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# How the Poor Can Have a Voice in Government Policy

Development thinking has changed significantly in recent years. Policymakers have recognized the ability of the poor to make a valuable contribution to the analysis of poverty and are consulting them directly. This new participatory approach has resulted in a broader definition of poverty and better-informed public policies that are more responsive to the needs of the poor.

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**B**Y THE END of the 1990s, there was growing recognition by governments and civil society of the need to change the way national strategies to reduce poverty were developed and implemented. Previous strategies had met with little success in Latin America and Africa, and poverty was on the rebound in East Asia after the financial crisis of 1997–98. It had become clear that, to succeed, poverty reduction programs needed to be developed by the countries themselves—rather than imposed from the outside—and that the input of the poor was critical to the development of effective poverty reduction strategies.

In September 1999, the World Bank and the IMF agreed to major changes in their operations to help low-income countries achieve sustainable poverty reduction. Henceforth, programs supported by the two institutions will be based on government-driven poverty reduction strategies (PRSs) developed in consultation with civil society and summarized in poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). In addition, the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, launched in 1999 by the World Bank and the IMF, links debt relief with poverty reduction. The PRSPs provide the basis for debt relief under HIPC as well as for all World Bank and IMF concessional lending.

In formulating poverty reduction strategies, policymakers have begun consulting the poor directly through participatory poverty assessments (PPAs), a methodology developed during the 1990s by governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, and donors. Although many methods have long existed for consulting the poor on the development of projects, PPAs are different in that their findings are intended to be used in national policymaking. To date, more than 50 countries have undertaken PPAs with assistance from the World Bank; an equal number of PPAs have been conducted by other agencies, including the United Nations Development Program, bilaterals, and NGOs.

## **What is a PPA?**

A PPA is a tool that allows us to consult the poor directly; findings are transmitted to policymakers, thereby enabling the poor to influence policy. Unlike a household survey, which consists of a predetermined set of questions, a PPA uses a variety of flexible methods that combine visual techniques (mapping, matrices, diagrams) and verbal techniques (open-ended interviews, discussion groups) and emphasizes exercises that facilitate information sharing, analysis, and action. The goal is to give the intended beneficiaries more con-



## Participatory poverty assessments reveal the many dimensions of poverty

trol over the research process. PPAs are usually carried out by intermediaries such as NGOs, academic institutions, government extension workers, and local consulting firms. The approach “stresses changes in the behavior and attitudes of outsiders to become not teachers but facilitators, not lecturers but listeners and learners” (Chambers, 1997). To ensure follow-up at the community level (a principle of participatory research), many PPAs (for example, those in The Gambia, Tanzania, and Uganda) have involved the development of community action plans subsequently supported by local governments or NGOs. Using PPAs to extract information just for research purposes, with limited participation and no link to policymaking, is considered bad practice.

Policy analysis in the past was focused on a classic statistical approach to poverty based on indicators of income, health, and education; poverty itself was measured by a money-metric poverty line derived from traditional household surveys. It has been recognized that an approach dominated by economic analysis fails to capture the many dimensions of poverty, while a multidisciplinary approach can deepen our understanding of the lives of the poor. PPAs, with their focus on well-being and quality of life, have consistently shown that such problems as vulnerability, physical and social isolation, insecurity, lack of self-respect, lack of access to information, distrust of state institutions, and powerlessness can be as important to the poor as low income (Box 1).

Moreover, because PPAs go beyond the household unit of traditional surveys to focus on individuals, intrahousehold dynamics, social groups (based on variables such as gender, ethnicity, class, caste, age), and community relationships, they capture the diversity of poverty. They have shown that people's priorities and experiences are affected by such variables as gender, social exclusion, intrahousehold allocation of resources, the incidence of crime and violence, geographical location, access to networks of support, and relations with those in power.

PPAs have three key elements. First, they increase our understanding of the multidimensional nature of poverty and enable us to include the perspective and priorities of poor people in our analysis of poverty and formulation of policies. Second, they promote wider ownership of researchers' findings and increase the influence of these findings on policymaking by including a cross section of other groups (for example, NGOs, policymakers, administrators, civic groups) in the process. Third, they can help countries increase their capacity to analyze and monitor poverty, as has happened, for example, in Mongolia, Vietnam, and Zambia.

PPAs often take less time and cost less than household surveys because they use a selected sample of communities (Box 2). As a result, they are not as extensive, representative, or standardized. They nonetheless provide more in-depth analysis of the views of the poor and the political, social, and institutional context, as well as insights into the reasons people become—or cease being—poor and their survival strategies.

Because methodological questions arise with both traditional household surveys and participatory research meth-

**Vulnerability.** Vulnerable groups are not always identified in household surveys, nor is the fact that their access to productive resources might be constrained by political, cultural, and social factors. In Armenia, single pensioners were consistently ranked by the communities as the poorest not because they had the least income but because they were isolated and socially excluded. In many countries, poor people's access to the labor market is restricted, forcing them into low-paid, insecure, often dangerous occupations, many of which are illegal, simply because no other options for earning a livelihood are open to them. In many African countries, the HIV/AIDS crisis is putting pressure on already strained networks of support; in Zambia, it has led to an increase in the number of particularly vulnerable households headed by children.

**Gender differences.** In Tanzania, men identified lack of transportation, farming conditions, and drunkenness as the three most important problems, whereas women identified food shortages, lack of clean water, and illness. In many PPAs, women complained of a lack of time to engage in activities other than working in the fields or the home.

**Crime and violence.** Some PPAs have highlighted the relationship between poverty and illegal activities, such as child prostitution (Zambia), drugs (Jamaica), and domestic violence (Mexico and Vietnam). Household surveys often are not able to obtain information on such sensitive topics because of respondents' mistrust of interviewers. Ecuador's PPA revealed that street crime and violence deter women from working outside the home, and safety concerns discourage women and the elderly from using public transport, particularly at night.

**Seasonality.** Many PPAs, including those in Ghana, South Africa, Togo, and Zambia, have revealed great seasonal differences in poverty (for example, food security, access to water, and health). When people are forced to sell their assets, seasonal poverty can turn into long-term poverty.

**Powerlessness.** In The Gambia and Uganda, the poor expressed frustration about their lack of influence on government policies. Ugandans also expressed concern about government corruption and distrust of state institutions, especially the police and the judiciary. In Vietnam's PPA, people said they lacked information on their entitlements, rights, and the activities of local government.

ods, it is essential to use them in combination: the findings of each can help researchers examine, explain, confirm, refute, or enrich information from the other (Carvalho and White, 1997). Which survey comes first should be determined by the conditions in each country. If the PPA comes first, its results can focus the research agenda for household surveys and generate hypotheses. Conversely, the results of household surveys can help identify the poorest geographical areas where research should be conducted and develop questions for future PPAs. The ideal process is an iterative one.



## Features of participatory poverty assessments

The design of a PPA is determined by conditions in a given country, research agenda, size of sample, and experience of researchers. A typical PPA has the following features:

Cost	\$75,000–\$200,000
Number of communities selected for research	40–60
Time spent on training	2 weeks
Time spent on field research	3–6 months
Time spent on analysis	2–3 months
Size of research team	10–20 people
Composition of research team	Nationals of country, with men and women equally represented; ability to speak local languages; representatives from various ethnic and age groups
Typical agency conducting the field work	Government extension workers; local and international NGOs; academic institutions; independent consultants and firms
Examples of donors that have contributed to government-led PPAs	U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), World Bank, Action Aid, Oxfam, UNDP, UNICEF, Danish Agency for Development Assistance (DANIDA), Asian Development Bank

## Impact on policy

Participatory policymaking is based on incorporating information gathered from local communities in a broader policy dialogue that includes a cross section of civic groups. But policymaking is a complex—and inherently political—process. Rules, legislation, traditions, networks, ethnic alliances, patronage, political allegiances, and bureaucratic structures all interact to form a complex and fluctuating policy environment. PPAs have had little or no impact in countries where political support for poverty reduction measures is lacking, participation of groups other than the poor is limited, or the government, donors, and participants mistrust each other.

Experience shows that governments should lead the process and key policymakers and administrators should be involved in planning the PPA from the earliest stages, that policymakers and donors should go to the field to participate in the PPA, and that high-level support is required to follow up on the findings and monitor the implementation of key recommendations. In Cameroon, for example, the government disregarded a PPA, even though the field work was of good quality and the results relevant, in part because some key policymakers felt excluded from the process.

In general, open political environments provide greater opportunities for building consensus around policies for poverty reduction. In Costa Rica, where there is a tradition of bringing marginal groups into the political sphere, the government was eager to better understand poverty from the perspective of the poor, and the data from the PPA therefore had an impact on policy. If a government is not fully committed to consulting the poor, it is unlikely to act on research results that run counter to its own interest. In such circumstances, participation should initially be limited to a few groups.

## Poverty reduction strategies

The process and findings of participatory research are relevant to poverty reduction strategies at four stages (see Box 3 for a detailed description of the links between Uganda's PPA and its poverty reduction strategy):

- **Poverty analysis.** The PRSs can incorporate information from the PPAs on the multidimensional aspects and causes of poverty.

- **Formulation and dissemination.** The priorities of the poor should be reflected in the goals set forth in the PRSPs. This can include the sequencing of public actions, the choice of indicators for monitoring implementation of poverty reduction strategies, and budget allocations.

- **Monitoring.** The PPAs can provide policymakers with information on the effectiveness and relevance of poverty reduction strategies and the institutions that implement them, as well as on the delivery of the budget and quality of services.

- **Evaluation of outcomes.** Outcomes reported during PPAs should be integrated with data on outcomes gathered from other sources and used to inform decisions on whether to change policies and budget allocations.

Programs supported by the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility will be modified to reflect the countries' PRSs. Policies to be implemented under these programs will have a greater focus on growth and poverty reduction. (See "Key Features of IMF Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) Supported Programs" at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/prgf/2000/eng/key.htm>.) However, more research is needed into how programs and policy reforms affect the poor, particularly (1) macroeconomic adjustments, such as tax increases, reduction or elimination of subsidies, and exchange rate realignment; (2) structural reforms, such as liberalization and civil service reform; and (3) public expenditures. Traditional surveys and PPAs, as well as data gathered through other research methods, will be crucial to good program design.

## Benefits of a participatory approach

In many countries, the poor are excluded from the policymaking process and often marginalized. Enabling poor communities to participate in the formulation of policy can empower them; they cease to be merely the passive recipients



## How the poor have influenced Uganda's poverty reduction strategy

In 1998/99, Uganda carried out a Participatory Poverty Assessment involving poor Ugandans in both rural and urban areas and incorporated the findings in its Poverty Eradication Action Plan.

### Poverty analysis

The Poverty Monitoring Unit in the Ministry of Finance integrates the findings of household surveys conducted annually by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics with other data to ensure that policy is well informed. In addition to income, health, and education, Ugandans emphasized the following concerns (all of which have been incorporated into subsequent household surveys): security (war, insurgency, cattle rustling, and domestic violence), corruption, isolation, lack of access to clean water, and inadequate information on government policies. The PPA also revealed that poverty is linked to specific locations (for example, because of poor roads, lack of work, depleted soil, lack of security).

### Formulation and dissemination of the PRSP

Reflecting the PPA's findings, one of the four goals set forth in the PRSP is improving governance and security. The differences in the poverty profiles of different districts impressed upon policymakers the need for more flexibility in distributing the central government's conditional grants to districts. Indicators monitor economic opportunities, human development, security, and empowerment (democratization, human rights, law and order). Substantially greater resources—including savings from debt

relief obtained under the HIPC Initiative—have been directed at improving water supplies and increasing political accountability. With the Ministry of Local Government, the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project will work with local governments to strengthen their capacity to consult poor communities for the purposes of local planning and budgeting.

### Monitoring implementation of the PRSP

Yearly assessments will be undertaken to track changes in poverty and well-being. The budget process is being developed to open up multiple channels of accountability. For example, the budget allocations for schools are posted on school notice boards. The government established a Poverty Action Fund involving both civil society and government to enhance the transparency and monitoring of how funds from savings under HIPC and from other sources are being spent on poverty reduction programs.

### Evaluating outcomes

In addition to a plan to integrate participatory monitoring of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan into the government's poverty-monitoring framework, there have been proposals to strengthen the role of elected village councils in monitoring the delivery of public services and to create mechanisms for increasing local accountability and monitoring delivery of services.

Source: Based on Bella Bird and Margaret Kakande, "The Uganda Case Study," in *Manual on Participatory Poverty Assessments*, by Andy Norton and others, draft (London: U.K. Department for International Development).

of (sometimes misguided) state benevolence and donor assistance. The two-way information flow—presenting data gathered during PPAs to policymakers and making information about government policies and budgets available to the public—can strengthen policymaking. Participation by civic groups and the poor in monitoring and evaluation promotes transparency and accountability and enhances people's awareness of their rights—and, in the long run, may encourage them to demand better governance. Furthermore, experience indicates that where there is a broad policy dialogue on poverty that includes different civil society groups, the constituency for reform is widened, the country's sense of ownership of policies is stronger, and policies are more likely to be implemented.

The outcome of many PPAs has been an increase in face-to-face interactions between diverse groups—such as NGOs, local community groups, and local and central governments—and better understanding between civil society and the state (McGee and Norton, 2000). PPAs have also shown that the poor have the capacity to appraise, analyze, plan, and act to a far greater extent than had heretofore been acknowledged by many development experts. Including the poor through a PPA leads to better technical diagnosis of problems and better design and implementation of solutions. When undertaken in an environment of increased trust, PPAs



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can present opportunities for a more open dialogue and greater understanding between those in power and the poor. **F&D**

*For further discussion of the multidimensional aspects of poverty, see Robert Chambers, 1983, Putting the Last First (London: Intermediate Technology Publications); N.S. Johda, 1988, "Poverty Debate in India: A Minority View," Economic and Political Weekly, No. 2421–28 (November); Caroline M. Robb, 1999, Can the Poor Influence Policy? Participatory Poverty Assessments in the Developing World, First Edition, Directions in Development (Washington: World Bank) (also at <http://www.worldbank.org/html/extpb/canpoor.htm>); and World Bank, World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty (New York:*

*Oxford University Press for the World Bank). Suggestions for further reading:*

*Soniya Carvalho and Howard White, 1997, Combining the Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches to Poverty Measurement and Analysis: The Practice and the Potential, World Bank Technical Paper, No. 366 (Washington: World Bank).*

*Robert Chambers, 1997, Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last (London: Intermediate Technology Publications).*

*Rosemary McGee with Andy Norton, 2000, Participation in poverty reduction strategies: a synthesis of experience with participatory approaches to policy design, implementation and monitoring, IDS Working Paper 109 (Brighton, United Kingdom: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex).*