

SECURING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS
through appropriate technology

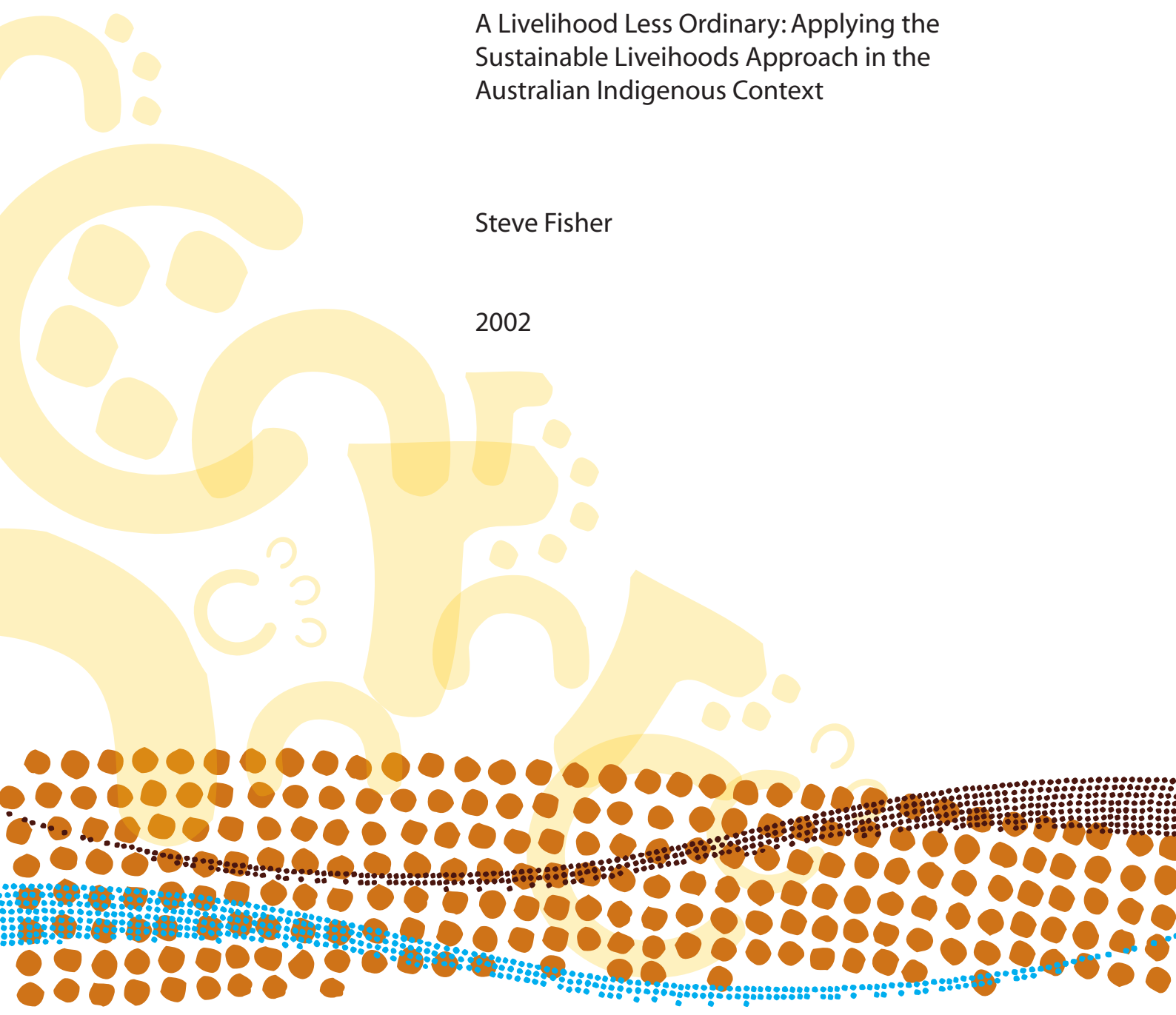
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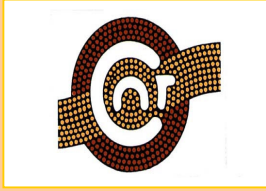
Centre for Appropriate Technology Paper

A Livelihood Less Ordinary: Applying the
Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in the
Australian Indigenous Context

Steve Fisher

2002





CENTRE FOR APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

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A Livelihood Less Ordinary

Applying the Sustainable Livelihoods approach in the Australian Indigenous context

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Thinking on sustainable livelihoods dates back to the work of Robert Chambers in the mid-1980s which was further developed by others, such as Conway and Carney, through the 1990s. During this period, a formal model to assist planning, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programs has emerged known as the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of agencies working in poverty reduction programs internationally have adopted the approach. It has had a far-reaching influence on the way in which practitioners think about ways to improve the conditions of the most marginalized in society. A language and terminology has developed around the subject and major programs and policies now operate internationally under the livelihoods banner.

Many programs report dramatic changes in their effectiveness since adopting the framework. A typical example is the work of the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government in drought and groundwater management in Southern Africa. Program staff point to a complete redefinition of 'the problem' in water through moving away from a focus on the resource itself and towards a more sophisticated understanding of the people who use and need it. The nature of water scarcity and the barriers to people gaining access to water have become the main thrust of their work (DFID, 2000).

Some of the concepts within the framework resonate with the experience of aboriginal communities, individuals and organisations in Australia. However, its application in this country has been limited to date. The purpose of this paper is to consider how international experience in the field of sustainable livelihoods might be relevant to the Indigenous context in Australia. I will approach the subject in three steps:-

1. By describing the framework, drawing on published material on sustainable livelihoods as well as personal experience of its application;
2. Through a discussion of the concept of a livelihood in the aboriginal context, posing a definition and setting out some of the issues to consider;
3. Then presenting some short case studies from CAT which illustrate how the framework might be applied, with insight into its value and its limitations.

The paper concludes with some recommendations for further work in this area.

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The development and application of the sustainable livelihoods approach

As its starting point, the sustainable livelihoods approach takes the skills, status and possessions of people and analyses how they use those assets to improve the quality of their lives. It seeks to understand the interconnectedness of these assets and the way in which they are deployed to meet the varied aspirations and needs of people.

As defined by Chambers and Conway (1992), a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets 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.

The overall approach is derived from a more formal framework shown in Figure 1. This framework takes the unit of analysis to be an identifiable social group, which is defined by class, caste, ethnic origin, gender or other characteristics defined through discussion and enquiry at the community level.

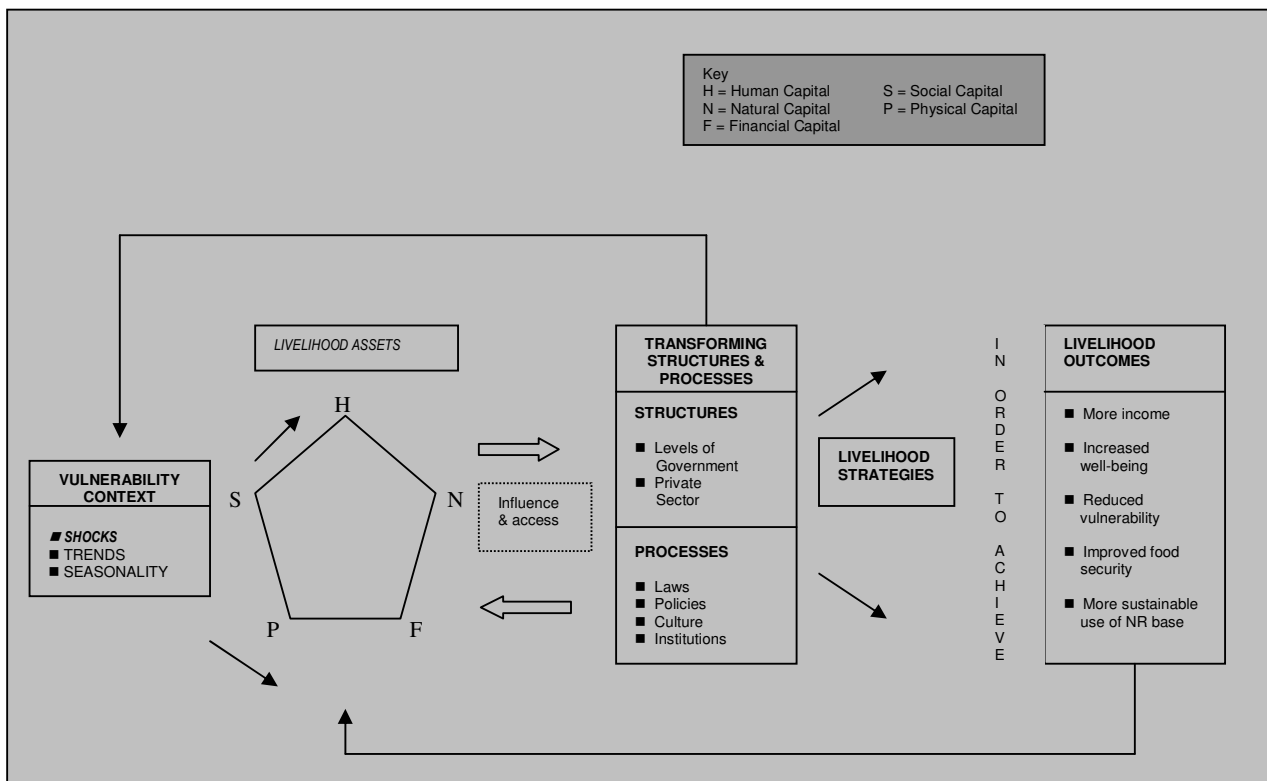


Figure 1. Sustainable livelihoods framework

Assets

At the heart of the framework is the 'asset pentagon' (see Figure 2) which can be drawn for any social group, community or household. Assets are services, resources, skills or attributes. The point where the lines meet in the centre of the pentagon represents zero access to assets while the outer limit is maximum access to assets. So different shaped pentagons will apply to different situations. Of course, these will also change over time. So the asset pentagon should be considered a dynamic presentation of the assets of a social group. It enables discussion to take place with the group about suitable starting or entry points for a project or program and the impact and trade-offs involved.

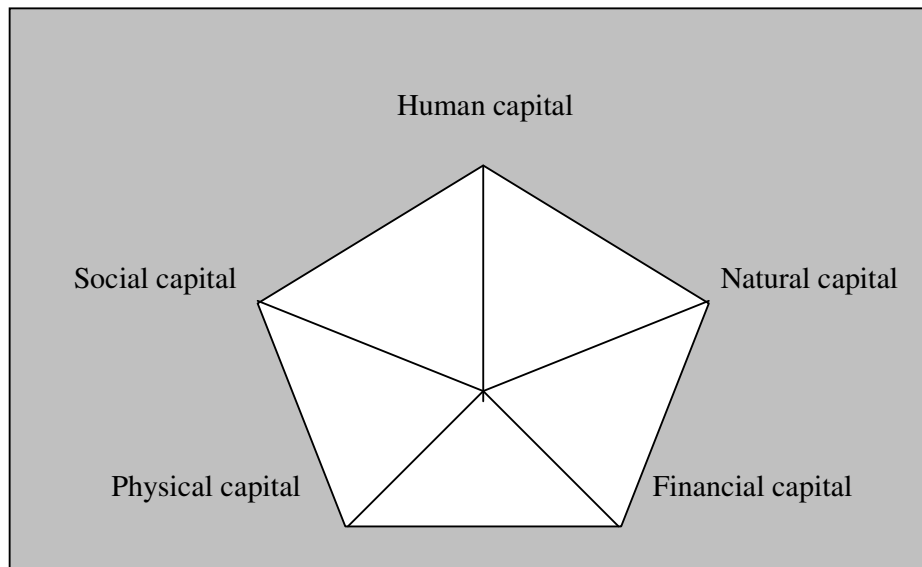


Figure 2 Asset pentagon

The sustainable livelihoods framework aims to be a progressive approach to development. It challenges the orthodoxy which held sway for decades and continues to be the dominant model for many agencies and companies, which might be called a supply-side approach or 'technology push'. In other words, many development interventions start with a product, such as a generator, a mill or a foodstuff, and then promote this as a means of bringing modern services to people.

Taking energy as an example, the reality for many households without the resources to purchase electricity is that they rely on a combination of energy services to meet their needs. These might include hand-milling of grain, kerosene lighting and a donkey cart to transport their produce to market. A proper consideration of the assets of the household helps practitioners and the community themselves to understand the multiple factors which influence their energy needs. This helps the process of choosing a suitable approach to meeting these needs.

Another principle of the sustainable livelihoods approach is that it emphasises the strengths of people, rather than their needs. In particular, it aims to achieve an analysis of those strengths which have the potential to reduce poverty. These include the ability of a social group to influence policy, their access to technologies or markets and the resources available to them.

The framework aims to help the various actors involved in such a process organise the multiple influences on livelihoods in such a way that they can identify options for moving forward. It is not tied to a particular sector, such as agriculture or light engineering, since it inherently takes a holistic view.

The table below sets out the five groups of assets and provides a description of each with an example. In the language of the livelihoods framework, assets are described as 'capital'.

Asset	Description	Example of application
Natural capital	Natural resources such as fuelwood, water, fruit trees.	Access to fuel will be influenced by, for example, the size of the resource and the nature of land ownership.
Social capital	Human contacts and relationships, group membership, clans, etc.	Networks provide support for using resources and information on their location. They also permit trading and sharing. A good example is groundwater.
Human capital	Knowledge, skills, capacity to work.	Directly relates to employment and the ability to generate an income.
Physical capital	Basic infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, shelter, equipment and tools. .	End use technologies for production rely on equipment. Transport to market requires roads or tracks.
Financial capital	Money for credit, savings, pensions, etc.	Finance enables purchases to sustain health, maintain tools, travel in search of opportunities, etc.

Stocks of capital described in the table can be maintained and accumulated by their holders. They can also decline. The interaction between assets is very important so, for example, a household may choose to build up social capital as a response to declining natural capital if they lose access to land and have to relocate to the area occupied by other family members. Sustainability is determined by the extent to which stocks are maintained over time. In some analyses, environmental capital is the ultimate determinant of sustainability.

A key point is that the approach integrates physical well-being, education, access to technology, information and the state of the environment as key aspects in the ability of poor or marginalized people to achieve sustainable livelihoods.

Each of the five capital assets needs to be understood for its importance in a particular situation. Having analysed each one, development interventions can then be organised in a way that builds capital where it is needed. The aim is to assist a social group to take advantage of opportunity, reduce constraints and realise their livelihood potential. A general principle is that those with access to ample assets are more able to make positive livelihood choices. Later in this paper, I apply these analyses to the aboriginal context in Australia.

Livelihood strategies

Returning to Figure 1, people seek to achieve a livelihood outcome through making the most of their assets. So, for example, a carpenter will use a combination of his or her skills and the resources, equipment and clients available in order to make a living. These strategies may be complex because they make use of the links between assets and the various political, cultural, economic and environmental influences upon them.

Recent studies show the enormous diversity of these strategies at every level (DFID, 1999). The reality is that people do not fit neatly into categories for planning purposes. Rural people are not either farmers, foresters or fisherfolk and urban people are not wage labourers. Understanding the reasons for their choice of livelihood provides development workers with the chance to reinforce those assets or features which increase choice and flexibility.

An improved livelihood outcome will probably include:

- More income;
- Increased well-being;
- Reduced vulnerability;
- Improved food security;
- More sustainable use of natural resources.

Once the assets of a particular group are set against the vulnerability of particular communities and the way in which structures and processes operate in practice, we can build our understanding of their livelihood strategies.

In the aboriginal context, well-being is probably the leading priority for people as a livelihood outcome. It includes self-esteem, the sense of control and inclusion, physical security, health and maintenance of cultural heritage. The history of Indigenous people in Australia and the objectives of many aboriginal organizations would point to the high importance of well-being as a goal.

However, gaining a measure of the well-being of people presents challenges in, for example, people knowing their own rights or in measuring the self-esteem of a group at a particular point in time. I return to this issue in the conclusion to the paper.

Vulnerability

People are vulnerable to a range of external changes which affect their ability to sustain their livelihoods and over which they have limited or no control. The sustainable livelihoods approach views people as living in an environment which is subject to trends, shock and seasonality.

Trends are long-term changes such as population, resources, national economics, etc.

Shocks include ill health, disasters, war, etc.

Seasonality is change influenced by the time of year, such as employment, prices, climate factors, etc.

In order to plan for the future, the vulnerability context in which people live must be understood in relation to livelihoods. This enables work to be planned which reduces the

negative impact of trends, shocks and seasonality. People who are secure will be more able to take risks and seize opportunities than those who consider themselves to be vulnerable.

Structures and processes

The final element of the sustainable livelihoods approach that I wish to describe in this short paper is that of structures and processes. These are the institutions, organisations, policies and legislation that influence livelihoods through shaping access to resources and terms of trade.

An example of particular relevance to aboriginal communities is access to land, which has been a subject of debate and struggle in Australia for over two hundred years. Land has been subject to great influence through policy and institutional development during this period. The ability of aboriginal people to determine policy has had an impact on their access to these assets.

Within the framework, structures and processes are elements which need to be understood and shaped to permit communities to make the most of their assets.

A new way of looking at the support and development of remote communities of Indigenous people

In order to apply the sustainable livelihoods approach in Australia, we have to understand the particular characteristics of aboriginal communities which distinguish them from rural communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America for whom the approach was originally conceived.

These distinguishing characteristics are:-

- The remoteness of many communities from main service centres and markets;
- The access of many communities to state welfare support or employment programs such as CDEP;
- The strong connection that aboriginal people feel with the land;
- Their status within a prosperous economy dominated by a western model of liberal economics;
- The tradition and culture of hunting and gathering as opposed to sedentary production or enterprise.

A simplification of the definition presented by Chambers and Conway earlier in this paper is suitable for our context in Australia:-

A sustainable livelihood for Indigenous people in Australia is a way of life which satisfies the needs of an individual or community and can withstand external change or shock.

This avoids the common misconception that a livelihood is an income-generating activity. This is not the way in which most people working outside formal workplaces consider their lives, especially in rural subsistence farming where the boundary between work and other activity is imperceptible.

A key principle of the sustainable livelihoods approach is that outside interventions will only be effective if they are consistent with the existing livelihood strategies, assets and ability to respond to change. Therefore, a thorough understanding of these aspects is a prerequisite to planning any kind of external support to an individual, household or community.

A process for applying the sustainable livelihoods framework will involve the following steps, each of which involves collecting suitable information, discussing each aspect and reaching an overall approach for building capital under the conditions which the group faces:-

1. Definition of the social group to whom the analysis applies.
2. Analysis and description of the vulnerability context for the group.
3. Measurement of the five capital assets for the group and the preparation of an asset pentagon.
4. Analysis of structures and processes.
5. Analysis of livelihood strategies leading to a description of livelihood outcomes.
6. Apply analyses and knowledge gained to a participatory process of design of a project or program.

I will now provide brief notes on each of the capital assets that form the core of livelihoods analysis. This is not intended to be a definitive guide, but a first endeavour to use these concepts in an Indigenous context.

The social group to which the analysis applies will depend on both the geographical and political division to which a project is directed and the extent of funding available. For the purposes of most development initiatives in remote Australia, the community is the most common unit of analysis, with the family, household or region being secondary in prominence.

Given the transitory nature of many remote communities and the high fluctuations in numbers of people living in a particular location, the notion of community has often presented difficulties to planners and funders. However, it remains the most suitable definition for the purposes of the sustainable livelihoods approach.

Human capital

As a livelihood asset, human capital depends not only upon the amount of labour available to a social group, but also the quality, capacity, education and health of individuals. Improvements in health and education in remote communities are essential to building human capital, an area which is already central to the work of many organisations in remote areas of Australia. It is important to understand who is excluded from opportunities of this kind and the reasons why, as well as collecting information on existing local innovation as a means of projecting future potential.

However, building human capital alone does not necessarily lead to better livelihoods. Training and education must be relevant to the existing and future livelihood plans of individuals and communities. The combination of Indigenous knowledge of art and culture with marketing and customer service skills is one proven model.

Natural capital

The relationship of aboriginal people to the land is a fundamental characteristic of their way of life. Whereas natural capital is important to those who derive an income from resource-based activities such as mining, fishing or farming, the heritage and tradition of Indigenous communities in Australia tends towards subsistence use of the land.

In the livelihoods context, a key question is the extent to which the growing access of people to the land provides them with a livelihood opportunity that they wish to take. Also, whether the use of a combination of natural, financial and social capital can penetrate markets which may be very distant.

Physical capital

Physical capital is a key factor in promoting better livelihoods for remote communities. This is especially true in the harsh and vast landscape of much of Australia.

The infrastructure for supporting livelihoods in remote communities of Indigenous people is variable in quality and reliability. The lack of affordable transport, and energy, secure shelter, adequate water and access to information are core dimensions of poverty since they link closely with other indicators. For example, poor water and sanitation can lead to poor health. Inadequate transport prevents access to markets.

An issue in Australia is the high cost of building physical capital in remote communities. For very small communities, the cost of building a road or airstrip which will remain serviceable for most of the year is very high per beneficiary. A livelihoods response to this issue would be to focus on not only the infrastructure itself but also the purpose to which it will be put. When considering service provision, it is vital that the investments match the priorities of users. Otherwise, the commitment of the community and the value that they gain from the service will be diminished. This especially applies to choices between basic services such as water, sanitation, roads and energy.

Financial capital

In remote communities, financial resources are often limited to that which comes from welfare or the Community Development Employment Program. In some cases, additional income is being achieved through tourist or art enterprises, but these are scattered ventures which vary in their effectiveness.

Financial capital, whether savings or income, is versatile in that it can be applied in different ways and to serve a range of objectives. Building financial capital in remote communities is constrained by limited access to opportunities to access financial services which might improve the productivity of savings and by social obligations which can restrict opportunities for saving.

For many communities who are locked into dependence on limited CDEP income or pensions, the challenge is for them to use existing structures and processes to access investment funds through ATSIC and other agencies. This is where a combination of leadership skills and the ability to prepare and argue for funding (ie human capital) with financial capital offers a real opening for communities to improve their livelihood outcomes. There are others which involve. For example, the organization of groups and cost-sharing ('chuck-ins').

Social capital

Aboriginal communities are often characterised by informal networks of social obligation. People are frequently able to draw upon reciprocal ties relating to family, language and skin group which provide them with a social resource. In this sense, the social capital of aboriginal communities offers the potential for people to improve sharing of knowledge and resources and to do this in a way which is efficient since it reduces the costs of transactions when compared to relationships where social ties are not strong.

It is the strength of social capital in communities which must be gauged before any kind of support to livelihoods is planned. A project which promotes new social relations is less likely to be effective than one which builds upon the existing ones.

The next section develops some practical examples of how the Sustainable Livelihoods framework might apply in planning with communities in Australia.

Bringing theory to practice; some case studies on the potential application of the sustainable livelihoods approach in Australia

A real understanding of the advantages and limitations of the sustainable livelihoods approach will only come from examining practical examples. This gives us the opportunity to tease out the issues in each case and to consider how decision-making might be changed by applying a different approach.

The three examples that I have chosen offer a breadth of analysis. They are not detailed case studies but real instances where CAT has either taken part in a project or has been invited to consider working in a particular location. Where details are missing, they have been assumed so as to add value to the illustration.

Fish farming in the Kimberley; the question of incentives

Recently, an individual supporter of CAT proposed that the organisation consider reviving some derelict fishponds at a community in the Kimberley. Communities in the area have quite a strong record of developing enterprises for tourism and arts. Infrastructure for access to the ponds is good. Funds would be available for capital costs.

An asset pentagon for the community would probably indicate that natural, physical and financial capital is high. However, there is scope for building knowledge of people in the technical aspects of fish farming. An awareness of the social networks and relationships within the community would enable us to plan any intervention effectively. In particular, a suitable structure for managing the enterprise will be essential.

A starting point for the project would therefore be to develop a thorough understanding of the way in which the community presently functions. A focus on measuring the governance and capacity-building required for local people to handle the initiative will also be necessary, together with a clear appraisal of their livelihood priorities.

An important question relates to financial capital. We need to understand fully what the incentives might be for the community to put their time and money into fish farming. Although funds might be available to renovate the ponds, if the community considers its current levels of financial capital to be adequate, then the value of a fish farming enterprise will be diminished. Importantly, their livelihood outcomes might prioritise well-being over income, in which case fish farming for food and nutrition rather than enterprise might be a preferred option.

The next example considers an example of an outstation movement from a former mission community in Queensland. It combines the common elements of a group of people wishing to both remove themselves from a setting which they consider unsatisfactory for their health and well-being with a powerful attraction back to 'country', which is their homelands in the Yalanji area.

Homelands in the Yalanji; processes for attaining services

People wishing to move back to their homelands reach their own assessment of the assets at their disposal. The 'strengths-based' planning processes undertaken by CAT with people in Wujal Wujal are practical examples of the measurement of assets in a way which is consistent with a livelihoods approach. The Bana Mindilji Planning Project newsletters provide a thorough account of these process.

In many cases in the Yalanji example, levels of natural and social capital will probably be higher than financial, human or physical capital. Services in new outstations will be undeveloped and so people seek ways to build up water, sanitation, power, access roads and other infrastructure. So planning tends to focus on training in areas such as computing, book-keeping and cattle management. Sources of funding and advice on toilets and power systems are sought and people organise themselves in order to achieve the livelihood outcomes that they have identified.

In this case, an important point is that the existing processes for returning to homelands have mirrored that which a sustainable livelihoods approach would encourage. Through taking a holistic approach to understanding the community, the vulnerability, structures, relationships and future livelihood aspirations of the communities have all featured.

Any organisation which seeks to achieve a positive impact with limited resources will operate in a strategic way. This means making choices from a range of competing options for how to deploy those resources. The third example draws on a recent experience of planning for work in housing, although it could equally apply to a number of other sectors such as water, energy or transport.

Strategic housing initiatives in Central Australia; making the right choices

Housing is one of the most complex issues in aboriginal affairs. It is a subject which has been littered with high hopes and failed initiatives for many decades. The challenge for CAT is how it can play a useful role in this area, achieving maximum impact with limited resources. The livelihoods approach would start by understanding the livelihood priorities of people living in remote communities. If, as has been suggested earlier in this paper, well-being is a high priority, then the framework would encourage us to consider both those assets which people need if they are to live in healthy and safe houses and the barriers to people achieving these aims.

We know that people are not trained and supported in living in the kinds of houses which are constructed in remote communities. Budgets are often limited or used inefficiently and standards of construction fall short of that which is required for houses to remain serviceable over a period of several years. This implies that there is potential for building human capital but also that structures and processes must be influenced so as to provide proper control of standards and design parameters for houses.

An understanding of social relationships within communities will probably lead us to view different social groups in different ways, especially where there is a correlation between the condition of houses and the status of households within the community or the level of income and education of people within particular groups. Overall, this analysis implies that CAT should focus its efforts on building human capital, on tackling deficiencies in processes for housing and that differentiating between groups within communities would enable resources to make a greater impact on the most acute needs.

Conclusion; opportunities and limitations

Through this paper, I have sought to work out whether the sustainable livelihoods approach can be a useful tool to those working in development in aboriginal communities.

My first conclusion is that the sustainable livelihoods approach must be viewed as a means of understanding the complexities of people's lives rather than a solution for the difficulties of planning. In some cases, some of the good practice implied by a holistic approach to understanding and planning with communities is already taking place in programs in Australia. But we have not yet called the work a livelihoods approach.

In other respects, the livelihoods framework could also certainly assist us by:-

- Encouraging us to ask questions that might not be asked under conventional project planning methods, such as who really makes decisions about community management or what determines livelihood strategies for aboriginal people?
- Making us think about the choices open to an organization which wishes to achieve the greatest positive impact through a grant. There is always more than one entry point to a complex subject such as livelihoods in Indigenous communities.
- Increasing the scope of our analysis to include areas which are too often undervalued, such as social capital, ways improving access to assets and the policy process.

Evidence from program experience elsewhere in the world suggests that the framework also promotes greater linkage between macro and micro level analysis. This enables field practitioners, local organizations and communities to gauge for themselves the impact of policy, trade and other economic changes on their own circumstances. In this way, it generates a case for policy advocacy., or at least a policy dialogue.

The sustainable livelihoods framework has a number of limitations and disadvantages. I summarise the main ones as follows:-

1. Cost, since thorough processes take time and money;
2. The danger of agencies offering high-quality ('gold plated') development support to a small number of communities through following an intensive method, when a lesser service to a larger number of people might be possible.
3. Difficulties in measuring assets, already described earlier in this paper in relation to well-being, but equally true of a number of other aspects of the framework.
4. Planning conclusions may not be conclusive enough to permit clear action, since the framework tends to point to influences rather than arrive at hard and fast measured results.
5. The method is complex and difficult for practitioners and communities to become familiar with in a short space of time.

It is counter-productive to consider a simple framework as a source of answers to difficult questions which have characterised aboriginal affairs for decades. However, the sustainable livelihoods approach does incorporate key elements that have been overlooked by conventional planning in the past, such as the importance of social networks and access to land. These two are particularly relevant in the aboriginal context. They are also valuable to organizations providing technical services or products, who naturally tend to promote that which they have to offer.

We also have to ask ourselves again what we wish to achieve through improved understanding of livelihoods. The CAT Vision is 'happy and safe communities of Indigenous people'. Our purpose is to secure sustainable livelihoods through appropriate technology. So taking the broad analysis of assets that comes from the sustainable livelihoods approach, we might wish to focus on those assets which CAT (or any focused organization) stands a good chance of influencing for the better, whilst retaining an understanding of links with other assets.

In other words, a cohesive social environment and better access to nutrition and health services are key factors. However, the contribution of a provider of technical services and training will focus on meeting infrastructure and service needs and enhancing the use of natural assets in a locality. Through understanding the interconnectedness of social and human capital, we have a better chance of helping communities make the most of their improved natural capital, physical and financial capital.

Of course, this may already be an implicit understanding, but it should be made explicit in the way in which projects are planned, particularly at the strategic level. This is where the approach offers the greatest benefit. In promoting a more sophisticated understanding of the factors influencing the livelihoods of communities of Indigenous people, so we have a chance to advance thinking in this area leading to better informed choices.

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