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Villagers' perceptions of rural poverty through the mapping methods of PRA

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• Summary

Villagers' perceptions of rural poverty and the official poverty line to identify poor households may or may not converge in practice. For villagers, poverty is much more than a mere demarcation of poor households by a poverty line based on money income. As a policy issue it is important to bridge the gap between the official poverty line and the villagers' description of poverty since the latter group constitutes the clientele of poverty alleviation programmes. Their views will affect how such programmes work.

In this study the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods of mapping and ranking have been used in two Indian villages to study villagers' perceptions on rural poverty. The maps were used to help the villagers identify the poor households in the village, rank them and also to understand the basis of such ranking. Through the mapping technique, the villagers identified different indicators to rank households in terms of poverty. They take into account not only living conditions and assets of the household but also their accessibility to food, employment, public services and common property resources. This makes for variations in ranking of poor households which the villagers perceived easily and clearly.

In practice, the official poverty line is essentially based on income which can act as a 'proxy' variable for many aspects of poverty which are strongly correlated with income. However, when poverty measures indicate variables that go beyond income, the poverty line no longer serves as an effective policy

tool to reflect the complexities and field realities of poverty.

• Background

There are standard indicators of poverty on the basis of which a certain line is drawn and a household is classified as either poor or not poor. This is related to the definition of poverty on the basis of relative indicators which is different from measuring poverty which seeks to aggregate the amount of poverty into a single statistic¹. This paper is concerned with relative poverty as perceived and described by the villagers and their ranking of rural households on that basis.

Any standard definition of poverty, arrives at a poverty line based on some conception of welfare. This may be broadly described as the minimum amount of goods and services necessary to live a decent life. The common focus on money income for measuring poverty has major flaws because access to basic needs is ignored in the process. We can use the criterion of per capita or household consumption, in value terms or in calorie terms, adopt the food ratio approach (which is a fraction of household budget spent on food) or use the basic needs approach (Glewwe and Vander Gaag, 1990). However, none of these criteria of poverty is fool proof. Each suffers from drawbacks regarding measurements and data requirements which can be complex, voluminous and not always available.

¹ Glewwe, P. and Gaag J. Vander, 1990. Identifying the poor in developing countries: do different definitions matter? *World Development* p. 804.

For India's rural development and poverty alleviation programmes, the official measure of poverty line relates to a cut-off level of income. The cut-off level is based on calorie norms translated in money terms. The official poverty line is an annual income of Rs. 6400/- per household (consisting of five members) at 1982-83 prices, below which are the poor households, consisting of small farmers, marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, rural artisans and others. Small farmers are defined as those cultivators with a land holding of 5 acres or below, the marginal farmers have a land holding of 2.5 acres or below, whereas an agricultural labourer is a person without any land other than homestead and deriving more than 50 percent of his income from agricultural wages. Below the poverty line there are four groups²:

- the destitute with an income below Rs. 2265;
- the very, very poor with an income range between Rs.2266 to Rs.3500;
- the very poor with an income range between Rs. 3501 to Rs. 4800; and,
- the poor who have an income range of Rs. 4801 to Rs.6400.

Annual income surveys of households at the village level help determine the poverty line.

• Villagers' perceptions

The issue is how the villagers identify poor households and on what basis they rank different groups of households. Is it different from what the official poverty line attempts to capture? To what extent is the official poverty line a realistic measure of identifying poor groups? Is it able to capture the poverty of households in the rural areas as perceived by the villagers? Perhaps it is a standard of reference constructed by urban experts who perceive poverty as related merely to income. It is important to account for the villagers' perceptions on poverty and to recognise major differences with the official poverty line. This would improve the selection of intended beneficiaries and, therefore, the performance of poverty alleviation programmes by incorporating more field-level realities.

PRA techniques were used to study villagers' perceptions of poor households and their ranking of poverty. The study had three aims: (i) to identify poor households through villagers' perception; (ii) to know why and how the villagers consider them to be poor; and, (iii) to document the discrepancies, if any, between the villagers' perception of poverty and the official ones used for targeting beneficiaries of poverty alleviation programmes. Some isolated villages with less than 100 households were selected, which were considered backward and poor. An account of the experience in two villages is given below.

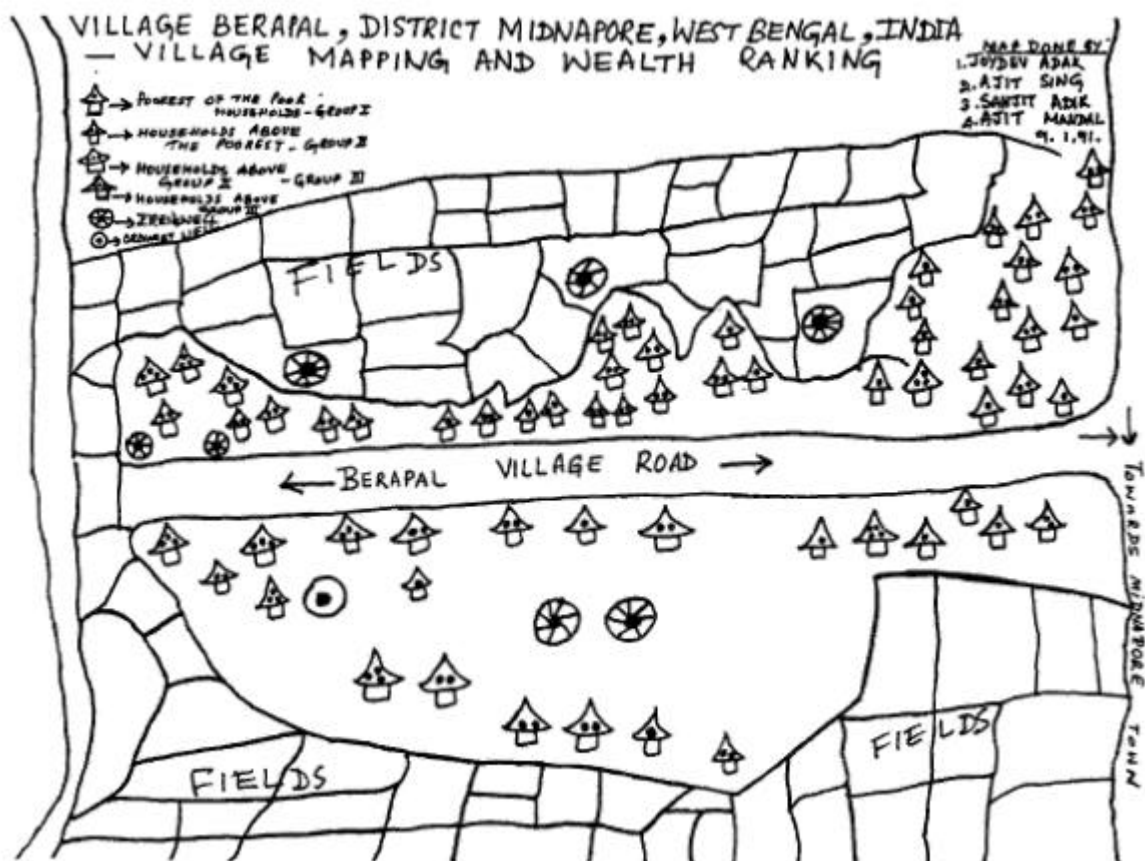
The methodology

The process started by drawing the villagers together near a village school or a tea stall. The villagers were asked to map the entire village. Then they were requested to identify the 'poorest of the poor' households in the village. This they did by marking the households which they considered to fall in that category. They were also asked to describe the characteristics and reasons which put these households at the bottom. They described the conditions of the identified households, explaining the causes which made them poor.

After identifying the 'poorest of the poor' the villagers were asked to identify the next group of poor households. The question posed to the villagers was: "Which group of households is slightly better than the 'poorest of the poor' and what are the causes of that and characteristics of such households?" The villagers marked each set of households with different symbols. They identified different layers of poor households, ranking them from below, and also enumerating their characteristics until all households from the village were marked. The entire exercise of mapping and ranking was done by the villagers.

• ² Based on the 38th Round of N.S.S. Consumer Expenditure Survey, Delhi.

Figure 1. The village map with wealth ranking of Berapal



Berapal village experience

Berapal lies in Sadar block of Midnapore district in West Bengal, India. Well-irrigation, both by private households and government agencies, has helped increase the productivity of the area. The village consists of mostly small and marginal cultivators and landless labourers.

A village map consisting of households, roads and fields was drawn by some villagers after a large number had gathered at a central place in the village (see Figure 1). The other villagers checked the map while it was being done. Using the village map the villagers attempted to rank the households. They marked the households which they felt were the poorest. These included the households which had widows as heads of households and had practically no assets, no regular source of income and not enough to eat throughout the year. Others in this group included agricultural

labourers having neither any land nor any regular source of income or food.

The villagers explained that poverty was accentuated by environmental degradation in the area. The forest which provided substantial back up during lean periods as a source of food and fuel wood was increasingly degraded, aggravating the hardship of the poorest of the poor who were more dependent on the forest products.

The villagers marked the group of households above the extreme poor group, distinguishing it from that group on the basis of some ownership of land. The households in the higher group would have been even better off with fewer dependents. This meant that the number of dependents was taken as an indicator of poverty. This also implied that the villagers had some notion of average income per head per household.

The group of households next identified was described as having better production from

land. They had more land and better quality of life despite having large families. The production from the land helped them in meeting their household consumption requirements as well as procuring income by selling some produce. Many of the households from the last two groups were also beneficiaries of official income-generating projects.

Kalsigeriya village experience

Kalsigeriya is an isolated village situated in Block I of Kharagpur in the district of Midnapore in the state of West Bengal, India. This village has a single cropped area and is affected by floods every year. There are 42 households, all belonging to the Scheduled Caste³.

Using the household map, the villagers distinguished three different groups of poor households. The extreme poor group had no land, little food availability during a year, not many working hands and a large number of dependent family members, both young and old who were not capable of productive work. They were all deficit households. They hardly had enough to eat during the year and, due to environmental degradation, went without food on several days.

According to the villagers the next poor group of households had a little land, about one or two acres. They had some working hands who contributed towards household income, all efforts together allowing the households to just fulfil their consumption requirements.

The third group had around 4 acres of land. Some of the household members had jobs outside the village and they were much better off in terms of household income, food availability and purchasing power. Many of the households from the last two groups were also beneficiaries of official poverty alleviation programmes.

The entire village agreed on the indicators of poverty. Before ranking the households the villagers discussed the indicators to rank the households. The process of triangulation based on the socio-economic map was quite obvious with the villagers checking and cross-checking with each other for each indicator. In case of disagreement the villagers discussed until they resolved the issue.

• Comparison of official definition of poverty and villagers' perceptions

The villagers identified poor households on the basis of the conditions and causes of poverty prevailing in the households. Food consumption was a major indicator in these semi-starved villages. The villagers would strictly rank poor households by the criterion of food availability over a year because it was a particularly scarce commodity. This was linked to common property resources, like forests and ponds being principal sources of sustenance in the lean season once the harvesting season was over. Households at the bottom of the poverty line were those which had the least availability of food on an annual basis.

The size of landholdings and its productivity was another important consideration for the villagers but land alone was not enough. Its productive capacity was equally important. It should be mentioned that certain aspects of the quality of land have been considered in the official guidelines for selection of poor households as beneficiaries under the rural development programmes like the IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme). However, the guidelines are not able to capture the minute variations in the quality of land holdings which villagers are able to do easily. Such variations can make a major difference in the livelihood of poor households. Apart from landholdings and food availability, the number of dependents was also an important consideration in the two villages.

It appears there are major problems associated with the use of income as a 'proxy' indicator of poverty. First, villagers' perceptions of poverty go beyond the income indicator. They take account of factors like the size and quality of land, food availability, the dependence on

• ³ Scheduled Caste has been recognised officially to constitute a set of selected backward castes in the caste hierarchy of the Hindu society in India.

common property resources, the harvest, the number of dependent family members and others. Such aspects of poverty are not properly reflected through a standard poverty line which is too perfect a line to capture the dimensions of both qualitative and quantitative variables determining poverty.

Second, there is the choice of considering either current or permanent income, both which have their own problems. There are major problems in estimating permanent income while current income can vary from day to day, season to season and year to year. Hence measured income in any one year or one season may not reflect the underlying living standards of the households concerned.

Third, there are serious problems of gathering data on rural income from the field with household questionnaire surveys. They are time-consuming to process and restricted, often based on questions reflecting urban perceptions of poverty rather than rural realities. The 'biases' of project, space, season, person and occupation are quite well known and it is not unnatural to expect the existence of such biases in field situations to appear when investigating income. Furthermore, rural livelihoods are diverse and complex. Any imputation of income to economic activity of the rural poor can suffer from estimation 'biases' and will fail to reflect the real picture.

Finally, the question is of contribution of poverty indicators to policy-making for poverty alleviation. The nature, causes and conditions of poverty vary from village to village. Any indicator which does not represent the diversity and complexity of poverty can at best be taken as a starting point and improved upon by incorporating field realities. In this way it can increase its effectiveness for better understanding of policy goals and redesigning the appraisal and evaluation of associated programmes.

• **Concluding remarks**

In case the indicators of poverty as used by the villagers are closely related to income, then income can be taken as a representative variable. There would then not be major discrepancies between the villagers' perception and the official poverty line and

one is justified in using the poverty line based on income for identification of rural poor.

However, problems arise when villagers use indicators which go beyond income such as education, accessibility to public services, dependency on common property resources, size of holdings and its productivity, social criteria or even the size of the household. The traditional poverty line based on current income can work in theory but in practice it is difficult to relate to field realities. The poverty line is a neat and precise indicator but this is exactly what the manifestation of poverty is not in practice. It may not be easy, or indeed relevant, to translate the diversity and complexity of poverty into a single indicator and arrive at an 'average' picture of poverty.

The use of PRA methods, in this case well-being mapping, in understanding rural communities' perceptions of poverty clearly shows their value in exploring the causes and conditions of poverty and ranking of households on that basis. PRA methods can be ideally used by planners and administrators to restructure the poverty line, incorporating villagers' perception of what constitutes poverty. In this way it is possible to arrive at appropriate micro-level interventions for poverty alleviation.

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