HOW CAN *WE* KNOW WHAT *THEY* WANT? UNDERSTANDING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND ILL-BEING IN ASIA[*]

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IDS WORKING PAPER 80

SUMMARY

Aid donors are increasingly focused on poverty eradication and influenced by the principle of participation. They would like more insight into how poor people in poor countries understand the character, causes, correlates and cures of poverty and deprivation. Such information would in principle enable governments and aid agencies to intervene more effectively. A review of the literature available on poor people's perceptions of poverty and ill-being in Asia suggests that it is very difficult to obtain this kind of knowledge in a policy-relevant form. The information is heavily filtered by the context in which it was collected, the values of the researchers, and the expectations of respondents. Some of the research 'discoveries' that have been promoted as running counter to conventional wisdom are misleading. We can certainly conclude that poor Asians often place a high value on objectives other than increasing their consumption or measured income – on security against economic and natural risk and against oppression, crime and violence; and on protecting and enhancing their human rights, social status and personal dignity. But it would be deeply surprising if this were not true. Did we not already know that even poor people do not live by bread alone? If information is to be policy-relevant, it has first to tell us more about the relative importance of these different objectives and concerns of the poor in different circumstances. Second, the information has to be valid for large populations and robust in the face of changing local circumstances. We do not have this kind of information available at present, and are unlikely to obtain it by commissioning more surveys.

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[*] This paper began life as a literature survey commissioned by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). It is based on all relevant material we could find in the books, journals and 'grey literature' available in the libraries of the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Sussex, including reports on wealth and well-being ranking and participatory training sessions; the PRA materials collection at the Institute; information from the Gender Network on the Internet; and the advice of a number of people. We acknowledge in particular the contributions of: David Booth, Vanessa Bainbridge, Robert Chambers, Martin Greeley, Barbara Harriss-White, John Harriss, Naila Kabeer, Romyen Kosaikanont, Melissa Leach, Patta Scott-Villiers, Kamal Singh, Saurabh Sinha and Shizu Upadhyay. Stephen Devereux kindly provided very useful comments on a draft.

1 THE CHALLENGE

- How do those people whom we label ‘poor’ view themselves?
- How do they define ‘poverty’ and ‘well-being’, and what are their own conceptions of vulnerability and security? Which, if any, different degrees of poverty/well-being and vulnerability/security are locally recognised? How are these views and understandings related to systems of livelihood?
- How are the causes of poverty explained?
- What forces are viewed as responsible for maintaining and furthering poverty?
- What are the opportunities and ways of escaping poverty, in people’s own views, and what do they see as the most effective actions in order to reduce poverty?
- What do people see as the main problem and concerns in their life-situations and how are these related to poverty and insecurity?
- What are the criteria for well-being and security?

These were the questions posed to us by Sida. It would be wonderful if we could provide reliable, stable, general answers, that would be valid for, say, Mindoro Island (Philippines) today and for years to come – and not simply true for Paluak village in mid 1998 in the light of the immediate impact of the Asian economic crisis and the loss of earnings from villagers who had previously been working in Manila. Such answers could help provide policymakers with useful information on:

- **Priorities** – what poor people really see as their pressing problems. External agencies would be better placed to shape public action directly to address those needs.
- **Frames of reference** – ways of organising, framing or presenting anti-poverty interventions such that they might be more comprehensible and acceptable the intended beneficiaries, and thus more effective.
- **Intervention strategies** – ways of helping the poor escape poverty that might be more effective than the existing repertoire of public interventions because based on the knowledge and experience of the poor.

The prospect is enticing. Reality, unfortunately, is disappointing. The literature survey that we conducted on poor people’s perceptions of poverty in Asia indicates that our capacity to answer any of these questions is at present very limited. There is less information than is sometimes believed – and it relates largely to South Asia. It does not lead to as many consistent, reliable conclusions as one would hope. The expectation that Participatory Poverty Assessments either have or could lead to a quantum leap in our understanding of these issues is misplaced. The conclusions that we can draw contain as many ambiguities and questions as answers.

2 WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE LITERATURE?

Understandings of Poverty

When poor people in Asia are asked about **poverty** – and we stress that we are talking of direct translations of the English term – they appear generally to recognise the concept and to have little difficulty in listing what we may term its 'immediate correlates', i.e. the factors most strongly associated with it at the level of direct observation. These immediate correlates vary from study to study. For example, Mukherjee's (1997) study with the *Chamars*, the lowest community in the caste hierarchy in a village in Uttar Pradesh, India, generated the following list of pressing needs and problems associated with poverty:

- internal conflicts
- lack of unity among villagers
- lack of a proper approach road
- lack of a proper village path
- absence of drainage/ sanitation
- problems of drinking water
- lack of year round employment
- non-availability of electricity
- problems of dwelling houses
- lack of schooling facilities
- landlessness

In the course of a participatory environmental assessment conducted by Oxfam in Cambodia (Keefjes, 1993), the poorest prioritised their problems as:

- lack of food
- lack of draft animals
- lack of meat
- lack of seed and fertiliser
- lack of clean drinking water
- lack of irrigation water
- lack of medicine
- people get sick
- transport difficulties
- lack of irrigation structures
- lack of firewood

- lack of knowledge

The following are the major constraints identified by the 'most disadvantaged group' in case studies conducted in rural India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Philippines (Ledesma and Getubig, 1988: 36):

- Limited access to land
- Limited access to credit
- Limited access to infrastructure and inputs
- Limited access to public welfare services
- Lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of education/skill for job market
- Increasing competition for scarce resources and available jobs
- High dependency ratio
- Natural calamities

We do not know how far the variations between studies in the listing and ranking of the correlates of poverty reflect differences in the actual situation and/or in perceptions, or how far they are the product of the ways in which researchers asked questions or interpreted answers. As one would anticipate, there is a fairly standard core of correlates of poverty that are mentioned regularly by the rural, agrarian populations among whom most research has been conducted. These are: lack of assets (land, housing, agricultural equipment); nature of other income sources (especially type of wage employment); living standards (type and frequency of food intake, children not attending school); and demographic/labour variables (high dependency ratios or large numbers of children, lack of able-bodied males, sickness or disability). In less agrarian and rural contexts, people focus more on types of jobs. In urban areas, secure access to residential accommodation is an especially important concern (DFID, 1997; Murphy, 1990; UNDP, 1996).

In most cases, the immediate correlates of poverty identified by the poor are mainly household or individual level variables (e.g. amount of land or other assets owned, types of employment, personal abilities, etc.) rather than environmental variables (e.g. remoteness from town, markets, and public services, poor soil, locally endemic diseases). In other words, people tended to characterise 'the poor' by comparing the local people who were least well-off with their immediate less-poor neighbours – and not by making contrasts with groups of people further away who might be on average much richer or much poorer. This kind of 'local-only comparison' is virtually inevitable in wealth or well-being ranking exercises, for the technique itself leads almost unerringly to local comparisons. Respondents are explicitly asked to make distinctions within their community, or between groups with which they are familiar. The same bias toward 'local-only comparisons' probably affects most studies of poor people's perceptions of poverty, even those that are not explicitly based on local wealth or well-being ranking. The researcher cannot hope to obtain rich data about perceptions of poverty by asking people from a poor community in Northeast Thailand to make careful comparisons between their lives and the lives of villagers far away in the rich floodplain around Bangkok. One ends up by focusing on local differences.

There appear to be no studies that clearly separate (a) the indicators of poverty identified by poor people from (b) their understandings of the causes of poverty. Few of us make this rather fine academic distinction between indicators and causes in a rigorous way in any context, unless we have a strong reason to do so and have been motivated to think carefully about the issue. In most cases, we do not know how far poor respondents would see the indicators of poverty and the causes as distinct. The interpretation of words dealing with causality is complex in any language. It is the exceptional cases that stand out. We found two very different categories of exceptions, at different poles on the continuum of social consciousness:

- At one end, we found a couple of such cases where poor, landless, low caste groups in India and the poor in Bangladesh appreciated that land-owning was associated with relative wealth locally, but did not conceive of **themselves** owning land, because controlling land and managing cultivation was much outside their experience, and seen as problematic in many ways (Van Schendel, 1989; Mukherjee, 1997). These appear to be cases of the inability of the poor to imagine themselves in radically different circumstances.[1]
- At the other end of the scale, some poor people implicitly draw a clearer distinction between the (immediate) indicators of poverty and its (ultimate) causes because they have been influenced by radical – mainly Marxist – ideologies (Beck, 1994). One of the central messages of Marxism as a political force is that the causes of poverty lie not in poor people themselves, but in the way they are exploited by other social groups.

The important general point here is that poor Asians do not live in local cultural isolation. They never have, and today do so less than ever. Their interpretations of the world are shaped by the language they learn to use at school, through the mass media, through exposure to political and religious ideas, etc., as well as by more specific, local circumstances. The influence on poor people's world views of the organisational and cultural activities of radical, Marxist parties is very clear in some areas because Marxist ideas are relatively distinct. There is no evident alternative source for the idea that the locally-rich are 'capitalists' – with clear implications of exploitation and of inherently antagonistic social relations between 'rich' and 'poor'. It is likely that similar ideas appear much more widely in diluted form. It is interesting, for example, that, when asked to classify their societies or communities into wealth or socio-economic status groups, poor people in Asia almost invariably identify three groups – some variant of 'rich', 'middle' and 'poor'. There is nothing 'natural' about this categorisation. The source may not be Marxism in a strict sense, but interaction with ideas from other elements of ‘global culture’. Because political and social movements other than Marxism/Communism rarely advance conceptions of social relations that are starkly identifiable, it is much more difficult for us to detect their influence on the minds of the poor.

Heterogeneity of the Poor

It should be fairly evident that ‘the poor’ in Asia are very different from one area to another. In much of South Asia, poverty is directly a matter of hunger and malnutrition. In much of Southeast Asia, hunger is rare. James Scott, writing about the poor in Sedaka village in Malaysia in the 1980s, noted that none of them were "in imminent danger of actually starving" (1985: 236). There are similar differences in the character of poverty within countries, and even within localities. A number of studies (e.g. Getubig and Ledesma, 1988; ONFARM, 1991) mentioned the wide differences in circumstances between households in the same locations that were classified as the poorest in rankings of wealth or well-being. This fits with our personal observations. The poorest households typically comprise some mixture of:

- (a) relatively able-bodied people who are poor because they lack assets, work or skills, and (b) people who cannot work because of old age, mental or physical disability, and alcohol or drug dependence;
- (c) households dependent on ‘legal’ sources of livelihood, and (d) those that engage in activities that are locally considered immoral (prostitution, drug dealing, begging) and/or illegal (theft, smuggling);
- (e) people who are an accepted part of mainstream local society, and (f) those that are treated as marginal or outcast because of their personal habits, ascribed social identities, etc.

The mixture varies very much from place to place. In some contexts ‘the poor’ are similar to the non-poor except that they happen to be poor; i.e. it is mainly differences in material conditions that distinguish groups from one another. In other contexts social criteria are very important in the construction of group distinctions: the poor are – or are assumed to be – beggars, thieves, immigrants, low caste groups, people who do especially dirty, difficult or dangerous jobs, gypsies, criminals, drunks, prostitutes, etc.[2]

It is reasonable to infer that there is often a wide diversity of views and understandings about the causes of poverty among the poorest people themselves. We are not very well informed about that, partly because it is the very poorest whose voices are least likely to be heard in any investigation. A great deal of experience indicates that the very poorest people tend to be under-represented as respondents in any kind of research unless very conscious efforts are made to include them. There are several reasons why they are likely to be unavailable or difficult to reach. They are especially likely to be: elderly, sick or physically disabled; to suffer from mental illness; to be alcoholic or drug dependent; to be socially ‘outcast’ or shy; or simply to be too busy working. We have some information on this last source of bias, probably because it is relatively predictable.[3] It is very likely that the voices of the very poor that we do hear are rarely those of the sick, old, disabled, addicted, shy, shunned or inarticulate.[4]

From ‘Poverty’ to ‘Ill-Being’?

The term ‘poverty’ does not appear to be particularly problematic in Asia. Few of the sources provided explicit, detailed discussions of the various local language terms relating to poverty (for an exception, see Scott, 1985). One can however infer from the responses obtained that in most cases at least there is available a term that is equivalent to ‘poverty’ in English, in the sense that the term refers primarily to material conditions of life, but may, in particular circumstances, be extended to incorporate, for example, some concept of (a) **insecurity** of material livelihood (as opposed to average level); and (b) characteristic patterns of **behaviour** (fecklessness, lack of concern for the future, poor manners, untrustworthiness, etc.), that may variously be seen as causes or consequences of poverty. If this is a correct understanding of the situation, it follows that questions framed in terms of ‘poverty’ will elicit responses referring mainly to material conditions of life.

But there is a circularity here: ask about a condition that Asians, like Europeans, appear to understand primarily in terms of material deprivation, and they will talk mainly about material deprivation. But it does not follow that their most pressing concerns or perceived causes of ill-being are material. How do we get at what really concerns them? There are in principle two answers.

(i) One is that we use some concept broader than poverty, such as ‘ill-being’ or ‘deprivation’. But the problem is that these are abstract, contested concepts with a range of potential meanings in any given context. They are not terms used in everyday discourse by poor people with clear, unambiguous meaning. They can be defined in many different ways. Even intellectuals do not always agree with their colleagues on the content or reach of such terms. Robert Chambers, for example, has a very useful five-dimensional concept of deprivation: “poverty proper (lack of income and assets); physical weakness (undernutrition, sickness, disability, lack of strength); isolation (ignorance, illiteracy, lack of access, peripheral location); vulnerability (to contingencies, to becoming poorer); and powerlessness” (1988: 8-9). Bob Baulch (1996: 2) suggests a different but equally plausible approach: a six-dimensional pyramid of poverty concepts, beginning with the most measurable – lack of access to private income – and becoming successively more complex with the addition of lack of access to (a) common property resources; (b) state-provided commodities (the ‘social wage’); (c) assets; (f) dignity; and (g) autonomy. Even in Britain, it would be very difficult to conduct a survey of poor people’s perceptions of any extended concept of poverty – whether labelled ‘deprivation’, ‘ill-being’, or something else – and be confident about the validity of the responses. Respondents would be unclear about the meaning and ‘reach’ of the basic concepts. In English, ‘ill-being’ does not very effectively encompass all the ideas that one might wish it to: vulnerability, insecurity, unhappiness, etc. People may feel ‘insecure’ but not ‘unhappy’; they may describe themselves as 'happy', understood as a short term concept, but still feel discontented with the world in a broader or longer term sense. How much more difficult it is to trust the results of surveys where the basic concepts are ambiguous or unclear yet have to be translated from one language to another.

One can illustrate these linguistic problems by looking at the pair of Hindi words *sukh* and *dukh,* that are often translated as 'happiness' and 'unhappiness', and are sometimes cited as indigenous equivalents of 'well-being' and 'ill-being'. That may be true in some situations, but, like many terms in all languages, *sukh* and *dukh* have a range of meanings that are dependent on the context in which they are used. *Sukh* also has connotations of 'willing acceptance of one's lot in life' – an idea that can generate very strong emotions in a society where caste divisions are both strong and increasingly contested. Dependent on context, *dukh* can be read to imply either (a) a perverse, contrary or even punishable unwillingness to accept one's ascribed place in society or (b) an admirable willingness to challenge outmoded and oppressive social distinctions. Because of this ambiguity, it is especially likely that respondents' replies to questions couched in terms of *sukh-dukh* may be very tactical, and heavily influenced by their perception of the questioner, why the question is being asked, and the potential dangers or benefits of giving one answer rather than another.

(ii) The other way of tackling this problem of the plasticity of extended concepts of poverty is simply to ask poor people 'What are your problems in life?' However, this is to run headlong into another source of bias discussed in more detail in Section 3: the strong incentives faced by the poor to respond tactically to such questions in the expectation that they might benefit in some way. We can illustrate the problem of interpreting answers by examining the responses of a group of poor people in Calcutta who were asked to categorise their communities into groups according to 'ill-being' or 'well-being' – not simply poverty (DFID, 1997). Thirty-five different criteria were mentioned, with a total of 121 'observations' (i.e. criteria multiplied by number of times they were mentioned). Only 21 of these observations – about 1 in 6 – did not refer directly to material issues, i.e. to sources of income, to wealth, or to expenditure patterns. Does this mean that the respondents understood 'ill-being' and 'well-being' mainly in material terms? Maybe. There is however an alternative explanation. The survey was conducted after the completion of a development project designed to bring benefits to the people living in the areas where the survey was conducted. When asked to draw up criteria to rank households according to well-being, the respondents may have focused on continuing material deficiencies in the (reasonable) belief that the agency asking the questions could possibly do something to address their material problems, but was unlikely to be able to help with other problems, such as violence and personal insecurity.[5]

Beyond Poverty: Dimensions of Ill-Being and Deprivation

From both Asian and African sources, Robert Chambers has distilled a range of criteria commonly used by poor people when asked to group and rank households according to ill-being (Chambers, 1995):

- Disabled e.g. blind, crippled, mentally impaired, chronically sick)
- Widowed
- Lacking land, livestock, farm equipment, grinding mills.
- Cannot decently bury their dead
- Cannot send children to school
- Having more mouths to feed and fewer hands to help
- Lacking able bodied members who can fend for their families in the event of crisis
- Bad housing
- Having vices (e.g. alcoholism)
- Being ‘poor in people’, i.e. lacking social supports
- Having to put children into employment
- Single parents
- Having to accept demeaning or low status work
- Having food security for only a few months each year
- Being dependent on common property resources

Despite the serious concerns expressed above about the language and concepts used in trying to comprehend extended notions of poverty, we can draw some conclusions about the non-material causes and dimensions of deprivation in Asia. The sources we surveyed left us in little doubt that narrow (material) poverty is far from being the only or the dominant problem for poor Asians. In many contexts, there are other, distinct causes of ‘ill-being’, however we translate that term. These other causes fall into two categories. The first are indirectly the result of material poverty: insecurity and uncertainty about future livelihoods, that arises in relation to the weather, labour markets, inflation etc.; and poor access to government, education, health and other public services (DFID, 1997; UNDP, 1996). The second category is more interesting for present purposes, partly because it encompasses the kinds of issues most likely to be ignored or under-valued if one begins from a concern with (material) poverty. These are the causes of ill-being that arise directly from patterns of **social relationships**, independently of material deprivation. The literature suggests four main types:

(i) The oppressiveness of public officials, including the police and the urban authorities that threaten to evict people from residential properties to which they have no secure rights:

> “The lack of legal status left the migrants vulnerable to agents of oppression. This included the police who most urban poor saw as enemy rather than protectors. Laxmi, a pavement dweller in Bombay, reported ‘time after time the police demolished us. We didn’t realise that the police legally can only demolish our

> plastic sheets and bamboo poles.' The antagonism against the police can be seen in Medina's voice: 'I think it is worth losing four of our own people if we kill two riot police.' A community worker from Jakarta reported 'The poor are forcibly removed. In some cases groups of thugs, under the eyes of police officials, were brought in to demolish the houses and push the people out. People were severely beaten.... Communities were broken; family life suffered; people lost access to jobs, and their children couldn't attend schools'" (Murphy, 1988: 187).

(ii) Gender inequality, discrimination and oppression of various kinds. We know from many other sources that oppressive gender relations are a major cause of ill-being in much of Asia, especially for women. Our survey did not explicitly target this issue: the literature on gender relations is largely separate from the literature on poverty. Neither were we able to obtain any clear picture of the relative significance of oppressive gender relations for women, compared to other causes of ill-being. The most immediate reason for this was the dearth of studies that have explicitly asked about causes of ill-being in an open-ended and consistent way for a large Asian population. Indeed, we have only one, the recent UNDP study in Bangladesh, that also has the virtue of having made a point of talking to women separately from men (UNDP, 1996).[6] This study provides gender specific perspectives on the poor rural and urban communities. The first priority of rural poor women was inability to find work, followed by problems in obtaining housing and land for homesteads and paying dowry for daughters' marriages. Drinking water was a priority problem for urban women. The absence of bathroom was the second problem; this they identified as particularly problematic for reasons of privacy and security. Inability to pay dowry ranked third, followed by lack of sanitary latrines and unhygienic conditions.

This issue of the under-provision of washing and toilet facilities for women, relative to men, especially in urban areas, is of broader significance than it might first appear. In broadly patriarchal (male-dominated) societies, women's abilities to lead decent lives are often restricted not just by direct subordination to men within families and households, but also by restrictions on the range of their physical mobility and social interaction that arise from – or are intensified by – norms about appropriate behaviour and privacy. Women are socially required to enjoy more privacy in their toilet and bathing facilities than is required of men. Yet women's concerns about providing such facilities may well be ignored, because they do not have adequate voice when these decisions are made.

However, even in the case of the UNDP survey cited above, we cannot be confident that women spoke freely. Issues of gender relations, like other issues that arise under the broad concept of 'ill-being', such as extra-household violence (see below), are likely to divide the population of any locality or community. Oppressors (or their agents) and oppressed may be in the same place, and the latter unable or reluctant to speak. In relation to issues of extra-household violence (e.g. thuggery and extortion), the victims may be willing to speak if they are assured that their oppressors cannot 'overhear'. This is less likely in the case of gender inequality and oppression: the oppressors have a legitimate presence in most of the private spaces where the oppressed can gather. Studies that graphically portray gender oppression within the household and the family are rare, and for that reason widely cited (e.g. Hartman and Boyce, 1983).

(iii) There is some evidence that lack of physical security in the public domain is a serious problem for many poor people, especially for women (Beck, 1994; Breman, 1996; Murphy, 1990; UNDP, 1996):

> "Gathering *sal* leaves and other non-timber forest products from village common property resources is the main source of income for *Lodha* women in West Bengal. However, with emergence of new institutional arrangements like the Joint Forest Management, customary usufructury have changed. Women from *Lodha* households made it clear that they did not gather *sal* leaves as the Forest Department guards would beat them if they tried to do so' (Beck, 1994: 132).

> "Women felt that without a place to live they were more likely to be victimised and many expressed a concern regarding their personal safety. Medina from Bombay felt 'a man can live anywhere – on the street or in an alley, but a woman needs a home. A woman without a house is destroyed. Men are always trying to put their hands under my clothes and into my pockets'" (Murphy, 1988).

It is virtually certain that the incidence of these kinds of problems – crime, extortion, dominance of localities by criminals, the use or threat of violence against women – is much understated in our sources. This is partly because we did not explicitly search for information on this, and partly because it seems almost certain that research and investigation of any kind tends not to be done in areas where these problems are rife. This is implicitly admitted in one of our studies. In the Participatory Impact Assessment of the Calcutta slum improvement project, 'at the suggestion of the CMDA staff. A slum was excluded on the grounds of serious law and order problems and difficulties in ensuring the participation of women' (DFID, 1997).

> 'We had to leave *basti* no.16 colony because the landlord came and rushed towards us to stop us. He told us to leave immediately and not come back. We repeatedly requested him to be reasonable and allow us to clarify our position' (UNDP, 1996).

There is no doubt that men are also victims of actual or threatened crime and violence. Women are however especially likely to suffer because of their vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment. In many societies, women who are victims of rape and sexual harassment are victimised again by their own families and kin. Fear of sexual violence is therefore a very powerful constraint on women's freedom of movement.

(iv) Poor people place a value on respect and self-respect. They prefer not to become indebted because of the dependence that ensues (Chambers, 1995). They feel that they are better off if they cease to be dependent on local patrons for work, loans, intermediation with authorities etc. (Jodha, 1988). That much we know, and indeed should not be surprised. What is unknown is how far and in what circumstances poor people place a value on respect in comparison with more material goods such as food and shelter. It is a difficult subject to research. The picture has been complicated because one widely-cited study of this issue, by Tony Beck (1994), has made exaggerated claims – that poor people value respect much more even than food. As we explain in Section 4, these claims are not credible, and certainly not generalisable.

3 WHY DOES THE LITERATURE NOT TELL US MORE?

We began this study with the understanding that there was limited material in the available literature on poor people’s own perception of poverty and well-being and their own opinion of how to overcome poverty. It however emerged that there was even less material than we had expected. Some ‘grey literature’ to which we were referred either simply did not exist or could not be obtained. Some of the oft-quoted studies provided somewhat different information from that claimed, or, more commonly, provided information not directly relevant to our objectives. Most of the material we used was the result of research not directly focused on poor peoples’ perceptions of poverty. The literature that is available has a definite bias towards South Asia, especially India and Bangladesh.

The information that we did obtain does not in most cases speak for itself: it has to be interpreted carefully. It is subject to four main potential sources of distortion:

A Respondents who do not actually represent the poor, either in the sense that they are not poor, or that they represent only some of the poor.

B The wide range of potential interpretations of the terms ‘poverty’, ‘ill-being’, ‘deprivation’ etc., and the consequent difficulties in interpreting responses.

C The filtering effect of researchers’ own views and agendas.

D The biases introduced by respondents’ understandings of the situation in which the data were gathered and by the fact that they have an agenda of their own in relation to researchers.

Biases of types A and B have been discussed above. Researchers’ biases – type C – appear to be of two main types. Academic researchers tend to be influenced by particular academic paradigms or theories. These are fairly evident from reading what they write. There is less transparency about biases that influence the results of participatory appraisals. There are various stories about how, when conducting participatory appraisals and assessments, researchers and facilitators by-pass ambiguity and uncertainty by prompting responses. (Investigators: "You don’t know how to classify households?" Villagers: ‘But we are all poor in this village.’ Investigators: "Put yourselves into three groups – poor, middle and rich"). We don’t know the extent and influence of such behaviour on the information finally presented. Given the pressures on people who conduct participatory assessments to produce unambiguous and useful results, it seems likely that a substantial amount of simplification takes place.

Type D biases – respondents' understandings of the purposes of the research and their own agendas – are especially important. A number of international agencies are currently sponsoring research into poor people's perceptions of poverty, especially through participatory appraisals, in the hope that these will generate understandings that are both (a) authentic and (b) relatively stable and consistent over time and space, i.e. useable for purposes of drawing up policy. A clearer understanding of the limits of any such exercise should be useful. Many of these issues have been mentioned above. They are summarised here for convenience. Any attempt to access poor peoples' authentic understandings of poverty and ill/well-being faces seven general obstacles:

(i) Poor people's perceptions of the world and of poverty are very much influenced by education, the mass media, social, political and religious movements and ideas, and by national and global forces generally. Their understandings of poverty and deprivation are necessarily filtered by the languages they have learned and the concepts and values they have imbibed. These understandings will change in response to changes in the broader context of culture and information. There is no such thing as 100% local 'authenticity' independent of external influences.

(ii) Behaviour and beliefs associated with ill-being, well-being, poverty, relative status etc. are sometimes conflictual and/or have implications of shame and dishonour. It may be difficult for any outsider – and most insiders – to obtain accurate information. The most vivid example is female prostitution. Fragments of information suggest that, outside the confines of social groups professionally dedicated to prostitution, attitudes are broadly similar to those elsewhere: women forced into prostitution by poverty regard it as a matter of great shame that they try to hide; male clients are likely to combine shame at their own behaviour with some degree of disdain for the prostitutes themselves. We know that prostitution is widespread in much of Asia, but references to it in surveys of any kind are, understandably, rare. Other 'shameful' behaviour that is hidden includes, for example, eating certain kinds of food or being unable to afford to celebrate or participate in socially valued feasts and rituals. It is striking that there is very little mention in the available studies of 'immoral' or illegal sources of income (e.g. prostitution) or expenditure (e.g. alcohol).

(iii) In any kind of research or survey activity, informants have some kind of 'agenda' of their own to convey. This is especially true in relation to poor Asia. To put the matter concretely, a great deal of the information we appear to have about poor peoples' conceptions of poverty and ill-being was gathered in the context of some kind of government or NGO 'intervention', the (implied) promise of one, or simply the expectation of one.[7] The latter kind of situation is very difficult to avoid. 'Researchers' – in the broadest sense of the term – are generally richer, better-educated, of higher status and more powerful that the people from whom they gather information. Were this not so, they would often find it difficult to get information. But that information is not always free; it is part of a transaction. People often behave strategically, i.e. respond to questions about their condition and perceptions according to what they expect they might obtain in return. Their expectations of ‘potential return’ are often difficult to fathom.[8] We can hypothesise that, in different situations, the same poor people may give very different answers to what appear to outsiders to be the same questions about poverty – if the context appears different to the respondents themselves.

(iv) The ‘causes of poverty’ can be understood at various levels. Most people respond with lists of what academics might term ‘indicators’ of poverty, e.g. poor housing, insecure job, lack of land etc. These are directly observable factors that can be labelled either ‘indicators’ or ‘causes’ according to one view of the world. Explanations such as ‘lack of education’ or ‘poor communications’ are implicitly a little deeper, in that the link to low consumption levels and poor living conditions is less direct. ‘Low crop prices’ is less direct still, especially if the assumed causal link lies with wage levels and the level of demand for the labour of the poor on the part of local farmers. And ‘exploitation’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘class relations’, ‘capitalism’ are even less direct. If the research context permits respondents to imagine a different world, they might refer to gender, class or ethnic/class inequality and oppression. If the context is simply what individuals can do in a given context, they are likely to refer to individual strategies: educating children, accessing credit, stopping drinking alcohol or taking narcotics, experimenting with new crops, migrating for work, etc.

(v) People do not always feel free to give their views even on relatively straightforward questions about poverty. The study of the living conditions in a number of state forest enterprises and agricultural co-operatives in northern Vietnam was constrained by the unwillingness of the farmers and forest workers to air their personal views: ‘people know the rules for separating public and private opinions... even two or three follow up interviews with the same households would probably not generate deeper insights, only more data’ (Liljestrom et. al., 1988). ActionAid’s micro-level research on poverty identification and programme interventions in Vietnam highlights the discrepancies in the responses of people to the same set of questions over time. In 1992, most villagers labelled most households in the village as being equally poor and vulnerable. However, just two years later they asserted that the same set of households had very unequal access to resources (Turk, 1996). It is unlikely that the situation had changed drastically over such a short period. Political liberalisation and a greater willingness of villagers to speak out probably explain much of the apparent change.

(vi) The views that the poor express about their situation may sometimes reflect in part ideological struggles in which they are engaged, with the rich or other local groups, over their standing, rights or treatment locally (see next section).

(vii) There is always the never-to-be-resolved problem of how far one can infer what people need (or should have) from what they say they want – even when their responses to the ‘What do you want?’ question are completely uncoerced and independent of expectations about what the person asking might be able to provide. We can never reject the possibility that people would want something different if they had not been influenced by an ideology or a world view that has simply led them to believe that some things are not possible (for the likes of them): for example, husbands who do not use violence.

None of these points are original or profound. This is simply a commonsense list of the reasons why things are not necessarily the same as poor people report them to be in a research context. The debate about the link between what the poor say they want and what they ‘really’ want is as old as the debate about poverty itself, and is unlikely ever to be resolved. We always have to interpret rather than endorse the answers we are given.

4 MONEY-METRIC MEASURES OF POVERTY: STRUGGLING WITH STRAW MEN?

It is possible that we would know more about poor people’s perceptions of poverty in Asia had researchers been less enthusiastic in attacking straw men: economists who are alleged to believe that the sole, authentic indicators of human welfare are incomes measured in money terms. This campaign has been exaggerated in two different ways.

First, it is difficult to actually identify anyone who believes that (private) money incomes (or consumption) really measure poverty adequately. These measures are generally used pragmatically as the most reliable and widely available indicator.

Second, a great deal has been made of two sets of research findings that appear to suggest a weak link between money or material incomes and poor people’s own perceptions of welfare. It is worth looking briefly at these two pieces of work, to demonstrate that they do not in fact make convincing cases about the weakness of the link.

What Value Do the Poor Place on Self-Respect?

The work of Tony Beck in West Bengal, India (1994) is widely acclaimed as illustrating that the poor value self-respect very highly. Beck published an apparently startling finding: when asked to make hypothetical choices between more food or more respect, almost all his (very poor) respondents in three villages (49 out of 58) said that respect was more important. "Typically, one replied ‘If I don’t have self-respect, will food go into the stomach?’" Significant as his work is as a corrective to narrow views that dehumanise the poor by presenting them as being purely materially motivated, Beck’s conclusion is not convincing – at least, not generalisable. He was asking a hypothetical question, not observing behaviour. And that question was asked in a very special context, with three particular, related features. One was that his poor respondents were all from single ethnic/caste minorities of landless labourers in villages where caste Hindus dominated and were their employers: Muslims in one village, a scheduled caste in the next, and a scheduled tribe in the third. There was therefore a substantial degree of ‘automatic’ class/ethnic/caste solidarity among the poor, and a history of intense local conflict with the dominant local castes. The second was that he consciously chose the more articulate people as respondents. The third was that West Bengal had for some time been ruled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), that was not only in general supportive of, and supported by, poorer groups, but had been actively organising and working with the poor communities that Beck was studying. We can be almost certain that: this ‘political protection’ encouraged Beck’s respondents to be relatively outspoken about the connection between poverty and local class relations; confident that he asked the question in a leading manner; and fairly confident that the high value that his respondents placed on self-respect to a substantial degree reflected the organisational and educational activities of the Communist Party. It is unlikely that poor people in other circumstances would emphasise self-respect to the same degree.

A more realistic view of these issues is provided in James Scott’s classic (very detailed, anthropological) research into social relations and social inequality in a small Malaysian village called Sedaka (1985). Recent changes in the technology of rice production had severely disadvantaged the village poor, depriving them of both rented land and work – and of the income needed to continue participating in the intensive round of intra-village ceremonials and festivities that had hitherto effectively defined the social boundaries of ‘community’ membership. Not only did the poor feel intensely bitter about their effective exclusion from the community, but when they spoke among themselves, they emphasised far more their loss of standing and recognition than the loss of income *per se* (p.239). We can certainly conclude, from this and other sources (Scott, 1985: 240), that self-respect is important to the poor. However, much of the point of Scott’s book is that, in framing their resentments in terms of loss of respect and exclusion from the community, rather than simply loss of income, the poor of Sedaka were engaging in strategic behaviour. Especially in a society where electoral competition was between two Muslim parties (one Islamicist), a discourse of ‘lost respect’ had more moral and political leverage – and was less likely to generate direct resentment and retaliation from the rich – than one framed in terms of ‘lost income’. Note also that, in asserting their claim to re-enter the village moral community, the poor in Sedaka were implicitly requesting that they re-enter into dependent relationships with local landowners. There is convincing evidence from other studies (Jodha, 1988) that the poor dislike such dependency relations, and celebrate their demise – provided that the material price is not too high!

There is no convincing evidence that the poor place a very high value on independence, respect or personal autonomy if that is to be traded off against food when they are hungry. Psychologists still debate whether there is a stable predictable hierarchy of human needs. But the general consensus – that people first focus on basic material needs, then material security, and then less tangible objectives such as affinity, recognition and self-actualisation – appears highly plausible. It is unlikely that poor people in West Bengal constitute a great exception.

Misunderstanding Money-metric Measures of Poverty

N. S. Jodha's work on two villages in Rajasthan, India has been widely cited in support of the argument that conventional money-metric measures of poverty can be positively misleading (1988). Jodha's argument is itself misleading. Because it has been so influential in this field, the weak links in his argument are summarised here.

Jodha measured the incidence of poverty in these two villages in 1963-66, and again in 1982-84. He found that, although average real (private, money) incomes had increased over this period, they had actually declined by more than 5% for 38% of households. Yet the majority of these same apparently-poorer households reported that they were better off on a wide range of other criteria, including: lesser dependence on landlords and patrons on a range of dimensions; lesser resort to 'emergency' income earning strategies (migration, withdrawing children from school, petty part time jobs, gathering food, fuel and fodder); larger savings; more travel; and a wider and more varied diet. His argument that this illustrates the fundamental weaknesses in money-metric measures and concepts of poverty is based on three misunderstandings:

(i) First, a money-metric measure of income is simply that. Money-metric measures of income are not intended to measure anything else. There is no inconsistency between the idea that (money-metric) income has declined but perceived welfare has improved. It is not unusual in OECD countries for people to feel no better off – or even worse off – when money-metric incomes have increased.

(ii) Second, the measured income decline related only to privately-generated incomes, not to what in other contexts has been called 'the social wage', i.e. the stream of benefits stemming from public investment and action. It is quite clear from Jodha's account that the 'social wage' had increased over the time period he was researching: piped drinking water had been provided and reduced the incidence of guinea-worm; off-season employment opportunities in public works had been introduced; and "institutional reforms" had given some poor people house-sites and debt reductions. There was a substantial reported increase in off-farm regular jobs. In addition, enhanced electoral competition meant that the political factions led by the rich were now competing for the votes of the poor. The people who said they were better off although their money incomes had apparently declined probably **were** better off in a material sense.

(iii) Third, it is far from clear that in these villages the private money-metric incomes of the poor had actually declined. Jodha does not tell us how far money-metric incomes had fallen, simply that they had declined by more than 5% for 38% of households. We do not know if the average decline was substantial, or marginal and within the normal range of measurement error for such surveys. The information he provides is quite consistent with the idea that the long term trend was for the incomes even of the poor to increase, and that the apparent decline was the result of the interaction of weather patterns with his choice of survey periods. He tells us that his income measure for the base period, 1963-66, was actually adjusted upwards by omitting entirely data for the year 1963-64 on the grounds that it was a drought year! Actual incomes at his base line period were therefore lower than those that he used in his calculations. There had been continuous good weather during 1974-78, that presumably helps explain why even the households he reported as suffering ‘income decline’ in 1982-84 compared to 1963-66 actually reported large increases in assets over the period, especially housing and bunded farm plots. The weather conditions in the final period, 1982-84, were "slightly" worse than during the initial period. In a rainfall-dependent agricultural economy, “slightly” worse weather could presumably account for some at least of the observed decline in money-metric incomes.

In sum, Jodha’s article simply warns us against drawing simplistic conclusions about poverty trends from money-metric measures of private incomes taken at two points in time. It does not make a convincing case that there is a weak link between these measures and poor people’s perceptions of their welfare.

5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Most poor people in Asia have a concept of ‘poverty’ that is similar to the English term, and therefore fairly easy to translate: ‘poverty’ is understood to be primarily a matter of material deprivation. The local indicators of poverty vary very much according to context. In some places it is simple hunger that dominates. In other places more stress is placed on such factors as inability to send children to school, or inability to afford to participate in local festivals and ceremonies.

2. Poor Asians appear to be similar to people elsewhere in that they do not equate ‘poverty’ with ‘ill-being’. The narrow concept of poverty as material deprivation does not directly encompass some significant causes of ill-being. Some of these other significant causes – notably economic insecurity and lack of health and education facilities – are fully implicit in most practical understandings of poverty and its causes, and now receive high priority in most development and aid agendas. There is however another category of causes of ill-being that are (a) not encompassed in any concept of ‘poverty’ and (b) only marginally or insecurely on most development and aid agendas. These are issues that tend to be of most concern to women: in particular, (a) inequality, oppression and violence in gender relations at the level of the family or household; (b) violence, crime and insecurity in the public sphere, mainly but not only in urban areas; and (c) poor service and ill-treatment at the hands of public officials.

3. Neither in English nor in any Asian language does there appear to be a standardised, widely accepted term that encompasses all significant dimensions of ill-being in addition to poverty. One cannot talk of ‘ill-being’ or ‘deprivation’ and expect the same level of comprehension and normative priority that one can obtain by talking of ‘poverty’. This is partly because the non-poverty causes of ill-being are very diverse and fluctuate in incidence over place and time. They do not add up to a coherent action agenda. Epidemic diseases come and go.

Urban authorities threaten to evict squatters in some places and times and not at others. The nature and extent of police, male, landlord, criminal or ethnic/caste violence and oppression is diverse and variable. Water and sanitation facilities are acutely scarce in some places and not in others.

4. The fact that these significant causes of ill-being are not adequately captured in the term ‘poverty’ – or in other available terms such as ‘deprivation’ or ‘livelihoods’ – represents a problem for aid donors that wish both to take a broad view of the causes of ill-being in their development programmes and, more specifically, to address gender issues. There is no immediate alternative, broader concept than ‘poverty’ that has the same capacity to command attention and to help mobilise resources and action. To use a broader term is to risk a loss of focus and mobilisation capacity. To continue to try to address these broader issues while claiming poverty alleviation/eradication as the ultimate goal of development aid is to risk a continuous debate about the meanings of terms and, most explicitly, about the extent to which concerns about gender relations and about physical safety, public order, oppressive states and policing could or should be subsumed under a ‘poverty’ heading.

5. Money-metric measures of poverty are imperfect measures of ‘well-being’ in poor Asia just as they are anywhere in the world. The ‘populist’ case against them is exaggerated.

6. Poor Asians do not hold perceptions of either the causes of poverty or of the nature and causes of ill-being that are either (a) relatively consistent and uniform across (or within) countries and (b) distinctively different from the understandings of the situation that can be obtained by intelligent reading of the development policy literature. No amount of additional research, however well done, is going to change that situation. Poor peoples’ perceptions and understandings of poverty are highly dependent on context and change over time in response both to changes in external understandings and changes in local conditions. Aid agencies have a role in sponsoring research into the situation, needs and perceptions of poor people in areas where particular public interventions are planned. However, there is no case for putting money into a general research programme to discover poor people’s perceptions of poverty. Indeed, there is a case against: research that invites poor people to respond to open-ended questions about their situation and problems almost inevitably generates expectations of some ultimate benefit. It is unkind, unwise, and inefficient to generate expectations that cannot be met.

7. There is no single best way of doing research on poor people’s situation, needs and perceptions. The main choice is between (a) more detailed, subjective investigations conducted by professional researchers and (b) participatory poverty assessments conducted according to relatively standardised procedures by less skilled researchers. Each method has advantages and disadvantages. Individual researchers can often obtain a more in-depth understanding, because they do not face the constraints of time-boundedness and the pressures to generate simple policy conclusions that tend in practice to influence the results of participatory assessments. And individual researchers are less likely to encourage respondents to expect some major material reward in

return for their cooperation. By far the most insightful study of poor people's perceptions of poverty in Asia – James Scott's **Weapons of the Weak** (1985) – was the result of an intensive individual effort. It was however very expensive – one senior American anthropologist living for two years in one small Malaysian village. In contrast, participatory assessments can elicit information relatively cheaply from a wider range of people, and may generate positive externalities by (a) involving local officials in identifying problems and opportunities and (b) helping to mobilise programme recipients to influence programme design.

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The following types of information on poor people's conceptions of ill/well-being have been identified. The literature survey has been categorised on basis of this information. Some of the literature qualifies in more than one category.

(a) Needs assessment surveys

These are potentially and in principle the most useful kinds of survey, for they directly address our ultimate concern, what do poor people need. They are however very difficult to interpret as they are all conducted in the context of some public intervention, actual or prospective, and responses are likely therefore to be very much shaped by expectations about the effect of answers on future resource flows.

(b) Environmental satisfaction rankings

These invite people to make judgements about 'environment' rather than life in general. The replies of the respondents focus on material issues where the external intervention might be expected to bring more benefits, but can at the same time raise issues such as insecurity, alcoholism and violence that had not been on a project agenda before.

(c) Well-being rankings

Conceptions of poverty and ill/well-being can be inferred from the criteria used to allocate households to groups, if large proportions of responses concern non-material issues. These inferences are indirect, and this technique also discourages respondents from raising gender issues, and other intra-household issues, such as age, disability etc.

(d) Wealth ranking

This allocates households in to groups on the basis of material possession. It discourages respondents from dealing with non-material issues such gender.

(e) Academic research

Study carried out for research. It has long-term implications and it is not tied to a development project.

(f) Impact assessment

This gives indication of the impacts from interventions. This however has its limitations in interpreting notions of well-being. The absence of the benefits received from the projects can indicate the participant's perceptions of poverty, or ill-being.

(g) Problem prioritisation

This gives an indication of what the poor people perceive as their constraints, and can be used to find out what is their perception of poverty.

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NOTES

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[1] We have however to be wary in interpreting the information this way. Poor oppressed people are normally well practised at hiding from outsiders any evidence that they have aspirations above their social station. Such ideas can invite punitive action from high status groups in many contexts.

[2] The *Lodha* of West Bengal were branded a criminal tribe by colonial authorities. This stigmatisation persists. They are blamed by the village elite for all local thefts: “They have always been thieves and always will be” (Beck, 1994).

[3] It became clear in a sequence of mapping and wealth ranking aimed at finding the poorest in a Tamil Nadu village that the poorest were unable to join in workshops as they survived on daily labour. They were not even counted as members of the village by the relatively better off (Pretty and Subramanium, 1992). "Although, the study team did not have any strong evidence to indicate that poorest households were excluded, a significant observation was that the migrants who had no legal status were marginalised and that the poorest did not have the resources in terms of time or finance to participate in programs. The seasonal migrants who were the poorest were at a high risk of being ignored by the health facilities" (DFID, 1997).

[4] A study in West Bengal, India that is widely cited as evidence of the intellectual sophistication of the very poor and their deep concern with human dignity was actually based on a 20% household sample biased in favour of “loquacity” (i.e. articulateness) (Beck, 1994 - see Section 4).

[5] The fact that the survey was not conducted in some localities because of problems of insecurity lends some plausibility to this hypothesis.

[6] One other study, done in Laos, might be placed in the same category (State Planning Committee, 1997). However, this was done by the government, and the household was used as the smallest unit of enquiry. Its reliability is questionable, and it does not appear to have offered scope for women to articulate their concerns separately.

[7] In a feedback session on the wealth ranking exercise conducted in order to test its applicability as a method of identification of the poor in a village in West Sumatra, one participant’s view was that as soon as the villagers came to know of the reason for the exercise, it would be very difficult to get the truth (Martins, 1994).

[8] It is not unusual for senior public officials associated with aid projects to assume that all foreign visitors are either from, e.g. the World Bank, or able at least to influence the Bank. They treat all foreign visitors accordingly: better to be safe than sorry. How much more difficult for poor people to understand what influence a stranger might or might not be able to bring to bear.