Monitoring Poverty

Introduction

Although the proportion of people living in poverty is shrinking, high population growth in poor countries means the absolute number of poor people is rising. Overall, 1.2 billion of the developing world's 4.8 billion people still live in extreme poverty on less than US$1[1] a day while another 2.8 billion live on less than US$2 a day. The gap between rich and poor has also grown. Today, the richest fifth of the world's population receives 85 percent of total world income, while the poorest fifth receives just 1.4 percent of this total. Globalization has helped to expand opportunities for millions of people around the world. At the same time, the benefits of globalization have been shared unevenly across the developing world, and many substantial challenges remain.

Concept: What is poverty, and how to monitor it?

A complex and multidimensional concept, poverty is no longer thought of exclusively as having a material component expressed in monetary value. Instead, it also consists of non-material components such as social indicators, environmental and gender issues, accountability and vulnerability. All such facets are inextricably linked to one another. An attempt to define absolute poverty was made in the final Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit for Social

Development, which was signed by the governments of 117 countries. Absolute poverty was defined in the following terms to differentiate it from overall poverty: "Absolute poverty is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to social services." On the other hand, overall poverty is seen as having "various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life."[2]

Therefore poverty is a deprivation of not only essential assets but also denial of opportunities to which every human being is entitled so as to attain a minimal standard of well-being.

Goals and targets in key development areas were set to reduce poverty throughout the 1990s at various international conferences and world summits – e.g. the 1990 World Summit for Children, and the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social

Development. A core list of such goals and targets became known as the International Development Targets (IDTs). These time-bound and measurable goals and targets were distilled and combined into a single set that is known as the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs after the Millenium Declaration was adopted by 147 leaders from around the world – 191 Nations in total – at the close of the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000. First among said goals is poverty, which these leaders committed to halve by 2015, the baseline being the 1990 level.[3]

A poverty monitoring system is an essential component of a viable poverty reduction strategy. It should serve as an analytical tool for understanding the dimensions and dynamics of poverty to enable policy-makers to understand its impact on the lives of people who are denied an opportunity to realize their full potential.

While the outcomes of monitoring poverty are not always self-evident and may become apparent only with time, it is important to draw key lessons from the experience. These outcomes have major implications for fostering innovations in poverty reduction strategies as well as programming for human development, political participation and social integration. The lessons learned from monitoring poverty presented in this *ESSENTIALS* are drawn from a diverse pool of resources from UNDP's experience and those of key partner organizations.

Lessons Learned

- **An effective approach for monitoring poverty has to overcome both political and technical issues**

Monitoring poverty is an ongoing and daunting challenge both for those who are living in it and for development agencies that are trying to address it. An effective poverty monitoring system requires national ownership of the institutional framework, or else efforts are likely to remain fragmented. This calls for the development of an evaluation culture as a practical tool, rather than a sanction, so that it can be proactively used by national authorities to define and implement poverty monitoring instruments.

Countries trying to tackle poverty are also challenged by the issue of institutionalizing an effective disaggregated approach to assess changes in the status of the poor and marginalized (e.g. women and girls, older people with disabilities, indigenous people, refugees and internally displaced persons, among others, who are particularly vulnerable to poverty) at the national and local level. Yet, this is often impeded by lack of political prioritization and adequate resources in the formulation of policies and strategies among national and international stakeholders.

What to do?

- Support national institutional framework for poverty monitoring to ensure that efforts of different national agencies are coordinated and facilitate the participation of different types of stakeholders within existing mandates and capacities.

- Support government to strengthen statistical information systems and M&E structures among national statistics bureaus, universities, CSOs and private sector to ensure production of reliable and high quality statistics on a regular basis.

- Foster national ownership of poverty reduction goals and strategies through consultations with public, civil society and other actors. Such efforts should be specifically directed at establishing clear roles and responsibilities for developing independent monitoring systems so as to encourage poverty monitoring by the beneficiaries and community based groups, including NGOs and CSOs.

- Sensitize policy-makers to the importance of monitoring the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of poverty for (i) identifying a core set of indicators for monitoring poverty at the intra-household, household, community, sub-national and national levels; (ii) identifying best practices for the design of innovative and participatory policies and programmes; and (iii) setting up monitoring procedures that allow for comparison of qualitative and quantitative data over time – by creating a network of national experts and practitioners on monitoring poverty.

- Promote public feedback on the impact on the poorest groups of policies, strategies and programmes at different levels of society by (i) supporting participatory poverty monitoring starting from the grassroots level; and (ii) enabling people to access information on programmes and relevant data to empower them to participate in the effort to overcome poverty.

- Advocate for the conduct of MDG assessment exercises by popularizing MDGs through various fora such as media campaigns, training workshops involving civil society organisations (CSOs), international development partners and relevant government representatives.

- Promote the use of IT as a key tool for accessing and presenting datasets for poverty monitoring.

Example:
The UN Secretary General is expected to report annually to the General Assembly on the global progress made toward achieving MDGs. At the same time, individual countries are to produce an assessment report of their respective progress by 2004.

Several countries have already issued such reports, and a model of its kind is the one from Nepal. A "frank" report on the status of living conditions within its borders, "the country's capacity to monitor and evaluate its progress towards meeting MDGs, is rated as being strong in only four of 60 categories."[4] Of the six categories under the Poverty Reduction Target, one rated strong, another rated fair while the remaining 4 rated weak – including the one on 'Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.'

Yet Nepal has initiated in 2001 a major national planning exercise with the preparation of the PRSP. This exercise and ensuing document were also used as the Approach Paper to the Tenth Five-Year Plan. The Government is now in a position to develop "a mechanism that allows for sustained policy review of successes and failures of poverty-reduction policies and programmes at various levels" that will be based on a poverty monitoring system at the grassroots level. [5]

Example:
To popularize MDGs, the 2002 National Human Development Report (NHDR) of Zambia will focus on the first MDG of halving poverty and hunger. As part of this initiative, two stakeholder workshops were held on the NHDR where MDGs were explored in greater detail. In addition, as Zambia drafts its first MDG report, publicity and the preparation of the report itself involves media programmes, workshops, data collection and establishing a broad monitoring framework that also included parliamentarians and donors.

- **The MDGs and PRSPs are catalysts for building national capacity to systematically monitor and report on goals and targets**

The time-bound and measurable human development goals and targets formulated as part of the Millennium Declaration have played a major role in mobilizing national and international development agents.

Although a few countries had already started building capacity to monitor and measure poverty and inequality prior to 2000, many others had not. With the reaffirmation of the development goals and the adoption of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) approach, a number of the latter countries realized the inadequacy of their systems as they were faced with the challenge of collecting information for MDG country reports and the PRSPs.

Box 1 – PRSP Approach: Monitoring & Evaluation

"In most countries, the preparation of PRSPs has involved useful steps toward better poverty data and diagnostics, helped to clarify national targets and indicators for poverty reduction, and increased attention to monitoring and evaluation. Many countries have identified and started to fill important gaps in their data about poverty and inequality, and have begun to strengthen the institutional arrangements for ongoing data collection and analysis. [All the PRSPs] have included plans to improve monitoring and evaluation capacities."[6]

Consequently, at the country level, poverty monitoring systems are being designed or improved upon to bring about a more coordinated national level approach to data and information collection, analysis, dissemination and storage. In some 60 low-income countries such broad-based, country-led processes have occurred and have facilitated the promotion of a more open, inclusive and focused national dialogue on the most effective policies and public actions for poverty reduction.

What to do?

- Promote MDG buy-in by developing national advocacy campaigns to mobilise and sensitise national stakeholders and the local donor community highlighting the significance and role of the MDG targets and assessments. The MDGs should not be viewed as unattainable goals but rather as a realistic aim to strive for.

- Support the development of the MDG country report, which serves as a comprehensive benchmark against which to judge progress, and the PRSPs, which function as 'national roadmaps' for reaching long-term MDG targets, by incorporating these tools in the assessment of poverty alleviation programmes and progress towards national poverty reduction targets. These two processes provide an opportunity to think through long-term development goals and to critically revisit the challenges and opportunities faced by any given country in addressing poverty.

- Raise awareness on the importance of collecting accurate and comprehensive data on poverty and wellbeing by building the capacity of national statistical institutes and other entities involved in the data collection to design, conduct, and process surveys, and analyse the resulting data.

- Assist governments and Civil Society organisations (CSOs) in making the link between their targets and policy formulation. As poverty reduction policies need to be informed by the results of the data collection and analysis, a systematic dialogue needs to take place between government and CSOs.

Example:
Until recently, the Albanian public administration has had incomplete and sporadic knowledge of the international conventions UN International Conferences and Summits held in the 1990s – including the MDGs – the country is a party to.

However, the UN Country Team has been very active in raising awareness about MDGs. A far-reaching advocacy campaign, consisting of workshops and training on MDGs, was conducted across Albania extending to all regions and constituencies.

This initiative was widely covered in the media and has led to the appointment of two MDG Ambassadors (chosen among top national political figures).

In addition, a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) was commissioned to write the country's first MDG report. The report was launched in 2002 and led to a 'Strategy for Follow-up to the Albania Millennium Development Goals Report'. Strong political commitment to improve follow-up and reporting processes was clearly demonstrated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the preparation of the report. The UN Country Team is now taking measures to support the continued commitment to MDGs and is in the process of establishing a CSO Forum that will independently monitor the progress toward the MDG targets.

Example:
Sri Lanka was one of the first developing countries to recognise the multidimensional nature of poverty and to take action against it. Prior to the 1990s it was heralded as a leader making tremendous strides. However, a considerable slow down in progress in the 1990s, and its adoption of the PRSP approach motivated the Government to produce its first National Policy Framework on Poverty Alleviation with the assistance of UNDP and the World Bank.

A series of sector studies on poverty related issues were supported through this initiative that fed into a number of participatory workshops and seminars, allowing a wide range of stakeholders to discuss their ideas, concerns and findings. This input in turn led to the formulation of a comprehensive and integrated national policy framework for attacking poverty and the better design of programmes that address poverty.

- **Global poverty reduction targets need to be tailored to the national circumstances**

Despite comparable objectives, there is a great variation in the ways in which poverty is defined and consequently measured in developing countries. A poverty line, generally taken to be a threshold in terms of income or wealth, may be identified on the basis of observation or the assessment of needs, and some poverty lines have been adopted primarily because they provide a useful indicator of need. They are seen as indicators of poverty, rather than precise measures, as lack of income is not usually thought of as a sufficient definition of poverty. Attempts to apply poverty lines with greater precision, for example to the position of women within households or the special needs of people with disabilities, make the application of poverty lines progressively more complex – and there may be a tradeoff between sensitivity and applicability. Thus "localising" targets remains a challenge for many countries that are actively involved in the global effort to reduce poverty.

What to do?

- Goals and indicators should represent the core developmental vision of a country as well as its government's effort to meet international goals. Facilitate a national level dialogue on the pertinence and feasibility of the goals. The examination of the goals should lead to their revision so as to fit the country's individual circumstances and needs by (i) reviewing national policies, strategies and programmes with an impact on poverty including legal and enabling frameworks; (ii) financial control and budgetary allocations; (iii) planning and coordination systems; (iv) character of economic reforms; (v) section of populations augmenting income as a result of national growth strategies; (vi) social security nets; (vii) local and national resource management; (viii)

status of implementation of programmes with participatory approaches; and (ix) national policy on NGOs, CBOs and voluntary organizations.

- Engage all stakeholders in poverty reduction efforts by identifying and facilitating their role in future action, including country-specific and common recommendations.

- Ensure new and revised targets are being incorporated in the scope of national data collection tools/surveys through national dialogue on poverty-related conceptual and measurement issues, including critique of conventional approaches, indicators, assessment and monitoring systems.

Example:

In Vietnam, the Government wanted its Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) to reflect its commitment to the international targets. Yet it also found it important to adapt the MDGs to local circumstances, rather than adopting them in their original form.

The initial goal of halving poverty between 1990 and 2015 had already been met by 2000, it made sense for Vietnam to define new targets. Therefore, in 2001 and early 2002 the Poverty Task Force – consisting of 16 government ministries, 6 donors, 4 international NGOs and 4 local NGOs – developed a whole range of new targets which were approved, along with the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) by the Prime Minister in May 2002. Vietnam now has two new poverty targets, the first of which aims to reduce by 40% the proportion of people living below the international poverty line between 2001 and 2010. The second aims to reduce by 75% the number of people living under the international food poverty line by 2010.

Example:

The Government of Mauritius took the lead in producing a MDG report at the end of 2001

with the help of the UN Country Team. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Cooperation (the coordinating entity for the production of the report) then took it upon itself to solicit feedback from all other Ministries.

The making of the report and the subsequent feedback brought to light gaps, needs, and follow-up actions. It was felt that some goals needed to be further adapted through the addition of more pertinent targets.

The production of this situation analysis was not viewed by the Government as an exercise to comply with UN reporting requirements. Instead it was seen as a way to examine, "track and monitor human development within a holistic and coherent framework common to most countries, by building alliances and fostering the participation of all stakeholders."[7]

The MDG report became an awareness raising and advocacy instrument for both national authorities and civil society. Its official launch, which was covered by the media, took place on the 24th October 2002 and was widely attended by high-ranking government representatives, the donor community, the private sector and NGOs. The possibility of producing another report that looks at the measures required to tackle the gaps is now being explored.

- **Effective monitoring depends on the active collaboration of national and international stakeholders**

Effective sustainable development interventions find their root in strong partnerships and inclusive participation. Different actors add value to the process by looking at poverty through different lenses (e.g. feminization of poverty) that has implications for both the scale and scope of the different aspects of poverty. Their collaboration allows for the strategic use of resources, since no one agency alone is in a position to address poverty, and for the

sharing of a wide range of national and international experience and lessons learned while at the same time fostering ownership of the process.

The mobilisation of stakeholders calls for result-oriented partnerships among a range of actors in the state and public sector, CSOs, the private sector, national and international foundations and donor institutions. The role of these agencies is two-fold. They can campaign to raise awareness on poverty reduction and also monitor progress to generate and sustain political momentum and public interest.

What to do?

- Support participatory processes to foster not only the involvement of the government and its line ministries but also that of civil society, making particular efforts to reach out to traditionally marginalized groups in both the development and processing of poverty surveys. This could be initiated by making available all relevant data/documentation in the local language and by convening thematic Task Forces with a wide-range of national and international representatives.

- Sustain key aspects of participation, including information sharing and openness of decision-making and debate about alternative policy choices, so that dialogue with non-governmental stakeholders can be routinely conducted by governmental institutions.

- Support capacity building of CBOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) to enable them to engage substantively with international organizations in the monitoring process through relevant training and systematic information-sharing. National and local organizations need to be strengthened for giving regular feedback to local participants and taking stock of the

concerns expressed by the latter, and making such information understandable and available to international organizations and donors.

- Ensure that each national and international actor/agency brings to the table a different set of skills and interests that can influence the process and draw attention to the issue it is championing.

- Clarify the role of international multilateral partners in the country to local partners – who are there not only to help build national capacity but also to support the operation of poverty monitoring systems, ensure their transparency and advocate for institutionalised forms of dialogue, rather than *ad hoc* consultations.

Example:

A UNDP and World Bank funded qualitative study conducted in Latvia in 1998, aimed to complement the information gathered through standard quantitative surveys. This Social Assessment was predicated on a participatory approach intended to involve stakeholders at every stage and to maximize Latvian ownership and engagement. The Steering Committee overseeing the process was composed of representatives of the Ministry of Welfare, the Bank Resident Mission, the Latvian Academy of Sciences and UNDP.

The assessment, which was widely shared with key development organisations, brought to the forefront issues including housing and medical costs, access to education and information and public health and alcoholism – was one of the studies used as the basis for the development of pro-poor policies. In this instance, national ownership and initiative to combat poverty gained real momentum in 1999 and culminated in the drafting of a National Poverty Alleviation Strategy.

Example:

The Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process (UPPAP) is an initiative launched by the Government, and implemented in partnership with Oxfam GB, that sought to bring the perspectives of poor Ugandans, through consultations, into the formulation and the implementation of policies and planning for poverty reduction at both district and national levels.

In 1997 prior to the launch of UPPAP, Uganda had developed a Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), which is still the country's comprehensive development framework. Although the PEAP was formulated as a result of a broad consultative process – involving central and local government, civil society and the private sector – the poor, for whom the Plan was developed, were not consulted. UPPAP was thus established to provide a mechanism for linking the perspectives of the poor to the policy formulation processes.

UPPAP is a three-year process that involves several phases, the first of which was the first Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA). It brought together the voices and perspectives of the poor consulted in 24 rural and 12 urban communities in 9 districts. The process is expected to continue through interaction with national policy processes, facilitation of district capacity development for participatory planning and monitoring, and a second PPA. Uganda's deepening commitment and broadening ownership of reform has helped place it among the top economic performers in Africa in terms of efforts to reduce absolute poverty.

- **Monitoring is only constructive when it leads to concrete follow-up actions**

Monitoring poverty allows the different stakeholders to not only gauge the progress being made towards the mitigation of poverty, but also learn from the experience.

Given the complex nature of poverty, effective monitoring at different levels of society has been difficult to implement, although the momentum is picking up.

Countries are also faced with difficulties in integrating the results into decision-making processes. However, monitoring of progress only bears its fruits if the findings are subsequently translated into effective policy formulation and programme interventions. Given that policy decisions and programmes are not always based on objective evidence, it is crucial to make available compelling evaluative evidence through an effective information system and advocacy strategy. The challenge is to provide valid information at the right time to the most strategic national and international policymakers.

The countries that have made significant strides in monitoring poverty have done so with the support of partners and the mobilisation of different constituencies. They availed themselves of the resources and perspectives at their disposal to take stock of their situation and bridge the gap by converting the findings into pro-poor policies and strategies.

What to do?

- Ensure that monitoring serves several functions in such a way that the information gathered at one level is useful at the next. Raw data should therefore be made available to the public and widely disseminated so as to improve core indicators, including magnitude and mapping of poverty and inequality, productive assets and income, quality of life, and social participation. Only with knowledge of the findings can stakeholders mobilize for change.

- CSOs should be encouraged to collaborate with governments and coordinate their actions to achieve commonly shared poverty reduction

objectives through regular and transparent consultations, while governments should be assisted in aligning with national cycles for decision-making, especially annual budget cycles.

- Governments should be held accountable by CSOs, donors and other international bodies – through the MDG/PRSP reporting systems that offer such a platform – and follow through on the policy commitments they made.

Example:

Throughout the 1990s, a vast amount of household survey data was generated in Cambodia. However, since much of the data were not comparable and the government recognized the importance of timely and reliable data as a baseline to monitor progress towards set targets, it developed a new poverty monitoring and analysis system.

In 2001, with the support of UNDP, the Royal Government of Cambodia adopted a result-oriented, country-owned, poverty focused and participatory-based poverty monitoring and analysis (PMA) system. The ensuing PMA Technical Report outlines a proposal for the establishment of a National Poverty Forum, i.e. a mechanism capable to promote a broad partnership on poverty. On the whole, the government expects to use this system to inform its pro-poor policy decision-making as well as its main tool for regular reporting on the country's progress towards achieving the MDGs.

Example:

In Latin America and the Caribbean a series of successful regional initiatives on monitoring poverty, have been taking place. Programa para el Mejoramiento de las Encuentras de las Condiciones de Vida (MECOVI) is an initiative of the Inter-

American Development Bank, the World Bank, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and UNDP which has set up a system of household surveys to measure living conditions. While another UNDP led programme has been linking macroeconomic policies to poverty reduction.

Within this framework, in Bolivia, support was provided by UNDP to the Unit for the Analysis of the Economic Programme, a semi-autonomous research institute that has played a primary role in developing the country's interim and full PRSPs. Support was also given to the government to include crosscutting concerns into the PRSP, such that governance, social capital and gender could be integrated with poverty. More specifically, in Bolivia – a country where more than 30% of people live from agriculture, farming and forestry and which has recently experienced social conflict in rural areas involving indigenous people – the PRSP has helped the government to reflect on key issue of lack of access to assets such as land in the formulation of its pro-poor policies.

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[1] US$1 a day is expressed in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).

[2] The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action: World Summit for Social Development 6-12 March 1995, United Nations, 1995.

[3] Numerical targets were set for each goal, these are to be achieved in most cases over a 25-year period – between 1990-2015.

[4] UNDP. Measurable Results Make all the Difference. By David Todd. Choices Magazine. September 2002.

[5] Unite Nations Country Team of Nepal, and HGM Nepal. Millennium Development Goals: Nepal Progress Report 2002.

[6] IDA & IMF. Review of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) Approach: Main Findings. 2002.

[7] UNDP South and West Asia SURF. Localising the MDGs: Some Examples. 2002.

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Contact Institutions

United Nations
DevLink – United Nations Development Group (UNDG)
http://www.undg.org/

DGO – The United Nations Development Group Office
http://www.dgo.org/

ILO – International Labour Organization
http://www.ilo.org/

UN – United Nations
http://www.un.org/

UNCDF – United Nations Capital Development Fund
http://www.uncdf.org/

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
http://www.undp.org/
This site is also the portal to individual UNDP country sites

UNFPA – United Nations Fund for Population Activities
http://www.unfpa.org/

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
http://www.unicef.org/

UNIFEM – United Nations Development Fund for Women (a fund administered by UNDP)
http://www.unifem.org/

WFP – World Food Programme
http://www.wfp.org/

The World Bank
http://www.worldbank.org/

Other Resources
CIDA – Canadian International Development Agency
http://www.cida.org/

Danida – Danish International Development Agency
http://www.um.dk/english/

Development Gateway
http://developmentgateway.org/

DFID – Department for International Development
http://www.dfid.gov.uk/

Eldis – Gateway to Development Information
http://www.eldis.org/poverty/index.htm

GTZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit GmbH

http://www.gtz.de/publikationen/english/

OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
http://www.oecd.org/

Oxfam GB
http://www.oxfam.org.uk/

SIDA – Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
http://www.sida.org/

IDS – Institute of Development Studies
http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/pvty/

USAID – United States Agency for International Development
http://www.usaid.gov/