

## **Women In Transition Out Of Poverty – An Introduction**

To read the paper in its entirety, please visit the Canadian Women's Foundation web site at <http://www.cdnwomen.org>

In early June 2000 the Women and Economic Development Consortium (WEDC) brought staff from nine projects across Canada to participate in "Common Threads", a national workshop designed to support the projects in comparing notes about their programs and sharing commonalities.

At the workshop, the researchers introduced both practitioners and funders to Sustainable Livelihoods, a holistic, asset-based approach to understanding women's lives. The response was enthusiastic. People saw how this framework could contribute to a more accurate analysis of the condition of low-income women. The framework could also help to define more clearly the role of practitioners and funders in supporting women to move out of poverty.

This paper captures the learning about low-income women and their transition out of poverty. It explores the process by which women use enterprise development as a vehicle to make changes in their lives, enhancing their independence and building a livelihood. It offers community economic development practitioners some practical learning and concepts that may assist in strengthening their economic development programs for women. It offers funders and policy makers a new asset-based framework to assist in the important work of supporting women to achieve self-sufficiency through enterprise development.

What is sustainable livelihood? It is an outcome that most of us work toward, whether consciously or unconsciously: we wish to be able to maintain and cultivate ourselves and our households, to take advantage of opportunities for growth over time, and to remain resistant to shocks and stresses from within and without.

How can women move from poverty to begin creating sustainable livelihoods? Just as a woman's life is complex and constantly changing, her livelihood will depend on her identifying and building her own various strengths, assets and capabilities. A sustainable livelihood may be achieved when she can secure access, over time, to:

- Supportive relationships, networks and environments,
- Long-term earning power and financial security (savings, insurance),
- Self-esteem, motivation, self-confidence and spiritual well-being, and
- Critical information, tools and capital.

Traditional welfare-based approaches to poverty alleviation have tended to focus on the deficits of those living in poverty, identifying what women are lacking and then "fixing" those gaps by providing women with monthly allowances, housing and training. While social assistance and other forms of income assistance and benefits are indispensable to ensure the stabilization and

well-being of poor women and their families, the systems and structures attached to this approach have been shown to promote long-term dependency and to undermine any foundation for women's self-sufficiency. As the social safety net weakens, it becomes even more important for organizations to experiment with new asset-based strategies to support women's development of sustainable livelihoods.

By exploring and assessing the livelihood assets that women have at their disposal, practitioners can develop an understanding of the process by which women build a foundation for sustainable livelihoods. This will make practitioners more effective in the work of supporting asset development.

Livelihood assets are the basic building blocks that support women in pursuing self-sufficiency. These assets are categorized into five key dimensions: social, financial, human, personal, and physical.

### **Social Assets:**

Social and political by nature, these assets refer to the connections that women can draw upon to achieve their goals. As such, they are highly important in determining a woman's ability to transform her context and to influence factors that make her and her family vulnerable. By supporting a foundation of networks and contacts, women find that they have enhanced their support systems, making it easier for them to develop other assets.

### **Financial Assets:**

Financial assets include earnings, money and financial security. Probably the most tangible of all assets, these play a critical role in determining the security of a woman and her family, and form an important entry point for her transformation and development. The ability to earn money and decide how it could be spent provides women with a powerful means of reversing the downward spiral into poverty and building a wide range of assets.

### **Human Assets:**

Human assets represent a woman's ability to command labour and wages and include not only her skills, knowledge, education, health, and leadership, but also her ability to draw on the skills and labour of her household for support. Although human assets are central to all livelihood strategies, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure progress toward a sustainable livelihood.

This asset area is one most emphasized and scrutinized by funders of community economic development who are focused on promoting skill and employability-related outcomes through training and capacity building.

### **Personal Assets:**

Personal assets, such as self-confidence and self-esteem, are less tangible, related to women's values and self-perceptions, but they exert a strong influence on women's motivation and

courage – the core from which comes personal transformation. Women often remind practitioners that they need to be true to their own values and priorities. For example, time for children is a priority and, while women want work, they desire challenging work that they feel has some value to society.

Yet women may also have to re-examine the way they see themselves and the world in order to prepare for personal change. The complexity of this task can often be overwhelming and paralyzing, and women may find themselves held back by negative self-images and by fear of success. Personal change needs to happen slowly and incrementally, and it has been learned that the process is not linear. Frequently it may be stalled by self-sabotage and other setbacks.

### **Physical Assets:**

Physical assets include the basic equipment, information, services, and infrastructure required to build a livelihood. Lack of access to these assets is a core dimension of poverty. It is difficult to begin to work with women who have not first made solid progress in ensuring that their household's basic human needs (shelter, security and food) are met.

The accumulation of assets makes women less subject to vulnerability. The more developed their assets, the more they can resist shocks and other forces and the quicker their recovery, the greater their access to resources and supports, and the greater the influence they have on their lives.

The following are strategies for building assets:

### **Social Assets: Connections and Cooperation**

- Minimizing sabotage and building family support,
- Broadening networks, and
- Group and mentor support.

### **Financial Assets: Earnings, Money and Financial Security**

- “Patching” income, focusing on business income as a growing core source,
- Creating “value added”, and
- Improving access to credit and a healthy credit rating.

### **Human Assets: Employability and the Ability to Work**

- Assessing self and identifying transferable skills,
- Participating in technical and business training, and
- Resolving health problems.

### **Personal Assets: Emotional Well-Being, Spirituality and Self-Confidence**

- Establishing goals,

- Drawing confidence and self-esteem from the process of building a business and generating income,
- Enhancing ability to access and build on personal strengths,
- Identifying and changing relationship patterns, and
- Increased risk-taking from a foundation of improved self-esteem.

### **Physical Assets: Basic Information, Services and Infrastructure**

- Access to housing,
- Collective strategies for reducing business costs, and
- Building infrastructure to support business growth.

Change is a very personal process and all women go through the stages at varying speeds. They have unique preferences and approaches, both for dealing with the challenges that make them vulnerable and for building assets. This process is not linear. There are often setbacks and it is common for women to get “stuck” in a stage until key challenges can be resolved. Experience has shown that a minimum of two to three years is required before low-income women can achieve a solid base from which to build self-sufficiency.

The Sustainable Livelihoods approach outlined is particularly suited to working with low-income women in the context of community economic development. It is:

- People-centred, building on micro-level perspectives, while acknowledging the impact of macro-level forces,
- Holistic, adopting a comprehensive approach to understanding women, their resources at hand and their needs,
- Positive, using an asset-based approach to build on women’s strengths, and
- Outcome-oriented, focusing on long-term sustainability of livelihoods.