



Chapter 1

Perspectives of the Poor

Summary

This book is based on the realities of poor people. It draws upon research conducted in 1999 involving over 20,000 poor women and men from 23 countries. Despite very different political, social and economic contexts, there are striking similarities in poor people's experiences. The common theme underlying poor people's experiences is one of powerlessness. Powerlessness consists of multiple and interlocking dimensions of illbeing or poverty. The organization of this book roughly follows the 10 dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing that emerge from the study. The remainder of the chapter presents the methodology and the challenges faced in conducting the study.

Introduction

Nobody hears the poor. It is the rich who are being heard.

—Participant, discussion group of men and women,
Borg Meghezal, Egypt

When they assist you they treat you like a beggar.

—Participant, discussion group of men and women,
Vila Junqueira, Brazil

There are 2.8 billion poverty experts, the poor themselves. Yet the development discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor—professionals, politicians and agency officials. This book seeks to reverse this imbalance by focusing directly on the perspectives and expertise of poor people. It is based on a study that used open-ended participatory methods to engage more than 20,000 poor women and men from 23 countries to express their own perspectives and experiences of poverty, its causes and how it can be reduced.¹

From poor people's perspectives, illbeing or bad quality of life is much more than just material poverty. It has multiple, interlocking dimensions. The dimensions combine to create and sustain powerlessness, a lack of freedom of choice and action. Each dimension can cause or compound the others. Not all apply all the time or in every case, but many apply much of the time. For those caught in multiple deprivations, escape is a struggle. To describe this trap poor people use the metaphor of bondage, of slavery, of being tied like bundles of straw. The psychological experience of multiple deprivations is intense and painful. Ten interlocking dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing emerge from poor people's experiences:

- ▶ Livelihoods and assets are precarious, seasonal and inadequate.
- ▶ Places of the poor are isolated, risky, unserved and stigmatized.
- ▶ The body is hungry, exhausted, sick and poor in appearance.
- ▶ Gender relations are troubled and unequal.
- ▶ Social relations are discriminating and isolating.
- ▶ Security is lacking in the sense of both protection and peace of mind.
- ▶ Behaviors of those more powerful are marked by disregard and abuse.
- ▶ Institutions are disempowering and excluding.
- ▶ Organizations of the poor are weak and disconnected.
- ▶ Capabilities are weak because of the lack of information, education, skills and confidence.

These 10 dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing are examined in the chapters that follow; they form the core organizational structure of the book.

This chapter describes the origins of the study, the methodology and some of the challenges faced, and chapter 2 explores in some detail the multidimensional nature of wellbeing and illbeing. Chapters 3–11 then address the core findings. Chapter 3 focuses on poor people’s livelihoods and coping strategies as well as their limited assets. Chapter 4 describes the places where poor people live and work, and how the lack of infrastructure and services adds to their disempowerment and difficulties. Chapter 5 focuses on the body as poor people’s most valuable and sometimes only asset; it includes a discussion of poor people’s experiences in accessing health services. Chapter 6 turns to changes in gender roles and the stress on gender relations within the household. Chapter 7 focuses on the many different forms of social exclusion. Chapter 8 explores the many meanings of insecurity and related fears and anxieties experienced by poor men and women. Chapter 9 details the behavior and character of institutions, both the qualities cherished by poor people in institutions with which they have contact and the quality of their interaction with these institutions. Chapter 10 describes the most important institutions in poor people’s lives and their ratings of effective and ineffective institutions. Chapter 11 brings these dimensions together into a many-stranded web of powerlessness. It particularly focuses on the lack of capability, including lack of information, education, skills and confidence that together with all the other deprivations contribute to poor people’s powerlessness. The final chapter is a call to action and dwells on the challenge of change.

Origin of the Study

The *Voices of the Poor* study, also known as the *Consultations with the Poor* study, was undertaken by the World Bank as background for the *World Development Report 2000/01: Attacking Poverty (WDR 2000/01)* and to inform poverty reduction strategies.² Its origins lie in the conviction that at the start of the 21st century any policy document on poverty should be based on the experiences, reflections, aspirations and priorities of poor people themselves. The aim of the study was to enable a wide range of poor people—women and men, young and old—in diverse countries and conditions to share their views in such a way that they could inform and contribute to the concepts and content of the *WDR 2000/01*.

The Study Process

The idea of a participatory poverty study to inform the *WDR 2000/01* emerged in the summer of 1998. It became immediately clear that something like this had never been attempted before. It was also clear that such a study would have to be done on a fairly large scale and completed quickly if it was to inform the *WDR 2000/01*. Planning the study brought out many tensions and differences: between those who thought the study should be done in great depth in four to six countries and those who thought the study should be done in at least 20 countries; between carrying

out an analysis of existing data and conducting new studies; between using participatory open-ended methods and precoded questionnaires; and between a more flexible research design that gave freedom to country researchers to choose issues and participatory methods and more standardization of the methodology.

An Evolving Framework

The methodological discussions engaged staff within the World Bank and researchers in civil society. Three methodological workshops were held in August and December 1998 and in January 1999. The framework for the study evolved during these meetings. It was decided that a range of participatory methods would be used; that the study would be conducted in 20 countries with the expectation of success in 15 (in the end studies were completed in 23 countries); that the range of issues would be limited and the study undertaken according to a prepared methodology guide with room for local adaptation; and that a systematic review of existing studies would be conducted while the new comparative studies were undertaken.

While the framework for the study was evolving, a draft methodology guide was developed and field tested in November 1998 in Bolivia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka by local research teams. Based on this experience and advice from participatory specialists, the methodology was refined and the final methodology guide developed by January 1999.³ This was translated into Spanish as well as Russian, Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese.

Focus of the Study

After much discussion, the scope of the inquiry concentrated on four themes:

- ▶ ***Wellbeing and illbeing***, as defined and experienced by poor people. The study used the local words and concepts of poor people to elicit their ideas about security, risk, vulnerability, opportunities, social exclusion, and crime and conflict; their perception of how their conditions had changed over time; and how households and individuals coped with changes in wellbeing.
- ▶ ***Problems and priorities*** of different groups and how these had changed. Poor men, women and youth identified priority problems and solutions, and who could play what role in solving the problems.
- ▶ ***Role of institutions***, specifically, the role that public, civic and market institutions play in people's lives; the criteria poor people use in evaluating institutions; to what extent they felt they had control or influence over them; and which institutions supported them in coping with crisis.

- ▶ *Gender relations*, changes in gender relations, roles, decision-making and violence within the household and the community, including whether women were better or worse off than in the past and how women fared as compared with men.⁴

Discussions on these topics were held in small groups of men, women, the elderly, youth and sometimes with groups that included a mix of men and women. A range of participatory methods was used. Participants sometimes prepared drawings as a tool for sharing and deepening their discussion and analyses. The research teams were encouraged to explore other topics as they emerged. Throughout, the intention was to enable poor people to express the realities of their experience in their own words.

Country Selection

Country selection was guided by the need to represent different continents and contexts while finding in-country partners who could undertake the research and follow-up. The study was conducted in 23 countries of Africa and the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and East Asia (see table 1.1). Insights into the experiences of those living in countries that have experienced recent civil conflict and war come from poor people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Somaliland and Sri Lanka.

To increase the probability of follow-up action, the study proceeded only in countries where a group with capacity for follow-up action at the policy, project, or community level took clear ownership of the study. This was achieved through a negotiated process of cost sharing. The study project was announced widely throughout the World Bank and staff were invited to express interest, identify programs and policies that would be

Table 1.1 Countries Involved in the Study

Africa and the Middle East	Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and the Caribbean	South and East Asia
Egypt	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Argentina	Bangladesh
Ethiopia	Bulgaria	Brazil	India
Ghana	Kyrgyz Republic	Bolivia	Indonesia
Malawi	Russia	Ecuador	Sri Lanka
Nigeria	Uzbekistan	Jamaica	Thailand
Somaliland			Vietnam
Uganda			
Zambia			

informed by the study, contribute matching funds and seek government interest and ownership. In four countries the study was managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—Bangladesh, Bolivia, India and Somaliland. In Jamaica, Malawi and Nigeria the study was conducted in close collaboration with the field offices of the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID).

In many areas where the study was associated with NGOs, follow-up action was almost immediate as findings were fed into ongoing programs. In many countries workshops have been held with government, civil society and the private sector, and the study is beginning to influence development strategies.

Site Selection: Representativeness

Given the constraints of time and resources, national research teams purposively selected 8–15 communities (typically neighborhoods in urban areas and villages in rural areas) to be representative of the most prevalent groups of poor people and a diverse range of people and conditions in that country.⁵ A typical example of the site selection process comes from Indonesia, where researchers write:

There was much discussion with the Government of Indonesia, NGO poverty specialists, and World Bank staff before sites could be selected. Since the locations that could be covered were only 10 or 12, a nationally representative sample was clearly out of the question. The consensus to focus on the island of Java emerged from the fact that Java has the largest number as well as the highest concentration of the country's poor and is the region hit the hardest by the economic crisis. In order to have some representation of the rest of the country, the choice fell on the Nusa Tenggara islands, which have livelihood patterns and geo-climatic features very different from Java. The decision was made to select 8 out of 12 sites on Java and 4 sites on the NTB-NTT islands. The final selection of communities was made in consultation with district level government personnel and NGOs to ensure a mix of rural and urban sites, a mix of hilly, coastal, and plain sites and a mix of remote and accessible communities.

The objective of representing significant diversity usually was achieved by sampling to include communities from different agroecological zones and regions of the country as well as to ensure inclusion of minority groups, refugees, or other locally relevant unique conditions. In Bulgaria, for example, researchers sampled both rural and urban areas and tried to get some national distribution. In addition one community was chosen to

represent a minority group. The Russian sites included the town of Dzerzhinsk in the Volga region of central Russia, 400 kilometers from Moscow, an area selected for its environmental pollution and known as the “chemical capital of the country and in constant danger of a technical catastrophe.” People there said, “We live on pins and needles all the time. If something happens at the chemical plant, it’ll be like a hydrogen bomb. Nothing will be left in the whole area.” In India two different states were selected, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, to contrast areas that are very different in terms of government effectiveness.

In some countries the selection of communities was influenced by the presence of World Bank or NGO activities. In Brazil the study was designed to support the formulation of an urban strategy; hence a diverse set of urban sites was selected. In Bangladesh and in India communities were chosen in areas where NGOs were already working to ensure use of local data and to facilitate access to the communities. The data in these two countries may be particularly biased by the concentrated presence of NGO assistance.

Using this sampling process, field studies were conducted and analyzed in 23 countries, in close to 300 communities. In India, Jamaica and Uzbekistan one proposed site had to be abandoned in each country because of hostility or violence, particularly in urban slums. During one discussion group in Brazil, a local drug dealer burst into the room carrying a gun because he felt threatened by reports of groups discussing crime and drugs. Fortunately he left quietly. In another community, youths worried about the safety of researchers because of a killing in the neighborhood, escorted the team out of the community before discussions could be completed.

The diversity of sampling procedures means that not every type of poverty was studied, nor are the data nationally representative. This affects the types of statements that can be made, and that are made, in this book.

Within communities researchers used a variety of techniques to reach poor men and women as well as, where possible, groups of elderly and youth. Research teams did not always have control over who participated in the study. Within each community team leaders relied on different methods in forming groups of poor people to conduct small group discussions. In some cases, community contacts from within the community or outside helped in forming groups. In some cases, “poor” people were identified after a discussion of what is poverty or wellbeing and the characteristics of different wellbeing groups in that community. While every attempt was made to sample poor people, sometimes the less poor were present in group discussions. There is probably an underrepresentation of the very poor in discussion groups, people who are often excluded or exclude themselves from community meetings. In each community research teams held group discussions with men, women and youth as well as individual interviews focusing on life stories or case studies of those who had escaped poverty and those who were always poor or were once better off but had become poor.⁶

Experiences in the Field

Fieldwork never proceeds according to the researcher's wishes and plans. This study is no exception. In Ecuador, for example, the fieldwork started just as the country plunged into financial crisis and all bank accounts were frozen. In all countries the methodology had to be constantly adapted to field conditions: compromises were made, challenges faced and solutions generated. The quotations in this section represent the voices of the local researchers who conducted the research in the 23 countries.

The Pressure of Time

On average each research team member worked 14–15 hours per day. Long hours working, excessive heat at daytime, and walking long distances to reach the village made one team member sick.

—Research team, Gowainghat, Bangladesh

The extreme poor are also often hidden.

—Research team, Jamaica

All research teams felt the time crunch. While the rapid completion of the country studies is a tribute to the in-country researchers' commitment, it was not without impact on the quality of the data. Even though researchers worked long hours, they sometimes had to make compromises in numbers of people and whom they reached, depth of probing, depth of the analyses and feedback to communities.

When time is short, it is easier to conduct discussion groups or hold interviews with those present. In Sri Lanka, for example, research teams in many places found it sometimes difficult to schedule meetings with villagers when it was "convenient to them and without any hindrance to their normal day-to-day work." This problem was particularly acute in villages where beedi (leaf-rolled cigarettes) manufacturing was the main source of income and payment was on a piece-rate basis: "The villagers were very particular about the number of hours they work. They do not even spare the time to attend the 'Samurdhi meetings.' The time they reluctantly spared for us was limited, and sometimes we had to get information from them while they were at work. This also in a way affected our survey."

Similarly in Bangladesh, researchers found it difficult to reach men during the day. As in other countries, this was overcome by scheduling late-night meetings well in advance.

In one community in Malawi only five of the eight scheduled discussion groups could be held. The team leader notes:

This situation came because it was rather difficult to mobilize men who spend most of the day at work and only come home

in the evening. According to our contact person, the chief himself, most men do not stay home even on Saturdays because they use their time to do other activities to supplement their income. Secondly, on the scheduled dates, there were funerals in the neighborhood such that the chief excused himself from our team to facilitate and organize the funeral ceremony. Thirdly, on the rescheduled date, three of the facilitators had diarrhea and could not join the team to the field. This, however, did not affect the process because the people did not turn up either. The research team did not therefore prepare a date for feedback on the research to the community.

While in some places the very poor people, those most marginalized in society, were included in the study, these people were often absent from or silent during group discussions. Still, in some places, as will be seen, glimpses were obtained about the realities of their lives. In Indonesia, for example, researchers systematically scheduled meeting times two days in advance with people from poorer parts of communities. In Dimitrovgrad, Bulgaria researchers spent time with children from residential institutions for the retarded. They write, "Few of the students were actually retarded, the overwhelming majority being either abandoned or orphaned children who ended up at this institution since they had nowhere else to go." In Moscow teams met with Tajik refugees and in Bulgaria with Roma groups.

The study was conducted during only one season of the year. In Sredno Selo, Bulgaria the researchers write, "Spring had come in full force by the time fieldwork began, 12 April. The villagers had pressing seasonal tasks to perform: raking of meadows, building fences around them, grazing livestock before a communal cowherd and shepherd have been hired, preparing the ground for planting onions, garlic, and potatoes." In Bangladesh it was the rainy season and heavy rains made some urban slums mud holes, which were very difficult to get to. In Vietnam, in Ha Tinh Province, it was the hottest and driest period of the year. The seasonal effect of the 1998 World Cup football in France was not anticipated and affected the first round of fieldwork, as many people watched football matches during late night and early morning hours.

In some countries, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, researchers paid people small amounts of money for participation in discussion groups. In other countries, snacks, coffee, or tea served halfway through or at the end of discussions were greatly appreciated by participants.

Establishing Trust

There was an element of suspicion among the villagers. It was hard to explain the study objectives to all the villagers in an equal manner during a short period of time.

—Research team, Elhena, Sri Lanka

Local authorities did not trust our explanation about the purposes and security of results of our investigations. That is why they warned the group participants about the necessity to remember the proverb, “Talking men will die without a disease.” It was not a threat of homicide, but was notice of possible troubles.

—Research team, Takhtakupyr, Uzbekistan

This was our very first site. We wanted it to succeed.

—Research team, Kajima, Ethiopia

Research teams knew well the critical importance of establishing trust. A variety of methods was used to build rapport. Most teams included men and women researchers so as to ease the approach to both men and women. In many countries, teams entered communities with written permits from the government and after briefing local government authorities. The Somaliland report describes one common approach used by the research teams:

Each team leader was responsible for establishing contact with the village or site committee, elder, or headman. It was agreed that at least one respected person from the village should accompany the team to perform the initial introductions, even though most of the team members were not strangers in these villages.

When the teams arrived at the site they requested a meeting with the village elders to explain the purpose of their visit. Individual members would also visit the public places (tea shops, mosques and grocery stores) to establish rapport and familiarize themselves with the community. The first morning of the visit was generally spent in getting acquainted....

The meeting with the elders provided the background of the village and primary information about its people and livelihoods. This meeting also produced suggestions for possible times and places to meet with various community groups.... After initial introductions, all teams reported pastoral people were easy to get along with and their famous hospitality was evident throughout their stay in the village.

In order to learn more about the community and improve acceptance by the community, study team members participated in the community activities, such as watering livestock or collecting wild berries. They also attended social functions like marriage sermons and evening prayers in the mosque.

In many countries, including Indonesia and Jamaica, researchers started their work with a “transect walk,” simply walking through a community, stopping to greet people along the way, introducing themselves and learning about the community. Researchers in Bower Bank, Jamaica write:

On the first day, all team members walked slowly across through the only road leading in and out of Bower Bank.... The team conducted a transect accompanied by Janet, the community representative... it was a public holiday, Labor Day, and a very good day for a transect as almost everyone was involved in a Labor Day project....

As the week progressed the women participated willingly in our discussion. In contrast the men, especially the young, appeared to be distrustful of our presence and remained skeptical. One young man recalled an incident where his friend had participated in a previous interview and was later assassinated, as a result of his picture being made public.... In order to gain their attention they had to be coaxed and interviewed at their place of relaxation, i.e., on the street, at the domino table, or their smoking corner; unlike the women, who led their own sessions inside the central office.... Interviews were carried out in competition with the surrounding noise, hindrances from passing cars, construction work, children playing, inquisitive passersby, and interruptions by the mentally unstable who are often found wandering through the community.

In some places, despite the best intentions, establishing trust proved harder than was at first apparent as researchers stumbled into local politics and power rivalries. In Kajima, Ethiopia one of the first things that researchers learned was that the community was the result of a merger three years previously of three different communities. The significance of this fact struck the researchers when they realized that the current leader had invited participants only from his part of the community, excluding the other two leaders and their communities. Hence there were not enough people to form eight discussion groups. To correct this problem, researchers decided to return later. They write, “When we went back two days later...we didn’t like the atmosphere. Word had gone out that the current Chair of the association had included only his people in the consultations. There was some tension as a result. We thought it would be better to leave and settle with six [eight were planned] discussion groups in the community than to stay and further aggravate the situation.”

The difficulties in establishing trust were fiercest in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia sites. In Bulgaria researchers write, “During the preliminary research, the team had experienced some difficulties in gathering focus

groups; we were suspected to be either an American religious sect or spies; so we decided to change tactics and to rely on traditional Bulgarian ways of contacting people: ...through previous contacts, friends, and during informal evening discussions and social gatherings.”

In the refugee camp of Bratunac, Bosnia and Herzegovina research teams found, “Gaining the confidence and willingness of camp residents to participate [took] more effort than normal, as residents were highly suspicious toward outsiders, particularly toward anyone associated with international organizations, as many people have been through the camp and made promises that nothing ever came of.”

The most extreme suspicion was experienced in Uzbekistan, not by community people, but by local authorities. In one community, the team reports:

After discussion of the causes of poverty, some people were frightened by their own frank words, and gave notice to the local militia that the vakhhabtists (revolutionaries) are visiting their aul, asking questions about rich and poor people, about reasons for poverty and sources of poverty and agitating poor people about rich people and authorities. On April 7th our house was encircled by a group of soldiers with automatic guns. They took our passports and documents and arrested us, and the next day the whole group was evicted from the district. After examination of our documents, and determining that we were not vakhhabtists, two weeks later our group was allowed to continue work in the same site.

Unprepared to Deal with Loss, Grief and Anger

When pursuing the case study, participants were asked to relive painful memories, which resulted in one respondent crying as his memory unfolded. This was painful to both him and the team member.

—Research team, Bower Bank, Jamaica

All research teams received field-based training in participatory research methods. One major oversight was the psychological preparation of the teams themselves to deal with the emotional intensity of being with poor people for a month or more while facilitating free-flowing discussions about their lives. In addition, researchers felt they were not equipped to deal with the emotional stress, grief and despair that was sometimes unleashed among participants as a result of questions about poverty.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the team leader writes, “Two of our note-takers, young men, were strongly affected by the process. Milos crying silently while taking notes during one discussion group, and Dado having nightmares and tension headaches after fieldwork.”

In Takhtakupyr, Uzbekistan groups included very poor people who became upset during discussions of criteria of poverty, problems, priorities and cause-impact analysis of poverty. To them, “methods of analysis of their own ‘bad life’ looked like a forgotten dusty mirror. People were so busy looking for food that they did not have time to look at the mirror. Our visit compelled them to wipe the dust and to look into the mirror and answer the question ‘Why are we poor?’” Sometimes this upset the participants very much. Participants remembered:

- ▶ The absence of bread and the necessity to send the children to the neighbor, since they had already gone to ask for bread several times before and hesitated to go again.
- ▶ The relative who died in the hospital because they could not buy the required medicine in time.
- ▶ Their children had forgotten the taste of sugar and meat.
- ▶ Their children could not go to school due to the absence of clothes and shoes.

“All this caused tears of despair, and the members of the investigation group had depressing feelings of helplessness which had broken the dynamic of the group and made it impossible to concentrate on the cause-impact analysis of poverty.”

Security concerns added to the psychological stress among researchers. In Ecuador, the lead researcher received late night calls from field team members frightened by street gangs and drug dealers.

Participatory Methods: What Worked and What Did Not

Informants discussed gender relations with great interest.

—Research team, Bashi, Kyrgyz Republic

Goat droppings, pebbles, small cards with pictures made by the people themselves were used for scoring and ranking.

—Research team, Daanweyne, Somaliland

There was much debate and disagreement between the women regarding the importance of the institutions, and it was difficult to gain consensus.

—Research team, Adaboya, Ghana

For most of the fieldworkers, but particularly for those from government institutions, it was the first time for training in participatory methodology, involving interactive learning instead of lecture-style passive learning.... A longer training with more fieldwork and practice must be considered essential.

—Research team, Ha Tinh, Vietnam

The study methods are rooted in the open-ended tradition of participatory and qualitative research inquiry. The study methodology guide states, “This approach explicitly encourages study teams to explore key issues that emerge by country, culture, social group, gender, age, occupation, or other dimensions of difference of local importance. New and old study tools will be used to uncover and understand the perspectives and insights of the poor, enabling them to express and analyze their realities, with outsiders playing a facilitating role.”

Participatory methods, both verbal and visual and including drawing, scoring, ranking and mapping, were used through nondominating behaviors by the researchers. Some of the country research teams were familiar with these approaches and all research teams were trained in participatory research tools.

Researchers changed the sequencing of methods as needed. In Bangladesh, for example, the teams found that starting the work with discussions of “wellbeing” raised expectations of relief and, hence, after the first day the team decided to start with “problems and priorities.” Almost everywhere researchers struggled to find simple local terms for words in the methodology guide. Words that were particularly difficult included *well-being, poverty, crisis, household, risk, vulnerability, institutions* and *social exclusion*.

Out of these struggles much was learned. In the Kyrgyz Republic the discussion of gender relations was introduced using a press clip that focused on domestic abuse to try to break the code of silence surrounding the issue. In Argentina sociodrama—enactment of gender roles—was used. In Jamaica role-playing, an activity called “a turned-over tortilla,” was developed whereby men enacted women’s lives and vice versa. In Bulgaria a focus on the functions of institutions emerged as the most effective strategy to get the institutions discussion started. In Vietnam all team members were requested to note five or more quotations per day that surprised and impressed them. In Bangladesh team members took on specialized roles each day: a lead facilitator, cofacilitator, content recorder, environment setter and process recorder.

While all researchers experienced some difficulties with some methods, the overall experience is summarized in the Jamaica National Report: “It is important to underline the high acceptance of the methodology by the people in the various locations in which we work. It also contributed to strengthening relations between investigators and participants.”

Being asked to describe their lives, being heard and engaging in discussion proved to be a novelty and a big draw in many countries. In Indonesia research teams note:

The interest generated was overwhelming. The researchers found people turning up in much larger-than-expected numbers and staying on to talk past midnight. Additional groups had to be conducted at times in order not to disappoint those who

came. The visual tools helped generate much interest and deeper insight, as people lost their self-consciousness and got involved in drawing, sorting, scoring, and diagramming.”

Despite many problems, the overall feeling among researchers, many of whom had never used participatory methods before, was that it was a “fantastic experience.” In Uzbekistan the researchers write that participation in the study helped them see their own country with new eyes: “honestly speaking, the sympathy and sense of sharing the destiny of each person encountered which arose during the research process was an experience never achieved in any of our previous studies, either qualitative or quantitative...The sensation of insight and sympathy for our own people is the most important finding of this study.”

The reflections of the researchers in Vietnam capture well the sentiments of the research teams who participated in this study:

Given an opportunity to speak with people ready to listen, poor women, men, boys, and girls were ready, willing, and capable of discussing, analyzing, and articulating a wide range of issues related to poverty and the ways and means of overcoming it. An initial hesitation disappeared easily into passionate and often heated discussions and deliberations. Initially it was found to be very difficult for PPA [Participatory Poverty Assessment] fieldwork staff to listen to poor people mainly because they thought that poor people knew little and had very little to say. Basic mistakes that were made during the first round of the PPA were not taking comprehensive notes, lacking patience to wait for and listen to people’s replies, and guessing answers to questions posed to informants. However, these mistakes were less in evidence during the PPA’s second round.

Data Analyses

Notes were written up every day, often until dawn.

—Research team, Jamaica

At the end of each day, the team sat together to analyze the day’s activities and study findings. Strategies for the next day were also discussed and planned.

—Research team, Somaliland

There was a constant tension between the need to present and represent the diversity of views and opinions of poor people and the need to have a sharp, focused, and message-loaded presentation of findings.

—Research team, Ha Tinh, Vietnam

In almost every country researchers wrote, analyzed and discussed findings and interpretations at the end of the day. In some areas where this was not possible they went back to communities to cross-check information as necessary. As elsewhere, in Vietnam the team held daily reviews and wrote fieldwork reports. The entire team in a given district attempted to meet every two days to share experiences and make tactical decisions about what was working and what was not. In Ghana the teams met every evening. In most site reports, researchers were careful to distinguish between their own opinions and interpretations and what was actually said.

The aggregation of data first from different groups within a community, then from several communities into district reports, and finally into national reports proved to be a painful process. Four hurdles emerged. First, there was the challenge of not losing poor people's voices and realities while imposing some organization. Second, it was important not to lose diversity while still grouping by commonalities. Third, suggestions for quantification—or even identification of frequencies especially in priority problems—became cumbersome and began to take precedence over documentation of what was said in poor people's own words. Fourth, fieldworkers were often reluctant to spend time analyzing across communities and writing reports. Time shortages and lack of experience in synthesizing qualitative reports further aggravated the research process in some countries.

After fieldwork was completed national workshops to collate and compare findings were held in several countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Nigeria and Vietnam. This led to the preparation of National Synthesis Reports. The teams and project staff shared draft country studies and other insights at an international workshop in New Delhi, India in June 1999, which also marked the beginning of the global synthesis. Three months later in September 1999 a preliminary global synthesis was completed, which provides the foundation for this book.⁷

Ethics of Participatory Methods

It may be that the villagers were not interested in providing information, as they saw no direct benefit for them of this study.

—Research team, Elhena, Sri Lanka

A lot of people secretly tried to ask us to solve their problems; we couldn't do that.

—Research team, Turtkul, Uzbekistan

People were busy in the fields. People were also expecting us to take relief food to them. This made the study difficult. People were also fed up with meetings with NGOs due to empty promises.

—Research team, Muchinka, Zambia

[Village] people were particularly interested to hear about the problems and priorities...they thanked the study team for the work done and said that the work had made them think of possible ways to resolve their problems.

—Research team, Ak Kiya, Kyrgyz Republic

The field research posed four continuing ethical challenges that can apply to all research with poor people—and not only research that uses participatory approaches and methods. They arise especially when the prime objective is not to directly empower and benefit the participants, but to help outsiders learn about the experience and realities of poor people, and then to influence policy and practice.

Taking People's Time. The time of poor people is valuable. The challenge here is to try to ensure at least commensurate benefits. In a few cases participants were remunerated for their time and trouble. In others, forms of hospitality were given. Perhaps more important, when poor people express and analyze their realities, they often themselves learn and gain satisfaction from the experience, enjoy it and develop solidarity with others. The process can lead not only to enhanced awareness, but also to taking action.

Raised Expectations. It was stressed to the research teams that they should clearly and repeatedly say they could not promise any assistance. Nevertheless, it was recognized as unavoidable that to some degree expectations would be raised. While follow-up action is taking place at the community level in some countries, the need remains urgent overall.

Feedback. The methodology guide and the terms of reference for the country studies say that researchers would feed information back to the communities before leaving them or upon return. Despite time constraints, many country teams shared the initial findings with community groups. Feedback meetings were held in community halls, libraries, council meeting rooms, garages and private homes, and under trees. This generated much excitement, pensiveness, sometimes sorrow and requests for information, contacts and assistance to solve problems. Often the findings on problems and priorities and on institutions generated the most interest.

In Brazil and Ecuador written copies of the community report were sent back to communities. In Brazil this process resulted in one community leader requesting multiple copies of the report, which he is using to lobby the municipality for improvements in services. He also sent a copy of the report to the president of the country. However, overall, the process of feedback is far from complete.

Follow-up Action. In some areas where the study was undertaken by NGOs working in the community areas, as in Bangladesh and Vietnam, or by community-based organizations, such as in Somaliland, there was scope for follow-up action, with findings feeding immediately into ongoing programs. At the Khaliajuri site in Bangladesh, for example, Concern Bangladesh at once undertook a program to help villagers improve their damaged and

dilapidated housing. All this said, ethical issues remain that demand sustained efforts to ensure follow-up at all levels.

Challenges in Writing This Book

Writing this global synthesis has not been simple. Not only has there been much material—close to 10,000 pages of field notes and national synthesis reports coming from 23 countries—we have also faced a struggle between the voices of those who experience deprivation and poverty and our own training, which drives us to categorize and use words that fit into the current development discourse. Our effort should be viewed as a stage in the search for understanding.

Problems of Language and Syntax. In seeking to enable poor people to express their realities, we have tried not to impose our words, constructs and concepts. In writing, we have had little option, most of the time, but to use words and concepts in English. We sometimes use the phrase “the poor” to refer to poor men and women to avoid endless repetition of the same phrase “poor people” or “poor women and men,” often several times in one paragraph or one page. It neither signifies disrespect, nor does it imply that poor people form a homogeneous group.

Generalizations: What Can and Cannot Be Said. The generalizations have emerged from a systematic process of content analysis. From this process, crosscutting themes have emerged, some of which are summarized in the headings of chapters and sections. However, these themes are not necessarily universal. We cross-checked the conclusions we drew by going back to country reports and site reports. In two cases—the analysis of trends in domestic violence and the institutional rankings by community groups—because of the importance of the findings and to ensure that we were not over-generalizing, we went back and checked every discussion group in every site report and analyzed data for frequency of occurrence. Finally, we also quantified data from mini-case studies on triggers for upward and downward mobility.

Our generalizations are not meant to apply to any country as a whole. In the interests of readability, we chose not to qualify every general statement by saying that it was “based on the communities and people who took part in this study.” The reader should keep this in mind when she or he reads, for example, “In Nigeria women say...” We communicate the key themes that have emerged from the analyses through the words of poor people themselves. Their voices are more direct, vivid, powerful and authentic than ours. We use their voices to echo themes that emerged over and over in very different contexts. Finally, although the fieldwork was conducted in 1999, we convey the findings often in present tense to close the distance between the reader and poor people and to add immediacy to what they expressed.

Our hope is that positive changes will result from the enormous efforts of the more than 20,000 poor people who participated in the study.

Notes

¹Appendix 1 identifies the leaders and members of the national research teams and many, many others who contributed to the study.

²*Voices of the Poor* is based on the voices of over 60,000 poor women and men. The research consists of two parts. The first is a systematic review of 81 Participatory Poverty Assessments prepared primarily for the World Bank in the 1990s. These studies reached over 40,000 poor men and women in 50 different countries. The review is entitled *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* by Deepa Narayan, with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher and Sarah Koch-Schulte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). A review of participatory poverty studies involving 50 focus groups conducted by NGOs and bilateral organizations was prepared in parallel by Karen Brock with the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, entitled "It's Not Only Wealth That Matters—It's Peace of Mind Too: A Review of Participatory Work on Poverty and Illbeing." This was published in an informal publications series for the Global Synthesis Workshop, Consultations with the Poor, World Bank, PREM, Poverty Group, Washington, D.C., September 1999.

The second part of the *Voices of the Poor* study, of which this book is a part, is new comparative research conducted in 23 countries in early 1999 and involving over 20,000 poor women and men. The Process Guide, which contains the methodology used during the fieldwork, was published as *Methodology Guide: Consultations with the Poor*. The findings from 21 countries are available in the National Synthesis Reports from Argentina, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Nigeria, Russia, Somaliland, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Zambia. Initial global findings were summarized in *Global Synthesis: Consultations with the Poor* by Deepa Narayan, Robert Chambers, Meera Shah and Patti Petesch. The *Global Synthesis*, National Synthesis Reports and the *Methodology Guide* were also published in the informal series for the Global Synthesis Workshop: Consultations with the Poor, World Bank, PREM, Poverty Group, Washington D.C., September 1999. A final book in the *Voices of the Poor* series, *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands* edited by Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), draws upon the 23 country studies and presents country case studies as well as regional patterns. For further information on the research project and its reports, see <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/voices>.

³For the full *Methodology Guide*, see www.worldbank.org/poverty/voices.

⁴See appendix 3 for further information on the study themes.

⁵Appendix 2 summarizes the criteria for selecting sites and lists the communities visited in each country.

⁶Pseudonyms have been used throughout the book to protect the identity of the study participants.

⁷A three-day workshop was held in Washington, D.C. which brought together all the country research teams, 70 development practitioners and the *WDR 2000/01* team. Country research team leaders interacted with Bank staff and others in a series

of half-day workshops hosted jointly with the Bank's regional departments and a day was spent with members of the *WDR 2000/01* team. Twenty-five reports of country findings, secondary reviews, global syntheses and a methodology guide were published and distributed at this workshop. All reports are available from the Voices of the Poor Web site indicated in endnote 1.