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Talking Points for “Participatory Methods of Poverty
Measurement”

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0. In Section 1, I discuss the continued need for survey work in poverty assessment. In Section 2, I discuss new strategies for survey work, which draw a more complete picture of households and household coping mechanisms. My recent experience in South Africa suggests that richer surveys are possible, but they are also expensive.

1. A role for survey work in poverty assessment.

When executed well, survey work and participatory rural assessment (PRA) provide complementary information on poverty. PRA is a tool of empowerment, with a goal of enabling local people to “share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate.” [Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, p. 104]. Survey work is primarily to gather information, to enable researchers, elected officials, and civil servants to learn more about particular phenomena on which they must act. One can embrace *both* PRA and survey work. Both are essential. (In South Africa, for example, the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development provided essential groundwork for the South African PRA “Experience and Perceptions of Poverty in South Africa.”) It can be productive for survey work and PRA to work together, and to learn from each other.

I will refer to survey work as “participatory survey work” (PSW), because good survey work is participatory also. Participation is always a question of degree: How closely is the research team listening? How willing is a team to revise its instrument? How many pilots are run? To take one example (pursued in greater detail below), a group of us learned an enormous amount piloting, reviewing, rewriting and repiloting a survey designed to look at how poor households live, and how they cope, in South Africa. In total, in addition to three sets of focus groups, we ran seven rounds of pre-pilot interviews in the townships of Cape Town (Langa, Guguletu, Valhalla Park, Bonteheuwel), East London (Mdantsane), in two rural settlements North of East London (Mooiplaas and Chalumna) and in rural settlements around Grahamstown, reworking (after some rounds, dramatic reworking) the questionnaire to incorporate what we learned. In the field, we spent a full day with each household, which gave us a chance to see what the questionnaire was good at capturing, and what it was not.

PSW is generally focussed on “information.” (For example: What is the unemployment rate in Cape Province? How does it compare with that in KwaZulu-Natal? What is the inflation rate? How quickly is inflation eroding the budgets of old age pensioners or those of households receiving child grants?) Legislators and public officials working with a budget constraint need this sort of information. They face trade-offs. PSW can provide some of this information, which is not readily available from a PRA. (As Chambers notes, a PRA is generally not about measuring, it’s about comparing, and comparing at a local level.) It may be possible to undertake a census of households in one area, and to ask people to rank households within that one area. However, this technique won’t work

on a national scale. (With the exception of street children, for example, the South African PRA undertook *no* analysis the urban poor.) To understand differences between regions, one needs to draw a sample that includes households from the different regions and, to guarantee the quality of the comparison; the sample should be drawn randomly.

Chambers notes that “possibly some questionnaire surveys will always be justified.” [p.122] Indeed, it’s very hard to see how PRA could answer the above questions, and it’s even harder for me to imagine how one could argue that these are not important questions for policy makers. If one agrees that some survey work is needed, then the question (here, I think, one of the most important questions) becomes how to take some of the lessons of PRA and apply them to PSW.

1.1 Nationally representative surveys: SALDRU 1993

The approach taken by South Africa in collecting nationally representative data is one that other countries would be well encouraged to follow. The country left the Apartheid era without adequate information on its African population: the last full census of the country was carried out in 1970. So the 1993 SALDRU/World Bank multi-dimensional survey, the first nationally representative survey since the 1970 census, was a very important source of information. SALDRU collected information on education, health, fertility histories, consumption patterns, life satisfaction, labor supply to the formal and informal sectors, migration and remittances, and sources of income. Many of South Africa’s leading social workers, sociologists and economists worked with the World Bank on the survey design and took a hand in shaping the questionnaire. They also insisted that the data be made available to *all* researchers as soon as the data were punched. SALDRU collected information on 40,000 individuals in roughly 9000 households. Here are the sorts of questions it allowed one to look at:

(i) The South African state old age pension (which until recently was the only social program of any size in the country). Do pensions systematically reach the deep rural areas? (They do.) What fraction of children in the country live with a pensioner? (It turns out that fully a third of all African children live with a pensioner, and that these are the poorest children in the country.) Is take-up greater among Africans than other races? (It is.) Is take-up greater among poorer households? (It is.) What fraction of the total household budget does the pension comprise? Is the pension money spent like other money coming into the household, or is it targeted toward certain goods? Does the pension lift poor households out of poverty? The SALDRU survey provided a first-cut at these questions. Analysis of the SALDRU data answered many questions and raised many others, and it was in part our analysis of the SALDRU data that led us to develop the preliminary questionnaire for our new survey.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of SALDRU as a nationally representative survey. For example, Ardington and Lund (1995) did a good deal of work in a style similar to PRA and found, in KZN, that households did not regroup around the pension. Our most recent survey work suggests that in many areas of the country such regrouping is taking place. Grown children often return to live with a parent when that parent becomes a pension recipient. It is usually impossible to know what is true nationally from what is found in a few locations, which would seem especially important to bear in mind

in a country as diverse as South Africa. This nationally representative sample also allows us to look at whether the problems associated with pension take-up were concentrated in a particular province, or are more likely in rural than in urban areas, and generally to home in on problems that exist in take-up.

(ii) Inequality of school resources in the country. Historically African schools received only a fraction of the resources White schools received. Virtually all white schools had primary and secondary school libraries and secondary school laboratories, while only 10 percent of black schools had primary school libraries, and only a third had secondary school libraries and laboratories. Within African schools, there was a very large dispersion of resources: pupil-teacher ratios varied from less than 20 students per teacher in some magisterial districts to 80 students per teacher in others. How do school resources translate into school achievement? Are students in very large classes at a disadvantage for maintaining grade for age? At staying in school? Can one find evidence of resource deprivation in literacy and numeracy tests? We were able to use data collected by the SALDRU survey team, together with information from the Education Foundation, to explore this in a great amount of detail and document the extent to which deprivation existed and the extent to which it affected the life chances of children.

2. New strategies for survey work

I have learned much in the last two years participating in the writing, piloting and repiloting of a new South African survey. Our “team” was composed on South Africans and Americans, drawn from gerontology, sociology, demography, anthropology, ethnography, economics, and the fields of health, nutrition, and mental health. Here are three substantive areas in which we feel we learned to ask a richer set of questions in a survey.

2.1 Households as networks

In South Africa, as in many parts of the world, the concept of a *household* is amorphous. It is common for three or four or five generations to live in the same compound for some part of the year, to share food from a common pot when they are living together, and to share resources whether they are living close by or far away. Kin come and go during the year, and the claims that members have on family resources are complex. An understanding of each network is critical for poverty assessment, for at least two reasons. First, any attempt to measure the availability of resources to individuals depends on knowing how many people lay claim to the household resources. In addition, one of the profound costs of poverty is the lack of wherewithal during a crisis (a failed harvest, a death and funeral, the loss of a job). An understanding of a household’s wherewithal (or, to look from the other side, vulnerability) isn’t possible unless one asks about kin far and wide, from whom resources could be gained, and to whom resources would be sent, if there were a crisis elsewhere.

For these reasons, we asked each adult in the household about their parents, and each of their children (age, sex, location) and grandchildren (age, sex, location). About each child, we asked whether resources are (or could be) exchanged, either regularly or if there was a crisis. About each grandchild, we asked which of the grandchildren the adult sent

money to or received money from. These questions can take a very long time to administer (these networks may be very large), but it doesn't appear that a full accounting of a household is possible without an understanding of the depth of a household's network, and its spatial location.

2.2 Levels of analysis: Individuals, households, and groups

Multi-dimensional surveys, such as SALDRU, generally speak to one member of a household, and ask that member to answer questions on behalf of the whole household. In our new survey work on how poor households cope, we began in this vein, asking each head of household about the income flows into and out of the household. In Guguletu, a pensioner head of household was able to give us a full accounting of her income sources: she received her pension, and some money from a son in the Transkei to care for his daughter (the pensioner's granddaughter) who lived with her in Guguletu, and some money from a different son who lived with her as well. We asked what this resident son earned, and our pensioner told us that she hadn't any idea what he earned-she knew only what he gave to her. In a different household, when asked whether she had any form of savings account, a pensioner replied that she did not. However, when her son-in-law left the room, she reported that she did indeed have a bank account, but she certainly wasn't going to let her son-in-law know about it.

Private information within households made us more suspicious about information reported by one household member about all household members. Indeed, we went back and revised our instrument so that we would now speak to each adult member of the household separately, getting an accounting from each about money coming into his or her hands and money going out. We found that people did very well at describing their money flows, and were able to give a fairly precise account of where money came from and on what money was spent. This is an extremely time consuming operation, and calls for multiple visits to households to interview members who aren't present for the first interview. (It is also sometimes not possible to interview people without family members hovering. For this reason, we tried to interview more than one member at a time, in order to give each some privacy.)

That the pensioner in Guguletu doesn't know what her son, a member of her household, earns also suggests that the concept of "household income" isn't adequate in all parts of South Africa, and must be rethought. (In many of the poorest households that we interviewed, one household member collects the earnings of all other household members, and the idea of a "household income" was operable.)

The question of private information isn't special to survey work. It is also something that PRA must deal with. Truth telling may not always be a dominant strategy within PRA groups. The political economy of how the pie is divided, or whose plan is accepted, and whether the less able or less powerful within the group are left to suffer, is a hard problem that does not go away.

In fact, the political economy issues are even more complicated than that. We met with an NGO that claimed it looked after pensioners' interests. It turned out that the NGO was controlled by the company hired to distribute pensions. Pensioners' perceptions of the

NGO were highly unfavorable. Everyone has interests (including NGOs), and perceptions tend to be fairly closely aligned with interests.

2.3 Poverty in multiple dimensions

We augmented our survey with modules that we hoped might lead us to a richer understanding of poverty. These included a health module, in which we took blood pressure, height, weight, hip, waist and arm circumference for all adults; a mental health module where we asked questions about depression and anxiety, and asked about the people available to aid and comfort one during times of stress; a social capital module, in which we asked people about their perceptions of their place in the community and the family, whether people asked their opinions and advice, whether they were church elders or held any positions in clubs or groups; and a module on time use, both on how their days were spent, and how they felt about their activities during the day (very pleasant through to very unpleasant). Some modules worked much better than anticipated: people talked freely about depression and anxiety, and people made careful distinctions between their perceptions of their status with neighbors and their status within the household. (Among other things, we hope at some point to be able to correlate social connectedness with health outcomes.)

We had much less success with time use questions, which is a prime area for cross-fertilization from the PRAs. We found, even after re-working the question in many different ways in different pre-pilots, that people could not report on how they felt about their activities. (One man looked at me and said “After breakfast I go and sit in the yard. If there’s something that needs fixing, I fix it. I stay there until lunchtime. How do I feel about that time? What’s there to feel? I just do it.”)