

Working Paper No. 1

***Touching the ground:
New directions and practical experiences in participatory policy
research ◆***

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Abstract: This working paper explores what participatory research – especially in the form of routine Participatory Poverty Assessments – can contribute to meso- and macro-level public policymaking processes. Attention is paid to the role of participatory research in generating important information, improving how governments operate and “empowering” ordinary citizens.

1. Overview

This working paper explores what “participatory research” can contribute to meso- and macro- level public policymaking processes.¹ It draws primarily upon the author’s experiences in Uganda and Tanzania since 2000. This time frame is significant because it coincides with the region’s first attempts to institutionalize participatory policy research in the process of developing and monitoring Poverty Reduction Strategies.

These experiences suggest that:

- Participatory research can improve the relevance, quality and reliability of socio-economic data for development;
- It is not enough for policy-oriented research to generate and disseminate information. Indeed, communication and advocacy strategies need to become an integral part of how pro-poor social science research is designed and implemented; and
- Participatory research can help open up public policymaking processes and increase the likelihood that policy decisions reflect the needs of ordinary people rather than special interest groups – but only in *accountable* political systems

In order to clearly substantiate such conclusions, this paper is divided into several parts, namely: a description of the growing demand for reliable socio-economic data in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA); an overview of different approaches to participatory

1 . For the purposes of this paper, participatory research is defined as a process in which professionals and ‘everyday-experts’ (that is, poor people themselves) collaborate to gather, assemble and analyse information. In contrast, conventional research is defined as a process in which information is generated and analysed solely by professionals.

policy research and how they differ from conventional research methodologies; and an assessment of how recent Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) in Uganda and Tanzania have affected policies and empowered people to push for pro-poor development priorities.

2. Background: research and public policy

Institutions committed to poverty reduction rely on ideas about why it occurs, why it persists and how it can be overcome to guide their work. Indeed, they have always operated on the basis of specific theories about poverty that reflect their understanding of cultural, social and economic realities. The majority of governments in SSA have historically lacked reliable information about national socio-economic conditions. This deficiency has contributed to dependence on imported ideas about development-related problems and solutions.

In recent years, the World Bank and some other powerful institutions have become less adamant that their ideas about development can be imported whole-sale (Blustein, 2004; Independent Evaluation Office of the IMF, 2004; Borsuk, Pierre Goad and Phillips, 1999). At the very least, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have come to see information about local specificities as a prerequisite to:

Poverty Reduction Strategies: In 1999, the World Bank Group and IMF agreed that nationally-owned Participatory Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSPs) should provide the basis for all concessional lending and debt relief under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Since then, PRSPs have been created in many countries as a framework for coordinating anti-poverty measures.

Millennium Development Goals: The MDGs commit the international community to a vision of development that promotes “human development” as the key to sustaining social and economic progress in all countries. The goals were accepted by member states of the United Nations in September 2000 as a framework for measuring development progress. The goals establish yardsticks for measuring results, not just for developing countries but for rich countries that help to fund development programs and for the multilateral institutions helping countries implement them (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2002).

- Customising conventional development prescriptions/rationalising public policy decisions (Norton and Stephens, 1995:3); and
- Monitoring their implementation/impact

IFIs' interest in national-level data to inform *Poverty Reduction Strategies* has merged with the need to monitor progress towards *Millennium Development Goals* and bilateral donors' wish to streamline development assistance/improve the performance of sector ministries. As a result, there is now unprecedented pressure on governments in SSA and other poor parts of the world to generate information about local conditions.

In East Africa, this trend has led to many changes. Perhaps the most comprehensive response to the demand for development data has been in mainland Tanzania, where the government's Poverty Monitoring System (PMS) has become a regional model. Although smaller, still meaningful changes have been made to how information is being collected in Uganda, Kenya and Zanzibar.

In each case, changes have included:

- Enhanced coordination by central government (typically under the ministry responsible for preparing PRSPs in order to streamline information flows and reduce duplication); and
- An emphasis on practical "partnerships" involving central government, donors, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and, to a lesser extent, the private sector. This *modus operandi* has been promoted for a number of reasons, such as the belief that each sector has complementary resources to contribute and that information will be more relevant and reliable.

3. Participatory Policy Research

Since the second half of the 1980s, public institutions have developed increasingly sophisticated multi-topic surveys as their preferred means to measure, analyse and learn about socio-economic conditions. In contrast with single-topic surveys (such as Employment, Income and Expenditure Surveys), these multi-topic Household Surveys are designed to generate information on a wide range of issues intimately linked to household welfare. At the same time, private development aid institutions and, to a lesser extent, academic institutions have been pioneering a “participatory approach.”

In their current forms, both methodologies involve ordinary people in the production of quantitative and qualitative data. As such, the telling difference between participatory and survey-based research is that the former systematically involves ordinary people in the *analysis* of its findings. It is this analysis, as much as the raw data, which is then synthesised to inform public policies.

Some of the advantages to Participatory Policy Research (PPR) are obvious. First, data analysis does not depend on speculation by urban elites about the realities people face. Instead, it is the result of normal people reflecting on, theorising about, debating and explaining the world in which they live. Second, PPR uses open-ended questions in a process that actively encourages poor people to guide investigation. As a result, it routinely uncovers critical information that professional researchers would never have known to seek. In contrast, surveys cannot provide a reliably complete picture of their subject because, in almost all instances, they use close-ended questions. Third,

PPR can contribute to democratisation by engaging citizens in policymaking processes.

A number of experiments that can provocatively be described as participatory policy research are being developed around the world. Examples include:

3.1 Policy Relevancy Tests

Policy Relevancy Tests have been conducted in Rwanda and Zanzibar. The methodology was initially developed by Action Aid and activist-academics at the University of Butare. It engages men and women of different ages and socio-economic status in focus groups assessing the (a.) relevance of national poverty reduction programs to community priorities and (b.) the impact of specific public policies (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Directorate of Strategic Planning and Poverty Reduction Monitoring, 2002).

According to a paper by Christian Aid (Bugingo, n.d.), roughly 10,000 people participated in the Rwanda PRT. Though coverage was imperfect – privileging, in particular, urban perspectives – the Tests were no less remarkable in terms of who they *did* manage to reach under difficult conditions. There is clearly room for improvement in this and other regards. The most important challenge is, arguably, for the methodology to ensure ordinary people are involved in formulating final policies rather than contributing only to initial analyses (*ibid.* 8). Regardless of these shortcomings, both the Rwanda and Zanzibar PRTs are noteworthy for demonstrating that policy analysis can be brought down to the community level.

3.2 A “Big Conversation” in the U.K.

In November 2003, the United Kingdom’s Labour Government initiated what it called the Big Conversation. It has been presented as a means (largely composed of focus group meetings between citizens, service providers and policymakers) to stimulate thought, share good ideas and develop practical solutions to pressing public concerns.

Sample questions from the “Big Discussion”:

- How do we build on economic stability?
- How do we do more to tackle poverty and inequality?
- How do we lead healthier lives?
- How do we make our communities safe?
- How do we give every child an excellent education?
- How do we balance work and family life?
- How do we ensure security and well-being in older age?

To the extent it has truly involved citizens in the analysis of social conditions and making difficult public policy choices – and to the degree that it really “re-engages” people in politics, as Tony Blair ostensibly hopes (White and Wintour 2003) – the Big Conversation is an innovative example of participatory policy research. Only time and in-depth analysis will tell if this is the case or if, as critics contend, it is merely a tool to legitimate and spread pre-conceived positions (Rawnsley, 2003).

In the meantime, there are grounds for concern. Although tens of thousands of people have submitted comments, this does not entail a conversation in any meaningful sense.² As one person put it, citizens are being asked to “E-mail [our] views, but everyone knows that from foundation hospitals to war in Iraq and tuition fees, Labour doesn't listen” (BBC News, 2003). Nor is the Labour Government answering

² The contrast with what Michael Edwards (n.d.) call “dialogic politics” is striking.

people's concerns. Indeed, the Big Conversation seems to have devolved into a monologue between two sides – each speaking past the other. Even so, this experiment remains noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, it is a rare example of an established representative democracy acknowledging that its form of government, in combination with a regimen of opinion polls, is an inadequate means of engaging the population in the development of public policies. Second, it suggests new ways in which modern technology can be used to facilitate communication between governments and people.

3.3 Citizen Report Cards

In response to growing concerns about the quality of public services, Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) were developed by civil society in Bangalore, India in 1993. The methodology recognises that service users possess a great deal of reliable information about whether, for instance, a public agency was actually able to solve their problem or they had to pay a bribe. This information is tapped through stratified, random sample surveys and amalgamated to score the quality, efficiency, and adequacy of services from users' point of view (Paul, 2004). The results are then used as a *starting point* for analysis and dialogue.

The CRC methodology developed in Bangalore has spread, and it is now being used nationwide in India as well as in Denmark, Kenya, Malawi, the Philippines, the United States and Vietnam. In these and still more countries, CRCs have been used to assess basic education; health services; water and sanitation; security forces/police

and the provision of credit; agricultural extension; and food rations. In doing so, the Report Cards have:

- Provided quantitative information which has helped government agencies improve the work they do;
- Assisted in prioritising reform efforts and allocating public resources;
- Communicated poor people's realities to government officials, decision makers and the public;
- Fostered public discussion and debate that, ultimately, built pressure for reform; and
- Treated users of public services as clients/customers whose voices matter in the design, delivery and assessment of government services

CRCs are particularly interesting because they demonstrate that conventional, close-ended survey questionnaires can stimulate and support a participatory *process* of meaningful dialogue, critical thinking and collaborative problem solving between citizens and the state.

3.4 Participatory Poverty Assessment

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are the most common form of meso- and macro-level participatory policy research in poor countries. They have been defined as “an instrument for including poor people's views in the analysis of poverty and the formulation of strategies to reduce it” (Norton, Bird, Brock, Kakande and Turk, 2001:6. See also: Brock, 2000 and Brocklesby and Holland, 1998). As such, the primary purpose of PPAs is to engage a wide variety of stakeholders – but, most

importantly, poor people – in the process of determining development ends and means. This goal is motivated by an interest in increasing the efficiency of poverty reduction efforts and by the belief that people have a right to influence decisions affecting their lives.

The first PPAs were conducted in Africa during the early 1990s. Together with information generated through surveys and individual interviews, their findings were meant by the World Bank to show the complex relationship between poverty profiles, public policies, expenditures and institutions (Narayan *et al.*, 2000:17). The methodology was quickly adopted by other institutions which subsequently applied it to their own needs. This adaptation led to the remarkably rapid evolution of PPAs to fill a variety of related niches.

Accordingly, the many goals of PPAs have grown to include:

- Providing critical information (especially qualitative/narrative data inaccessible to surveys) on which to base effective plans for poverty reduction;
- Building poor people's capacity to analyse and solve their problems;
- Stimulating local activities for poverty reduction (i.e. wide spread Community Based Planning) ;
- Raising poor people's awareness of their rights and responsibilities ;
- Changing policymakers' understanding of and attitudes towards poor people by involving government officials in the research process;

- Building governments’ capacity for poverty analysis and policy design; and
- Ensuring that Poverty Reduction Strategies reflect the priority needs of poor people

As Karin Brock (2000, 4) points out, “Not all PPAs aim to fulfil all these functions, and not all PPAs fulfil their objectives.” However, many are realised and have made important contributions to poverty reduction efforts at local, national and international levels.

Despite emergent differences between PPAs, their core beliefs, principles and methods are consistent and typical of participatory research in general. This includes:

- The belief that ordinary people are knowledgeable about, and are capable of particularly reliable and insightful analysis of their own life-circumstances;
- The principle that *all* people – irrespective of age, gender, level of formal education, etc. – have a fundamental right to participate in informing the decisions that shape their lives;
- The use of visual methods, such as Seasonal Calendars, Venn Diagrams, etc., to facilitate the meaningful involvement of people in the research process; and
- A commitment to sharing ownership of research results with local people and facilitating the identification



A group of young men add their perspectives to a resource map developed by women in Ndogowe village, Tanzania. This approach allowed the evolution of individual positions through dialogue.

of practical measures people can take to improve their lives

3.4.2 PPA versus PRA

The Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process (UPPAP) and the Tanzania Participatory Poverty Assessment (TzPPA) were designed to inform national-level policies. Other PPAs in Tanzania (as well as PPAs in Indonesia, Pakistan and Vietnam) have been designed to generate locally owned action-plans. Though all are referred to as “PPAs,” UPPAP and the TzPPA are examples of *participatory policy research* while the latter are scaled-up mechanisms for *participatory public planning* (as commonly associate with PRA/PLA).

When the goal is participatory public planning, researcher-facilitators typically encourage village assembly-sized meetings in which a critical degree of consensus can be fashioned around a specific course of action. In the process of pursuing this worthwhile goal, marginal perspectives and agendas for change are frequently left behind.

In contrast, participatory policy research does not need to develop “community consensus.” In order to fulfil its mandate and contribute to making well-informed policies at various levels of government, this type of PPA seeks to learn about the range of conditions people face, as well as their concerns, competing priorities, success stories, etc. Instead of determining a single course of action, these PPAs can – on the basis of such rich information – recommend hundreds. This is an ideal

outcome that would undermine the likelihood of participatory *planning* exercises leading anywhere at all.

4. Participatory Poverty Assessments in Uganda and Tanzania

Uganda's experimentation with participatory policy research dates to 1997, when the Government of Uganda (GoU) agreed to work together with a consortium of NGOs to initiate a continuous PPA "process" (UPPAP,1998). The consortium was led by Oxfam, in partnership with the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. Since its inception, UPPAP's purpose has been 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" (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2005).

Specific topics for research were selected by asking policy makers what they wanted to know more about and subsequently conducting a desk review to identify relevant knowledge-gaps. This procedure led UPPAP to examine governance, people's knowledge of existing policies and their experiences of policy implementation, in addition to typical issues such as service delivery and perceptions of poverty (Bird and Kakande, 2001:44)

In 1999, multi-sectoral, inter-disciplinary teams then conducted research for up to two weeks in each of thirty-six communities. All but two of these rural and urban sites were selected because they were especially poor. This approach to site selection maximised opportunities for the country's poorest people to communicate their

experiences and priority problems. Nonetheless, it also meant that UPPAP's research results were less representative of conditions in Uganda as a whole. This shortcoming undermined some of the knowledge-claims made in UPPAP's main report (McGee, 2000). Some international critics resolutely focused on these interpretative errors. However, attention within Uganda quickly moved on to the report's strengths, as well as those of UPPAP's district reports, district capacity needs assessments and policy briefing papers which were published within the context of a careful communication and advocacy strategy.

UPPAP's second cycle, which began in 2001, saw a number of changes. The most important of these were its research topic (which was narrowed to address a single theme, namely the relationship between poverty and the environment) and leadership (which changed hands from an outspoken international NGO to ministry personnel). Also, research sites were chosen to be more broadly representative of conditions in Uganda as a whole.

The history of PPAs in Tanzania is longer than that of Uganda. Indeed, the first was conducted in 1993 by the World Bank, whilst in 1997/8 the United Nations Development Programme commissioned a PPA in Shinyanga Region to inform a Human Development Report. The 1993 World Bank PPA illuminated aspects of poverty and wellbeing important to poor people themselves. It also showed how surveys can distort our understanding of poverty by papering-over the unequal access to economic and non-economic resources experienced by individuals in the same household. Indeed, findings from this PPA contributed to growing recognition of poor communities and households as heterogeneous units whose members face an

array of circumstances demanding a range of policy responses. In stark contrast, the Shinyanga PPA worked in a single region. It built the capacity of local government staff to engage in participatory planning and provided key information for a UNDP Human Development Report.

Both these “first generation PPAs,” as distinguished by Norton *et al.* (2001:9), were designed to collect information about the nature, causes and consequences of poverty from the perspectives of poor people. They did this well and provided policymakers with essential information about the complexity, seasonality, etc. of poverty in Tanzania. Unfortunately neither PPA was designed as a comprehensive process to inform and influence national policy. As a result their impact was limited. The 2002/3 TzPPA was different. It was initiated by the Government of Tanzania (GoT) in order to inform the first revision of GoT’s *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, or *National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty* (NSGRP)

In contributing to the NSGRP, the 2002/3 TzPPA was tasked to explore the causes, consequences and policy implications of “vulnerability” – a term frequently used in Government’s first PRS (and many donor documents) without substantial clarity about its meaning. Research for the TzPPA was conducted in thirty sites spread throughout the country. They were chosen to represent the diversity of livelihood conditions (namely: agriculture, livestock-keeping, fishing and town-based work) experienced in the country as a whole. Research teams were composed of six people from local and central government, as well as national and international Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and they lived for up to three weeks in each site.

The Civil Society/Government consortium implementing the TzPPA ended in December 2004, at which point all research results were transferred to a Government Working Group under the auspices of its national Poverty Monitoring System. Since then, the Working Group has taken responsibility for publishing the main report, an executive summary and 15,000 copies of a “popularised” version of the main report for distribution throughout the country.

There are no immediate plans to conduct another PPA in Tanzania or institutionalise the TzPPA in an ongoing “process” comparable to UPPAP.

4.2 Empowerment

Both UPPAP and the 2002/3 TzPPA cost in excess of US\$1 million to implement, and it is important to ask whether they were worth their high price tags. Because participatory research typically lists empowerment – both in terms of strengthening capacities and redressing power imbalances – as a major goal it, is one reasonable measure.³

The methods through which UPPAP and the TzPPA generated their findings contributed to participants developing a deeper understanding of local realities. As evidenced by the ways in which they sometimes took these insights and transformed them into action, a degree of “empowerment” took place at the grassroots (Yates,

³ The UPPAP field guide states, “UPPAP has adopted participatory methods as a vehicle for... empowering communities to use local knowledge and strengths towards poverty reduction” (UPPAP, 1998:5). In contrast, the TzPPA field guide explicitly advised researchers to play down immediate, local-level benefits from community involvement in the research process (Ehrhart, 2002).

2000:35; Ehrhart, 2003). Nonetheless, this should not be overstated. Because the presence of PPA teams in each community was fleeting compared to the long-term partnerships that characterise effective community-based planning, the extent to which they strengthened local capacities, shifted perceptions and influenced power relations was inevitably limited.

Nor is it clear that the TzPPA or UPPAP meaningfully redressed, or empowered poor people to redress power imbalances between themselves and the state. By naming and shaming corrupt district officials, UPPAP certainly caused a stir and, in some cases, remedial action by authorities wishing to placate their angry constituencies (Yates, 2000:32). However, this remedy never eventuated in institutionalised citizen oversight or a fundamental change in power relations. Though its Government-headed Steering Committee instructed the TzPPA to avoid even this limited level of support to grassroots grievances, research teams purposely created spaces wherein people could challenge local authorities. The results were sometimes explosive and, in some instances, almost certainly led to change. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences of these events have not been documented.

The impact of UPPAP and the TzPPA is more evident at the national level, at least in part because they incorporated specific activities to strengthen civil society vis-à-vis the state,



In Tanzania, participants drawn from civil society, government (central ministries and local authorities), and multi- as well as bi-lateral donors, collaborated to understand information developed at the grassroots.

private sector and donors. This incorporation did not endear these studies to the *status quo*. However, they survived and, at times, even thrived, due to the patronage of small but powerful coteries of conventional power holders. This precarious dependency necessitated that the PPAs walk a political tightrope. For the most part, this was managed by facilitating others to engage in pro-poor advocacy. This led the TzPPA to produce a popular version of its report and hire only the full time staff of poverty-focused NGOs who would feel ownership over research results and a commitment to assertively carry them forward into policy arenas. It also led UPPAP to convene lively, open policy debates routinely drawing members of parliament, senior ministry officials, students and social activists.

In both countries, these activities helped civil society to better understand and communicate people's experiences of poverty and exert political pressure for positive social change. In Uganda, at least, it also improved relations between civil society organisations and the government (Yates, 2000:31). This improvement may amount to the empowerment of poor people by proxy and, as such, it is surely less than ideal. Yet realistic alternatives are unclear since effective advocacy – especially at macro levels – requires contacts, planning and a command of relevant information that is simply inaccessible to most poor people.

4.1 Policy impact

UPPAP and the TzPPA generated a great deal of high quality, practical information that could not have been developed through conventional research methodologies. By immediately feeding back their findings through simple reports and presentations at

village and district levels, they were able to effect local development (Ehrhart, 2003; Bird and Kakande, 2001; Yates, 2000).

The best examples of local-level change set in motion by the TzPPA took place in Ilala Municipal District, Dar es Salaam Region, where the Municipal Council Economic Planner participated in the research process for three intensive weeks. Afterwards, he returned to his office to discuss the experience with colleagues. They decided to identify appropriate responses through dialogue with community representatives, and this culminated in:

- Provision of counseling services to drug-users seeking to break their addiction;
- Provision of counseling and other forms of targeted assistance (such as training in alternative employment and soft loans) to Commercial Sex Workers;
- A new strategy to encourage equal provision of schooling opportunities to girl and boy children. This strategy, unlike those in the past, begins from an understanding of local ideas about gender and education; and
- The creation (by community members) of transparent criteria for priority support from “good Samaritans” to especially poor local households

Whilst cases of directly attributable change at the local level are plentiful, the impact of UPPAP and the TzPPA on national-level policies is less clear. Both PPAs and the *Bitter Seeds* and *Tender Shoots* studies conducted for the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and World Bank in the Gambia have shown that “communities are capable of devising and assessing socially acceptable and culturally sensitive ‘best-bet’ initiatives to address their educational problems...” (Kane, Bruce and O’Reilly de Brun, 1998:35-36). In other words, ordinary people can make sound policy

recommendations when they are provided with important information through dialogue and debate with policymakers.

Despite the potential demonstrated by such precedents, neither UPPAP nor the TzPPA were designed to develop policies in partnership with poor people. UPPAP spoke with communities about their problems and solicited development wish-lists. As a result, its main report had little to contribute in terms of sophisticated policy recommendations coming from the grassroots. It did, however, provide a number of observations, insights and powerfully illustrative case studies to social activists, donors and government authorities.

According to the assessment of UPPAP's major donor and government champions (Bird and Kakande, 2001:51), UPPAP brought about a number significant policy changes including:

- The decentralization of budget-*item* decisions to districts allowing, for instance, local government to decide how to spend their health or infrastructure budgets ;
- A substantial increase in the proportion of Uganda's national budget allocated to water and sanitation services;
- Improved mechanisms to monitor local-level Poverty Action Funds expenditures (Edgerton *et al.*, 2000);
- Creation of a National Information Strategy; and
- An emphasis in Uganda's second *Poverty Eradication Action Plan* on improving governance, service delivery and information flows (Yates, 2000: 28).

UPPAP is also given credit (Yates, 2000:30-31) for having provided the World Bank with a better understanding of poverty and influencing its Country Assistance Strategy (2001-3); reinforcing the Swedish aid strategy's focus on human rights, democracy and poverty alleviation; and assisting the Department for International Development's (DfID) personnel to appreciate "a whole new set of issues such as powerlessness and the importance of poor people having information on government policies and their rights and entitlements."

As noted by even its most ardent supporters, it may be simplistic to attribute these changes directly to UPPAP (Bird and Kakande, 2001:50). With regards to World Bank Poverty Assessments, Norton and Stephens (1995:13) write, "[the] policy impacts of specific PPAs can be difficult to measure. The PPA is only one of a number of influences on the recommendations of the main document of a Poverty Assessment. In turn, the Poverty Assessment itself influences policy, but in many cases it is only one of a number of factors that influence any specific policy change" (see also Robb, 1999:26). The same principle – and caution when making causal claims – applies to UPPAP.

In practice, UPPAP's findings were used by 'movers and shakers' to legitimate and more effectively leverage their pre-determined agendas (including fiscal decentralization and the provision of safe water as a major development goal). Analysis by the then DfID Social Development Advisor and head of GoU's Poverty Monitoring Unit illustrates how and why this happened (Bird and Kakande, 2001:50):

Not all of the policy responses can be attributed entirely to UPPA, in many cases they have confirmed what has been ‘suspected’ or enhanced the focus on issues that have been highlighted in other studies or surveys. The power of the UPPAP material however, is that it does represent poor people’s views, and in a context where political commitment to poverty eradication is high, and political leaders are increasingly being called to account for their promises to the electorate, this carries considerable weight.

The agendas pushed forward with the help of UPPAP’s findings were genuinely pro-poor. Yet some of the *major* concerns of poor people themselves – namely, chronic insecurity and detrimental macro-economic policies – were left behind when political elites selectively mined UPPAP’s reports. This is alarming but, perhaps, not entirely surprising. With regards to participatory policy research, *participation* implies “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them” (Edgerton *et al.*, 2000:2). As such, UPPAP was an exercise in opportunistic consultations with poor people (wherein politically expedient issues were taken forward whilst sensitive cries about structural adjustment policies, the brutality of government officials and war in the north were disregarded) rather than a truly participatory experiment in pro-poor policy making.

This critique may appear overly harsh, for governments surely can’t be expected to adhere verbatim to recommendations from the grassroots. Of course not, as one of governments’ responsibilities is to balance the concerns of individuals and particular social groups/regions with others – and all of this against financial constraints, etc. But the majority of policymakers still see themselves as having no obligation to either negotiate or explain their decisions to the public. Until this changes, it seems likely

that political elites will continue to use research results that support their positions and disregard those which are, for whatever reason, unpalatable.

The main report of the TzPPA, ostensibly commissioned by GoT to inform its *National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty*, was not printed and distributed until a year after its contents had been approved. This substantial time lag would have precluded its use in debates about the NSGRP had it not been for the report's unofficial circulation by CSOs involved in the research. Other outputs from the TzPPA were abruptly cancelled by Government. Most notably, a television show in which people from four villages were given an opportunity to produce half-hour films about vulnerability (in their own style and words). According to a senior official in the Vice President's Office, this was largely due to the intolerably "rude" comments of one seventeen year old boy who opined that the often hopeless plight of urban youth could destabilise the Government – as it had in other African countries – if not addressed.

Despite these challenges, final drafts of the TzPPA's main report and executive summary spread amongst institutions concerned with the national policy framework for poverty reduction. This report differs from that of UPPAP in several ways. For instance, the main report incorporates much more elaborate social and economic analysis, including: a comparison of community members' understanding of vulnerability with that of academics, the World Food Programme, etc. and the use of other studies on HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality to contextualise the PPA's location-specific findings. The TzPPA's main report also avoided development wish-lists. Instead, it focused on the dynamics driving poverty and sought to identify the

most strategic areas in which to concentrate poverty reduction efforts. As such, the TzPPA's report was highly proscriptive despite Government having censored a chapter of recommendations developed through dialogue between various ministries, the World Bank, UNDP, university and NGOs.

Again, it is difficult to assess, much less conclusively attribute, policy changes to the TzPPA. Yet the NSGRP marks a radical departure from positions outlined in GoT's first PRS to priorities set out by the TzPPA. Indeed, the NSGRP explicitly recognises macro-economic policies during the last decade (a.k.a. "structural adjustment policies"), corruption and irresponsible environmental management as major impoverishing forces; and it now places them at the centre of GoT's poverty reduction strategy.

In this case, the TzPPA helped shape, through a number of direct and indirect conduits, the position of influential movers and shakers in the policymaking process. It is worth considering, even if unanswerable, whether this would have happened if its final report had been a purer, less elaborated upon recitation of what poor people had said.

5. Conclusions

Experiments are taking place in both wealthy and poor countries to engage ordinary people in gathering *and analysing* information for policymaking purposes. This exercise has led to better information whose "legitimacy" – in coming from the

grassroots – has been a salient point that some elites have capitalised upon to lobby selective changes.

In some cases, even urban citizen groups have been able to effectively wield participatory research to influence policy outcomes (Balakrishnan n.d.).⁴ This influence has not occurred in either Uganda or Tanzania. UPPAP has, though, been credited with:

- Identifying priority development needs at local and national levels;
- Improving policymakers’ understanding of poverty by revealing, for example, important distinctions between the nature of rural versus urban poverty;
- Catalyzing and facilitating pro-poor planning in line ministries; and
- Enhancing working relations between government and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) (Bird and Kakande, 2001; Yates, 2000:31)

Albeit to a lesser extent, the TzPPA has also affected the spaces in which policy decisions are made. Despite these meaningful contributions to our understanding of poverty and to opening up policymaking processes, a number of limitations and questions remain. For instance:

- Participatory policy research is time-consuming and expensive in comparison with the process of elites meeting behind closed doors, speculating about citizens’ lives and setting policy. To what extent, when and how can different methodologies be strategically integrated into national research agendas?
- Participatory policy research is most effective when used in combination with other techniques suited to capturing the broad, spatial dimensions of social

⁴ The confluence between participatory research and the emergence of “dialogic politics” is especially interesting.

phenomena. In other words, participatory research can generate quantitative and qualitative information about people's lives, what they do in response, etc. However, it cannot identify the scope of certain conditions or practices across a region or country (see: Carvalho and White, 1997). What are the best ways, including sequencing, to combine participatory and survey-based research?

- Many development issues are extraordinarily complex and far removed from the direct experience of ordinary people. Therefore, it might be impossible to rigorously examine some issues through participatory research without demanding too much of people's time. What techniques can be used to expand the repertoire of important issues that participatory research can address?
- Not everyone in a community will want to invest their time in the process of participatory research – especially when they expect a welfare relationship to government or lack faith that their efforts will be heard and listened to. Moreover, many people lack the self-confidence to work with outsiders. How can these people be reliably reached and involved in participatory policy research?
- Participatory research does not “help” conventional decision-makers. To the contrary, it is much easier for them to make decisions without the information provided by PPAs, etc. Good research exposes competing interests, challenges orthodox assumptions and reveals complexities that make decision-making very, very difficult. The more that reports try to analyze options and guide decisions, the more accessible and helpful they become to decision-makers. However, this entails making the authors' voices stronger and stronger at the expense of poor people's voices. Where is the balance point?
- It would be counterproductive (and logistically impossible) to involve all stakeholders in participatory policy research. How do we maximize – and how do

we know how closely we have achieved – “representivity” (as distinct from representation)?

Experience with participatory policy research has convinced civil society organizations as well as governments, donors and the international financial institutions that are worth replicating. However, this long list of outstanding questions calls out to be addressed by rigorous studies aiming to improve research and policy-making processes. The burning need to reduce poverty and realize people’s right to share in shaping public policies demands nothing less.

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