without assistance. However, with their economies of scale, urban areas are important hubs of production, employment, and innovation which can be adopted to improve one's lives. There is often a mix of individual and household survival strategies that are developed over time and enable the urban poor to cope with their circumstances. The mix of strategies includes labour market involvement, adaptation of different technologies for production, social networking, and changes in consumption patterns, labour and asset pooling, and at times even reverting to criminal activities.

The sustainable livelihoods framework becomes important if one is to better appreciate the dynamics of urban poverty. Through participatory assessment methods, one would be able to create linkages between the different assets of the poor within an urban area, and in the process capture the underlying relationships of the household as well as those of the neighborhood and larger society. The framework also permits a fuller understanding of the distinctions between coping or survival strategies, stabilization or adaptive strategies, and even provides an insight into how growth can be achieved by the urban poor.

### **SLA AND URBAN POVERTY REDUCTION**

The SLA recognizes the multiple dimensions of poverty that can be identified in participatory poverty assessments. Its goal is to help the poor to achieved lasting improvements against the indicators of poverty that they identify, and from a baseline they define. Through taking a wider and better information view of the opportunities, constraints, objectives and interactions that characterize people's lives, it lends itself to livelihoods development. The result is a more effective contribution to poverty reduction. Adopting SLA provides a way to improve the identification, appraisal, implementation and evaluation of development programmes so that they address the priorities of the poor, both directly and at a policy level. In the urban context, the SLA acknowledges that poverty is a condition of lack of access to physical capital rather than only a lack of wealth (UNDP, 1997; 11SD, 1999). Further, it recognizes that the circumstances of the poor change constantly and that they sustain themselves despite precarious conditions by employing a variety of assets (Rakodi, 1997; Beall and Kainji, 1999). It is possible to improve their access to assets and this contributes to the reduction of poverty through a variety of wide ranging interventions that support their activities (Wratten, 1995; Satterthwaite, 1997). Central to the SLA is the need to recognize that those who are poor may not have money but have some assets (DFID, 2000a; Rakodi, 2002). Therefore the SLA requires a realistic understanding, through a holistic and participatory appraisal of the assets available to the poor with which they pursue their livelihoods. The approach provides a balance to the global and more strategic perspectives usually offered by a sustainable development policy framework for sustainable human and environmental development.

The SLA offers both a conceptual and programming framework for poverty eradication and national development in a sustainable manner. It embraces the principles of sustainable human development through participation, empowerment, gender equality and good governance. Meikle *et al* (2001) identify a number of principles as underpinning such an approach to poverty reduction. These include community sensitive approach, sensitivity to the environment, promotion of a living based on individual's priority, acknowledging and addressing issues of equity, and a holistic integrated approach to the achievement of sustainable livelihoods. Other researches such as Chambers and Conway (1992), Ellis (1998), Rakodi (1999, 2002), and Ashley and Carney (1999) consider SLA as complementary to more traditional approaches to development. However, in common with many other governmental and Non- governmental agencies, DFID (2000c) believes that SLA is the most sensitive and practical way of thinking about planning and implementing development programmes and projects aimed at significant poverty reduction. Also, in a comparative study of livelihood approaches, Carney *et al* (1999) opine that the sustainable livelihoods concept and methodology attempt to bridge the gap between macro policies and micro realities, an effort that neither other traditional poverty reduction programmes nor other development initiatives have been able to accomplish successfully. Rennie and Singh (1995) believe that SLA is concerned about participatory development that recognizes working with the people, for the people and by the people. Norton and Foster (2001) reiterate that the approach is developed to suit the needs and conditions of urban poverty, and that in many ways, the methodology can serve to complement ongoing efforts and existing tools and techniques being used by urban managers. And finally, SLA is sustainable in that it integrates economic, social, and environmental issues into a holistic framework for analysis (UNDP, 1998, 2000b; DFID 1999a, 2001b; Brook 1999; Carney, 1999; Ogwuche, 2005). This, it does by identifying not only the types of assets which people use but also how existing livelihoods can be strengthened with new and appropriate technologies and economic instruments.

### **ADOPTION OF SLA IN PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The adoption of SLA in practice and research can be appropriated by the speed at which the sustainable livelihoods concept was picked up by a number of agencies. In practical terms, DFID has demonstrated the application of SLA in the design of projects, and in a way that has brought about a change in the delivery of services by government institutions that are now far more responsive to the needs of the poor (DFID, 1999b). By using the approach in the development of Cambodia's country strategy papers, DFID has been able to identify opportunities for interventions with sectoral or resource based focus (DFID, 2000b). Similarly, it has highlighted where micro-level policy development and planning are to be formed with the knowledge of people's needs and priorities. Linking sustainable livelihoods to UNDP's urban development cooperation, UNDP has adopted an approach that links sustainable human development with economic productivity by development strategies that promote equitable growth, gender equality and participatory development. In the area of research, Solesbury and Daniel (2002), observe that the sustainable livelihoods concept provides a rich new agenda, and has become an international focus for both empirical and theoretical works for development agencies. While the agencies provide fertile ground for

SLA to take root, it requires individuals in these organizations to sow the seed. Other researchers, such as Ogwuche (2005), in an assessment of physical capital as a sustainable livelihoods approach to poverty reduction in Otukpo urban area, identified eleven (11) underlying factors of physical capital that measure poverty in the 14 residential areas of the urban area, with access to physical capital for sustainable livelihoods having the highest occurrence in the residential areas. The study also found out that lack of access to physical capital for sustainable livelihoods is the main underlying factor responsible for the poverty in the area.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF SLA**

The adoption of SLA has a number of implications for policies and actions for urban poverty reduction, which Carney *et al* (1999) state as 'normative principles' and Rakodi (2002) calls 'win-win scenarios'. In all, they advise that such policies and actions which must be people-oriented, responsive and participatory, should improve the access of the poor to livelihood assets. The sustainable livelihoods analysis requires an understanding of the assessment of the community strengths and assets. It uses individual and community assets as its entry point, building on these to create opportunities from existing livelihoods, thus translating coping into adaptive strategies. It equally addresses the existing gaps of how policies affect the livelihoods of urban poor who are not in any way involved in the formulation of policies. Farrington *et al* (1999) recognize that SLA tries to create the medium through which policies can be modified in order to support the efforts of the urban poor to making a living. This, they say, includes identifying the potential for establishing partnerships to create an enabling environment, which in turn will provide poor people with opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

Policy planners should not exclusively rely on secondary data as the basis for defining project strategy, but should need to understand the historical evolution of livelihood systems and coping strategies of the people through the eyes of local people, especially the poor. Livelihoods are complex and there can be wide differences in the way individuals and households construct them. This diversity of activities calls for an enabling policy environment, or one which encourages access to opportunities and attempts to reduce constraints to variety of livelihoods. Also, since income diversification is an important strategy for both low and middle income groups, changes in land-use in urban areas should carefully consider their consequences on employment and income generating activities. Access to urban physical and social capitals should be encouraged as it is pivotal to the development of positive livelihoods strategies. SLA can be of great value to different levels of field workers in different ways. For instance, field workers engaged in service delivery would be helped by the sustainable livelihoods perspectives to understand the vulnerability that the poor face, and the ways they might reach a balance between opportunities for increased income and those for greater security. Also, country programme officers in charge of the preparation of country strategies, programmes and projects for poverty reduction need to be conversant with the SLA to engage national or international consultants to prepare strategies,



projects or programmes and get the best from them. It is therefore important that adequate training on SLA be given to such country programme officers.

### **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION**

Governments must recognize the priorities for creating an empowering environment where the sustainable livelihoods concept can be used most effectively to eradicate poverty. These priorities are political, economic, physical, and social. Sustainable livelihoods thinking and action in a participatory systems manner is a long term vision that in the short term requires capacity development, networking and collaboration on macro-micro linked cross-sectoral policy analysis, the design of development programmes, and a shift in implementation strategies. The stage is now set for building on the growing momentum by international development agencies, research institutions, civil society organizations, government, policy makers, development banks, etc, to make a global shift to a sustainable livelihoods approach to poverty reduction, especially in urban areas.

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