

**Working Paper 217**

**Sustainable Livelihoods:  
A Case Study of the Evolution of DFID Policy**

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## Acknowledgements

The research described in this Working Paper was originally undertaken as part of a larger study of the impact of ESCOR-Funded research projects within the Department for International Development, triggered by the need for DFID to have a clearer understanding of how social science research impacts on policy, and by discussions arising from the Harvard Institute for International Development Report on the Future of Development Studies in the UK. The original data was then re-analysed following the Overseas Development Institute's Context, Evidence and Links framework as part of the ODI Bridging Research and Policy Project.

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## Acronyms

DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development
ESCOR	Economic and Social Research programme (ODA)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development (Canada)
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRAC	Natural Resources Advisory Committee
NRPAD	Natural Resources Policy and Advisory Department
ODA	Overseas Development Administration
ODG	Overseas Development Group
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIP	Policy Institutions and Processes
RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
SID	Society for International Development
SLA	Sustainable Livelihoods Approach
SLRG	Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group
SLSO	Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office
UEA	University of East Anglia
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WFP	World Food Programme
WRI	World Resource Institute

## Executive Summary

This paper is a case study of the influence of research on a particular shift in policy for the Department of International Development (DFID). In the 1997 White Paper on international development, DFID made the ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’ (or SLA), a core principle of its strategy for pro-poor policy making. The concept of SLA had first appeared in research literature in the 1980s, and its inclusion in the White Paper marked its transfer to the policy domain. This Working Paper offers a descriptive narrative of this progression, identifies major events in the story, and analyses this successful transfer from research to practice and policy through the framework of context, evidence and links.

The paper forms part of the Overseas Development Institute’s Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme, which seeks to learn more about linkages between development research, policy and practice. The main questions addressed are:

- How did the idea of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach come to be adopted
- What was the role of research in this process

The principle events of the evolution of the SLA framework were as follows (see Table 1 for further details and references):

1987	The World Commission on Environment and Development publishes the ‘Brundtland Commission report’
1988	IIED publishes ‘The Greening of Aid: Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice’
1990	UNDP publishes the first Human Development Report
1992	UN holds Conference on Environment and Development; IDS publishes ‘Sustainable Rural Livelihoods’ by Chambers and Conway
1993	Oxfam employs the SL approach
1994	Care adopts household livelihoods security as a framework for relief and development
1995	UN World Summit for Social Development; UNDP adopts Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods as one of top five priorities; IISD publishes ‘Adaptive Strategies and Sustainable Livelihoods’ by Singh and Kalala; SID launches Sustainable Livelihoods and People’s Everyday Economics project
1996	‘Adaptable Livelihoods’ by Davies is published; DFID invites Sustainable Livelihoods projects; ‘Participatory Research for Sustainable Livelihoods’ by Rennie and Singh is published
1997	New Labour publishes White Paper on International Development ‘Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century’

These events have been mapped onto the RAPID framework of context, links and evidence, to explain the interactions of research, policy and practice. The case of SLA shows the framework to be useful in organising events and processes which influenced the policy shift in DFID, but suggest it must be refined to guard against determinism.

## Context

In a number of ways, the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) was well aligned with its political and institutional context. Firstly, the SLA was in tune with wider shifts in approaches to development through the 1980s and 1990s; towards a focus on human-wellbeing and sustainability rather than economic growth. Crystallised in the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987 and the first UNDP Human Development Report in 1990, NGOs and supportive researchers had negotiated this shift over the preceding decades. The new perspective was welcomed in the mid 1990s by DFID as it strove to redefine its role and mark the change of government in 1997 with a distinctive and timely approach to international development. The sustainable livelihoods approach succeeded in winning the attention of key policy-makers in donor institutions in the early 1990s, DFID in 1997 and the Natural Resources Department, away from the competing knowledge and theory which key individuals have been exposed to during the course of their careers. This attempt succeeded then because of the collision of two factors: a broad international climate which favoured people-centred approaches, and a specific need to mark out a new phase of development practice in DFID.

## Links

A number of individuals worked as ‘testers, developers, champions, communicators, interpreters and advocates’ of SLA to facilitate its adoption within DFID. More often than not, these individuals performed more than one of these roles, and many roles were performed by several people. In the development of SLA, core researchers, policy-makers and practitioners tended to know, or at least know of, each other. This was especially true within DFID, which fostered mutual respect, awareness and trust and eased the quality of ideas exchanges and the path of SLA. The creation of the Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group lent a boost to the development of this community on an international level. Flows of ideas between individuals were reinforced by flows of individuals themselves, as critical agents moved their jobs and took their expertise and perspectives from one organisation to the next. The movements of individuals such as Conway between Imperial College, IIED, Ford Foundation, Sussex University and the Rockefeller Foundation, illustrate the non-linear trajectory of research, policy and practice in the development of SLA.

In the SLA case, the conventional view of research informing policy which frames practice: Research → Policy → Practice could be better represented as a triangle where all components inform each other.

## Evidence

As it was accumulated over the decade preceding the 1997 White Paper, the concept of SLA had been tested both intellectually and empirically by researchers and practitioners in dialogue. Evidence with these qualities was particularly attractive to DFID, who were not persuaded by a single campaigning group, but through their interactions with diverse sources and media. The numerous strands to SLA, and the fact that it was communicated many times by many agents, lent resilience to SLA as a core concept which would not be undermined by a single piece of counter evidence or failed argument. The very personal means by which SLA was transferred between colleagues, often through face to face discussions, also fostered resilience as the concept could be tailored to engage with the expertise and interests of specific individuals. However, of equal importance to the multifaceted nature of SLA, was its clarity and ability to be recognised and referred to. Since Chambers and Conway coined the phrase in their 1992 research paper, ‘sustainable livelihoods’ has expressed a complex set of relationships and ideas with great economy. The Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office produced a range of literature for both lay and political audiences which presented SLA clearly, with a range of case studies and practitioner

guides. These have provided some centre of gravity around which more diffuse and wide-ranging debates around SLA can revolve, and have ensured that – whilst being worked from many angles – the concept remained coherent.

## **Refining the Context/Links/Evidence Framework**

There are two elements of the case of SLA which fall outside RAPID's context/links/evidence framework: time and chance. In terms of time, a decade passed between the conceptual formation of SLA and its adoption in the 1997 White Paper. This time was necessary in part for the conjunctions of context we have outlined, but also in a less perceptible way for ideas to be internalised and embedded. The context/links/evidence framework falls short of tracking this process. As for chance, a number of lucky encounters, overlapping diaries, and external decisions set up the chronology of SLA. Arguably, the web of relationships that characterise the community of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners, was sufficiently close and well developed that had these incidents not taken place, others would have emerged in their place, but this cannot of course be verified.

Thus, in order to counter the potential for determinism from the context/links/evidence framework we must recognise a separation between necessary and sufficient conditions. Without necessary conditions there would be no chance of a successful impact of research on policy, but these conditions do not guarantee change on their own. *Sufficient* conditions lead to actual impact. In the case of SLA, these sufficient conditions were time and chance encounters. In other instances of research influencing policy, the conditions may be very different.



# 1 Introduction

This Working Paper forms part of the Overseas Development Institute's Bridging Research and Policy project which is seeking to learn more about the linkages between development research, policy and practice and to develop simple tools for researchers and policy-makers to promote evidence-based international development policy. This paper is a case study of the influence of research on a particular shift in Department for International Development (DFID) policy. The policy in question is known as the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA).<sup>1</sup>

A sustainable livelihood is commonly accepted as comprising:

...the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) 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 (DFID, 1999a).

The concept of Sustainable Livelihoods was an important element in the new Labour administration's 1997 White Paper on international development. Its core commitment was to:

...refocus our international development efforts on the elimination of poverty and encouragement of economic growth which benefits the poor. We will do this through support for international sustainable development targets and policies *that create sustainable livelihoods for poor people*, promote human development and conserve the environment (DFID, 1997: Summary, my italics).

Thus the concept, which had first appeared in research literature in the 1980s, had become in the late 1990s one of a trio of principles underpinning UK development policy and the basis for a number of DFID programmes and practices.

Most studies of research impact take some specific research as the point of departure and seek to identify patterns of dissemination and influence. In contrast, this study started from known changes in policy and/or practice and asked what influenced them and whether research – of any kind – was among those influences.<sup>2</sup> The study approach has been:

- First to construct a chronological narrative of SLA policy, practice and research<sup>3</sup> over the last two decades.<sup>4</sup> Full references of key texts are given in the References;
- Second to characterise the key interactions of practice, policy and research in the narrative through document review and contacts with key players. The Annex provides a list of interviewees and correspondents who have helped the study with their knowledge and insights;
- Third to analyse these interactions in terms of the context/networks/evidence framework of influence devised as a working hypothesis for the Bridging Research and Policy project.

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<sup>1</sup> Some people prefer the plural 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches' but in this paper, for convenience, the singular is used and usually abbreviated as SLA. This term refers to the policies and practices that DFID adopted. The term Sustainable Livelihood(s) is used in this paper for the underlying concept or philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> There have been few attempts at such tracer studies in the field of development policy – two recent examples are Swanson et al. (1998) and IDRC (1990) – but it seems likely that this approach will be used more in future. While a tracer study may be a harder analytical challenge, it can provide a richer and more contextualised assessment of how research operates as one of many influences on policy and practice.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between policy, practice and research is not always clear in the SLA narrative; we have characterised a contribution as one or the other dependent on the position of the contributor as policy-maker or policy adviser (usually in DFID), practitioner (in executive development agencies and/or in the field), or researcher (academic or consultant).

<sup>4</sup> It is recognised that the origins of the sustainable livelihood concept extend back more than 20 years and into more literature, especially from non-UK sources, than it has been possible to examine here. However the focus for this paper is on what is believed to have been most influential on UK policy and practice.

The structure of this paper follows this sequence. Section 2 presents a chronology and a descriptive narrative of the development of SLA. Section 3 identifies and characterises four key interactions between research, policy and practice in that development. Section 4 applies the context/networks/evidence framework to analyse the main determinants of the influence of research on SLA policy and practice. Section 5 draws conclusions on the applicability of the framework to the SLA case.

## 2 The Development of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

A simple chronology of the main formal actions is presented in Table 1 – principally events, publications and organisational changes. The rest of this section gives details to the chronology with a narrative account of the evolution of SLA research, policy and practice from 1987 to 2001.

**Table 1 Sustainable Livelihoods Chronology**

1987	The World Commission on Environment and Development publishes its report: <i>Our Common Future</i> (the ‘Brundtland Commission report’) (1987a)
1988	IIED publishes papers from its 1987 conference: <i>The Greening of Aid: Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice</i> (Conroy and Litvinoff, eds., 1988)
1990	UNDP publishes the first Human Development Report
1992	UN holds Conference on Environment and Development IDS publishes ‘Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992)
1993	Oxfam starts to employ the SL approach in formulating overall aims, improving project strategies and staff training
1994	CARE adopts household livelihoods security as a programming framework in its relief and development work
1995	UN holds World Summit for Social Development UNDP adopts Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods as one of five priorities in its overall human development mandate, to serve as both a conceptual and programming framework for poverty reduction IISD publishes <i>Adaptive Strategies and Sustainable Livelihoods</i> (Singh and Kalala, 1995), the report of a UNDP-funded programme SID launches project on Sustainable Livelihoods and People’s Everyday Economics
1996	<i>Adaptable Livelihoods: coping with food insecurity in the Malian Sahel</i> (Davies, 1996) is published by Macmillan DFID invites proposals for major ESCOR research programme on Sustainable Livelihoods. IDS-led consortium wins the main award, with another award to ODG IISD publishes <i>Participatory Research for Sustainable Livelihoods: A Guidebook for Field Projects</i> (Rennie and Singh, 1996)
1997	New Labour administration publishes its first White Paper on international development, <i>Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century</i>
1998	DFID’s Natural Resources Department opens a consultation on sustainable livelihoods and establishes a Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group Natural Resources Advisers annual conference takes Sustainable Livelihoods as its theme and later publishes contributory papers: <i>Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: What Contribution Can We Make?</i> (Carney (ed.), 1998) SID publishes <i>The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, General Report of the Sustainable Livelihoods Project 1995–1997</i> (Amalric, 1998) UNDP publishes <i>Policy Analysis and Formulation for Sustainable Livelihoods</i> (Roe, 1998) DFID establishes the SL Virtual Resource Centre and the SL Theme Group IDS publishes ‘Sustainable rural livelihoods: a framework for analysis’ (Scoones, 1998) The FAO/UNDP Informal Working Group on Participatory Approaches and Methods to Support Sustainable Livelihoods and Food Security meets for the first time

1999	<p>DFID creates the Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office and appoints Jane Clark as its Head</p> <p>DFID publishes the first <i>Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets</i> (DFID, 1999a); <i>Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Elimination</i> (DFID, 1999b); and <i>Livelihoods Approaches Compared</i> (Carney et al., 1999)</p> <p>Presenters at the Natural Resources Advisers' Conference report progress in implementing SL approaches and DFID later publishes these in <i>Sustainable Livelihoods: Lessons from Early Experience</i> (Ashley and Carney, 1999)</p> <p>ODI publishes 'Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice: early application of concepts in rural areas' (Farrington et al., 1999)</p> <p>DFID establishes the Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group of researchers/consultants</p> <p><i>Mixing it: Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries</i> (Ellis, 2000b) is published</p>
2000	<p>DFID commissions and funds Livelihoods Connect, a website serving as a learning platform for SLA</p> <p>FAO organises an Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches, involving DFID, FAO, WFP, UNDP, and IFAD</p> <p>DFID publishes <i>Sustainable Livelihoods – Current thinking and practice</i> (DFID, 2000a); <i>Sustainable Livelihoods – Building on Strengths</i> (DFID, 2000b); <i>Achieving Sustainability: Poverty Elimination and the Environment</i> (DFID, 2000c); and more SL <i>Guidance Sheets</i></p> <p>The Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group establishes a subgroup on PIP (Policy, Institutions and Processes)</p> <p>IDS publishes 'Analysing Policy for Sustainable Livelihoods' (Shankland, 2000), the final report from its ESCOR programme</p> <p>Oxfam publishes <i>Environments and Livelihoods: Strategies for Sustainability</i> (Neeffjes, 2000)</p> <p>The Government publishes its second White Paper, <i>Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor</i> (DFID, 2000e)</p>
2001	<p>DFID commissions research on further development of the SLA framework; practical policy options to support sustainable livelihoods</p> <p><i>Sustainable Livelihoods: Building on the Wealth of the Poor</i> (Helmore and Singh, 2001) is published</p> <p>DFID organises SLA review meeting of officials, researchers and practitioners</p>

Note: full references for publications are given in the References section

## 2.1 The Brundtland Commission and the first UNDP Human Development Report

The Brundtland Commission Report of 1987 offered the first appearance in policy debate of what was conceptualised later as SLA. The report put the concept of sustainable development firmly on the global political agenda. It defined 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 state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987a: 43).

The report went on to argue that the pursuit of sustainable development requires:

- a political system that secures for citizens the opportunity to participate effectively in decision making
- an economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained basis
- a social system that provides for solutions for the tensions arising from disharmonious development
- a production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological basis for development
- a technological system that can search continuously for new solutions
- an international system that fosters sustainable patterns of trade and finance
- a flexible administrative system that has the capacity for self-correction (World Commission in Environment and Development, 1987a: 65)

The first Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Programme shared much of this analysis (UNDP, 1990). This and subsequent reports addressed development in terms of individual and household health, education and well-being, thus shifting the focus away from the macroeconomic bias of earlier development thinking.

Many of the ingredients that subsequently characterised the SLA were evident in the Brundtland and the Human Development reports: the focus on poor people and their needs; the importance of citizen participation; the emphasis on self-reliance and sustainability; the ecological constraint. These subsequently became powerful terms in the lexicon of international development policy and politics, particularly in the work of the UN's 1992 Environment Conference in Rio, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development and the 1996 World Food Summit.

## **2.2 Chambers and Conway (1992) and its precursors**

The origination of sustainable livelihood as a concept is widely attributed to Robert Chambers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The key reference is the 1992 discussion paper he co-authored with Gordon Conway (Chambers and Conway, 1992). Here they offered a working definition not that different from the definition subsequently adopted by DFID.<sup>5</sup>

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 7).

The paper explicitly recognised that it was both reacting against and building on earlier thinking. It criticised many previous analyses of production, employment and income as industrial and reductionist, which 'do not fit or capture the complex and diverse realities of most rural life' (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 4). It presented sustainable livelihoods as a linking of the three extant concepts of capability, equity and sustainability. For each of these there was a tradition of research extending back through the 1980s and even earlier in some cases. For example, reference is made in the paper to the work of Sen (1981), Jodha (1988) and Schumacher (1973) in relation to capability and to that of Pearce et al. (1989), Lele (1991) and Swift (1989) in relation to

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<sup>5</sup> Given in the first paragraph of the Introduction above.

sustainability, for which Chambers and Conway emphasised the social as well as the environmental dimension.

In the paper Chambers and Conway offered a framework for development thinking that was both normative and practical. Their concluding policy prescriptions were presented under three headings (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 31):

- Enhancing capability – in facing change and unpredictability, people are versatile, quick to adapt and able to exploit diverse resources and opportunities;
- Improving equity – priority should be given to the capabilities, assets and access of the poorer, including minorities and women;
- Increasing social sustainability – the vulnerability of the poor should be minimised by reducing external stress and shocks and providing safety nets.

The final paragraphs of the paper restated its purpose:

In this paper we have tried to open up and explore concepts, analogies and relationships to fit future needs. In doing so we have rejected some conventional professional wisdom. In the spirit of exploration, we have also allowed ourselves the liberty of speculation, of seeing where a line of thinking would lead. In consequence, the paper raises more questions than it answers. It also puts forward combinations of working concepts, categories and hypotheses for testing for practical utility (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 34).

### **2.3 Donor practices in the early 1990s**

By the early 1990s, certain donor agencies had seen sufficient merit in sustainable livelihoods to begin employing SLA in their work:

- From 1993 Koos Neefjes in Oxfam was promoting sustainable livelihoods as a component in formulating its overall aims, improving project strategies and in staff training. Oxfam later published reports on ideas, experiences and achievements of country projects in the livelihoods field. In its most recent strategic policy statement Oxfam maintains the ‘Right to Sustainable Livelihoods’ as one of its five overall aims (Oxfam, 1998; Neefjes, 2000);
- In 1994 CARE International adopted ‘household livelihoods security’ as a programme framework in its relief and development work;
- In 1995, following the World Summit for Social Development, the UNDP adopted the promotion of sustainable livelihoods as one of its five mandates. It has pursued this in two ways: as an analytical and planning methodology (Helmore and Singh, 2001) and in the design and delivery of its country programmes (Roe, 1998).

The approach to operationalising SLA in these agencies was later compared with that subsequently adopted by DFID (Carney et al., 1999). The conclusion was that all four agencies shared an asset-based approach and all stressed the need for effective micro/macro policy and practice links; but they differed in their understanding of sustainability, their stress on empowerment and the role of technology.

## 2.4 Empirical sustainable livelihoods research leading to the 1996 ODA SLA programme

In the early 1990s empirical research on sustainable livelihoods also proceeded in a number of places. For example:

- In 1993, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) in Canada, where Naresh Singh was appointed Director of a new Poverty and Sustainable Development programme, undertook case studies in a number of African countries funded by the UNDP (Singh and Kalala, 1995; Rennie and Singh, 1996);<sup>6</sup>
- A year later, the Society for International Development (SID), with financial support from the Netherlands government, began a three-year, multi-country project on Sustainable Livelihoods and People's Everyday Economics 'to contribute to the search for alternatives to mainstream development strategies, support ongoing civil society-led experiments in countries of the South, and develop further the theory of the sustainable livelihoods approach to sustainable development' (Amalric, 1998: 1). It involved contributions from researchers and NGOs, case studies in 19 countries, regional workshops in Bangladesh, Tanzania and Colombia, and two international round tables;
- IDS continued work on sustainable livelihoods through the 1990s, both through individual<sup>7</sup> and group projects. The IDS Environment Group, for example, won an award in 1996 under the Economic and Social Research Council's Global Environmental Change programme for work on environmental entitlements, which established a new focus on institutional processes governing access to resources – an important precursor for later sustainable livelihoods work at IDS (Leach et al., 1997a, 1997b, 1999);
- The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) continued work in its Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods programme, established in 1986. Through a succession of projects, initially under Gordon Conway's direction, it has undertaken many case studies, publishing a 'Policies that Work' series of reports and developing a mode of research for participatory learning and action (Pretty et al., 1995);
- Sustainable livelihoods research was also undertaken by John Farrington, Diana Carney and Caroline Ashley at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (Farrington et al., 1999) and by Frank Ellis at the University of East Anglia (Ellis, 1998a, 1998b).

It was in this context of developing sustainable livelihoods practice and research that DFID's predecessor – the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) – decided in 1995–96 to invest in a major research programme on Sustainable Livelihoods.<sup>8</sup> The topic had emerged as a priority for research under the Administration's Economic and Social Research programme (ESCOR), following a wide-ranging consultation both inside ODA and outside in the research and practice communities, conducted by Sean Conlin, Head of ESCOR. Research centres already active in this field were invited to submit a 'capability statement' and subsequently four received invitations to tender.

This competition was won by IDS at the University of Sussex, in partnership with Sussex's Poverty Research Unit and IIED. Their project had an institutional focus, addressing the questions: what institutional arrangements enable some poor people to achieve sustainable, secure livelihoods when others fail? and what policies support both groups? Fieldwork in the IDS project was undertaken in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali with local collaborators (Brock and Coulibaly, 1999; Carswell et al., 2000; Toufique, 2000; Shankland, 2000). The Overseas Development Group (ODG) at the

<sup>6</sup> This and later work provides the basis for Helmore and Singh (2001).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Robert Chambers (Chambers, 1995), Susanna Davies (Davies, 1996) and Ian Scoones (Scoones, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> This was in the context of a shift of departmental research funding towards supporting a smaller number of larger research programmes which would be competitively tendered – the Sustainable Livelihoods programme was one of these.

University of East Anglia was a runner-up in the ESCOR bid and components of its proposal were also funded, including work on livelihood diversification (Ellis, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b).

In 2000, a further three large-scale research awards were made in the sustainable livelihoods area by DFID's Policy Research Programme, following a competitive tender process in which 11 institutions or consortia were invited to bid. These were won by the ODI (John Farrington) for work in South Asia; ODG (Frank Ellis) for work in East Africa and Malawi; and IDS Sussex (Ian Scoones and Melissa Leach) for work in southern Africa. These projects were respectively called Livelihood Futures (ODI), LADDER (ODG), and Policy Reforms around Land, Water and Wild Resources (IDS). In addition, part funding was provided to a fourth project, based at Leeds University (John Soussan) for additional work in South Asia.

Collaboration has characterised this research as much as competition. Members of some research teams were part of more than one bidding consortium. Also much inter-institutional collaboration is found in the funded projects. Additionally there has been an expanded participation in the work by researchers from the countries where the research is being undertaken.

## 2.5 The 1997 White Paper

The November 1997 White Paper (DFID, 1997) made the elimination of poverty in poorer countries the over-riding aim of UK policy for international development. It also reaffirmed the UK's commitment to the International Development Targets endorsed *inter alia* by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).<sup>9</sup> In pursuit of these goals, the White Paper adopted the creation of sustainable livelihoods for poor people as one of three priority policy objectives, alongside promoting human development and conserving the environment.

Although the White Paper offered no formal definition of sustainable livelihood, it expressed a number of views and offered a number of prescriptions that spelled out its meaning. For example:

- All people have the same basic needs: fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, uncontaminated food to eat, and livelihoods that allow them to earn their keep and raise healthy, educated children (DFID, 1997: para 1.7);
- Poor people have assets in their own skills, in their social institutions, in their values and cultures and in their detailed and sophisticated knowledge of their own environment (DFID, 1997: para 1.11);
- Given the necessary support, the poor can be the means as well as the beneficiaries of sustainable development (DFID, 1997: para 1.12);
- In order to benefit and promote the participation of the poor, economic growth must incorporate a sound and open macro-economic framework in which resources are used productively and which facilitates the development of income and employment-generating activities that specifically include poor people, particularly women, since the majority of the poor are women (DFID, 1997: para 1.17);
- The State must also provide a framework of law and regulation within which people can exercise their rights; it is the poor everywhere who pay the price where these conditions are not in place (DFID, 1997: para 1.19).

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<sup>9</sup> The International Development Targets cover extreme poverty, universal primary education, gender equality, infant mortality, reproductive health care, sustainable development, and resource conservation.



In the White Paper, sustainable livelihoods was presented as a policy objective rather than a specific programme. It was to be delivered through a wide range of policies and actions (DFID, 1997: Statement of Purpose, panel 3):

- sound policies and pro-poor economic growth
- the development of efficient and well-regulated markets
- access of poor people to land, resources and markets
- good governance and the realisation of human rights
- the prevention and resolution of conflicts
- the removal of gender discrimination

Since 1998, the Department's Annual Reports have always included a chapter on Policies and Actions which promote Sustainable Livelihoods, in which DFID's work directed towards the 1997 White Paper objective has been reported.

## 2.6 The Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Framework (1998)

In June 1998, IDS published a Working Paper providing an analytical framework for sustainable rural livelihoods (Scoones, 1998). Figure 1 shows the framework diagram from this paper. What it expressed was the question:

Given a particular *context* (of policy setting, politics, history, agroecology and socio-economic conditions), what combination of *livelihood resources* (different kinds of capital) result in the ability to follow what combination of *livelihood strategies* (agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification and migration) with what *outcomes*? Of particular interest in this framework are the *institutional processes* (embedded in a matrix of formal and informal institutions and organisations) which mediate the ability to carry out such strategies and achieve (or not) such outcomes (Scoones, 1998: 3, italics in original).

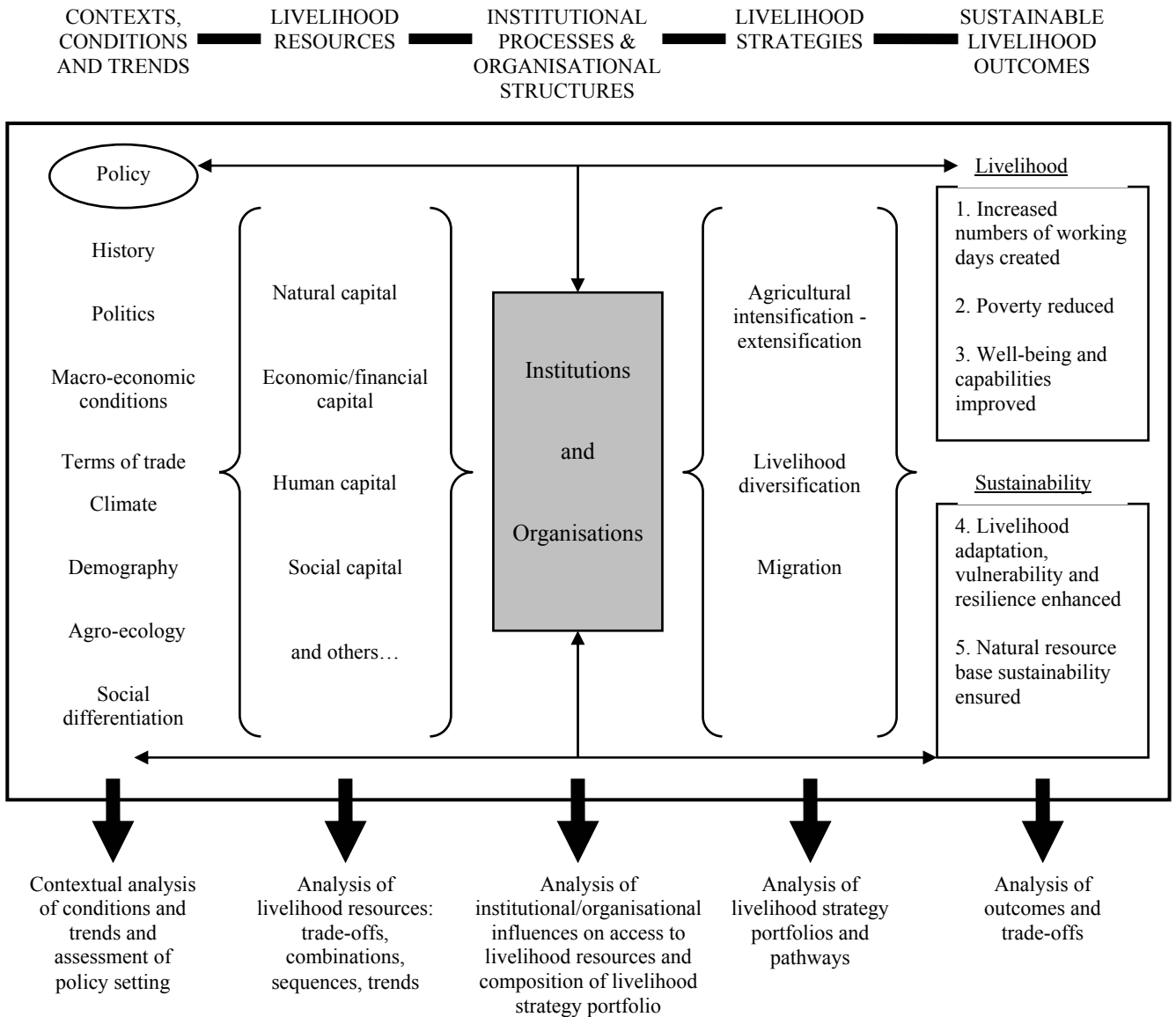
The framework therefore highlighted five interacting elements: contexts; resources; institutions; strategies; and outcomes.

In elaborating on these, the paper acknowledged the existing research from which it had derived its ideas. The framework originated from IDS brainstorming in 1996, during preparation of their bid for DFID's research programme on Sustainable Livelihoods. ODG's bid contained a different version, with some similarities to the IDS framework, but independently developed from the same set of ideas. These frameworks were discussed in 1998 by the DFID Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group of which Scoones was a member.<sup>10</sup> A framework diagram was eventually adopted by the Group, discussed at the NRAC Conference and published by DFID (Carney, 1998) (see Figure 2).

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<sup>10</sup> See section 2.7 Natural Resources Department's SLA Initiative below.

**Figure 1 IDS’s Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Framework**

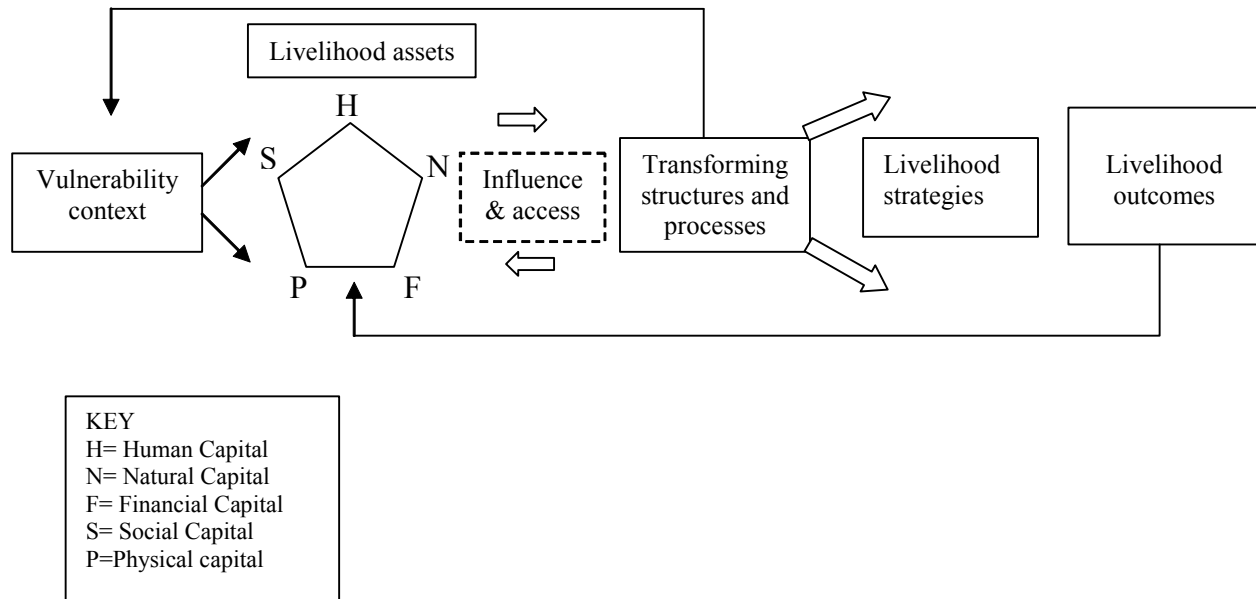


Source: Scoones, 1998

## 2.7 Natural Resources Department’s SLA initiative

In January 1998, the then Natural Resources Policy and Advisory Department (NRPAD) in DFID, under Michael Scott, initiated a consultation on SLA. The consultation extended both within DFID (at Headquarters and in regional offices) and outside (with NGOs, other donor agencies, researchers and consultants). A Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group was also established, comprising a mix of DFID officials and outsiders from the UK research community, plus Oxfam. Michael Scott was the chair and Diana Carney, then a researcher at the ODI, was Secretary. Its prime objective was to operationalise the sustainable livelihoods concept to which the White Paper had committed UK policy. The Group produced papers which were presented at the DFID Natural Resources Advisers’ Conference in July 1998 (Carney, 1998).

**Figure 2 DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods Framework**



Source: Carney, 1998

All this work was brought within the ambit of a newly created Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office (SLSO) within DFID in April 1999. Jane Clark was appointed and remains its Head. The Office currently has four advisers with different programme expertise and ‘link persons’ in other DFID departments.

In the subsequent years the SLSO has actively promoted SLA in a number of ways:

- Preparation of a series of Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets to summarise and share emerging thinking on SLA – the first, which provided an overview, was published in April 1999 and others followed on conceptual framework, uses, methods, policy reform, comparing development approaches, SLA in practice, and on references and sources (DFID, 1999a, 2000d, 2001). French, Spanish and Portuguese translations are available;
- Creation of the Livelihoods Connect website ([www.livelihoods.org](http://www.livelihoods.org)), managed for DFID by IDS, with reference material; news of publications, policy developments and events; an open noticeboard; links to organisations; and an email update service for subscribers;
- Provision of distance learning materials for practitioners, based on the Guidance Sheets and available from the Livelihoods Connect website;
- In succession to the earlier Virtual Resource Centre, the establishment of the Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group (SLRG) – a group of researchers and consultants with call-down contracts to act as advisers to DFID, either individually or through the formation of subgroups;
- Promoting and supporting the application of SLA in DFID’s country programmes – SLSO estimates that up to £200 million has been spent in SLA relevant aid;<sup>11</sup>
- Running workshops and conferences – for example, a series of fora to introduce SLA to consultants; in-country training of DFID and partner organisations; a regional workshop in Bangladesh in May 2001;

<sup>11</sup> Estimate by Jane Clark in interview.

- Publishing promotional reports on SLA, many authored by researchers and consultants, on topics such as the lessons from early experience (Ashley and Carney, 1999); comparison of different agencies' approaches to SL (Carney et al., 1999); the contribution of SLA to poverty reduction (DFID, 1999b); a review of current SLA thinking and practice (DFID, 2000a); an explanation of DFID's livelihoods approach (DFID, 2000b);
- Commissioning further research under the DFID Policy Research Programme with a focus on the implementation of SLA policies.<sup>12</sup>

The annual three-day meetings of DFID's Natural Resources Advisers provided regular opportunities to reflect on progress with SLA, exchange experiences and develop ideas. Outsiders from the practice or research communities were always involved, often as presenters or discussion leaders. Papers from the conferences are often published (e.g. Carney, 1998; Ashley and Carney, 1999). In 2001, Diana Carney conducted a more thoroughgoing review for DFID, involving consultation with the research, policy and practice communities and subsequent discussions at a meeting in October 2001 (Carney, 2002).

## 2.8 Inter-agency working

DFID operates in a global context of NGOs, other donor agencies, and multilateral institutions. The 1997 White Paper made a commitment to:

work closely with other donors and development agencies to build partnerships with developing countries to strengthen the commitment to the elimination of poverty, and use our influence to help mobilise the political will to achieve the International Development Targets (DFID, 1997: section 2 summary).

Since the 1997 White Paper, DFID has actively promoted SLA with other agencies. This has been pursued through:

- Inclusive policy development work, consulting widely with NGOs, other donor agencies and partner organisations, as DFID reflected on experience with SLA and developed SL thinking – often engaging external consultants in this work;
- Joint initiatives – a good example is the March 2000 Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches. This was organised by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), part-funded by DFID and attended by representatives of CARE International, the World Food Programme (WFP), UNDP and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (FAO, 2000). As a follow-up DFID has funded a FAO Livelihoods Support Programme seeking to improve the impact of FAO interventions through the application of SLA;
- Facilitating job mobility of UK researchers, policy-makers and practitioners for permanent posts, short-term contracts or secondments with various multilateral organisations including the World Bank, FAO and IFAD.

## 2.9 Late 1990s research connecting the macro and micro

In the later 1990s a new strand of work by researchers began exploring the interconnections between practical analyses and actions to promote sustainable livelihoods on the ground and the broader questions of development policy. The rationale was that:

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<sup>12</sup> See section 2.4.

there remains a wide gap between bottom-up livelihoods analysis and top-down policy analysis with the findings of the former generally being seen as too context-specific to guide policy making, and the findings of the latter generally being seen as too highly aggregated to reflect the complexity of livelihoods (Shankland, 2000: Summary).

Some of this new work was emerging from existing empirical research, some was more the product of conceptual thinking and much of it was commissioned by DFID. Examples of topics covered by work of this kind include:

- Policy analysis and the sustainable livelihoods framework – the final report from the IDS SLA research (Shankland, 2000);
- Rights and sustainable livelihoods – a background paper commissioned by DFID for the World Development Report 2000/2001 on sustainable development (Moser and Norton, undated);
- Creation of a Policy Institutions and Processes (PIP) sub-group of the SLRG, led by Frank Ellis of ODG, that prepared short papers and held a workshop in 2000; later synthesised into a single document by Hobley (2001);
- The use of SLA in poverty reduction strategies – a discussion paper commissioned by DFID (Norton and Foster, 2001);
- The implications of SLA for organisational change and policy processes – a paper drawing on the discussions at the March 2000 Inter-agency Forum (Hobley, undated) and other IDS papers (Keeley, 2001; Pasteur, 2001);
- Technological change and market development in SLA – work by the Intermediate Technology Development Group (Albu, 2002);
- Working papers emerging from the four PRP-funded livelihood research projects described above and running from April 2000 to March 2003; these projects are providing new insights into the research application of SLA in a poverty reduction context.

Much of this recent work has used the sustainable livelihoods framework as its point of departure; exploring, interpreting and even modifying its components and relationships. SLA remains a work in progress and such continuing research helps to develop its potential.

## 2.10 The 2000 White Paper

In December 2000 a second White Paper on international development was published entitled *Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor*. In its Foreword the Secretary of State declared:

this second White Paper on International Development stands alongside our first...[that] committed us to focus all our development effort on the reduction of poverty and the mobilisation of the international system to meet the International Development Targets...This second White Paper analyses the nature of globalisation. It sets out an agenda for managing the process in a way that could ensure that the new wealth, technology and knowledge being generated brings substantial benefits to the one in five of humanity who live in extreme poverty (DFID, 2000e: Foreword).

While this second White Paper was intended to complement the 1997 White Paper, it is not explicit about how its new analyses and commitments relate to the existing policy objectives of *inter alia* creating sustainable livelihoods for poor people. Implicitly it raises the issue – pursued in the most recent research – of what macro policy framework is needed to support sustainable livelihoods. This is the new challenge for SLA.

### 3 The Key Research/Policy/Practice Interactions

The story of how SLA developed is peopled by a range of actors, including researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. Sometimes they worked alone within their own research, policy or practice communities; sometimes they crossed the boundaries of those communities and engaged with others – through writings, discussions and collaborations of varying degrees of formality. This section of the Paper pinpoints the key stages at which important interactions between research, policy and/or practice seem to have occurred. As can be seen now, what was important about these interactions was that they set a new course for or gave a new impetus to the development of SLA.

Four key interactions are identified:

- the emergence of Sustainable Livelihoods 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
- the operationalisation of SLA within DFID in the late 1990s

Each of these interactions are characterised in turn below.

#### 3.1 Emergence of the SL paradigm

The emergence of the sustainable livelihoods concept had all the qualities of a classic ‘paradigm shift’ – defined as ‘a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions’.<sup>13</sup> In interviews, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers often attested to the role of the 1992 IDS discussion paper (Chambers and Conway, 1992) in changing their perceptions of the nature of rural development and the priorities for policy and practice. Some could clearly recall when and where they first read or heard of the concept. This shift came at a time when previous dominant theories and practices – particularly those associated with integrated rural development – were losing their intellectual and political attraction. Sustainable livelihoods offered a fresh approach.

Part of its attraction was that it captured and synthesised diverse strands of evolving thought and action. It has been seen as having conceptual, practical and organisational roots (Ashley and Carney, 1999: 4):

- Conceptually it drew on changing views of poverty, recognising the diversity of aspirations, the importance of assets and communities, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures and processes;
- In practical terms it placed people – rather than resources, facilities or organisations – as the focus of concern and action; and emphasised that development must be participatory and improvements must be sustainable;
- Organisationally it had evolved within research institutes, NGOs and donor agencies and was not exclusive to one or the other.

While the Chambers and Conway paper gave the concept powerful expression, it had been in circulation for some time. It seems to have first been presented five years before in the report of an agriculture advisory panel of the Brundtland Commission, of which Chambers was the UK member (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987b). The panel had argued for agricultural systems that focused as much attention on people as on technology; as much on resources as on production; and as much on the long-term as on the short-term (World Commission

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<sup>13</sup> Definition from the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) and referenced to the writing of Thomas Kuhn in the 1970s.

on Environment and Development, 1987b). The sustainable livelihoods concept had also been pursued at a 1987 conference organised by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) from which papers were published (Conroy and Litvinoff, 1988).

Nevertheless it was through the 1992 IDS paper that the concept gained widespread currency. It provided an appealing presentation by well-known thinkers from an institution of high repute. It built on well-established research traditions in different fields and chimed with an evolving political philosophy of a more people-centred approach to development. It was the right statement at the right time.

### **3.2 The adoption of sustainable livelihoods in practice and research**

This can be appreciated by the speed at which the sustainable livelihoods concept was picked up by a number of agencies. Staff at Oxfam, CARE and the UNDP were attracted by it and adopted variations in their work. This happened explicitly from 1993 onwards, but seems to have been foreshadowed by earlier internal debates and practices. It appears they may also have been tuning in to the emerging concept before the 1992 IDS paper appeared in print. In embracing sustainable livelihoods, the NGOs were building on their long-standing commitment to participatory approaches to development. The concept aligned with their existing values and beliefs. But it also gave them powerful new analyses and arguments with which to promote them.

For the researchers the sustainable livelihoods concept provided a rich new agenda. It quickly became an international focus for both empirical and theoretical work – in IIDS in Canada, in the Rome based SID, as well as in the UK at IIED, ODI, UEA and IDS. For them, as for the donor agencies, it had the appeal of both continuity and change. It built on established perspectives but reconfigured them in a new and attractive paradigm. It was this new intellectual direction in the research community that ODA identified when looking in 1995–96 for new major research initiatives to support.

But while the agencies provided fertile ground for SLA to take root, it required individuals in these organisations to sow the seed. Naresh Singh was instrumental in forging links between the UNDP and the IISD, where he became Director of the Poverty and Sustainable Development Programme in 1993; he later became the UNDP's Principal Adviser on these issues. Koos Neefjes played a similar role at Oxfam, as did Tim Frankenberger at CARE International. The prime mover in ODA was Sean Conlin, who saw in sustainable livelihoods the potential for a major new priority for the ESCOR research programme.

### **3.3 Political endorsement: the 1997 White Paper**

It was quite clear that development policy was due for a shake-up when Labour gained power in May 1997. Clare Short, the new Secretary of State for International Development, showed strong commitment to pro-poor strategies and, like all the new Ministers, she was keen on issuing an early White Paper. Even so, the prominence given to sustainable livelihoods in the November 1997 White Paper took the practice and the research communities by surprise. Its status as one of the three main policy objectives was universally welcomed, however it remains unexplained to those outside DFID.

An important part of the background to this development was the need to reorient UK policy towards the International Development Targets for 2015. Among these Targets was one for halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and another for reversing current trends in the loss of environmental resources. The Targets had been endorsed in 1996 by western donor

countries, grouped together in the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Sustainable livelihoods as an approach to meeting these targets was discussed within DAC and particularly in its Environment Working Committee, of which Andrew Bennett of ODA was a member and for which Richard Sandbrook of IIED was an adviser.<sup>14</sup> Implementing the Targets became the leitmotiv of the White Paper.

Within the UK the process of White Paper preparation was inclusive. Submissions were encouraged from outside organisations between the election in May and White Paper publication in November. Oxfam, IIED and IDS all made such submissions. There were also round-table meetings with ministers and officials to which researchers and practitioners were invited.<sup>15</sup> There had also been earlier discussion on sustainable livelihoods within DFID in the course of the consultative processes, through which the 1996 brief for the ESCOR research programme was defined.

Thus, through both international and domestic contacts, the sustainable livelihoods concept was clearly 'in the air' in DFID at the time of work on the White Paper, but doubtless so were many other ideas. What seems to have been particularly attractive about sustainable livelihoods to the White Paper authors was its value as a coherent organising principle for bringing a range of multi-sectoral actions to bear on the primary goal of reducing poverty. It was attractive politically because of its emphasis on the asset base, because of its inherent dynamism and because of its support for self reliance – qualities that resonated with New Labour's philosophy. Presentationally it sounded pro-active – as one interviewee remarked: 'you experience a life, but you make a livelihood'. However it is also clear that, at this stage, thinking about SLA within DFID had not really proceeded much beyond the embrace of the philosophy and the adoption of the language.

### 3.4 Operationalising SLA

The White Paper's new policy priorities did not map neatly onto the existing pattern of policy responsibilities or professional competences within DFID. Nor was there seemingly any impetus from the top of DFID to reorganise around them. The political endorsement of SLA in the White Paper was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for change in DFID's programmes.

It was in this context that the then Natural Resources Policy and Advisory Department, and its Head, Michael Scott, saw an opportunity to reorient its work towards DFID's new commitment to sustainable livelihoods. Scott was finding their traditional approaches, which focused on resources and technologies, less and less convincing in the field. Much of the work was also embedded in rural development programmes which had fallen out of favour politically. He saw SLA as an opportunity to make his team's work more people-centred and to move it into the mainstream of DFID work.

This change had a mixed response from DFID natural resource colleagues – some felt it devalued their technical expertise, while others found it intellectually liberating and organisationally empowering. Outsiders from IDS, ODI, UEA and Oxfam were brought into the policy development process. In particular, Diana Carney of ODI was given a powerful role as Secretary (and principal report author) of the Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group that was established in 1998. Later, the SLSO was created as a separate entity to uncouple SLA from natural resource interests alone, and to reach across to all DFID programme areas and beyond them to the wider development assistance community. This whole post-White Paper initiative was therefore designed to bring outside experience and thinking into DFID's policy and practice on SLA.

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<sup>14</sup> The Environment Working Committee had appointed IIED, IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and WRI (World Resource Institute) as its advisers.

<sup>15</sup> There had also been such meetings with Labour politicians and advisers before the election.



Throughout this process the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provided a powerful focus in operationalising SLA. Ian Scoones offered it as a working idea to the Advisory Group and Frank Ellis had independently developed another version. DFID took it up with enthusiasm, adapting it somewhat along the way to become the version that appeared in the first Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheet (see Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> The Framework has proved a powerful tool in all DFID's subsequent work – in promoting SLA within the Department at Headquarters and in its regional offices and to partner organisations; as a focus for discussions with other donor agencies (Carney et al., 1999); and as an agenda for further policy development and research.

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<sup>16</sup> In Scoones' view, expressed in interview, DFID's adaptation shifted the focal point of the Framework from institutions to assets, which perhaps was necessary to ease its adoption by natural resource interests; later DFID would re-emphasise the institutional dimension.

## 4 Testing the Context/Networks/Evidence Framework

It is clear that both research and researchers have influenced the development of policy and practice in SLA. This has happened in various ways and at various stages of the narrative. To what extent can all this be explained in the terms of the context/networks/evidence framework of influence devised as a working hypothesis for the Bridging Research and Policy project?

The hypothesis is that a positive impact of research on policy and/or practice is determined by three factors: context, networks and evidence.<sup>17</sup> These factors are explained more fully below, with the proposed research questions which arise.

A. The context of politics and institutions:

- How did the global, national and community level political, social and economic structures and interests affect the room for manoeuvre of decision-makers in the policy or practice area?
- Who shaped the aims and outputs of the research, how and why?
- How did assumptions influence policy making? To what extent were decisions routine, incremental, fundamental or emergent? Who supported or resisted change?
- How did applied and academic research influence the development of policy when being put into practice?

B. The legitimacy and influence of actors and networks:

- What roles were played by which kinds of groups and individuals? What were the links between them?
- Which women or men had significant influence over the policy?
- How did researchers and advocates establish legitimacy? Did it make any difference to the policy outcomes?

C. The communication and credibility of evidence:

- How was information gathered and by whom?
- What was perceived as credible evidence by different actors and why?
- Did researchers segment their audience and if so how? Did this affect impact on policy?
- How and why was information ignored, reinterpreted and distorted and by whom?
- Did the communicator, channel, format, style or timing of the communication play a role in influencing policy-makers?

### 4.1 The context of politics and institutions

Time and place have played their part in the SLA case. They have often provided a favourable context at a particular stage in the development of SLA. From the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, there was clearly a shift in thinking towards a more people-centred approach to international development. NGOs had pioneered this shift, researchers provided analytical support for it, and in time government agencies also came to accept it – the Brundtland Commission report in 1987 and the first UNDP Human Development Report in 1990 were evidence of this. This approach later found particular expression in the International Development Targets, which focused on human well-being and sustainability rather than economic growth. This provided a context in which novel,

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<sup>17</sup> A full account of the framework is given in Crewe and Young (2002).

cross-cutting ideas that addressed this new agenda, such as sustainable livelihoods, found a welcome audience.

There were also more specific examples of context favouring the SLA. There were clearly people and agencies, working in increasingly participatory ways in rural development in the early 1990s, for whom the Chambers and Conway thesis (Chambers and Conway, 1992) articulated their ideas and practices. In the mid 1990s DFID was in the market for new research priorities for its ESCOR programme. After the 1997 election, there was a new administration and a new Minister seeking new approaches that would deliver on goals for international development. DFID officials had a pressing need to produce a coherent and rigorous statement of policy for a White Paper – a need which the sustainable livelihoods concept helped to meet. After the publication of the White Paper, its commitment to SLA chimed with the ambition of the Natural Resource Policy and Advisory Department to redefine its role. Most recently the interest of researchers in exploring the institutional constraints on SLA has found application through the commitment in the 2000 White Paper to find ways of ‘making globalisation work for the poor’ (DFID, 2000e).

However it is important to recognise that such favourable contexts rarely offer a *tabula rasa*. The new knowledge created by research usually enters a world of policy or practice already occupied by – even pre-occupied with – other knowledge informing existing thought and action. Such working knowledge may have been derived from previous research or other sources. To get used by policy-makers or practitioners, new research findings must compete for attention with this existing knowledge and sometimes displace it in their thinking. The SLA case shows this is achieved most readily by reaching those who are at the cutting edge of policy or practice and actively looking for new ideas – i.e. donor organisations in the early 1990s, DFID at the time of the 1997 White Paper, Natural Resources Department thereafter.

Two contextual influences can be separated out in the SLA case. First is an underlying progressively more favourable climate for the adoption in policy thinking of more participatory, poverty-focused approaches to international development. The scope of this contextual shift was international, focused particularly in global institutions and fora – the UN and its agencies, OECD, the international NGOs – and happened through the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, it found little expression in UK policy until the 1997 change of administration. Secondly, there was a context favourable to the development of the specific SLA concept in both research and practice, and through their interaction. This context was characterised by practitioners seeking new approaches to development work and researchers funded to reflect on that practice. It was only after the 1997 White Paper, with the urgent need to operationalise its SLA commitment, that these two contexts connected.

## 4.2 The legitimacy and influence of actors and networks

While researchers, policy-makers and practitioners have all played parts in the SLA narrative, these terms are insufficient to define the variety of roles in their many interactions. Once sustainable livelihoods had been created as a concept, its adoption in practice and policy was facilitated by people playing different roles, for example:

- as testers – applying it empirically and reporting the results
- as developers – expanding and extending the concept to enhance its relevance
- as champions – promoting and supporting commitment to the concept
- as communicators – expressing it in ways that enhanced its appeal to different audiences
- as interpreters – relating it to different issues and contexts
- as advocates – building more support

There are many examples of these roles being played in the SLA case. Chambers and Conway had a talent for communication as well as for thought. Naresh Singh at IISD/UNDP and Koos Neefjes at Oxfam were acting as testers, developers and champions of sustainable livelihoods in those organisations. Sean Conlin championed further research. Diana Carney, as Secretary of the Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group, was skilful as both interpreter and communicator. Michael Scott acted as a champion for SLA within DFID after the 1997 White Paper. The frameworks described by Ian Scoones and Frank Ellis were important development work. Advocacy has also been an important part of the SLSO's remit. As these examples show, these different roles were not always discrete and indeed were often combined. Particular roles were not usually exclusive just to researchers, policy-makers or practitioners: that is, the same kinds of actor played different roles and the same role could be played by different actors. In the course of the development of SLA, the roles often recurred.

These roles were shared amongst a fairly small community of people involved in the development of SLA – as researchers, policy-makers, or practitioners. They are mostly specialists with long careers in this field – this certainly is truer of officials in DFID than of those in many other government departments. Consequently they know of each other, mostly know each other, and are in frequent communication. In recent years the SLSO has actively fostered the development of this community, both nationally and internationally, and has drawn researchers into policy development work, particularly through the Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group. This intimacy has fostered awareness, mutual respect and trust which have eased the communication of ideas and experience between practice, policy and research. It does also mean though that it has become more difficult for researchers outside this community to have influence.

It is also notable how job changes have been a feature of the SLA narrative – examples are Singh moving between IISD and UNDP; Carney between ODI and DFID (as an adviser) and then into consultancy; Scoones from IIED to IDS; Moorehead (nee Davies) between IDS and DFID; and Conway between Imperial College, IIED, Ford Foundation, Sussex University and the Rockefeller Foundation. As they moved (and continue to move) from one organisation to another they took their knowledge and experience of sustainable livelihoods thought and practice with them.

The networks in which these actors played their roles had a particular configuration. A conventional view is that research informs policy and that policy is implemented through practice. This linear, one way relationship can be expressed thus:



So policy is the appropriate target for influential research. The SLA narrative reveals a rather different pattern of relationships. Research impacted on practice – in the early 1990s, as much as on policy – in the 1997 White Paper. Also the relationships were not just one way. Chambers and Conway remarked that ‘livelihoods, and sustainable livelihoods, are concepts which have evolved more from open-ended fieldwork than from the closed concerns of surveys and statistics’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 25). Similar interactions between practice and research operated in the work of the UNDP, IISD and IIED. At a later stage the policy commitments flowing from the 1997 White Paper had a marked influence on the researchers’ agenda. So it is more accurate to represent the SLA research/policy/practice interaction as shown below, where all three have two-way interactions with each other:



### 4.3 The communication and credibility of evidence

The evidence to support the SLA concept accumulated over a decade before the policy shift of the 1997 White Paper. It derived from both theory and practice and, importantly, from the iteration between the two made possible by the intimate networks connecting researchers and practitioners in this field. The SLA concept therefore had the advantage of being both intellectually attractive and empirically tested – characteristics that were attractive to the White Paper authors. Nonetheless its adoption as a DFID policy was not actively promoted by any alliance of institutions or individuals. There was no SLA political campaign. Rather the concept was brought to the notice of DFID policy-makers by a variety of routes and media. It then progressively became part of the policy discourse in the mid 1990s, first for the International Development Targets to which the UK subscribed as an OECD member and subsequently for the 1997 White Paper.

It is notable how modest in size the two key research documents were in the SLA narrative. The Chambers and Conway 1992 paper ran to 34 pages and Scoones' 1998 paper to 22 pages – both very readable, easily reproducible. They both used powerful modes of expression. In the 1992 paper it was the term 'sustainable livelihoods'. Chambers claims to have calculatedly conjoined the two words, making a new phrase in order to arouse curiosity, to challenge conventional thinking and to insert a new idea into established discourse.<sup>18</sup> In Scoones' 1998 paper it was the diagram of the sustainable rural livelihoods framework which grabbed attention. Its principal virtue was its economy in expressing ideas about a complex set of relationships – really 'a picture worth a thousand words'. Subsequently, it also proved valuable in mapping the various interests with whom DFID and the SLSO would have to deal if they were to promote SLA.

The SLSO has recognised the continuing importance of effective communication in promoting and developing SLA. For political and lay audiences it has published reports which use clear prose and graphics to present SLA in lay terms, often employing brief case studies to bring the arguments to life (DFID 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). For practitioner audiences it has created the Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets as a loose-leaf handbook (DFID 1999a, 2000d, 2001). It has also exploited the potential of the internet by creating (with IDS as its agent) the Livelihoods Connect website as an open and accessible resource for all who wish to keep up to date and to exchange views and experiences on SLA.

But the SLA case also shows the importance of personal contact in the transfer of knowledge between research, policy and practice. Personal contact has two key characteristics. First, it is interactive and two-way, allowing question and answer and discussion – most apparent in face to face meetings, but clearly also in telephone or email communication. Secondly, it is individualised and so the knowledge transfer can be tailored precisely to the expertise and interests of those involved. Personal interaction can take place in many ways – through contact (sometimes arranged, sometimes chance) between people working in different settings or brought together in the same setting through job mobility (sometimes secondments, sometimes job changes). Many of the key influences of research on policy and practice in the SLA narrative were strongly shaped by these kinds of personal contact.

Even the most strongly targeted and personalised interaction between research, policy and practice may not achieve influence with a single shot. The SLA narrative had several strands to it – with many actors playing diverse roles, having different perspectives, engaged in many interactions at successive stages. This multiplicity was one reason for the success of research in shaping policy and practice in this case. This is comparable to the law of requisite variety in cybernetics<sup>19</sup> – that a regulating system needs to generate as many states as can the regulated system. So where the

<sup>18</sup> Other, more recent examples of such tropes are 'social capital' and 'ethical investment'.

<sup>19</sup> See Ashby (1956).

context of policy and practice is complex, as in the SLA case, the means adopted by research to influence it must be equally complex. Thus a single communication of a research finding, for example spoken at a conference or written in a publication, will never be sufficient. It must be communicated many times and in many different ways to many people to strengthen its chances of influence.

## 5 Conclusions

The SLA case is a remarkable story of research influencing policy. Over less than a decade, between 1987 and 1997, an idea that originated from researchers, conceptualising both emergent theory and practice, was adopted as a guiding principle of UK development policy. It is easier to provide a narrative of how this happened than an explanation of why it happened. The proximate causes of each development – especially the four key interactions analysed in section 3 – can be readily identified. The ultimate causation is less apparent.

Nevertheless the context/actors/evidence framework helps to explain much. In summary:

- There was a context of practice imperatives and research opportunities that provided favourable ground for the development of the SLA; and, for its translation into policy, there was a progressively more favourable context for its acceptance and then finally the major opportunity of the 1997 White Paper;
- There was an intimate network of actors including researchers and practitioners who, in various roles, nurtured the idea in its early years and then later shared it with their policy contacts – albeit in an undirected way;
- Finally, the idea itself was credible and attractive as evidence, both intellectually and practically, and was powerfully and repeatedly communicated between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

However, this still leaves two other important factors in the SLA case outside the framework – time and chance.

The SLA idea took a decade to travel from its origin in research and practice to its policy destination.<sup>20</sup> That was partly the consequence of waiting for the right conjunctions of context, actors and evidence that enabled each of the key interactions that speeded the idea on its journey. In this case the impact of research on policy did not happen in one leap, but through a number of steps forward. The decade-long lapse may also be because ideas travel slowly. Ideas compete for the attention of practitioners and policy-makers, so they have to be persuaded to discard old ideas – and the policies and practices derived from them – as well as to embrace new ideas. This rarely happens through instant conversion; more often it happens through a progressive change in perceptions which takes time for people to recognise and acknowledge. A decade may not be a long time in policy development.

There must also be recognition of the serendipity that characterised some episodes in the SLA story. The 1992 Chambers and Conway paper was conceived when the two long-standing friends found themselves both working in India in 1991 with time for long discussions. Richard Sandbook was advising OECD in 1996 when the International Development Targets were on the DAC's agenda. Andrew Bennett of ODA was also involved at that time. Ian Scoones' recruitment to DFID's Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group, which adopted his tentative idea for a sustainable livelihoods framework, resulted from a chance encounter with Michael Scott. It can be argued that if one such chance connection had not occurred, then – within the close networks characterising the field – another with similar effect might have done, but one cannot be certain of that.

So the SLA case study suggests that, while context/actors/evidence framework captures most of what happened, it is perhaps too mechanical, too determinate to provide a full explanation. It would fit the SLA case better if the framework incorporated the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions in historical interpretations of events. That is, the framework identifies the

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<sup>20</sup> Such elapses of time are not uncommon for the adoption of many kinds of social or technological innovation.

necessary conditions for the successful impact of research on policy – if they were not met then there would have been no chance of successful impact. However, they alone could not guarantee impact. Actual impact required other, sufficient conditions to be met. In the SLA case these were the elapse of time and chance encounters. In other cases these sufficient conditions may be different.



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## Annex: Interviewees and Correspondents

The study has drawn on the recollections and opinions of a number of people involved in the development of SLA. This has been facilitated through face to face interview, telephone interview or email correspondence, either with myself or my colleague Doug Daniels. All such contact was confidential. So, with a few exceptions agreed with the interviewee or correspondent, there are no direct attributions in the text. Those contacted are listed below alphabetically by second name, coded I (for face to face interview), T (telephone interview) and C (email correspondence) to indicate the mode of contact. I am grateful for their cooperation.

Caroline Ashley	Sustainable Livelihood Resource Group, ODI	(I)
Andrew Bennett	Chief Natural Resources Adviser, ODA and DFID	(T)
Stephen Brown	Director, Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP	(I)
Diana Carney	Consultant formerly at ODI	(T)
Robert Chambers	Participation Team, IDS	(I)
Jane Clark	Head, Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office, DFID	(I)
Sean Conlin	Head of ESCOR division, OECD, DFID, 1993–96	(C)
Gordon Conway	President, Rockefeller Foundation; formerly Vice Chancellor, University of Sussex and Director; Ford Foundation in South Asia	(C)
Jennie Dey Abbas	Chief of Rural Institutions, FAO	(I)
Frank Ellis	Overseas Development Group, University of East Anglia	(C)
Barbara Hendrie	Social Development Adviser, DFID	(I)
Antonio Hill	Policy Advisor – Environment, Markets and Sustainable Livelihoods, Oxfam	(I)
Simon Maxwell	Director, ODI	(I)
Richard Sandbrook	Former Director, IIED	(I)
Ian Scoones	Environment Team, IDS	(I)
Michael Scott	Head, Rural Livelihoods Department, DFID	(I)
Naresh Singh	Consultant; former Principal UNDP Adviser on Poverty and Sustainable Livelihoods	(I)
Henry Stenefield	Animal Production Systems	(I)
Myles Wickstead	FCO; formerly 1997 White Paper team, DFID	(C)