

# **Participatory research and community education, strategies for defining, assessing and alleviating poverty: insights from the Caribbean**

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## **Introduction**

Between 1995 and 2000 the Caribbean Development Bank funded Country Poverty Assessments (CPAs) in six Caribbean countries. They were intended to assess the nature, extent and severity of poverty; to identify the factors that contribute to, generate and maintain poverty; to examine what government agencies, NGOs and Community Groups were doing to alleviate poverty; and assess the impact of their efforts. Assessments were carried out by a regional consulting firm in Belize, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, St Kitts-Nevis and The Turks and Caicos Islands. The methodology used in the last three countries differed from that used in the first three. A Participatory Research Methodology was used to collect data from individuals and groups in the poorest communities about their experience of poverty; to analyse the level, extent and severity of poverty in these communities; and to explore with community members their ideas of what needed to be done to alleviate poverty and improve their situation.

This paper describes the methodology used in Grenada, St Kitts-Nevis, and the Turks and Caicos Islands and it focuses on the participatory methodology used to conduct the Community Situation Analysis (CSA) component of the CPAs. It describes the various components of the CPAs, the research and training activities undertaken, and the process and the outcomes of the CSAs. It then explores the implications of using adult education principles and approaches as a strategy for defining, assessing and alleviating poverty.

## **Background and context**

The Commonwealth Caribbean consists of a number of islands and two mainland countries. The islands vary in size and form an archipelago that stretches from the southern tip of Florida to the northern shores of Venezuela. They include Anguilla; Antigua and Barbuda; the Bahamas; Barbados; Belize; the British Virgin Islands; the Cayman Islands; Dominica; Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique; Guyana; Jamaica; Montserrat; St Kitts-Nevis; St Lucia; St Vincent and the Grenadines; Trinidad and Tobago; and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Caribbean countries have small open economies and the majority is dependent on agriculture, tourism and remittances from abroad. Because of their reliance on a small number of cash crops for export and the inability of the agricultural sector to feed their populations, they are vulnerable to global trends and changes in international trade agreements, and at a severe disadvantage when competing in the global marketplace.

Globalization, the creation of new trading blocks, new international agreements, loss of preferential treatment for Windward Islands bananas, and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes have all contributed to increase in poverty and deterioration in the standard of living and the quality of life for a significant number of people in Caribbean countries.

Data from the CPAs revealed that in several countries nearly one third of the population was poor and that about 16.5% of these were extremely poor or indigent. In Grenada, 28.8% of households and 32.1%, of individuals were poor and 13% extremely poor or indigent. In St Kitts 30.5% of individuals were poor and 11% extremely poor, and in Nevis 32% of individuals were poor and 17% extremely poor. In St Vincent and the Grenadines 30.6% of

households and 37.5% of individuals were poor and about 25% of these were extremely poor or indigent. In addition, poverty is more widespread among female headed households and in many countries over 50% of poor households are female-headed.

## **Country poverty assessments in Grenada, St Kitts-Nevis and the Turks and Caicos Islands**

### **The conceptual framework**

Identification of poverty levels, of the underlying contributing causes and of strategies needed to alleviate or reduce it, depend on an understanding of the links and relationships between the macro, meso and micro levels. While the primary objective of the CPAs was to determine the nature, extent, severity and causes of poverty, it was important that they examine the links between the political, social and economic policies and cultural issues, and the creation, maintenance, and alleviation or reduction of poverty. It was also important that they identify institutions that had intervened to alleviate or reduce poverty, and to assess the outcomes and impact of their interventions.

### **The structure of the assessments**

The CPAs consisted of four components: An Analysis of the Macro Economic Context (MEC), to increase understanding of the impact of international and regional trends on countries, communities and households, A Survey of Living Conditions (SLC), to produce a picture of living conditions in a representative sample of households, Institutional Analysis (IA), to identify institutions that interact with communities and households, to examine their interventions and to assess their capacity and capability to alleviate or reduce poverty, and Community Situation Analyses (CSA), to define and examine poverty, living conditions and the quality of life in poor communities, from the perspective of the poor.

A structure was created to ensure the involvement and active participation of stakeholders at the macro, meso and micro levels, and to facilitate the transfer of skills to key individuals and groups. In each country A National Assistance Team (NAT) was established and given responsibility for working with the Consultants to implement the CPAs. Members of these broad-based teams formed sub-committees to manage the various activities and stages of the implementation process. In addition there were groups of interviewers for the SLC and of Research Facilitators for the CSAs.

Training and research were the two main activities undertaken. Formal and informal training was an important on-going activity throughout and several workshops were designed to orient, inform, transfer skills, and facilitate learning. Orientation workshops exposed members of the NAT and the Research Facilitators to concepts, theories and approaches to poverty assessment, and to the participatory methodology being used. Others were designed to increase participants' skills in conducting the SLCs and the CSAs. Community workshops, held in all of the selected, poor communities, provided opportunities for community members to share and articulate their experience of poverty, to become more aware of the importance of obtaining different types of information and of methods for doing so, and to increase their understanding about factors that contribute to and determine the standard of living and quality of life in their communities.

### **Design of the assessments**

#### *The macro economic analysis*

This entailed an overview of the international and regional economic environment and its impact on the countries being studied. In order to situate the CPAs in the particular national context, in each country, an analysis was done of the society, polity, economy, population, political structure, national policies, performance of economic sectors, social trends, civil society, urban/rural differences, immigration and emigration. Analysis of secondary data from national statistics, official government and other reports, provided information on

regulatory frameworks, institutional mechanisms, procedures and arrangements; all factors that determine and contribute to the spread, maintenance or reduction of poverty.

### **The survey of living conditions**

The SLCs produced quantitative, statistical data that were used to measure and assess poverty. They were conducted with a representative sample of households using a two stage random sampling technique. The sample selected was based on the distribution of population in the 1991 Population and Household Census.

Several instruments were used to collect a variety of data from the sample households. The Poverty and Indigence Lines were used to establish the minimum food requirements necessary for existence. Head Count Index and The Poverty Gap were used to measure the prevalence and depth of poverty, Chi Square tests were administered to test the significant differences among socio-economic groups, and Expenditure and other data were used to identify absolute and relative poverty.

### **Institutional analysis**

Open ended interviews were conducted with representatives of government ministries and departments, with NGOs, private sector organizations, financial institutions, unions, agencies, and education institutions. These interviews provided general information on the institution its operations and programmes, as well as specific information about the institution's work in poor communities and about their impact on poor households. Using a scale of 1 to 5, information on the nature of their interventions was rater and used to assess the capacity and capability of various institutions to alleviate poverty. While the data collected in the IAs were useful in identifying interventions and programmes intended to contribute to the development of communities, they suggested that efforts by the institutions had not succeeded in reducing poverty in any significant way.

### **Community situation analysis**

The objectives of the CASs were to generate qualitative data that would:

- Complement and give deeper meaning to the quantitative data produced by the SLCs
- Give a multi-dimensional view of living conditions and quality of life in selected poor communities from the perspective of individuals and groups living there
- Provide insights about how individuals and different groups of people in poor communities perceived, experienced, and dealt with poverty
- Identify survival and coping strategies being used by individuals and households in these communities to deal with, alleviate and reduce poverty, and to improve living conditions and the quality of their lives.

In selecting communities for the CAS several factors were taken into consideration including location, size, demography, infrastructure, and type and amount of economic activity. Final selection was also influenced by information from a variety of sources including a living condition index developed from the census data and based on unmet needs, discussions with the NAT and with "outreach" ministries, and community visits. Eleven communities were selected in Grenada, nine in the Turks and Caicos Islands and twelve in St Kitts-Nevis.

A participatory methodology was used to involve community members, research facilitators, members of the NAT and the consultants in a process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information provided by individuals and groups in the selected communities, and to make suggestions for alleviating poverty.

The research facilitators who were responsible for collecting information in the communities participated in an orientation workshop that began with discussions of poverty and their perceptions and beliefs about its causes and impact on individuals, households, communities

and the country as a whole. Short presentations by the consultants and the use of charts and diagrams provided them with general information about the CPA, its objectives, and the activities to be undertaken. They also obtained specific, detailed information about the CSA and discussed their role in achieving the expected outcomes. They learnt about the philosophy, approach and methods of participatory research, about the research process and about the data collection tools that they would be using. Interactive exercises, role plays and small group discussions provided them with opportunities to sharpen their skills in interviewing and to discuss strategies for approaching communities and for dealing with problems and possible negative reactions from community members. They were given guidelines for conducting focus group discussions, and a booklet with the activities that they would conduct in the community research workshops, and they discussed and practiced these in small groups. A great deal of learning took place in these orientation workshops.

### **Community research workshops**

Thirty research workshops were conducted, fourteen in Grenada, eleven in St Kitts-Nevis and five in the Turks and Caicos Islands. In Grenada 350 persons participated, in St Kitts-Nevis 230 and in The Turks and Caicos forty. In all cases more women than men participated.

During the workshops several tools were used to generate data that would give a multi-dimensional view of living conditions and the quality of life in the communities. Among these were the Wheel of Well Being, A quality of Life Index, community mapping, wealth ranking, and small and large group discussions. Each of these produced a different type of data. For example, using a scale of 1 (lowest), to 5 (highest), participants were asked to rank the community on various axes of the Wheel to produce a graph that showed the spiritual, emotional and psychological, the physical and material, the economic, and the social well-being of the community. The animated discussion and debate that took place before they arrived at a particular score provided a large amount of rich qualitative data and deep insights about living conditions. In addition analysis of the graph and comparison of the scores on different axes for different aspects of wellbeing, increased understanding of the links between different aspects of life. For example they were able to see and discuss the link between unemployment and education, how health is influenced by the state of the environment, and how family life and treatment of women is influenced by moral values and attitude.

The Quality of Life Index required participants to rate several aspects of community life including; economic activities, physical facilities, health and nutrition, educational opportunities, and participation in community activities. Under each of these headings were specific items and again a five point scale ranging from very low to very high was used and there was a lot of discussion before agreement was reached on how to rank each item. Comparison of the outcomes of this activity with those from the Wheel added another dimension to the discussion and provided deeper insights into living conditions, the standard of living and the quality of life in poor communities. The various types and amounts of qualitative data generated in these workshops represented the collective view of people in poor communities about the quality of their lives and their sense of well being.

Community mapping allowed participants to identify community facilities and resources and to discuss and agree on additional resources that were needed to improve their living conditions. Wealth ranking, while not done in all of the communities, was useful in identifying the poorest households and pockets of extreme poverty in some communities. This information was used to identify households to be interviewed by the Consultants.

### **Focus group discussions**

For poverty alleviation programmes to have maximum effect they must be based on an understanding that the experience and impact of poverty is different for different groups and that their survival and coping strategies will differ. In each community focus group discussions were therefore held with women, men, youth, and with unemployed, elderly and

challenged persons. Three hundred and two women, 273 men, 376, young people, 206 unemployed, and 234 elderly and challenged persons participated in these discussions.

During these discussions it became clear that for poor women poverty meant their inability to feed their children and families and many of them admitted that they would do anything to feed their children: 'I ent telling no lie, I does take man to feed these children, it better than stealing, if I steal they will put me in gaol and then my children will starve'.

Several women also shared experiences of sexploitation from politicians and government officials in their attempts to find employment: 'Government people won't give work to women who they can't touch up. You have to go to bed with them first'.

For many poor men being poor not only undermined their manhood and independence and their relationships with women as well as with other men, but also their ability to fulfill their role as provider: 'I am not able to meet my needs and commitments, I can't go by the woman to sleep cause I ent have nothing to give her and I can't maintain the children as I should'. Poverty has also eroded their self esteem and made them feel inferior and inadequate: 'I have to hide to buy a drink because I can't afford to buy for the fellas.'

Young people were unable to fulfill their dreams and aspirations, were ridiculed by their peers, and often turn to drugs and crime: 'I wanted to go to technical school but my mother didn't have money to give me lunch and bus fare everyday'; 'My friends laugh at me because my shoes have holes'; 'Poverty makes you commit crime. When I get too hungry, I does steal so that they will put me in goal and I will get food for a few months'.

The experience of failed attempts by unemployed persons to get jobs highlighted the importance of education and training and the inadequacy and irrelevance of the formal education system: 'What you learn in school is no use because we can't get a job when we leave. Even when there is a vacancy you are not trained'.

In addition to accessing services, the elderly and physically challenged faced the additional problem of lack of basic needs: 'The clinic too far to walk and I have no money for bus fare, and even if I get medication, I don't have anything to eat and you can't take medicine on empty stomach'.

### **Interviews**

In depth interviews were carried out with 31 poor households in St Kitts-Nevis, 26 in Grenada, and 16 in the Turks and Caicos Islands. Most of these were single-parent and female-headed with about seven or eight children, several often under five years old, living in deplorable conditions with few amenities or resources: 'Eleven of us living in the house, but it leaking like a basket'.

Many interviewees commented on the negative impact that poverty has on family life, on bad relationships between family members, and on domestic violence:

Family life is crumbling, there is no love among family members, we quarrel a lot especially when he is drunk. There is a lot of domestic violence but women don't talk about it because of fear and threats, the victims are accustomed to the blows, they accept it because they have to depend on the men for money.

The interviews provided insights into inherited poverty and the cycle of poverty, the factors that cause and perpetuate poverty, and the feelings of frustration, helplessness and powerlessness that poor people experience:

I living in poverty since I born, catching hell day after day, after day..... Six years

now I owe the shop \$70.00 and can't pay. My parents were poor, I and my children poor, we will dead poor.

### **Implications for adult education**

Data collected in the CSAs show that there was consensus among people in poor communities that lack of, and low levels of were major contributing factors to poverty. People in all of the communities recognized the importance of education.

Education is the key, if you don't have education you can't get away from poverty. Education enables us to get better jobs and leads to improvement in the standard of living.

The data also show that in poor communities the level of education is low and that many adults are illiterate or functionally illiterate: 'Plenty of uneducated people up here, I left school early so I can't read and write too good'. People in these communities realized that the absence of adult and continuing education is adversely affecting the development of individuals and the quality of life in their communities. Yet in most of these communities there were few, if any, adult education programmes or opportunities for adults to participate in education activities. Several respondents identified the need for classes to build self esteem and for personal growth and development, to upgrade formal education, to learn skills and to increase knowledge in areas like child care:

We need more adult education, young people go to school, but there is need for adult classes and continuing studies. There is need for skill training as well as academic subjects and for adult education geared towards poor people.

The research and training activities conducted within the CSAs were in themselves a process of community adult education because they not only produced a large amount of rich qualitative data, but they drew on the experience of the individuals and groups to generate new knowledge about and deep insights into the nature and extent of poverty in poor communities. By engaging community residents in a process of analysis and reflection on their individual and collective experience of poverty, the activities raised their awareness and increased their understanding of the political, social and economic factors that contribute to and perpetuate poverty, and that determine their standard of living and the quality of their lives. Moreover participation in the CSAs gave them 'a voice' and empowered them to make statements and suggestions about what they and others could do to alleviate poverty and improve their situation.

By their own admission they saw adult education as a key strategy for alleviating poverty and called for a wide range of such programmes to be implemented in their communities. However there is little evidence that planners and designers of subsequent Poverty Alleviation Programmes implemented in some countries, have taken their recommendations seriously, or that they, like people in the poor communities, understand the importance of the role of adult education in poverty alleviation and reduction.

### **References**

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