

# Chapter 2

## The Theory Behind the Sustainable Livelihood Approach

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will seek to set out the definition, origins and structure of SLA. In [Chap. 1](#) it was pointed out that SLA is founded upon the notion that intervention must be based upon an appreciation of what underpins livelihoods. However there have been other factors at play that led to SLA as we know it today. First it is important to note that SLA was devised from what can be called an ‘intentional’ approach to development. Development has many meanings and Cowen and Shenton (1998) have made an interesting case for two basic forms:

1. Immanent development (or what people are doing anyway): this denotes a broad process of advancement in human societies driven by a host of factors including advances in science, medicine, the arts, communication, governance etc. It is facilitated by processes such as globalisation (an international integration) which helps share new ideas and technologies.
2. Intentional (or Interventionist) development: this is a focussed and directed process whereby government and non-government organisations implement development projects and programmes (typically a set of related projects) to help the poor. The projects are usually time and resource bound, but have an assumption that the gains achieved would continue after the project had ended.

Both of these forms can and do occur in parallel, with ‘Immanent’ development providing a broad background of change in societies while ‘Intentional’ development takes place as planned intervention. Thus, a country will be continuously undergoing ‘Immanent’ development as its public, private and ‘Third’ sectors gradually invest in infrastructure (roads, hospitals, water provision etc.), education and training, consumer products and services. The same country may also be host to a number of development projects, perhaps funded by foreign-based agencies. These project(s) may draw upon local expertise and resources, perhaps even secondments from public bodies, and may work in tandem with immanent development taking place in the country. Thus the national government may be

investing in building and staffing of new hospitals, and a project may be funded by an international donor to help facilitate some aspect of this change. Similarly, the private sector may invest in new communication technologies such as a mobile phone network (immanent development) and in parallel a development agency may fund a project which explores how that new technology can be adapted to help with the delivery of a public service (intentional development). Projects within intentional development will typically have a ‘blueprint’ which sets out what has to be done, by whom and when, allied with some notion as to what the project is trying to achieve with the resources and time at the team’s disposal. These objectives, methods and outcomes may be set out in formats such as a logical framework.

Immanent development has been around for as long as the human race but ‘Intentional’ development is a newer process. Indeed it can be argued that intentional development is largely a post—Second World War process that emerged from the ‘Bretton Woods’ institutions (named after the conference venue in New Hampshire where their creation was agreed). These institutions are best known as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the World Bank) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Both were born on 22 July 1944 and became operational in 1946. In the understandable optimism of those immediate post-war years a new president, Harry S Truman, came to power in the US following the death of Franklin D Roosevelt on 12 April 1945. President Truman won the next presidential election in 1948 in what is still regarded by many as the greatest election upset in American history. In the first national televised inauguration speech on January 20th 1949 he made the following statement:

We are moving on with other nations to build an even stronger structure of international order and justice. We shall have as our partners countries which, no longer solely concerned with the problem of national survival, are now working to improve the standards of living of all their people. We are ready to undertake new projects to strengthen a free world. In the coming years, our program for peace and freedom will emphasize four major courses of action.

One of the “*major courses of action*” was set out as follows:

we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas..... The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for assistance of other peoples are limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development.

As well as optimism the speech also conveyed a sense of help and support for the poorer countries of the globe. One has to take care to put these intentions into the context of that era. This speech was delivered within a background of a growing ‘Cold War’ with the communist bloc, which in the coming years heralded much volatility and fear in the world. It is clear that the global engagement outlined in the speech was no doubt motivated in part by USA’s self-interest to limit

the international spread of communism, especially amongst the colonised countries of the Global South. The UK, Belgium and France, the predominant colonial countries of Europe, were on their knees economically and were being urged to hasten withdraw from their colonies in Africa and Asia. But many of their colonies were regarded by the USA as precisely those places where communism could flourish. The outbreak of the Korean War (1950) was only a few years away and there was growing unrest in Indochina (Vietnam). However, while the Truman speech is a convenient starting point for ‘Intentional’ development it is highly simplistic and perhaps unfair as it ignores what was happening before that year. For example, missionaries had long been engaged in ‘intentional’ development via the establishment of schools and hospitals.

Intentional development has had its fair share of critics, largely because it is based on a constructed sense of who is—and who isn’t—developed and indeed what development actually means (Schuurman 2000). As highlighted with the Truman speech it tends to be the richer countries which set the agenda as to what needs to be done in the poorer countries. Escobar (1992, p. 413) for example regarded intentional development as nothing more than the “ideological expression of the expansion of post-World War II capitalism”. Given the ‘Cold War’ context of the changes noted above then perhaps this should not be all that surprising, but it does help to highlight where the power rests with this process and it is an unequal distribution (Estreva 1992; Escobar 1992, 1995; Mathews 2004; Siemiatycki 2005; Simon 2006, 2007). Sidaway (2007) has even suggested that the practice of intentional development since the Second World War is almost a reconfiguration of colonialism as the rich, some of whom are old European colonial powers, dictate to the governments of their former colonies what they must do. Critics have also argued that Intentional development has by and large not been very successful (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Pieterse 1998; Hart 2001; Toner and Franks 2006), with Africa often cited as the classic example of failure (Mathews 2004). They point out that despite major investment by the developed world development projects have often failed to generate positive and sustainable outcomes for the people who were meant to benefit. These issues of visioning what is required for development and failure are not unrelated. If a vision of development from richer countries is being imposed in circumstances that are unsuitable then it is inevitably doomed to failure. As a result, there has been a backlash to such ‘Intentional’ development, often referred to as the ‘post development’ movement (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997) or sometimes more evocatively as anti-development (Simon 2006). It has to be noted that the post-development movement has had its own critics, largely because it can be quite woolly as to what can be done to help people living in poverty (Blaikie 2000). Some have even made the rather ironical point that post-development and capitalism have much in common as both appear to call for as little directed intervention as possible on the part of governments, albeit for entirely different reasons; i.e. they are both *laissez faire* in outlook.

SLA evolved within the context of the intentional development approach by which development practitioners were seeking to maximise the effectiveness of their interventions to help the disadvantaged. It is in effect a diagnostic tool which

provides a framework for analysis leading to concrete suggestions for intervention (Allison and Horemans 2006; Tao and Wall 2009). It was typically applied in poorer countries as part of a planning phase for an intervention via policy, a development project or perhaps as the basis for more in-depth research. In that sense the SLA is an analysis of peoples' current livelihood and what is needed for an 'enhancement', and useful in avoiding the inappropriate interventions critiqued by the post-developmentalists. It should be noted that the latter might not necessarily be the need for people to replace their current livelihood or indeed have more means of livelihood. Instead it might involve making the current means of livelihood less susceptible to environmental, social or economic 'stresses'. The SLA could also result in recommendations that people themselves may be able to put into practice rather than be dependent upon the actions of outsiders. It is thus a 'no holds barred' approach to understanding and improving the sustainability of livelihood, although it clearly has to take into account what is feasible in different circumstances.

As set out here and in [Chap. 1](#) it may be rather obvious to the reader that any attempt to improve livelihood should be founded upon an understanding of what is needed which must entail an appreciation of the diverse range of factors and processes that comprise livelihood? How can it be any other way yet still hope to succeed? It sounds so obvious. This intriguing question will be discussed later, but it is fair to say that 'integrated' approaches to 'Intentional' development did exist before SLA. Such integrated rural development projects (they were often based in rural areas) sought to bring together important components to development such as education, health, infrastructure and agriculture, which has some resonance with the 'integrating' basis of SLA. By way of contrast, it is also fair to say that historically many interventions geared towards addressing poverty tended to have a narrow perspective and were perhaps not 'joined-up' or not 'all embracing' (Krantz 2001). For example, poverty is not only about monetary income but has linkages to health and education as well as to perhaps less tangible entities such as a sense of 'powerlessness' (Krantz 2001). Thus poverty is multi-faceted, though the history of development suggests that a project ought to focus only on addressing one of the facets (income for example) and ignore all others. The project might have succeeded in boosting the income of some people but this might be at the expense of others, a boost that might be short lived. As noted above, the history of intentional development delivered via projects is a patchy one.

This chapter will explore some of the experiences to date with SLA. It will begin by setting out the nature of SLA, its definitions and origins, and move on to discuss the role of capitals and outline some of the critiques of SLA. The chapter will end with an important aspect of SLA that arguably has received less attention in the literature—how it can help translate new information to intervention. It should be noted that the sustainable livelihood, SLA and evidence-based intervention literature is a substantial one and the authors cannot claim to have mentioned every project, research and/or development in nature, where these aspects have played a role. Some of this has been reported in the academic literature but much also exists in so-called 'grey' form as reports residing within development funders, aid

agencies, international agencies, consultancy companies etc. Some of this may be readily accessible while much may not be. Thus inevitably the chapter can only hope to skim the surface of this literature and the authors apologise in advance if the reader feels that a particular project or publication has been excluded.

## 2.2 The SLA Framework

The SLA framework is often formally set out diagrammatically as shown in Fig. 2.1 (Ahmed et al. 2011). An outline of SLA and suggestions for putting it into practice can be found in ‘guidance notes’ produced by DFID (available at [www.nssd.net/references/SustLevel](http://www.nssd.net/references/SustLevel)). Figure 2.1 is a far more sophisticated version of the collage in Fig. 1.3, and associated points made in the text of the previous chapter included in diagrammatic form. At its core is the assessment of the different capitals that are deemed to underpin livelihood at the level of the individual, household, village or group. These capitals are classified as human, social, physical, natural (a category not included in Fig. 1.3) and financial. They are then assessed in terms of their vulnerability to shocks and the institutional context within which they exist. Once this is understood then interventions can be put in place to enhance livelihoods and their sustainability, perhaps by increasing the capital available or by reducing vulnerability. Thus the process is about understanding the current situation and developing suggestions for improvement based upon that understanding. The SLA is meant to avoid a situation where intervention is unguided giving little positive impact or is at worst detrimental.

The reader will no doubt note that the SLA as set out in Fig. 2.1 is linear in style although in practice the interventions identified should give feedback to help

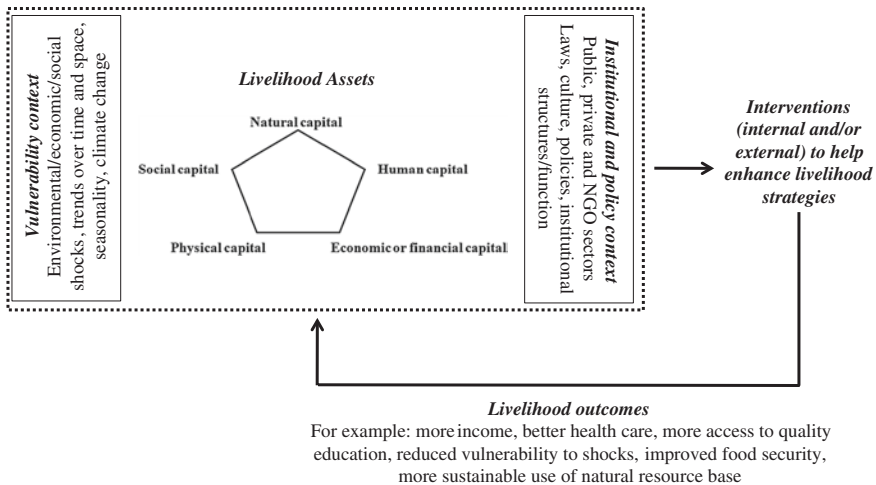


Fig. 2.1 The DFID sustainable rural livelihoods framework (after Carney 1998)

improve the capitals and contexts. It should also be noted that the degree to which this framework is meant to ‘model’ reality in any one case may be limited, but, of course, there has to be some semblance otherwise one could question the point of the exercise. The degree to which an SLA can generate an approximation to ‘real’ livelihood will be returned to later. Indeed it is also important to realise that the use of the SLA framework is not necessarily dependent upon facilitation by an external agency for those whose livelihood is being analysed. In theory it should be possible for anyone to apply this model. For example, an individual could apply it to themselves or to their household or a group could use it to analyse their own livelihoods. Also, SLA as set out in Fig. 2.1 does not specify particular methods and techniques that have to be applied to explore the capitals, institutions, vulnerability etc. In practice, the process of ‘doing’ an SLA could utilise a disparate range of methods including standard techniques based upon observation, focus groups and interviewing. The SLA is simply providing a framework as to what should be looked for and not necessarily how to do the looking.

However, while the logic behind the SLA has been set out here in a somewhat mechanical cause-effect terminology, it can be considered in many different ways. Krantz (2001, pp. 3 and 4) argues that there are two ways of using SLA. On the one hand there is the approach taken by DFID which sees SLA as a framework for analysis, while other agencies such as UNDP and CARE (an NGO) apply it to “facilitate the planning of concrete projects and programmes”. The distinction made here would appear to be a rather fine one as the purpose of SLA is to help analyse a situation which would seem a logical fit with its use in implement projects. Farrington (2001) presents a more nuanced view of the different dimensions of SLA:

1. As a set of principles guiding development interventions (whether community-led or otherwise). The fundamental assumption here is that an intervention has to be evidence-based rather than instigated in top-down fashion without adequate knowledge of the community. SLA can thus be seen as a loose checklist of points that need to be considered before an intervention is planned.
2. As a formal analytical framework to help understand what ‘is’ and what can be done. The framework helps aid an appreciation of the capitals which are available to households, their vulnerability and the involvement of institutions.
3. As an overall developmental objective. In this case development is seen as the improvement of livelihood sustainability, perhaps by making capital less vulnerable or by enhancing the contributions that some capitals can make or even by improving the institutional context.

The differences between these three dimensions of SLA may seem to be rather fine, especially with regard to 1 and 2. The Nigerian case study covered in later chapters will provide an illustration of the differences between these.

SLA has certainly helped establish the principle that successful development intervention, especially if led internally, must begin with a reflective process of deriving evidence sufficiently broad in vision and not limited to what may seem like a good ‘technical’ fix. This may be a surprising advance given that the logic upon which SLA is based seems clear—before development can take place there

must be some idea what needs to be done, along with the why and what of how it must be done. It does imply a necessary degree of humility in that it suggests there is much to be learnt and understood before help is offered; this has to be built upon a partnership with those meant to benefit rather than seeing them just as passive recipients.

### 2.3 Definitions of SLA

SLA has been in vogue amongst development practitioners and researchers since the late 1990s and indeed was a central concept of the UK's Department for International Development's (DFID) strategy during the early years of the UK New Labour government. The call for an emphasis on sustainable livelihoods was set out in the 1997 White Paper on international development as follows:

...refocus our international development efforts on the elimination of poverty and encouragement of economic growth which benefits the poor. We will do this through support for international sustainable development targets and policies that create sustainable livelihoods for poor people, promote human development and conserve the environment. DFID (1997: Summary, page 6).

What exactly are these 'sustainable livelihoods' that DFID intends to help create? Some illustration of this has already been provided in [Chap. 1](#), but a definition has been provided by Chambers and Conway (1992) some five years before the White Paper:

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

Assets are the same as the capitals mentioned earlier, but note how issues such as claims and access are included. An asset may not necessarily be owned by a household for it to be an important contributor to livelihood. As long as the household has access to it then it will help. Also, in this definition a number of strands coalesce. On one hand there is a requirement for a sustainable livelihood to be able to recover from "*stress and shocks*" but it must also be able to "*maintain and enhance*" capabilities and assets into the future. A central element in this 'resilience' to stress and shocks may well be the diversification of elements that comprise 'livelihood'. Hence a more diverse livelihood base could arguably be seen as more sustainable as shocks to one or more components can be compensated for by an enhancement of others. But this is conjecture and may not always be the case. A simplistic assumption that a diverse livelihood is more sustainable needs to be treated with caution.

Prior to publication of the White Paper, Carney (1998) provided a simpler vision of sustainable livelihood which has resonance with the definition of Chambers and Conway (1992):

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living.

And, when merged with sustainability

A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base.

The reader may be surprised that these definitions were not given earlier but in essence they are more concise and formal statements of points already made. What matters is that the definitions, for all their formality, are not surprising or unexpected. The simple example of a household livelihood provided in [Chap. 1](#) has already set out the territory in terms that may well resonate with at least one group of readers; those born and raised within households where livelihood is largely dependent upon wage-earning. The definitions present the points discussed in a more generic way, but in more negative vein Carswell (1997, p. 10) has made the point that definitions of sustainable livelihoods are often “*unclear, inconsistent and relatively narrow*” and this could add to “*conceptual muddle*”.

## 2.4 Origins of SLA

As already noted in [Chap. 1](#), the notion of sustainable livelihood as we know it today can be said to have arisen out of the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio (Perrings 1994) and its promotion of Agenda 21 (Agenda for the 21st Century). A stated aim in Agenda 21 is that everyone must have the “opportunity to earn a sustainable livelihood”. Once the concept of a sustainable livelihood had been adopted then it seems like a small step to go from there to SLA. But SLA did not become main stream until the late 1990s, so why did the delay occur?

Like many initiatives in intentional development SLA did not come out of a vacuum nor indeed can it be said to have a definitive starting point. Rather it grew organically from a number of older trends and ideas; the term sustainable livelihood even predates the 1992 Earth Summit. For example there are influences arising from the application of ‘systems’ approaches to sectors such as agriculture. ‘Agro- Ecosystem Analysis’ has its origins in the 1960s and sought to bring together concepts in ecology along with social and economic aspects of agriculture (Conway 1985). These system-based (systemic) approaches were not just research frameworks but also had practical application. An example is the evolution of new approaches to knowledge generation with farmers. The historical approach had been to consider farmers as mere recipients of ‘new’ knowledge and technologies generated by research services and transferred via an extension service; hence the phrase ‘transfer of technology’. Again the model was linear with information flowing one way. Newer systems changed this to a partnership approach towards knowledge generation, with farmers working together with researchers. Terms using the phrase ‘farming systems’ began to evolve in



the 1980s to capture this new mentality; for example ‘farming systems research’ (FSR; Flora 1992). As one of the earliest papers on the application of systems thinking to natural resource management puts it:

Systems or, to be more specific, systemic methodologies necessarily question the efficacy of linear models such as transfer of technology (TOT) and diffusion of innovations. Both neglect social and organisational processes in their assumptions about the nature of human communications and have been found wanting in many areas of rural development. Ison et al. (1997, p. 258)

Partnership approaches had to be built upon a genuine participation of farmers in the process; not a token representation where farmers were simply lectured to. Indeed FSR itself tapped into the parallel evolution of participatory methodologies since the 1960s (or indeed earlier) such as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA). Both RRA and PRA had a strong ‘rural’ focus (and exemplified in their respective names) and sought to include households in the knowledge generation process (Chambers 1991). RRA was more extractive in that it was intended as an umbrella term to cover a suite of methods by which researchers could learn about local livelihoods and so arrive at recommendations for intervention. PRA had the added thrust that potential interventions became part of the participatory-based discourse. This suite of methods used within PRA is much the same as those of RRA, and often used within SLA.

FSR, RRA and PRA are more focussed on work with households at village scale and as a result it is easy to see the resonance with SLA (Korf and Oughton 2006). All share a systemic mindset with a similar epistemology. However there are some resonances of the more macro-scale field of ‘integrated rural development’ (IRD), in vogue during the 1960s and especially the 1970s amongst major funders such as the World Bank (Yudelman 1976; D’Silva and Raza 1980; Krantz 2001). The literature on IRD is substantial and does not need to be reviewed in depth here. An early review of IRD which dates to the time when the concept was still popular is provided by Ruttan (1984). For recent discussions of successes/failures the interested reader is referred to Gaiha et al. (2001) for IRD in India, Zoomers (2005) for IRD supported by the Netherlands ‘Directorate-General for International Cooperation’ (DGIS) and carried out between 1975 and 2005 in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and Fenichel and Smith (1992) for IRD in Zambia. The manifestation of IRD often took the form of large projects implemented over five years or so covering regions of a nation state with staff seconded from government agencies; a form of decentralisation. The ‘integration’ in the title usually meant a consideration of multiple sectors and how they interacted. Thus, it was argued that agricultural development also requires effective infrastructure such as roads to transport inputs and produce as well as adequate health care. The latter in turn depends upon good water supply in both quantity and quality. IRD projects were designed to address all these relationships and mark a break away from the older ‘sector-specific’ nature of development projects where agriculture (for example) may have been taken in isolation without any regard as to where inputs may come from or how farmers managed to get their excess production from enhanced yields to markets. Indeed if the word sector is replaced by asset or capital then

IRD would appear to have much in common with SLA. Figure 2.1 embodies this same sense of interaction.

Although SLA has resonance with older ideas one of its most prominent influences is the rise of what is referred to as ‘human development’ in the 1980s and promoted especially by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Indeed SLA has been regarded by some as the ‘operational vehicle’ of human development (Singh and Gilman 1999). Human Development was influenced by the work of the Indian economist Amartya Sen and his writing on capability (Sen 1984, 1985) as well as other authors on vulnerability (Swift 1989; Chambers 1989; Davies 1996; Moser 1998) and access to resources (Berry 1989; Blaikie 1989). These are inter-related in the sense that having a more diverse capability can reduce vulnerability of livelihood to shocks in much the same way that biologists argue that greater biodiversity aids ecosystem resilience to shocks. ‘Human development’ took as its central tenet the importance of enhancing capability:

Human development is a process of enlarging people’s choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and change over time. But at all levels of development, the three essential ones are for people to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. If these essential choices are not available, many other opportunities remain inaccessible.

UNDP Human Development Report (1990, p. 10)

Enlarging choices can be achieved by widening the capital base, for example by education and training. There are also nods in the direction of sustainable development albeit with an unambiguous focus on people:

the development process should meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the options of future generations. However, the concept of sustainable development is much broader than the protection of natural resources and the physical environment. It includes the protection of human lives in the future. After all, it is people, not trees, whose future options need to be protected.

UNDP Human Development Report (1990, pp 61–62)

Compare this wording from the Human Development Report of 1990 to that of SLA as envisaged by DFID:

The livelihoods approach puts people at the centre of development. People—rather than the resources they use or the governments that serve them—are the priority concern. Adhering to this principle may well translate into providing support to resource management or good governance (for example). But it is the underlying motivation of supporting people’s livelihoods that should determine the shape of the support and provide the basis for evaluating its success. Website: The DFID approach to sustainable livelihoods ([www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm](http://www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm), accessed September 2009);

There is clearly much overlap between the two and it is easy to see how SLA can almost be a framework for achieving human development, at least at the scale of the household and community. However, the phrase “it is people, not trees, whose future options need to be protected” in the HDR (1990) can be misleading as it may imply that the environment is of secondary importance; that people can be allowed to systematically destroy their environment if it means that they can enhance their

livelihood. The concept of human development and indeed a sustainable livelihood certainly does not seek to facilitate livelihood at the expense of the environment:

However, while it starts with people, it does not compromise on the environment. Indeed one of the potential strengths of the livelihoods approach is that it ‘mainstreams’ the environment within an holistic framework.

Carney (1998)

Short-term survival rather than the sustainable management of natural capital (soil, water, genetic diversity) is often the priority of people living in absolute poverty. Yet DFID believes in sustainability. It must therefore work with rural people to help them understand the contribution (positive or negative) that their livelihoods are making to the environment and to promote sustainability as a long-term objective.

Indicators of sustainability will therefore be required.

Carney (1998)

It is sometimes said that human development as encouraged by UNDP has more in common with the earlier ‘basic needs’ approaches to poverty measurement and alleviation than to Sen’s vision of capabilities (Srinivasan 1994; Ravallion 1997). ‘Basic needs’ is a generic term which covers approaches based on the notion that human beings need a basic set of resources (food, water, clothing, shelter etc.) to survive. Exactly what these are can vary depending upon who is defining ‘basic needs’. Sen does make a clear distinction between ‘basic needs’ and capabilities (Sen 1984, pp. 513–515), but even so the influence of human development on SLA is clear (de Haan 2005).

Another influence on the notion of sustainable livelihood and indeed SLA is the field of ‘new household economics’ which grew during the 1980s and its focus on household labour, income generation and expenditure, even if there were recognized limitations to seeing households in such mechanical terms:

The major shortcoming of structural–functional and economic approaches to the household is the neglect of the role of ideology. The socially specific units that approximate ‘households’ are best typified not merely as clusters of task-oriented activities that are organized in variable ways, not merely as places to live/eat/work/reproduce, but as sources of identity and social markers. They are located in structures of cultural meaning and differential power. Guyer and Peters (1987, p. 209). Cited in de Haan (2005, p. 3)

Numerous publications in the 1980s sought to understand households in the developing world, especially in agrarian societies in Africa. A flavour of this is found in the writing of Jane Guyer who did much of her research in Nigeria (Guyer 1981, 1992, 1996, 1997).

Indeed there are so many influences which have helped spawn SLA that it is helpful to set them out as a chronology. Table 2.1 is based upon such a chronology originally set out by Solesbury (2003) covering the period 1984–2002 and which has been expanded, to include some other influences that may well have been important.

Indeed given this long history it can reasonably be asked what exactly is new about SLA? The focus on households and participation is not new and neither is the attempt to understand and integrate aspects considered important for development. Even the ‘sustainable’ in the name of SLA has a long heritage, and the same applies to the idea of making interventions (including policy) evidence-based. The reader may understandably consider that SLA is nothing more than a new(ish)

**Table 2.1** Sustainable livelihoods chronology (after Solesbury 2003, pp 3–4)

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1960s/1970s	Integrated Rural Development projects funded by the World Bank and others Concept of Agro-ecosystem Analysis emerges (combines ecological, social and economic components) Gradual evolution of ‘systems’ approaches such as Farming Systems Research and participatory methods in development (RRA and PRA) through the 1970s and into the 1980s
1980s	1980s sees the rise of New Household Economics
1984	Long refers to ‘livelihood strategies’ in his book ‘Family and work in rural societies’ (Long 1984)
1985	Amartya Sen’s book <i>Commodities and Capabilities</i> is published by Oxford University Press
1987	The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) publishes its report: <i>Our Common Future</i> (often referred to as the ‘Brundtland Commission report’). The notion of ‘sustainable livelihood’ is referred to
1988	International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) publishes papers from its 1987 conference: <i>The Greening of Aid: Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice</i> (Conroy and Litvinoff 1988)
1990	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publishes the first Human Development Report (HDR) which included the Human Development Index (HDI); an amalgam of income, life expectancy and education regarded as important components within capability. The HDR is published each year since 1990 and include updated figures for the HDI and a suite of other indices
1992	United Nations (UN) holds a Conference on Environment and Development; the Earth Summit. Held in Rio de Janeiro Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex in the UK publishes ‘Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century’ (Chambers and Conway 1992)
1993	Oxfam starts to employ SLA in formulating overall aims, improving project strategies and staff training
1994	CARE adopts household livelihoods security as a programming framework in its relief and development work
1995	UN holds World Summit for Social Development UNDP adopts Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods as one of five priorities in its overall human development mandate, to serve as both a conceptual and programming framework for poverty reduction IISD publishes <i>Adaptive Strategies and Sustainable Livelihoods</i> (Singh and Kalala 1995), the report of a UNDP-funded programme SID launches project on Sustainable Livelihoods and People’s Everyday Economics
1996	<i>Adaptable Livelihoods: coping with food insecurity in the Malian Sahel</i> (Davies 1996) is published by Macmillan DFID invites proposals for major ESCOR research programme on Sustainable Livelihoods IISD publishes <i>Participatory Research for Sustainable Livelihoods: A Guidebook for Field Projects</i> (Rennie and Singh 1996)
1997	New Labour elected by a landslide (179 seat majority) New Labour government publishes its first White Paper on international development, <i>Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century</i>

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(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

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1998	<p>DFID's Natural Resources Department opens a consultation on sustainable livelihoods and establishes a Rural Livelihoods Advisory Group</p> <p>Natural Resources Advisers annual conference takes Sustainable Livelihoods as its theme and later publishes contributory papers: <i>Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: What Contribution Can We Make?</i> (Carney 1998)</p> <p>SID publishes <i>The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, General Report of the Sustainable Livelihoods Project 1995–1997</i> (Amalric 1998)</p> <p>UNDP publishes <i>Policy Analysis and Formulation for Sustainable Livelihoods</i> (Roe 1998)</p> <p>DFID establishes the SL Virtual Resource Centre and the SL Theme Group</p> <p>IDS publishes 'Sustainable rural livelihoods: a framework for analysis' (Scoones 1998)</p> <p>The FAO/UNDP Informal Working Group on Participatory Approaches and Methods to Support Sustainable Livelihoods and Food Security meets for the first time</p>
1999	<p>DFID creates the Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office and appoints Jane Clark as its Head</p> <p>DFID publishes the first <i>Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets</i>. These have been regularly updated and are available at <a href="http://www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm#Guidance">www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm#Guidance</a></p> <p>DFID also publishes <i>Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Elimination</i> (DFID 1999) and <i>Livelihoods Approaches Compared</i> (Carney et al. 1999)</p> <p>Presenters at the Natural Resources Advisers' Conference report progress in implementing SL approaches and DFID later publishes these in <i>Sustainable Livelihoods: Lessons from Early Experience</i> (Ashley and Carney 1999)</p> <p>Overseas Development Institute (ODI) publishes 'Sustainable Livelihoods in Practice: early application of concepts in rural areas' (Farrington et al. 1999)</p> <p>DFID establishes the Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group of researchers /consultants</p> <p>Amartya Sen's book <i>Development As Freedom</i> is published (Sen 1999)</p>
2000	<p>DFID commissions and funds Livelihoods Connect, a website serving as a learning platform for SLA</p> <p>United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) organises an Inter-agency Forum on Operationalising Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches, involving DFID, FAO, WFP, UNDP, and International Fund for Agriculture and Development (IFAD)</p> <p>DFID publishes <i>Sustainable Livelihoods—Current thinking and practice</i> (DFID 2000a); <i>Sustainable Livelihoods—Building on Strengths</i> (DFID 2000b); <i>Achieving Sustainability: Poverty Elimination and the Environment</i> (DFID 2000c); and more SL <i>Guidance Sheets</i></p> <p>The Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Group establishes a subgroup on PIP (Policy, Institutions and Processes)</p> <p>IDS publishes 'Analysing Policy for Sustainable Livelihoods' (Shankland 2000), the final report from its ESCOR programme</p> <p>Oxfam publishes <i>Environments and Livelihoods: Strategies for Sustainability</i> (Neefjes 2000)</p> <p><i>Mixing it: Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries</i> (Ellis 2000) is published</p> <p>The UK government publishes its second White Paper, <i>Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor</i> (DFID 2000d)</p>

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(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

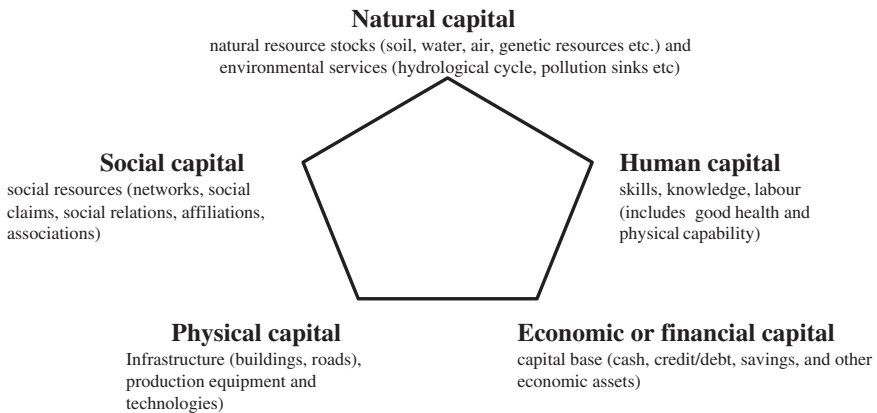
2001	<p>Millennium Development Goals established</p> <p>New Labour wins election</p> <p>DFID commissions research on further development of the SLA framework; practical policy options to support sustainable livelihoods</p> <p><i>Sustainable Livelihoods: Building on the Wealth of the Poor</i> (Helmore and Singh 2001) is published</p> <p>DFID organises SLA review meeting of officials, researchers and practitioners</p>
2002	<p>World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth Summit 2002) takes place in Johannesburg, South Africa. Called Rio +10</p>
2012	<p>World Summit on Sustainable Development takes place in Rio de Janeiro</p> <p>Called Rio +20</p>

name for what in fact are old ideas and concepts. SLA certainly provides a convenient framework (and hence title) which brings together the various points discussed so far, but it is perhaps most distinctive in its roots within economic concepts of capital.

### 2.5 Capital in SLA

SLA is an example of the ‘multiple capital’ approach where sustainability is considered in terms of available capital (natural, human, social, physical and financial) and an examination of the vulnerability context (trends, shocks and stresses) in which these capitals (or assets) exist. The five principal capitals often suggested as important to livelihood are presented as a pentagon in Fig. 2.2.

Some have already been mentioned, and are straightforward. For example the man-made physical capitals of buildings and machinery and the natural (non



**Fig. 2.2** The five capitals of sustainable livelihood (after Scoones 1998)

man-made) capitals of soil, water, crops and so on. However some are less immediately obvious, such as social networks, knowledge and good health. All are important although clearly the extent of their importance will change from household to household and over time. Indeed people may sacrifice some capital for others if they deem it more appropriate for livelihood, and that switching may reverse at another time (Bebbington 1999). Thus even a relatively simple diagram such as Fig. 2.2 has much embedded complexity and can hide what is in practice a complex dynamic of change in the importance of various capitals for any one household. Even so, attempts have been made to link these livelihood capitals to a measure of poverty; with the assumption being that they provide a multidimensional and inverse proxy for poverty (less capital equates to greater poverty; Erenstein 2011)

The notion of exploring livelihood through such multiple capitals has a long pedigree in economics, but not so overtly within the systems or participatory approaches mentioned earlier. For many the term is limited to describing ‘money’ (i.e. financial capital held in a bank account or as investments) and therefore the breadth of capitals in Fig. 2.2 may come as something of a surprise. In classical economics ‘capital’ is a term used to describe a factor of production. Adam Smith (1723 to 1790), the pioneer of political economy, analyzed production by looking at the distribution of costs across the inputs that were required for the process. Money has to be turned into physical inputs before production can occur:

money → payment for capital → production → outputs → revenue

In the classical model, capital underlying such production comprises ‘things’ such as land or natural resources (minerals, plant products etc.), labour and human-made capital such as machinery. This vision of capital as the basis for production is said to have had its roots within some of the first attempts to record debits (payment) and credits (revenue) within accounting. Note how they are described here as being ‘physical’ (or tangible). This was indeed the early classical vision of capital—as physical entities that go into production. But this is clearly incomplete as much depends upon ‘how’ such inputs are used in production; given the right knowledge more can be achieved with less. Therefore since the 1960s economists have taken a broader view and included human capital, such as investment in education and training, within a consideration of production. Indeed O’Neill (2005) has even made the interesting suggestion that ergonomics, the study of the relationship between workers and their environment, can play a significant role in SLA precisely because it seeks to create the conditions that maximise productivity.

It should be noted that what comprises capital within SLA is open to some debate and the five capitals in Fig. 2.2 should not be considered as being definitive, although much can depend upon how broadly the capitals are defined. Serageldin and Steer (1994) suggest that there are four types of capital that need to be considered in sustainability:

- human-made capital (equates to the physical capital in Fig. 2.2)
- natural capital
- human capital
- social capital

and that these need to be expressed in monetary terms—no easy task. Some have also argued for the inclusion of spiritual capital, distinct between social and human capital, which encapsulates the benefits to society provided by spiritual, moral or psychological beliefs and practices. Odero (2006) has also suggested that information should be seen as another capital and this is distinct from what some refer to as ‘intellectual’ capital. A dilemma is that spiritual and intellectual capital may appear to be subsets of social capital, and indeed the boundaries can be quite fuzzy. It may come down to what is associated with an individual or with society as a whole. Some have also argued that capital within SLA should not just be seen as factors underpinning production, in a mode akin to that adopted by Adam Smith, but in more nuanced ways in terms of how people can engage with others and what such engagement provides for all. For example, there is the following point made by Bebbington (1999, p. 2022):

People’s assets are not merely means through which they make a living; they also give meaning to the person’s world.

Capital is therefore a means by which people can “*engage more fruitfully and meaningfully with the world, and most importantly the capability to change the world*”. Thus they are not just ‘things’ that go into a production process but also a basis for power to act and ultimately to bring about change in society. Hence Bebbington (1999) suggests that these capitals take on three distinct roles:

- vehicles for instrumental action (making a living)
- hermeneutic action (making living meaningful)
- emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living)

This is a much more nuanced meaning of capital and arguably can embrace information technology and enhanced connectivity via devices such as mobile phones (Sey 2011). It can also embrace culture, religion and recreation as these help to make living meaningful, but such hermeneutic and emancipatory uses of capital are often not included with SLA; a point to be discussed later.

At a most basic level social capital covers the connections between people; or social networks. Its first use within the academic literature was in a paper published in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan. He was researching a rural school community center and explained what he meant by social capital as follows:

In the use of phrase social capital I make no reference to the usual acceptance of the term capital, except in a figurative sense. I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among group of individuals and families who make up a social unity...

The latter part of this definition can be summarised as a ‘social network’ but this is a loose term. Indeed membership of social networks can be quite fluid. Lyons and Snoxell (2005) for example explored changes in social capital of migrant traders to Nairobi in Kenya and showed that while they bring with them and utilise the social networks they already had in place (what the authors term as ‘inherited’ social capital) they quickly developed new ones in the urban context. Networks were built in an opportunistic fashion but were nonetheless critical



to survival. Korf (2004) came to similar conclusions regarding the importance of social networks after using SLA to explore livelihoods in war torn areas of Sri Lanka, especially linkages with key holders of power. Grant (2001) refers to what she calls ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital, with the former influencing the ability of a group to act together while the latter is the ability of a group to collaborate with others. However, it is important to avoid the simplistic assumption arising out of these studies and many others that being part of a network is always a ‘good thing’; even words such as goodwill, fellowship and mutual sympathy used by Hanifen (1916) bring out this sense of the positive. This is understandable. For example, a group can provide support against workplace exploitation or provide better access to resources, but this may not necessary be so and social networks can be a constraint which limits livelihood options. Portes (1998) identifies a number of ‘negatives’ that can be associated with social capital:

- exclusion of ‘outsiders’
- excessive claims on group members such as fees
- restrictions on individual freedom as a result of rules and regulations imposed on group members
- downward leveling norms

An example of the importance of social capital relevant to the Nigerian case study to be discussed later is that associated with faith-based groups. In Christianity all Churches and denominations play a unique role in the provision of social capital. Goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and networking are the hallmarks of these institutions but their roles go far beyond this in the 20th and 21st centuries. Experience in Africa has shown that desirable change can take place within such groupings. Just as a group can provide support and lobby against exploitation in the workplace so too can groups be enabled to examine their own situation and explore the means whereby the members can reach their full potential. To the Christian the ‘Glory of God’ means that people are more fully alive and where better than in a place of reflection and prayers to ponder on such matters. Most religious groups now concentrate more on a people-centered approach than they did previously when the emphasis was on the group or society and not on the individual. This shows that groups can gradually change and understand the need for human development at a personal level; it is clear to many that lives and livelihoods develop to the extent that people take control of their destinies and understand their rights to a means of living. But poverty is often so great that people cannot think or even feel along such lines so worried are they about how they can provide the next meal or get a sick child to hospital. It is fair to say that Churches have always made great strides in addressing the issues of poverty as it is their specific remit to take care of the downtrodden and the poor. Churches have taken a more radical approach in the past 50 years and it is at grass root level that this enjoys greatest strengths. This often demands being counter cultural but reflective practices such as those introduced by Paulo Freire (1970) and adapted through various teaching methods such as ‘Training for Transformation’ have and are gradually changing communities. Root causes of problems have been tackled

without causing revolutions and gradually women and widows in particular find means of improving and demanding their rights. Such groups may appear low key to outsiders but they are active and are all about the welfare of their people in a society where social welfare does not exist. They organise contingency funds from their meagre resources and are the first and most efficient in dealing with the tragedies especially maternal deaths when strike regularly. Women can often be more constrained in the decision making as men have to give permission for example for a women to be admitted to hospital for a caesarean section. But with more education this is slowly changing. Groups can help facilitate such change. The question the authors often pose is what change would be possible without such groupings?

However, while noting the above contributions it has to be acknowledged that the term social capital has taken on a number of hues and can be argued to hide as much as it reveals. As a result, it has even been argued that “*some authors employ the term not for its conceptual cogency but rather in the hope that it might give their work more visibility.*” (Bebbington 2002, p. 1). Indeed Bebbington (2002) argues that one of the problems with social capital may be that it is a label covering too many situations.

Compared with social capital the natural capital component of the SLA is arguably more tangible. Natural capital can comprise goods and services such as the soil for growing crops and trees, water for drinking, washing, cooking etc., uncultivated plants for food and medicine, wild animals for food and so on (Daily 1997; Norberg 1999). Indeed the natural capital and related services it provides has been viewed in a different way within the currently in vogue concept of ‘ecosystem goods and services’ (EG&S; Costanza et al. 1997; de Groot et al. 2002; Fisher et al. 2009). This was a term first used by Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1981), although, the concept of an ecosystem and the human ‘place’ within ecosystems and the damage that can be wrought is much older. The difference is that with EG&S the goods and services are allocated a monetary value rather than simply being recorded and evaluated, although these are necessary first steps. The logic behind such economic valuation has been set out in the seminal paper on EG&S by Costanza et al. (1997, p. 253):

Because ecosystem services are not fully ‘captured’ in commercial markets or adequately quantified in terms comparable with economic services and manufactured capital, they are often given too little weight in policy decisions.

More recent approaches to EG&S have tended to downplay the need for monetary valuation, but the origins were very much in this sense of providing an equal playing field with other capitals.

The literature on EG&S has expanded rapidly (Fisher et al. 2008a) in recent years and given this wealth of research and literature on the topic it is not possible to go into any detail here. The interested reader is referred to various reports published by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005a, b) and available at [www.maweb.org/en/Index.aspx](http://www.maweb.org/en/Index.aspx). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005b, p. V) categorised ecosystem services into four main types:

provisioning services such as food, water, timber, and fiber; regulating services that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes, and water quality; cultural services that provide

recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits; and supporting services such as soil formation, photosynthesis, and nutrient cycling.

The inclusion of ‘cultural services’ in this list is an interesting one given that as Daskon and Binns (2010) and Tao et al. (2010), amongst others, have pointed out, SLA often does not adequately address traditional cultural and religious values, even within the social capital category, and may even see them as a constraint. In effect the ‘services’ in the quotation above are of two types. Firstly there are the processes that take place within ecosystems whether humans are present or not e.g. soil formation, photosynthesis and nutrient cycling. Humans can alter the rates of some of these through management but they are natural processes nonetheless and will take place even if people were not around to influence them. Secondly there are the services which equate more to ‘benefits’ that people can gain from EG&S. Hence recreation is listed as a ‘cultural service’ but is obviously not a natural ecosystem process. Similarly a forest will produce wood and products that can potentially be consumed by humans as food and medicine irrespective of whether humans are present. EG&S can tend to conflate natural processes with the benefits that people gain from them. Fisher et al. (2008b) suggested that ‘services’ within EG&S be subdivided into two types:

1. Intermediate services. These are the natural process that occur within ecosystems, but which can be managed by people to enhance their usefulness to support final services
2. Final services. The benefits which people gain from the intermediate services. For example, drinking water, food, medicine and timber.

Even with such subdivision, EG&S is an arguably less clear term than is the one used in SLA to cover much the same thing; natural capital. At least the latter is a human-centric term placed within a highly human-centric framework that stresses the human gain from the ecosystem. Maybe EG&S is an over-elaborate conceptualisation of natural capital?

One of the initial assumptions behind EG&S which does tend to separate it out from natural capital as envisaged within the SLA framework is that by providing a monetary valuation of goods and services then there will be substantial resonance with the language that politicians, policy makers and managers can appreciate, and this will help avoid EG&S being taken for granted as ‘cost free’. All too often the EG&S have not been appreciated until they have been lost. Hence while an attribute such as biodiversity may be promoted for its intrinsic value this may not appeal to groups that control the purse strings. But if loss of biodiversity can be shown to have a monetary cost then there may be a greater desire to address it (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs 2007). But while an economic valuation of EG&S has a certain appeal providing an economic valuation for its components is certainly a challenge, especially as they are not typically traded within markets. A local stream provides water for a range of services but in many places these services are not purchased in monetary terms but are accessed as a common property resource. Also, of course, it is not inconceivable that such monetary values of EG&S will vary across space and

time. Indeed an ecosystem may remain relatively constant over time in terms of its components and interactions, but change dramatically in terms of the EG&S valued by humans (de Groot et al. 2010). So how is their monetary value estimated? For ecosystem goods, such as fish for example, that have a market price and traded each day then this may be straightforward; these are direct market uses. There may typically be no economic valuation of the ecosystem food chain that supports the fish, but at least the fish have a market price and many of the species are towards the top of their food chain. But there are many other EG&S that are not traded within markets and in these cases economic value has to be determined indirectly via a range of techniques (Farber et al. 2002). One example is the use of a shadow pricing technique such as contingent valuation. Here people may be asked via face-to-face surveys about their willingness to pay for EG&S. The technique has attracted some criticism given that respondents may, for various reasons, over or under-state their willingness to pay (Diamond and Hausman 1994). Another approach that can be applied in some circumstances is to use a travel-cost methodology, where travel distance and frequency are used to construct a demand curve.

There are various 'Payment for Ecosystem Services' (PES) schemes in place by which ecosystem service 'buyers' compensate 'sellers' who agree to protect, enhance, or restore ecosystem services (Engel et al. 2008; Tacconi 2012). One of the classic examples of a PES scheme is that of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the USA and currently run by the United States Department of Agriculture. The CRP has its roots in the aftermath of the 'Dust Bowl' disaster in the 1930s; an event which influenced the writing of John Steinbeck's classic novel 'Grapes of Wrath'. At present some of the high profile PES schemes are based on carbon markets as a means of controlling greenhouse gas release. Studies exist which have explored the role that PES can play within sustainable rural livelihoods, and problems noted. An example is provided by McLennan and Garvin (2012) for Costa Rica. These authors were critical of the PES in that country as effective mechanisms for linking forest recovery and sustainable rural livelihoods.

As already noted, within the SLA framework it is possible to regard EG&S as a detailed analysis of the natural capital component but there is obviously some spillover into the other components of Fig. 2.2. The nature of such interaction across these capitals, including how culture impacts upon valuation of EG&S and how, in turn, EG&S can help underpin human wellbeing is still said to be poorly understood (Carpenter et al. 2006). As stated by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, (2005b, p. 6):

The degradation of ecosystem services often causes significant harm to human well-being. The information available to assess the consequences of changes in ecosystem services for human well-being is relatively limited. Many ecosystem services have not been monitored, and it is also difficult to estimate the influence of changes in ecosystem services relative to other social, cultural, and economic factors that also affect human well-being.

Perhaps this should not be that surprising as, the EG&S are very much a human construction and interpretation of gain from a complex set of components and processes which exist and evolve in an ecosystem (Boyd and Banzhaf 2005; Costanza

et al. 1997; de Groot et al. 2002). Even the 'value' of something as fundamental as biodiversity in maintaining ecosystem services has been questioned by some (Mertz et al. 2007). Clearly there is much still to be discovered about the natural capital component of SLA and a simple quantitative cataloging of the capital that may be available to a community is not enough.

Finally it is worth noting that these capitals interact across space and time and households may reduce or increase some at the expense of others. The clearest example is that financial capital can be used to purchase physical or natural capital and vice versa as physical and natural capitals can be sold. But this interaction between capitals is not limited to the immediate space where people live but can also occur amongst people separated by space. Family members, for example, may live many miles apart in quite different contexts yet they can exchange capital (Meikle et al. 2001). Thus it is necessary to view capitals not in isolation or static but as dynamic.

## 2.6 Vulnerability and Institutional Context

Once these capitals have been identified and assessed for the contribution they make (or could make) it is necessary to explore the vulnerability context in which they exist; what are the trends (over time and space), shocks and stresses? Shock tends to denote a more sudden pressure on livelihood. For example, a severe flood and drought can seriously affect natural and physical capital in a short period of time. A locust swarm can devastate a crop in a matter of hours. Stress is a term used to denote a longer-term pressure. For example, an economic downturn can take place over years and lead to unemployment and dampened markets for produce and labour. This is admittedly a subjective divide but it does encourage the researcher to consider a range of pressures that could exist. It may be something of a challenge to predict such things although historical trends and modelling can provide clues. The historical legacy could indeed be very important within SLA (Scoones and Wolmer 2003). Clearly it is not only a matter of knowing what is happening now but also what the trends are and will be in the future. Some assets may change little over time (e.g. land and buildings) while others such as cash and social networks can be volatile and depend upon movement of people into and out of the household. For example, increasing population density can result in fragmentation of land holding.

Vulnerability to shocks can also vary. A drought for example will impact upon natural capital and in turn reduce crop yields, but may have little if any effect on other capitals. In the longer term, a severe drought could impact on a wide range of capitals, including social and human as people emigrate. Similarly, flooding may damage physical and natural capital while having little impact on the others. Climate change as a longer-term trend is increasingly being seen as an important factor that can effect such vulnerability for some populations and SLA provides a framework to understand this and how people might adapt (Elasha et al. 2005; Iwasaki et al. 2009; Simon and Leck 2010; Siddiqi 2011; Below et al. 2012). UIy et al. (2011) provide an example of such an SLA employed to explore options

for vulnerable communities living in coastal parts of the province of Albay, Philippines. But these authors also make the important point that vulnerability can vary at low scales. Hence capitals will vary in their resilience to different types of shock and the intensity of that shock, and this can vary over relatively small spatial scales; even within a village. Wlokas (2011) came to similar conclusions with regard to the installation of solar water heaters for households in South Africa. However, this was not just a case of variation in local climate as the approach and strategies adopted by the implementers of the solar water heating project could also have an influence on the extent of any benefits on sustainable livelihood that may be seen by households.

Moreover it is necessary to examine the policy and institutional context within which these capitals exist, including the legal context and what 'rights' may, or may not, exist (Ashley et al. 2003). While some capitals may be vulnerable to certain shocks it may be that authorities are able to act and limit any damage which occurs or perhaps provide recompense. While assets may be damaged by flooding there may be publically owned structures in place to reduce the likelihood of the disaster occurring. Similarly, there may be publically funded extension services available which can supplement the knowledge base of farmers or provide advice and help with irrigation systems. It is not only government services which need to be considered here as they may be non-governmental or even private agencies at hand that can provide support for livelihoods. Finally, it is not only a matter of considering each institution in isolation that matters but also the ways in which they do, or do not work together.

The importance of institutions is often reiterated within the sustainable livelihood literature, and in a variety of contexts that go beyond the examples provided above. Institutions influence the natural access to many of the capitals as well as peoples' opportunities and choices. They can help govern social relations and power structures at many scales. Challies and Murray (2011), for example, highlight the importance of institutional support for small-scale raspberry growers in Chile by improving their capacity to comply with safety and quality standards and hence gain and retain market access via the global value chain. Such access to global markets underpins the sustainable livelihood of these growers. Cherni and Hill (2009), in the context of energy supply in Cuba, make the interesting point that the institutional context is a two-way street even if the SLA does tend to focus on households and communities. Thus policies that help the livelihoods of the poor can also help governments achieve their own policy targets. Indeed there are some interesting points which arise when livelihoods are based on undesirable activities. Tefera (2009) provides an example of an SLA applies to growers of khat (*Catha edulis*) in Ethiopia, a crop which is used to produce an amphetamine-like stimulant which is addictive and illegal to either possess or sell in a number of countries and controlled in some others. But the crop does yield a high income (albeit those market prices can fluctuate) and Tefera (2009) points out that a policy of 'criminalizing' khat production and trade is likely to have a negative impact on the livelihood of growers. What is required are alternatives, but the relatively high market price of khat tends to work against a broadening of livelihoods.

Only when vulnerability and institutional contexts have been considered can it be possible to develop strategies that help enhance livelihood (i.e. generate positive livelihood outcomes). The assumption is that these planned outcomes would feedback to enhance livelihood assets and make them more resilient.

## 2.7 Representation Within SLA

One issue that no doubt would have come to the mind of the reader regarding the above sections is the extent of community involvement required in SLA. As set out above the scale of the SLA has been left rather ambiguous and terms such as household, family, population etc. have been purposely interspersed with descriptions of capitals, resilience and institutions. As will be seen later, the scale of the SLA in relation to the number of people meant to benefit from the insights has varied somewhat in the literature, but this does create a critical question regarding representation. Just who should be included within the SLA to achieve such representation, and equally important how many people should be included? If the intention is to help a community of say 10,000 households then it may simply not be possible to talk to every one of them. But which households should be included and how many of them should be 'sampled' to gain a meaningful insight into livelihoods that would be representative of the 10,000? Would 100 be enough or 1,000? Given that the time, effort and resources involved in exploring the capitals let alone the resilience and institution contexts is substantial then the question over 'representation' is a critical one.

Unfortunately there is no easy answer to the 'representation' question. Access to households can be influenced by many factors and one of these is that a proportion of households may not be willing to take part in the SLA. Hence there may be a tendency towards 'convenience' sampling; including those that can be reached and are willing to take part. Also, the appropriate sample size to provide an adequate (whatever the terms 'appropriate' and adequate' may mean) representation of a population is something of an art form. Indeed this is the question asked more often than not in any social enquiry. Statistical theory can provide some guidance. There is a basic equation in statistics that gives the required sample size once there is some notion as to the variation one might see in a sample. In any population, say of 10,000 households, it is possible to take a series of samples of 100 households and ask them for their land ownership (a physical capital) and convert to hectares. It is also possible to calculate the mean land area for each sample as well as the standard deviation (SD); a measure of the variation in land ownership within each sample. The sample means will be different, across the series of samples and each of them is an estimation of the true (overall) population mean (the mean land ownership calculated for all 10,000 households). The standard deviation for the samples will also vary and will again give estimates of the variation in land ownership for the 10,000 households. The samples are providing windows on the population as a whole, but none may give the true value. It is possible that, by

chance, one sample does indeed provide the true population mean and SD but that will not be known to the researcher. The variation between these sample means is called Standard Error (SE). Ideally one wants to have as small SE as possible. If the variation in sample means is very large (high SE) then the degree of confidence one can have as to where the ‘real’ value for the population rests will be low; the precision is low. The smaller the SE then the more confident it is possible to be about where the real mean may rest; in other words the precision is higher. Obviously the sample size is an important concern here. Larger sample sizes are likely to provide better estimates of the overall mean (SE will be small). The ultimate would be to have a sample size of 10,000 households—everyone in the population! Similarly if the variable being measured, in this case land area, is reasonably uniform across households then it too can help reduce the variation in sample means.

Rather than take lots of samples it can be mathematically (and conveniently!) proven that variation between sample means (the SE) can be estimated by the values of N and SD for one sample:

$$SE = \frac{SD}{\sqrt{N}}$$

This equation ‘works’ irrespective of the distribution of the variable being assessed; whether it is positively or negatively skewed (as land ownership can be) makes no difference. Thus the higher the value of N and lower the value of the SD for the one sample then the lower the value of SE. The equation can be rearranged as follows:

$$\sqrt{N} = \frac{SD}{SE}$$

The gain from this simple rearrangement is that if the SD and SE can be reasonably estimated (or guessed!) based upon experience or perhaps a preliminary sample then values can be plugged into the equation to provide an estimate of the sample size (N) that may be required. Admittedly this is all a bit ‘ball park’ as one not only requires an estimate of the SD but also some notion of precision that one is willing to tolerate (represented by the SE). Given the same value for the SD, if less precision is required (SE is high) the sample size can be low whereas if more precision is required (SE is low) then the sample size will need to be larger.

The reader should note that the equation shown above is a relatively simple example of how an adequate sample size can be arrived at, and it is by no means the only such example. There are other more sophisticated formulae and some statistical software packages allow the user to ‘plug in’ various assumptions about precision etc. and the program will provide a suggested value for N. But the example does provide the reader with a taste as to how statistics can help with this issue.

With stratified sampling where the population is assumed to comprise of different groups then this challenge becomes more complicated. In that case it may be necessary to derive different values of N across the groups, and the SD for the same variable may not necessarily be the same across them. For example, the land



ownership variable used above might have a quite different pattern across genders, ages and ethnic groups within a single village. There is also a case for smaller sample sizes which allow for a greater degree of in-depth exploration of livelihood (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). Naturally there is a trade-off here with representation. Hence it may be of no surprise to the reader that sample sizes within the SLA literature have not typically been formally set using such formulae.

In the SLA literature the sample sizes vary a great deal. Wlokas (2011) in her study of solar water heaters in South Africa employed a sample size of over 600 households in low-income areas of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Fernandez et al. (2010) employed a sample size of 237 households in four Mayan communities of Campeche, Mexico, when using SLA to explore the effect of income strategies on calorie intake. Nguthi and Niehof (2008) used SLA to research the effects of HIV/AIDS on the livelihood of predominantly banana-farming households in Kenya. They conducted a survey with a sample of 254 farming households stratified into two main groups; 75 that were affected by HIV/AIDS-affected households and 179 that were non-affected by HIV/AIDS. In all cases the main methodology for data collection was a questionnaire-based survey which could allow for relatively large numbers of respondents to be included in a reasonable time frame. The surveys were also supplemented with other means of data collection such as open-ended stories of impact. However, in all cases the sample sizes were much smaller than the communities from which they came although the size of the latter was typically not given. There is also the question of depth to consider. In each of these examples the focus was upon only one facet of livelihood—energy, calorie intake and impact of HIV/AIDS respectively—which allowed some honing of questions to take place. The importance of the foci was, of course, set out for each study. But in ‘exploratory’ situations where one is beginning with a blank sheet and SLA is being used to establish what the main issues might be, then such honing may not be possible or indeed desirable. This will be discussed again later.

## **2.8 The Attractions and Popularity of SLA**

SLA is comprehensive and people-centred in a direct sense (Glavovic 2006a; Chang and Tipple 2009; Høgh-Jensen et al. 2010), and depends upon the involvement of those meant to be helped by change as well as their local knowledge (Mercer and Kelman 2010). Indeed this is both a principled and practical stance as it is difficult to imagine being able to implement an SLA without the involvement of these people. Thus SLA forces an engagement with those meant to be helped by an intervention or policy. It cannot be done from an office. In line with participatory approaches in general this provides opportunities for community-based learning where people can learn from each other as well as from outsiders (Butler and Mazur 2007). As a result SLA builds upon the long history of the participatory movement in development, and techniques and methods honed over years of application in stakeholder participation can also be used within SLA.

SLA also represents an acceptance that multiple-sectors have to be considered i.e. it is holistic (Tao and Wall 2009). As Allison and Ellis (2001) have succinctly put it with regard to an SLA they implemented with a population of fisher folk:

Its [SLAs] chief point of departure is to avoid undue preoccupation with a particular component of individual or family livelihood strategies, in this instance fishing, to the neglect of other components that make their own demands on the resources available to the household.

Krantz (2001, p. 1) puts this need for holism in even broader terms:

The concept of Sustainable Livelihood (SL) is an attempt to go beyond the conventional definitions and approaches to poverty eradication. These had been found to be too narrow because they focused only on certain aspects or manifestations of poverty, such as low income, or did not consider other vital aspects of poverty such as vulnerability and social exclusion.

SLA forces this wider perspective through its very design, and is especially relevant in situations where people may have multiple contributions towards their livelihood rather than just a single wage or salary (Tao and Wall 2009). It also forces a consideration of interactions and trade-offs. McLennan and Garvin (2012) for example employed an SLA to explore livelihoods in North-West Costa Rica and showed how intervention was necessary to help mitigate the negative effects of 'locally-felt' trade-offs between conservation on the one hand and use of resources on the other. Such trade-offs are common where people have little choice, and thus SLA can help highlight the issues and explore possible solutions. Indeed this is not just an issue for rural populations and SLA has been employed in urban contexts. (Simon and Leck 2010). Wlokas (2011) speaks of a 'Sustainable Urban Livelihoods Approach' (SULA), although the essence of SULA is the same as that outlined above. SLA builds from this existing knowledge and experience-base rather than taking a new direction.

There is an assumption underlying all this in that change happens and livelihoods are dynamic rather than static. The importance of understanding the history of where people are helps in appreciating why things are the way they are and why people do what they do (Scoones and Wolmer 2003). Intrinsic within this is the nature of decision making and the inevitable trade-offs and conflicts that can occur. The inclusion of such dynamics from the outset as a part of the analytical framework provides SLA with a clear advantage, although in practice the piecing together of historical context may be difficult.

Finally, SLA sets out what the objective of an intervention should be; need for diversification for example as a means of limiting exposure to risk. Once this has been accepted SLA sets out a process by which that 'broad vision' can be gleaned. There are no detailed schematics, blueprints or precise methods that 'must' be used, only a framework. Thus SLA is a flexible approach that can be implemented in many different ways depending upon local context and expertise available for the analysis. It can also be used as a framework for developing indicators to help policy makers and others chart progress towards attainment of sustainable livelihood (Bondad-Reantaso et al. 2009; Bueno 2009; Nha 2009).

Given the benefits of SLA it is to be expected that it featured within the academic literature. Figure 2.3 is a plot of the number of journal papers which have the terms ‘Sustainable Livelihood Approach’ or ‘Sustainable Livelihood Analysis’ in their abstract. It is therefore a similar analysis to that presented in Chap. 1 with regard to ‘sustainable livelihood’ and as in that case it needs to be stressed that this is not an ideal measure of usage but it does nonetheless provide a clue. It should also be noted that these are refereed papers; their content has been checked and approved by other researchers. Mention of SLA began in 1999, which more or less matches the publication of the SLA framework by DFID in 1998, but the number of journal papers is still surprisingly low at one paper per year until 2003. Even so the number of papers published per year has tended to remain significantly below 10 for almost all the years in the graph with the exception of 2009. The figure for 2012 is incomplete as it only covers the first two months of 2012.

Nonetheless the extent of the academic literature on SLA is remarkably small which may surprise the reader given the comments already made in this chapter and the previous one regarding what SLA can help achieve. In fairness it needs to be stressed that the origins of SLA are very much as a practical tool for development intervention rather than as a research tool, although there is no intention here to diminish the potential value of SLA within research (Hogh-Jensen et al. 2009, 2010). Indeed there can be a fine line between research and intervention, and the two are often intertwined in approaches such as action research. But it was not a framework intended to aid pure research *per se*. Indeed many of the papers included in Fig. 2.3 are based upon applied research funded by donors such as DFID. They are also typically site specific, usually focussed on relatively small in areas terms in parts of a single country. As a result much of the SLA literature is not necessarily in the ‘refereed’ domain picked up by the literature searches

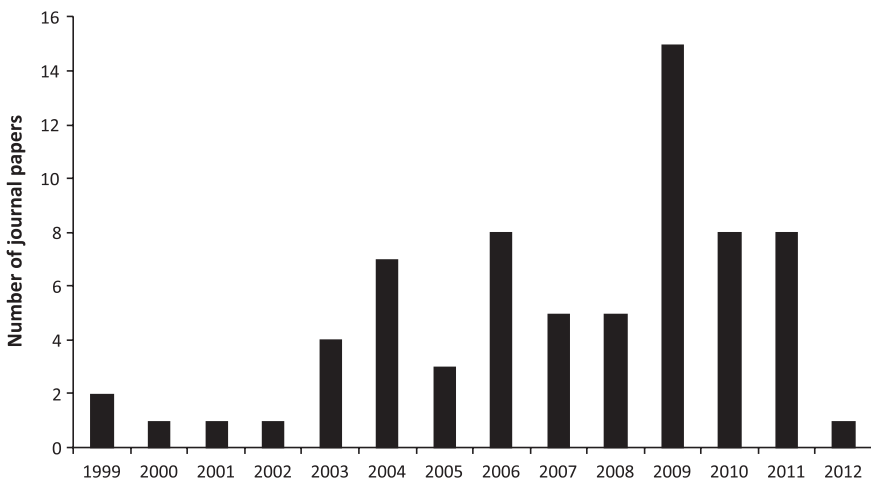


Fig. 2.3 Number of papers that mention SLA in their abstract

used to generate Fig. 2.3. Much of the SLA experience may reside in the so-called ‘grey’ literatures of project proposals and programme reports required as a condition of receiving funds from development partners. Given that such reports are not always made available to a wider audience then it is to be expected that researchers bemoan the paucity of literature which analyses the operationalisation (rather than theory) of SLA (Allison and Horemans 2006). Even if such reports are understandably site and time specific they can still provide a valuable resource.

SLA is a practical framework for analysing a concept of sustainable livelihood, and it is perhaps no surprise that this wider concept has had much greater reporting within the academic literature; a point made in Chap. 1 with regard to Fig. 1.2. Indeed the contrast between Figs. 2.3 and 1.2 is marked in a number of respects. The start date in Fig. 1.2 is 1989; some 10 years earlier than for Fig. 2.3, and the number of paper published per year is generally much higher. Many of these papers will use the term ‘sustainable livelihood’ as a concept and in most of them the methodology revolves around other frameworks or specific techniques rather than SLA. Thus, for example, a paper may use the concept of ‘sustainable livelihood’ to broadly cover what the researchers were exploring but the research may focus only on one aspect of it (one of the capitals or institution perhaps). Indeed even the forerunner of ‘sustainable livelihood’, namely Integrated Rural Development’ has still managed to maintain popularity within the academic literature as shown in Fig. 2.4. The history is a longer one, with papers being published in the early 1970s, with periods of relative stasis in terms of publications per year, but the concept has remained in use right through to 2010.

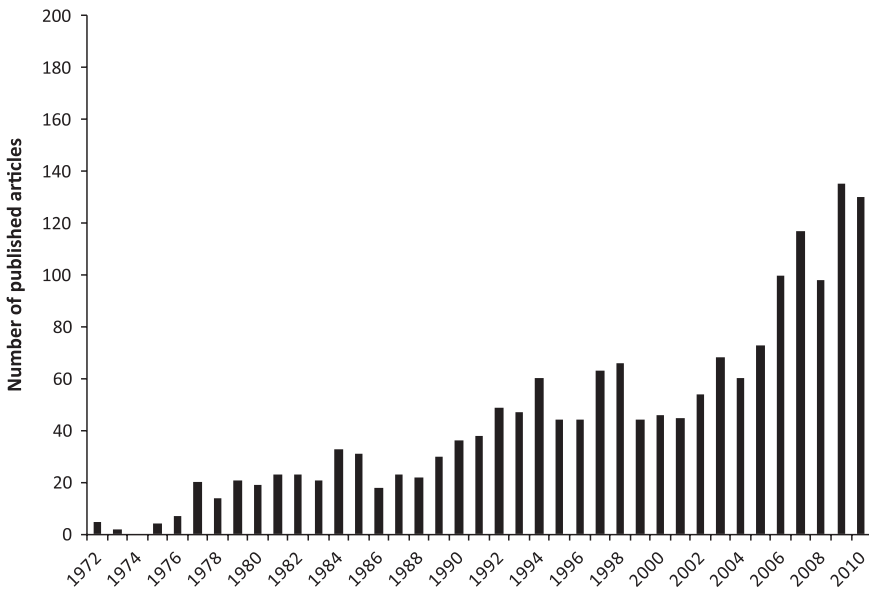


Fig. 2.4 Number of papers that mention ‘Integrated Rural Development’ in their abstract

One of the lessons of the literature analysis is that the SLA framework is arguably and ironically less popular with academics than is the more abstract notion of a sustainable livelihood. But what are the potential factors that could diminish the value of SLA—at least relative to what one may expect to see given the popularity of the concept of sustainable livelihood? The next section will highlight some of the problems with SLA that have been highlighted in the literature.

## 2.9 Critiques of SLA

SLA, like evidence-based approaches in general, has had its critics and its proponents are often careful to point out that it is not a panacea (van Dillen 2002; Sillitoe 2004; Toner and Franks 2006; Small 2007; Kelman and Mather 2008). Some of the criticisms are set out as follows, although it has to be noted that a number of these are by no means unique to SLA.

1. For all the people-centred rhetoric of SLA people are strangely invisible in Fig. 2.1. There are capitals, one of which is ‘human’, influences, institutions, policies etc. but where are the people? The danger is that SLA can become a rather mechanical and quantitative cataloguing exercise which plays neatly into the broad critiques offered by post-modernists and indeed harks back to the ‘new household economics’ approach and its focus on “*clusters of task-oriented activities*” (Guyer and Peters 1987, p. 209) from which SLA sprang. However, quantification does have advantages; it certainly feeds into the current vogue for numbers and statistics within social policy and thus can have resonance with those using the information to bring about change (Sorrel 2007; Neylan 2008). But SLA has little about ‘culture’ *per se* even though this is an important consideration for communities (Tao et al. 2010). Indeed if anything ‘culture’ may be perceived by development practitioners as a constraint to an understanding of opportunities and potential interventions (Daskon and Binns 2010). Also absent from the SLA framework are important considerations such as leisure, and this can have an important impact on resources. For example, in their study of the fishing of Atlantic billfish off the coast of West Africa, Brinson et al. (2009) point out the importance of recreational fishing on the stock and suggest that this should be included in an SLA alongside the more traditional focus on fishing to support livelihood. Hence the paradox of a ‘people centred’ approach almost entirely avoids some of the key aspects of human existence; people have a culture and also try to enjoy their lives.
2. It is unclear how to analyse and measure capitals within SLA. The pentagon of Fig. 2.2 is a neat representation of important asset groups but each could contain many elements and how are these to be assessed? Is it necessary for all of them to be measured or only some, and if the latter than how is to be determined which to assess? Obviously there is an element of ‘context specificity’ here, but at least superficially it might seem straightforward. For farming households the obvious physical asset of importance is land and surely land

area can easily be measured? In reality land ownership can be far more complex than this as a household may own many irregular parcels of land which can be spatially scattered at varying distances from the place of residence. Also, of course, there is a difference between ownership of land and access to land through rent or gift. The latter can be volatile and thus constitute a capital in one year but not in the next. Finally there is the issue of ‘substitution’ of these capitals whereby one could presumably replace another. In economic theory this is the case as capitals are ‘production factors’ but is it applicable in sustainable livelihoods? Can natural capital really be replaceable by financial capital, and if so how desirable is that for sustainability?

3. Related to point (2) is the importance of trust and openness (Lapeyre 2011). An SLA is reliant upon the participation of those at the centre of the analysis yet the questions being asked, for example asset ownership can be sensitive for all sorts of reasons and it would not be surprising if households withhold information if they felt that the questions are too intrusive (Why is such a question being asked? Will a truthful answer put us in trouble with the law/government?). Again, if land ownership is taken as a seemingly straightforward example, in many countries tax payments are positively related to land area. It would be expected that if a household withheld information about the area of land it owned, it was because it feared that asset could be taxed; the answer would therefore grossly underestimate the asset. This may not be the case, but again it might. The same sensitivity could apply to all asset ownership and potentially distort the outcome of an SLA.
4. An SLA could result in much detailed analysis but how is this to be translated into interventions, policy for example, that will help people? The claim that the process is liberating for participants only holds if those same people have power to bring about change or indeed if they have options. Ahmed et al. (2010) provide an example of prawn fishers in Bangladesh that have limited scope for adjusting their livelihood; restrictions on prawn catches set by government to help the sustainability of the stock has not been enforced precisely because the fishermen lacked alternative livelihood strategies. Indeed power can be a highly skewed property! (Toner and Franks 2006). Some households may be able to adapt to help improve their lot following an SLA while others—frankly—may be able to do little if anything. An SLA, of course, should be able to detect such heterogeneity between households provided the ‘sample’ size is large enough and the sampling has been designed to pick up such variation. Thus SLA does not avoid the key concern of representation and the ‘myth of community’ inherent within all participatory methods. The problem is that different actors are involved in the various arrows and neat boxes of Fig. 2.1 and those involved in doing the SLA are not usually the same actors involved in using the information to bring about change, be it through allocation and monitoring of resources or perhaps policy. The danger is that SLAs become an end in themselves and do little more than form the basis for lengthy reports and papers in academic journals. This is by no means an issue solely for SLA, and often voiced in critiques of participatory methods in general (Toner and Franks 2006).

5. While there is an attempt to assess vulnerability (shocks, trends etc.) there is obviously much unpredictability, especially at macro-scales. An historical analysis can help as these can allow some sense as to the likelihood of what could occur even if it does not allow for when. This has become all too clear following the ‘credit crunch’ of 2008 and its global ramifications, but could also cover more national ‘shocks’ such as *coup d’etat*, rampant inflation as a result of political instability and even outbreak of disease. Such shocks can have massive impacts at household scales, including abandonment of land and migration and impossible to predict except at relatively short time scales.
6. As a result of the above there is much complexity in SLA. The diagram in Fig. 2.1 may be a neat and simple representation but people’s lives are complex. Putting aside the need to consider the wider policy and institutional contexts, and these are complex enough, the first steps of identifying livelihood assets and their vulnerability contexts are ‘non-trivial’ and there are dangers that arise out of this. As noted by one author, SLA “*belongs to the group of holistic approach that seeks to capture the enormous complexity of development problems, but do so at the cost of focus, depth and analytical clarity*” (van Dillen 2002, p. 251). It certainly can be argued that an SLA exercise has to be based upon inter disciplinarily which in itself is a challenge (Sillitoe 2004) and perhaps goes further than that by evoking trans disciplinarily as new knowledge is “*produced, disseminated and applied in the borderland between research, policy and practice*” (Knutsson 2006, p. 91). If there is to be a ‘quick’ analysis then the danger is that it could also be ‘dirty’ driven by the needs of those doing the SLA. The result may be more descriptive (what people do and have) than analytical (why do people have what they have and do what they do?). Ironically the response of the UNDP when designing their attempt to measure capability with the Human Development Index (HDI) focussed on just three elements which they deemed of central importance; income, health care (proxied by life expectancy) and education. Thus human development becomes compressed into just three measures for which data are relatively easily available. In an SLA the information generated may be substantial and decisions have to be made not only about the analyses and interpretation but also presentation to those that need to make use of it.

Some of the above has received remarkably little attention within the SLA literature, which is perhaps surprising given these points are well-known within critical analyses of attempts to use ‘evidence-based’ approaches to intervention in general (Sanderson 2002; Pawson 2006). Thus while there is an undeniable logic to being aware of the assets available to a household and their vulnerability as a starting point for the framing of a basis for intervention, the creation of this knowledge amongst those employing the intervention is a significant challenge; not simply in terms of a technical issue like measurement but also participation and trust. Any snapshot in time, a catalogue of what assets are present, may be misleading for a variety of reasons. An incomplete ‘asset pentagon’ may not provide a good foundation and this is before trends in assets are considered. Is there

evidence of these increasing, decreasing or remaining the same? Again, some trends may be obvious. For example, land may be divided into smaller parcels as a result of population growth and result in classic indicators of cropping intensity. For others this may be more complex, for example, reliance on memory.

## 2.10 SLA for Evidence-Based Intervention

The point has now been made through this and the previous chapter, that SLA is typically applied as the basis for intervention; for doing something to help people. In effect it can be a diagnostic ‘tool’ which provides the evidence-base to help ensure that interventions can be designed to have the most positive impact (Allison and Horemans 2006; Toner and Franks 2006). The intervention itself can take many forms. For example, the intention may be to use the SLA to help design a development project over the short term or perhaps a programme of linked activities over the longer term. Perhaps the SLA points to the need to encourage other sources of income generation or better access to markets. On a larger scale the SLA may be the basis for new policy or changes to existing policy (Kotze 2003; Glavovic 2006a, b; Glavovic and Boonzaier 2007) perhaps by using SLA as the basis for creating indicators (Bueno 2009; Nha 2009) or as a part of methodologies designed to help with decision making (Cherni et al. 2007; Brent and Kruger 2009). In some cases SLA has been used as a tool for evaluation (Mancini et al. 2007). However, while primarily intended as a framework to help guide intervention SLA can also be employed as a ‘research paradigm’ to help guide the agenda for further research (Hogh-Jensen et al. 2009). The holistic nature of SLA certainly did resonate with policy makers and others and does help to explain the relative popularity it had amongst these groups (Knutsson 2006).

The utilisation of frameworks and tools to provide a solid basis for intervention is certainly not unique to SLA. The literature on ways in which interventions of all types, but especially policy, can be based more on evidence is substantial and goes back many years. In recent times there has been the rise of ‘theory of change’ as a means to help think through how a project’s activities could help bring about change (Funnell and Rogers 2011). In effect this covers the return arrow of Fig. 2.1 which goes from what the SLA suggests should happen to improve matters back to making that change happen. This could involve changes at the scale of the household through to institutions and indeed the state. The latter may involve changes to institutional policy, and if policy is not based on evidence then the chances are that it will not have the desired effect and even have unintended, perhaps negative, outcomes. Gray (2001) for example has set out a gradient of categories that link evidence with policy as follows:

1. Evidence-ignorant policy; policy not even aware of relevant evidence
2. Evidence-aware policy; policy cognisant of but not using evidence



3. Evidence-informed policy; policy considering but not substantially shaped by evidence
4. Evidence-influenced policy; policy changed in some identifiable way by evidence
5. Evidence-led policy; policy that is for the greater part shaped and embedded in evidence about goals and outcomes.

These categories represent a spectrum, from no use of evidence at all in policy (number 1 of the list) to the other extreme (number 5) where evidence leads policy. Between these extremes there are shades of grey, with lots of scope for malleable definitions as to what is meant by words such as ‘consideration’, ‘identifiable’, ‘shaped’ and ‘change’. Categories 3 to 5 involve policy being shaped to some extent by evidence, even if identifying this in unambiguous terms might be a challenge. Sorrell (2007) makes the point that this linkage between evidence and policy is supposed to help with a number of problems that one could encounter in category 1 and to some extent category 2. If good quality evidence is not used to inform policy then there is scope for conflict and confusion over key issues as different people bring their own views to bear on the said issues and these may be significantly at odds. Also, there may be an over-reliance on individuals and perhaps *ad hoc* studies that may not necessarily be representative of the wider picture. But there are complex issues involved in the placing of information (even information from an SLA) into a wider context. As Bruckmeier and Tovey (2008) put it, there is a chain linking data (simple facts) to information (where data is interpreted) to what they call knowledge (information placed into context). An SLA may generate information that suggests a clear set of actions, but policy makers place that information within a wider context where those actions may not necessarily be the best options. Indeed Bruckmeier and Tovey (2008) also point out that the chain linking data, information and knowledge can be reversed in the sense that knowledge creates a sense of where the gaps occur and can thereby drive further need for data. This being so, the link between evidence coming from SLA and policy is a two-way street. Policy makers do not only consume information but can also commission its creation. Interestingly the role of those commissioning SLA, and their motivations for doing so, as well as the uses made of any insights, has rarely been discussed within the SLA literature.

Categories 4 and 5 in the spectrum provided by Grey (2001) cover the use of knowledge in what Boswell (2008) refers to as an instrumental mode to distinguish it from other ways in which knowledge can be used within policy (Table 2.2). For example, the fruits of research may not influence policy but can be used as a legitimisation of existing policy decisions (legitimizing knowledge) or perhaps commissioned and interpreted in different ways by contending groups all seeking to influence policy (substantiating knowledge) (Table 2.2).

Notwithstanding these issues, the categories towards the bottom of Grey’s list in Table 2.2 have an obvious appeal and have been in vogue within a wide variety of fields for many years; often this may have been more implicit than explicit. Indeed such ‘evidence-based policy’ has even been described as a

**Table 2.2** The use of knowledge

Instrumental knowledge	Legitimizing knowledge	Substantiating knowledge
Organizational structure and substance of research reflect performance targets	Looser fit between structure/ substance of research and policy goals	Structure and substance of research reflect lines of contention
Intensive interest in and take-up of research by decision-makers	Looser ties between decision-makers and research unit	Some exchange between decision makers and research unit
No obvious interest in publicizing knowledge utilization	Clear interest in widely publicizing knowledge utilization	Selected interest in publicizing utilization (to relevant policymakers)

(after Boswell 2008)

modernist-rationalist project. It was especially popular as a mantra with the New Labour government of the 1990s (Sanderson 2002):

New Labour proclaims the need for evidence-based policy, which we must take to mean that policy initiatives are to be supported by research evidence and that policies introduced on a trial basis are to be evaluated in as rigorous a way as possible. Plewis (2000; cited in Sanderson 2002, p. 4)

New Labour was in power in the UK when SLA began to be adopted and promoted by DFID. Indeed the objectivity implied in evidence-based policy is alluring and as Holt (2008, p. 324) puts it:

A modern perception of ‘evidence-based policy making’ is sometimes characterized as a process whereby the ‘evidence’ is assembled almost independently of the policy options and then through a process of analysis and distillation the policy options and then the preferred policy choice emerge.

This is almost an ideal perception; with evidence providing a range of suggested options and a ‘best choice’ eventually emerges. An alternative and perhaps less prosaic view of this process is provided by Black (2001) where the evidence is almost “*a retail store in which researchers are busy filling shelves of a shop front with a comprehensive set of all possible relevant studies that a decision maker might some day drop by to purchase*”. However Black (2001) does go on to say that the “*the case for evidence based policymaking is difficult to refute*.” However, the problem is that while this may be the case the reality is that policy makers may not necessarily base their decisions on the evidence, including that arising from context. The distinction between information and knowledge made by Bruckmeier and Tovey (2008) has already been mentioned, but the failure of policy makers to adopt recommendations or make use of evidence has been the source of frustration amongst academics and researchers. Huston (2008, p. 1) speaking of the difficulty of making ‘evidence-based’ approaches a reality makes the following:

Most social scientists believe that strong evidence should lead policymakers to adopt effective programs and to eschew those that are demonstrably ineffective, but policies sometimes seem to fly in the face of data. The unpredictable and volatile world of social policy has led some researchers to renounce efforts to inform it because they believe that decisions are entirely political and that data are invoked at best only to support a position that someone has already decided to endorse.

The last point in this quotation resonates with some of the types of knowledge set out by Boswell (2008) in Table 2.2. It seeks to remind us that evidence, no matter how good it is, is but one source feeding into a decision-making process. Huston (2008) suggests that in reality decisions can be influenced by the ‘four I’s’:

- Ideology
- Interests
- Information
- Institutional contexts

Only one of these ‘I’s’ is ‘information’ while the others are much more elusive and indeed in the case of interests and institutions can be quite ephemeral. Black (2001) reinforces this point:

Clearly, research has only a limited role because governance policies are driven by ideology, value judgments, financial stringency, economic theory, political expediency, and intellectual fashion. It would be naive and unrealistic to expect research to provide evidence to clinch arguments about governance policies.

Hence many factors influence decision making besides evidence, and this needs to be considered within any theory of change. Information is just part of the picture. This can be frustrating for those who have dedicated much time and energy to an SLA which would appear to provide clear and workable recommendations to help improve the livelihoods of a community. A classic example of this can be seen with transport policy and this is not a million miles away from an analysis of sustainable livelihood. While in the developing world livelihoods may be more localised to the immediate area where the household resides, although marketing of produce and services can involve significant travel, in the developed world it is not unusual for people to commute long distances to earn a wage. Often this is because paid employment is not available where they live or because the salary is higher elsewhere. Transport policy is an important consideration for their choices, but as Himanen et al. (2004) have pointed out, knowledge of what needs or should be done in transport policy can push against what policy makers perceive as being acceptable by the public.

The present authors have noticed that many experts agree—based on scenarios and modelling studies—on the main features of the policy packages necessary for improving sustainability (Banister and Stead 2004). In the case of urban development, these main features include transport policies making car travel less attractive and public transport more attractive, and land-use policies to increase urban density and mixed land use (Spiekermann and Wegener 2004). However, these policy packages are not implemented because the public—and therefore policymakers—accept only the last part of the above transport policies: improving public transport. The first part, restricting car travel, is not accepted.

Thus a desire for a more sustainable approach on the part of the transport planners clashes with what the commuter may regard as sustainable; in the latter case defined as being cost effective. In the first case it is the promotion of public transport and a lessening of the use of the car while in the latter the car is an important

option that should not be underestimated. Hence all the environmental evidence may suggest that car travel needs to be discouraged yet the reality is that this is neither possible nor feasible. Himanen et al. (2004) go on to make the following points:

1. some interventions in the name of sustainability may not make sense in an era of change
2. research information does not seem to have been very influential in the choice of sustainability policy mechanism, especially the choice between standards and market approaches
3. even carefully planned and implemented policy actions may provide disappointing results because of unexpected human behaviour and/or misjudges market responses.
4. ways policies are adopted. Planners reconcile demands for sustainability with other public goals (affordability, equity, acceptability).

Thus despite the evidence being strong that car use should be reduced, people want to use their cars and policy makers end up responding to that demand. As already mentioned, this is relevant to SLA as it highlights the importance of 'whose livelihood' is being improved? Indeed one can argue that an SLA conducted on a sample of commuters in the developed world would arrive at exactly the conclusion that their cars are an important aspect to their livelihood and thus potentially help inform these policy makers that any effort to enhance public transport has to address certain concerns before these people will give up using cars. Much depends upon what evidence is collected and for what reason. Huston (2008) makes this point amongst others with suggestions that there are limitations to any evidence-based policy. After all, the audiences for the evidence can be diverse, and have different backgrounds which can influence their ability and indeed openness to use evidence. The quality of the evidence can also vary, and any implications of evidence for action can be interpreted in various ways. Black (2001) makes a further set of observations as to why evidence-based policy is difficult to achieve in practice:

- Policymakers have goals other than effectiveness (social, financial, strategic development of service, terms and conditions of employees, electoral)
- Research evidence may be dismissed as irrelevant, perhaps because it was derived from a context not regarded as being broadly applicable
- Lack of consensus amongst researchers about the research evidence (complexity of evidence, scientific controversy, different interpretations)
- Other types of competing evidence (personal experience, local information, eminent colleagues' opinions)
- Social environment not conducive to policy change (perhaps because other priorities are regarded as of greater importance or because the public may not accept the changes that evidence suggests should be made)
- Poor quality of knowledge purveyors

The last point is especially interesting. Who are these so-called ‘knowledge purveyors’ and why are they important?

These are the people who carry the research evidence into the policymaking forums. In central government, civil servants usually have this crucial role. In the United Kingdom, a high turnover of such staff, lack of experience in a particular field, and high workload militate against good quality advice.

Black (2001)

The role of such purveyors, indeed the means by which information is communicated is also rarely, if ever, discussed within the context of SLA. If the SLA derives new information that needs to be brought to the attention of those meant to act on it then how is this communication to take place and by whom? It may not necessarily be the case that those implementing the SLA are responsible for this. Maybe the funder (‘owner’) of the SLA just wants the job done and a report produced. The implementers may wish to publish the results in another outlet, such as an academic journal or perhaps an academic conference, but the objective here may not necessarily be to convey this knowledge to policy makers. The result so often is that the SLA is ‘done’ to generate this information but the users may be ill defined and, even if they are clearly defined, the means by which this knowledge is conveyed to them may rest on the assumption that they will read the report or journal papers available. This may be wishful thinking.

Empirical evidence for the importance of communication between researchers and policy makers is available. For example, Choi et al. (2005) reviewed a number of studies which explore the influences that help policy makers make use of research and a summary is provided as Table 2.3. Some of these elements have already been mentioned, but others such as personal contact are not perhaps what one would expect. This appears to head both lists but one wonders how often this occurs with SLA. Do those responsible for the implementation of the SLA have an opportunity to communicate the findings directly to those who will ultimately make the decisions over what to do, or is the communication only via reports and policy briefs?

Given all of the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ‘rationality-modernity’ which underlies such ‘evidence-based’ approaches, has been critiqued from a number of angles most notably from the constructivist/interpretivist position. Here it is argued that the social world is a complex one and there are real dangers in treating it in a way which suggests that it can be deconstructed to derive actions that will lead to a simple cause-effect mechanism. SLA for all of its efforts to accommodate the breadth of a social world will inevitably fall short of a true appreciation of the complexity. Indeed such critics argue that the evidence that forms the basis for evidence-based policy is itself value laden as humans have made prior decisions over what information to collect and how; these may be influenced by their perspectives. SLA is not immune from this; no matter how ‘objective’ the framework is presented there is still much scope for bias by directing the means by which data are collected and interpreted. With many SLAs, where those funding and implementing the process may even be external to the communities they are investigating, then the potential for misreading is rife and the dangers are

**Table 2.3** Facilitators and barriers to use of research by policy makers, identified in a systematic review of 24 interview studies

Facilitators to use of research by policy makers	Number of studies
Personal contact between scientists and policy makers	13
Timeliness and relevance of the research	13
Research that includes a summary with clear recommendations	11
Research that confirms current policy or endorses self interest	6
Good quality research	6
Community pressure or client demand for research	4
Inclusion of effectiveness data	3
Total studies	24
Barriers to use of research by policy makers	
Absence of personal contact between scientists and policy makers	11
Lack of timeliness and relevance of research	9
Mutual mistrust between scientists and policy makers	8
Power and budget struggles	7
Poor quality of research	6
Political instability or high turnover of policy making staff	5
Total studies	24

(tabulation of data provided by Innvaer et al. 2002)

perhaps more readily apparent to the reader. But this issue highlighted by the constructivist/interpretivist critics is not restricted to SLA. For example, social deprivation is a complex concept to define let alone measure, yet in England the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) comprises a relatively small number of components as shown in Table 2.4. The table shows the construction of the IMD over the three years that it was used to assess social deprivation; 2000, 2004 and 2007. The table lists the various ‘indicator themes’ (each comprising a collection of indicators) employed to measure social deprivation and the relative contribution that the indicators made to the overall index. Shading of the cells is used to show whether a particular ‘indicator theme’ was included for that IMD. The detail is not important but even a cursory glance at the table shows how the IMD has evolved over a relatively short space of time. In 2000 the IMD had six ‘domains’ covered by 32 indicators, and half of the index was derived from just two of the domains; income and employment. The 2004 version of the IMD had some overlap with that of 2000 but included two new domains covering crime and the ‘living environment’ (air quality, houses without central heating, quality of private sector housing stock and traffic accidents). The 2007 version of the IMD was broadly similar to the 2004 IMD but the geographical scale over which it was assessed changed. This shows that over only seven years not only has the vision of IMD changed regarding what was seen as important but also the geographical scales over which it was assessed changed. It should also be remembered that this change has been driven by a combination of an evolution in the ways in which social scientists envisage social deprivation along with availability of quality data. In effect the IMD, for all its intricacy and empiricism of which Table 2.4 can only provide

**Table 2.4** Summary of the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) for England

Domain of social deprivation	Indicator theme used to assess social deprivation (each theme comprises a number of separate indicators)	Index of multiple deprivation		
		2000	2004	2007
Income deprivation	People in income support			
	People in income based job seekers allowance			
	People in family credit /working families tax Credit			
	People in pension credit			
	People in child tax credit			
	People in disability working allowance/disabled persons tax credit/benefits			
	National asylum support service supported asylum seekers			
Employment deprivation	Unemployment (claimants, jobseekers allowance)			
	People on new deal options			
	Incapacity benefit recipients			
	Severe disablement allowance claimants/recipients			

(continued)

Table 2.4 (continued)

Domain of social deprivation	Indicator theme used to assess social deprivation (each theme comprises a number of separate indicators)	Index of multiple deprivation		
		2000	2004	2007
Health deprivation and disability	Mortality ratios for men and women at ages under 65 Years of potential life lost			
	Acute morbidity			
	Limiting long-term illness			
	Proportion of births of low weight (< 2,500 g)			
	Emergency admissions to hospital			
	Disability rates			
	Adults under 60 suffering from mood or anxiety disorders			
Education, skills and training	Working age adults with no or low qualifications			
	Children aged 16 and over who are not in full-time education (school or school level)			
	Proportions of those aged under 21 not successfully applied for/entered higher education			
	School performance data (Key Stages)			
	Primary school children with English as an additional language			
	School absence rate (primary, secondary)			

(continued)



**Table 2.4** (continued)

Domain of social deprivation	Indicator theme used to assess social deprivation (each theme comprises a number of separate indicators)	Index of multiple deprivation		
		2000	2004	2007
Barriers to housing and services	Housing			
	Homelessness			
	Household overcrowding			
	Poor private sector housing			
	Difficulty of Access to owner-occupation			
	Access to services			
	Access to a post office (general post office counters)			
	Access to food shops			
	Access to a General medical practitioner			
	Access to a primary school			
Crime	Burglary			
	Theft			
	Criminal damage			
	Violence			
Living environment deprivation	Social and private housing in poor condition			
	Houses without central heating			
	Air quality			
	Road traffic accidents involving injury to pedestrians and cyclists			

Shaded cell means that the indicator theme was included in the IMD of that year

a flavour, is a human construct based on thinking at that time. Indeed for the sake of completeness it is worth noting that the IMD is by no means the only attempt to measure deprivation. For example, the Townsend Index of Deprivation (TID) is an earlier (late 1980s) example but one that is much simpler than IMD (Townsend et al. 1988) comprised of just four components:

1. Unemployment as a percentage of those aged 16 and over who are economically active
2. No car ownership (% of all households)
3. No home ownership (% of all households)
4. Household overcrowding.

The choice of these four variables in the TID is in part influenced by availability of the required data via the UK census. Thus its creator has compromised between what social deprivation is and what data are available to measure it. The creators of the IMD have gone beyond the limitations of what data are available via the UK census but have still had to consider what data may be collected at a cost deemed to be reasonable. In the TID the four variables are combined (with equal weight in terms of perceived importance) to form an overall score. As with the IMD, the higher the TID the more deprived and disadvantaged an area is thought to be.

While it might look quite different to Fig. 2.1 the domains and ‘indicator themes’ of Table 2.4 can be mapped onto the SLA framework. The income and employment (or unemployment in the case of the TID) domains have a fairly obvious match to sustainable livelihood and have been mentioned in Chap. 1, and the health and education domains are linked to human capital. Access to housing and services span SLA elements such as physical assets as well as supporting institutions. Crime is not mentioned in the SLA, although for some it does, of course, provide an income. It is clearly not a capital but it can negatively impact a number of the capitals and work against social capital as it can diminish trust. The living environment domain also impinges upon a number of the capitals. There are elements here that impact upon human capital in terms of health. Indeed the overlap should not be all that surprising as both the IMD and SLA are coming at the same system from a different angle.

It should be noted that the IMD was commissioned by the government with the intention that it help inform policy; it was not established as an academic exercise. While each of the components of the IMD in Table 2.4 can certainly be justified as being both relevant and important, and can be mapped onto the SLA framework, they are not the only means by which such components could have been selected. Indeed many of the adjectives in Table 2.4 such as ‘poor’ can be defined in many ways. Given this, the reader can come up with suggestions as to what could be included or omitted in this list of IMD indicators. The relative weighting of the domains (not shown in Table 2.4) is also a matter of opinion or choice.

Both the IMD and the earlier TID attempt to encapsulate the complexity of social deprivation into numerical scores. Thus it is possible to present social deprivation as a league table ranking of different regions of the UK (to help identify ‘hotspots’ of deprivation) or perhaps present social deprivation alongside other ‘measures’ such as allocation of resources to help address it. Such indicators and

indices (an index combines a number of indicators) have proven to be popular ways of encapsulating complex ideas so that they may easily be digested by policy makers. In SLA it is also possible to use indicators to build up a picture of the various components and interactions. Indicators have a veneer of objectivity but the subjectivity that underpins them can easily be forgotten. Indeed as Turnhout et al. (2007, p. 218) point out:

However, the ideal of value free science is still very dominant, for example when you look at what is expected of science and at how divisions of labor between science and policy are organized. Science is supposed to produce facts and policy then makes value-laden decisions.

Yet apparent objectivity and ‘facts’ can be misleading. The IMD is founded upon a degree of subjectivity, or perhaps more accurately of informed opinion. It is a human construct designed to represent in as simple a way as possible an aspect of human existence for those who are meant to help do something about it. But that representation can be highly diverse depending upon who is doing the representing.

However, the counter argument to such a critique of attempts to dissect and model society is that it ultimately can lead to a decision to do nothing. Such post-modernist stances only highlight the complexities of the social world and hence the need for some guidance for human action otherwise it is a recipe for complete abstention from any attempt at intervention, including policy (Sanderson 2002). People are suffering from deprivation so something needs to be done and if this means that simplifications have to be made such as those that underpin the IMD then so be it. It is impossible to represent all aspects of social deprivation that effect people so the choice is either to simplify or—in effect—to do nothing at all—just wring their hands in despair. The IMD may be imperfect but it is better than nothing. Similarly, the SLA may not be able to identify every aspect of people’s livelihood and arrive at a perfect set of interventions but at least it is better than having no idea at all.

But nonetheless such critiques do serve to remind us that we cannot avoid the complexity of social systems as a major problem in deriving evidence that can form the basis for interventions (Tavakoli et al. 2000). Given this uncertainty it is possible that even if an intervention is based on evidence then it may not succeed in its intentions or, at worst, perhaps have unintended and negative impacts.

One of the ‘I’ set out by Huston (2008) for the factors which influence policy is ‘institutional context’. This can convey a host of different aspects, including the perceived need for an institution to sustain itself even if evidence suggests that it is no longer needed. Indeed institutions often like to portray themselves as using evidence-based approaches. As Boswell (2008) has pointed out this provides a legitimizing effect, although this is a relatively under-explored field.

Moreover, contributions in organizational sociology have shown how organizations derive legitimacy through signalling their commitment to knowledge utilization..... However, there has been little attempt to develop a theory setting out the conditions under which symbolic knowledge utilization may be expected to occur, or testing these claims through empirical enquiry. This lacuna seems to be especially regrettable for studies of European Union (EU) policy making. It has been argued that EU policy is predominantly

regulatory and technocratic, and that its civil service appears to derive legitimacy from its expertise..... But the absence of a more rigorous theory of the symbolic functions of knowledge has made it difficult to elaborate or test these claims systematically. Boswell (2008, p. 472)

Thus it can be seen as being positive for an institution to portray itself as being 'evidence based' in the way that it works and so becomes its badge of honour. The alternative is to say that the institution is not or only partially evidence based which can generate a negative image. Those funding SLAs have the same motive to promote it as a means for generating evidence as the basis for action, and may help explain why the approach has been so popular amongst partners providing development funds. However, it is sobering to note that Knutsson (2006) with his work on knowledge integration within SLA and how this has been handled in a number of development-focussed case studies comes to the following conclusion:

Despite the fact that SLA is often described as an approach to societal problems, such as poverty and lack of development in rural areas, the approach has so far primarily been used as a framework for knowledge production. The knowledge produced by the approach is of course intended to be applied in the context of development projects and programmes, but as the results shows, there are less examples of application than examples when SLA is used as a framework for production or dissemination of knowledge. (Knutsson 2006, p. 95)

At the end of this story, it is perhaps sobering to consider that in the eyes of some, DFID, a pioneer and key champion of SLA since the late 1990s, has subsequently become less enthusiastic (Clark and Carney 2009). One of the issues appears to have been a concern that SLA, as a perceived 'project level' tool, cannot feed into the national-scale policy and budgetary changes with which DFID was becoming involved. There is no reason *per se*, why the lessons of SLAs cannot be a part of this more national-scale change but the perception within DFID appears to have been that the approach is 'small scale' in nature and presumably cannot make much of a contribution towards the evidence that may be required. This is a stark contrast between SLA seen as a framework that generates context specific insights at relatively small scales and tools such as the IMD designed to be applicable at much larger scales. If the focus for change is at the larger scales of the nation state or region then SLA may be seen as having little value. Indeed this highlights one of the problems that often confronts new frameworks and ideas. In the furnace of stark reality, where development and indeed research funding is inevitably limited and the direction can also be driven by political decisions then choices constantly have to be made and it is almost as if there is competition between approaches that could be taken. This sounds odd as surely there is room for all these ideas, and there should be complementarily rather than competition, But SLA is but one approach amongst many that could be taken by a development agency, and the shift in focus (and hence resources) at DFID towards more macro-scale interventions could work against approaches such as SLA deemed to be more appropriate at smaller (project) scales. The policy sands are indeed often in motion and even a framework based upon solid principles and good ideas can lose out in the competition for attention for support. Indeed is that necessarily a bad thing?

In order to address this issue of SLA ‘losing out’ to competing ideas Clark and Carney (2009) have suggested that the future of SLA within DFID can be secured by the following steps:

1. *“build on concrete achievements and lessons from practice*
2. *develop a simple narrative for livelihoods approaches and link this to other modes of working and DFID’s corporate objectives*
3. *review how SLA can be adapted to contribute to current development challenges, including the food crisis, fragile states, economic growth and making markets work for the poor*
4. *address perceived weaknesses of SLA, such as limited analysis of policy processes, ecological sustainability, gender and power relations.”*

This is an interesting list of suggestions and will be returned to [Chap. 5](#). The first is at least in part a call for more reporting and analysis of SLA-based case studies as a prelude for such ‘building on concrete achievement’. The 2nd and 3rd involve an adaptation of SLA to better meet the perceived agenda of DFID and indeed wider ‘development challenges’. The need to evolve SLA to meet DFIDs’ “corporate objectives” is an interesting suggestion, but one which would appear to run counter to the founding principles upon which SLA is built—its ‘people first’ ethos. Why should a framework built on such solid principles have to accommodate itself to the fashions that pertain within development agencies? The suggested adaptation towards “current development challenges” does have more credence, and the challenges listed are no doubt important, but given the all-encompassing nature of SLA then it too does seem somewhat superfluous. As the reader would have seen from the examples provided in the chapter, SLA has already been employed in a variety of contexts and one would have thought that the existing framework could readily address issues of food, markets, economic growth and consider challenges arising between shocks and stresses such as political instability and a “fragile state” environment. Surely that is what SLA does best—the need to consider resilience and the institutional context where livelihoods are being pursued. The fourth point about perceived weaknesses also has an odd ‘feel’ to it. The point has already been made with regard to the interface between natural capital in SLA and EG&S. Indeed the latter is also an example of a currently successful approach. Hence while it is hard to see why SLA should be perceived as downplaying “ecological sustainability” in fairness it is easy to see how this may be so when compared with the clear ecological focus of EG&S. The perceived weakness of SLA in terms of gender and power relations is far less easy to appreciate given that these should permeate not just the capitals but also a consideration of their resilience and the institutional backdrop. Surely any consideration of the capitals should include factors such as access and control, and it is hard to see why gender and power relations can in any way be minimised within that. Certainly in the case study presented in this book they were major concerns and readily emerged, along with others such as ethnicity and age, as an important fabric. A particular SLA might underplay their relevance and impacts but that be said to be a fault of the framework; more of implementation.

## 2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has covered much territory; from the origins and form of SLA through to the issues that surround it. Much emphasis has been placed on the practical aspects of SLA and in particular how it is meant to help bring about a positive intervention. The authors do not apologise for this. The mechanics of an SLA are certainly important, and will be returned to in the following chapters; there is undoubtedly no intention to diminish the exploratory value of SLA. Worthy of note is that while the SLA provides a very logical framework for analysis there is much potential variation as to how best it should be done, especially given that compromises are almost inevitably. The resulting trade-offs may mean, for example, that representativeness of the findings is open to question. Of course it is important that an SLA be done 'properly' as this ensures confidence in the knowledge that has been generated. A poorly implemented SLA will be open to much criticism, undermining its findings and conclusions. Similarly the authors are not claiming that publication in refereed journals and conferences of studies that use SLA as part of the methodology is of no value. Such studies provide a wealth of experience to help guide the 'doing' of SLA. But it is important to remember that an SLA is typically being done as a means of informing an intervention and that intending participants benefit. This makes an appreciation of desired change, and how best to bring it about, a vital consideration; just as important as making sure that the capitals, resilience etc. are understood. Part of this will be the communication of the findings to those meant to use them.

Finally, the scale of SLA is an interesting point especially with DFID's recent move towards more national scale interventions and an apparent lessening of the importance of SLA within its agenda. While SLA can be thought of as a means of understanding livelihoods with a broad applicability, it can also be highly context specific. The case for SLA being a basis for a small-scale localised project can make a lot of sense, even if the practicalities of 'doing' the SLA are challenging. This point will be addressed in the following two chapters which explore the use of an SLA by an agency in Nigeria. However, while much is often made of the usefulness of SLA to help inform larger scale (e.g. national) interventions this does have significant challenges. The challenges involved in making decisions more 'evidence-based' are well established, and evidence gleaned from SLA is no different in that regard. This can even result in competition for attention and resource amongst approaches and outlooks, with the 'selection pressure' being the result of a range of factors. While this may sound odd given that the approaches and ideas are typically complimentary in the sense that they operate at different scales, the almost inevitable shortage of resource combined with changing political stances can result in foci which shift around the landscape of potential interventions. For all its holistic and people-centred foundations SLA is no different in that regard and the lessons of what happened within DFID are certainly salutatory, as indeed are some of the suggested 'cures'. The oddity here is that a broad-based and holistic framework that can be applied to the livelihood of human being ends up being downplayed because it is not relevant to larger scales of intervention. This point will be returned to in the final chapter of this book.