

Kristin Helmore and Neresh Singh. SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS: Building on the wealth of the poor.
Bloomfield, CT.: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2001. xiv+128 pp. Index. \$ 19.95. Paper.

In attempts to address sustainable development matters effectively it is important to take into account all current and prospective role-players in an effort to harness the strengths of all, and, at the very least, acknowledge power plays and pecking orders. This general democratic principle does not only hold true for traditional societies, but also traditional and tribal factions of all societies including those in the so-called developed world. Such acknowledgement, as Tucker (in Munck & O Hearn, 1999:24) infers, is likely to bring about the necessary transformations in domination and exploitation. Neglecting to acknowledge the entire spectrum of role-players may result in leaders, in their different guises (husbands, village heads, politicians, etc.), paying lip service to development, and pledging support that may never be forthcoming in as much as it may discourage popular participation in development projects. This awareness is perhaps the main contribution of the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach to grassroots development; an approach that the book *Sustainable Livelihoods: Building on the wealth of the poor* documents and explains.

Contrasting the SL approach with Integrated Rural Development, the UNDP acknowledges that the latter lacks a participatory focus and is entirely donor driven, enabling little ownership on the part of national governments or local organizations (Sustainable Livelihoods Unit of UNDP: Online). This often resulted in frustrated development efforts and intact hegemonies, with additionally, frustrated expectations on the part of ordinary people in dire need of development. The latter brings in its train a suspicion of any future development efforts, and deeper entrenchment of relationships of domination and exploitation.

The SL approach as an alternative model for development finds its *raison d'être* in resolutions taken at the 1995 *World Summit for Social Development*, where the goal of the eradication of poverty was adopted as "an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of human kind" (Sustainable Livelihoods Unit ...: Internet). This important normative and operational shift in approaching development challenges seeks to better understand poverty and its effects on sustainable human development. The renewed focus on poverty on the world development agenda meant that the multi-dimensionality of poverty was better appreciated, and its impact on human development better understood. It meant the *re-thinking* of traditional development constructs and praxis; acknowledging that the related policies, policy instruments and activities have proven not entirely adequate to meet extant development challenges. Reminiscent of Vincent Tucker's holism approach to development (see Nederveen Pieterse in Munck & O'Hearn 1999: 63-88), the SL approach seeks to combat human poverty and promote Sustainable Human Development by being inclusivist in the acknowledgement of role players and their various needs and strengths, and also endeavoring to avoid the trap of "one size fits all" type of development. In this sense the SL approach advocates authentic dialogue between all role players in the development project, and seeks to reverse difference without resorting to cultural relativism.

The above broad themes are journalistically treated in the book *Sustainable Livelihoods: Building on the wealth of the poor*. The rather catchy sub-title of the book alludes to an important realization and concession on the part of the UNDP as the institutional author of the SL approach; viz., that the subjects of development enter the project with essential assets that cannot be denied or ignored if development is to be successful. These assets are not only natural or biological, but also social, political, human, physical, and economic (*cf.*

Sustainable Livelihoods Unit ...: Internet). The aim of the *SL* approach to development, therefore, is primarily how to enable men and women to utilize their specific *asset portfolios* sustainably over the short and long-term.

As intimated above, the book is broadly based upon ideas and fieldwork developed and tested by UNDP advisors. A perusal of the *Acknowledgements* page and also pages vii and viii, reveal a very broad spectrum of contributors to the development of the construct and praxis of the *SL* approach; from UNDP officials, to individuals affiliated to research institutes, to *SL* Programme facilitators at the village level, from Europe to India to Zimbabwe. This fact certainly alerts to an ideal-type approach to development; one that emphasizes process as well as dialogical exchange, engaging with third world contexts, problematic, hegemonies, and traditions, amongst other salient factors.

The first chapter of the book presents the *SL* approach as a development strategy that takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of preceding development strategies; attempting to build on these with a view to addressing development challenges, and in particular, eradicating poverty. Chapter two emphasizes the need for authentic dialogue and participation at all levels; an important aspect that already surfaced in the acknowledgements section of the book. It is aware of, and celebrates the strengths of all involved in the project, what I refer to in this review as the “asset portfolios” of the participants in the project. It also recognizes the need for training and learning at all levels, by all levels; emphasizing reciprocal learning. The latter theme is particularly emphasized in chapter three, a chapter that deals with the need for a better understanding of human interaction with science and technology. Implied in the chapter is the need for technology transfer, referred to in the book as capacity development; *i.e.*, the need for role players from developed countries to assist and enable those in developing countries to gain skills with which they can address their development needs in a sustainable manner, becoming self-sufficient and independent. The authors of the book would have done better to have given more attention to the latter implied points instead of spending time on a superficial treatment of rather technical matters of science and technology that are likely to be relevant to only specific and limited development contexts.

In chapter four the authors turn their attention to the very contentious aspect of development finance and financial services. An emphasis is placed on the need for healthy social investment supported by imparting of necessary skills; particularly with a view to asset creation and long-term investments. Case studies of potentially successful district development funds, among other vehicles of investment and funding are cited. In chapter five the need for vibrant networks between the development role players is again emphasized by focussing on the need to acknowledge the important roles of government; particularly its policy functions. Civic education for participation is mooted as a means of empowering the citizenry, especially women, and of bridge building between citizenry and the government. The chapter also suggests that developed countries evince a need for the development of management capacity on all levels of government. Addressing this need, the authors suggest, will equip government to play an increasingly enabling role *vis-à-vis* its citizens, inviting and welcoming them into participatory roles in decision- and policy making, and in the process promoting sustainable livelihoods. The authors understand that improved means of effective communication can also serve to advance *SL* projects.

The appendixes provide, among other things, a very good summary of the methods and processes involved in the *SL* project. This summary “how to” section, coupled with UNDP contact details, especially the

interactive Internet addresses, could perhaps have sufficed as a more concise and less time consuming and practical hand book. The book provides a very limited resource list, but ends in a helpful index

The jury on the success, failure, or general impact of the *SL* approach to development, and especially to poverty eradication in the third world is still in session. It seems evident however, that this approach does seek to better understand and deal with the holistic needs of effective development, and that is a welcome approach to development in the third world, as development commentators are increasingly acknowledging.

List of Sources

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VALIANT A. CLAPPER

Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence

Southern University

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA.