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Views of the Poor

by DEE JUPP

In 2002 the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Tanzania commissioned a four-week participatory research study in Morogoro region, its main area of operation. The aim was to deepen SDC staff and partners' understanding of the lives of the poor and to inform the process of reformulating its country strategy. The experience turned out to be transformational for many of those who took part, giving a wealth of insights into the lives of the poor, and exposing the often hidden nature of poverty. The study had a significant impact on the Tanzania country strategy, and the way it was monitored and evaluated.

Background

The 'Views of the Poor' Study was organised by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Tanzania, in late 2002. Its aim was to assist in strengthening the poverty focus of its new Country Programme. One of the ways it achieved this was to put some of its staff, as well as staff of development partners, through a brief village immersion process as researchers.

The intention of involving staff was twofold:

- to orient them to the current realities of rural poverty; and
- to gather first-hand insights into the range of experiences of poor households to contribute to policy formulation and programme design.

The study was also designed to explore diversity and individual experience rather than the more common focus group approach. This tends towards consensus seeking and generalised views, often 'sanitised' for public airing.

Design considerations

Involving development agency staff in the research exercise imposed a number of time constraints. Furthermore, although all the staff were comfortable with field visits, few had spent time actually working at village level. The following are some design decisions made to mitigate these constraints:

- Provide staff with depth of experience rather than breadth. It was decided to immerse each member of staff in day-long interactions with only two households each. They were to live with the family through a normal day, helping them in their daily chores, assisting with cultivation, eating with them, and resting with them.
- Focus on the household. The household is an easily identifiable unit. No special facilitation skills would be needed as are required to conduct public workshops or focus

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group discussions. Good interaction with the household would depend on appropriate attitudes and behaviours rather than special communication skills.

- Emphasise the use of visual tools. Disposable cameras were to be given to each household to take pictures of the things they liked and disliked about their lives. Household members were to be encouraged to draw pictures and diagrams to share their experiences and aspirations. This would enable them to assume more control and minimise the need for expert facilitation skills and/or interference from the staff.
- Provide mentors. The staff would work with a household in pairs and have a mentor who was an experienced participatory researcher. The mentor did not accompany them to the household but was able to give advice following the rapport building introductions and helped to debrief in the evenings. Immersion experiences can create very profound emotional responses, which need careful support.
- Ensure that there were benefits for the households too. Each household was given a bag of food items. The extra pair of hands was expected to make a real contribution to cultivation. Interactions with households should be ‘chats’ rather than interviews, and householders would choose the areas they wanted to talk about. The households would each receive an album after the study containing the photographs they took which would include family portraits.

Carrying out the study

Each staff member co-opted to the research team spent 6.5 days away from their work. This time included their orientation, time spent with households, debriefing, and a final reflection workshop.

The researchers spent between 8 and 10 hours with each household, arriving soon after the household had finished getting ready for the day. They helped with collect-

ing water, cultivating the *shamba* (small farm), collecting firewood, lighting fires, and preparing food. This had several objectives:

- to ensure that the normal routine would be minimally disturbed;
- to build trust and rapport; and
- to provide researchers with first-hand experience of some of the hardships faced on a daily basis by the households as well as providing tangible assistance.

Households were asked what they felt they had gained from the day. Most felt that talking with outsiders had been very useful as they had been able to think through things and some had even gained direct information (e.g. the family which did not know that schooling was now free, families which did not know they were entitled to free or subsidised medicines). Most had never been asked their opinion before, and few would have attended a public forum. They appreciated that the researchers ‘came to us’ and they did not have to go anywhere and ‘waste time’.

Researchers were encouraged to manage as far as possible without taking notes. The idea was to enhance the possibility of free-flowing conversation. Nor did they write reports: instead, each pair was de-briefed by the team leader while still in the field.

Results

The outcomes of the exercise were extraordinary. Not only was a wealth of insights into the life of poor households gathered, but the experience turned out to be transformational for many of the research team.

I thought I knew about village life as my roots are in the village and I still visit family in my village from time to time. But I know nothing about what it is like to be poor and how hidden this kind of poverty can be.

I could not believe that the family only had one broken hoe to cultivate with. It was like trying to dig with a teaspoon. I will never forget that.

We heard the untold stories. It was an eye opener as families shared their problems which would never be aired in group meetings. They treated us like confidantes.

Members of the research community also acknowledged value in this approach, both as a means to contextualise the voice of poor people and thus a useful supplement to more conventional research, and an important bridge between

Box 1: Extracts from the study report

I never go to the village meetings. I do not feel welcome.
Elderly woman, Lungongole village

I never go to community meetings because I am too busy either at the shamba or weaving mats.
Elderly man, Morogoro town

I rarely have time to go to village meetings.
Farmer, Mgeta village

The study team was shocked to visit households where there was no furniture at all as illustrated in these remarks during feedback sessions:

We were invited to sit on a pile of firewood which was hastily covered with a fertiliser bag as there were no chairs.

The whole family sleeps on the mud floor.

Householders themselves commented on their lack of assets:

I do not like having no money. I do not have a bed, a chair, an axe – nothing. I feel ashamed.
Father of four, Mgeta village.

theory and reality for staff of development agencies. The consensus following presentations to senior development officers in Berne was that this study was an 'eye opener' and, 'so much more meaningful and real than the statistics and academic studies we are usually subjected to'.

There is no doubt that the fact that several of SDC's staff had been involved in the study conferred a sense of ownership of the Country Programme design and an enhanced shared understanding of poverty. The quotations and pictures from the study, which are inserted throughout the main Country Programme document, serve constantly to remind the reader that special efforts are required to reach the poorest and take their views into account (see Box 1). The monitoring system for the new Country Programme draws extensively on approaches used in the study, which are also used to carry out 'reality checks' of programme impact.

CONTACT DETAILS

Dee Jupp
Email: dee.jupp@btinternet.com

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NOTE

This article is an extract from the methodological notes written by the lead trainer/facilitator, Dee Jupp (Jupp, 2004). Box 1 contains extracts from the main study report (Jupp, 2003). Both reports, and further information about the study, can be obtained from Dee Jupp, email dee.jupp@btinternet.com or Gerhard Siegfried, Head of the Evaluation and Controlling Unit in SDC, email: gerhard.siegfried@deza.admin.ch

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One year later (2004)

Some of the researchers were asked to reflect on how their participation in the 'Views of the Poor' study had affected them personally and in their work one year after the experience.

...I always think of the faces and environment of those people I talked to during the study... Sincerely speaking, this picture was not in my mind before the study... I understand that I am also coming from rural areas but I didn't expect them to express the way they did... This poses challenges to both development actors and local institutions, i.e. how to respond to the wealth of this knowledge.

I would not like to meet the people I interviewed during the VOP because I feel I am part of those who ask touching and pricking questions about poverty, produce a good report and count the work is done. I do not think I can convince my interviewees of how the study will be useful to them, as I know their priority is where to eat the next meal rather than strategic long-term thinking.

Finally, we often forget that some of our staff have been brought up in poverty. It can be awkward for them to use their own experience in professional circles. This exercise enables others from more privileged backgrounds to appreciate for themselves what these staff already know. They have a joint point of reference thereafter.