

Principles and processes for enhancing sustainable rural livelihoods: Collaborative learning in Uganda

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SUMMARY

Livelihood diversification is essential to food security and improved incomes for human development in African rural communities. Uganda's agrarian economy suffers from limited diversification, environmental degradation, low incomes, and multifaceted negative impacts of AIDS. Efforts to stimulate and support innovation in agricultural production technology, forms of social organization, and poor markets are essential elements in promotion of sustainable rural livelihoods. Iowa State University's Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods and its partner organizations are applying a multi-dimensional approach to engage Uganda farmers and rural leaders in community-based learning and capability strengthening. We describe the role played by livelihood diversification and explore the promotion of sustainable livelihoods through scholarship with praxis. Sustainable livelihoods concepts are examined as a means to better understand contemporary African rural development. We identify principles and processes critical to achieving sustainable livelihoods. Their application is highlighted based on our early collaborative experience, including a discussion of the complexities associated with entering into balanced partnerships required for a successful community-based program. We explore the value of social science perspectives and processes for strengthening rural development in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Africa's development has received increased attention as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (Annan 2000) provide direction for international development through 2015. Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest proportion of the world's people living on less than \$1 a day, and of all middle and low-income countries, African economies exhibited the slowest growth in the 1990s. People south of the Sahara are almost as poor today as they were 20 years ago.

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the poor, accounting for about 20% of the sub-Saharan GDP. While agriculture is the dominant export for East Africa (47% of exports), the comparable figure for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole is about 16% (Dixon *et al.* 2001). The productivity of agricultural labor has declined and yields of food grains, tubers and legumes are no higher today than in 1980. Africa's share of total world trade has dropped from 8% in 1965 to 3% in 1996 (IBRD

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2002). Industrialized nations' subsidies to their farmers make it difficult for poor farmers in Africa to compete globally. Consumer preferences are an important factor in determining what is produced, yet in Africa agricultural priorities and supportive infrastructure are often significantly influenced by governments and donors. Country policies generally provide little support for the needs of the rural poor. HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis are having a profound negative impact on life expectancy, school completion, the cost of social and health services, community and organizational leadership, and work force capacity.

Education and skill development lag far behind, especially for women and girls. Often women do not have access to the resources to increase productivity; their time is constrained by the need to manage multiple responsibilities, and they frequently lack information and affordable access to labor-saving technologies. African land degradation is increasing and the causes are complex – few policy incentives to improve land management and cropping practices, the extreme variability of rainfall and limited water storage capacity, increased exposure of the land to wind and water, high population density in many areas, the severity of weather conditions, and the increasing need to harvest forest resources for food and income. Seventy per cent of Africans rely directly on natural resources for their livelihoods.

In this paper, we describe the vital role played by livelihood diversification in rural areas of developing countries and explore how sustainable livelihoods can be effectively promoted through scholarship with praxis. To accomplish this, we discuss the centrality of the 'sustainable livelihoods' concept as a way to understand contemporary rural development trajectories in Africa, and we explore key principles associated with the application of the livelihoods framework. We continue by identifying forms of assistance that genuinely support local self reliance and sustainability, appropriate roles for partners, and organizational cultures that serve this goal. Application of SL principles is considered in light of our collaborative experience (a Ugandan non-governmental organization and university, and a US university – ISU's Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods). This narrative highlights some of the complexities associated with entering into balanced partnerships required for creating and implementing a

successful community-based development program in rural Uganda.

LIVELIHOOD CENTRALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

In recent decades, development practitioners and theorists have forged a fundamental shift in the way that poverty is understood, and local people's participation is valued in sustainable community development. The sustainable livelihoods (SL) framework helps us to understand the true wealth of the poor. The SL approach places priority on the livelihood systems of the poor, and the ways in which the poor adapt to maintain their livelihoods under conditions of severe environmental, economic or political stress. The first step is to understand the 'wealth' of the poor. Wealth may be reflected in such assets as indigenous knowledge, special skills, individual or group resourcefulness and social support systems, and the strategies that people use to cope with hardships. Over time, these coping and adaptive mechanisms may become part of daily life, e.g., planting drought resistant crops, changing animals' grazing patterns, or sharing tasks with family and friends. The value of the SL approach is that, often with the addition of a little scientific knowledge, improved technologies, financial assistance, or changes in government policies, many adaptive strategies can be made more productive and even sustainable (Helmore and Singh 2001).

Sometimes, there may be need for increased government support, e.g., through improved extension services; or several communities may see advantages in greater cooperation, as in building a community facility to collect and store water between rainy periods. With a small amount of training, some credit, or a part-time job, modest initiatives can be turned into larger, more permanent businesses that employ more people.

Local history and socio-economic patterns influence development. For example, households in developing countries often produce food and earn income from multiple sources to achieve livelihood security. Livelihood strategies may include home-based businesses such as a village-based nursery school, or an entrepreneur who makes and sells porridge to neighbors. Other households may rely on remittances from sons or daughters who work elsewhere, street vending, a job as a school teacher,

or any combination of informal sector alternatives. Understanding the diversity of livelihood strategies and how they are integrated into the social structure, may be an important starting point.

By the late 1990s, the concept of sustainable livelihoods began to emerge as a relatively coherent, integrated approach for guiding development efforts.¹ Sustainable livelihoods frameworks focus on poverty reduction, recognizing the importance of local knowledge, assets, and capabilities as well as people's hopes, dreams and problems. These approaches can be used to encourage local innovation and entrepreneurship, and to strengthen individual and institutional capabilities. Local empowerment, one of the keys to sustainability, is evidenced when local people initiate development activities in which they believe. Sustainable livelihoods frameworks can help to conceptualize the multi-dimensionality of life, and to facilitate greater social equity, ecological integrity, and economic efficiency. A SL approach may require a significant paradigm shift on the part of policy makers, practitioners, and local farmers, particularly if the typical development pattern has been more 'top down' than 'bottom up'.

There are many different definitions of sustainable livelihoods. One developed by Chambers and Conway (1992), and later modified by DFID, is as follows:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from shocks and stresses and maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, whilst not undermining the natural resource base (Carney *et al.* 1999 in de Satagé 2002: 4).

A more people-centered definition of sustainable livelihoods is also instructive:

People's capacity to generate and maintain their means of living, enhance their well-being and that of future generations. These capacities are contingent upon the availability and accessibility

of options which are ecological, economic and political and which are predicated on equity, ownership of resources and participatory decision making (Titi and Singh 1994 cited in de Satagé, 2002: 4).

Food security is only one of several objectives. For example, individuals and families may endure hunger in order to preserve seed for future crops; subsistence crops may be sold to add to household income; degraded land may be transformed for improved production; or young people may be withdrawn from school and sent to work. Livelihood security, which places a priority on the long-term viability of the household as a productive and reproductive unit, may be the overriding concern among poor families (Maxwell 2001).

Considerable variation exists in household resiliency to food insecurity through the ability to engage in diverse livelihood activities. An 'asset-vulnerability' approach (Moser 1998) links vulnerability to security through an increased understanding of seasonality, the impact of shocks (e.g., weather, violence, illness, market and price changes), and mechanisms to respond to livelihood stress. Assets can be utilized to buffer against the impacts of shocks. Development processes should enhance our understanding of coping mechanisms used to protect productive assets. This may include reliance on traditional community structures, family and community support systems, and broader networks. Those with limited social assets are more isolated, powerless and vulnerable (Maxwell 1999; Swift and Hamilton 2001). An important goal of SL approaches is to sustainably increase the asset base and strengthen capabilities to utilize those assets.

DIVERSIFICATION

At the micro level, a livelihood can be considered as the 'assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household' (Ellis 2000: 10). Because rural

¹ Principal organizations adopting the SL approach included the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the World Food Program, Oxfam International, Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom government, CARE International, International Institute for Sustainable Development (Winnipeg), Institute for Development Studies (Sussex), and Overseas Development Institute (London).

households typically cannot obtain sufficient food and income from farming alone, they depend on a diverse 'portfolio' of activities and income sources, nurturing the social networks of kin and community that enable such diversity to be secured and sustained. Diversity, or multiplicity, of food and income sources requires a complex network of social relations to buttress it. Diversification is the 'creation of diversity as an ongoing social and economic process, reflecting factors of both pressure and opportunity that cause families to adopt increasingly intricate and diverse livelihoods strategies' (Ellis 2000: 14).

The concepts of diversity and diversification are also applicable to understanding rural development actors. All countries and communities are comprised of different citizen backgrounds and resources, unique social institutions, varying socio-economic structures and, as a result, diverse reasons for household poverty and vulnerability. Therefore, one community may not view its development needs and goals the same as another. Thus, one common development approach is unlikely to serve all situations. As a general rule, striving for diverse approaches, policies, partners and resources makes good development sense. For example, partnerships may be established among different organizations such as international or national NGOs, institutions of higher education, agencies, village organizations or groups, and various individuals such as local leaders, officials, or politicians. Stakeholder diversity can bring strength and resilience to overall program outcomes through common goals.

Different actors may bring valuable experiences, networks, financial and human resources, and ideas – all of which can contribute to a more sustainable program. However, this variation can also add to the complexity of program management and implementation. If the diversity of organizational partners is extreme, as reflected in differing partner values, operating philosophies, *raison d'être*, etc., this may add to partners' frustration in working together. For some participants, the 'process' time may appear too long relative to the outcomes. This may suggest the need for frequent individual discussions, neutral facilitation, or training on conflict resolution. Partner diversity may require more time to achieve consensus in decision-making. Starting small, with a few different partners, may pay off.

Diversity of operational policies may also be worth considering. There may be instances where some 'top down' decisions are necessary, e.g., to achieve financial accountability. In other cases, participatory or consensus-type decision-making at the community level may be important for program planning. Interactive processes will be worthwhile in the long run. Learning to work together will help to build local ownership in program initiatives, expand social networks, and strengthen individuals' capacity for responsibility and leadership.

The SL approach, and the various tools and methods entailed, is a holistic, people-centered approach that can inform program planning and development. SL unites concepts of economic development, reduced vulnerability, environmental sustainability, and linkages with social institutions and processes, and even rural and urban areas. This framework offers a practical way to understand and respond to the diverse worlds of the poor. Different programmatic entry points are possible, as are different levels and scales. Several targeted interventions can be introduced at once. Analysis can include the various forms of capital to which people may have access, or transforming structures and processes that serve as entitlements, e.g., policies, agencies, or the private sector. Various opportunities, such as those that follow, may emerge, beginning with the people themselves and encouraging community members to set their own agendas and to develop unique plans:

- Expanded production and marketing opportunities for alternative crops;
- The growth of a women's association restaurant to include a food processing business, including more local jobs; and
- Linkages with extension and health to promote demonstration gardens, training in medicinal vegetable production, food preparation and nutrition for HIV/AIDS patients.

The strength of the SL approach lies with the diverse framework it brings for understanding the ways that families derive their livelihoods from different capabilities and assets, then for working with community members and other organizations to reduce household vulnerability. Even with the SL framework, development is a human process for which there are no shortcuts. What works in one location may not necessarily work in another setting. Development involves an enormous amount

of listening, learning, nurturing and supporting in order to more effectively target and use available resources and identify new ones.

SELF-RELIANCE AND ASSISTANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Development involves individuals and communities taking responsibility for the quality and sustainability of their own and their neighbors' livelihoods. Components may include:

- Enhanced self-reliance;
- Creative use of resources; and
- Increased ability to work together on decision making and program implementation.

It is thus possible to simultaneously utilize and enhance various resources. This also helps to minimize dependence on external resources and institutions. Interactions with other institutions can be based on the 'internal logic' and priorities of the community rather than being externally determined. The learning processes will strengthen local institutions and civic capacity for collective action, ideally to move forward together toward a shared vision. While some groups have a long tradition in the rural community and culture, others may be more recently created by external agents for particular purposes (marketing cooperatives, credit associations, self-help groups). Internal challenges to the success of a self-reliance strategy stem from violations of the assumptions that (1) community members share common interests and consensus is central to community development, (2) inclusive participation and democratic decision-making within the community are necessary and possible, and (3) sufficient autonomy exists for people to influence their community's future (Littrell and Hobbs 1989).

Group participation can facilitate local management of development, thereby strengthening civil society and increasing private sector activity. Groups that articulate and pursue their own goals and priorities are more likely to expand livelihood opportunities, and do so in a sustainable manner. A key element is the existence and functioning of mechanisms for addressing local problems and for proactive community planning.

One of the challenges is to anticipate the ways that external assistance can support local development efforts. At one level, development assistance

can facilitate group participation and democratic decision-making. Compared to the 'technical assistance model' in which an external 'expert' assesses a community's situation, then recommends a course of action, a self-reliant approach provides community members with the tools to carry out their own situation analysis, and, together, to develop a plan of action to move the community forward. Using the SL framework, individuals identify and use their own assets and resources, drawing on various sources of capital such as indigenous knowledge, experiences and skills, and local institutions and organizations.

At another level, as evident in the SL framework, there is a need to link communities with structures (government, private sector) and processes (policies, laws, institutions) responsible for social, economic, and political transformation that shape the parameters within which local livelihoods are realized. There are great differences in the way that community development thinking and practice have been integrated into sustainable livelihood program implementation. Brocklesby and Fisher (2003) suggest that community development mechanisms for transforming livelihoods have been notably absent. Rather, program implementation has been focused more on tools and methods, e.g., participatory poverty assessment and policy analysis. Others note that SL gives more attention to micro-level technical development rather than to micro-macro linkages and policy (Moser and Norton 2001). Compared to donor-driven development projects, a livelihoods approach can emerge spontaneously from the knowledge and priorities of the rural poor. For example, in natural resource management, individual or group learning, negotiation processes and direct benefits to local people may be more important than the introduction of a particular technology (Sayer and Campbell 2004). The evolving SL approaches of DFID, CARE International and UNDP address this lack of attention to the linkages between local community dynamics, participation, development needs and macro policy by incorporating a rights-based approach, and giving attention to institutional and macro policy issues.

Mainstream agricultural science and development projects have, in some cases, contributed to disillusionment with food production practices, ecosystem health and human health impacts. With this has come an erosion of public support, in both

high- and low-income countries, for agricultural science and rural development programs and policy. There is increasing concern about the neglect of social equity, economic efficiency, and ecological integrity, all of which have contributed to rural community decline and environmental degradation. Only rarely have agricultural development projects been sustainable after donor support is withdrawn. These and other issues are paving the way for more decentralized, self-organizing, learning community approaches to agriculture and natural resources research and rural development (Pretty 1995; Ashby 2001; Sayer and Campbell 2004).

ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS, CULTURES, AND DYNAMICS

A conceptual framework for understanding organizational characteristics, cultures, and dynamics provides guidance for addressing both community development principles and livelihood components, thereby linking the local situation with national policies and institutions. It can guide analysis of local organizations and groups (Lewis *et al.* 2003), and provide useful feedback to the network of organizations involved. A second useful element is action research which can be applied to

organizational decision-making processes and to program management.

Organizational cultures, relationships, and practices are important for improving livelihoods (see Figure 1). Organizational *culture* consists of the 'assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs (artifacts) of organization members and their behaviors' (McNamara 1999). Examples include an array of beliefs and values (e.g., use of resources, equity, social justice, gender roles, ethnic identity, sub-cultures); management and leadership style; methods of control, authority, and power; and how the group is perceived by members and outsiders. The culture of an organization impacts its decision making, performance, and ability to adapt. It nurtures trusting relationships and opportunities to learn and grow. Therefore, understanding an organization's culture may reveal useful insights about its potential effectiveness in facilitating self-reliant community development and achieving more sustainable livelihoods.

Studies of development organizations' cultures are relatively rare, particularly in Africa. However, the importance of culture in development processes has been receiving more attention. For example, Lewis *et al.* (2003) reported on a study of the effects of organizational culture on World Bank-funded projects focused on empowerment and capacity building of community-based organizations. The investigation, based on fieldwork in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso and Peru, examined relationships between culture, knowledge and power, and generated insights into knowledge formation, project conceptualization, and project implementation. One of the key questions was whether these projects could foster empowerment of the poor under conditions of multiple agency collaboration when 'meanings' about empowerment were inconsistent with the needs of project implementation. Fragmentation among the various organizations' cultures and institutions (technologies, practices, power relationships) may be detrimental to the purported participants and beneficiaries of rural development, while being advantageous to the interests of the state and other development institutions. Thus, the ability to achieve capacity strengthening and empowerment goals may be problematic.

Relationships among members and units within the group and between the group and other organizations can impact internal trust and confidence,

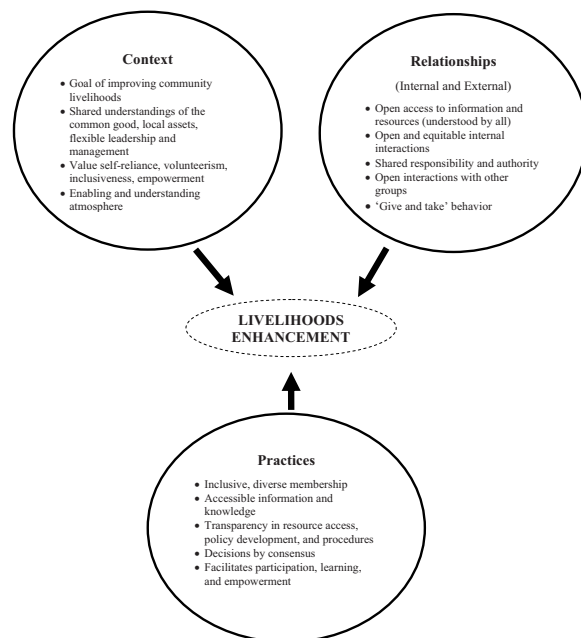


Figure 1 Organizational components that contribute to livelihoods enhancement

and external perceptions of the group. Important questions internal to the group are:

- How is information obtained and shared among individuals or sub-groups?
- How is power shared in decision making?
- How is responsibility shared in implementation?
- How are relationships fostered and maintained?
- If there are constraints or impediments, how can they be addressed?
- How are group members empowered to make the best contributions possible – to enhance the group mission and to enrich individual's own lives?

Relationships with other organizations can shape a group's access to information, potential for co-operation, ability to share resources, and impact on community development. Key issues concern how positive relationships between the group and other organizations are established, maintained, and strengthened. However, the substantial resources that external organizations bring can effectively create unequal relationships.

Organizational *practices* have a direct bearing on a group's abilities to achieve its goals. A 'learning organization' enhances the capability of the group to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Lewis *et al.* 2003). Participating in a learning organization can enrich individuals' lives as well as strengthen the organization. Key features of such organizations include transparent agendas and procedures; informed decisions made by consensus; open communication; tasks and roles that reflect members' needs and interests; and experiences to encourage leadership development and responsibility. Learning organizations are more likely to contribute to improved livelihoods among the poor and disempowered. As noted by Senge (1990: 139), 'Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.'

Even at the highest scale, Africa must be viewed as a 'learning environment' in which policies and institutions facilitate learning opportunities for renewing infrastructure, strengthening human capabilities, and promoting entrepreneurship for community development. Like a learning organization, citizens of every generation must participate in learning processes that harness indigenous and scientific knowledge and practical experience to

transform the social, economic, political and technical environment (Juma 2006).

Brocklesby and Fisher (2003) note the value of integrating concepts and practices from community development into sustainable livelihoods approaches. Community development draws on indigenous knowledge and places value on people's experiences and realities. Methodologies must emphasize people's world-views. Are the concepts of human and social capital adequate to understand asset vulnerability? The SL concept is based on the notion that an understanding of people's assets and strengths can be utilized to promote positive livelihood outcomes. Is this too simplistic for the poor whose assets are extremely limited? Without the benefit of skilled community practitioners, is it possible to gain a deep enough understanding of local realities? Is the SL approach adequate to include the broad range of actors that are needed to achieve sustainable livelihoods?

Diverse organizational relationships may be more effective than conventional one-to-one relationships for information and knowledge exchange, and for collective learning. Multiple organization partnerships may bring more knowledge to the table, catalyze creative thinking, build trust relationships, and generate more useful alternatives for farmers, especially if farmers contribute their own experiences and assessments. Practitioners and researchers can learn from farmers, and business owners can mentor entrepreneurial farmers.

Among the various actors, *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs) can be influential in development processes. NGOs frequently have a variety of purposes and roles, ranging from providing training and support, carrying out research, accessing funds, and coordinating with other organizations to promote policy change. Each NGO brings its own particular culture, such as its ways of operating in the community, perceptions about beneficiaries, program design, staff-management policies, and for working with agencies, other NGOs, CBOs, or universities. The more compatible the cultures of collaborating partners are, the easier it will be to work together. On the other hand, contrasting organizational cultures may build a stronger program, and the potential to complement each others' qualities. In a case like ours, it has taken several years to know and understand the culture of our NGO partner, and to identify our appropriate roles. We are still learning

each other's ways of operating, cultural behaviors, and expectations. We are committed to shared decision-making and inclusive planning processes. It takes extra effort to maintain continual communications simply because of physical distance that separates the ISU management team from our Ugandan NGO partner (Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns, VEDCO) and university partner (Makerere University). Regular communications and visits facilitate our efforts to operate as a learning organization. We are learning to trust each other and to explore the application of the SL concept to decision making and planning.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are local level institutions or organized groups that are involved in development activities. They include customary groups that have a long and enduring past (e.g., kinship or clan-based groups, age-mates, work groups, and support groups, as for illness or funerals), and more recently organized groups formed for designated purposes (e.g., marketing; farmer training; water or land management; income generation). All are relevant to achieving more sustainable livelihoods. CBO culture is manifest through values about cooperation, self-help and volunteerism, equity and social justice, being supportive and helpful to other families, and openness to new ideas/practices. Their relationships are manifest in linkages to public and private sector institutions. The operational styles of CBOs can support capacity strengthening by encouraging participation and empowerment, inclusiveness, decision making by consensus, and decentralization. Outcomes may include increased capability and sense of efficacy and ability and willingness to take on new responsibilities – like volunteerism and leadership. These qualities will shape the manner in which the group takes on future partnerships.

Rural community groups can contribute to community development and poverty reduction through learning processes that empower members. A study in Ghana of over 100 village group members who faced constraints like market access, high transportation costs, and limited information, illustrates the potentials that exist for groups to cooperatively negotiate prices, and to construct and maintain local infrastructure. Some of the keys to successful group processes are village cohesiveness, trust based on existing relationships, and the strength of traditional leaders. Past leadership experience, self-selection of members for key

responsibilities, and flexibility in group operations are also important. However, groups are only one of the alternatives for supporting sustainable livelihoods. Group processes require time, and may be less appropriate for some activities. Group effectiveness can be improved by training in such things as management, accounting, the value of transparency, credit cooperation, and marketing (Lyon 2003).

There are opportunities to strengthen local leadership and organizational capacity through the support of local organizations through clarifying livelihood values and reinforcing the value and feasibility of democratic processes. However, little progress has been made in the development practitioner community to create a truly 'actor-oriented analysis' of the meaning of livelihood vulnerability; as a result, strategies are often misdirected (Arce 2003). The economic and social practices of local people and their organizations, especially informal ones, are still not at the forefront of mainstream development. The central question is: How can our methodologies and policies better reflect the realities of people who face poverty and inequality on a daily basis and strive for a better life, society, and economy? For example, in Uganda's Kamuli District communities, we have learned that some of the disenfranchised populations, such as HIV/AIDS affected households, are members of formally organized groups. Our initial planning process identified special processes (volunteer farmers receiving sustained training to, in turn, teach members of local farmer groups) and resources for reaching out to 'special needs' groups. In other cases, our partners learned that there were extremely poor households that were not part of an organized CBO; as a result, we are assisting these poor households on a one-to-one basis with activities to increase food security, nutrition and health, and income.

UGANDAN SOCIETY AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Uganda is an appropriate country in which to support sustainable livelihoods initiatives. The country has a low level of human development, and significant problems of poverty, hunger and malnutrition (United Nations Development Program 2005). The majority of Uganda's population still lives in rural areas where beneficial integration

into the market economy is limited; the natural resource base is increasingly stressed; and access to government services is difficult or non-existent.

At any given time, 40% of Uganda's population lacks reliable access to sufficient healthy food. Malnutrition undermines work productivity, increases the risk and severity of disease, and can lead to death. Average life expectancy is 47 years, and 39% of children under age five are stunted. Approximately 1.5 million Ugandans (7% of the population) suffer from AIDS. As a result of AIDS, knowledge of crop production is being lost. Crops normally cultivated by women are less evident because of men's reluctance to be associated with these crops. With AIDS, labor inputs diminish, improved practices are not adopted, food production declines, animal herds are reduced, and environmental deterioration intensifies. Adults weakened by AIDS cannot withstand the labor-intensive nature of farming, have low incomes, suffer malnutrition, and become a burden to others. Many young people drop out of school, assume off-farm employment, and become family caretakers. Reduced income leads to lost educational opportunities, and this often leads to poverty.

Uganda's progress looks hopeful. Between 1992–2002, Uganda's fiscal policy strengthened, and GDP grew, inflation declined, and private investment almost doubled (World Bank 2002). Although there was a significant decline in absolute poverty from 1992 (56%) to 1999 (35%), over 82% of the population still lives on less than one dollar a day. Real per capita income is rising about 3% annually. Poverty is concentrated in rural areas, especially among rural food crop farmers and women, and in the northern and eastern regions. In 2000, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) was adopted to promote macroeconomic growth, especially for those in agriculture, improve social services and ways to respond to shocks, provide a just and secure social order, and to promote balanced regional development. This was followed by the Plan for the Modernization of Agriculture (PMA). These reforms support decentralization and local government reform. The PMA is clearly dedicated to transforming subsistence agriculture into commercial agriculture, while recognizing the multi-sectoral nature of rural livelihoods. While one can speculate about the depth of 'ownership' in Uganda's recent reforms, there appears to be high-level engagement in these policy

changes (World Bank 2002; Ellis and Bahiigwa 2003).

Food security, reliable income, good health and education are proclaimed by Uganda's rural citizens to be their paramount goals. Many stakeholders articulate both the need and plans for increased agricultural production based on improved soil fertility and natural resource management, successful introduction of new technologies and adoption of other inputs, crop diversification, marketing, value-added processing in rural communities, and increased access to savings and credit activities.

Civil society organizations are numerous, networked, and committed to improving the lives of the poor majority. Their esteem, however, varies from region to region. In focus group discussions in three districts (Mbale, Kamuli, Mubende), people were asked to evaluate institutions in terms of how helpful they are in enabling people to improve their livelihoods. Traditional or long-standing institutions (elders, clan chiefs, the *gabunga* who coordinates fishing sites, etc.) that provide checks and balances within the society were widely favored, as were some of the newer community-based organizations (e.g., savings groups), and NGOs that directly impact people's lives (e.g., building schools, digging boreholes, piping water). Decentralized government institutions received mixed reviews, and government agencies (extension, fisheries, agricultural research) were not perceived as facilitating institutions (Ellis and Bahiigwa 2003).

Ugandan citizens' participation in local decision making and planning faces challenges associated with the process of decentralization itself and the government's ability to facilitate service provision. The actual availability of local revenues may be a greater obstacle than local leaders' capacity. While each village produces a Community Action Plan based on local priorities, villages get a very small share of the overall revenue. The apparent contradiction between centralized control and local participation appears to have generated two parallel modes of operation. The 'technocratic' mode prioritizes poverty reduction with upward accountability; the 'patronage' mode draws on the language of participatory planning but lacks resources and is dominated by local elites, so that actual 'participation' may not occur. Thus, 'pro-poor' policies and local participation can contribute to sustainable rural livelihoods only through a shift in values and awareness, and the emergence of

active citizenship to promote increased democracy and accountability (Francis and James 2003).

APPLICATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ISU'S CSRL PROGRAM

The Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) at Iowa State University was established in 2003 to foster sustainable rural livelihoods and food security in developing countries. It is designed to provide leadership and support for collaborative efforts in rural communities to increase local food security, strengthen sustainable natural resource use and agricultural practices, increase sources and levels of income, enhance abilities to cope with various shocks, and improve household and community well-being. *Principles* that guide our work include:

- Placing importance on local people's priorities;
- Building collaborative relationships and partnerships with local and national organizations and institutions; and
- Using participatory, inclusive approaches.

Our efforts to improve livelihoods and food security among the poor are premised on:

- Understanding the root causes of their poverty and hunger;
- Enhancing their capabilities, assets, and activities; and
- Helping in the transformation of structural factors that constrain realization of sustainable livelihoods.

Our *strategy* is to support local and national organizations to identify social and economic mechanisms to support local initiatives, human resource development and leadership capabilities. Our initial partners in Uganda are an indigenous NGO, community members and their own grassroots organizations in four sub-counties in one district in the east-central region, and university faculty members who can provide technical assistance in agriculture, institutional development, and nutrition and health. The CSRL works closely with the NGO which, in turn, works directly with multiple local CBOs.

New activities complement those designed to achieve the original objectives (food security and agricultural commercialization); these now include sustainable agriculture and natural resource

management; diet, nutrition and health; school gardens for education and more nutritious lunches; food storage, value-added processing, marketing; local credit systems; entrepreneurship and business development; and local asset building and capability strengthening. We emphasize project activities that promote resiliency and diversification. Opportunities for capability strengthening are identified through learning activities with community members and partner organizations. For example, a group may have a long-term goal of setting up a learning center to monitor young children's health and nutrition status, train local birth attendants and provide nutrition education for HIV/AIDS caretakers. Such a program could begin with a women's group that recognizes the need to improve the health of local mothers and children.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

We face an array of challenging – and interesting – issues concerning how best to work with our partners to support rural people who strive to achieve more sustainable livelihoods. With regard to CBOs, how can we best understand local conceptualizations of key assets, vulnerabilities, risks, etc. and learn how people cope with vulnerability, adversity, etc.? In Kamuli District there are at least 25 registered NGOs and CBOs, in addition to informal or customary organizations. Most organizations offer services in support of livelihoods needs such as HIV/AIDS counseling and testing, child nutrition and immunization, adult literacy, environmental protection, and micro-credit.

We spent over a year getting acquainted with potential NGO partners, our preference going to those that were Ugandan. Many NGOs carry out strong programs, some of which corresponded to our SL interests. Most NGOs operate with international funding support, therefore must continually work to secure their project funding. This makes it challenging to determine the true commitment to livelihoods in that our program has aspects of a donor project. We are a partner in program conceptualization, design and monitoring, as well as to provide funding support for the components in which we have a mutual interest.

Universities offer contributions as well as challenges to this type of initiative. Makerere University personnel bring a wide range of technical expertise, and knowledge of national and local

institutions, communities and ecologies. Makerere University, like Iowa State University, is driven by research and teaching interests, the need to generate funding, and to conduct recognized research. The engagement of communities, while a part of both universities' mandates, is not always prominent in the minds of departments – unless there is a funding potential. This represents a potential imbalance of power *vis* partner NGOs, partly because of participants' education and training levels, but also due to institutional resources. We must be sensitive to our own organization's culture, and how accountability to our donors and to our institution's policies shape our need to balance relationships with community and NGOs.

Within the Uganda SL network, we place a high value on indigenous knowledge and experience – in practice – and we value local people's knowledge, experience, skills, social networks and the full range of resources contributed to our activities. We must respect local experiences, priorities, and suggestions. More broadly, it is important to understand the cultures of all partner organizations and groups, including the meanings associated with resources and practices, and relationships of power and influence within and external to each organization. Doing so requires operating as a learning organization that involves our network of partners.

MOVING FORWARD WITH A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STRATEGY

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has both practical and strategic goals. The practical goal is to generate knowledge that people can apply to improve their individual and collective wellbeing. It is predicated on the 'living knowledge' derived from the everyday experiences of an array of stakeholders who jointly engage in questioning and 'sense making' in relation to needs and priorities for change. As individuals and communities develop skills of inquiry and practice, the evolving learning process can become empowering, leading not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create and accumulate knowledge (Reason and Bradbury 2001). The process of inquiry is as important as the outcomes and that 'knowledge is power'. PAR affirms the rights and abilities of people, regardless of their social or economic position, to meaningfully take part in decisions that

affect their lives (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Thus, PAR can contribute to democratic processes of change and thereby shift the balance of power in favor of poor and marginalized groups (Greenwood and Levin 1998; Selener 1997).

PAR suggests a series of action cycles and related questions to guide the early phase of SRL implementation. Using a PAR framework, the process of joint planning, action, observation, reflection and learning provide the framework for CSRL's long-term approach. With careful facilitation, PAR expands the types of stakeholders in the process by asking 'who has been left out of this discussion?' and 'how can their ideas be included?' The process can nurture a learning environment that empowers participants to plan activities that respond to the diverse needs of community members.

Our approach is premised on strengthening our capability to develop as a learning organization within which meanings are shared, knowledge is accumulated, and plans are proposed and refined cooperatively. By facilitating an open, inclusive process among various stakeholders and team members, CSRL will endeavor to strengthen local communities' capacities to examine their own assets, jointly plan ways to meet their needs, carry out actions (with the support of partners) that they feel will improve their situations, observe and reflect on the process together, and improve these plans for the next cycle.

Central to our effort is the need to generate knowledge about our own participation in the SRL process, and to combine this knowledge with what is learned from others participating in the process. As a learning organization, all of us as partners must become part of the PAR framework.

REVISITING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS PROCESSES

In conclusion, by exploring the theory and application of the SL concept, we have identified several processes that are essential to the successful implementation of a sustainable livelihoods program in a developing country. While our focus has been on our experiences in Uganda, the concepts and processes are applicable elsewhere. While it may be possible to operate a livelihoods program in a variety of ways, our experiences tell us that the following processes are central to the sustainability of a SL program:

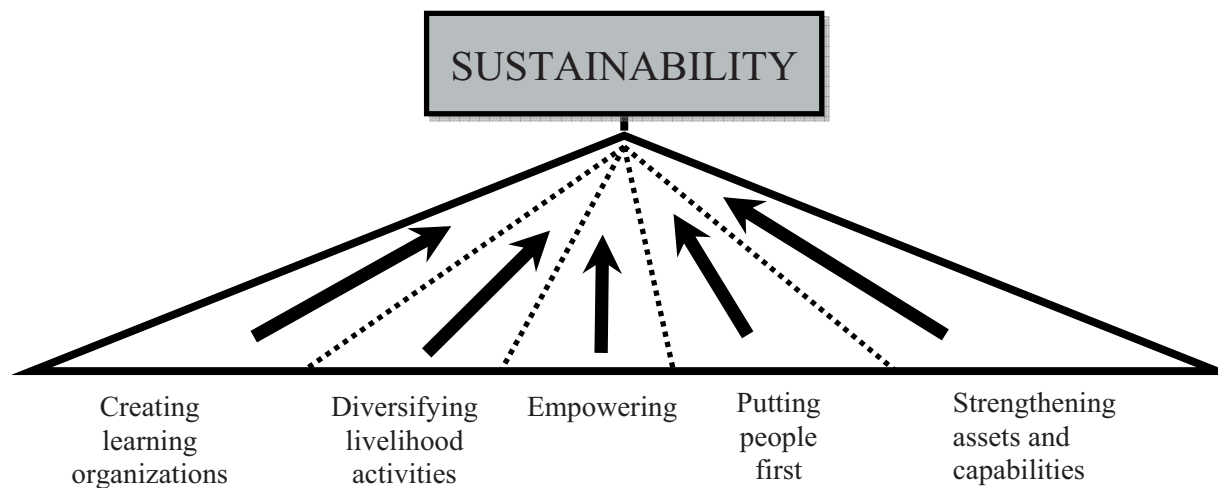


Figure 2 Principles and processes for enhancing sustainability

- Creating a Learning Organization – promoting values, opportunities, processes and policies that enrich our partners as individuals and their leadership capacities, as well as the overall capabilities of the collaborative network;
- Putting People First – strategies that promote methods, processes and policies to generate local or ‘insider’ knowledge, innovations, experiences, ideas, hopes and dreams, including active participation to make local plans a reality;
- Empowering – recognizing unequal power relationships, and learning cooperatively how to bring about needed changes in operating style, decision making, policies, etc; facilitating self-reliance; collaborative planning, decision making and program implementation; planning for change in leadership responsibilities;
- Diversifying – encouraging participation of different types of partners and beneficiaries at all levels; through reflection about operating policies; variety in tools and methods; entry points; in household and community livelihood activities;
- Strengthening local assets and capabilities – learning about household and community assets and resources (social networks, helping relationships, indigenous knowledge, local credit, shared labor, etc.); strengthening local assets; improving local innovations; disseminating successful innovations (Figure 2)

ISU’s CSRL is in its early phases. We have a diverse management team and advisor board, each member with considerable international development

experience and expertise. Our partners bring a wealth of knowledge about Uganda, its people, communities, ecologies, policies and processes. We will continue to look to the social science knowledge base for answers. With this in mind, we conclude with four research **questions** that underlie our capabilities to grow as a learning organization. The answers, which we hope to investigate over time, will guide the implementation of this exciting new program.

- How can we learn to recognize and acknowledge our own, and our partners’, organizational characteristics and cultures in order to more equally balance our working relationships?
- How do we ensure that issues of partner engagement and balance are kept in perspective, without over-shadowing programmatic objectives and outcomes?
- How do we learn to facilitate constructive conversations between ourselves and our partners concerning action research strategies, participatory approaches, and training methods – the core of program implementation?
- How much ‘local control’ is desirable and realistic? How do we achieve this and still address our own accountability?

One of our goals is to narrow the gap between agricultural research, natural resource management and rural development. In keeping with the premise offered by Ashby (2001) and Conway (1997), the health and livelihoods of individuals and communities depend on natural resources and environmental services. Agriculture can help to manage natural

ecosystems for achieving sustainable livelihoods. Local people's voices are essential to understanding cause-effect relationships, assessing trade-offs, clarifying ethical questions, providing feedback on technological change, and to balancing food production interests with those of environmental stewardship. To achieve harmonious integration,

learning communities composed of researchers, local farmers and development practitioners will need to learn to negotiate differences in values that underlie competing goals and trade-offs. We believe this process can be guided by a livelihoods approach.

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