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1 POVERTY AND INFORMATION NEEDS

1.1 Information characterized
This article is mainly concerned with the use of information in decision-making. It deals with the general issues that arise in this connection, and uses case material from Chile, and to a lesser extent from Brazil.

Information is processed data: the 'raw material' around us cannot be used without going through certain operations of collection, selection, elaboration, refinement and analysis. All decision-makers have limited time, and this constraint becomes more serious as one goes up the hierarchy; what they need is compact information, relevant to the issues at hand, easily understood, clear to act upon. They cannot handle long reports, massive sets of tables, intricate statistics, ill-defined lists of alternatives.

In public policy, also in relation to poverty reduction, those providing decision-makers with information today think mainly in terms of quantitative data, of statistics, indicators, time series, comparisons. Yet, in less developed countries (LDCs), for many areas of policy making quantitative data are either unavailable, or lack reliability - so that the elaboration to which they are subjected may give a false sense of precision. Alternatively, data are collected and processed with much zeal, yet with little thought about their eventual use (or usefulness): 'information' accumulates, is 'available' yet irrelevant. Technical experts refine the methodologies of processing, helping to produce information 'for when it may be needed'; in fact, by the time it might be required, it is likely to be out of date.

Yet information is not only of a statistical or quantitative kind. The concept is also used for the material stored in 'information resource centres' (the kinds of units we used to call libraries in years gone by).[1] Libraries store documents of all kinds, and do this in ways so as to make them 'available', accessible and easy to locate whenever someone needs to consult them. They have always worked on the principle of providing as open-ended a service as possible, and they have always found prioritizing - that is to say, selecting for inclusion, or discarding - both difficult and painful. Libraries are above all repositories of material that 'might' be needed; especially in LDCs their mode of operation has parallels with that of statistical units which collect data and produce information without much thought for their actual use in the process of government.

Even so, information specialists related to information resource centres - now also holding much material in data bases and other computerized forms - have become increasingly aware of the fact that availability does not in itself lead to use. Abstracts and indexes have long existed. Content analysis of classes of documents is comparable to statistical analysis of quantitative data. Now, increasingly there are summaries, often recurrent, of such analyses in the form of commentaries, digests, intelligence reports, and so on - products comparable to indicators in the quantitative domain. The use of these summary products is advancing in the scientific community as well as by business executives, where information overload has become a growing problem (on line systems providing even more 'easy' access to huge amounts of information often merely make this problem worse).[2]

Nevertheless, particularly in LDCs such developments are still in their infancy. Most information for (regular) use in decision-making continues to be that which arises out of the more traditional procedures

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[2] See Wyllie (1993). Wyllie has developed the concept 'information refinery', where significant inferences are drawn for 'key' or priority problem areas in contemporary (business) decision-making, from large bodies of information, using basically content analysis techniques.

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used for the collection and processing of quantitative data. This remains also the case with information available for decision-making on poverty reduction policies. While the issues arising out of the better use of information as defined by 'information scientists' (or in 'information resource units') should be considered whenever possible, the central focus - also of this article - remains on the need for improvement in the use of information in the more limited, largely quantitative, sense.

1.2 Necessary and appropriate information. What we need and what we get

Certain kinds of interventions undertaken within the routine activities of sectoral ministries can be expected to have an impact above all on the poor. Obvious examples are primary health care programmes, low cost housing programmes, primary - and often also secondary - education, urban improvement programmes, programmes for poor farmers. On the whole, it is mainly through such activities that governments translate their anti-poverty policies into practice. In contrast, programmes aimed specifically at poverty-reduction are by their nature almost necessarily cross-sectoral; they may demand (but not necessarily achieve) a measure of inter-sectoral coordination, and be made the responsibility of a non-sectoral ministry such as Development Planning.

Information is needed to plan, monitor and evaluate such activities. In planning terms, the most important issues arise around the question of matching (scarce) resources to (differential) needs, and around the identification of the beneficiaries of programmes: the problem of cost-effective targeting. All programmes should explicitly decide how to match resources to needs, how to allocate scarce means between different possible activities. Often, nothing of the sort happens. And insofar as such discussions on priorities take place at all, they are based on concepts of 'vulnerability', 'disadvantage', or 'being at risk', that are likely to differ from sector to sector.

In education, for example, the disadvantaged tend to be concentrated in particular types of school, such as rural schools or inner city schools, which themselves often have fewer resources than schools elsewhere: special programmes may be set up to help

overcome such handicaps.[3] In the health sector, those seen to be 'at risk' include specific age groups (under-fives) and people in particular life-cycle circumstances (pregnant or lactating women); health information systems conventionally produce a great deal of information about these categories, available at clinic level for the 'screening' of individual patients. Yet screening individuals (including categories of people such as one-parent families or even malnourished mothers) is not the same as identifying groups of people who are sick because they are poor, or poor (partly) because they are in bad health, nor does it lead to actions that are necessarily coherent with those that might be undertaken by the education or housing sectors. The challenge here is to link the efforts made by different programmes, and also to make the approaches to selectivity and targeting compatible, so as to avoid a dispersal of efforts and a failure to make a noticeable impact anywhere.

There will always be programmes separately managed by different sectors. These are likely to be most effectively linked through the targeting of localities, so that some form of coordination can be achieved among programme managers at a decentralized level. Then, other means have to be found to translate categorical target groups into groups of persons that can be detected, or 'marked out'. Relatively little attention has been paid to this issue of 'marking out', i.e. being able to use information to identify target groups in an operative sense. If programmes aimed at reducing poverty are to be effective, it is necessary to 'convert' target groups defined in a categorical sense (through statistical analyses) into persons 'physically' reachable by field activities, and to do this in a cost-effective way - viz without the inclusion of large numbers of 'false positives'. I shall return to this issue in Section 2.3, in relation to one particular approach which has been developed in Brazil for the health sector.

It is the failure to make information useable for management that is at the core of many problems: when information is not effective at this executive level, it will not be seriously considered in policy making either. Poverty-focused policies need to deal with and respond to inequalities, disaggregations, and changes over time; policy management requires an understanding of the extent to which general targets have been met in specific circumstances or

[3] In Chile, for example, such a special programme was instituted by the newly-elected democratic government to improve learning in the thousand or so most disadvantaged schools in the country. See de Kadt (1993).

areas, and at what cost. Few information systems provide such data. Even if there are reasonable figures on **outputs** (children immunized, houses built, courses given), much less tends to be known about **outcomes** or impact. The former can be monitored, but they get entangled in administrative 'targetry' (whether or not targets set by some higher authority have been met), and can make for merely ritualistic implementation of tasks. Knowledge about outcomes or impact is of much greater interest to programme workers and to those expected to benefit from the programmes, but requires some form of evaluation - still a very rare activity (usually with the exception of certain donor-sponsored programmes).

Moreover, most information systems are set up nationally, based on the requirements of the national government, with little regard for the fact that regional variations of conditions are likely to demand regional variations in information systems. Difficult decisions need to be made to sail between the Scylla of overcentralizing and the Charybdis of neglecting to collect comparable information needed for general policy making. In many circumstances, it is in principle best to anchor information systems at an intermediate level of decentralization - for example, the province - rather than at the national level, as is usually the case. Links can then more easily be constructed upwards to the centre and downwards to the districts, taking account of the specific needs of each.

Yet away from the centre there is almost everywhere a great scarcity of people who are able to understand what information is most important, and how it might best be used - there are often few sectoral specialists who can advise on these matters, and few decision-makers who know what they need. In spite of frequent calls to remedy this situation, central governments seldom give high enough priority to decentralization to make available the needed resources, notably for the training of personnel at decentralized levels. And even within central government there appears to be quite limited capacity to move from technical excellence to policy relevance, from the capacity to produce 'the best information

that money can buy to the ability to produce the (limited) information that decision-makers need, and when they need it.

1.3 How might we get a relevant information system?

Information that is relevant to poverty-focused policies needs to come from a variety of sources, even when the programmes concerned are managed primarily from within one sector. Improving the education of poor children is likely to have a greater effect on their future life chances than providing social assistance to their parents - even though the latter is of course also important. Conversely, the health of the poor is likely to show more improvement as a result of policies that help reduce poverty than of purely 'medical' targeted measures. Sectoral information systems are, on the whole, not being adjusted to take account of such interrelations: on the contrary, they tend to remain locked in the collection and processing of data conventionally demanded, yet often not properly used, by those responsible for sectoral health, education or other services. And in this they are often reinforced by the demands of specialized international agencies, such as FAO, UNESCO or WHO. UNICEF has been providing the shining exception to this, with its concern to assemble cross-sectoral information relevant to the well-being of children.[4]

In any particular situation perhaps the first urgent practical task is to investigate what information is being routinely produced by the various departments, and how.[5] This needs to be done at lower levels - province, district - as much as at the centre. After assessment of the policy relevance of such information, a choice can be made of a limited number of quantitative or qualitative 'indicators' that would provide a capacity to monitor the different parameters of poverty, as well as assess the likely impact of programmes aimed at reducing its incidence or severity.

Setting up such a system is neither technically nor politically easy. In general, much practical groundwork is required, and one easily runs into the 'territorial imperative': agencies are jealous of their 'patch'

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[4] An early example was the pioneering and highly important four volume report on Kenya (UNICEF 1984). More recent was its influential work on the social impact of recession and structural adjustment programmes on the well-being of the most vulnerable population groups, notably children (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart 1987), while UNICEF's regular country situation reports are also relevant.

[5] A substantial part of the work on famine early warning systems has, hitherto, concentrated on this issue: see Davies *et al.* (1991).

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and suspicious of others who intrude, 'skim off' information, or try to coordinate.

Such problems were experienced in work carried out in Chile, to which reference will be made from time to time in the rest of this article. Latin America, of course, is quite different from Africa (or much of Asia) in the level of its information 'capacity', and Chile, with its well-established and well-functioning bureaucracy (well-functioning at least on its own terms), is in turn rather special in Latin America. The objective of the 'project' - so far only partially implemented[6] - was the setting up of a capacity to monitor the implementation and impact of social policy. By way of example, a brief description follows of the specific steps which were proposed so that a 'continuous evaluation' capacity could be set up, there, based on a system of timely, valid and relevant information, that would however not necessarily be of ultimate accuracy. In a later Section (2.1), I shall examine some of the institutional issues that arose in this work.

In spite of the increasing use of modern computing equipment, at the present time much of the information produced in the social sectors in Chile still only becomes available with considerable delay - in many cases the relevant publications refer to data from a year or more ago. Most of the information relevant to social policy appears to be sent up to the centre for processing and analysis, and only relatively modest use appears to be made of it closer to its place of production. This general assessment was the starting point of the design of a more appropriate information system.

It was clear, however, that improvements could not be devised on the basis of such generalizations, and that a reasonably detailed overview would be required of precisely what information was being routinely collected from the operational bases of each sector (schools, health centres, housing offices, courts etc.). It would be necessary to document what actually happened to this information in practice - how and by whom it was generated and with what presumed reliability, how it was transformed in the process of being sent up through the administrative channels, and which part of it appeared to be actually used in some aspect of routine monitoring

or decision-making. The instructions about the proper way to fill in the forms would have to be examined, and they would have to be assessed for the extent to which they say anything at all about the analytical use of the information produced. It would be important to establish if any training had been given to those producing or collating the information to incorporate it into their work (feedback does not just 'happen' - it needs to be brought about). Attention would need to be paid to the tension between national demands for uniform data and the requirement to have information at the local level relevant to locally specific needs and resource availability. Awareness (or lack of it) of the advantages - and the difficulties - of making information available to the people for whose benefit the respective services are meant to operate would have to be investigated. Finally, information would be needed on where the delays occurred, what bottlenecks existed, and which distortions, if any, emerged. Steps were set out on how to acquire these kinds of data.

It would only be once such an overview existed, that a first and tentative choice could be made of a limited number of indicators from the different sectors (overload is a problem everywhere), which together could provide in the social sectors the kind of guidelines for policy-making that indicators of production, money supply, unemployment, inflation, and so on, provide for macro-economic policy.

In relation to social policy even more than with regard to macro-economic policy, regional variations are of great importance. Social realities differ considerably from region to region, between town and countryside, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Social programmes, and particularly those aimed at poverty reduction, are not needed equally everywhere. Helping to establish where they are required with particular urgency, to decide on the consequent targeting, and to follow their effects on the poor, would be the prime function of such a mini-system of social indicators. The initial conception of the system as it emerges from the preliminary analysis thus needs to be taken back down to the decentralized levels. Only in that way can regional information systems develop that have the necessary flexibility, while maintaining the

minimum of essential common elements required for national policy making and management. Morever, it was envisaged to incorporate a Geographic Information System in the set-up, which also is best pursued at the most decentralized level feasible.[7]

2 INFORMATION AND DECISION-MAKING

2.1 Administering and using information
In the Chilean project discussed above there was, from the outset, awareness of the danger of pursuing the development of this monitoring capacity 'for its own sake', of falling prey to the fallacy that information is useful in and by itself, in disregard of the processes for collection, analysis and feedback that determine its effectiveness in planning and implementation - the fallacy of a 'silver bullet' approach to information.

While technical issues, such as those dicussed above, usually need to be resolved first, the really important matters relate to those institutional questions of use and feedback. This is particularly true for systems involving intersectoral information. There are two main sets of reasons for this. The first relates to the very nature of interaction across sectors, the second to the way services are organized at decentralized levels.

As for the first set of reasons, interaction across sectors is in the first place made difficult by the professionalization of sectoral activities - even within the social sectors. Different professionals use different 'languages', which makes it hard for them to communicate and to understand each other (Chambers 1983). They also focus on different issues, and look differently at the world around them and at the people to whom they are supposed to provide a service. Their criteria for targeting are not the same, arising as they do both from the underlying social models with which they approach the world, and from the specific 'missions' of the sectors in which they are employed. Agricultural extension officers will see their potential clients as small farmers and disregard the special problems which women heads of household may have because they are women - not because they are small farmers. Officials who work for authorities concerned with women's affairs may

do the opposite: look at women for example as potential members of women's income-earning circles, rather than as carriers of water or tillers of subsistence plots. They often also draw different conclusions from the same phenomenon. An agricultural extension officer might see 'increased production' as the answer to malnutrition; a nurse might suggest 'better nutrients' or perhaps 'better health care'; a teacher could reply 'better education'. All these answers represent partial truths - but partial truths that make it difficult for these professionals to look **together** at an issue such as malnutrition, or to formulate jointly a series of steps that may lead to priority action (de Kadt 1989).

These obstacles need to be overcome before an intersectoral, poverty-oriented social information system will either be accepted or can be expected to function. In the Chilean case referred to above, meetings were held early on with senior officials from other ministries to learn of their own initiatives in this domain, to involve them in the development of the ideas, and to try and 'market' the proposed approach while it was still being developed. Emphasis was placed on its contribution to a style of decision-making that could bridge sectoral gaps (and professional cultures). By providing a 'common language' for all, and a minimal set of common and cross-sectoral data, each sector could use the system in interaction with additional information related to its own specific requirements, thus building the potential for intersectoral analysis into decision-making from the very start.

The second set of reasons why institutional questions of use and feedback are so important have to do with the organization of services at the decentralized level - on the range of issues that can be handled without reference to higher authority by, say, the District Medical Officer, the District Inspector of Schools or the District Agricultural Extension Officer. Much will also depend on the locus of political authority. If this remains with central government, monitoring may be done on a decentralized basis by an organization such as the Ministry of Planning, or - more usually - it may be left (without much effect) to sectoral ministries. There is, in this situation, no government official at that lower level who can exercise authority over the different sectoral 'chiefs'.[8] In

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[7] A Geographic Information System links various information databases to computerized maps, for more easy decision-making. See de Kadt and Tasca (1993: Chapters 5 and 6).

[8] Even in centralized systems there may be a person with local authority. This is found in much of Francophone Africa, where authority is delegated from the centre to a *préfet*, a person who holds, in the name of the Head of State or the Minister of the Interior, wide authority over the local representatives of different departments.

that case, it is unlikely that such chiefs will try to broaden the information at their disposal beyond that produced within their own sector.

If, however, political responsibility for certain aspects of social policy has shifted to a lower tier of government, such as the region or the municpality, then decentralized monitoring can at least in principle more easily become intersectoral. Rather than having to depend on the initiative of technical officers responsible to a central ministry, the regional government can demand reports and information from its own sectoral officials. And it could give responsibility for analysing that information intersectorally to its own planning or statistical department.

In the Chilean case, these issues were of particular relevance because of the recent institution of a new tier of government at the regional level, and the emergence there of as yet fledgling social committees. A mini-system of regional social indicators, which would be brought up to date on a three- or perhaps six-monthly basis, could provide the regional government with a tool for the regular monitoring of social programmes and social trends, always provided its regular discussion was formally incorporated into the routine decision-making procedures at this level (viz. placed on the agenda at certain times of the yearly cycle). In the first year of the existence of regional governments nothing like this happened: their meetings appear to have dealt with specific issues of immediate urgency, rather than to have focused on broader, strategic themes, or on regular monitoring of particular aspects of regional development.

As was indicated earlier, setting up the system continues on the agenda, but it has not yet been fully implemented. A monitoring capacity has indeed been instituted at regional level: there is now a regional monitor attached to the office of each SERPLAC, the regional representative of MIDEPLAN, and there are also three national monitors at the central ministry. This is, nevertheless, a quite modest arrangement. It might be sufficient if used as a mechanism to back up routine sectoral monitoring efforts (monitor the monitoring), but these are on the whole still rudimentary, and the existence of the MIDEPLAN system has only in a few cases led to improvements there. So what is in place is not yet substantial enough to ensure a broad regular monitoring capacity, also because the

activity remains limited to particular exercises, undertaken simultaneously throughout the country in relation to specific government priority programmes (in areas such as housing, health or education). The reports provide information on programme implementation and 'customer-satisfaction', but it is not clear to what extent the information is used effectively within the ministries concerned. MIDEPLAN cannot ensure that the information is considered by those responsible, even less that it is acted upon; there are, moreover, no institutionalized feedback mechanisms to the relevant Cabinet committee. Consideration of the findings is further hampered by the fact that the reports are not public, being provided on a confidential basis by the Minister of MIDEPLAN to his respective colleague - although this is understandable for the reason that access to all relevant information might otherwise not have been given to the MIDEPLAN monitors. Finally, while the development of a regular monitoring capacity through mini-systems of social indicators remains on the agenda, and is indeed actively under discussion, no concrete steps have yet been taken to institute this.

The Chilean case, then, once again underlines the importance of thinking through and taking action on the institutional issues concerned with the linking of information production and analysis to its use - an issue emphasized by Buchanan-Smith, Davies and Petty in this Bulletin in the examination of the failure of famine early warning (EW) systems to prevent rather than merely to predict famine. Institutional location is said to be crucial, so that those responsible for providing the warning are not divorced from those responsible from taking action: 'However timely and accurate EW information may be, it cannot itself instigate action, unless there are strong and effective links between producers and users of information' (Davies et al. 1991: 85) What is needed are administrative - and political - links between information provision and the triggering of action.

2.2 Embedding information in appropriate institutional arrangements

It is an old trick to blame the problems of government and policy management on 'lack of political will'. In some of the articles in this Bulletin, in contrast, there is considerable focus on 'the structures of power', which can also be blamed for failures of policy management (rather like 'the system' was a favourite target for blame a couple of decades ago). Both phrases often draw

attention away from failures at the technical or institutional level. Even with all the political will in the world, or with wholly 'benevolent' structures of power, inadequate institutional arrangements (or inadequate understanding of the needs in this domain) can lead to serious failure.

Yet while that is no doubt an essential message, in the case of information systems the opposite is more often the case: all eyes are on the technicalities and procedures for producing and analysing the information. Few look at questions of use. As with Famine Early Warning Sytems, we can predict, but - because we cannot get action - we cannot prevent. We cannot get action, because the information system is not properly embedded in the necessary institutional arrangements. These require institutional analysis and understanding; ultimately, however, they also require political will.

Let me briefly deal with that point first. When no effective political action is taken, it is not necessarily the case that politicians do not take an interest in the particular issue. Rather, they may have other problems on their hands, other priorities. As Grindle and Thomas have shown, political reactions to reforms tend to be more positive when these are put forward during political crises (when loss of control is threatened), than when ideas come up during periods of 'business as usual'[9] (Grindle and Thomas 1991). If a problem is not seen as urgent by decision-makers, it will not be discussed at the appropriate level, or decisions will not be taken, or they will not be implemented or followed up. If, in addition, a problem affects sectoral or political interests, if it is seen as contentious and not really urgent, then the chances of positive decisions are even slimmer.

Such reasons can indeed account for the so far limited success of the Chilean effort to institute a capacity to monitor the effects of social policies, and to promote greater coordination of significant, but hitherto disconnected, programmatic activities in the field of poverty-reduction. At the most mundane level, the resources needed - even if only for a short while - to set up the kind of 'continuous evaluation' system sketched above (Section 1.3), were greater than those routinely available. The task could nei-

ther be undertaken by the sectoral service workers involved (though their cooperation would be essential), nor by a few officials from the research and information department of MIDEPLAN itself, or its Social Division, who were already overloaded with other work. The necessary resources have not been made available because other priorities have prevailed even within MIDEPLAN, and because the whole idea of social policy linkage or coordination has been neither fully accepted nor properly institutionalized within government.

That is so, in spite of the fact that the first article of the law setting up the Ministry formally confers on MIDEPLAN the tasks of '... harmonizing and coordinating the different initiatives of the public sector aimed at eradicating poverty'.[10] Yet when the government was constituted in March 1990 no mention had been made to any of the ministries concerned of such a coordinating function: MIDEPLAN was only set up as a ministry in July, and was not provided with explicit instruments to translate that abstract, general authority into reality. No institutionalized procedures exist at the national level to match resources to needs within the social sectors; there are virtually no operative mechanisms at decentralized level to link programmes and focus them on priority groups or areas; there are few instruments anywhere to monitor and evaluate programme effectiveness. There has been no political urgency to correct any of these faults. There can be little surprise that developing an information system for the effective coordination and monitoring of social policy did not make as much progress as had been expected.

Consequently, in due course attention switched from the more limited technical issues to those concerned with broader institutional matters. This also meant emphasizing process (how to get there) rather than blueprints, and involved considering the political steps required to bring about the necessary support for the proposed changes. This happened at a time when other issues, beyond information, had run into similar implementation problems, and when 'reform of the state' had come to occupy a more important place in the political discussion - especially in the run up to the elections of December 1993. As part of this discussion, the future of the social

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[9] This is a rather different point from that made by Davies *et al.*, that even at times of threatening famine, political considerations may lead to a suppression of information, or to it being disbelieved or disregarded (1991: Ch. 9).

[10] Law No 18989 of July 1990.

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sectors, and their coordination, was being considered: information, monitoring and evaluation were central issues, here, even if they dealt only with matters of technical adequacy and support.

Effective coordination would remain difficult without a solution to the 'authority without power' problem that had plagued MIDEPLAN during the first period of democratic government. Hence proposals were elaborated to deal with this issue at the most central level of government. Social coordination would have to be taken in hand by a Cabinet Committee specifically charged with this task, and supported by the Ministry that would provide its secretariat, and hence the necessary technical support - most notably the information on which to base its decisions. This would necessarily involve setting up operative information systems and procedures for monitoring and evaluation, and creating a capacity to analyse, interpret and supply feedback from regular reporting, so as to provide a basis for decision-making to this Cabinet committee.

Yet at least equal emphasis was placed on the need for appropriate authorities, instruments, and procedures at the decentralized level, both in the Regions and the Municipalities. These would have to develop real capacities to identify, mark out and then target the groups and areas most in need of attention, developing procedures so that different programmes could reinforce each other where need is greatest - impossible without relevant information (but equally impossible without the political commitment to make resources, including training, available for these tasks).

In examining these proposals for institutional innovation, it became clear that many of them could not be implemented in isolation of wider changes in public administration, and in the rules, regulations and broader administrative culture that underpin it. To bring those wider changes about is even more difficult than generating the political commitment to reform certain aspects of social policy-making and management. Think, for example, of the promotion of a new sense of accountability: less concerned with compliance, more with performance; less with particular external *ex ante* controls, more with an internally monitored sense of responsibility; less with bureaucratic rules, more with the user-friendly interaction of service-provider and citizens.[11] But if such new conceptions of policy management are to work, those citizens need to get wide access to information, while the public bureaucracy also needs to use the information the citizens can provide.

2.3 Paying due attention to local needs and contributions

There appears to be a widespread tendency for information systems, at any level, to be arranged in accordance with the requirements and capacities of the most central authority involved. What 'they', 'up there', demand, determines what is collected, analysed, processed and even used. In practice, this limits the possibility of lower level managers to focus attention, and information management, on local issues which they believe to be of particular importance, however much such freedom may exist in theory.

That is a serious matter in relation to programmes aimed at contributing to poverty reduction. The information which will help track the factors that locally influence poverty and vulnerability may not be identical to that which is produced to fulfil routine reporting requirements. Moreover, without some input from the very people to whom they are expected to provide a service, even local managers may have difficulty to identify the locally required information. Procedures to incorporate such 'bottom-up' knowledge are in practice even more difficult to institute than the more limited, earlier discussed decentralization of bureaucratic information management.

Yet they are essential for many programmes aimed at poverty-reduction, especially if these attempt to target the poor via some kind of territorial identification.[12] In that case, the more the information can be disaggregated - by region, province, district, or even neigbourhood - the better the chance of matching resources to needs, of using limited resources on objectives which have true priority, and of moving from theoretical 'targeting' (which covers the entire area being managed, and for which 'global screening' usually cannot be afforded) to effective 'marking

[11] A most helpful discussion of these issues can be found in Paul Light's book on Inspectors General in the US (Light 1993).

[12] The following discussion incorporates some of the central elements more fully developed in Promoting Equity (de Kadt and Tasca 1993), which sets out an approach to information management, centrally concerned with targeting, effective resource use, and equity, first developed for the health sector in Brazil.

out'. That is needed if general objectives are to be translated into cost-effective field activities which can reach those who are primarily meant to benefit.

All this suggests that information systems should indeed have a **minimum** of common elements for overview comparisons to be made from a higher level (without which no judgment of relative need would be possible), but be primarily conceived as 'bottom-up', and be built around local needs.

Let us assume that decentralization really does give local decision-makers and programme managers control over the activities they are meant to implement.[13] Then they should seek to develop mechanisms that will enable them to understand needs as experienced by the potential beneficiaries themselves (rather than merely those considered by policy makers), and also to learn from them about concentrations of poverty and vulnerability that need priority attention.

There are many places, especially within urban areas, where small geographic areas ('neighbourhoods'), delimited not just by conventional borders but by environmental and socio-economic characteristics, are recognized as such by the local people - but **not** in the conventional administrative divisions or information units. The people resident in such relatively homogeneous small areas ('micro-areas') are subject to similar ecological and socio-economic environments, and they share the same general living conditions. Such facts need to be taken into account by decision-makers concerned with poverty reduction, who can complement their usual technical procedures with approaches that start from rapid appraisal methods, which provide for an element of participation in decision-making by potential beneficiaries of programmes.

Hence the identification of such 'micro-areas' best proceeds in a process of interaction between the 'overview' which only the technical analysis of the available information can provide, and the bottom-up vision of the local population itself. Rapid and participatory appraisal methods can help, here. They uncover the environmental and socio-economic differences through expert observation, combined with information from interviews that give the point of view of the local population. Informants have no

difficulty in identifying different neighbourhoods, where living conditions differ significantly from adjacent ones, and providing a first 'map' of the wider area in such terms. Hence, an initial picture can be built up from the conventional information available to the local programme manager and that collected through rapid appraisal methods. This then helps guide further data collection and analysis, prior to the operational division of the territory which can guide targeted activities, sectorally and - if institutional conditions are satisfactory - inter-sectorally as well.

Poverty-oriented programmes of different sectors, separately or (better) together, can then be focused on these micro-areas. If appropriate, they can carry out simple and inexpensive further targeting procedures **within** those micro-areas, minimizing errors of inclusion and exclusion if the initial geographic targeting has been well conducted. Allocative capacity will be increased, and activities intended to better the situation of the underprivileged will be more easily implemented, since they will be conducted within a limited and geographically defined area.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This article has tried to make a few central points. First, in relation to poverty-oriented programmes, the information base in poor countries is often obviously deficient, both quantitatively and in qualitative terms (range, disaggregation, reliability, timeliness). Yet in many circumstances, it is not so much lack of information that is the problem - it is rather the **abundance** of undigested and often not 'prioritized' data, and the lack of **relevant** information. Information needs to be timely and does not have to be of ultimate accuracy (but good enough to follow changes in trends). It has to be helpful in identifying pockets of poverty, provide a basis for resource allocation decisions, often on a territorial basis, and enable decision-makers to follow (monitor) the outputs and outcomes of programmes aimed at the poor. Its best anchorage is the intermediate level of decentralization, and it needs to start with what already exists, then prune this down to the essentials.

Second, what is relevant (how to prune down) depends on the problems at hand. Making sectorally-based poverty-oriented programmes more effective and efficient requires taking account of factors

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[13] In practice this is, of course, often an heroic assumption.

beyond the sector, on which information is not routinely available; for programmes not linked to a particular sector the information required for decision-making may be quite broad-based. In both cases inter-sectoral collaboration is essential. Setting up a 'minimalist' common socio-economic inter-sectoral information system, can help steer sectors into inter-sectoral approaches in decision-making. Again, the decentralized level would seem to be more propitious to that kind of initiative than central ministries, though appropriate solutions will often need to be found to problems of lack of capacity and human resource availability.

Third, even when broadly the right kind of information is available to decision-makers, the institutional mechanisms must exist to ensure it is actually considered in 'monitoring' and decision-making at appropriate levels and on appropriate (and possibly regular) occasions. Public authorities are often buffeted by crises; issues that get considered are those that demand most immediate attention. Yet institutionalizing the consideration of regular reports, with information relevant to the problems of the poor and the programmes meant to improve their situation, can help keep this aspect of policy

on the agenda, and implementation mechanisms under review. Such procedures are needed at all relevant levels of government.

Fourth, even the best policy management procedures will not work if there is no interest in making decisions that take account of the information considered relevant. What makes information relevant is not only the analytical framework which links causes to effects, but the political framework which determines whether (political and other) resources are to be committed to the issues at hand; one need only refer to the discussion about power structures, information manipulation and politics in this Bulletin. Even with governments genuinely committed to programmes that combat poverty, there will be limits to such commitments.

Finally, while emphasis has been placed on the importance of institutions at the decentralized level, due attention must also to be paid to the contribution which service-users and other citizens can make to the improvement of the information base for decision-making. It is a challenge to information systems to incorporate that contribution into routine procedures. So far, very few have risen to it.

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