



This Briefing Note is part of a series addressing issues surrounding poverty and poverty reduction. They have been produced for SDC, its partners and interested development practitioners and offer an overview of the current debates. An introduction to the full series can be found at www.poverty-wellbeing.net.

Brief No 2– Perceptions of Poverty

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1. Introduction

“Poverty is like heat; you cannot see it; so to know poverty; you have to go through it. (A poor man from Adaboya, Ghana)”

(Source: Narayan, 2000, Crying Out for Change)

This Brief focuses on different perceptions of poverty; how it is perceived by poor people themselves, people who are not poor, and by development practitioners. In order to have a more complete picture of poverty, it is important to take into account subjective perceptions as well as objective measures. By taking perceptions into account, the dimensions of poverty that are important to poor people themselves can emerge, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the nature, causes and potential paths out of poverty. In addition to improving our understanding of poverty, being attentive to different perceptions of poverty and well-being also has implications for pro-poor policy making. Recognising that poor people are in fact experts on poverty, and listening to their views, can contribute to the development of more efficient policies. The way poor men and women view well-being, poverty, and their manifestations and determining factors dictates to a substantial degree how they behave and react in relation to public policy. Thus such perceptions must be incorporated already in the design phase of an intervention.

2. How do poor people perceive poverty?

“The poor is he who is blind and has 8 children to support; he who cannot keep his children in school even though he wants to educate them. Instead he sends all of them to work as bonded labour in the houses of the better-off. He is my father.” A 12 year old son of a blind man in Karak district, NWFP, Pakistan.

(Source: IC Pakistan, 2003)

In Tanzania, Madagascar, Bangladesh and Pakistan, SDC supported programmes collected the poorest peoples’ life stories and make them available to others.

In these stories, ill-being is most commonly expressed in terms of hunger, bad health, bad housing conditions, inadequate livelihoods, followed by descriptions of feeling helpless, not accepted or excluded. For example, in Tanzania, SDC identified the perceptions of poor people during a study on the ‘Views of the Poor’ (SDC, 2003). People associated wellbeing strongly with having enough food to eat, living in a house that was dry and in good condition and having good family relations. Ill-being was related to hunger, for example most families had to reduce the number and size of meals to two or even one a day in lean periods which could last up to 6 months. Ill-being was also associated with the state of the houses, with leaking roofs being one of the worst aspects of their lives; with older people having been abandoned by their children and lacking support, with women who had been abandoned by their husbands and with socially excluded households. The following quotes illustrate this:

“You can wear one cloth or dress for a week, a month and even a whole year... but you can’t suspend hunger and stay without eating even for a single week”, Grandmother, 60 years old, Mgeta, Tanzania

“The worst thing for me is when it rains at night. The roof leaks so badly that I can’t lie down on the ground and we have to stand up throughout the night”, 10 year old boy, Mgeta, Tanzania

“The worst thing is when my baby gets sick. We have no money and nobody to turn to for help. I just give her panadol”, young mother, Mgeta Tanzania

(Source: SDC, 2003)

Well-being ranking can be used to identify people’s own views about poverty and well-being. For example, in an exercise in the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project, local respondents (rarely the extreme poor) categorised households as wealthy because they had food security due to land ownership and had an income, in particular a regular salary. Respondents also acknowledged the importance of social and other factors. Commonly quoted indicators of well-being

include good political connections outside the village; that all family members were in good health; the ability to pay for all children's education; the ability to lend money; and (in some cases) having a toilet (Pokharel and Carter, 2007).

The World Bank, with its well-known study "Voices of the Poor" made public the perceptions of thousands of poor women and men from over 50 countries. Their povertynet website has a page dedicated to sharing their stories: www.worldbank.org/povertynet .

2. How do non-poor people perceive poverty?

The non-poor - or the never poor as they are categorised by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC, 2004) - live permanently above the poverty line. How do they perceive poverty?

The study "Comparing Elite Perceptions of Poverty" describes perceptions of national elites in the South in Haiti, South Africa, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Brazil (Reis and Moore, 2003). The elites they interviewed belonged to "the thin sliver from the 'top' in a 'power' sense of the population". Interviewees in all five countries agreed that poverty is non-desirable and understood it mainly in terms of material deficits. Few interviewees could speak with conviction and fluency about different types of poverty or different categories of poor people, or of different routes into and out of poverty. Their understandings were mainly constructed from indirect sources rather than from any direct personal experiences. In general, they viewed the poor as a homogenous and passive group. Rural poverty was consistently seen as being less intense than urban poverty. It was difficult for these elites to identify reasons for being concerned about poverty and poor people were not seen as potential assets to the economy, either as workers or as consumers. Elites and non-poor people commonly perceived poverty to be the fault of poor people – that if only they tried, they could get out of poverty themselves.

Besides these national elites, there are many more non-poor people who have opinions and views on poverty. To perceive poverty and to understand how a poor person feels and thinks is difficult for people who have never experienced being poor. As Robert Chambers states in his book 'Putting the Last First' (Chambers, 1983), outsiders' views of the poor are distorted in many ways. "Lack of contact or communication permits outsiders to form those views without the inconvenience of knowledge, let alone personal exposure. Poor people are rarely met; when they are met they often do not speak; when they do speak, they are often cautious and over polite; and what they say is often either not listened to, or brushed aside, or interpreted incorrectly."

3. Development practitioners' perceptions of poverty

Development practitioners responsible for planning and implementation define and describe poverty in a number

of ways (see Brief No. 1 for a range of definitions). Definitions can be based on descriptions and definitions made by poor people themselves (see Section 4), but more often by outsiders such as development practitioners. Most commonly used definitions refer to income in dollars per day.

However, outsiders and poor people themselves recognise that poverty is multidimensional and not just a lack of material goods. Today, poverty is seen as dynamic, with people moving in and out of poverty. The **drivers**, identifying factors that cause individuals or households to fall or slide into poverty; **maintainers**, factors that make poverty persistent and trap people in poverty; and **interrupters**, factors that support individuals or households to seize opportunities to escape poverty, will be different for different groups of poor people. They will greatly influence which policies and interventions are most appropriate for reducing poverty. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC, 2004) therefore proposes to differentiate poor people into the following five categories, based on the observation that poverty can be seasonal, transitory, chronic or inter-generational. The categories are based on available data, which is often only monetary and related to income and expenditures. However, poverty can also be assessed in terms of assets or nutritional status, for example. The categories are as follows:

- **Always poor** – expenditure or incomes or consumption levels in each period below a poverty line
- **Usually poor** – mean expenditures over all periods less than the poverty line but not poor in every period
- **Fluctuating poor** – mean expenditures over all periods close to the poverty line but sometimes poor and sometimes non-poor in different periods
- **Occasionally poor** – mean expenditures over all periods above the poverty line but at least one period below the poverty line
- **Never poor** – mean expenditure in all periods above the poverty line

The **chronically poor**, those always or usually poor (see Figure 1), are a heterogeneous group whose deprivation can stem from many different factors. A number of categories of individuals, households and social groups are particularly likely to suffer chronic poverty (Hulme et al, 2001):

- Those experiencing deprivation because of their stage in the life cycle e.g. older people, children and widows.
- Those discriminated against because of their social position at the local, regional or national level e.g. marginalised castes, ethnic, racial or religious groups, refugees, indigenous people, nomads and pastoralists, migrants.
- Household members who experience discrimination within the household e.g. female children, children

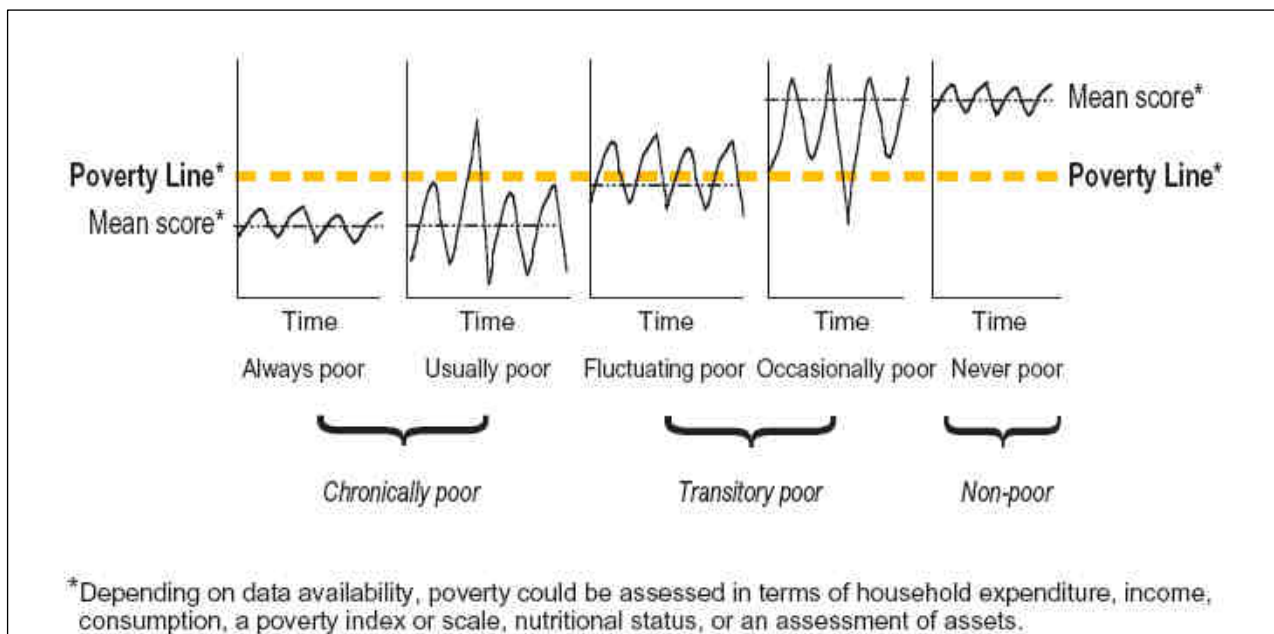
in households with many other children, daughters-in-law.

- Those with health problems and impairments e.g. HIV/AIDS sufferers, disabled people, people with mental health problems.
- People living in remote rural areas, urban ghettos, and regions where prolonged violent conflict and insecurity have occurred.

Commonly, the chronically poor experience several forms of disadvantage at the same time: these

combinations keep them in poverty and block opportunities for escape. Poor people themselves often identify these multiple dimensions of poverty. To address these and identify the right mix of policies, the underlying causes of poverty must be better understood. Causes can originate from within the household, from the economic, social, political and environmental sphere at the local level (e.g. low productivity, low quality of natural resources), at the national level (e.g. poor economic policies, insufficient government investment in health and education), and at the international level (e.g. globalisation, political domination) (Hulme et al., 2001).

Figure 1: The chronically poor, transitory poor and the non-poor – a categorisation



(Source: CPRC, 2004, 5)

Participatory approaches are increasingly used by development practitioners seeking to work with poor people. In the methodological guide “Consultations with the Poor”, the World Bank describes a range of tools used to uncover and understand poor people’s perspectives and insights, enabling them to express and analyse their realities, with outsiders playing a facilitating role (World Bank, 1999).

An example of a participatory approach is a study on poverty measurement in Niger conducted collaboratively by SDC, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the Government of Niger’s PRSP office. The study explored the extent to which livelihood needs were met within a particular social environment. It sought to go beyond quantitative approaches to poverty assessments to include meaningful qualitative data. “The interesting thing was that understanding varied greatly. Thus for example the category ‘to have enough to eat every day’ means something very different to a herdsman in the north, for whom this signifies at least two bowls of milk to drink per day, compared with a small farmer in the southern part, for whom milk to drink is irrelevant. So, while measuring the same category in a

quantitative way, the indicators defined by the poor varied within the country and even within a zone” (SDC, 2007). Dutch development cooperation used participatory methods to evaluate two of their rural development programmes and assess to what extent they achieved poverty reduction (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004).

As mentioned in Brief No. 1, Robert Chambers states that commonly used definitions of poverty have been constructed by development practitioners. He also writes that many professionals fail to recognise poverty, because they are exploring the wrong indicators. Their perception is distorted by bias, without them being aware. Chambers identifies these biases: as spatial, project, person, seasonal, diplomatic, professional, security and, possibly, urban. For example, many do not make time to visit remote areas or do not make these visits at times of seasonal hardship and instead stay along the main road or near the project office. This distorts their perception of reality (Chambers, 2006).

“In Pakistan, the hot season is a lean season for project visits as it is difficult to find external consultants for this

period. Most consultants prefer the cooler season for field visits.”

(Source: Personal communication, 2006)

Project-based practitioners often work on “islands” of development amidst poverty, where they can display their success stories. Their contacts are often with people who are less poor and more influential, including, for example, progressive farmers, village leaders or those who communicate the easiest. They often belong to local elites. They are educated and their interest in learning and understanding more about the lives of the poor is variable.

There are several ways to offset these biases, in particular by having more and differently organised visits. Methods can include direct learning approaches, for example, participatory assessments such as those mentioned above, or **immersions**. An immersion is a relatively unstructured learning experience in which a development practitioner becomes a guest of a community for a few days and nights. The visitor is present not as an important person but a fellow human being, and, as such, lives with the community, taking part and helping in life, and experiencing and learning as a participant. There are many forms of immersion and many ways of arranging them (see Chambers 2006 and Eyben 2004 for more information).

However, it remains particularly difficult to address the problems of chronically poor people. They tend to be powerless, badly connected politically, and poorly represented. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC, 2004) identifies a number of ethical problems which emerge when working with the chronically or extreme poor: how can practitioners manage social relations with people who live on the margins of survival? It is not easy to meet people in hunger or in need of medical care and after an interview leave just a thank you.

4. Conclusions

“Once it was my dream to have 2 meals per day for my family members while I could hardly manage one. I am very distressed to say that 10 of my children died in their early age as I could not manage to get food for them and I could not ensure medical treatment and facilities. We always suffered from diseases. I did not have my own homestead. I was sheltered in my neighbour’s house. As I had many children, several times I was dislocated from the shelter. The villagers and the well-off people hated my family and did not give us attention due to our poverty.” Poor woman, Sunamganj, Bangladesh.

(Source: IC Bangladesh, 2005)

People have their own views about poverty, whether they have never been poor, belong to national elite or are a development practitioner (from the South, East or North). Poor people themselves, given a chance, articulate very well the multiple dimensions of the poverty and ill-being that they experience. In *Putting Poor Peoples’ Livelihoods at the Centre of Rural*

Development: A Practitioners Guide (2008, in press), SDC presents a method in which poor peoples’ perceptions of poverty are gathered and are used to develop a typology of households, based on their livelihood strategies. This typology can then be used to design and plan -or re-orient- a programme that supports rural households in adapting their livelihood strategies to a changing environment. The method aims to result in a shared understanding of poverty and inequality among the actors, a common vision for the future and a strategy for achieving the vision.

The process of arriving at a shared understanding of poverty can be challenging. NADEL and SDC (2006) underline the importance of an approach that is able to reconcile the perceptions of insiders (poor people) and outside observers (researchers and development practitioners). They mention that combining these perceptions might be difficult but is necessary to improve the poverty reducing effectiveness of planning processes. A recent example of an effort to combine perceptions can be found in India, where the Asian Development Bank along with the Government supported participatory poverty assessments in 7 Indian states in which the perceptions and suggestions of poor people are combined with the suggestions and feedback of policy makers. This provided insights that were useful to understand and prioritise some fundamental issues from the point of view of the poor. (Viswanathan and Srivastava, 2007)

Participatory approaches can be used to highlight poor people’s perceptions of their own poverty. The development community’s current focus on pro-poor policy and poverty reduction, coupled with increasing attention being given to accountability, transparency and citizenship creates opportunities to highlight the perceptions of poor people and communicate their priorities into policy debates and decision-making fora.

The Voices of the Poor provides a model of how this challenge might be approached, by focusing directly on poor people’s perceptions, and identifying the interlocking dimensions of powerlessness and ill-being which emerged from their narratives (World Bank, 2000). However, as well as integrating insider and outsider perceptions, improving our understanding of how national (and international) elites perceive the poor is important. Such elites are best placed to mobilise and shape public action against poverty – or thwart such attempts (Reis and Moore, 2003).

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