

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Lessons learned from REDD+ and other conservation strategies

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What do we mean by sustainable livelihoods?

“A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base.” (Scoones, 1998)

This most widely used definition of sustainable livelihoods was first adopted in the late 1990s by agencies including the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and Oxfam, amongst others. The accompanying conceptual framework illustrates that people’s ability to access and use assets (including natural resources), and hence the activities and strategies they employ, are influenced by a wide range of policies, institutions and processes, including market and governance mechanisms, and social norms.

If conservation organisations are to help local communities achieve truly sustainable livelihoods then we need to understand that livelihoods are diverse, complex and dynamic. They are the means by which people seek to achieve their life’s goals. These goals are usually not solely about achieving increased income or even entirely about meeting the tangible basic human needs of food, shelter, physical health and security. Often of equal priority are other aspects of well-being, including having a sense of purpose and autonomy, and the fulfilment of socio-cultural and spiritual values. In many cases, people’s livelihoods choices should be seen as “ways of living” not just “means of making a living”. This understanding helps us better appreciate why many people do not want to fundamentally change key aspects of their way of life even if incentivised to do so – and hence why many of the assumptions behind interventions to create ‘alternative’ livelihoods are fundamentally flawed¹.

Why are sustainable livelihoods important for conservation?

There are a number of reasons for conservationists to engage with sustainable livelihoods issues. The most commonly stated rationales include:

- *“Conservation underpins sustainable livelihoods”*: An ‘ecosystem based approach’ relies on the premise that biodiversity provides ecosystem goods and systems that, if managed sustainably, can support people’s livelihoods and well-being.
- *“Sustainable livelihoods and good governance support conservation outcomes”*: This assumes that support to sustainable livelihoods and participatory governance of natural resources can help relieve pressure on biodiversity by reducing unsustainable use.

¹ For a more detailed analysis of these issues see the FFI briefing paper *Why not alternative livelihoods?* <http://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/Why-not-alternative-livelihoods.pdf>

- “*Conservation hinders livelihoods and well-being*”: This premise recognises that conservation activities can reduce local access to natural resources or restrict how much of a say local people have in the management of those resources. There is therefore a moral imperative to ‘do no harm’ and mitigate the costs of conservation by ensuring equitable sharing of any benefits from conservation related activities, as well as supporting people to utilise other livelihoods assets and to maximise potential benefits from the natural resources that they are able to access.
- “*Poverty reduction hinders conservation*”: In many contexts, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss is caused by increased affluence and consumer demand in developed as well as developing countries, together with economic growth policies that lead to an expansion of land under production for agricultural and other commodities. This implies that we need to address these wider drivers of change, alongside providing appropriate support to the local communities affected by them.
- “*Supporting livelihoods activities generates goodwill and trust*”: This rationale is based on the premise that support for livelihoods generates a ‘local constituency of support for conservation’ or provides ‘social licence to operate’ i.e. that local community members are more likely to be supportive of conservation activities, or at least not actively opposed to them, if they benefit in other ways.

FFI’s position on Conservation, Livelihoods and Governance² pays particular attention to the first three of these premises recognising the role of ecosystem services, the importance of resource use rights and participatory governance, and the imperative to, at the very least, ‘do no harm’ to the well-being of already poor or marginalised groups.

The elements of the typology described above are not mutually exclusive: our rationale for integrating livelihoods and associated governance issues into conservation projects is often based on a combination of these elements. However, the primary rationale for our engagement with livelihoods issues is likely to affect our choice of interventions. For example, we may seek to enable women and men to strengthen livelihood strategies directly linked to the sustainable use and management of some of the elements of biodiversity we are aiming to conserve. This can include extractive use of timber or non-timber forest products, such as honey, rattan and other locally important food, medicinal and fibre products. In some cases we support non-extractive uses, for example through ‘eco’ or sustainable tourism development, and direct employment of local people in community ranger or similar roles. Alternatively, we may support strategies not directly linked to the landscape or species of conservation concern but which seek to reduce pressure on those resources, such as productive but environmentally friendly agricultural and agroforestry practices. In some cases, we may help people develop small-scale income-generating activities not directly based on natural resource use, although the opportunities for this are often limited in the poor, remote rural communities with which we work, and the links between these activities and conservation actions and impact are often less clear to those involved.

Conservationists endeavour to incentivise local livelihoods strategies that are *sustainable* in the sense that they don’t destroy biodiversity and the ecosystem services on which those livelihoods depend. However, we also recognise that some elements of biodiversity, such as some endangered or ‘flagship’ species, may be more valued globally for their existence and bequest values than locally, particularly where their presence results in human-wildlife conflict. Other elements that contribute to provisioning services such as food, fuel, fibre, medicine and water may be more valued by local stakeholders (for direct use and cultural values) than they are by the global community. In these cases, we should be explicit about the inevitable trade-offs between conservation and livelihoods, acknowledge that there are not always ‘win-win’ solutions and ensure that it is not the poorest and most marginalised people who lose.

² FFI’s position and approach to conservation, livelihoods and governance is available at <http://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/FFIs-position-and-approach-to-conservation-livelihoods-and-governance.pdf>

In the particular context of REDD+, internationally recognised voluntary standards have requirements related to livelihoods and well-being. For example, the **Climate, Community & Biodiversity Standards** (version 3) requires project proponents to demonstrate that the project does not require the involuntary relocation of people or of the activities important for their livelihoods and culture. Projects must generate 'net positive impacts on the well-being of communities over the project lifetime' and must maintain or enhance values of importance to the well-being of communities. Well-being is defined as people's experience of the quality of their lives including social, economic, psychological, spiritual, and medical dimensions. Also highlighted is a need to pay attention to groups who may be particularly vulnerable to shocks and stresses.

The **Plan Vivo standard** (2012 draft) requires project interventions to have clear potential to benefit the livelihoods of participants over and above the receipt of payments for climate services. Land use management plans need to be appropriate to local livelihoods and not undermine livelihood needs and priorities or reduce food security.

How do we identify locally appropriate livelihoods strategies?

As conservationists our starting point should be to try and understand and address the key drivers of deforestation, ecosystem degradation and unsustainable use that have negative impacts on the biodiversity we are trying to conserve. From here we can explore, alongside female and male stakeholders, the most appropriate approaches to increasing livelihood sustainability that will also contribute to positive biodiversity impacts. This may involve challenging commonly held assumptions both with regard to key threats and to the best livelihoods options. A comprehensive context analysis may well demonstrate in some cases that local livelihood activities are not the main, or exclusive, drivers of ecosystem change. For example, in many landscapes expansion of large-scale commercial agriculture or extractive industries may have a larger part to play in habitat destruction and/or may be displacing local communities from their traditional lands into areas of high conservation value. In these cases, part of our approach can be to support tenure security³, including exclusive or preferential use or management rights that enable people to 'defend' their small-scale, potentially sustainable, livelihoods activities against external and/or more powerful destructive forces. Secure tenure is a key element of some of FFI's work with forest-dependent communities in Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

When trying to identify locally appropriate livelihoods strategies we need to help stakeholders consider **economic**, as well as environmental, sustainability. For livelihood strategies that yield products for sale, there are a number of key questions to be asked when designing appropriate interventions. For example, is there a market demand that will sustain production and sale of those products beyond the period of project support or subsidy? Do producers have the access to information and the relationships with other actors in the market value chain that will enable them to negotiate a fair price and to be able to adapt to future market changes? An often fatal flaw is to start with the supply side of the market – encouraging small-scale producers to take risks by diversifying into 'new' products that are considered biodiversity friendly without understanding how the market chain works and what the barriers are to entry for new producers. Economic sustainability is about durability and adaptability i.e. positive changes to market systems that can be sustained by the system and the actors within it.

Social sustainability is also important – are the activities supported consistent with the choices of community members themselves? Such strategies have a greater chance of being adopted and continued in the longer term than a 'menu' of options that external actors, such as NGOs or government agencies, may choose to promote. We also need to take into account social norms and cultural values which affect both tangible and more intangible elements of livelihoods and well-being, including gender equity⁴. Social sustainability also means that livelihoods choices don't undermine the well-being of others, causing further marginalisation of disadvantaged community members or fuelling conflict. This implies that they are based on a shared vision of a common

³ For more information see the paper in this series on tenure and resource use rights

⁴ See the paper in this series on gender

future for a particular community and consistent with a spatial plan for the wider landscape that has been negotiated and agreed with multiple stakeholders from civil society, government and the private sector.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) adopted by FFI promotes the use of such empowering processes by which community members can make informed decisions about the livelihoods options that are most appropriate to their situation. The Sustainable Livelihoods Enhancement and Diversification (SLED)⁵ methodology, which several FFI teams have explored and adapted for their particular context, is one example of such a process.

How can FFI support such strategies? What is our role?

Given the range of contexts in which we work, and the complex and dynamic nature of people's livelihoods strategies, a wide variety of skills and expertise may be needed to strengthen sustainable livelihoods. As a biodiversity conservation organisation, FFI's project teams rarely have staff to cover the whole range of expertise required to provide intensive technical input and advice on all possible topics. These can include 'technical' natural resource management skills such as agroforestry, sustainable agricultural practices, soil and water conservation, sustainable community forest management and processing of non-timber forest products. They can also include economic skills in microfinance, small enterprise development, value chain analysis and market facilitation⁶ or establishment and management of producer organisations and co-operatives. In addition, the participatory skills, experience, tools and attitudes needed to facilitate gender-sensitive, empowering processes to defining appropriate livelihood development strategies are often absent from the formal training and career development of many of those who choose to work in conservation.

In some cases, we may be able to address these skills gaps in the short-term by recruiting specialist staff for short periods, for example the HARVEST project in Cambodia has employed an agro-ecologist and a bamboo production and marketing expert. However, rural producers often need on-going support and mentoring which can be lost if short-term inputs do not include building capacity and making links with people and organisations with longer term presence on the ground. A further disadvantage of this approach is that often much of the tacit knowledge and trust gained through the process of community engagement on these technical issues can be lost when short-term contracts end.

In other cases, we work with partners who have the necessary expertise, such as the agronomists working for Ya'axche in Belize, Fundacion Entre Volcanes in Nicaragua and the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC). We should acknowledge that our most appropriate partners in some cases may not always look like us, i.e. some may consider themselves 'community development' rather 'conservation' organisations, or some expertise may come from applied agricultural research institutes or from government extension agencies. When working with such partners, we need to consider complementary skillsets and joint objectives so that all parties are clear about approaches and desired outcomes⁷.

What challenges do we face and how have we tried to overcome them?

A number of specific challenges and tips have been identified by FFI project teams trying to support sustainable livelihoods development.

- The costs, risks and benefits of different livelihoods options are hard to establish from the outset, making it difficult for people to make informed choices. This further complicates Free,

⁵ For further information see IMM (2008) *Sustainable Livelihood Enhancement and Diversification – SLED: A Manual for Practitioners* IUCN www.icran.org/pdf/SLED%20Manual%20Final%20-%20Low%20Res.pdf

⁶ For further information on Participatory Market System Development (PMSD) see <http://practicalaction.org/pmsd>

⁷ FFI guidance on partnership development can be found at http://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/Partnership_guidance_September2009.pdf and http://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/Partnership_checklist_English_September2009.pdf

Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes and design of equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms⁸.

- The benefits from Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes, including REDD+, and other conservation initiatives, may not be able to compete with the financial returns of competing land uses such as oil palm or timber extraction.
- There is a danger that adding economic value to natural resources results in ‘crowding in’ (more people exploiting the resource) thereby undermining sustainability, as well as elite capture of benefits, undermining equity.
- History is littered with examples of NGO ‘livelihoods projects’ failing due to the lack of understanding of market systems and incentives, including social and cultural norms.
- Developing mutual trust between conservationists and local communities is really important; it is not just about technical expertise but also about trust and relationship building.
- Adaptive capacity is key: we need to work with people so that they are empowered to adapt to future changes, including climate change, not just ‘deliver’ livelihoods options that may only be appropriate in the short-term and only with intensive external support.
- Increased income, whether through livelihoods development or through cash payments under a PES, does not automatically result in positive wellbeing impacts for both women and men. This depends on the choices people make on how to use additional income.
- Organisational development of community institutions, including paying attention to internal governance, is often critical to enabling people to weigh up options and make appropriate and equitable choices. These may include customary institutions, but also other new or existing community-based organisations, such as village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) and community funds.
- We need to take small steps, at least to start with, to minimise risk particularly to poor members of the community, and to learn from experience of successes and failures before trying to scale-up. Taking a participatory learning and action (PLA) or adaptive management approach can enable this to happen.
- Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches need to be integrated with more rigour into project design, fundraising and implementation, as well as monitoring and evaluation, not just used as ‘buzz words’ in funding proposals.

Key References

FFI (2013) *Why not ‘alternative livelihoods’?*

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Scoones, I (1998) *Sustainable rural livelihoods: a framework for analysis* IDS Working Paper 72

<http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/Wp72.pdf>

⁸ See the papers in this series on Free, Prior and Informed Consent and equitable benefit-sharing

This document is one of a series of outputs from a learning event held in Cambridge in April 2013 to share experience, tools and lessons learned on the social aspects of REDD+ and other conservation strategies.

Topics discussed included: equitable benefit sharing; Free, Prior and Informed Consent; gender; grievance mechanisms; Opportunity Cost Analysis; Social Impact Assessment; sustainable livelihoods; and tenure and resource use rights.

All outputs are available to download from FFI's Livelihoods and Governance library: <http://www.fauna-flora.org/initiatives/livelihoods-and-governance-library/#learning>



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