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A 'proper household' - exploring household and community dynamics in South Africa

Edward D. Breslin and Peter Delius

• Introduction

Operation Hunger is a South African non-governmental organisation concerned with the problems of chronic and acute malnutrition and poverty. Participatory methodologies are used at the village level to help understand the underlying causes of malnutrition and poverty. They are also used to develop plans to overcome the identified development challenges and to monitor and evaluate the impact of the implemented programmes.

Operation Hunger recently contributed to the South African 'Participatory Poverty Assessment' (SA-PPA)¹. The SA-PPA was commissioned by the South African Reconstruction and Development Office to give voice to vulnerable South Africans whose insights and perceptions were often lost or simplified in quantitative surveys. It was hoped that the SA-PPA would provide South African policy makers with a greater sense of local processes and perspectives. It also provided additional and alternative perspectives that enriched the statistics which are used for broader development policy and programming.

Operation Hunger's contribution to the SA-PPA explored local understandings of poverty and malnutrition at six development sites throughout South Africa.

¹ The SA-PPA was funded by the World Bank and the Overseas Development Administration and coordinated and compiled in South Africa by Data Research Africa.

• Local perceptions of poverty

Operation Hunger's initial approach to the SA-PPA was to try and gain a better understanding of how local people are classified within villages. Operation Hunger was aware of numerous local social categories of people, such as 'commoners' or 'royalty'. These did not necessarily conform to the conventional economic classifications that are used by development practitioners, such as the 'poor' or 'ultra poor'.

Discussions with local people identified poverty as a key issue from the outset. Yet further and deeper discussion on poverty was limited. For example, a SA-PPA session was held in Riba, Northern Province in January 1996. A group of local women were asked to identify the different classifications of people in the village. The participants continuously responded that 'we are all poor', although they recognised that there were some 'wealthy people'. The women claimed that none of the participants present at this SA-PPA session were wealthy.

Similar exercises were initiated at the other SA-PPA sites but the process proved equally difficult. On reflection, there appear to be a number of reasons why this exercise was difficult to apply at the local level, including:

- fear on the part of participants that efforts to understand local categories were a targeting exercise;
- the nature of the PPA, as a poverty study participants may have believed that Operation Hunger was only looking for economic classifications, such as the 'poor'.

• **A proper household**

It was suggested that instead of using local classifications of poverty as the starting point for discussion, it might be more productive to explore the diverse nature of households within the village. Rather than beginning with questions about how to identify the poorest or most vulnerable households, we decided to explore what people considered to be a 'proper household'. We then moved on to explore the disjuncture between the ideal and local realities.

A challenge was to prevent the sessions from degenerating into a 'wish list'. Instead, we wanted to create a situation where people were comfortable expressing their perceptions of what is 'ideal' within their context.

One option was to see if we could get a sense of what local people thought a 'proper household' would look like. Who would be in this household? What would this household be doing and why was it 'ideal' according to participants? Were there some households in the village that resembled this proper household? If so, how did they reach this ideal condition? If not, what other types of households are apparent in the area?

The initiative developed a dynamic of its own when the questions were posed in the field. The participants at the SA-PPA session in Riba decided that they would draw a picture of a 'proper household'. After simple questions about the 'proper household' were posed by Operation Hunger staff, participants began drawing pictures that represented other households in the village. This allowed the group to explore a range of household dynamics. These provided important clues into local responses to deprivation, areas of cooperation and conflict between and within households, and a vision of participants' aspirations.

The session not only provided new insights into local dynamics but posed new questions

that could be explored at future sessions. Importantly, the process was driven by questions, not tools.

We realised that similar sessions could be conducted within, and across, development sites to highlight possible points of continuity and difference. Operation Hunger found that participants were comfortable depicting household-types in picture form and using these pictures to explore complex inter- and intra-household dynamics.

Facilitating a 'proper household'

Operation Hunger staff conducted SA-PPA sessions with groups of between 20-30 people. Groups were often, but not always, divided in terms of age and gender.

Our experience suggests that mixed groups can be dominated by male participants, especially if they are community leaders. Moreover, the mixed group sessions tend not to be as rich as sessions run in groups divided by age and gender. It must be remembered, however, that groups divided by age and gender are by no means homogenous. Participants' positions within the broader community still effect their participation during smaller, less overtly threatening, group work. 'Proper household' sessions showed that even seemingly homogenous groups, such as female pensioners, had vastly different development opportunities and constraints.

Some of the more interesting sessions were held in villages where a 'proper household' exercise was facilitated more than once and with different groups of people. These sessions often clarified differing gender and generational perceptions of household and community dynamics. They also highlighted contrasting development priorities within villages.

BOX 1

FACILITATING A 'PROPER HOUSEHOLD', RIBA, JANUARY 1996

23 women attended the session, ranging in age from their early twenties to mid-sixties. 11 of the women were currently utilising land. The other 12 did not have access to land and were, in some cases, employed as agricultural labourers by women present in the group with access to land.

42% of the women present depended on either their own pensions or the pension of a household member. All engaged in piece work and 20 % relied primarily on remittances from husbands or brother-in-laws.

53 % of the women were raised in Riba. The remaining women had arrived in the area since the mid-1970s. There appeared to be no correlation between time of residence in Riba and land ownership.

Facilitated by P.Talane, E.D.Breslin, P. Delius, S. Madrid, J. Mofe, R.Sekonya

- **Poverty and malnutrition in Riba**

Box 1 describes the characteristics of the 23 women who participated in one 'Proper Household' session in Riba in January 1996². One of the defining features of the group was that 11 of the 23 women had access to (and were presently utilising) land for agricultural purposes. The remaining 12 did not have access to land and were, in many cases, working for some of the women within the group who did have access to land. Also notable was that, with one exception, the women without access to land were older but not near pensionable age.

The participants decided that a proper household in Riba would have the following characteristics:

- both parents are present and the household has children (number unspecified);
- the household always has a fire burning and food in the pot;
- the household has different buildings on the compound (This was not drawn but came out in the discussions. For example, there would be a structure that serves as a kitchen);

² Operation Hunger administers a short questionnaire after each PRA session. The questionnaires are used to clarify who is actually participating in the PRA sessions and how their life histories and position within the village could shape their responses during PRA sessions or influence the proceedings.

- the household has no in-laws or the brothers/sisters of either the husband or the wife present;
- the parents both have a regular job and consistent source of income; and,
- the household has a proper fence around the compound.

Seven different types of households were drawn by participants in Riba. These illustrate a range of different household situations in the village (Figure 1). It is probable that there are other types of households apparent in Riba not depicted in the pictures. However, the pictures highlight a range of different scenarios, each accompanied by a story of how that household survives.

Picture 1 in Figure 1 depicts the 'proper household'. Picture 2 is of a single female with children and no food in the pot. This household has a limited support network in the village and survives on piece jobs and begging from neighbours.

Picture 3 is of a household that was once doing well when the husband was working. They had nice furniture, a toilet and a proper fence. The husband has, however, been retrenched (lost his job) and returned home. The family cannot extend their house and the parents now engage in piece jobs in the area and beg from neighbours. There are times when there is no food in the pot.

Picture 4 is of a small, one room house with a poor fence that is occupied by a grandmother. The grandmother has been forced to leave her

home by her son who is now married. The grandmother survives on a pension.

Picture 5 is of a household with a large number of in-laws present. There are sharp conflicts between the household members. The in-laws stay in the adjoining house and the family often has no food.

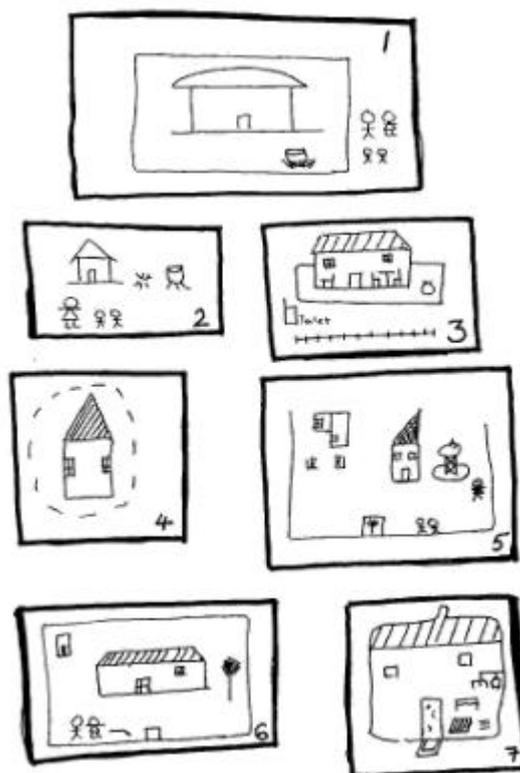
Picture 6 is of a household where the husband has a steady job but the salary is quite low. The family is unable to extend their house or maintain their fence properly. They have one house on the compound and they do eat regularly, but the food is not enough.

Picture 7 is of a poor house where the ceiling is leaking and the compound is small, so all of the washing has to be done indoors. The family survives on piece jobs.

The session revealed that the major conflicts within households appear to revolve around the control and allocation of money. Participants argued that families often split over the issue of money. The participants explained that the conflicts over money can be between:

- **mothers and sons**, who will fight over the remittances sent by the father. The sons will argue that this is their money and at times the conflicts become physically violent. One woman explained that a mother could go and buy her son some new 'takkies' (shoes), but he will be unhappy, saying he wants the more expensive 'takkies'.
- **wives and sister-in-laws**, because the wife has become more important to the brother than his sister. In the past, the brother would provide support to the sister, but now the resources go to his wife. Discussions during this session were heated and the life histories demonstrate that there were a number of women present who live with their brother's wife and children. Some participants argued that the in-laws are lazy, do not assist with household tasks, expect food to be prepared for them and expect their houses to be cleaned by the new wife.
- **pensioners and family members**, as the former have a steady source of income. Again, discussions on this subject were heated. One group of younger women argued that pensioners do not provide enough support to the household. But a pensioner responded that she provides resources but asks why she should be solely responsible for all the food and clothing in the household. At times, the situation becomes unmanageable and the family asks the pensioner to leave home (illustrated in Picture 4, Figure 1).

Figure 1. Types of household drawn by women in Riba. See text for a full interpretation of pictures 1 - 7.



There are also issues that cause conflict between households, including:

- **conflicts between neighbours over their children**, which were usually short-term problems that are easily resolved;
- **conflicts between households over resources**, where one household has more resources than another. This was often caused by jealousy. Participants explained that these conflicts are extremely difficult and can, at times, lead to witchcraft accusations; and,
- **conflicts because one household borrows all the time but does not reciprocate**. This issue proved to be very important, as some households are perpetually begging yet do not offer support to others during the times when they have resources that can be shared.

Participants argued that households cooperate when they have the same beliefs and opinions. They share with each other and reciprocate because they have broadly the same standard of living.

The 'proper household' session was also useful for exploring household coping strategies. A range of piece jobs were highlighted. It was clear from the participants (and largely confirmed in the life histories) that piece jobs play a critical role in the local economy. The wage rates for piece jobs are generally between South African Rand 5 - 10 (R7.95 : UK£1) per day.

An interesting finding from this session was the role of agriculture. The participants had been asked to come to the SA-PPA session on the previous day to discuss agricultural issues. Originally, the defining feature of the group was that some had access to land and were growing food and others did not, but were presently engaged in agricultural piece jobs. Despite this, there was no mention of agriculture except as an aside in Picture 6 (Figure 1).

The key issue which was constantly reinforced throughout the exercise was wage employment - employment being central to the 'proper household'. Moreover, the loss of employment

appeared to be a key factor in the undermining of the household.

• Conclusion

The 'proper household' sessions were subsequently conducted in the six development sites that were part of the SA-PPA. This allowed for useful comparisons to be made across development sites.

Operation Hunger has found that 'proper household' sessions offer a sound starting point for further analysis of development challenges in a village. They highlight points of conflict that should be avoided and areas of cooperation that could be developed when implementing development projects. Additionally, the approach could prove useful as a monitoring and evaluation tool.

- **Edward D. Breslin**, Operation Hunger, P.O.Box 32257, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa and **Peter Delius**, Department of History, University of Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, WITS 2050, South Africa.