

Identifying the Poor: A Case from Kerala, India

Much of the contemporary debate on poverty centres on multidimensionality. Research has also brought local meanings of poverty to the fore. In this case from India, we focus on a multidimensional approach to poverty and identification of the poor. We illustrate how actors who make the policies (government) and actors who are affected by the policies (local people) identify the poor based on a field study in a Kerala village. The Government of India, in its recent BPL census, used a multidimensional methodology to identify poor households. In Kerala, the state government has been using a methodology that is multidimensional as well as oriented to the local settings. We compared the two methods with a method that we developed in consultation with the local people. Some convergence is evident among the different methods in the identification of the poor because all approach poverty primarily in terms of material deprivation. However, there are divergences as well, since they differ with regard to the type and number of dimensions included and weight assigned for each indicator. A major question is how these different methodologies impact on the way individual households are identified and targeted for public support. Our study intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on multidimensionality as well as the renewed interest in local and subjective meanings of poverty.

How to identify the poor in India?

Multidimensionality and issues surrounding it have occupied much space in the contemporary poverty debate (Narayan et al., 2000; World Bank, 2000). Also, in line with anthropological and participatory traditions, local and subjective meanings of poverty have once again been brought to the fore recently (Hulme, 2004; Krishna, 2004). Poverty research has taken a direction towards 'life knowledge' (Krumer-Nevo, 2005) in which experiences of those who face poverty and vulnerability in their day-to-day lives is a key input. However, the operationalisation of multidimensional concepts encounters many challenges. Participatory methods, which have been recognised as the best to derive perceptions on poverty (Chambers, 1994), often result in largely contextualised information making it difficult to generalise and influence policies.

In India, macro level estimates of poverty are based on the survey data of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). In order to identify the poor households to be targeted for assistance from the government, the Ministry of Rural Development of Government of India (GoI) commenced a quinquennial Below Poverty Line (BPL) census in 1992. The first census used an income poverty line as the criterion to identify BPL households. This resulted in a higher poverty figure that did not correspond with the estimates of the NSSO. An expert body was set up by GoI to propose an improved methodology for the BPL census of 1997. This committee recommended 'exclusion criteria' to screen better-off households and expenditure to identify the poor from among the remaining ones. This census also came up with estimates of poverty that did not match the NSSO figures. For the latest BPL census in 2002, another expert group was formed, which recommended an indicator-based methodology for identifying the poor, doing away with income and expenditure. The new methodology identifies poor households using thirteen indicators relating to size of landholding, type of house, availability of clothing, food security, sanitation, ownership of consumer durables, literacy status, status of labour, means of livelihood, status of children, type of indebtedness, reasons for migration and assistance preferred from the government.

This approach has led to two types of criticism. Better-off states like Kerala claim that poverty in their state is much higher and that they therefore need a higher share of national resources for poverty alleviation. Secondly, practical aspects also hinder the applicability of the new method as idealised. Once the BPL household list is prepared, it is required that it be displayed at a public place and scrutinised by the local community before finalising. In how many panchayats in the country will this be done properly remain doubtful.

Identifying the poor in Kerala

Over time, Kerala has experienced a considerable reduction in absolute poverty and a rise in the quality of life. Conventional measures of absolute poverty have hence been recognised as inappropriate to capture the relative well being of the people of the state. The Government of Kerala (GoK) in its policy documents has acknowledged the multidimensional nature of poverty (GoK, 2004).

The BPL indicators emphasise basic needs (food, clothing, housing and toilet), assets (land, consumer durables and debt), capabilities (literacy and school attendance of children) and livelihood (labour status, means of livelihood and migration). The indicators suggest that the BPL Method aims to draw from a variety of frameworks, notably Basic Needs (Weigel, 1980) and Capability (Saith, 2001a) and Livelihoods (Scoones, 1999). However, the approach is top-down with experts choosing the indicators and assigning priorities, with no involvement of the lay people or the target group.

The Kerala Method, in addition to basic needs (food, water, housing and toilet) and capabilities (literacy), emphasises socio-cultural (caste) and local factors. Caste is an important element in the concept of Social Exclusion, as applied to societies like India. Kerala Method takes a bottom-up approach, involving target groups through Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), stressing local definitions of poverty (Krishna, 2004, 2006).

In developing a Local Method, we took an open-ended and bottom-up approach in line with the participatory tradition. Eventually, we came up with quantifiable indicators developed in consultation with the target group, but the researchers based on field experience assigned the priorities. Methodologically, we have adopted what may be called a 'Participatory Numbers' approach (Chambers, 2003).

Findings

We compared the categorisation of households according to the BPL and Kerala methods and a method that we developed (Local method). We also examined the match/mismatch among them in identifying the poor households in the village. Households that are poor and non poor, according to the BPL, Kerala and Local methods were identified and compared so as to assess the extent to which different methods diverge or converge and to draw some lessons that may be used in the development of methods for identifying the poor.

Local meanings of poverty were derived through structured discussions with eight groups, six of women and two of men. Instead of convening meetings ourselves, we chose to attend weekly sessions of self-help groups organised by a local NGO and the neighbourhood groups constituted by the panchayat. Six of these groups belonged to the NGO and two to the panchayat. One group each of men and women was composed exclusively of scheduled caste (SC) households. For the interviews we selected 100 households in the village.

Participants in all the group discussions began by suggesting that 'what you earn' (varumaanam) must be the key determinant of poverty. Also, they pointed to agricultural labour households as the poorest in their community. However, ensuing in-depth discussions revealed the participants' insecurity for the future, which they associated with varying degrees to different means of livelihood. There was consensus among participants in all the groups that 'livelihood insecurity' is the key determinant of poverty and must be the core criterion in identifying poor households. A poor household in the village is one that does not have steady income and a secure means of livelihood. Households were categorised into four groups, based on primary means of livelihood of the household head: very poor, poor, non-poor/better-off and secure/well-off.

They defined the 'very poor' as the 'hungry households'. According to all the groups, none of the households in the village fit in this category at that time. The 'poor' category included agricultural

labour households and other labour households. Other labour households included fish workers, construction workers and casual labourers. However, everyone agreed that agricultural labour households are the ‘real poor’. The non-poor/better-off included toddy tappers, farmers, Gulf migrants and government employees. ‘Secure/well-off’ are the few wealthy households, including traditionally rich families. They are presently farmers, skilled migrants, business people or in the government.

We see that the three methods, BPL, Kerala and Local, take a multidimensional view on poverty. The Local Method stresses livelihood and a host of vulnerability factors. The BPL and Kerala methods emphasise basic needs, assets and capabilities. Some convergence is evident among the different methods in the identification of the poor because all approach poverty primarily in terms of material deprivation. The BPL Method identified the households that are really better-off and really worse-off, similar to the Local Method. Furthermore, we found similar pattern in classifying poor households using the local vulnerability scores and BPL scores. Likewise, we find more or less similar indicators among the vulnerability factors in the Local Method and the risk factors in the Kerala Method (housing, sources of income, gender). However the three methods differ with regard to the type and number of dimensions included and weight assigned for each indicator. This accounts for the differences between them in identifying the poor from among the same set of households. The table summarises a comparative assessment of the three methods.

Method	<i>BPL</i>	<i>Kerala</i>	<i>Local</i>
Developed by	Experts	Experts and NGOs (as PPA facilitators) in consultation with local people	Researchers (as PPA facilitators) in consultation with local people
Level	Macro	Meso	Micro
Actors	GoI	GoK	Local people
Approach	Multidimensional: Combination of basic needs, assets, capabilities and livelihood	Multidimensional: Combination of basic needs, capabilities, social exclusion and adaptable local/contextual factors	Multidimensional: One predominant dimension of poverty (livelihood insecurity), but many dimensions of vulnerability inside poverty
Intended universality	High (national)	Medium (regional)	Low (local)
Objectivity	High	High	Medium
Poverty line	No	Yes	Yes
Unit of analysis	Household	Household	Household
Time-frame	Current picture	Current picture	Past, current and future events (e.g. marriage)

Some policy issues

There exists now a broad consensus on the multidimensional nature of poverty. Consistent efforts by academics and practitioners working within the participatory framework have put local knowledge and poor people's priorities high on the development agenda. Nevertheless, discrepancies remain in terminology and the way we use concepts. Conceptualising 'Local' is a case in point. What exactly do we mean by 'local'; a village, a set of villages (like a panchayat) or beyond? Also, to what extent can local meanings of poverty be included in policies? Identifying commonalities in terms of geography, livelihoods and culture could be starting point of defining 'local'. Our study, for instance, could form the basis of developing the indicators to identify the poor in Kuttanad, a collection of many panchayats, which may not be applicable to a wider region beyond. Such efforts could find immediate policy application at the governmental level, given the existence of strong decentralised institutions with autonomy in decision-making, especially in the management of funds.

However, relying purely on local definitions may make us blind to some otherwise apparent indicators of poverty. An ideal mix would be to develop indicators in consultation with the local people and add to it the 'objective' factors at the expert level. As suggested elsewhere (Krishna, 2006), independent 'poverty monitoring stations' that work in close collaboration with the local government and NGOs could be established to develop local indicators and keep track of the changes.

Our study also shows that conceptualising poverty is highly complex. Definitions of poverty are relative, contextual and culture specific. The definitions speak for the actors who use them and the purposes for which they use them. Multidimensional indices like a Human Development Index or a Human Poverty Index are helpful in giving a macro picture of a composite of various dimensions of poverty facilitating cross-country or cross-regional comparisons and policymaking. However, we need to focus at a more micro level to develop locally relevant indicators if multidimensional approach is to be operationalised to help identification of the poor to be targeted for governmental or NGO assistance. 'Local' should, hence, form a key element in discussions on poverty and multidimensionality.

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