

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

Asset or capacity building models focus attention on developing the underlying resources and capacities needed to escape poverty on a sustainable basis. They depict the critical mass of assets needed to cope with stresses and shocks, and to maintain and enhance capabilities now and in the future. They recognize that everyone has assets on which to build and support individuals and families to acquire assets needed for long-term well-being. They may focus on a more limited (e.g., specifically economic) or a wider set of assets (e.g., personal, cultural, social, political).

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework was adapted from a model developed by the UK's Department for International Development, and adjusted for use in Canada. It is a holistic, asset-based framework for understanding poverty and the work of poverty reduction. It is an attractive model because it provides a simple but well-developed way of thinking about a complex issue. It is also attractive because it can be applied at various levels of detail – as a broad conceptual framework or as a practical tool for designing programs and evaluation strategies.

Sustainable Livelihoods

The UK Department for International Development defines a 'sustainable livelihood' in the following way:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living... A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future [Department For International Development].

Diagram I depicts the three key dimensions of the Sustainable Livelihoods framework [Ferguson and Murray:

1. Sustainable Livelihood Assets

Assets are the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood. By building assets, individuals and households develop their capacity to cope with the challenges they encounter and to meet their needs on a sustained basis. The framework draws attention to the variety of assets that contribute to making a sustainable livelihood and to ways in which they are interdependent. Within the five broad categories of assets it presents, it suggests a wide range of subcategories. (See Diagram II.)

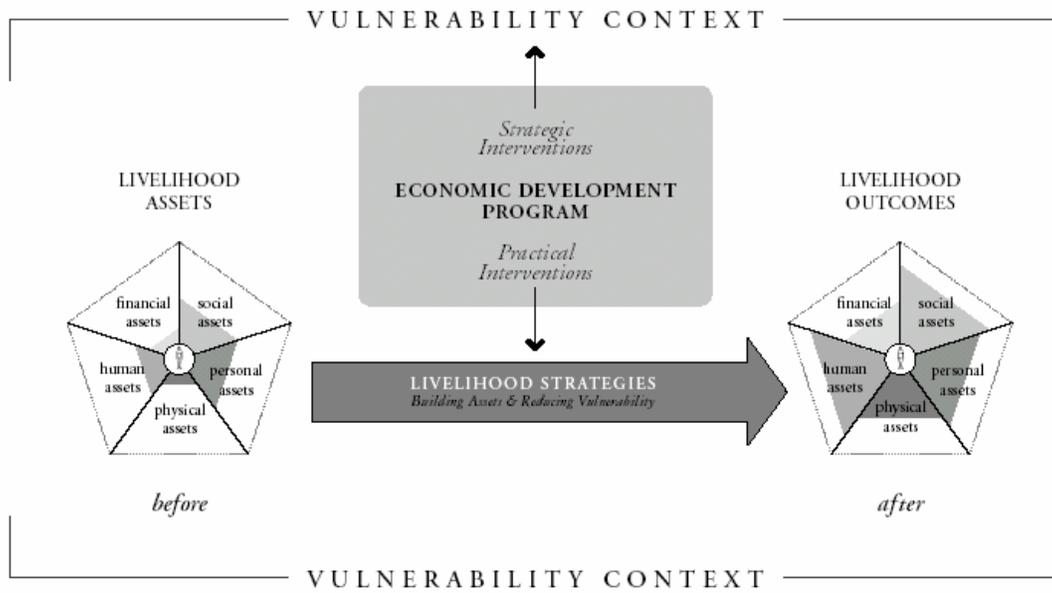
2. Vulnerability Context

The factors that create and perpetuate vulnerability and poverty can be seen at two levels: that of individuals and their circumstances, and that of the broader context. This aspect of the framework directs attention to the contextual and systemic factors that contribute to the occurrence of poverty. It points out the need to seek changes at the organizational, community and policy levels in addition to building the assets of individuals and households.

3. Techniques and Interventions

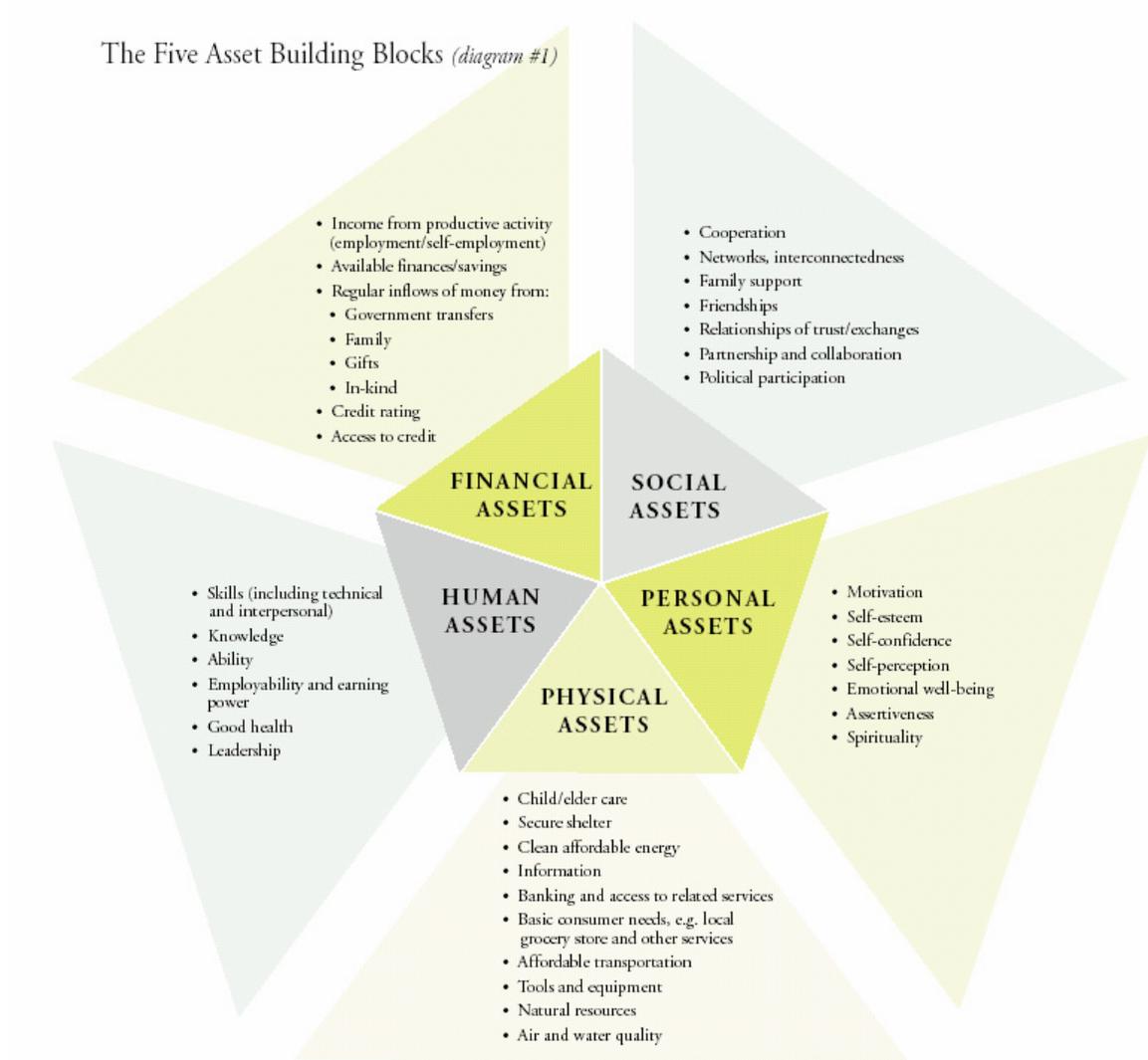
The framework identifies two basic types of intervention that communities can pursue in their poverty reduction work. ‘Practical interventions’ facilitate the efforts of low-income households to build their livelihood assets. They include such things as counselling programs, education, employment training, economic literacy and savings programs, and support for small business development. ‘Strategic interventions’ are directed toward the vulnerability context. They work toward the goal of social and economic change at the systemic level. Among the methods used are community building and organizing, alliance building, policy work and advocacy.

Diagram 1



The Role of Program Interventions

Diagram II



References:

Department for International Development. (1999). *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheet: Introduction*. http://www.livelihoods.org/info/info_guidancesheets.html#1.

Murray, Janet and Mary Ferguson. (2001). *Women in Transition Out of Poverty*. Toronto: Women and Economic Development Consortium. January. <http://www.cdnwomen.org/eng/3/3h.asp>.