



Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches: an explanation

By Patrick Moriarty

The phrase ‘Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches’ is being increasingly well-used within development circles. This article looks at what the approach really means and how it can be used within

Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLAs) are the latest ‘hot topic’ to emerge from rural development and make themselves felt in the rural water and sanitation (WATSAN) sector. In this respect, SLAs follow on the heels of other concepts and methods, such as participatory approaches that have been successfully adapted to the needs of providing water supplies and sanitation in rural areas.

However, what do livelihoods approaches really mean, and how can they be applied in practice? This article briefly considers these questions, and sets out some of the practical implications of adopting a livelihoods-based approach to rural WATSAN.

According to an early definition, ‘A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required to make a 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’¹. More recently the Department for International Development’s (DFID) livelihoods framework identifies five groups of ‘capital assets’ upon which sustainable livelihoods are based – social, physical, natural, financial, and human to which political capital is increasingly being added.

Put simply then, a livelihood consists of all the factors that contribute to keeping people alive and upon which they base their wellbeing and security. A livelihoods approach is about ensuring that projects and programmes have the maximum impact on livelihoods and hence poverty reduction, where poverty is defined in terms of lack of access to some or all of the different capital assets.

SLAs mean very different things at different levels. To high level programme developers they mean identifying what mix

of approaches (for example providing water supply, improving transport infrastructure and developing micro-credit facilities) is most likely to have the maximum positive impact on reducing poverty in a country or region. For project-level WATSAN, LA imply maximising the impact on poverty of providing a reliable water supply and sanitation service.

How can this be done in practice? The approach can be divided into two parts, the first largely analytical and aimed at understanding the role of domestic water supplies in peoples’ livelihoods, the second building on this understanding and using it to increase the ‘value added’ by the water supply in combating poverty.

Impact of domestic water supplies in rural livelihoods

The first thing to realize is that much of the water-supply sector already applies approaches that are close to SLA.

Demand-responsive approaches in particular contain many of the components of a Livelihoods Approach, while the traditional focus of the sector on improving health and reducing women’s drudgery is also entirely in line with SLA.

Water plays a number of important roles in rural livelihoods. The most familiar to those from the WATSAN sector are drinking, cooking, washing and other ‘domestic activities’. However, there are also economically productive roles that are not traditionally considered. These include growing vegetables, watering livestock, brewing alcoholic drinks, running laundry services, making bricks and a host of other activities.

WaterAid’s recently published ‘Looking Back’² looks at the impacts that WATSAN projects implemented in the early 1990s have had on their recipient communities. These include a wide range of activities related to the use of water in

1. Adapted from Chambers, R., and Conway, G.R. (1992), *Sustainable rural livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st century*, Institute of Development Studies discussion paper no. 296, Brighton, UK

2. WaterAid, (2001), *Looking back: The long-term impacts of water and sanitation projects*, London, UK

small-scale productive activities but also the impacts on the social and political aspects of people's livelihoods in terms of capacity building, empowerment and greater ability to work together to achieve common goals and objectives

A study in South Africa's Northern province found communities using nearly as much water for productive activities as for domestic use, leading to a total consumption that was nearly double South Africa's 'RDP standard' of 25 l/p/d. In Northern Gujarat another study found that WATSAN projects which targeted women's use of water for productive purposes while fostering economic activities, using the time saved in collecting water, led to increased willingness to maintain the water-supply scheme.

An important implication of all of these findings is that the potential role of water in people's livelihoods, particularly in many arid and semi-arid regions, is considerably more than that of health improvements and time saving alone.³ Extending monitoring and evaluation frameworks to include these additional impacts will therefore give a truer picture of the overall contribution of WATSAN provision to poverty reduction.

However, while useful, such monitoring on its own is only half the story. The real impact of a livelihoods-based approach on a WATSAN project will only be realized when the insight gained is acted on during the implementation phase of the project to make it more responsive to the real needs of rural people. The following section explains how this can be done in practice.

Adding livelihoods value

The adoption of a wider livelihoods-based focus in identifying the role of water in people's lives has made clear that it is crucial as a key productive resource. In particular, small-scale water-based economic activities form a vital part of the livelihoods of many poor people, and in particular women. While some of these activities make use of rainfall or other 'non-domestic' sources of water, many use water that is primarily intended for domestic consumption. A pilot project carried out in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s shows one model for a livelihoods-based water supply project, focused on providing communities with a mixed-use groundwater supply.

This DFID funded 'collector well' pilot

project⁴ developed large diameter wells to extract groundwater from shallow aquifers with the specific intention of providing both domestic and productive water supplies. The wells were equipped with twin hand pumps to increase the daily yield to 15m³, enough to provide water for both domestic needs and micro-irrigation in a 0.5 ha community garden. The project paid to fence the gardens in which up to 100 members had plots for vegetable cultivation. The revenue derived from the gardening activities was more than sufficient to cover the operation and maintenance (O&M) costs of the project, while it also provided an important source of income to garden members; money that was then used for purposes such as buying agricultural inputs, paying school fees, and starting other projects. In addition to the money from selling vegetables the gardens also provided improved nutrition, and increased social capital in the form of greater self-esteem and heightened ability to undertake income-generating projects. 'Nutrition gardens' are now being adopted by other water-supply programmes in Zimbabwe, where yields from boreholes and wells allow.

More recently, the Mvula Trust in association with CARE South Africa, is piloting a household-focused approach, to provide 'better-than-basic' service levels of water supply. This approach, which focuses on providing individual household connections rather than communal standposts, is encouraging the economically-productive use of water as a means of helping to pay for the maintenance of the upgraded service. The project uses a low-pressure supply to household 'trickle tanks' which store the water for later use. In addition to encouraging productive uses of the water provided, the project also addresses a wider package of economic measures (including micro-credit) to allow women to make productive use of the time saved transporting water.

An important role in cost recovery

Both the Zimbabwe and South African cases illustrate an important aspect of taking a SLA to a key concern of the WATSAN sector: cost recovery. Current community-management approaches to rural water supply that focus on full or partial cost recovery, particularly those that fol-

3. A point previously noted by Nicol reporting experiences in: Nicol, A. (2000), *Ethiopia and Somalia in Adopting a sustainable livelihoods approach to water projects: implications for policy and practice*, Working Paper 33, ODI, UK

4. Lovell, C. (2000), *Productive water points in dryland areas: guidelines on integrated planning for rural water supply*, ITDG Publishing London, UK

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low the World Bank's Demand Responsive model, all rely to a greater or lesser extent on both the willingness and ability of communities to pay.

However, there are worrying indications that communities' willingness is often not supported by ability, resulting in an overall lessening in water consumption and reversion to 'traditional' and less-safe sources. The issue of ability to pay is a serious one with the potential to undermine the development of sustainable water supply systems. However, by explicitly dealing with the productive as well as domestic aspects of a water supply at project inception, it is much easier to convince communities both of the need to pay and to provide them with a means to doing so.

Moving forward

Livelihoods-based approaches offer the opportunity to move beyond rigid sectoral divisions and to develop a new approach to rural water supply that is based not so much on providing a minimal domestic water supply, but rather on an adequate, equitable, and sustainable supply to fulfil people's domestic and productive needs. However, while there are a growing number of success stories from pilot projects there are few, if any, examples of more widespread application of the approach at a national or regional level.

Making possible the widespread application of livelihoods-based approaches to WATSAN will call for changes in both policy and the capacities of sector personnel. At a planning and policy level, policy

makers will need to support provision of greater quantities of water where demand for this exists. As in southern Africa this can be done within a framework of full cost recovery for the additional quantity over and above that needed for purely domestic requirements. At a more general level, support of a more cooperative and 'holistic' way of working between sector agencies will be necessary if the approach is to make headway.

Of more relevance to *Waterlines* readers is what can be done at the project level within existing policy frameworks. Here perhaps the approach can be summed up as using participatory techniques to examine the full range of *potential* uses of water within people's livelihoods and to work to achieve as many of these as possible within project budgetary constraints. Ideally this will include providing increased quantities of water, infrastructure, and training to enable economically-productive use (as in Zimbabwe and South Africa). However, it may also be as simple as putting women's groups in touch with micro-credit organizations to enable them to make best use of the time saved in collecting water.

Even in cases where 'domestic water' coverage standards or other constraints make it impossible to produce significantly increased quantities of water it is still possible to try to give an added support to making best use of the time saved by women by giving support to income-generation activities (for instance by providing micro-credit). Equally, it may be possible to identify with the community other, possible lower quality, sources for 'productive' water such as roof-top rain-water harvesting, or waste-water reuse.

The key point is to take the time to listen to communities and to understand where they see water fitting into their lives. Then, working with them, the optimum match between their total requirement and a projects' ability to provide water may be achieved. The SLA has been described as 'applied common sense'; it should be applied pragmatically to ensure that the activities of projects (providing water supplies and sanitation) lead to desired objectives (reducing poverty). As such SLAs can make a valuable contribution to the effective implementation of projects and programmes.

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