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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

**REPORT**

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON PROMOTING BEST PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABLE  
RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN THE ESCWA REGION  
BEIRUT, 24-25 NOVEMBER 2010**

**Summary**

The Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Best Practice for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Region was held in Beirut on 24-25 November 2010. The meeting sought to encourage the sharing of experiences and lessons learned from local Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) initiatives, the identification of priorities for rural development in the ESCWA region and the enrichment of a draft guide on the “Application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in the ESCWA Region”, which is being prepared by ESCWA. The meeting was a follow up to a previous meeting held in December 2009 which had recommended, among other things, to further the debate on SLA and SLA-related issues and to prepare a guide on the application of SLA for the ESCWA region.

Participants at the meeting reviewed, debated and shared experiences around three main themes: (a) SLA and sustainable agriculture, food security and rural development; (b) SLA and the degradation of natural resources with an emphasis on land, water and biodiversity; and (c) SLA and emerging issues such as climate change and a green economy. In-depth discussions took place with a view toward improving and clarifying regional understanding on how to best use SLA for development purposes, particularly in rural areas, with an emphasis on: (i) how to contextualize SLA within the concept of sustainable development; (ii) how best to revise and focus the guide, which is being prepared, in order to support regional development efforts; and (iii) how to make SLA operational in the ESCWA region. The meeting concluded with a set of recommendations that supports the implementation of SLA.

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## **Introduction**

1. The livelihood approach is a framework that helps to understand the status of people living near the poverty line and as such, allows for the derivation of meaningful development strategies. Livelihood approaches are responsive and participatory and favour multidisciplinary and multilevel development interactions. They generate a deeper understanding of the livelihood context people live in, the livelihood assets available to them and the range of livelihood strategies being pursued, thereby placing them at the centre of a web of inter-related influences that determine how they earn a living. Thus, the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) is an important tool that can be used at various levels, both geographic and/or sectoral, for research, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and most importantly for policy and strategy development and implementation in support of rural development.

2. Despite its potential benefit, SLA is not widely used or applied as a development tool, especially in the western Asia region, as there are quite a number of misconceptions and potential difficulties linked to it, notably when trying to apply SLA for development purposes. Most of these stem from a lack of comprehension on what exactly is meant by SLA, what comprises its overall scope and the scope of its core components and which of those are most relevant for our region. As such there is a need to improve our understanding and clarify regional perspectives on what is at the heart of SLA and to raise awareness and foster dialogue on the ways that SLA can be understood and applied in the region.

3. In December 2009, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized an Expert Group Meeting on Adopting the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach for Promoting Rural Development in the ESCWA Region. The meeting, which was attended by 32 experts from the Arab world, allowed for the exchange of experiences on viable options for promoting SLA and proposed recommendations in support of adopting this approach for sustainable rural development in the area. Among these recommendations was the need to maintain the flow of communication and to produce an informative guide that would highlight practical applications of SLA in promoting rural development in ESCWA member countries. As a result, ESCWA organized this meeting on Promoting Best Practice for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in the ESCWA Region in Beirut from 24 to 25 November 2010.

4. The two-day meeting was structured so as to allow for in-depth discussion and experience sharing on key issues of SLA. Its main objectives were to:

(a) Provide a platform for experts to exchange views and experiences on best practice for sustainable rural livelihoods and specifically on the application of SLA in promoting sustainable development in rural areas in the region;

(b) Review a draft guide on the application of SLA in the ESCWA region in order to enrich it with practical examples and case studies from ESCWA member countries' own experiences so as to make the guide the result of a collaborative regional effort.

## **I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. CONCLUSIONS**

5. In order to encourage debate on various issues related to the application of SLA for rural development, the meeting was set up so as to allow for the presentation of substantive papers and country experiences and extensive discussion on topics of interest. The presentations reviewed the history and concept of SLA, the successes and failures of rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region and the structure and key elements of a guide on the application of the SLA concept for rural development. Other substantive presentations assessed the impact of SLA in supporting sustainable agriculture, achieving food security and promoting rural development through a case study from Lebanon, how SLA can be used to manage rapidly-depleting and degrading natural resources of the region through a case study from the Kurdistan Autonomous

Regional Governorates in Iraq and the interlinkages between SLA and various emerging and/or challenging issues such as climate change, green economy, desertification and land degradation. The above presentations were interspersed with case studies and experience sharing from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen and two international organizations, the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

6. The above presentations were complemented by in-depth discussions which revolved around three main themes: (i) how to contextualize SLA within the framework of sustainable development, (ii) how to revise the guide to apply SLA, and (iii) how to make SLA operational in the ESCWA region. The first set of discussions assessed the importance of SLA as a tool for sustainable development and the added value it brings as a methodology for improving livelihoods at the local level, particularly in rural contexts. The second set of discussions was aimed at revising the guide on applying SLA to the ESCWA region with a view toward adopting its overall structure and introducing the required changes and additions in order to enhance its quality, so that it can be used as resource material for analysing, designing and implementing programmes for sustainable rural development. The last set of discussions assessed what can be done next in order to enhance the adoption and application of SLA in policy formulation and programme design and implementation in the region. The emphasis was on the type of programmes that are needed, identifying target beneficiaries, and determining the scope, means and resources required for making SLA operational.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS

7. Participants formulated the following recommendations in order to set the stage for the next step in adopting and implementing SLA for development in the region, particularly in rural areas:

(a) Finalize the guide, taking into account the various suggestions and incorporating case studies and examples provided as appropriate. The revised version, should put less emphasis on discussions related to the SLA concept and methodology and more on its application in promoting sustainable livelihoods for people living near the poverty line in the ESCWA region;

(b) Build national and regional capacity for the promotion of sustainable livelihoods by providing training, coaching experts on its use and targeting technical staff (mainly female agriculture engineers) who will be putting it into practice;

(c) Enhance synergy and coordination between donors and international development agencies on one side and national institutions (starting with community-based institutions and local authorities) on the other, for addressing SLA and identifying areas for partnership building;

(d) Map case studies and conduct detailed analysis both on success stories and cases of failure for knowledge and experience sharing;

(e) Establish a community of practitioners (network) and a repository of information on tools, success stories, applications and policy options for promoting SLA with a regional and/or Arab specificity;

(f) Promote women's empowerment and emphasize on the importance of gender issues in improving livelihood in rural areas;

(g) Liaise with regional organizations such as the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development, the Union of Arab Farmers and relevant Arab League research centres and international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ICARDA, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, FAO and others in order to identify areas of cooperation for the promotion of sustainable livelihoods in the ESCWA region at the policy, programming and implementation levels.

## **II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

8. The presentations made and the discussions held during the two days of the meeting are summarized in the following sections.

### **A. OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDE ON THE APPLICATION OF SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH IN THE ESCWA REGION**

9. This first substantive session was devoted to reviewing the history and conceptual framework of SLA, the successes and failure of rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region and presenting the structure and key elements of a guide on the application of the SLA concept for rural development.

10. An ESCWA presentation reviewed the history and concept of SLA, illustrating the evolution of the concept of development throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explaining definitions and various views that have characterized the issue of poverty and the response to it and then touching on the emergence of SLA and its main guiding principles and methodology. It concluded with certain key concerns about applying SLA in the ESCWA region.

11. The next ESCWA presentation provided an overview of the successes and failures of rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region, discussing their main features and noting that they failed to reach their intended results primarily due to prevailing regional and global crises. The presentation also provided a description of certain regional rural development characteristics, including a comparison of rural versus urban poverty, food demand, cereal import, various vulnerabilities such as desertification, but also highlighting some of the success stories.

12. The last ESCWA presentation of this session presented the structure and key elements of a guide on the application of the SLA concept for rural development as adapted to the ESCWA region. It provided an overall outline of the guide, which emphasizes four major components: characterizing SLA as it is referred to throughout the guide, the steps involved for translating SLA from theory into action, the integration of SLA into policies and programmes at the national, sectoral and local governance levels and identifying key challenges and priorities together with the next step in implementing SLA in the ESCWA region.

13. Identification of specific challenges to the ESCWA region was emphasized in the discussion. The role of good policies as a cornerstone for SLA adoption and implementation and the need for new political and institutional arrangements and commitment were both articulated. It was also stressed that there is a need to expand available expertise as the SLA framework touches on various aspects of rural life including labour, health and education. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach can stand alone or can overlap or complement other approaches leading towards the common goal of rural development.

### **B. SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, FOOD SECURITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

14. The second substantive session focused on SLA and sustainable agriculture, food security and rural development, opening with an ESCWA presentation detailing a case study from Lebanon, then continuing with the presentation of regional experiences from Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen.

15. The ESCWA presentation dealt with the issue of livelihood approaches and sustainable agriculture, food security and rural development from a Lebanese perspective. The presentation touched on major problems threatening rural stability and weakening poor farmers in rural areas, including poverty, illiteracy, the lack of adequate capacity and political neglect. Two projects were analysed using an SLA lens, by systematically applying its concepts, beginning with the planning stage and by assessing its potential and consistently incorporating its framework into existing programmes, in order to highlight how SLA can be used in planning, implementing and analysing development projects.

16. The presentation from Egypt highlighted the achievements of a programme to promote sustainable development of rural villages through, among other things, providing small loans for agriculture and rural development, improving rural infrastructure and increasing rural economic activities with a view to improving the quality of life, providing additional sources of income, transforming rural villages from consumers to producers, and reducing rural poverty.

17. The presentation from Jordan featured the Government's integrated model farm project in Wadi Araba which tries to improve poor people's lives through participatory approaches to achieving sustainable development. The project targets rural small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and emphasizes engaging the private sector.

18. Two cases studies from Palestine were presented. The first described a project promoting beekeeping technology for enhanced livelihoods while the second provided an overview of a project to develop roof-top gardens in support of food security under unstable political conditions, high population density and limited access to natural resources.

19. The presentation from the Sudan discussed the Special Program for Food Security (SPFS) project, which fights food insecurity through increased agricultural production, diversification of income-generating activities for low-income groups and promoting greater equity enforcement in rural areas.

20. The presentation from Yemen provided an overview of a participatory rural development project to empower women in rural areas to improve food security, increase and diversify income and improve local communities' contribution to sustainable development initiatives. Many examples of activities being implemented were provided and these included the provision of loans, extension efforts to improve productivity and improving rural infrastructures.

21. During the discussions participants were able to get additional information and to exchange experiences on various issues including the lack of an appropriate microcredit system in certain ESCWA member countries and the lack of adequate institutional framework. The limited availability of water resources in the region was also discussed and participants were able to exchange ideas on how this issue could be tackled using SLA. The role of donors and the importance of internal financing mechanisms were also mentioned.

### C. SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH AND NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (LAND, WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT)

22. The third substantive session focused on the issue of SLA and natural resources management, with a special emphasis on land, water and the environment. The session opened with an ESCWA presentation, which was followed by countries' experiences from Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and one from FAO. This third set of presentations provided an overview on how SLA can enhance the management of rapidly-depleting and degrading natural resources of the region.

23. The ESCWA presentation introduced a case study from the Kurdistan Autonomous Regional Governorates of Iraq and detailed problems prevailing in the area such as rural exodus, lack of income-generating activities, water shortage and other threats to the natural resource base. It noted that all these concerns could be addressed in a holistic manner by focusing on the well-being of the population and the natural resources they have access to.

24. The case study from Oman provided an overview of various development projects that have been undertaken, and which range from empowering youth to the provision of microcredit in rural areas and other activities aimed at empowering the population and generating income.

25. The case study from Iraq addressed problems faced by the agro-ecosystem of the country and presented the Government's plan to reduce negative factors, particularly those related to water shortages, and simultaneously improve agricultural practices through extension efforts and appropriate legislative reforms.
26. The case study from Saudi Arabia provided an overview of a multi-dimensional rural development project for Farasan Island based on the concept of Integrated Rural Development. The project improves livelihoods and living standards of concerned stakeholders while safeguarding biodiversity and minimizing depletion and degradation of the natural resource base.
27. Finally, the case study from the FAO country office in Lebanon provided an overview of a project to support recovery and poverty alleviation through improved forest fire prevention and control.
28. The session concluded with discussion related to SLA and natural resource management, during which the significant role that the private sector can play, particularly in reforestation and combating natural resource degradation, was acknowledged. The need to solve the growing water crisis issue at an inter-country level was also emphasized, especially as most of the water comes from outside the ESCWA region. The issue of project sustainability following donor's initial financing was also discussed.

#### D. SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH AND EMERGING ISSUES (CLIMATE CHANGE/ GREEN ECONOMY/DESERTIFICATION/DEGRADATION)

29. The last substantive session dealt with the issue of SLA and various emerging issues such as climate change, water issues, the green economy, desertification and land degradation. It also included a brief sharing of related experiences and lessons learned about these issues from Palestine and ICARDA.
30. An ESCWA presentation described the impact of climate change on livelihoods, particularly in rural areas and discussed various strategies for adapting and planning in order to reduce vulnerability, including the need for measurable indicators to better understand the evolving context and plan related actions.
31. A representative from ICARDA tackled the issue of sustainable livelihoods and food security and presented the role that agricultural research programmes can play in facilitating adaptation, particularly to climate change, in dry areas. The presentation also outlined the efforts of ICARDA in this field while taking into consideration the specificity of the region.
32. An ESCWA presentation contextualized SLA within the framework of a green economy emphasizing on opportunities and challenges. Various examples showed the importance of promoting a green economy in providing additional sources of revenue, which could thereby act as a major driving force for improving livelihoods and ensuring sustainable development.
33. A case study from Palestine presented a programme to promote saving and lending in support of the agricultural sector. The project focuses mainly on women and on a fatwa to solve lending issues as an adaptive solution to financing for them.
34. A general discussion followed together with an overall wrap-up of all issues raised during this first day of the meeting, stressing on the importance of using language common to everyone in order to improve the usefulness of the guide. The need to develop appropriate mechanisms to differentiate between what is and is not sustainable, particularly as related to financial issues but also governance, the farming system and others, was also noted.

## E. IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION

35. The second day of the meeting was devoted to in-depth discussion around three main themes: (i) contextualizing SLA within sustainable development; (ii) revisiting the Guide on applying SLA; and (iii) making SLA operational in the ESCWA region.

36. The session on contextualizing SLA reviewed its capacity as a tool for sustainable development and the added value it brings as a methodology in improving livelihoods at the local level, particularly in rural contexts. The discussion addressed the need to design and adopt innovative local policies and to terminate those which are not adapted or sustainable. It also advocated the promotion of auto-financing which would be an indicator of sustainability and voluntary work, while taking into account a project's cultural dimension. The role of donors and development assistance (political and developmental grants) must be re-assessed so as to complement local initiatives, especially in the design of small-scale and pilot projects and their up-scaling. Finally, it was suggested that successes and failures be identified in order to learn from them and impact assessment should be conducted of projects. Such analytical tools would foster a better understanding of SLA and a more focused approach to addressing issues of sustainable livelihood, particularly at an operational level.

37. The session on revisiting the guide on applying SLA was geared towards reviewing its structure in light of the discussions held. Appropriate changes and additions were proposed to enhance its quality, making it a resource material for analysing, designing and implementing programmes for sustainable rural development initiatives. Discussion emphasized the need to promote the political environment, growth with equity and the creation of government incentive systems as strategies vary, depending particularly on prevailing political and governance structural conditions. Thought was given as to how successful projects at the local level could be scaled up at the regional level. Planning is needed for the next step in the use of the guide and the number of case studies it contains must be expanded to include such issues as the need for more effective extension programmes, capacity-building, coaching tools, cooperatives and the importance of insurance against calamities.

38. The session on making SLA operational in the ESCWA region sought out the next step in adopting and applying SLA in policy formulation, programme design and implementation with emphasis on the type of programmes needed, target beneficiaries and the scope, means and resources required to realize them. Discussions stressed that during project cycles, effort must be made to incorporate the need for sustainable livelihoods into sector strategies and plans including emergency, early recovery, development and programming, in order to identify other areas and sectors that allow for income diversification. The importance of SLA in helping fight desertification and alleviating other problems must be stressed and the need to promote sustainable livelihoods must be built into sustainable land management practice. It was also noted that ensuring sustainable livelihoods can help reverse rural-urban migration by enhancing conditions in rural areas, but requiring an enabling environment, a supportive legislative systems and laws and increased capacity and expertise for implementing SLA.

## III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK AND ATTENDANCE

### A. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

39. The Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Best Practice for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in the ESCWA Region was held at the United Nations House in Beirut during 24-25 November 2010. The meeting was divided into five substantive sessions: (i) overview of the Guide on the Application of a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in the ESCWA Region; (ii) SLA and sustainable agriculture, food security and rural development; (iii) SLA and natural resources management (land, water and the environment); (iv) SLA and emerging issues (climate change/green economy/desertification/degradation); and (v) in-depth discussion on the issues of contextualizing SLA within sustainable development, revisiting the guide on applying SLA and making SLA operational in the ESCWA region. In the first four sessions key background papers were



presented together with country papers presenting national experiences and lessons learned on the application of SLA. The last session consisted mostly of in-depth discussion on key issues that had been identified in order to allow attending experts to express their opinions on issues of concern with regard to the application of SLA. The documents of the meeting are available at: [www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1350E](http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1350E).

## B. OPENING OF THE MEETING

40. The meeting was formally opened by Ms. Roula Majdalani, Director of the Sustainable Development and Productivity Division (SDPD), who welcomed participants and briefly introduced the overall context, reviewed certain challenges facing the region with regard to sustainable development, particularly in rural areas and set the stage for the presentations and discussions, including a reference to this being a follow-up meeting to the meeting on SLA held in December 2009. She then presented the main objectives of the meeting and articulated what was expected from the attending experts, namely to review and assess how SLA can be used as an effective tool for sustainable development, to review the guide on the application of SLA that is under preparation by ESCWA and to formulate appropriate actions for the next step in the adoption and implementation of SLA. Mr. Fidèle Byiringiro, officer-in-charge, Productive Sectors Section, SDPD/ESCWA, then presented the major points of the agenda. The review was followed by a round table discussion whereby participants presented themselves, their experiences and their interests in relation to the subject matter of the meeting.

## C. AGENDA

41. The meeting Agenda was as follows:

1. Opening Session.
2. Overview of the Guide on the Application of Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in the ESCWA region.
  - (a) Overview, Historic and Conceptual Framework of the SLA;
  - (b) Rural Development Policies and Programmes in the Arab Region: Evaluation of Successes and Failures;
  - (c) Guide to the Application of SLA in the ESCWA Region: Overview.
3. SLA and Sustainable Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development.
  - (a) Livelihoods Approach and Sustainable Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development: A Perspective from Lebanon;
  - (b) Sharing of Related Experiences and Lessons Learned.
4. SLA and Natural Resources Management (Land, Water and the Environment).
  - (a) Sustainable Livelihoods Approach and Natural Resources Management: a Case Study from Kurdistan Autonomous Regional Governorates in Iraq.
5. SLA and Emerging Issues (Climate Change, Green Economy, Desertification and Degradation).
  - (a) SLA and Climate Change;
  - (b) Sustainable Livelihoods and Food Security Under Changing Climate in Dry Areas;
  - (c) SLA and Green Economy.
  - (d) Sharing of Related Experiences and Lessons Learned.

6. In-depth Discussion:
  - (a) Contextualizing SLA within Sustainable Development;
  - (b) Revisiting the Guide to Applying SLA;
  - (c) Making SLA Operational in the ESCWA Region.
7. Conclusions, Recommendations and the Way Forward.
8. Closing Remarks.

#### D. PARTICIPANTS

42. The meeting was attended by twenty-four participants from ten ESCWA member countries including, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, in addition to representatives from AOAD, ICARDA, UNDP and FAO. The list of participants is attached in the annex of this Report.

#### IV. EVALUATION OF THE MEETING

43. An evaluation questionnaire was distributed in order to assess the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the meeting. Twenty-two out of twenty-four participants who attended the meeting completed the questionnaire. The feedback received was positive, overall, as respondents were unanimous as to the relevance of the topic of the meeting to their work. The majority of respondents found that the workshop had met its objectives and their expectations while certain of them agreed that they had benefited from the meeting. In addition the majority of participants agreed that the quality of the presentations and papers was good, that the meeting was well organized and that they would like follow-up activities such as capacity-building workshops on selected issues and networking meetings to exchange experiences with other member countries.

44. Certain participants did make recommendations for improving similar events in the future. These included: setting up national committees to promote SLA and link up with ESCWA and other institutions and countries, implementing pilot projects in the region and having other such meetings to continue the discussion, exchange experiences and conduct capacity-building programmes.

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