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## Observations on urban applications of PRA methods from Ghana and Zambia: participatory poverty assessments

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### • Rural Appraisal and Participatory poverty assessment

Over the last year exercises termed participatory poverty assessments have been carried out as part of the process of preparing World Bank Country Poverty Assessments in a number of countries. In Ghana, Zambia and Kenya such exercises have been carried out using methods based on the RRA/PRA 'family'. So far only the Zambia document is available in a reasonably 'final' form (*Zambia Participatory Poverty Assessment*, Norton, Owen & Milimo 1994).

To give some idea of the agenda for this work, the objectives of the Zambia study were to:

- Explore local conceptions of poverty, vulnerability and relative well-being in poor urban and rural communities in Zambia;
- Assess what the poor themselves see as the most effective actions for poverty reduction which can be taken by i) individuals or families, ii) communities, iii) government agencies, iv) other institutions;
- Discover what people in poor urban and rural communities see as the main concerns and problems in their lives at present and how these have changed over the last 5-10 years; and,
- Investigate local perceptions of key policy changes related to economic liberalisation.

As these exercises were designed to influence policy-making on a national level in both macro and sectoral terms, they had to attempt

to deal with the above agenda in both rural and urban communities in a broadly comparable fashion. This undertaking led to a particularly interesting situation within which to compare the demands of undertaking this type of research in urban as against rural situations in Africa. The following observations are drawn from experiences in Ghana and Zambia. These are personal reflections, although they draw on the experience of the large Ghanaian and Zambian research teams that were involved in the research<sup>1</sup>.

We were acutely aware of the fact that the PRA methods which were employed had their origins in traditions of rural research (RRA, PRA, agroecosystem analysis, farming systems research, PALM etc.). The teams generally concluded that there were no major areas where these methods or modes of working were inappropriate or seriously problematic in an urban context. There are even certain ways in which undertaking this kind of research can be easier in an urban area (for example, logistics and transportation are generally simpler).

There are nonetheless some areas where the assumptions behind much rural research have influenced the development of the RRA/PRA school of methods - and it is clear that in these cases researchers may need to be aware of

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to reference everyone - key 'players' included the PRA trainers who participated (Meera Shah, Neela Mukherjee and Tony Dogbe in Ghana - Meera Shah in Zambia), the lead researchers in the two exercises (Dr Ellen Brotei-Dorku in Ghana and Dr John Milimo in Zambia), and in Zambia the coordinator and research manager from the Southern Africa Country Department of the World Bank, Dan Owen.

differences which tend to characterise urban situations.

- **Rural assumptions and urban realities**

### **The assumption of mutual knowledge**

This applies only to some methods which rely on detailed knowledge of the situation of other community members, in particular wealth ranking. On occasions in both Zambia and Ghana urban families refused to rank their neighbours on the grounds of lack of sufficient knowledge. A participant in Ghana commented that it was only when one's neighbour was in a situation of serious difficulty (needing medical fees for a sick child, for example) that one could see the social resources in terms of networks of kin and friends which an individual could draw on. In rural areas these networks are coded in relatively 'public' form in the socially visible kinship and community links that unite different social groups - in urban areas this is much less the case. For the poor in Africa such resources in terms of social institutions and networks are a critical element of livelihood and survival.

### **The assumption of homogeneity in patterns of livelihood**

Secondly there is the assumption of homogeneity in local livelihood strategies. This applies particularly to seasonality diagramming. Urban livelihoods and incomes may be just as subject to seasonal patterns as rural, but the patterns of seasonality are more varied within any given community in terms of how incomes are affected (the impact of the rainy season on building workers and market traders in various foodstuffs for example are marked, but very different). On the other hand, the impact of seasonality on health status may be subject to no more variation between households and individuals than in a rural area. Therefore there is a real need to think out the likely lines and patterns of seasonal change and how these will affect different social and livelihood groups. Urban seasonality appears a much underrated issue in Africa - but investigation in group contexts requires care.

### **The assumption of community**

Finally, much PRA elicits an analysis of the problems facing poor rural people at the level of the *community* (e.g. water supply, access to health facilities, management of common property resources). In many urban situations the understanding of what constitutes a community is more variable. The tendency for 'community' to be understood as a shifting category, the meaning of which changes according to the context of discussion, is greater in urban than rural contexts. Group discussions which rank needs or priorities on a community basis, or discuss issues which are of concern particularly at the community level (e.g. personal safety in public areas, urban services etc.) therefore need particular care.

Aside from these assumptions, there are also issues of basic methodology which tend to be different in rural and urban situations. An obvious issue that is considerably more complex in urban situations than in small rural settlements is the question of the selection of participants. Generally a more complex set of decisions has to be taken by researchers to ensure that for the purposes of the research a representative group of participants has been found. This generally involves much greater reliance on key informants in the orientation phase of the research. Again, researchers need to examine carefully the reasons behind their own selection of key informants and others who facilitate contacts into a community. It is particularly important to document the process of decision-making involved, and to be aware of the early influence which this selection may have had on the whole process of the research.

None of these caveats implies that participatory research methods cannot be used to great effect in urban areas - it simply means that researchers have to be aware of the context and constantly examine the nature of their own assumptions; good practice under any circumstances.

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