

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AND VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

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1. Abstract

This paper provides a summary of some important recent thinking on sustainable livelihoods and vulnerability to disasters. In particular, it looks at the sustainable livelihoods (SL) framework currently being developed and promoted.

The paper includes a list of selected references and sources of information on these subjects. It also comments on issues arising from current theories that are relevant to work on livelihood options for disaster risk reduction.

2. Introduction and background

This work was commissioned by the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) as part of its contribution to the project 'Livelihood Options for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia' that is managed by the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) Sri Lanka, in association with the South Asian network Duryog Nivaran (DN).¹ The project has three main aims:

1. To explore the impact of disasters on livelihoods in South Asia, and assess the livelihood needs and opportunities that result from disasters.
2. To identify practical options that can enhance livelihoods in disasters.
3. To test and demonstrate options for enhancing livelihoods that can be disseminated more widely (ITDG 1999: 12).

The project builds on earlier work on people's vulnerability undertaken by DN and DMI that has explored the complexity of this subject. Vulnerability has many dimensions: economic, social, demographic, political and psychological. Vulnerability is not just poverty, but the poor tend to be the most vulnerable. The work by DN and DMI has highlighted the links between levels of livelihood security and levels of vulnerability to disasters. Ensuring livelihood security is an integral part of a sustainable approach to disaster mitigation, but livelihood support is largely ignored in disaster mitigation plans (ITDG 1999: 10-11).

¹ The author is grateful to DMI for permission to update and reproduce the paper.

3. Vulnerability theories

During the 1970s and especially the 1980s the relationship between human actions and the effects of disasters – the socio-economic dimension of vulnerability – was increasingly well documented and argued. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, two important conceptual models were developed to give disaster managers a framework for understanding vulnerability to disasters and for reducing it:

1. Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (Anderson and Woodrow 1989/1998).
2. Pressure and Release/Access models (Blaikie *et al.* 1994).

Both models have been influential among disaster specialists. They are summarised here, with particular attention to their views of livelihoods and how to enhance them.

This section of the paper also looks at DMI’s vulnerability model (Bhatt 1996) and comments on other aspects of vulnerability thinking that are relevant to the subject of livelihood vulnerability and resilience.

3.1 Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA)

This is a framework for NGOs to use in designing and evaluating projects. It was designed to make relief interventions more developmental but has been used more widely in disaster preparedness and mitigation. It is above all a practical and diagnostic tool.

The basis of the CVA framework is a simple matrix for viewing people’s vulnerabilities² and capacities in three broad, interrelated areas: physical/material, social/organisational and motivational/attitudinal.

Figure 1: CVA matrix

| | Vulnerabilities | Capacities |
|--|-----------------|------------|
| Physical/material What productive resources, skills and hazards exist? | | |
| Social/organisational What are the relations and organisation among people? | | |
| Motivational/attitudinal How does the community view its ability to create change? | | |

² CVA makes a distinction between ‘vulnerabilities’ and ‘needs’: vulnerabilities are long-term factors that affect a community’s ability to respond to events or make it susceptible to disasters; needs (in a disaster context) are immediate requirements for survival or recovery after disaster.

Each of the three areas covers a wide range of features:

Physical/material vulnerability and capacity. The most visible area of vulnerability is physical/material poverty. It includes land, climate, environment, health, skills and labour, infrastructure, housing, finance and technologies. Poor people suffer from crises more often than people who are richer because they have little or no savings, few income or production options, and limited resources. They are more vulnerable and recover more slowly. To understand physical/material vulnerabilities, one has to ask what made the people affected by disaster physically vulnerable: was it their economic activities (e.g. farmers cannot plant because of floods), geographic location (e.g. homes built in cyclone-prone areas) or poverty/lack of resources?

Social/organisational vulnerability and capacity. How society is organised, its internal conflicts and how it manages them are just as important as the physical/material dimension of vulnerability, but less visible and less well understood. This aspect includes formal political structures and the informal systems through which people get things done. Poor societies that are well organised and cohesive can withstand or recover from disasters better than those where there is little or no organisation and communities are divided (e.g. by race, religion, class or caste). To explore this aspect, one has to ask what the social structure was before the disaster and how well it served the people when disaster struck; one can also ask what impact disasters have on social organisation.

Motivational/attitudinal vulnerability and capacity. This area includes how people in society view themselves and their ability to affect their environment. Groups that share strong ideologies or belief systems, or have experience of cooperating successfully, may be better able to help each other at times of disaster than groups without such shared beliefs or those who feel fatalistic or dependent. Crises can stimulate communities to make extraordinary efforts. Questions to be asked here include what people's beliefs and motivations are, and how disasters affect them.

Five other factors are added to the CVA matrix to make it reflect complex reality. These are: disaggregation by gender, disaggregation by other differences (e.g. economic status), changes over time, interaction between the categories, and different scales or levels of application (e.g. village or national levels).

Value of CVA to analysis of livelihoods and vulnerability to disaster

The strengths of the CVA matrix are that it is practical and broad-based, linking the many different aspects of vulnerabilities and capacities. If CVA is used properly, it should balance these different factors. Livelihoods are covered: they fit within the 'physical/material' category. On its own, CVA does not provide indicators of vulnerabilities and capacities, just an overarching framework. If CVA were to be used to look at livelihoods, specific indicators would have to be developed. The 'physical/material' category includes hazards, but when applied in practice CVA

tends to underestimate the significance of natural hazards by concentrating on human aspects of disasters.

3.2 Pressure and Release/Access models

These two related models were developed as part of the detailed study of human vulnerability to natural hazards by Blaikie *et al.* (1994). They are more conceptual than CVA and have had some influence on the way that vulnerability is perceived.

The basis of the Pressure and Release (PAR) model is recognition that a disaster is the intersection of two opposing forces: the processes generating vulnerability on one side, and physical exposure to hazard on the other. Increasing pressure can come from either side, but to relieve the pressure, vulnerability has to be reduced.

Figure 2: PAR model
(Blaikie *et al.* 1994)



The model proposes a ‘progression’ of vulnerability with three main levels: root causes, dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions.

Root causes or underlying causes are the most remote influences. They are economic, demographic and political processes within society (including global processes). They reflect the distribution of power in a society, and are connected to the functioning and power of the state.

Dynamic pressures channel the root causes into particular forms of insecurity that have to be considered in relation to the types of hazards facing vulnerable

people. These include reduced access to resources as a result of the way regional or global pressures work through to localities.

Unsafe conditions are the specific forms in which a population's vulnerability is expressed in time and space in conjunction with a hazard. Examples include people having to live in dangerous locations, being unable to afford safe buildings, having to engage in dangerous livelihoods or having minimal food entitlements.

All of these factors change over time, sometimes rapidly. They also interact with each other in complex ways. The outcome can be unpredictable.

The second, linked, model is the Access model that attempts to show how unsafe conditions arise in relation to the economic and political processes that allocate assets, income and other resources in society. The Access model sees livelihood strategies as the key to understanding the way people cope with hazards. Access involves the ability of an individual, family, group, class or community to use resources to secure a livelihood.

Figure 3: access to resources to maintain livelihoods
(Blaikie *et al.* 1994)

Their access to resources is always based on social and economic relations (including the social relations of production, gender, ethnicity, status and age). It varies greatly between individuals and groups, and this affects their relative resilience to disasters. Those with better access to information, cash, means of production, equipment and social networks are less vulnerable and are generally able to recover more quickly.

vulnerabilities and capacities, just a framework for viewing them. The four key categories of food, water, habitat and work security are key elements of livelihoods and the categorisation helps to draw attention to the centrality of livelihoods to vulnerability. If applied sensibly, the matrix should provide insights into this issue but may not cover livelihoods in all their diversity and complexity. Although hazards feature implicitly in the matrix, there is a risk, as with the CVA matrix, of undervaluing their significance in the disaster equation.

4. Sustainable livelihoods approaches

All of the approaches described above are attempts to understand and reduce vulnerability to disasters. They therefore take disaster/hazard vulnerability as the starting point, viewing livelihoods as an aspect of the question. An important recent conceptual development, the sustainable livelihoods (SL) approach, starts from a developmental standpoint and puts livelihoods at the centre of the discussion. It considers vulnerabilities, of all kinds, as part of the context in which livelihoods are shaped. This is a shift in emphasis but an important one.

In essence, SL theory brings the thinking and practice of poverty reduction strategies, sustainable development and participation and empowerment processes into a framework for policy analysis and programming. The SL approach is new and still evolving but its ideas are generating a great deal of enthusiasm in some quarters, including major agencies such as the Department for International Development (DFID) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). SL approaches will probably become part of the mainstream of development discourse in the next few years. Some people believe that SL thinking offers a good opportunity to get disasters and vulnerability higher up the development agenda. It is therefore discussed in some detail here.

Many people and institutions are involved in developing SL theory. A number of approaches have been developed that are broadly similar and draw upon each other. Three approaches are considered here. The principal one is the SL approach that has been developed by a number of researchers and institutions and is now being promoted by DFID. For convenience, this is labelled the SL framework. The other two discussed are those of UNDP and CARE. Neither is discussed in full. UNDP's model is considered with regard to its thinking on vulnerability, and CARE's approach with regard to its application specifically to disaster contexts.

4.1 Sustainable livelihoods framework

The following outline is based on DFID's series of 'sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets' (DFID 1999-2000). Other relevant literature is listed among the references below.

Basic approach

The SL framework is designed to help understand and analyse poor people's livelihoods. It takes a broad view, indicated by its definition of the term 'livelihood':

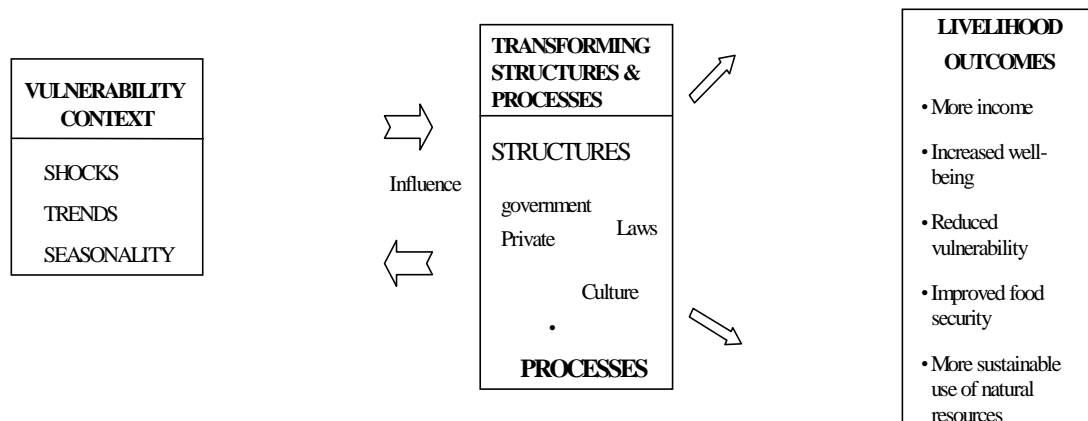
A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. (DFID 1999-2000)

The livelihoods approach attempts to put people at the centre of development (in terms of analysis and participation). It is holistic, recognising that there is a multiplicity of actors, influences, livelihood strategies and outcomes. It also recognises that livelihoods and the forces that influence them are dynamic. It tries to bridge the gap between micro- and macro-level factors and actions.

The aim of the SL framework is to help stakeholders engage in debate about the many factors that affect livelihoods, their relative importance and the way in which they interact. This should help in identifying appropriate entry points for supporting livelihoods. It is emphatically participatory, believing that only participatory approaches can identify problems and solutions.

Figure 5: Sustainable livelihoods framework

Ashley & Carney 1999



The framework starts with the *vulnerability context* in which people live their lives and the *livelihood assets* (in effect, capacities) that they possess. It then looks at how *transforming structures and processes* generate *livelihood strategies* that lead to *livelihood outcomes*.

Sustainability and the vulnerability context

A central feature of the approach is that it views people as operating in a context of vulnerability. This frames the external environment in which people exist and is responsible for many of the hardships faced by the world’s poorest people.

The factors that make up the vulnerability context are important because they have a direct impact upon people's assets and the livelihood options that are open to them. The framework presents three main categories of vulnerability: trends, shocks and seasonality.

Trends are long-term and usually large-scale. They include population trends, resource trends (including conflict over resources), economic trends (national and international), trends in governance and politics, and technological trends. They have a particularly important influence on rates of return from chosen livelihood strategies.

Shocks include human health shocks (e.g. epidemics), natural shocks (e.g. natural hazard-induced disasters), economic shocks (e.g. rapid changes in exchange rates), conflict and crop/livestock health shocks. They can destroy assets directly (e.g. in the case of floods or storms). They can also force people to dispose of assets as part of coping strategies. Resilience to external shocks and stresses is an important factor in livelihood sustainability.

Seasonality is expressed through seasonal shifts in prices, production, food availability, employment opportunities and health. These are one of the greatest and most enduring sources of hardship for poor people.

The factors that make up the vulnerability context are important because they have a direct impact upon people's assets and the livelihood options that are open to them.

Livelihood assets

Like the Access model, the SL framework takes a broad view of people's strengths/capacities in the form of livelihood assets. This is expressed visually as an asset 'pentagon' showing the different types of asset and the important inter-relationships between them.

Figure 6: the asset pentagon
(DFID 1999-2000)



and implement livelihood strategies. These are often complex and may change rapidly in response to the external context. The SL approach seeks to understand the many factors influencing people's choice of livelihood strategy and then to reinforce the positive aspects (factors that promote choice and flexibility) and mitigate the constraints.

Livelihood outcomes are also diverse. The SL framework divides them into five broad categories to make the framework more manageable:

1. more income and more economically sustainable livelihoods
2. increased well-being (non-material goods such as self esteem, sense of control)

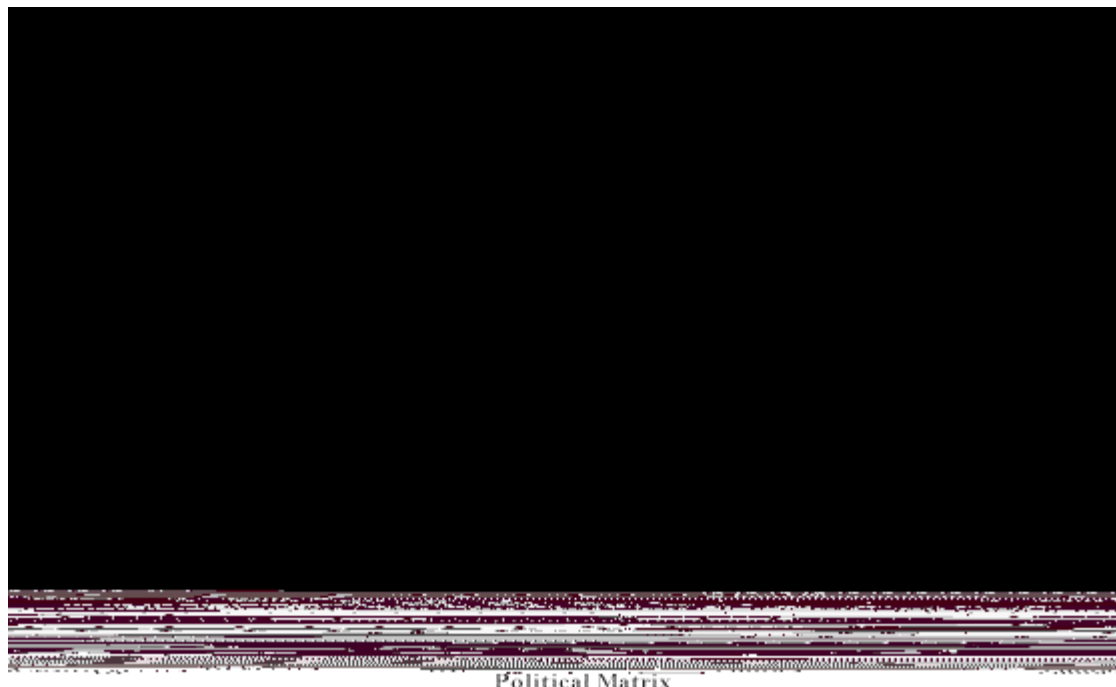
Overall, the SL framework is a good model for viewing livelihoods in all their aspects, and in setting risk reduction and hazard vulnerability in the wider vulnerability and livelihoods context. It is recommended as a conceptual model for framing research studies in the project 'Livelihood Options for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia'.³

4.2 UNDP, sustainable livelihoods and vulnerability

UNDP's thinking on SL is influenced by the framework described above. Two relevant elements are described here: a conceptual framework and one of the several models considered before reaching that framework (Hoon *et al.* 1997).

In UNDP's conceptual framework, the livelihood system is defined by three distinct processes that are linked through a tripartite structure.

Figure 7: analytical framework for SL used by UNDP
(Hoon *et al.* 1997)



The three sides of the analytical triangle are Human Ecology, Expanded Entitlements and Policy Matrix.

The *human ecology* side refers to the relations between the natural resource base and human society.

The *policy matrix* side refers to the relationship between policy and livelihood systems. Patterns of entitlements, distribution of assets and livelihood strategies are embedded in a policy structure at macro- and micro-level.

³ SL is intended also as a tool in planning new projects although it can be difficult to apply.

The *expanded entitlements* side comprises commodities, social support structures and capacity to make use of environmental resources.

The core of the triangle comprises the coping and adaptive strategies of the livelihood group. Each point of the triangle represents a network of interconnected ideas and indicators that can be categorized on the basis of processes, structures, values and decisions.

The triangle represents UNDP's conclusions after considering different theories and models. One of those models, which is worth discussing here because of its direct relevance to disasters, is the vulnerability assessment (VA) model. In the context of livelihoods, this sees vulnerability and sustainability as two ends of a continuum. The properties of a vulnerable livelihood system are contrary to those of a sustainable livelihood system, notably in terms of the risk of exposure to crises, stresses and shocks, and capacity to cope with these.

Livelihood systems can be located at a certain point on the continuum but it must be remembered that sustainability and vulnerability are processes and not events. Livelihood systems and groups on the vulnerability-sustainability continuum are dynamic in nature.

The stage of moving from *rehabilitation to mitigation and preparedness* comprises medium- to long-term rehabilitation-to-development activities that aim to build up assets and improve household production, consumption and exchange activities. Livelihood promotion strategies are focused on longer-term asset building to improve access to resources and mitigate future shocks and stresses.

It is pointed out that while the livelihoods approach is based on holistic analysis, it does not necessarily lead to holistic or multi-sectoral projects. The intervention strategy must be focused.

Value of CARE's approach to analysis of livelihoods and vulnerability to disaster

the disaster in the context of their daily struggle to earn a living and feed their families. They can also articulate these issues clearly, if they are given a chance (e.g. Bhatt 1998).

6. Conclusions

The models and theories outlined here have much in common. In particular, all are holistic views that link disasters and development processes. They are methods of understanding problems and framing solutions, platforms on which to develop detailed research and projects. Each model or approach has its strengths and weaknesses, explained above, but all are flexible and can be adapted to circumstances.

For research studies on livelihood options for disaster risk reduction, the SL approach appears to be the most useful. For community-level projects, such an approach would have to be simplified according to the scale of the project and the capacity of those implementing it but the basic analytical framework would remain valuable.

Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets section 8, and from the British Library of Development Studies and Eldis databases (see below). Key references are accompanied by comments on the content and value of the document concerned.

7.1 References

Vulnerability theories

Anderson MB, Woodrow, PJ 1989/1998, *Rising from the Ashes. Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications (1998 edition). 338pp. The first half of the book presents and explains the CVA framework. The second half contains case studies of disaster response.

Bhatt MR 1996, 'On Understanding Vulnerability'. Presentation to Duryog Nivaran Steering Committee, November 1996, Colombo. Mimeo. 28pp. Explains DMI's victim security matrix and related views of vulnerability.

Blaikie P, Cannon T, Davis I, Wisner B 1994, *At Risk: natural hazards, people's vulnerability, and disasters*. London: Routledge. 284pp. The definitive textbook on people's vulnerability to natural hazards. As well as setting out the PAR and Access models, the book examines vulnerability in relation to different hazard types and presents a strategy for reducing risk.

Other documents on vulnerability

Bhatt E 1998, 'Women Victims' View of Urban and Rural Vulnerability' in Twigg J, Bhatt MR eds 1998.

Twigg J 1998, 'Understanding Vulnerability – an introduction' in Twigg J, Bhatt MR eds 1998.

Twigg J, Bhatt MR eds 1998, *Understanding Vulnerability: South Asian Perspectives*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications/Duryog Nivaran.

The sustainable livelihoods framework

Ashley C, Carney D 1999, *Sustainable livelihoods: lessons from early experience*. London: Department for International Development. 55pp. Available in print or online (<http://www.ids.ac.uk/livelihoods/nrcadc.pdf>). Examines the application of the SL approach to development projects and considers the lessons learned.

(DFID) Department for International Development, 1999/2000, *Sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets*. London: DFID. A series of informative, readable guidance sheets on different aspects of the SL approach. It covers aims, the framework overall, its uses, methods for applying the SL approach (analytical approach, indicators, etc.) and key literature and websites. The series is incomplete: other sections will be added in due course. All the guidance sheets produced so far are available online at <http://www.ids.ac.uk/livelihoods>

Farrington J, Carney D, Ashley C, Turton C 1999, *Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice: early applications of concepts in rural areas*. London: Overseas

