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**Local Identities of Poverty: poverty narratives in decentralised government and the role of poverty research in Uganda.**

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**Introduction**

Decentralisation is commonly regarded as a central component of 'good governance' requirements of internationally sponsored poverty reduction strategies. Decentralisation of resource management associated with democratic representation is expected to improve 'responsiveness' of government to the needs of the poor by allowing the poor more direct participation in decision-making and making local government officers more accountable for their decisions. This expectation remains the prevailing orthodoxy, despite evidence that 'local elites' who invariably run decentralised government are unlikely to be more 'pro-poor' than those who run central government (Johnson, 2001; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001).

Hossain and Moore's (2001) study of attitudes to poverty among 'elites' in developing countries concludes that they are in general less likely to be concerned with reducing poverty than those in developed countries and, by extension, bilateral aid programmes. The same study identifies as least likely to be sympathetic to reducing poverty those elites whose power is locally-based, particularly in agrarian relationships. The perception that poverty reduction is more likely to be promoted by central rather than local elites underlies Crook and Sverrisson's (2001) comparative study of poverty-reduction effects of decentralisation. They conclude: "the most successful cases were the ones where central government not only had an ideological commitment to pro-poor policies, but was prepared to engage actively with local politics....to challenge local elite resistance if necessary and to ensure full implementation." (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001:48). This emphasis on local political engagement by central government is in contrast with the more 'technocratic' character of poverty reduction strategies which typically focus on managing resource flows from international funding agencies to local projects within internationally-agreed sectoral expenditure programmes (Craig and Porter, 2002).

This raises questions of how poverty is conceptualised by policy-makers, and whether there are opportunities for making poverty reduction strategies more effective through a 're-identification' of the nature and causes of poverty. One obvious means through which such a re-identification of poverty may be achieved is research. The case of Uganda is particularly interesting in this regard as the development of the government's poverty reduction strategy has attributed a prominent role to evidence about poverty gathered from a variety of research activities, of which the two most important are the Uganda National Household Surveys (UNHS) and the Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP). This paper reviews the ways the different research approaches have informed the government's poverty reduction strategy, and considers how research on poverty can be better designed to promote the cause of the poor in the political climate of decentralised government.

**Uganda's Decentralisation Policy and Poverty Reduction.**

The Ugandan Government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) was established in 1997 as its policy framework for fighting poverty for the period 1997-

2017, with an overall goal to reduce 'absolute poverty' to less than 10% of the population by 2017 (MFPED, 2000; MFPED, 2001). Internationally accepted as Uganda's Poverty Reduction Strategy, the PEAP promotes multi-sectoral activities towards four principal goals: a framework for economic growth and transformation; good governance and security; an increased ability among the poor to raise their incomes; and an improved quality of life for the poor.

The PEAP activities focus mainly on primary health care, rural feeder roads, education, and water supply. With the publication of the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), in 2000, PEAP activities were extended to include the promotion of commercialisation of agriculture (MAAIF/MFPED, 2000). The funding of PEAP activities is linked to macro-budget planning through a Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) which defines the overall budget constraint, or 'resource envelope'. The operation of PEAP brings together two strands of reform: decentralisation of governance; and 'pro-poor' expenditure of funds made available under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt-relief programme.

The decentralisation programme, was initiated in 1993 with a series of legal reforms culminating in the Local Government Act of 1997. It converted the existing resistance councils (RCs), established during the civil war and the NRM's accession to power, to Local Councils (LC) at the level of village (LC1), parish (LC2), subcounty (LC3), county (LC4) and District (LC5). Councillors at the LC1, LC3 and LC5 levels are directly elected by citizens within geographically-defined constituencies. Members of LC2 and LC4 are administrative units whose membership is determined by that of the by the 'council executive' of the LCs in the tier below (i.e. LC1 executive members select members for LC2, LC3 executive members form the LC4) (Francis and James, 2003). Although an important aim of decentralisation is to increase local control of, and accountability for, generating revenue to pay for public services, locally-generated revenue is generally less than ten percent of the overall funds administered by the Ugandan local councils. The remainder consists of transfers from central to local government. Most of these (84 percent in 2000-01) are 'conditional grants' which must be spent on sectoral projects in support of PEAP. The bulk of conditional grants (CG) originate from HIPC and other debt-relief and budget-support funds that, together with Ugandan government resources, are transferred by central government to local government via the Poverty Action Fund (PAF) begun in 1998-9. Transfers to local government also include 'unconditional grants' (UCG), the expenditure of which is decided by local councils.

Central-local transfers more than doubled from 1997-8 to 2000-01, when they totalled Ug Sh 512 billion (US\$300million). However, the UCG component fell from 24 percent to 15 percent over the same period (Francis and James, 2003). Management and disbursement of CG is administratively complex due to a multiplicity of separate transfers and stringent monitoring requirements to ensure expenditure complies with the conditionality of the grants, by sector and locality. Some have argued that the preponderance of conditional grants in local expenditure has reinforced central line-ministry control, with local government acting as little more than a transmission belt for centrally-determined investment programmes (Craig and Porter, 2002). Conversely, however, there are relatively few reporting requirements attached to unconditional grants, most of which are spent on general administrative costs (Francis and James, 2003), or to locally-raised revenue. There is now considerable evidence (UPPAP, 2000 ; Francis and James, 2003; Yates and Moncreiffe, 2002) that accountability for the expenditure of such funds is poor, and that, in certain respects - notably that of locally-collected taxes - the action of local government bears particularly harshly upon the poor. The remainder of the paper considers how different approaches to poverty research have informed perceptions

of poverty within central and local government, and assesses whether they may be made more effective.

### **Poverty Research : the Uganda National Household Survey**

The Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) is here used as a label for a series of six national surveys of household consumption and expenditure undertaken between 1992 and 2000 with funding from the World Bank. The name Uganda National Household Survey strictly only applies to the latest of the series. The first was the Integrated Household Survey (IHS) in 1992, followed by four Monitoring Surveys (MS-1 to MS-4) undertaken annually from 1993 to 1996. The IHS and the UNHS both used a sample of 10000 households, while the Monitoring Surveys used a sample of 5000 households. In each of the surveys the sample was drawn to be nationally representative, covering all districts except for four that could not be included in some years due to insecurity.

The estimates of consumption were transformed into poverty estimates by determining the 'headcount' in households whose consumption fell below a minimum consumption 'poverty line'. The methodology for determining locally-adjusted poverty lines for rural and urban contexts for different regions of Uganda has been described by Appleton (2001).

A key initial motive in undertaking the household surveys was to assess whether the growth of 5-6% per year in the Ugandan economy indicated by macro-economic indicators was reflected in increased consumption levels (taken as an indicator of reduced poverty) among the population (Appleton, 2001). This the survey data did, with a national estimate of those below the poverty line falling from 56% in the IHS (1992) to 35% in the UNHS (1999-2000). The average reduction in poverty was accompanied by an increase in inequality (Appleton, 2001), expressed most frequently as an increased gap between urban areas, where the percentage estimated below poverty line was 10% in 2000, compared to 39% in rural areas (Appleton, 2001:table7). This result was prominent in arguments for extending the PEAP to increase investment in improving productivity of agriculture through the PMA (MAAIF/MFPED, 2000).

Despite considerable efforts (Appleton, 2001) to check the 'robustness' of the UNHS central finding that, nationally, average household consumption levels were increasing and that this constituted a reduction in poverty, the UNHS has been heavily criticised for presenting a misleading one-dimensional picture of poverty. McGee (2003) has set out a number of reasons why increased consumption cannot be taken as a proxy for reduced poverty. These include expenditure increases associated with problems that create heightened vulnerability, such as expenditure on curative health care, alcohol consumption, or increased food purchases due to insecurity of stored food for own consumption. While these are valid criticisms of the expenditure data, and demonstrate the importance of familiarity with the local context for questionnaire design, it is arguable that they could be substantially overcome by extending and partitioning the categories of expenditure or consumption identified by the questionnaire. Moreover, the one-dimensioned character of household consumption estimates as indicators of poverty need not negate their usefulness for monitoring poverty trends, as long as their limitations are clearly understood. Appleton notes in the introduction to his analysis of the UNHS that his focus "is on the measurement of changes; we not attempt to explain them." (2001:4).

Despite the influence that the UNHS series has had upon Uganda's policy makers and their financing agencies, there are important limitations to the use of UNHS data to inform perceptions of poverty, particularly among local elites. Two limitations will

be considered here: the sample structure, and the analysis of inequality. The first of these derives from the design of the UNHS as a nationally representative survey with a sample drawn from a large number of small 'enumeration areas'. In effect, the sample was very thinly spread throughout the country. This ensures good representativity at national level, but may leave few 'representatives' in a given administrative area. As a consequence, disaggregated analysis of data to provide comparisons between different geographically-defined subsamples may rely on too few observations to allow statistically-validated conclusions. In fact the UNHS was designed to allow comparisons between four 'regions' (North, East, West and Central) which, although of use for a central planning standpoint, do not correspond to any unit of local government. Where district-level data on household consumption are presented by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, such as in Uganda Human Development Reports (UNDP, 2002: Appendix 2) these appear to have been 'interpolated' from data aggregated at larger units (e.g some districts have identical data). Not only does this mean that the UNHS contributes little district-level information on poverty to civil servants involved in drawing up District Development Plans, but it also cannot provide local politicians with any local picture of poverty, or any comparison of their district with neighbouring ones.

The second limitation is linked to the first in that inequality is represented at 'regional' levels, rather than at a scale that can be related to decentralised government action. However, the treatment of inequality of consumption in reporting of the UNHS findings also suggests how emphasis of research findings may be modified by the political context. It has been observed above that the main 'message' on inequality was that the rural-urban gap had increased. However, Appleton states "in the IHS, 16 percent of inequality was attributable to the rural-urban gap; in the UNHS, this rises to 24 percent" (2001:15). Put another way, in the UNHS survey 76% of inequality was not attributable to the rural-urban gap, but to intra-rural or intra-urban inequality. The significance of this is increased by Appleton's assertion that "The rise in inequality implies that all reduction in poverty between the first and last surveys can be attributed to growth rather than redistribution." (2001:16).

Two observations can be made here. Firstly, that the UNHS appears to be able to detect redistributive effects, and hence could generate indicators of 'pro-poor' growth. Secondly, however, the interpretation of these indicators may be obscured because analysis will be undertaken for geographical units much larger than those for which poverty reduction actions are being managed.

### **Poverty Research : The Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment**

The Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP) was initiated in 1998 with a review of participatory poverty assessment exercises that had been undertaken earlier in Tanzania. The UPPAP methodology was adopted by the Ugandan Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED) and Oxfam was contracted to implement it in 9 districts over a three-year period. The aim of UPPAP was "to bring the voices and perspectives of the poor into central and local governments' policy formulation, planning and implementation, as well as strengthen and complement quantitative monitoring of the planning and implementation processes." (Ssendaula, 2000:vii). In order to achieve this, field researchers were contracted from nine different Ugandan 'partners', of which five were NGOs, three were research organisations, and one (Uganda Bureau of Statistics) was a government department. These participated in a planning workshop and then joined field staff seconded by each of the 9 districts in a three-week residential training programme "to create a shared vision for the project" and to gain "theoretical and practical knowledge in participatory methodologies" (UPPAP, 2000:6). The 36 researchers then undertook participatory research in a total of 24 rural and 12 urban

sites over a period of eight months, with a team of six researchers covering four sites over a 35-day period and each site being researched by a 'sub-team' of three.

The methodology for fieldwork draws broadly on Participatory Poverty Assessment methods used extensively by the World Bank and others in the early 1990s (McGee and Norton, 1999; Brock, 2002), which were based on the Participatory Rural Assessment approach (Chambers, 1995). This is based on ethnographic qualitative research methods, but with particular attention to techniques to visualise information (diagrams, maps) and to elicit perceptions through ranking exercises.

The information gathered during the site research was recorded in daily reports, subsequently compiled as site reports. The four site reports were then to be synthesised as district reports, from which the national report was to be generated. In fact, Yates and Okello (2002) observe that the district reports were often produced relatively slowly, while the site reports were being used directly as sources for the national UPPAP report, published in 2000 (UPPAP, 2000). This last demonstrates the importance and urgency attached to the UPPAP by central government (notably the MFPED) and by international funders of the programme, among which DFID was prominent. This interest is also reflected in the substantial literature which has quickly emerged analysing the UPPAP process as well as its findings (Brock et al, 2002, 2003; McGee, 2003; Yates and Okello, 2002). The following discussion draws on this literature as well as upon a synthesis of site reports in a second round of UPPAP (Yates and Moncreiffe, 2002).

Much of the analysis of UPPAP has focussed on its impact on policy (Brock et al, 2002, 2003; Brock and McGee, 2002). There has been rather less discussion of whether the methodology itself could have been implemented differently, with different results. Below, I suggest that, from a qualitative research standpoint, there are grounds for arguing that the methodology could produce a different emphasis to the way poverty is conceptualised in Uganda. First, however, it is worth briefly summarising the impact of the UPPAP.

Perhaps the most important effect of UPPAP has been to legitimise the PEAP, and to validate the use of 'participatory' approaches to measuring and analysing poverty. Thus, the "messages on priority areas for intervention" that conclude the national report (UPPAP, 2000:138) state: "The PEAP priorities are in line with those of the poor...". Yates and Okello (2002) also observe that, although the UPPAP raised the importance of water and sanitation investment within the PEAP, it otherwise simply confirmed the pre-existing PEAP priorities. Brock et al (2002) suggest the national report used the PEAP findings selectively, downplaying or avoiding the more politically sensitive issues, such as land tenure rights. Yates and Okello (2002) also argue that the UPPAP yielded different results to different stakeholders: for international funders it provided a greater understanding of poverty; for MFPED it provided monitoring information on the 'pro-poor' performance of spending ministries. This interpretation is interesting in that it locates the leadership of the pro-poor agenda within the MFPED, a view reinforced by Brock et al (2002) who go further and identify it with a small number of key individuals within that ministry. All writers also appear to agree that the influence of UPPAP upon local perceptions of poverty has been negligible. This is consistent with Yates and Okello's (2002) observation of the limited involvement of District officials with UPPAP. Overall, therefore, the impact of UPPAP on perceptions of poverty appeared greatest among those agencies who had promoted it at the outset, and then principally where it confirmed existing policy priorities. I will now consider the UPPAP methodology from the point of view of qualitative research in order to explore whether the methodology could have other outcomes.

A first difficulty with the methodology was a confusion of objectives. Yates and Okello (2002) describe how some of the partners in UPPAP interpreted its purpose as promoting local development through the production of 'community action plans', rather than simply recording local perceptions of the causes and effects of poverty. Following inconclusive discussions about this issue, individual researchers made their own decisions about the purpose of the fieldwork, and in a number of sites local communities produced local action plans only to find there was no provision to support their implementation.

This problem was accentuated by the inexperience of many of the UPPAP field researchers: "For many researchers, the UPPA training was a first experience of PRA" (UPPAP, 2000:9). The consequent weaknesses in "drawing inferences from information, and report writing" (ibid) are also apparent in comments on the quality of site reports in the second UPPAP:

"The site reports offer varying levels of analysis, with differing implications for 'understanding poverty and poverty trends'. There is a clear difference...for example, between those reports that merely record the respondents' 'voices' and those that include the researchers' observations.....[I]nsights on subjects such as 'gender dimensions of poverty' or 'locally specific poverty dimensions' can be greatly enhanced through independent researcher assessments. (Yates and Moncrieffe, 2002:63)

This further illustrates the importance of clarity of purpose, and also that researchers understand the nature of qualitative method and the role within it of researcher's own reflexive judgements. In certain of its formulations the 'participatory' variant of ethnographic method obscures this issue, for example where a reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's own biases (which identifies more than one point of view in a non-normative way) becomes equated with a 'recognition of one's own limits and the willingness to embrace error' (Blackburn and Holland, 1998:146, quoted in McGee, 2002:21) that privileges another's viewpoint (typically that of 'the poor') in a normative way. The point of Yates and Moncreiffe's comment quoted above is that simply reproducing the perception of the poor is only part of an understanding of poverty, along with the perceptions of poverty by others, such as the non-poor and the researcher. This highlights the central importance in qualitative research of a capacity for relatively sophisticated analytical skills among those undertaking interviews. It is a requirement that contrasts with questionnaire surveys, where questionnaire design and analysis are separate from the interview process itself, and the highly structured nature of the latter allows the possibility that they be conducted by 'enumerators' whose level of decision-making during interview is much lower than that required by semi-structured interviews characteristic of qualitative research. In this sense, the use of relatively inexperienced field researchers, with experienced researchers in a support role, generally away from the interview context, is a significant weakness in the way the methodology was implemented in UPPAP. It also suggests that, although nominally rooted in ethnographic, qualitative methodology, the UPPAP was designed more like a questionnaire survey.

This is also apparent in the 'synthesis' which emphasises quantified aggregate 'top ten' rankings of particular 'causes' and 'effects' of poverty determined by the relative frequency (number of sites) with which particular aspects of poverty were mentioned. This raises a number of problems of validity of representation. Firstly, the impression is given that the rankings somehow describe the relative extent of these 'causes' of poverty nationally. In fact, all but two of the districts included in UPPAP were chosen purposefully as the 'poorest' according to a series of criteria. They therefore cannot

be used to 'represent' a national picture in a quantified, aggregate sense. Secondly, the site information synthesised by Yates and Moncreiffe (2002) makes clear that any such aggregation is attempting to combine such greatly disparate poverty contexts, as to make the aggregate meaningless. The UPPAP2 sites, for example, include Kamama (Kitgum District) where a 'local' population of 700 lives with long-term 'internally displaced' people numbering 11000, and Bubanda (Mubende District) where population has halved due to outmigration during the past decade.

Even where synthesis of site reports attempts to compile (but not aggregate) information 'thematically' (eg natural resources, education), the effect is to fragment the site-specific picture to such an extent that it is 'decontextualised' and it becomes difficult to understand the connections (and hence causality) between different aspects of poverty. Again, this undermines one of the most important strengths of qualitative method: the ability to trace causality in complex social contexts.

A final problem relates to the need for a more reflexive approach to 'synthesis'. That is, there are instances where considering a reverse of causality may present a quite different interpretation, and where researchers therefore need to reflect on why a particular direction of causality is being favoured. An example is the identification of 'vulnerability' as a consequence of poverty. Yates and Moncreiffe (2002) catalogue many instances where vulnerable people are victims of exploitative or predatory behaviour: orphans physically or sexually abused or dispossessed of land by relatives or neighbours; widows expelled from pastoral communities on the death of their husband; disabled people barred from access to land; 'local' landholders charging exorbitant rents for land or housing to refugees.

To the extent that vulnerability is seen as a consequence of 'poverty', the problem is identified as a 'lack' characterising poor people. If the causality is reversed (i.e that poverty is the result of vulnerability), then the relational aspect (vulnerable to whom?) is emphasised, and the problem becomes a 'lack' (of social protection) in society. The consequence is rather than focusing on the 'lack' experienced by the poor, action could target social values and behaviour among the non-poor.

None of the above critique of qualitative method as implemented through the UPPAP negates the importance of undertaking qualitative research to understand poverty and its causes, but, should there be a political commitment to reducing poverty, then I would argue that a more rigorous application of qualitative methodology would deliver a sharper analysis which would enable 'entry points' for intervention to be identified more clearly. The most important departure from current practice would be to report the fieldwork in the form of case studies linking historical and current processes and identifying the key dynamics of power and how they are exercised. The aim should be to identify what kinds of poverty-creating processes are at work in particular kinds of contexts (eg urban areas, areas subject to settlement by refugees or 'internally displaced people'). The aim should be to ask: to what extent are these processes visible in similar or different contexts. This would produce not 'ill-health' as a cause of poverty, but a 'model' of what local processes prevent health care for the poor from improving. Rather than "the pump could not be maintained because the community maintenance committee had ceased to function", but "why was this the case?" This would then allow the further step to identify existing and potential pro-poor actors or constituencies and explore ways to strengthen them.

### **Decentralisation, Local Politics, and Poverty Reduction**

The emerging empirical research on local governance following decentralisation in Uganda (Francis and James, 2003; Brock et al, 2003) paints a sombre picture of

patronage politics - characterised at its extreme as 'ethnic gangsterism' (Brock et al, 2003:24). It is a landscape in which the exploitative inclinations of local politicians are barely held in check by other actors: women, youth, displaced people, disabled people and ethnic minorities who are excluded from representation as much by informal social processes ('lobbying', social drinking) as by formal barriers (language); civil service technocrats in continual negotiation with local politicians over their role and control of resources; non-government organisations seeking their influence through contracts for service delivery.

Although this may somewhat caricature the politics of decentralised government in Uganda, there is little evidence to date that the pro-poor initiatives currently underway are coming from anywhere other than central government. In this situation the problem of reducing poverty presents a political challenge similar to that posed by Crook and Sverisson (2001) at the start of this paper, to: "engage actively with local politics....to challenge local elite resistance if necessary and to ensure full implementation".

The job for Participatory Poverty Assessments would appear to be to engage in the search for local pro-poor allies for this project. In order to do this, experienced researchers need to be directly involved in the field research, and the analysis needs to emphasise an understanding of how the different elements of a context affect social and economic outcomes. The presentation of political 'scenarios' would be a more appropriate way to analyse such studies, while the representation of poverty characteristics both geographically and in time is more properly left to a rigorously designed survey - appropriately modified, for example, to take full account of known relationships between expenditure and wellbeing.



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