WHY NOT 'ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOODS'?

Reasons we support the development of sustainable livelihoods rather than the promotion of 'alternative livelihoods' within our conservation programmes

Conservation, Livelihoods and Governance Programme

August 2013

FFI endeavours to ensure that its conservation activities do not disadvantage poor, vulnerable or marginalised people and seeks, wherever possible, to conserve biodiversity in ways that enhance well-being and social equity. People's livelihood strategies depend on the range of social, financial, human, physical, and natural assets that they possess, or have access to, as well as the context within which they live. Poorer people are likely to have a smaller and less diverse asset base, and are more vulnerable to the impacts of shocks, seasonality and negative trends. They are also less able to engage in or influence policies, decision making, and other factors in the external context that can affect their access to assets and their vulnerability.

Poor women and men have fewer choices available to them and limited capacity to adapt to change, and if access to one set of assets is denied or restricted they may find it more difficult to substitute these with other assets. Conservation interventions can thus constitute a shock to poor women and men, and can even lead to the 'criminalisation' of certain livelihood activities, increasing risk to already insecure livelihood strategies. Whilst conservation projects can sometimes present an opportunity for livelihood enhancement, they tend to benefit those who already have a diverse range of assets, including confidence and skills, and are thus better able to participate in or access project activities or services, take advantage of any opportunities, or adapt to change.

'Alternative livelihoods' are often promoted by conservation organisations to reduce people's reliance on or use of natural resources, or to compensate them for loss of access, but the effectiveness of such interventions has been limited. A common weakness of many livelihoods projects is a failure to understand, or to pay sufficient detail to, the complex dynamics of people's livelihoods and how this relates to natural resource use.

To address this problem, FFI promotes the use of a sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) to working with communities to achieve positive outcomes for biodiversity and for people. SLA uses participatory, holistic methods to help understand the reality and complexity of people's lives and livelihoods. We recognise livelihoods as being as much about a 'way of life' as they are a means of making a living. Our approach is to support *sustainable* livelihoods, including diversification of livelihoods strategies where appropriate; that is, to empower women and men to make their own livelihood choices more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable.

In this paper we highlight some of the factors that lead to the failure of many 'alternative livelihoods projects', and explain why we support the development of sustainable livelihoods within our conservation programmes.

Understanding different people's goals and motivations

- 'Alternative livelihood' projects tend to focus on income generation activities, but supporting sustainable livelihoods encompasses more than economic considerations. Increased income is one of a number of positive livelihood outcomes. Often of equal, or even higher, priority are basic food security and broader social well-being, including having a say in decisions and the fulfilment of socio-cultural and spiritual values. Understanding different people's livelihood goals is crucial to the success of any livelihood intervention.

- It is also important to understand the other factors, including cultural norms and practices, which motivate people's behaviour - the incentives and disincentives that influence their choices. For example, factors that affect bushmeat consumption, or indeed use of any natural resource, are more complex than just availability and price. They may also include habit, personal preference, cultural attachment and symbolic value. It is important to be realistic about the potential for success of any introduced activities, but especially those that involve a lifestyle change.

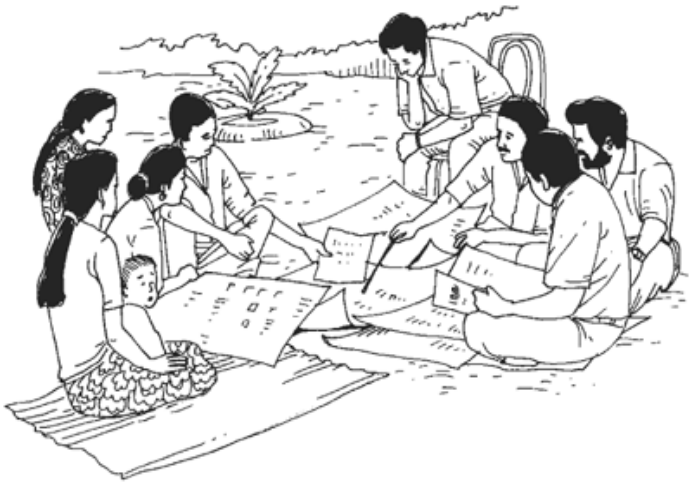
Understanding existing livelihood activities and social diversity

- People living in poverty may be unable to involve themselves in new and un-tested livelihood activities or methods of income generation due to the high risk involved in doing so. Moving to completely new activities is extremely high risk for poor women and men. Households may seek to reduce risk through diversification of livelihoods and thus 'alternative livelihoods' tend to be added to a portfolio of other activities rather than substituting them. For example if chicken farming is introduced as an alternative to hunting, people may farm chickens and continue to hunt, particularly where there is under-utilised labour within a household.

- Consideration thus needs to be given to how any introduced livelihood activity will fit into existing livelihood strategies, and how it will be reconciled with other livelihood activities. Introduced activities are likely to be more successful if they provide lower levels of risk, equal or higher profits, and have similar or more favourable characteristics to existing activities, including level of investment required, ease of storage, transport and marketing and so on.

- Attention also needs to be paid to the socio-economic dimensions of livelihood activities, including issues of gender. The introduction of additional activities may actually increase the burden of work on more vulnerable household members, such as women and children. Also, different groups of people can be involved in different stages of one 'livelihood activity' such as fishing, and these differences will be context specific. Women and men use natural resources in different ways, according to their socially defined roles and responsibilities, and thus have different knowledge and skills. If these differences are not fully understood the success of any intervention is likely to be limited, and there could be unintended consequences for poor and marginalised groups.

- Interventions are not likely to reach the more marginalised members of a community or poorer households unless they are specifically targeted. Communities are not homogenous and some people will be more able to take up opportunities than others. We need to understand age, gender, ethnicity and any other social factors that affect people's choices or opportunities.



Linking livelihoods and conservation

- The link between livelihood interventions and conservation impact are often tenuous. 'Alternative livelihoods' are often introduced without a thorough understanding of the drivers of unsustainable resource use so their introduction therefore does nothing to improve sustainability. People taking up any introduced 'alternative livelihoods' may not be the same people as those using the resource of concern in the first place. To be a successful conservation tool any 'alternative livelihood' needs to be targeted at the right people. In addition, local resource users are often only partially responsible for the degradation of natural resources and may not be the biggest threat to an area or resource of concern; external threats, such as large-scale commercial agriculture or timber concessions, can have a far greater impact.

- Increasing the positive effects of conservation on local people through introducing new livelihood activities does not mean that the negative effects of conservation are automatically reduced. For example, introducing beekeeping or chicken farming may not adequately offset the costs of reduced access to a resource. The effectiveness of any introduced activities may thus be limited.

- Poor people require options for diversifying away from resources of concern to be developed *before* their access to those resources is reduced. However, 'alternative livelihoods' tend to be introduced at the same time or after changes in resource management have already been implemented, when people are already struggling to adapt to reduced resource access.

- Thought needs to be given to what any 'alternative livelihood' is an alternative to. For example, in the case of reducing the hunting and trade of a specific species, alternatives could include sustainable hunting as an alternative to unsustainable hunting, livestock farming as an alternative source of protein, and the promotion of other means of generating income as an alternative to hunting or trading to earn income. There is often also the complication that the distinction between subsistence and more commercial use is blurred. Different activities along the chain from hunter to consumer will involve different actors with different incentives.

Thinking holistically

- 'Alternative livelihood' interventions tend to be single solution and supply driven. External organisations often 'supply' a number of options from a 'menu' of activities that they determine, rather than exploring with people their own aspirations and options. In addition, when developing small businesses, there is a tendency to consider only the supply side of the value chain rather than whether there is a viable market demand for the products.

- Supportive policies, institutions and processes are important for the success of any livelihoods intervention. If not considered, the contextual constraints that have an impact on people's options and decisions will hinder the success of any intervention.

Failure to take into account the factors described above mean that 'alternative livelihood' interventions are often unsustainable in the long term, even if they appear initially to be successful. There are no 'best' livelihoods projects that can be applied across different conservation sites. The most important factor in integrating livelihoods into conservation interventions is to understand existing livelihoods and how these relate to natural resource use and dependency. It is also essential to understand that livelihoods strategies are different for different groups of people within a community, and can change over time. In particular, the experiences of women and men often differ in terms of their access to assets, their vulnerability, and how policies, institutions and processes affect their livelihoods.

Support to developing and diversifying sustainable livelihoods in itself should enhance well-being, by empowering and building capacity to enable people to utilise the opportunities available to them, including those presented by conservation interventions. This requires time; there are no quick fixes. Our approach is more about how we 'do' conservation, rather than promoting 'alternative livelihoods projects' as one element of a wider conservation programme.

References

The information in this document is based on the experience of the Conservation, Livelihoods and Governance team at FFI (http://www.fauna-flora.org/initiative/livelihoods-and-governance), supplemented with material from the following sources.

IMM (2008) *Sustainable Livelihoods Enhancement and Diversification (SLED): A Manual for Practitioners* IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Colombo, Sri Lanka; CORDIO, Kalmar, Sweden; and ICRAN, Cambridge, UK.
http://www.iucn.org/what/tpas/livelihoods/resources/documents/?2653/SLED

Ireland, C et al (2004) *Alternative Sustainable Livelihoods for Coastal Communities – A Review of experience and guide to best practice* IUCN East Africa Regional Programme, Nairobi
http://www.eldis.org/assets/Docs/40248.html

Sandbrook, C and Roe, D (2010) *Linking Conservation and Poverty Alleviation: the case of Great Apes*
http://pubs.iied.org/G02770.html

The Nature Conservancy (undated) *Livelihoods Approaches as a Conservation Tool*
www.reefresilience.org/pdf/LivelihoodsApproachLongVersion.pdf

The pictures in this document are taken from Gonsalves, J et al (2005) *Participatory Research and Development for Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management* IDRC
http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-73446-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

FFI's Conservation, Livelihoods and Governance programme is financially supported by Anglo American.

Fauna & Flora International, 4th Floor, Jupiter House, Station Road, Cambridge, CB1 2JD
Telephone +44 (0) 1223 571000
Fax +44 (0) 1223 571000
Email info@fauna-flora.org