

Working Paper 133

**From poverty assessment to policy change: processes,
actors and data**

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Summary

This paper focuses on the production of poverty knowledge through measurement and assessment, providing an overview of contemporary poverty assessment approaches, and the issues and dilemmas involved in applying them in the context of poverty reduction policy processes. Section One examines the policy process in order to understand the relationship between poverty knowledge and policy change. It looks at the way that legitimate knowledge is framed in the policy process – traditionally, as the domain of technical experts, who reduce complex phenomena to measurable variables – and how the frame changes if policy is understood differently, as a more chaotic process with multiple actors involved. Section Two examines two broad questions – ‘what is poverty?’ and ‘why measure it?’. The discussion focuses on the emergence of an apparent consensus amongst international development actors concerning what poverty is, and argues that this consensus obscures intense and wide-ranging debates concerning how poverty should be measured. Section Three focuses on the range of methodologies which are available for poverty assessment, and examines the dynamics of choice between different approaches. We pay particular attention to discussing household surveys and participatory poverty assessments, and discuss the apparent contradictions which arise from the different epistemological heritages of each. In the final section, in two case studies, we examine how international development actors with very different objectives, the World Bank and Oxfam, used a range of information about poverty in the construction of their policy messages. The case studies confirm the argument that, despite the range of technical choices which inform the practice of poverty assessment, the way that policy is formulated means that it is the situated agency and objectives of policy actors themselves that are perhaps the most important component in shaping the policy narratives that they put forward.

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Introduction

Throughout the 1990s the field of poverty assessment grew in importance for donors and their partner governments. The methods and approaches available to development practitioners increased, diversified and confronted new challenges. Three significant developments in international co-operation – the re-affirmation of poverty reduction as its overarching objective,¹ the announcement of the International Development Targets in 1996 by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD² and the international financial institutions' launch of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper as the new framework for debt relief and concessional multilateral lending in 1999³ – confirmed and accentuated the need of the global development community and national governments to assess poverty and track changes in its level and nature over time.

This paper is one of two conceptual papers produced in this project, which examine the role of knowledge in the process of making and implementing poverty reduction policy. Both papers take a similar approach to the policy process, suggesting that it is made up of multiple spaces in which a wide range of actors shape policy through the construction and application of different kinds of knowledge. The other paper (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001) looks broadly at shifts in the ways that knowledge about poverty has come to be articulated within the development discourse. This paper focuses on the production of poverty knowledge through measurement and assessment, providing an overview of contemporary poverty assessment approaches, and the issues and dilemmas involved in applying them in the context of poverty reduction policy processes.

Section One examines the policy process in order to understand the relationship between poverty knowledge and policy change. It looks at the way that legitimate knowledge is framed in the policy process – traditionally, as the domain of technical experts, who reduce complex phenomena to measurable variables – and how the frame changes if policy is understood differently, as a more chaotic process with multiple actors involved. This necessitates understanding the original frame to see why particular methods of poverty assessment have come to dominate the field. It also necessitates understanding what recent methodological innovations, prompted by broader conceptualisations of poverty, imply for the way that poverty reduction policy changes.

Three aspects of a 'policy as process' approach are highlighted as particularly important for the question of knowledge construction through poverty assessment. Firstly, power and politics are an important component of policy, which shapes not only methods of poverty assessment, but which messages become dominant. Secondly, discourses, biases and narratives are important parts of policy because of their role in shaping the sense that is made of 'truths' about poverty. Thirdly, different actors and their respective agency are central factors in the policy process, and they have an impact on what is measured, and how. As such, we suggest that poverty assessment processes are shaped equally by technical factors and issues of power, politics, discourse and agency, which are more frequently 'unseen'.

¹ See DFID (1997); World Bank (1990).

² See OECD (1996).

³ See Wood (2000); World Bank (2000).

Section Two examines two broad questions – what is poverty, and why measure it. The discussion focuses on the emergence of an apparent consensus amongst international development actors concerning what poverty is, and argues that this consensus obscures intense and wide-ranging debates concerning how poverty should be measured. To answer the question ‘why measure poverty?’, we look at three policy events – the adoption of the International Development Targets, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, and the *Voices of the Poor* initiative – to show how different objectives for undertaking poverty assessment shape the methodological choices which different policy actors make.

Section Three focuses on the range of methodologies which are available for poverty assessment, and examines the dynamics of choice between different approaches. We pay particular attention to discussing household surveys and participatory poverty assessments, which have become the major approaches used in assessing poverty for policy, and explore the apparent contradictions which arise from the different epistemological heritages of each. The two approaches are situated in discussion of a series of dichotomies which have emerged in the literature on poverty assessment, and a range of contextual factors which influence methodological choice. Our discussion is illustrated by a case study from Uganda, where controversy existed about the apparently different narratives of poverty change which emerged from analyses of household survey and PPA findings. The section concludes with an examination of the issues involved in combining methodologies for poverty assessment.

In the final section, our discussion returns to the issues raised by taking a process-based view of policy. Here, in two case studies, we examine how international development actors with very different objectives, the World Bank and Oxfam, used a range of information about poverty in the construction of their policy messages. The case studies confirm the argument that, despite the range of technical choices which inform the practice of poverty assessment, the way that policy is formulated means that it is the situated agency and objectives of policy actors themselves that are perhaps the most important component in shaping the policy narratives that they put forward.

Section one

The policy process

Understanding how poverty assessment methods are related to policy change requires an understanding of the policy process itself. This section looks at the ways that policy has been conceptualised – from a linear, dichotomous process of rational decision-making, to complex, political processes in which power and agency are key dynamics. This discussion of the policy process situates the subsequent discussion of the evolution and dynamics of contemporary poverty assessment in wider debates about how policy changes and the influence of knowledge on such change.

Conceptual shifts in the way that policy is understood can be related to broader changes in the mainstream development paradigm which has increasingly come to embrace a wider range of actors, and their activities in the sphere of policy-making, as part of the development agenda.⁴ Closely linked both to the policy process and to the operationalisation of mainstream development policies, the evolution of poverty assessment methods is framed by these broader discourses. The nature of this frame means that certain methodologies and types of knowledge are privileged, while others are excluded.

Mainstream development policy is rooted in a positivist paradigm of rational decision-making. The linear model of policy-making which has been prevalent in the rhetoric of public administration and development since the 1950s is variously described as decision-oriented, top-down, relying on rational actions in decision-making and implementation, and resting on the assumption that an optimal policy is possible (Clay and Schaffer 1984; Schaffer 1984; Keeley and Scoones 1999). In the arena of poverty reduction, this instrumentalist view of policy creates a demand for a particular kind of knowledge, described by Øyen, who notes that ‘according to the rules of the game, the poor deserving help have to be identified so as to ensure some kind of “fair” allocation of resources’ (Øyen 1996: 9). In order to achieve the identification of the poor, policy-makers and bureaucrats have required poverty knowledge which reduces ‘the complex issue of poverty to a few manageable variables,’ (*op. cit.*) which are by definition measurable.

Top-down models of policy place a strong emphasis on technical expertise and the production of generalised, universalisable statements. Knowledge in this model is seen as a resource, to be mobilised to influence policy debates about prescription and implementation – what ought to be done and how to do it (Wuyts, Mackintosh *et al.* 1992; Gaventa and Cornwall 2000). The model has emerged from a positivist view of knowledge, in which science is perceived as superior because of its claims to objectivity (Gaventa 1993).

Kaplan argues that positivist models of knowledge require scientific discipline to be based on a rigorous methodology, to make empirical generalisations based on observed uniformities, and devise general laws which explain the empirical generalisations (Kaplan 1993). Requirements for the production

⁴ See Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) for a detailed overview of post-war development discourses.

of this form of knowledge have had a strong influence on conventional measures of poverty, particularly within economics, and have done much to shape the field of poverty assessment.

Several authors have argued that reductionism characterises the demands of powerful policy-making institutions for the production of poverty knowledge. Nustad and Sending, for example, note how the World Bank's production of poverty data is shaped by the demand for information that is digestible by decision-makers, mostly economists (Nustad and Sending 2000). Similarly, Moore suggests that the way 'political analysis' is undertaken for poverty reduction policy and the methods it uses – algebra, statistics and econometrics – are shaped by the need to address audiences used to talking about public policy in economic terms (Moore 1999). Proponents of combined methodological approaches to policy research are unequivocal in asserting that quantitative approaches have traditionally dominated the field. Brannen attributes the 'long-established preference' of Northern government policy-makers and social policy researchers for the quantitative paradigm to policy-makers' assumption that data provided by quantitative methods are 'quintessentially neutral in a political or value sense' (18); that the 'researcher as technician' provides them and the policy-makers decide how they are to be interpreted and used. Researchers, she contends, compound this bias among policy-makers by often assuming that qualitative approaches are unacceptable to them (Brannen 1992: 18).

The focus on expert knowledge in the policy process is highly congruent with early conceptualisations of development and poverty reduction as essentially technical problems. In both, the role of experts is seen as critical to the process of making rational, evidence-based decisions in policy and planning. There is an implicit equation in this understanding, which is that better information leads to better policy. The demand for more refined tools to produce 'better' information has been a major driver of methodological innovation in mainstream poverty assessment.

We take as our starting point the methodological dynamics which surround the production of conventional poverty information for policy-making. Adopting this perspective highlights the way that methodologies have evolved in tandem with broadening conceptualisations of poverty. Our discussion of methodological evolution in poverty assessment is situated in an understanding of the policy process which emphasises the relationship between knowledge production and the agency of a broad range of policy actors. This reveals that 'poverty knowledge' is conventionally understood as measurable data; and allows us to highlight moments within policy processes where policy-makers' demands for more accurate information, backed up by the legitimating forces of empiricism and replicability, may create spaces for the articulation of other domains of knowledge which have often been excluded from the policy process.

Such domains of knowledge include that which arises from the practice of policy implementation. Rist suggests that although there is an increasingly wide range of methodologies used in research for policy, these are motivated by the pursuit of technical adequacy in the supply of relevant information to policy-makers, to the detriment of concerns with implementation (Rist 2000). Secondly, there is the

domain of what may be broadly described as ‘local people’s knowledge’.⁵ Harper, discussing the validity of what she frames as ‘grassroots experience and isolated testimony’, suggests that such knowledge is routinely excluded from policy processes because it cannot be generalised or form the basis of extrapolation (Harper 1997). The dynamics of alternative narratives of poverty, and their influence on mainstream development policy, are discussed in more detail in the second concept paper of the current research (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

Partly as a response to the perceived exclusion of some kinds of knowledge from poverty assessment processes, the recent evolution of conventional poverty assessment methodologies has increasingly included methodological innovations which attempt to challenge exclusion, whilst simultaneously constructing knowledge in a form which meets the demands of policy-makers. These combinations include second-generation PPAs⁶ designed not only to provide ‘non-expert’ knowledge to policy-makers but to create networks of pro-poor policy actors who are engaged in processes of implementation; and attempts to establish multi-stakeholder participatory monitoring of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Although the notion of poverty as a measurable phenomenon continues to underpin development policy, an increasingly wide range of voices is influencing decisions about what is the best approach to assessing it and about the relative importance of assessment among the full range of possible responses to the challenge of poverty reduction.

Traditional models of policy-making, as well as favouring particular kinds of knowledge over others, also tend to obscure the extent to which policy is shaped through interactions between various actors at multiple levels of the policy process.⁷ For the purposes of situating our discussion of poverty assessment methodologies, we highlight here three elements of a process-based view of policy which have particular relevance to the poverty reduction arena, and discuss their importance for methodological evolution.

Firstly, there is the argument that power and politics are important components of policy. Many alternative visions of the policy process emphasise the importance of power. These range from those which have focused on political power relationships between different interests in a policy process (Clay and Schaffer 1984), to those which suggest that the relationship between power and knowledge is an integral part of policy processes (Shore and Wright 1997), and that it is critical to understand the mechanisms through which certain versions of ‘reality’ are filtered (Chambers 1997). Others, taking a different theoretical approach to the issue of power, suggest that the key question is how to challenge dominant power relations in order to make policy processes more responsive to complex, local realities. This has led to a focus on issues of governance and policy, and the problematisation of policy itself (Shore and Wright 1997; Keeley and Scoones 1999). In the arena of poverty reduction policy, we focus in Section

⁵ There is a wide range of literature discussing the role of indigenous technical knowledge and rural people’s knowledge in development policy. See for example Hobart (1993) and Scoones and Thompson (1994).

⁶ ‘Second-generation’ PPAs [...] have moved away from a primary and sole focus on information generation to pay greater attention to questions of engagement, ownership and impact. A wider spectrum of actors have been drawn into these processes, which place as much emphasis on the impact of their learning on their agency within the policy process as on the information that is produced’ (Cornwall 2000: 64).

⁷ Keeley and Scoones (1999) present a very comprehensive survey of the literature on environmental policy processes, outlining a multi-level, multi-actor approach to policy analysis.

Three on the question ‘why measure poverty?’ to illuminate the issue of power and politics. The responses of differently positioned policy actors are mediated through power relations and articulated through their choices about poverty measurement.

Secondly, there is the notion that what is said in policy matters. Many commentators, accepting the notion that policy and discourse are closely related, if not analogous, have focused on the linguistic devices employed in the policy process, and the mechanisms through which discourses change (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996). Schaffer notes that each discourse has its favoured data and statistics, and that each has particular policy and political uses (Schaffer 1984). These discussions offer important departures from the way that policy change – and the role of knowledge in it – is conceptualised in the mainstream model of development. In place of a version of policy where expert-based knowledge is provided to rational decision-makers, policy discourse analysis suggests that biases, practices and narratives are as influential in decision-making as ‘information’ (Apthorpe 1997). Seeing policy as discourse illuminates some of the processes by which particular methods of poverty assessment gain hegemony, through their attachment to particular narratives of cause and effect. It also lays the conceptual terrain for linking the issue of methodological choice to the construction of policy messages. Case studies in Sections 3 and 4 pick up this issue, examining how two poverty policy documents construct very different narratives of poverty reduction from similar data sources.

Thirdly, if we accept not only that what is said matters, but that power and politics are defining forces in determining what is said, then the roles of different actors and their perspectives on knowledge become more important to understanding the policy process. Research on actors involved in policy processes (Long and Long 1992) emphasises the importance of agency and action in creating knowledge, and notes that expressions of agency result in both intended and unintended outcomes. In poverty assessment, this becomes particularly complex because of the wider range of actors involved, implying a degree of unpredictability in policy. It also suggests however that the policy process may be responsive to multiple ways of knowing and knowledge creation. Further, certain kinds of actor who are often excluded from conventional models of the policy process – be they ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1990), extension workers (Verschoor 1992) or poor people – can have an influence in terms of new forms of insight and action.

The analysis of policy as process – the activity of people and organisations in effecting change – leads to a focus on the different policy actors involved in poverty reduction. The agency of different policy actors is a crucial factor in understanding the construction of knowledge, and the ‘unseen’ factors which motivate and dilute the technical choices of policy-making. In policy for poverty reduction, issues of agency have been made more explicit by the adoption and spread of participatory approaches which aim to have a long-term impact on the way that information is used in policy, and increase the agency of the poor and their allies in shaping policy. Simultaneously, efforts to implement participatory approaches have frequently encountered difficulties due to the residual power of rules and norms about what constitutes legitimate knowledge. The challenges raised at the interface between survey and participatory approaches to poverty assessment are discussed in Section Four.

What do these three insights, offered by alternative views of the policy process, imply for the specific case of the role of knowledge in poverty reduction policy? Issues like power and politics, the framing of poverty and the importance of actors and agency are central underlying factors in understanding how one method, or one set of findings from a multi-method study, prevail. Focusing on such issues highlights the methodological challenges implied by the increased necessity of incorporating a range of voices and perspectives in understanding the causes and effects of poverty, and the contextual political factors which affect the choice any policy actor makes about poverty assessment methodologies. Finally, they emphasise how the power relationships between different actors in a policy process may produce different versions of poverty knowledge which are not necessarily related to methodological difference.

The contemporary agenda for poverty reduction policy frames the relationships between different actors in a policy process in the language of partnership between multiple stakeholders. Some experience shows that concentrated efforts at creating multiple-stakeholder partnerships can provide the space in policy processes to make important incremental changes in the way that poverty is understood by a variety of actors in the national policy arena, from central and local government to civil society organisations (Turk 2000). However, the scenario presented in Booth's discussion of partnership in the DAC Guidelines for Poverty Reduction⁸ – where priorities for partnership are the open and systematic sharing of analytic work between all stakeholders towards a collective assessment of poverty, and close working partnerships with country institutions at all levels – begs the question of how power imbalances between stakeholders might shape the outcome of such apparently consensual processes (Booth 2000).

The multi-stakeholder partnership model of poverty reduction policy-making and implementation – and, by implication, of poverty assessment methods – presupposes that all policy actors have a similar investment and interest in evidence-based policy-making. Some research into poverty reduction policy suggests that this is not always the case. Kabakchieva's study of poverty policy in Bulgaria is illustrative in this regard: she argues that most national policy is assumption-based rather than evidence-based, and that poverty studies have all been externally financed to meet donor agendas. She points to weak relationships and lack of linkages between researchers, donors and policy-makers, as well as barriers of professional and spoken language (Kabakchieva 2000). Hossain's work on the role of political elites in poverty policy in Bangladesh suggests that international concepts and definitions of poverty may lack the potential to mobilise elites in support of anti-poverty programmes, and thus may threaten the survival of governments (Hossain and Moore 1999).

Although the World Bank's own research also recognises the kind of political and cultural issues put forward by such commentators, it employs them in support of the imposition of evidence-based policy-making as an unequivocal, technical solution:

⁸ DAC is the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD and therefore represents the views and priorities of the major bilateral donors. Their Guidelines for Poverty Reduction are an important representation of the poverty reduction narratives employed by this group of policy actors

Policy analysis should be driven by the needs of policymakers. The problem is that policymakers in developing countries frequently do not know how to frame policy questions or use the results of policy analysis. A common theme in the case studies is the need to convince government officials that data can enhance public policy decisions.

(Blank and Grosh 1999: 222)

The view that government officials should be convinced of the instrumentality of poverty knowledge illustrates an obscuring of the political and social dynamics which other commentators suggest are at play in the policy process. It also focuses heavily on the ‘formulation’ stage of the two-stage linear model of policy. Adopting a process approach to policy, in contrast, implies a focus on implementation. It further implies recognising the micro-politics of knowledge construction at different moments of the policy process.

Our focus on the dynamics of choice in poverty assessment methodologies, in the remainder of the paper, provides a window through which one set of underlying structures that are at play in policy formulation can be viewed and analysed, and allows discussion of which versions of ‘poverty knowledge’ are included and excluded in contemporary policy processes. The agenda-setting power of institutions like the World Bank has given rise to a hegemonic focus on measurement – and particular kinds of measurement more than others – as the principal articulation of poverty knowledge. Within this frame of measurement, attempts to make policy more responsive to the needs and knowledges of poor people have been directed through the medium of methodology. This construction and contestation of poverty assessment methodologies is the subject of the next section.

Section two

Poverty assessment: shifting frontiers

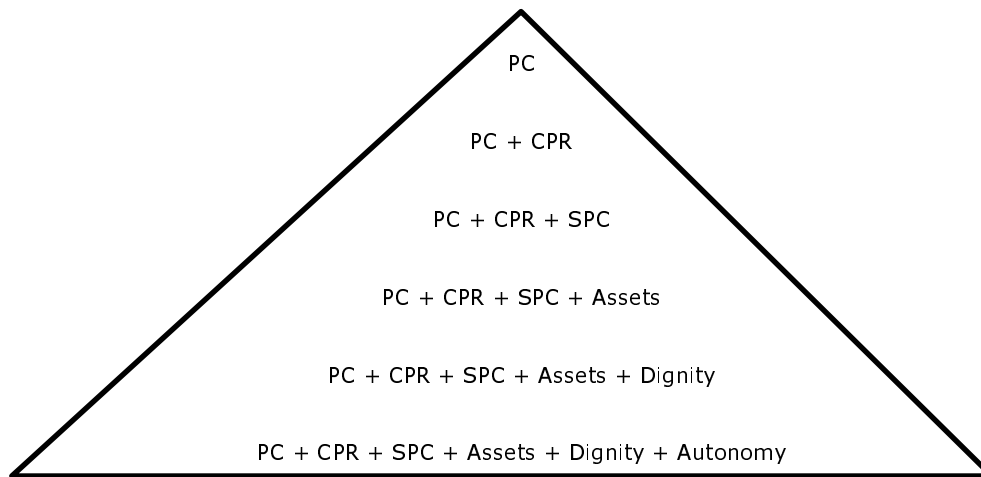
A dominant consensus now exists, at a rhetorical level at least, about what captures the essence of poverty. This broad consensus can be found in the publications of influential development agencies (DFID 2000; Narayan, Chambers *et al.* 2000; UNDP 2000; World Bank 2000). In brief, poverty is deprivation or insufficiency of one or more dimensions of wellbeing or capability. The dimensions span material sustenance, access to state-provided infrastructure, secure control over a range of types of asset (physical, human, social, environmental), psychological wellbeing, political voice and choices about the future. Some commentators (e.g. May 2001), contesting the idea that consensus exists, cite examples of alternative views; but the very marginality of these serves to confirm the existence of a consensus, rather than disproving it.

The framing of an apparent consensus on the nature of poverty tends to obscure the fact that technical debates rage on about the measurement of it. Beyond the consensus, details are more problematic. Establishing precise definitions, deciding which weight to accord different dimensions of poverty,⁹ and selecting methods for measuring them, are all contentious (Hanmer, Pyatt *et al.* 1999). Measurement decisions have to be guided by questions about exactly what is to be measured – an increasingly vexed issue as understandings of the phenomenon of poverty have broadened – and by the specific purpose of a given measurement exercise. Our discussion of poverty assessment approaches is therefore prefaced with a review of current thinking on what constitutes poverty, and relatedly, why it needs to be assessed. It is followed by a more detailed consideration of contemporary poverty assessment needs.

Current thinking on what constitutes poverty and wellbeing has come a long way since the 1970s, when poverty was understood as low income and failure to satisfy basic needs. The meaning of poverty has widened progressively in the debates of the 1980s and 1990s. This widening is described by Baulch in terms of a pyramid of poverty concepts (Baulch 1996). Each concept represents a dimension of wellbeing; and each conceptualisation, a different combination of dimensions, with the combinations getting ever broader and more complex (see Figure 1).

⁹ See, for example, the discussion in World Bank (2000: 19) on weightings.

Figure 1 A pyramid of poverty concepts



Note: PC = private consumption; CPR = common property resources; SPC = state-provided commodities.

The apex represents the longest-standing and most persistent conceptualisation. Moving downwards, the pyramid's successive layers roughly correspond to expansion of the concept over time, although the bottom few layers are approximately contemporaneous.¹⁰

Mainstream poverty measurement continues to be a contested terrain, in technical terms. Baulch explains:

The traditional income/consumption approach's concept of poverty would prefer to focus on line 3 of this pyramid (private consumption, common property resources and state-provided commodities) but often settles for line 1 (private consumption alone) or private income, due to the difficulties of measuring consumption of state-provided commodities and access to common property resources. A distinction is then often drawn between ultra (or extreme) poverty, in which the poor are unable to meet their minimum nutritional needs, and a higher level of private consumption in which net savings become possible [...] (2).

The longest-standing and most reductionist of the definitions – poverty as private consumption shortfall – has alone generated numerous dilemmas and controversies among those who attempt to measure it. Several of these remain unresolved: the intricacies of survey design and avoidance of interviewer bias; the problematic assumptions involved in converting income or consumption data collected in surveys into measures of wellbeing; the failure of household-level income/consumption data to reveal anything about intra-household inequality, especially that arising from gender discrimination; and the calculation of poverty lines, wherein trade-offs arise between accurately reflecting local prices and permitting

¹⁰ Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) review the evolution of different concepts of poverty in development discourse over the past fifty years, providing insights on the political-institutional backdrop to this process of conceptual broadening.

inter-regional or international comparison.¹¹ Deepening understandings of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon involving far more than these income/consumption aspects, as shown towards the pyramid's base, pose far more, and still more complex, measurement challenges. Furthermore, changes in the conceptualisation of poverty have so far been incremental, taking as given the centrality of the private consumption aspect and gradually adding on new elements to supplement and complement it. Sen, among others, argues for the revolutionary approach of turning the pyramid on its head and starting from freedom, autonomy and dignity as central, with other concepts relegated to a secondary level of importance (Sen 1999).

Some of the roots of contestation around mainstream poverty measurement can be identified by analysing why poverty assessment has acquired such high priority. As well as being a multifarious problem for the world's poor, poverty is the stated overarching *raison d'être* for the world's development agencies and increasingly a priority concern for some of the southern governments with which these agencies co-operate. The DAC Guidelines for governments and development co-operation agencies¹² present a distillation of the accumulated knowledge and experience of the development community in addressing poverty reduction, intended to inform resource allocation and co-ordination between development partners (Booth 2000). Booth sets out three reasons why donor agencies and their partner governments assess poverty: to monitor whether policy goals have been met, to assess the impact of particular policies and programmes, and to identify who the poor are. This latter objective is presumably pursued with a view to designing pro-poor policy measures, and reflects a new emphasis among development agencies re-focusing on poverty reduction in the 1990s on evidence-based planning and budgeting, geared towards more direct channelling of public actions and resources to benefit the poorest in the population. In themselves, these purposes embody no challenge to the dominant consensus described above; they could, indeed, be deployed in a circular way so as to reinforce the consensus rather than admit any challenges to it.

The three reasons posited by Booth relate to one set of actors and their specific needs, which all fall within the mainstream narrative of consensus. While they do hold for the donor community as a whole, there are divergences between the positions of individual donors. Further, there are other actors besides donors, who have an interest in conducting and using poverty assessment yet whose positions differ from the main donor standpoint.

Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs), for example, work both within the dominant poverty consensus and outside it. When working within the consensus NGOs might assess poverty in a given locality to find out who the poor are as a basis for targeting their interventions there, thus mirroring

¹¹ Hanmer *et al.* (1999) discuss 'the many problems of collecting data to support analyses of poverty over time and space which build analytically on a money metric measure of wellbeing, income or consumption', asserting that these 'have yet to be adequately solved' and suggesting 'the present degree of reliance on such an approach should be reduced'

¹² See Section One, Footnote 8.

– on a different scale – the third of Booth’s reasons to assess poverty. Alternatively, NGOs might assess poverty using participatory approaches, both to generate poverty data which can be used in a conventional way and, simultaneously, to open up spaces wherein participants generate less conventional knowledge which can lead to poverty reduction through other channels, for example, by stimulating local-level action. This approach represents a challenge to the dominant consensus from outside its boundaries; and the mobilisation of other actors beyond those considered to be ‘policy-makers’ – the general public, rather than bureaucrats and technicians – to take their own stances in the poverty policy debate. The different meanings of Booth’s purposes when associated with different actors suggest that while they are valid, they beg a range of further questions: Whose policy goals are being monitored? By whom? What sort of policies are being evaluated? Are the poor present only to be identified, or to participate in poverty knowledge creation? In either case, what will be the effect of the poverty assessment effort on them?

As this discussion of the divergent perspectives and activities of donors and NGOs demonstrates, there are clearly differences in detail and in position between the different actors concerned with poverty assessment, despite the appearance of consensus. This raises the questions implied by our discussion of the policy process in Part One. Has the apparent consensus been built from the top downwards; or has it issued from the bottom upwards? Rather than being the outcome of extensive and evermore sophisticated and diversified knowledge production endeavours, is it, in fact, a policy narrative which has been driven by the demands of the policy process and its traditionally powerful actors?

Light can be shed on such questions by focusing on three important ‘policy events’ – the International Development Targets,¹³ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the *Voices of the Poor* study – which illustrate the arrival of poverty assessment at centre-stage in development discourses. Examining these events from a methodological perspective highlights the current challenges facing poverty assessment, and shows how the demands of the policy process and actors within it shape the design and outcome of poverty assessment, and the technical choices that are part of it.

In 1996 the international development community adopted the International Development Targets. These targets, based on agreements adopted at previous UN conferences throughout the 1990s, establish both income and non-income poverty reduction goals at a global level. The main target is to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries by the year 2015. The IDTs represent the coalescence of the international donor community around the dominant consensus. Their translation into action, however, has focused on the more conventionally accepted, tangible dimensions of this multidimensional phenomenon, and allowed the less conventional, less tangible dimensions to fall by the wayside.

As soon as the IDTs were announced, the debate began on how to interpret them and monitor their attainment. As well as the obvious practical reasons for donors and governments to monitor progress

¹³ The IDTs were adopted by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which includes all the donor governments. For more details see OECD (1996).

towards such targets, there is the argument that monitoring mobilises and sustains public support for targets, enhancing their chances of success (Maxwell 1999: 92–3). For all these reasons, donor agencies invested considerable effort in selecting indicators and means for monitoring progress towards the IDTs. For ease of monitoring and of aggregating to national, regional and international levels, simplicity prevailed.¹⁴ the World Bank’s internationally comparable absolute poverty line, setting at US\$1 a day (in PPP dollars)¹⁵ the income which represents the poverty threshold, was adopted as the benchmark.¹⁶ Its suitability as a measure for tracking the progress towards these targets at a national and global level has helped the dollar-a-day standard to maintain its dominance in development agency discourse in the late 1990s despite a simultaneous increase in the credibility and acceptance of multi-dimensional concepts of poverty. The priority assigned to relatively easy international monitoring in the IDT context has led to the marginalisation not only of certain dimensions of poverty, but also of certain kinds of poverty knowledge which would be generated were different methodological approaches applied.

The IDTs are a case where adherence to mainstream assessment approaches has dictated or shaped the policy tool. The debate on how to monitor the IDTs, while its conclusion was perhaps foregone, aired some of the contemporary conundrums about poverty assessment. One argument against poverty targets is that monitoring them is a complex exercise and carries opportunity costs which, in the case of the IDTs, could be very heavy and could thus detract from the overall aim of the IDTs. Maxwell and others (McGee, Robinson *et al.* 1998) warned that designing targets for easy monitoring often means designing reductionist targets, based on uni-dimensional or overly simplified concepts of poverty:

[...] international targets have only a tenuous connection to the real world of national planning and resource allocation. These activities need to be guided by quite a different epistemology, one that recognises the richness, diversity and complexity of real-world situations and builds on the knowledge, insights and ideas of poor people themselves. There are narratives to be reported about poverty and food insecurity, that will bear very little relation to the narratives implied by international targets.

(Maxwell 1999: 103–4)

¹⁴ This is not to imply that comparing poverty-line-based poverty indices from all the countries pursuing the IDTs is a simple exercise. It is to say that the complexity entailed lies in technical issues of data-collection and aggregation and not in conceptual dilemmas about the suitability and applicability of various concepts of poverty in all the diverse settings in question.

¹⁵ PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) dollars are explained thus: ‘The quantity of goods and services which can be bought with one dollar varies from country to country [...] Using the actual exchange rate to calculate the local currency value of the dollar poverty line would mean that the results would not be comparable between countries. People living on a dollar a day in low price economies would be better off than those in ones with higher prices. The exchange rate is adjusted for price differences so that a dollar commands the same quantity of goods and services in each country. This is called the purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rate’ (IDS *et al.* 2001: 35).

¹⁶ The DAC also selected indicators for the other social and environmental targets (reproduced in Maxwell 1999: 103), but the high profile of the economic wellbeing target (halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty) accords primacy to the dollar-a-day income indicator.

Maxwell's contention is that newer, alternative approaches to understanding poverty have enabled us not only to identify its less tangible dimensions but also to recognise other kinds of poverty knowledge which can develop when spaces are opened up through the use of particular poverty assessment methods. Therefore, he argues, the real challenge for poverty reduction initiatives today is to address these dimensions and build on these other knowledges, not all of which lend themselves to measurement.

By definition, monitoring the IDTs is about assessing the implementation of policy. But as Part One showed, implementation is more political and unpredictable, and hence a more significant part of the policy process, than has been claimed. Efforts to monitor the IDTs perhaps represent an attempt to apply to this complex and political episode of policy the same monitoring techniques which were developed for application within a simplistic, linear understanding of policy to describe the 'policy problem' *ex ante* and monitor progress towards solving it.

The second major development which has focused attention on poverty assessment is the adoption of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper framework by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, in 1999. This move can be interpreted on the one hand as an indication of the international creditor institutions' increased commitment to poverty reduction after harsh critiques of the structural adjustment model, a concession to organisations campaigning for debt forgiveness in the interests of poverty reduction. On the other hand, it can be perceived as a way for the international financial institutions to increase and diversify the conditions attached to their new lending instruments.¹⁷

As the framework for debt relief and concessional loan disbursement to highly indebted poor countries, poverty reduction strategies need to be monitored closely, for governments receiving debt relief to account both to their creditors for the destination of funds, and to their electorates and public for the implementation of policies and programmes. The PRSP framework embodies a sharper focus on desired results than previous models. Moreover, it combines the promotion of pro-poor policy reform with 'process conditionality' of a sort entirely novel in relationships between the IFIs and borrower governments: the promotion of a participatory and broadly inclusive policy process led by Government, country ownership of the PRSP process (despite the origins of the model in Washington), and the development of new forms of accountability between Government and people.

The PRSP framework represents a new departure, in seeking to construct multi-stakeholder partnerships for poverty reduction which bring together IFIs, donors, governments and civil society. It also presents new and complex information needs. This model thus raises different questions and poses different challenges from the IDTs: it operates on a different scale, and involves different actors engaging in different activities for a range of motivations.

The strong emphasis placed on multi-stakeholder partnership suggests that monitoring systems will have to capture not only the fulfilment of sectoral input and output goals such as reductions in income poverty; but also the development of a process involving poor people and their civil society advocates in

¹⁷ For critical perspectives on the PRSP framework see Wood (1999b).

realising the strategy.¹⁸ The use of a language of partners rather than clients, for referring not only to government institutions but also to civil society representatives of various interest groups, implies that monitoring progress should itself be a process which enables these non-governmental actors to fulfil certain non-material developmental goals: to exact accountability and claim rights to information, transparency and established performance standards, as well as merely collecting or providing data. There are prospects for innovations in poverty assessment, in response to these new needs. PRSPs are being introduced against a backdrop of a widening vision among the IFIs of what constitutes acceptable poverty data. This suggests that country-level poverty assessment might indeed become more responsive to country needs and realities.

However, these new understandings emerging from below will need to steer an upwards course through the complex configuration of power relations that prevails. PRSPs appear to offer increased scope for the evolution and application of bottom-up approaches to understanding poverty and addressing it within a specific country context, so that the sort of ‘richness, diversity and complexity’ mentioned by Maxwell might come to shape the formulation of national poverty reduction strategies. But whether these prospects materialise will ultimately be determined by the interplay of power relations between the different actors involved, and the political imperatives of debt relief, which is supposed to be conditional on the content and process of PRSPs. Much depends on who controls the terms of engagement of the multiple stakeholders entering into partnership, and on the motivations and positioning of the governments (assigned the role of ‘leaders’) and civil society (assigned the role of ‘participants’) vis-à-vis the IFIs.

One illustration of the World Bank’s broadening vision on what constitutes acceptable poverty data is the *Voices of the Poor* exercise, our third example of the centrality of poverty assessment to the international development agenda. This attempt to elevate participatory research methods to poverty assessment at the global level is one of the most publicised developments in poverty research in recent years. Conducted to inform the *World Development Report 2000/1, Attacking Poverty* (World Bank 2000), which like the 1990 and 1980 Reports focused on poverty and development, the *Voices* exercise is described as ‘an unprecedented effort to gather the views, experiences, and aspirations of more than 60,000 poor men and women from 60 countries’ (Narayan, Patel *et al.* 2000: ix). As such, it is the largest-scale attempt ever at poverty research using participatory methods.

One motivation behind the *Voices* exercise was to capture the dimensions of poverty which are not captured by standard income/consumption measures or conventional data-collection methods. A second motivation set it apart from the cases of the IDTs and PRSPs described above: ‘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’ as a complement to conventional income- and human-development-based poverty indicators (Narayan, Chambers *et al.* 2000: 6). This statement of

¹⁸ This is confirmed by a study commissioned by DFID to look at good practice in the development of PRSP indicators and monitoring systems Booth and Lucas (2001).

conviction reveals how far participatory approaches to development have travelled since their early applications in micro-level project appraisal and radical consciousness-raising programmes in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁹

The *Voices* experience illustrates the significant challenges which arise at the interface between on the one hand complex, diverse realities from all over the world, and on the other, the reductionist framework of international poverty discourse and action. Scaling up a participatory research methodology in any context presents practical, methodological and epistemological challenges (Gaventa 1998). The *Voices* exercise appeared to hold the promise of ‘a new approach to giving voice to poor people on a global scale, and of influencing the World Bank, the WDR and perhaps development thinking, policy and practice more widely’ (Chambers 2001: 3). But using micro-level research to inform the policies of a powerful institution in the global development community implies framing the findings in a certain way so as to achieve impact. A self-critical retrospective appraisal by one of those involved acknowledges that the exercise got the ‘voices of the poor’ heard and possibly even heeded by influential figures like the President of the World Bank, yet it also testifies to the hidden trade-offs, epistemological and ethical, inherent in such an exercise of aggregating and amplifying up to global policy for the perspectives of so many individuals from such diverse contexts (Chambers 2001).

Another critique of the process by researchers involved focuses on the contradictions of seeking to construct international policy narratives from poor people’s words, when these narratives are actually shaped by political agendas entirely beyond poor people’s reach (Rademacher and Patel 2001). By way of illustration, the *Report’s* pivotal themes of security, opportunity and empowerment were established before the *Voices* exercise began, and then voices used to flesh it out. Rademacher and Patel’s critique highlights the principal methodological challenge raised by the *Voices* project: how to do research drawing on the participatory tradition, when the object was to inform global policy. The way this challenge seems to have been dealt with is to absorb the techniques and methods of participatory research, whilst obscuring their political aspects, which were incompatible with the nature of the *Voices* exercise.

Overall, the *Voices’* implications for the field of poverty assessment are uncertain. Has this high-profile and ambitious project tested and validated large-scale participatory poverty research? Has it laid bare the aggregative weaknesses of participatory research and the pitfalls of trying to derive policy messages from diverse, localised experiences? Or was it, in fact, not participatory research at all, thus offering no basis for assessing the participatory tradition’s strengths and weaknesses? It will no doubt attract further analysis and critique and, it is to be hoped, will stimulate reactions that find different ways of addressing some of these challenges. We return to some of these issues in Section Three.

¹⁹ It can also be interpreted as reflecting a convergence between their evolution and the emergence of a rights discourse in development in the 1990s (Hausermann 1997; Ferguson 1999). However, many argue that this convergence is only at the level of discourse, and that what has happened is in fact the subsumption of earlier approaches to participation into a neo-liberal paradigm, dubbed by Cornwall (2000: 25) the shift from ‘do it by yourself’ to ‘do it for yourself’.

The IDTs, the PRSP framework and *Voices of the Poor* project present a range of answers at various levels to the question of why poverty needs to be assessed, and show that multiple motivations give rise to and support a variety of poverty assessment approaches. At the global level, the sponsors of the IDTs show a heightened concern with poverty assessment so that the progress of this global compact can be tracked and development interventions thus proven well-focused and cost-effective. Tracking the IDTs requires conventional poverty data, relies heavily on mainstream methods particularly household surveys, and involves only conventional actors – policy-makers and technicians. The PRSP framework introduces an increased need for poverty assessment within the poorest countries, for use both at the interface between international creditors and national governments, and at the interface between these and their electorates. Monitoring PRSPs requires conventional poverty assessment by household survey, but also, in principle, opens spaces for other kinds of poverty knowledge to evolve and feed into policy processes through alternative poverty assessment approaches and advocacy mechanisms. The *Voices* is an attempt to apply participatory poverty assessment methods to make known situations of poverty in poor people’s own words, through the influential *World Development Report*, where the dominant conceptual framework and language are those of the international development policy community.

In these three cases, the poverty assessment approaches which have been adopted in response to the range of motivations and imperatives prevailing in each case are mainly two: household surveys and participatory poverty assessment. In Section Three we explore these two approaches in more detail.

Section three

The dynamics of methodological choice

Having reviewed the range of phenomena which can be measured under the name of ‘poverty’ and discussed some of the reasons for assessing it, we now turn to the assessment approaches themselves. There are choices to be made in poverty assessment. Producers and users of poverty data make choices according not only to the objectives inherent to their institutional positions, but also according to the strengths and weaknesses of the various alternatives available, the purpose at hand and the capacity for applying particular approaches. Additionally or alternatively, they can choose to combine methodological approaches to poverty assessment, as increasing numbers of practitioners do.

Available approaches range from ethnographic investigations using classical anthropological methods,²⁰ participatory poverty assessment,²¹ longitudinal village studies,²² beneficiary assessments among service users and programme beneficiaries,²³ and conventional household surveys.²⁴ Each is identified with particular conceptualisations of poverty, comes from a particular research tradition, and employs a particular method or set of methods.

To make a detailed exploration of the major issues and dilemmas of contemporary poverty assessment, and congruent with our research approach of looking at what is actually happening in this field, we select as a heuristic device two commonly used approaches, which feature in the three examples discussed in the last section: the household survey and participatory poverty assessment.²⁵ The household survey approach is associated with a concept of poverty based on material needs deprivation, which is assessed via measurement of income and consumption levels (Shaffer 1996). It represents the positivist tradition of research, and the quantitative, money-metric, economic school of poverty analysis. The survey method relies on data on household incomes (or, more usually, consumption as a proxy for income) gathered by means of a questionnaire, and compares it with a poverty line which represents the level of income or consumption, relative or absolute, deemed to be the poverty threshold. Poverty line data are considered attractive as a policy tool on the grounds that they permit an assessment of progress that is objective, verifiable and replicable. Although the same principle applies to many measures of non-income (yet tangible) dimensions of poverty,²⁶ income measures continue to have most resonance among major users of poverty data.

A broader view of deprivation is associated with participatory poverty assessment. This approach relies on methods from the Participatory Rapid Appraisal school, and draws on diverse disciplinary

²⁰ For more on these see Lewis (1959) and McGee (1998).

²¹ See Norton, Bird *et al.* (2001).

²² See Jayaraman and Lanjouw (1998).

²³ See Salmen (1994; 1999).

²⁴ See Grosh and Munoz (1996).

²⁵ Several analysts have featured the same two approaches when reviewing contemporary poverty assessment methods, e.g. Baulch (1996) and Schaffer (*ibid.*).

²⁶ E.g. infant mortality rates, school enrolment rates, life expectancy, income poverty measures.

approaches including social anthropology and agro-ecosystems analysis. The participatory approach captures better than surveys the broad perspective on poverty represented by the base of Baulch's pyramid (see Part Two): indeed, it is largely through the use of participatory approaches that these broader and more varied dimensions have entered the field of vision of mainstream analysts. The best-known form that participatory assessment takes is the Participatory Poverty Assessment or PPA, defined as follows:

A participatory poverty assessment (PPA) is an instrument for including the perspectives of poor people in the analysis of poverty and the formulation of strategies to reduce it. Its purpose is to improve the effectiveness of actions aimed at poverty reduction. PPAs are generally carried out as policy research exercises, aimed at understanding poverty from the perspective of poor people, and what their priorities are in terms of actions to improve their lives. PPAs can strengthen poverty assessment processes through: broadening stakeholder involvement and thereby increasing general support and legitimacy for anti-poverty strategies; enriching the analysis and understanding of poverty by including the perspectives of the poor; providing a diverse range of valuable information on a cost-effective, rapid and timely basis, and creating new relationships between policy-makers, service providers and people in poor communities.

(www.dfid.gov.uk 2000)

The label 'PPA', however, harbours multiple forms, with the World Bank stretching the definition to cover studies and processes which other PPA practitioners would not count as participatory, due to their reliance on survey-based methods.²⁷ It also leaves out those participatory poverty assessment initiatives conducted without a specific policy focus or links to government, often led by NGOs, some of which retain more connection with the constructivist epistemological tradition of participatory research than do the larger-scale, policy-focused PPAs.

Household surveys and participatory poverty assessments dominate other methods in terms of the frequency and wide extent of their application and use, the large scale at which they are carried out, and the high profile they have secured in poverty research literature and practice. They have become the major approaches used by governments and institutions concerned with making and implementing policy on poverty, and as such enjoy a status that other forms of research and analysis, carried out by different actors like academics and NGOs, do not. Their importance to policy actors at least partly reflects the fact that they can be applied at the national level and, in the case of household surveys, are deemed representative at that level and useful for cross-country comparisons. Loosely speaking, they can also be used at the international level, notwithstanding the complexities of cross-country poverty headcount measurements and the issues raised – and left unresolved – by the *Voices of the Poor* about how findings

²⁷ See, for example, Narayan, Patel *et al.* (2000: 316) for a 'participatory poverty assessment' that relied exclusively on questionnaires; and Robb (1999) for an overview of various studies included in a 1998 World Bank review of PPAs.

from a twenty-three-country 'PPA' study were processed into messages of global resonance. A quality which in the realm of policy appears to be essential for validating poverty assessment methods is their ability to capture the big picture, the national profile or the country's status vis-à-vis the international average, despite the fact that these big pictures are better at indicating absolute or relative progress than they are at explaining which policy interventions work and why.

In choosing to focus on these two approaches, we are cognisant of their different epistemological roots. As noted above, the household survey emerges from the positivist tradition. Participatory poverty assessment is sometimes contrasted with the survey approach on the grounds that it has its origins in a post-positivist or even a constructivist paradigm. The latter, in Denzin and Lincoln's words,

assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures'.

(Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 21)²⁸

Despite their different heritages, the two poverty assessment approaches are nowadays frequently used as if they were commensurable, meaning, in epistemological terms, that they are used simultaneously in the same research undertaking, elements of one being blended into the other, so as to represent some elements of each (positivist and constructivist) paradigmatic world view.²⁹ In our view this commensurability cannot be taken for granted. Yet in a world of social science research where the positivist paradigm still dominates, the tendency in contemporary poverty assessment is for the 'outlier' approach coming from a constructivist tradition to be absorbed into the dominant positivist approach, at least to the extent that the subjective, positioned knowledge to which it gives rise gets treated as empirical fact. The process of absorption has focused on the technical aspects of combining methods for poverty assessment, to the neglect of ethical or epistemological aspects. This opens up two important options for enquiry. One is to explore the kinds of poverty knowledge that get excluded from this absorption process; this issue, among others, is addressed by the other conceptual paper produced in this project (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). The second option is to focus on the dynamics around the technical choices made in combining methods for poverty assessment.

This is the theme to which we now turn. After reviewing the range and breadth of options and choices confronting the poverty assessor, we present a case study from Uganda which illustrates several points about methodological choices. The case study shows on the one hand how the very same data,

²⁸ We do not mean to imply that all PPAs reproduce faithfully these constructivist principles; merely that it is from these paradigms that participatory approaches have evolved, as counterpoints to the positivist survey approach. The extent to which this is an accurate representation of PPAs or their methodological ancestor, PRA, actually depends on the case in question. Some PPA exercises, including the *Voices of the Poor*, build their legitimacy on claiming, conversely, a moral authority based on representing the voices of the poor in pure unadulterated form, denying that the researcher has any role or agency in co-creating meanings and shaping 'findings'.

²⁹ For a discussion of commensurability, see Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 169–74).

arising from household surveys, can give rise to explanations of what is happening to poverty which emphasise quite different issues. On the other hand, it shows how subjective, positioned knowledge gathered through a Participatory Poverty Assessment gets judged against validity criteria established within the positivist paradigm for judging conventional poverty data.

There are several classificatory schemata in use for distinguishing ways of assessing poverty. Most are continua rather than dichotomies, although they are often juxtaposed to appear as binary choices. Some classificatory schemata distinguish different *methods*; others distinguish different types of *data* arising from the application of methods, and others distinguish *conceptual* approaches to poverty. The distinctions between methods, data and concepts are all too often blurred and merit clarification here.³⁰ For present purposes, *methods* are data-gathering tools. The distinction we make between methods and methodologies is that methods are the operationalisation of methodological approaches or methodologies, which are essentially *conceptual* frameworks, each with its own epistemological foundations, concept of poverty, and associated method or set of methods. Methods are distinct too from *data*, although in some discussions about different approaches to social science research these are sometimes confused: for example, discussions of qualitative and quantitative ‘methods’ usually refer in fact to the sort of data they produce, and not to the methods themselves (Booth, Holland *et al.* 1998; Hentschel 1999).

Table 1 presents the broad range of ways that aspects of poverty assessment are currently classified in the literature.

The various categories shown in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive. For example, a single poverty assessment exercise will involve choices about concepts, methods and data, and might require decisions about several of the sets of options presented in the table. Clearly, when one conceptual framework, set of methods or kind of data are adopted instead of others, trade-offs are made.

The most comprehensive review of tradeoffs concerning the definition of poverty is perhaps Booth, who develops Baulch’s 1996 work on different conceptualisations of poverty to discuss the different kinds of trade-off implicit in choosing between them (Booth 2000). Booth deals with concepts ranging from consumption-based, uni-dimensional concepts of poverty, to a broad, multidimensional concept encompassing private consumption, assets, human development, social and cultural dimensions, political empowerment, and security/vulnerability. While methods for poverty measurement can in principle be chosen from a range of research tools, Booth argues that choices also rest on data availability and analytic capacity: ‘the less tangible dimensions [of poverty] are difficult to measure and quantify’ (*op cit.*: 12). This trade-off, of diversity and complexity against ease of measurement, partially explains the relative prominence of measures denoting the tangible dimensions, such as private consumption.

³⁰ Brannen (1992: 3) also discusses this.

Table 1 Continua and dichotomies in approaches to poverty assessment

P C O N C E P T S	Uni-dimensional ↔ Multi-dimensional	Whether poverty is seen as measurable by one variable (usually, consumption shortfall) or requires an appreciation of more dimensions
	Objective ↔ Subjective	Whether poverty is seen as universally, objectively measurable or whether there will always be a subjective value judgement involved
	Relative ↔ Absolute	Relative poverty represents the deprived state of one section of the population in comparison to another section. Absolute poverty represents a level of income which does not permit a household or individual to obtain a minimum agreed level of wellbeing.
	Dynamic ↔ Static	A dynamic concept distinguishes the 'transitory poor' (those falling into poverty due to temporary adversity) from the chronically poor; a static concept does not
M E T H O D S	Direct ↔ Indirect	Whether measurement captures actual satisfaction of needs (direct) or resources a household commands to meet its basic needs, i.e. the potential satisfaction of needs (indirect)
	Identificatory ↔ Aggregative	'Who are the poor?' versus 'What is the overall level of poverty?' Aggregation often implies representativity of the sample and common units of measurement across all cases examined
	Economistic ↔ Non-economistic	Economistic methods gather data (usually income/consumption levels) across a representative sample of the population and derive predictions and statistical inferences across the whole population on that basis; non-economistic methods do not.
	Extractive ↔ Empowering	Whether methods seek only to gather data for analysis elsewhere, or to facilitate the empowerment of participants
	Rapid ↔ In-depth	Whether researcher's interaction with the researched is rapid and relatively superficial, or is a long process aiming at in-depth understanding
	Contextual ↔ Non-contextual	Extent to which method attempts to understand human behaviour within the social, cultural, economic and political environment of a locality
D A T A	Objective ↔ Subjective	Whether the datum is a piece of information which can be objectively verified and compared to established benchmarks, or a subjective perception on opinion.
	Micro ↔ Macro	A micro approach (usually community or village level) emphasises detail; a macro approach emphasises patterns on a larger (usually national) level
	Qualitative ↔ Quantitative	Whether findings are expressed in non-numerical forms or in numbers, from which empirical generalisations are often made ³¹ .

Sources ³²

³¹ There is debate over whether these two are mutually exclusive because they describe different realities, or complementary because both are needed to describe one reality.

³² Note: This table draws on a range of sources (Booth 1995; Baulch 1996; Kabeer 1996; Carvalho and White 1997; Harper 1997; Boltvinik 1998; Brocklesby and Holland 1998; Hentschel 1999; Martini 2000; Rubio, Prennushi *et al.* 2000).

A further trade-off exists, Booth posits, between the different purposes of monitoring poverty. To assess poverty as a uni-dimensional conceptualisation provides ‘a bird’s-eye view of global poverty’ (*op cit.* 13) and facilitates international comparison. To assess it as a multi-dimensional conceptualisation which includes the less tangible dimensions is a relatively complex undertaking which affords a perspective ‘closest to the ground – and to the people’ (*op cit.* 13) and generates data ‘most adequate for detailed planning and monitoring purposes’. He continues by noting the difficulties of applying measurement to a multi-dimensional view of poverty, pointing out that ‘for the remaining dimensions there are no good methods to standardise and quantify measures that would permit comparisons. But several countries have undertaken participatory poverty assessments, which provide very useful qualitative and multidimensional poverty information’ (*ibid.* 13). Booth at once frames the information arising from PPAs as useful in planning and implementation, but not in satisfying the conventional criteria for validity in poverty assessment. His discussion reveals that the traditional separation between ‘information for planning’ and ‘information for action’ in the policy process remains, together with long-established ideas about what kinds of information are deemed to make a legitimate contribution to either activity.

Booth’s analysis demonstrates that the choice that any policy actor makes about poverty assessment methodologies is profoundly affected by contextual factors which surround knowledge construction. Brannen examines more closely such contextual factors in the dynamics of social policy research. In her discussion of the contemporary dilution of the long-standing bias towards quantitative approaches in UK social policy research, she highlights issues which are broadly relevant for poverty assessment in southern countries.

Firstly, she notes, in an environment of constrained funding the sheer cost of large-scale quantitative exercises militates against their continued dominance. This resonates with early arguments by large development institutions for the adoption of participatory toolkits for rapid qualitative research as a component of poverty assessment in the south.³³

Secondly, changes in political culture can influence the way social sciences are regarded and whether and how social science research is used in policy. Brannen gives the example of ‘the existence of a radical and ideologically driven government [in the UK] during the 1980s’. In this situation:

[...] policy makers have had a lesser requirement for information in order to support and inform their decision making. Where political decisions are made primarily for ideological reasons the power of knowledge and experts is diminished and policies are created willy-nilly (18–19).

It is tempting to draw parallels with 1980s sub-Saharan Africa and charge the dominant ideologues from the international financial institutions, bent on promoting a particular school of economic reform, with obviating the need for expansions in indigenous poverty knowledge generation capacity in poor

³³ See, for instance, Chambers (1983); Paul (1987) cited in Cornwall (2000): 23–6.

countries.³⁴ This is not to suggest that there was no call for any kind of new poverty knowledge in those circumstances, but that the call was for the particular form of knowledge which was acceptable to and congruent with the demands of international institutions, privileging macro-level poverty indicators, PPP poverty lines and dollar-a-day headcounts suitable for international comparison, over micro-level perspectives and explorations of community-level and intra-household poverty dynamics suitable for understanding policy impact at local level. In such an ideological environment, and under funding constraints, the limited autonomy of indigenous research establishments meant they could no longer claim to pursue independent knowledge, and had to produce outputs they could market to buyers (Brannen 1992: 19).

A third set of factors are the constraints imposed on the spread of multi-method research by the skills, career paths and mono-disciplinary background of most social science researchers. Again, this point applies forcefully in southern countries where research capacity of any kind is sorely limited compared to northern countries, among other things by lack of adequate training institutions and by the paucity of funding for researchers to train overseas. Where such funding is available, it is often in the form of internships or Young Professionals' placements in influential global institutions, where trainees often learn to adopt and replicate the cultures of the host institutions, including any biases or 'preferences' therein.

Fourthly, the political values and perspectives of policy actors themselves form a critical part of choice of poverty assessment methodologies. While there is no natural link between a particular political perspective and a given method, feminist critiques have shown convincingly that orthodox sociology methods such as surveys are 'not the objective, neutral and scientific instruments they claim to be but are imbued with masculinist assumptions' (Brannen 1992: 22). Recent developments in the poverty assessment field support this view. One of the most notable impacts of the growing use of qualitative approaches to complement surveys in the 1990s has been a deepened understanding of the gender dimensions of processes of impoverishment and gender-specific experiences of poverty, previously completely invisible outside the field of anthropology.³⁵ Besides explaining several of the most infamous oversights of past development research (now well-documented in the gender and development literature), this observation also highlights the ample scope for political manipulation and interest group influence to interfere in the choice, application and outcomes of social science method.

This discussion of broad contextual factors which affect the choice of poverty assessment methodology highlights the complexity of external influences which contribute to particular

³⁴ It is not necessarily contradictory to accuse the IFIs of this while simultaneously recognising that in a distinct dynamic, it was in great part the IFIs' promotion of instrumental 'participation' that gave impetus to the emergence of 'indigenous technical knowledge'. The latter refers primarily to technical know-how for getting things done, whereas the indigenous poverty knowledge generation which, we contend, the IFIs' behaviour might have suppressed refers to conceptual capacity, especially the development of critiques and counter-hegemonic discourses.

³⁵ This enlightenment cannot be attributed entirely to the methods *per se*, as evinced by numerous examples of gender-blind PRA and anthropological practice. However, the fact that a growing use of qualitative methods coincided with increased awareness of these issues is surely related to the importance that qualitative methods attach to the role of the researcher her/himself and the acknowledgement that qualitative (like participatory) research approaches are only as gender-sensitive as the people using them.

methodological choices. Such contextual factors shape the policy space which any actor occupies, and determine the boundaries for action. The case of poverty trends in Uganda provides a useful concrete illustration of several of the issues discussed by Brannen (*op cit*) and by Booth (*op cit*), as well as the considerations summarised in Table One. It also clearly demonstrates the diversity of institutional priorities amongst policy actors in their construction and use of different kinds of poverty information, and the debates to which different methods of poverty assessment give rise.

Case study 1

What is happening to poverty in Uganda? Interpreting data on poverty trends

Poverty reduction is a central, stated objective of both the Ugandan government and donors to the country. *The Uganda Poverty Status Report*, a key government policy document published in August 1999, identified a major challenge arising from data on household consumption levels between 1992/3 and 1997 as ‘ensuring that the poorest elements within the population are not further marginalised in the development process’ (Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development 1999: 12). Based on analysis of national household survey data (Appleton 1999), the Poverty Status Report included the table shown below, demonstrating that the two poorest deciles’ consumption levels stagnated between 1993/4 and 1995/6, only rising in 1997. In contrast, the income of the richest 10 per cent increased every year between 1992/3 and 1995/6, falling slightly in 1997.

Table 2 Consumption per adult equivalent by decile,* Uganda

Decile	1992/3	1993/4	1994/5	1995/6	1997
Poorest 10%	2453	2920	2898	2802	3164
Next poorest 10%	3234	3627	3682	3650	3991
Richest 10%	12237	12946	13748	14905	14503

(* 1989 Uganda Shillings per month)

The Report noted that since rich people do not consume all they earn but make savings and investments as well, the income gains of the rich were likely to be understated by these figures. For the poor, however, income was probably not much greater than consumption.

The Report recognises that national aggregate data show that overall the proportion of Ugandans in absolute poverty fell substantially during the period. Nonetheless, it draws attention to the fact that successes in poverty reduction have not been equally experienced by all. In addition to concerns about the poorest of the poor, it concludes that future policy needs to address regional, rural/urban and gender disparities in order to further address poverty reduction.

In October 1999, the World Bank launched its Comprehensive Development Framework³⁶ for Uganda. A paper presented at the launch meeting gives a very different interpretation of the data and analysis which were presented in the Poverty Status Report. It concludes that ‘[...] if anything growth in living standards has been strongest among the poorest households’ (Appleton 1999: 18). It is noted in the paper that the 1995/6 poverty headcount is higher than the 1994/5 and 1993/4 levels and that ‘this implies that the position of the very poorest households may have deteriorated’ between 1993/4 and 1995/6 (13). However, this point does not make its way into the paper’s conclusions. The Conclusions focus on the short time period for which data are available and the related question of whether poverty reduction will prove to be sustainable (18). The

³⁶ The Comprehensive Development Framework is a new approach to development management proposed by the World Bank in 1999 and currently being piloted in twelve countries including Uganda. For further information see Wood (1999) and World Bank website.

discussion of issues meriting future attention draws policy-makers' attention away from the experience of different groups of poor people and towards the experience of the poor in aggregate, stating that '[t]he sustainability of poverty reduction will depend on the sources of growth and the extent to which the poor derive income from growing sectors or can enter them' (18).

At the same meeting, the draft report of the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment (UPPAP) was presented. The PPA had used participatory and qualitative approaches to research poor people's perspectives on poverty in nine districts. One finding reported was that according to the poor, they were getting poorer and the rich were getting richer. This apparent discrepancy between this statement and the analysis of survey data presented in the other paper gave rise to considerable controversy at the meeting and subsequently, and led some to cast doubt on the validity of the PPA.

In response to the apparently contradictory narratives of poverty which were emerging from different sources, the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development – which is both a partner in the PPA process and the major user of the consumption data produced by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics – delayed the publication of the final national PPA report until they could commission further analytical work on the poverty trends data from the household consumption survey and the PPA.

This analysis (McGee 2000) concluded that

- The two sets of findings are not directly *comparable*, but differ in respect of: the dimensions of poverty to which they refer; underlying assumptions about the relationships between household consumption and wellbeing of household members; approach to sampling the population; total reference periods; and the time intervals over which change was assessed.
- Analysis of the findings and the methods by which they were generated gives rise to the conclusion that the findings are *compatible*. The assertion of their compatibility rested on a set of explanations concerning: the difference between consumption levels and purchasing power; the fact that some increases in consumption may be regarded as perverse when the objective is poverty reduction; overall evidence of worsening food security which increases people's vulnerability and changes their livelihood strategies; and the strong focus on gender issues and inequalities in the PPA, in contrast to the survey.
- The two sets of findings having different strengths, they can be used to complement each other. Such complementary use will offer more and better information on poverty in Uganda than either set on its own. Secondary sources, and suggestions from various analysts and observers based on the Uganda PPA data themselves, highlight a wide range of options for complementary use.

The Uganda case study can be read from several perspectives. Firstly, it reveals the largely unquestioned dominance of household survey methods in the formulation of government and IFI poverty reduction policies. However, as revealed by the two different interpretations of the same data – one held by the World Bank and advisors, and the other by the Uganda PPA team and government, broadly speaking –, the existing positions of policy actors give rise to different policy recommendations, because the data is being analysed for different purposes. This reinforces the argument made in Section One, that poverty information (or data) is one of a range of influences on policy-making, and perhaps always not the most important or unequivocal.

Secondly, the case study sheds light on how distinct types of poverty knowledge, constructed using different methods, contribute to the process of policy-making. The apparently contradictory conclusions drawn from analyses of household survey data and PPA findings are derived not only from different

concepts of poverty – relative versus absolute, uni-dimensional versus multidimensional – but different methods – contextual versus economistic – for assessing it. Initially, the apparent discrepancy between the two sets of findings was used to discredit the PPA methodology: critics judged the PPA findings as empirical facts and subjected them to the validity criteria of household survey data, rather than focusing attention on broader questions of analysis or interpretation in poverty assessment, or on the different concepts of poverty which underpinned the different assessment exercises. The case study illustrates a tendency to try to dismiss one set of findings as invalid, rather than to explore the possibility that the narratives emerging from the two are complementary.

The conclusion of the comparative analysis of the household survey and PPA findings advocates the complementary use of different kinds of poverty assessment data to understand trends from different perspectives, and thus give a multi-dimensional view of poverty. The debate in Uganda illustrates some of the difficulties of using separate poverty assessments which tackle the same subject from different methodological perspectives to inform policy. As combined approaches become increasingly common in the practice of poverty assessment, however, the Uganda case highlights the need to examine more closely the dynamics of methodological combination.

There is a significant new statement of commitment amongst donors and IFIs not only about the value of combining qualitative with quantitative approaches to poverty assessment, but also towards combining micro with macro³⁷. Until recently, however, relatively little has been written about combined approaches in the specific context of poverty reduction. Some debates from the social science literature of the 1970s are relevant, however, with their focus on the concept and practice of triangulation, particularly in terms of the relationship between and combination of fieldwork and surveys (Jick 1979). By the 1990s, discussions had moved beyond the fieldwork/survey distinction, to focus on combining methods from the qualitative and quantitative paradigms (Brannen 1992).

The debate on methodological triangulation is central to understanding some of the issues surrounding the selection of methods for poverty assessment. There has long been a general premise in contributions to this debate, that multiple viewpoints yield ‘better’ findings. In the 1970s Jick wrote of ‘a more certain portrayal’ (1979: 602), while Denzin argued that triangulation ‘enhanc[es] claims concerning the validity of the conclusions that could be reached about the data’ (1970, cited in Brannen 1992: 13). More recently, the language for discussing combined methods has become less positivist and more critical-realist, with Booth *et al.* using the term ‘a fuller understanding’ (1998: 5). But what does a ‘fuller understanding’ of social reality entail? Different commentators stress different factors. The positivist argument is that ‘data generated by different methods can simply be aggregated to produce a single unitary picture of what is assumed to be the “truth” ’ (Brannen 1992: 13). This perspective, as Brannen argues, both assumes that a single truth exists, and denies the existence of any underlying intentionality in the construction of knowledge. Other proponents of triangulation stress, conversely, that an implicit principle

³⁷ Addressing a World Bank workshop in Washington in September 1999 to launch the *Voices of the Poor* findings, Ravi Kanbur noted that ‘we need a grammar and a language to bridge the micro-macro gap.’

of triangulation³⁸ is the multiple perspectives that multiple respondents will have, and go so far as to identify ‘multiple investigators’ as another form of triangulation alongside ‘multiple methods’, ‘multiple data sets’ and multiple theories’ (ibid: 10–12).

In poverty assessment, several experimental studies have deployed methods from diverse traditions alongside each other, so as to ‘examine, explain, confirm, refute and enrich’ (Carvalho and White 1997) one set of findings in the light of the other.³⁹ The use of qualitative information to triangulate quantitative findings on poverty has been promoted particularly by qualitative researchers,⁴⁰ as a way of filling the gaps they identify in quantitative information, demonstrating the usefulness of their own outputs as complementary to quantitative data, and generally bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide.

Booth *et al.* (1998) point out that arguments for triangulation are often misunderstood as a plea for the widespread of adoption of PRA, which epitomises ‘within-methods’ triangulation. In fact, proponents of combined methods for poverty assessment are generally promoting ‘between-methods’ triangulation (PPAs to complement household surveys), attempting to counter ‘the vulnerability of all single-stranded methods’ with a ‘robust eclecticism’ (6). While this is undoubtedly a good thing, the case study of poverty trends in Uganda illustrates a total neglect of the triangulation processes which had occurred *within* the process of the PPA, and the contributions that such processes may have made to the validity of the findings. Emphasis was firmly placed on the apparent contradictions arising *between* findings produced by different methods, at the cost of pursuing a ‘fuller understanding’ of what was happening with poverty reduction.

Other imbalances are also at work. Carvalho and White (1997), alone in offering practical strategies for methodological combination in poverty assessment, review how quantitative and qualitative findings are used in World Bank Poverty Assessments. They note the unequal legitimacy attached to quantitative and qualitative work in policy formulation. ‘[Q]uantitative work is invariably heavily drawn on to derive policy recommendations’, not least because of the difficulties of drawing macro-level policy implications from micro-level qualitative data, but also, no doubt, reflecting the superior validity ascribed to quantitative over qualitative approaches. The influence of qualitative findings, on the other hand, is much more varied across Poverty Assessments, and is less detectable, because often these are used just to confirm quantitative findings rather than to inject distinctive perspectives’ (23–4).⁴¹ It is noteworthy that these two imbalances – the promotion of ‘between-methods’ triangulation to the neglect of the ‘within-methods’ sort built into PRA, and the prevalent influence of quantitative findings in policy

³⁸ This refers to ‘within-methods’ triangulation, as opposed to ‘between-methods’ triangulation. PRA is an example of the former. The latter is exemplified by many contemporary efforts to complement surveys with participatory poverty assessments.

³⁹ See for example Narayan and Nyamwaya (1996); UNDP (1996).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Norton and Stephens (1995); Booth, Holland *et al.* (1998); Holland and Blackburn (1998). Noteworthy exceptions are Carvalho and White (1997); Hentschel (1999), who are primarily quantitative analysts, not qualitative.

⁴¹ Carvalho and White’s point is backed up by Whitehead and Lockwood’s analysis of gender perspectives in six African poverty assessments (Whitehead and Lockwood 1998).

recommendations resulting from mixed methods – both tend to take the standard household survey approach as the norm, overlooking possible benefits from alternative approaches.

Calls for further work to strengthen the links between qualitative and quantitative approaches in poverty analysis have yet to be fully answered. Three distinct modes of methodological combination emerge. First, and most common, are predominantly quantitative studies which use qualitative approaches to complement or help interpret their findings. Secondly, and increasingly common, is the presentation of policy recommendations which draw on examples from separate quantitative and qualitative studies. Thirdly, and most rarely, a limited number of studies have integrated diverse methods into one study, consequently generating insights which, it is argued, neither method could produce on its own.⁴² Experience to date suggests that of these three strategies for combining methods, systematic integration of qualitative and quantitative methods at every stage of the venture is the strategy which most helps to equalise their status. The other two strategies leave more to the discretion of the researchers or users of the information, who will bring to bear a particular disciplinary training and their own preferences and biases. Furthermore, they will often be looking for data to inform macro-level policy, and will readily marginalise qualitative information on the grounds that it is not suited to this purpose. In this context, for the strengths of qualitative approaches to be fully exploited in the realm of poverty policy, it is imperative that more strategies for systematically integrating them with quantitative methods are devised.

In summary, the use of combined methods for poverty assessment offers ways both of reconciling some of the tensions between strengths and weaknesses of single-stranded approaches, and of accommodating the multi-dimensional rhetoric on poverty which has become current. How best to combine methods is far from self-evident and is insufficiently explored as yet. The matter is further confounded by a range of factors: rigidly mono-disciplinary stances among practitioners and their professional publications; the special requirements of ‘policy-relevant research’, including its macro-level focus and the epistemological conservatism of policy-makers (Brannen 1992; Carvalho and White 1997); and practical difficulties of interpreting outcomes from combined approaches (Jick 1979).

In all probability, given the contemporary needs in poverty assessment discussed above, experimentation with combined approaches will increase. It will be favoured by ongoing efforts to translate the rhetoric of multi-dimensionality into operational approaches, and by the incipient actor-oriented and institutional perspectives on poverty policy which are now developing and which afford some understanding of the role agency can play in knowledge creation as well as knowledge use. Having discussed some of the dynamics of methodological choice facing those who undertake the task of poverty assessment, in the next Section we examine, through two case studies, how the knowledge produced through poverty assessment processes has been used by different international development actors to illustrate and justify their broad policies and perspectives.

⁴² See, for example, Booth’s discussion of the Tanzania PPA (Booth, Holland *et al.* 1998).

Section four

Poverty knowledge in policy documents

What are the links between the apparently technical questions which surround poverty assessment methodologies and the stories about poverty which are told by international development actors? How closely are the narratives of poverty associated with different kinds of policy actors related to particular kinds of knowledge? In this section we look at two examples of poverty policy documents, the *Oxfam Poverty Report* and the World Bank's *World Development Report 2000/1*, and examine the way that each uses different kinds of information about poverty. The institutions which produced these policy documents, Oxfam and the World Bank, have very different perspectives on poverty reduction. This is apparent in their use of information and the choices they have made in the construction of the poverty narratives they present.

Case study 2 *The Oxfam Poverty Report*

Where do the critics of the International Financial Institutions get their poverty knowledge from?

As part of an international group of not-for-profit non-governmental agencies concerned with critiquing structural injustices and advocating justice for the poor globally, Oxfam UK & Ireland published a 'Poverty Report' to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations in 1995 (Watkins 1995). Poverty assessment is not the speciality of development campaigning organisations, yet to make a case to their advocacy targets and their public they need to present information which will be convincing and will generate reactions among both sets of readers. What sort of poverty information is demanded by these actors? What sort of poverty knowledge does the report present? Where does Oxfam get it from? What effect is it intended to have?

The general approach to poverty in the *Report* is holistic, multidimensional and structural, linking it intimately to conflict, inequitable asset distribution and gender discrimination. These forms of deprivation are expressed in terms of denial of basic rights, with reference to UN conventions on civil, political, economic and social rights. Relative poverty, presented in terms of differing degrees of needs satisfaction in different countries and different social strata within countries, is treated as being as much of an affront to humankind as absolute poverty. The *Report* appears to address itself principally to global institutions (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation) and citizens who benefit from the current status quo, with proposals for change at global, national and local levels. It proposes alternative policy solutions to the orthodox prescriptions emanating from powerful global development institutions, which it heavily critiques. Its own proposals are based on political and institutional reforms at global and national levels, reflecting Oxfam's political and institutional analysis of poverty.

The *Report* cannot be taken to embody any one methodological approach to poverty, because it is intended first and foremost as a mobilising advocacy report rather than an analytical document. No formal poverty assessment or poverty research has been commissioned as background to the report. Oxfam starts from the position that most people are aware that there are injustices in the world and need reminders of this to spur them to moral outrage, and explanations of the structures which cause and perpetuate these stories, to urge them to act. While detailed empirical data are thus superfluous, a limited amount of primary empirical material is presented: a narrative account of the living conditions of a village woman in rural Zimbabwe and the various predicaments – environmental, economic, political, social, cultural – she faces in efforts to gain a living.

It appears to be based on open-ended interviews and participant observation. The story of this woman, taken to typify many poor Africans, is a highly descriptive illustration of the problems of poverty, setting the scene at the micro-level and evoking engagement and reaction by readers, as a precursor to analytical chapters on contemporary global policy, institutional and environmental frameworks and their implications for people like her. The rallying cry to readers is therefore on two levels: on a theoretical level a direct appeal to universal standards of human wellbeing, coupled on an empirical level with a highly personalised and individual story of illbeing.

In the analytical sections, the report draws on qualitative and quantitative secondary data from a range of sources. Sampling one in five of the references in the end-notes gives the following picture of sources:

Academic	IFIs (WB, IMF)	UN agencies and ILO	NGO	National gov'ts in North	National gov'ts in South	Non- specialist media
36	16	21	32	5	2	15

The broad spread of sources and the predominance of findings generated by academics and NGOs attests to the *Report's* aspirations of independence. The paucity of references to southern government documents probably reflects how few publications they produce compared to the other sources, and how little disseminated and unobtainable these publications are compared to, say, *World Development Reports*, for global analysts like Oxfam researchers.

Given how strongly the *Report* critiques the IFIs, its extensive citation of IFI sources merits further examination. These sources are used principally in two chapters, on Poverty and Livelihoods, and on Structural Adjustment. This is unsurprising: the Bank publishes more documents on poverty than any institution, and the IFIs' role in structural adjustment has been so major that they are the principal source of information on it and necessarily a central focus in any discussion of the subject.

Analysis reveals that the citations of IFI-produced material are of several kinds and are used in a variety of ways in the *Report*:

<i>Facts and figures on southern countries' macroeconomic and sectoral performance, labour and product markets, asset use etc</i>	Published mainly by the World Bank in its country Poverty Assessments or Economic Memoranda. These are used generally to support Oxfam's claims about the current state of southern economies and arguments about poverty and livelihoods, often in the context of criticizing past IFI policies; but the data themselves are never refuted.
<i>Development 'truths' - analytical findings about the relationships between particular policy interventions or expenditures and their human development outcomes</i>	Published by the World Bank and IMF in research reports and policy documents. These are mainly used in support of Oxfam arguments, although they are occasionally refuted or their practicability questioned.
<i>IFIs' statements of their missions or objectives</i>	Cited sometimes approvingly, sometimes in the context of claims that IFIs have failed to pursue them or have interpreted them in ways which increase poverty, insecurity or inequality.
<i>Admissions by IFIs that policies or interventions have not produced the desired effects</i>	Usually mentioned in internal evaluation reports and presented not as recantations but as lessons from new data or analysis which will allow things to be done better in future. They are generally cited as solid evidence that the IFIs are fallible and that their critics are sometimes right, and proven so by the IFIs themselves.

What conclusions can we draw from this brief review of sources used in the *Oxfam Poverty Report*? Firstly, the ‘methods’ of primary poverty assessment used in the report appear weak in terms of their formal legitimacy as research tools, since no technical information is given to allow the reader to judge the trustworthiness and or broader relevance of the story presented. The secondary sources drawn on have used a range of poverty research methods, some having broader legitimacy than others in the academic and policy worlds. Secondly, data from micro-level participatory research is interspersed with statistics from large-scale national surveys and global-level analysis. This provides a ‘personal interest’ angle on issues which are of great human import but whose causes and solutions are taken to lie in policies formulated and implemented at the macro and global levels. Thirdly, the extensive use of IFI data and dictums as ‘truths’ testifies to the unequalled capacity of the IFIs in data-gathering and -processing, analysis, research and dissemination. In the case of the IFI poverty data utilised in the *Oxfam Poverty Report*, the absence of contestation reflects the fact that the data, uni-dimensional and economic as they are, tend to be accepted even by critics of these institutions as the most credible available, and as sufficiently legitimate to substantiate their claims.

For our final case study, we turn to a publication of the IFIs themselves, the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2000/1: Attacking Poverty* (World Bank 2000).

Case study 3

Poverty knowledge in the *World Development Report 2000/1: Attacking Poverty*

The *WDR 2000/1* is one of a ten-yearly series of pronouncements on poverty by the World Bank. It announces both the problems and the answers, at least in terms of the broad areas of policy where the Bank intervenes. In summary form, in the Overview and on the cover, the dimensions and intensity of the poverty problem are presented compellingly; the solutions are identified as lying in actions by communities and countries, supplemented with action by global institutions.

The cover and first few pages galvanise readers by using both global figures conveying the size of the problem, and also verbatim quotes from poor people consulted in the *Voices of the Poor* exercise,⁴³ emphasising the human misery lying behind the figures. In a manner which is strikingly similar to the *Oxfam Poverty Report*,⁴⁴ the *WDR* opens with ‘Basrabai’s story’, the narrative account of the life of a poor Indian woman and her community. The overview goes on to outline the scale and scope of the *Voices of the Poor* study, and states the value it adds to conventional Bank poverty information in terms of ‘[showing] that poor people are active agents in their lives, but are often powerless to influence the social and economic factors that determine their wellbeing’ (p3).

It is in the Overview and Chapters 1 and 2, covering nature, evolution and causes of poverty, that we find the most explicit focus on poverty concepts and data. The *Report* embraces

the now-traditional view of poverty [...] as encompassing not only material deprivation (measured by an appropriate concept of income or consumption) but also low achievements in education and health. [...] This report also broadens the notion of poverty [in respect of the 1990 *World Development Report* on poverty] to include vulnerability and exposure to risk – and voicelessness and powerlessness (p15).

⁴³ See the discussion of *Voices of the Poor* in Section Two above.

⁴⁴ See Case Study 2.

In contrast to previous *WDRs*, considerable attention is devoted to explaining the origins of the poverty data used in the *Report* and evaluating its quality and applicability. The limitations of poverty estimates based on a \$1-a-day or \$2-a-day are clearly stated: '[these] are only useful as indicators of global progress, not to assess progress at the country level or to guide country policy and program formulation' (17). The inadequacy of household-level data for developing a gendered understanding of poverty is noted (27). While the amount and quality of available survey data and time series data on income and social dimensions of poverty are acknowledged to have greatly improved over recent years (17), lack of these for some countries still plagues attempts at national and international analysis (18, 23).

Moreover, the addition of new dimensions to the concept of poverty obliges the Bank to recognise that some dimensions – voicelessness, powerlessness – are not yet measurable 'in an accurate, robust and consistent way' which permits international comparison. Vulnerability, being a dynamic concept, can only be assessed multiple indicators and panel data spanning several years. For assessing such concepts as voice, power and governance, participatory methods are said to be useful complements to polls and national surveys (19–20). The question of how to weight different dimensions of poverty, or 'how much income people are willing to give up for, say, a unit of improvement in health or in voice' (19) is deemed intractable (22). Eschewing sophisticated techniques for developing a tidy composite indicator for these multifarious phenomena, the Bank opts instead for focusing on the different facets of deprivation, especially the overlap of multiple dimensions in the case of the very poorest, as a 'necessary first step in developing a comprehensive multidimensional framework' (19). This will come as a relief to analysts who have watched with concern the Bank's tendency to reduce everything into units that are measurable and discard as unimportant all that cannot be so reduced (Chambers 1994; Fine 1999).

A further novelty in relation to past *WDRs* is the acknowledgement of scope for political manipulation of poverty data. The selection of poverty lines and measures can be political as well as technical: 'Policy makers seeking to make the largest possible impact on the headcount measure might be tempted to direct their poverty alleviation resources to those closest to the poverty line (and therefore least poor)' (18). An account is given of the effect on poverty headcounts of using different poverty lines for one country (24).

Chapter 2 evaluates the two-pronged strategy for poverty reduction laid out in the *WDR 1990*. Asserting that it was based on the best knowledge then available, this *WDR* nonetheless notes that newer knowledge has supplanted it. The spread of a multidimensional, multidisciplinary approach to poverty, while not negating earlier strategies, 'do[es] show the need to broaden the agenda' beyond the economic domain, and beyond social and labour policy prescriptions, to a recognition of governance and power issues (33). This leads the *WDR* to advance a set of policy recommendations on opportunity, empowerment and security. While less simplistic and more faithful to the complexities of poverty, these are also far less concrete or operational than the two-pronged strategy.

The *Voices of the Poor* study is drawn on extensively in identifying causes of poverty, in the form of an insert summarising perspectives on interacting with State institutions, and several verbatim quotes from poor individuals explaining their illbeing. In subsequent chapters a pattern emerges. Analytical passages drawing mainly on national survey data and research by international analysts and heavily dependent on the Bank's own sources, are interspersed with disembodied 'voices of the poor' stating a sentence or two, usually immediately after chapter or section headings. These are usually labelled with the sex and sometimes approximate age of the speaker, the name of the research site and the country where they live. References to the *Voices of the Poor* are not listed individually in the endnotes, but are covered by a blanket statement that 'unless otherwise stated, all quotations in the chapter are drawn from *Voices of the Poor*[...]' (207 & *passim*). Examination of the endnotes reveals that approximately 37 per cent of the bibliographic references are either Bank publications, or documents commissioned by the Bank from external sources for presentation at its conferences or use in its publications. This figure does not include references to the *Voices*, nor articles written by Bank staff or consultants and published in academic journals, which are also used extensively.

Apart from some positive examples in chapter 7 of poor people organising to overcome social barriers to their progress, the voices cited mostly give negative perspectives on what it is like to be poor and to suffer the privations of which the global figures convey only a sanitised account. However, in the chapter on 'Harnessing Global Forces for Poor People' there is but one citation from the *Voices*, and it is a positive one:

At last those above will hear us. Before now, no-one ever asked us what we think – Poor man, Guatemala (186).

This is surprising, given the extensive, vociferous and widely publicised critiques poor people and their organisations have made in recent years about the many pernicious consequences of globalisation for their livelihoods. It raises the question of whether the context in which the voices were recorded (or subsequently filtered) for use in the *WDR*, was not altogether impartial vis-à-vis the role of the Bank and like-minded institutions.

From this brief review a number of conclusions can be drawn concerning the use of poverty knowledge in the *WDR 2000/1*. This report differs from its predecessors in embracing a multidimensional concept of poverty in its rhetoric, and in attempting to do so in operational recommendations. Further, it attempts to give some account of the conventional data it draws on, and takes a somewhat critical attitude to some of these. The change in attitude can be attributed both to the inadequacy of conventional data to capture multiple dimensions, and a growing acknowledgement of the role of poor people's agency as an element of poverty reduction. This *WDR*, however, remains strongly self-referential. This tendency reflects in part the Bank's unparalleled capacity to produce and disseminate knowledge, as noted in the case of the *Oxfam Report*; but may also reflect biases and a reluctance to engage with critical perspectives.

Findings from research conducted using participatory techniques are cited, but can hardly be said to be incorporated on an equal basis with findings from survey research and econometric analysis. It might be supposed that the findings have influenced the angle and policy prescriptions of the *Report* and the development of its structure, wherein opportunity, empowerment and security receive such prominence; but, as mentioned in Section Two, the main thrust and structure were actually established before findings from the *Voices* were available.⁴⁵

The findings from the *Voices of the Poor* used in the *WDR* are not treated as data. They are not subjected to the same critical analysis of origins and limitations as the poverty line, poverty headcount and other survey-based data are; they are not listed and sourced individually in the endnotes; and their influence on the arguments presented in the text is indeterminate. Rather than data, they are treated as illustrations and flourishes; rather than being systematically analysed, they are used as disembodied voices to humanise the analysis presented in the text and to give it moral authority.

The *WDR 2001/1* and the *Oxfam Poverty Report* are both, in their different ways, very public faces of poverty reduction policy. As the two case studies show, it is not only technical choices about methods which shape the pool of knowledge from which policy recommendations are made, but the aims of the

⁴⁵ A 'very first cut' of the *WDR* was made available to the public for discussion on 1 January 1999. The broad structure of the *Report* did not change substantially between that draft and the final published version.

actors involved. Policy actors exercise agency and express positions by constructing narratives which persuade their audiences about their decisions, and form the foundations of their operational interventions.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw about the relationship between poverty assessment and policy change? Our discussion throughout this paper has confirmed the vision of the policy process put forward in the introductory section, pointing to the importance of the positions and objectives of actors in shaping the way that poverty knowledge is constructed and used to influence policy. The demands of policy-makers for particular kinds of information and the dominance of measurement as an approach to knowledge construction have shaped the range of technical choices available for poverty assessment.

Increasingly complex responses to the questions ‘what is poverty?’ and ‘why measure it?’ have resulted in a broad range of different assessment options being pursued, but these have remained largely within a dominant paradigm of quantification and reductionism. Where this paradigm has evolved to incorporate ‘alternative’ approaches to knowledge construction, it has done so without a concomitant shift in the criteria by which the legitimacy of knowledge for policy-makers is judged, or in who makes decisions about what knowledge is and is not legitimate. What this discussion demonstrates is that the relationship between ‘better information’ and ‘better policy’ is very far from linear and even further from exhaustive.

Despite this conclusion, we have also demonstrated that the field of poverty assessment has broadened considerably in the past decade, and that the methodological challenges thrown up by the hegemony of the measurable may yet offer spaces for the articulation of alternative narratives of poverty. Much of our discussion has been at the level of powerful international policy actors and their priorities for poverty measurement, and the extent to which these have shaped poverty assessment activities at all levels.

It is important to remind ourselves, however – particularly in the context of the PRSPs and their rhetorical commitment to put countries ‘back in the driving seat’ of poverty reduction – that policy is made and re-made through implementation. Although the interface between national governments and the international donor and creditor community is important in this regard, more important still for successful poverty reduction policy are the interfaces between national governments, civil society and local policy actors. It is the construction and use of poverty knowledge in all these spaces, which provides the focus for the field component of this research project.

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