

PRACTITIONER RESOURCE #1: SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS BACKGROUNDER

The design of the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF) Economic Development Collaborative Fund research is grounded in an extensive investment in learning and outcomes documentation made by the first CWF Collaborative Fund, initiated in November 1998 and continued until 2001.

The first Collaborative Fund program supported its 10 original grantees to document and analyze the changes in women's lives as a result of participation in women-focused community economic development (CED) programs.

During this first research process, the Sustainable Livelihoods frameworkⁱ was adapted and used to gain a better understanding of the profound effects of social exclusion on the lives of disadvantaged women, as well as to capture the ways in which women build their economic security and independence and to document effective practices in supporting them to move out of poverty.

The Fund's partner in the research, Eko Nomos, identified a holistic range of assets that combine to promote social inclusion and develop women's livelihoods. Two papers were published in 2001 and 2002 to document the learning from the first Collaborative Fund.ⁱⁱ These papers have themselves been highly influential in promoting a more women-focused, holistic approach to program delivery in the field of women's CED in Canada.

Eko Nomos has continued to define and develop participatory, outcomes-based tools in cooperation with CWF and a range of other funders.ⁱⁱⁱ The CWF Collaborative Fund is now supporting the development of a more user-friendly package to help practitioners use the Sustainable Livelihoods approach when documenting the outcomes of their work.

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework is an excellent tool to explore four contextual dimensions of poverty:

- A: The "Vulnerability Context"
- B: Assets
- C: The Dynamics of Change
- D: The Policy and Institutional Context

A: The "Vulnerability Context"

The framework focuses on understanding the context that creates and perpetuates women's vulnerability to poverty, in order to support more active, strategic interventions. It explores the context at two levels: that of the individual and her circumstances, and that of the broader institutions and systems that affect the options that are open to marginalized women. It acknowledges that while women can and do make choices that deplete assets and make their lives less stable, there are powerful external systems and forces that combine to keep them in a long-term cycle of poverty.

B: Assets

Assets are the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood at the individual level and a sustainable community at the neighbourhood level. Women pursue various asset-building strategies that support them both in surviving and in coping with the context that makes them vulnerable to poverty, so that they can move towards stability and sustainability. A limited range of assets is what makes women vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion.

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework identifies five broad asset areas that offer a holistic picture of all the capabilities, resources and entitlements that women have invested in and developed over time. In its focus on women's assets rather than their deficits, the framework avoids the negative, deficit-based approach that is so common to the social service and economic development fields.

These five broad asset areas are:

Social Assets

These assets refer to the social connections that women can draw upon to achieve their goals. By building a foundation of networks and contacts, they find that they have enhanced their support systems, making it easier for them to develop other assets.

Physical Assets

Physical assets include women's basic needs for housing and food, plus access to the information and services required to build a livelihood.

Human Assets

Human assets refer to how employable a woman may be, in terms of her skills, knowledge, education and leadership. Although human assets are central to all livelihood strategies, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure progress towards a sustainable livelihood. This asset area also includes health as a pre-determinant of a women's ability to participate in the economy.

Personal Assets

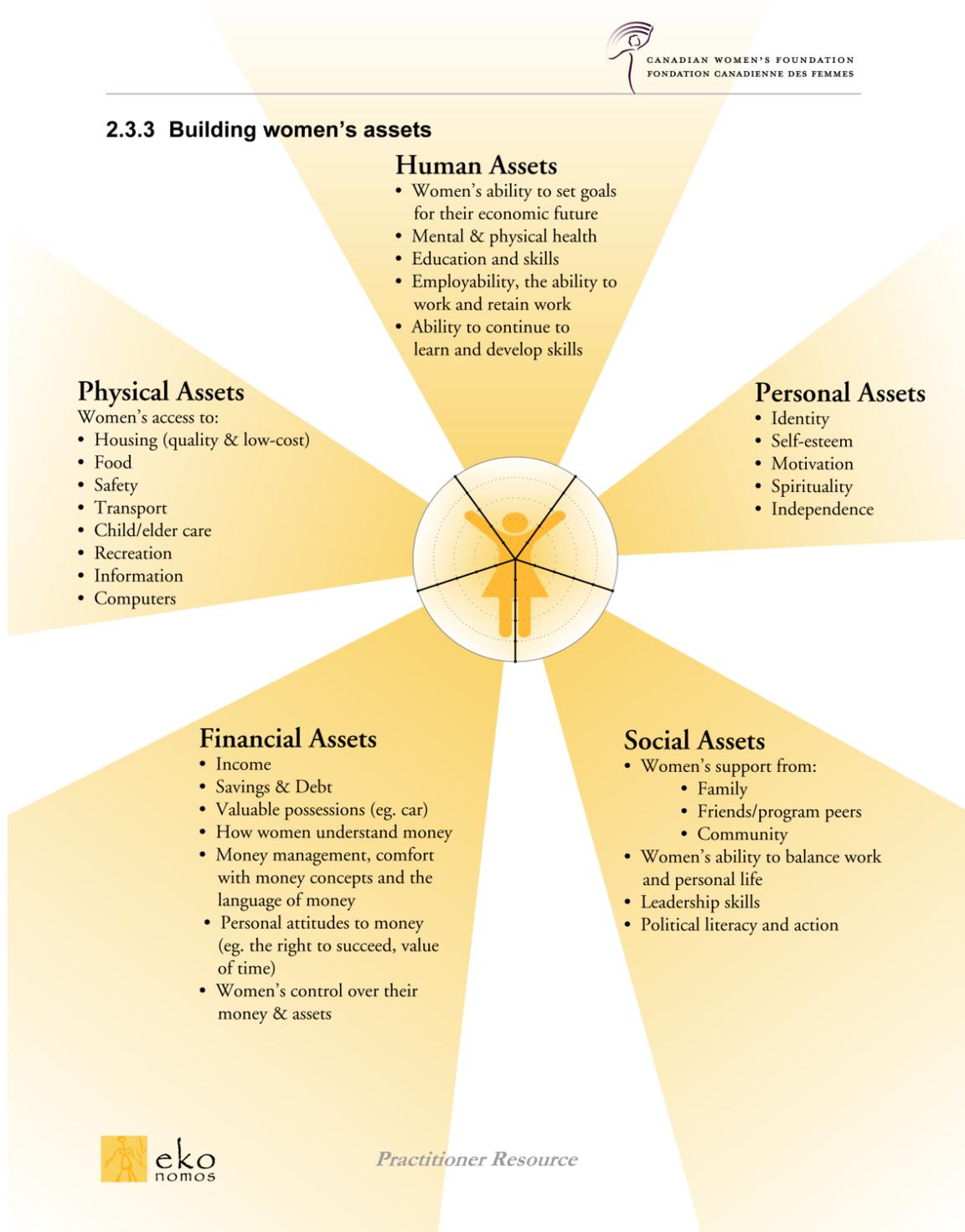
Less tangible are personal assets, which are connected to women's sense of personal and cultural identity, and their private values and beliefs. These assets include self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as the motivation and strength that women may be able to bring to the process of personal transformation.

Financial Assets

Financial assets are earnings, money and financial security (including access to financial entitlements from government). They offer an important entry-point for transformation and development: the ability to earn money and decide how it should be spent provides women with a powerful means of reversing the downward spiral into poverty, and of building up a wider range of assets.

The sample asset map below was developed by the Collaborative Fund practitioners at a grantee meeting in the first year of the fund. This map provides a summary of the outcomes that the practitioners were working towards with the women in their programs.

Figure 1: Sample Asset Map



C: The Dynamics of Change

CWF's previous research taught us that assets and outcomes must be understood in terms of the progress that individual women make towards a livelihood. We identified a "theory of change" about how women develop assets over time and the stages through which they progress on their way towards sustainable livelihoods (see Figure 2 below).

We have learned that when women are in survival mode and have few assets, asset development strategies focus on accessing basic needs. As women get on their feet, strategies to reduce social isolation and support participation become important. Once a certain reserve of assets is in place, we have seen women moving from coping strategies towards strategies that are designed to build their employability and develop their business.

It is at this transitional stage that the social purpose enterprises and self-employment programs can be most effective. Progress towards a livelihood is not linear: while most programs select women who are at the transitional stage, the women often experience setbacks in their personal lives and in the development of their livelihoods. Grantees frequently end up working with participants to rebuild lost stability and assets after these crises in their lives. As a result, we have seen women's livelihood outcomes spread out along the full spectrum of stages delineated in the diagram below.

Figure 2: Stages of Transformation to Sustainable Livelihoods



D: The Policy and Institutional Context

“Transforming Structures and Processes within the livelihoods framework are the institutions, organisations, policies and legislation that shape livelihoods. Their importance cannot be over-emphasised. They operate at all levels, from the household to the international arena, and in all spheres, from the most private to the most public.

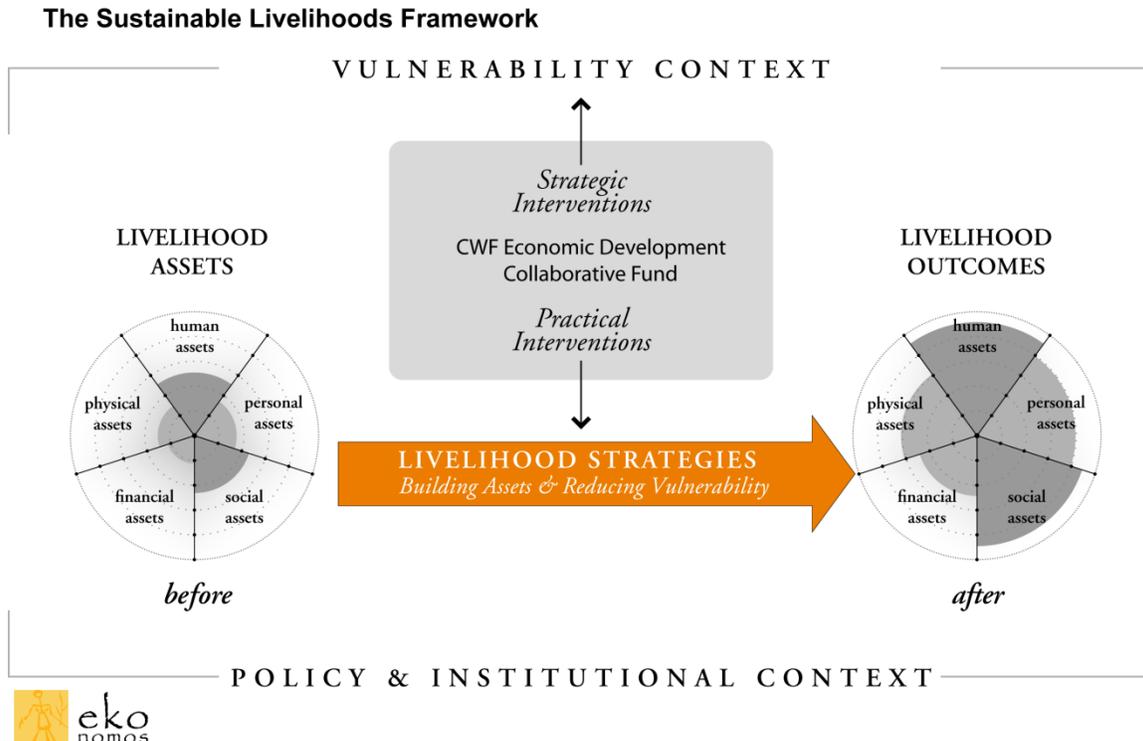
They effectively determine:

- Access (to various types of capital, to livelihood strategies and to decision-making bodies and sources of influence);
- The terms of exchange between different types of capital; and
- Returns (economic and otherwise) to any given livelihood strategy.”^{iv}

By looking at the context provided by our institutions and their current policies, we can understand some of the constraints and opportunities it presents, and develop strategies to build a more enabling policy environment.

An overview of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which combines all of the above concepts, appears below.

Figure 3: The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



A Theory of Change

Almost ten years of Collaborative Fund learning, evaluation and exploration of Sustainable Livelihoods have created a research-based “theory of change” about how strategically designed economic development interventions can support low-income women to make a transition out of poverty.

A theory of change approach pushes both funders and practitioners to make explicit the connections between their proposed investments and activities, and the longer-term effects of those activities.

“[T]heory-based evaluation strategies have been developed as tools to help test and explain complex change processes. *Theories of change* seek to identify the interlocking assumptions that drive the need or desire for change. Through clearly defining and understanding these assumptions, it is easier to develop a road map that effectively lays out the processes and actions required to reach the agreed-upon destination.”^v

Thus, the Sustainable Livelihoods framework provides a theory of change which has anchored the Collaborative Fund outcomes evaluation process. Having identified the expected pathways of change and waves of outcomes connecting current activities to long-term outcomes, the research process set out to verify underlying assumptions, to provide evidence of expected outcomes and to learn about the pathways and livelihood strategies that women pursue in order to build assets, reduce vulnerability and create sustainable livelihoods.

ⁱ The Institute for Development in Brighton, U.K. developed the Sustainable Livelihoods model to assess community assets. Eko Nomos has adapted this model to explore asset development with participants of economic development interventions. For a more detailed description of the IDS Framework see <http://www.livelihoods.org/>

ⁱⁱ For some of our recent publications using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, see:
Murray, Janet and Ferguson, Mary, *The Business of Inclusion* (Toronto Enterprise Fund: March 2004) <http://action.web.ca/home/uwgt/reports.shtml?reload=tpl>; Murray, Janet and Ferguson, Mary, *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: A Guide to Effective Practice in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods through Enterprise Development* (January 2002) http://cdnwomen.org/eng/pdfs/WIT_pract.gde.full.pdf; Murray, Janet and Ferguson, Mary, *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: An asset based approach to building sustainable livelihoods* (Women and Economic Development Consortium: February 2001). <http://cdnwomen.org/eng/pdfs/wit.asset.bsd.full.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Eko Nomos would especially like to thank the CWF for its generous support and willingness to take risks, and United Way of Greater Toronto for supporting the development of the Sustainable Livelihoods framework as a foundation for results tracking in community economic development programs.

^{iv} Section Two: Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets, DFID, UK http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance_sheets_rtf/Sect2.rtf

^v Bruner, Charles. “*The Build Initiative’s Theory of Change*”, *Summary of Toward a Theory of Change for the Build Initiative: A Discussion Paper*, Build Strong Foundations for Our Youngest Children, p. 1.