

Qualitative and Quantitative Poverty Appraisal: Complementarities, Tensions and the Way Forward

Notes for the session on qualitative approaches: self-criticism and what can be gained from quantitative approaches

I have been asked for brief bulleted notes on key issues covering self-criticism of qualitative approaches in poverty appraisal, and what can be gained from quantitative approaches. I am taking poverty appraisal to include Participatory Poverty Appraisals (PPAs), the Consultations with the Poor undertaken in 23 countries for the World Development Report 2000/01, and other poverty-related participatory research, especially where this has been on a medium or large scale. The benefits of quantitative data seem to me so obvious that my notes on them are very brief. What have I missed? I conclude pointing to a way forward with some promise of having the best of both worlds.

A. Gains from Quantitative Approaches

Quantitative approaches usually (but see C below) means research using standard sampling techniques, questionnaires and statistical analysis. The well known potential benefits include:

- time series comparisons to identify trends in whatever dimensions are measured,
- cross-section comparisons between different individuals, households, groups and communities, and across regions, countries and continents
- correlations which identify associations which raise questions of causality and covariant changes
- estimates of prevalences and distributions within populations and areas
- triangulation and linkages with qualitative data (Booth 2001 to this workshop)
- the credibility of numbers in influencing policy-makers
- the utility to policy-makers of being able to put numbers on trends and other comparisons

B. Self-criticism of Qualitative Approaches

Benefits and gains from qualitative data from poverty appraisals have been widely documented in comparative analyses drawing on a range of experience (e.g. Norton and Stephens 1995; Brocklesby and Holland 1998; Holland with Blackburn 1998; Booth et al 1998; Robb 1999; Brock 2000). There is a literature on appropriate forms of rigour with qualitative approaches and data (e.g. Lincoln and Guba 1985). Self-critical epistemological awareness is at the core of rigour. This section lists some of the dilemmas, dangers, tensions and trade-offs which abound. They fall into two main groups: methodological and analytical; and ethical.

What follows describes some of the main and more common pathologies. It is not comprehensive. All can be various degrees be guarded against. But all occur, even if

practice is generally improving. They are common bad practice, or inherent weaknesses, or the two linked.

Methodological:

Design and Fieldwork

- *Poor selection and training of facilitators.* Not everyone has it in them to be a good facilitator of participatory processes. Selection is liable to be constrained. Consultants pop up all over the place to claim to be “PRA trainers” who are not competent, and who do not concern themselves with behaviour and attitudes. Training is too short. Training is not experiential in the field.
- *Selection of sites.* Few sites can be selected, limiting representativeness. Purposive selection brings in biases which may not be recognised. One is the choice of atypical communities where an NGO is already working and can provide access, and can reduce ethical dilemmas by ensuring follow up.
- *Unrepresentative participation.* The views and interests of a dominant group in a community, or of dominant individuals in focus groups, are over represented. Marginalised groups are left out, especially the “bottom poor”.
- *Agenda framing.* The realities expressed are over-influenced by the agenda of the facilitators.

Analysis

However “good” the data, analysis is vulnerable to distortion, inaccuracy and unrepresentativeness, especially with

- *Large amounts of data.*
- *Data which are not comparable or difficult to compare*
- *Deadlines, and lack of time and resources*
- *Personal difficulties in delegating analysis* [I include this because I find it difficult to delegate analysis of disparate qualitative data. Others do not share this problem to the same degree]
- *Delegated analysis* in which items have to be sorted into boxes, where the boundaries of the boxes are ambiguous, or different analysts in a team make different decisions
- *Analysts with strong preconceptions and mental templates* (diagrammatic models into which they habitually fit complex realities – *mea culpa* as a pentaphiliac)
- *Pressure and incentives for early policy messages*

These can then lead to:

- incomplete coverage of the data
- distortions through misleading or inconsistent classification
- falling back on conventional or personal categories of classification instead of allowing the data to generate emergent categories

- selective searching for data which fit the analyst's preconceptions instead of wider coverage of analysis
- circularities, where the method itself contributes to an emergent category [e.g. to some degree places of the poor – chapter 4 of Narayan et al 2000b – again *mea culpa*]
- overattention to striking quotations
- successive simplification and editing, excluding qualifications and exceptions
- unsubstantiated or not fully substantiated assertions based on the authority of the process rather than the actual data
- omission of qualifications, caveats and limitations of the data and statements
- overgeneralising
- oversimplification of complex realities

Ethical:

a. with participants

- taking the time of poor people, especially those suffering poverty of time and energy, without recompense
- raising expectations of benefits which are not realised
- leaving participants exposed to later penalties (violence, persecution etc)

b. with policy influence

- the ethics of the soundbite: selecting and simplifying evidence and making assertions which variously
 - fit the analyst's preconceptions
 - are not based on adequately representative or adequately analysed qualitative data
 - but which have potential for policy influence

[Unlike soundbites themselves, the professional and ethical issues here are *not* simple and one should not rush into judgement]

Tensions and Trade-offs

Running through these issues are tensions with trade-offs. Some of the more obvious are:

- Depth in fewer places versus breadth in more
- Scale and representativeness versus analysability
- Standardisation, narrowness and analysability versus open-endedness, depth, and difficulty in analysis
- Volume of data versus willingness to suspend habitual categories and preset ideas [under pressure the analyst is driven to use familiar embedded categories]
- Delegation of data analysis versus personal judgment and “ahas!”
- Resources available for follow-up with fewer communities or groups versus more communities or groups with fewer or no resources for follow-up

C. The Best of Both Worlds? [This section is exploratory and I regret not properly finished]

There is a common assumption that participatory means only qualitative, and that quantitative data can only be generated by questionnaire surveys or by measurements. At least since the early 1990s, however, examples have been accumulating (and are now almost a flood) which show this is not so, in two modes which can also be combined:

1. Participatory visual analysis has now in many instances generated numbers similar to those from questionnaires (ActionAid 1992; Eldridge refs). It was explored in work at ICRISAT/IFPRI ~~work~~ in 1993 by Lawrence Haddad and his colleagues, and elsewhere in India by Parmesh Shah through a Visual Interactive Questionnaire. The question has to be asked whether and if so to what extent participatory visual analysis now presents an alternative to questionnaires, with a potential for having the best of both worlds¹.
2. Focus group responses can be aggregated (e.g. UNDP 1996; Moser and McIlwaine 2001) (*check).

Three types of numbers, either separately or in some combinations, can be generated and derived from these forms of participatory analysis: counting, estimating and valuing. A selection of examples can illustrate:

Counting: especially through social, census and other participatory mapping. This has been used for census-type purposes and identifying numbers of households or individuals with particular characteristics (for example women, men, girls, boys, pregnant women, disabled people by type of disability, caste in South Asia, landless, numbers of donkeys, buffaloes, goats etc owned, housing type etc).. These are usually represented and differentiated by symbols (beans, seeds, stones, stickers etc). The first major example of going to scale with this approach was probably the service utilization survey conducted in over 130 villages in Nepal by ActionAid in 1991 (ActionAid 1992). This concluded with tables like those from a questionnaire survey, with households in the 9 areas summing to 6,544 and the population to 35,414. Combinations of criteria can be used to allocate totals, sometimes for characteristics which would be difficult to access with questionnaires, for example the castewise breakdown of number of families with addiction to alcohol (PRAXIS 2001: 33).

Estimating: especially through pile sorting, pie diagramming and two-dimensional scoring (Eldridge 2001b). A remarkable example is the study using tangible visuals in a retrospective study by SCF for SADC of how poor farmers coped with the 1992 drought in Southern Africa, conducted in 20 districts in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Eldridge 1995) and Eldridge 1998, 2001a, 2001b). Others are historical matrices (e.g. Freudenberger and Freudenberger 1994; Freudenberger 1995 for livestock and coping mechanisms, and PRAXIS 2001: 98 and 102 for impacts of drought on different

¹ Other examples can be found in RRA Notes 1-21 subsequently PLA Notes 22-39 continuing. For a review of social and census mapping and comparisons with questionnaires see Chambers 1997: 122-5, and for other comparisons Mukherjee 1995

household members, and on households as a whole), seasonal diagrams (e.g. food calendars Mukherjee and Jena 2001: 51), and numbers of days off school for different reasons.

Valuing: especially through ranking and matrix scoring. Common early examples were matrix scoring of crops (e.g. Drinkwater 1993; Manoharan et al 1993), but applications are now innumerable and diverse e.g. contrast a scored matrix of qualities of different health providers in the UK (Cornwall 1999).

Estimating and valuing together: This occurs when the criterion scored combines quantity and value. Examples are pile sorting into a matrix for “importance” where the axes were types of crop and agroecological zone (Chambers 2000), and seasonality of non-timber forest products (PRAXIS 2001: 66).

Actual and Potential Applications in Poverty Assessments

Where the same methods are used in a poverty assessment, with some degree of standardisation, numbers can be derived from aggregations.

- a. *where detailed categories are preset as in a questionnaire*. An example is the Tanzania PPA of 1995 where (I believe) standardised cards were used for participatory matrix scoring and estimating, and the figures aggregated (see the video *The Poverty Experts*).
- b. *where general areas are preset but not specific categories*. This was the case in the Consultations with the Poor (for the methodology guide see World Bank 1999). 163 community and provincial (in the case of Vietnam) reports were analysed for reported trends in domestic violence which were then presented as percentages in pie diagrams showing increase, decrease, violence reported but trend uncertain, violence rare or not present, and same as before (Narayan et al 2000: 124-132).
- c. *where categories are emergent*. This was apparently the case with the PRRA (Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal) which was the basis for volume 3 of the UNDP 1996 Report on Human Development in Bangladesh which was *Poor People’s Perspectives* (UNDP 1996). Focus groups of poor women and men, both rural and urban, listed and ranked their priorities for actions which were “doable”, and these were then aggregated into a PPIP (Prioritised Problem Index of Poor communities). A recent large-scale example is rural problem listing and prioritisation in Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh (Dawra 2001) in which 1,631 Anganwadi workers and 365 Cluster Volunteers were trained as facilitators, and data were generated by groups of women in a Government programme from 947 “habitations/villages”, using pebbles to rank the problems.

The evidence of potential is so compelling that one must ask why it has not been recognised and these methods become more widespread. Some possible answers may be:

- Many of the innovators are younger professionals in the NGO sector and in countries in the South who are unaware of the significance of what they have done, lack the time, competence or inclination to write up, and do not have the professional seniority to carry weight with older and more settled development professionals
- Conservatism, and even defensiveness, together with reflexes to use standard methods, prevail in academic curricula and among the middle-aged and middle management in both academia and the development professions
- Individuals and organisations capable of good facilitation are still in short supply
- Some of the best among those with the capability have ethical reservations about extractive participatory research and set conditions which potential sponsors do not accept

Many critical questions need to be asked. This note does not discuss to what extent these approaches and methods gain the benefits of qualitative enquiry. Trade-offs seem likely. My purpose in writing it is to provoke questions, and to point to sources for further investigation.

A workshop is proposed to explore these approaches and methods further. Is that a good idea? If so, what questions should it address?

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Some Sources

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