

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

A study of relatively poor
African households
by
Norman Bromberger

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A STUDY OF RELATIVELY POOR AFRICAN HOUSEHOLDS

This study was carried out in 1983 in parts of the Inadi, Mafunza and Mpumuza wards of Vulindlele district outside Pietermaritzburg. The area is administratively part of KwaZulu and has been a 'Reserve' since 1846. Local administration is headed by chiefs. The area has distinctly rural features and yet it is, in an obvious economic sense, a large suburb of Pietermaritzburg (with 100 - 150 thousand inhabitants) and is tied to it by an extensive road system and by a major bus transportation service.

1. The objectives of the study

The study linked naturally with a number of other studies of small-scale agriculture, household incomes, and unemployment which had grown out of my work with the Subsistence Agriculture Study Group in Vulindlela. It was also mounted with this Conference in mind.

- 1.1. It seemed important to try to measure just how low the incomes of households at the bottom of the distribution of household income were. At early stages of my survey work I had come across cases (in the records) of apparently zero incomes. This seemed implausible, and yet one had no firm evidence that there was not a category of poor households (both absolutely poor and poor relative to everybody else) which were physically destitute and reduced to beggary or starvation.

In the process of attempting to measure the incomes of such households one would naturally be looking for income-components that are additional to the primary income components such as wages and salaries, and pensions. Of particular interest here would be the fact that Vulindlela has a semi-rural character so that crop-cultivation, livestock rearing, wood-collection are all possible - as are certain

other resource-based crafts. In addition there appear to be no restrictions on building and there is relatively easy access to residential sites, so that people either build and repair their own homes (using some local materials) or hire other local labour to do so. We are talking about an aspect of subsistence 'incomes' or about opportunities for small-scale specialization in production, market-exchange and income-generation which may often escape notice.

Finally in this context we need to know something about the life-support systems provided by kinfolk and neighbours. Are they operative in environments such as this, and at low levels of long-term real income where reciprocity is strained?

1.2. However low relatively low incomes turn out to be it also seemed important to understand what poverty of this sort means concretely for a household's consumption of private and public goods. Of course low consumption of publicly-provided goods such as education and health services might well influence the transmission of poverty to the next generation.

1.3. What kind (or kinds) of households are poor? What demographic structure (perhaps linked to a particular family history) will increase the probability that a household will be poor?

1.4. Linked with (1.3) : how are the poor selected across the generations? What birth-places, what parents' occupations and degree of literacy etc. increase the probability that the current generation will be poor?

2. Methods

It is one thing to write grandiosely about the 'objectives of the study', quite another thing to get the listed questions answered.

I think it is almost certainly the case that the survey-questionnaire method is not ideal for answering some of the cluster of questions in (1.1) and (1.2) - one needs direct observations, familiarity with peoples' pattern of life, and enough trust from them to make it possible to discuss low incomes and consumption levels without evoking embarrassment and shame or creating expectations. One needs to be an anthropologist, in fact. I am not; I do not even speak Zulu.

2.1. I used questionnaires and Zulu-speaking fieldworkers. While we had all become reasonably known in the area we were spreading ourselves (initially) over an area lived in by about 4 500 households. Later we increased the spread.

2.2. The attempt to pick a sample of the 'relatively poor' was faced with many difficulties. We began from a 1981 census-style household survey in Inadi in which cash incomes of household-members had been asked. Our initial procedure was to list all households with total reported income less than R50 (1981 prices) per month. Roughly there were 10% of households in that income-category. However, 2 years after the initial survey, it proved immensely difficult to find many of these households - both because there are no addresses except the name of the spring used, and because there appears to be a good deal of geographical mobility of various kinds. Then there were the problems of not finding an interviewable person at home, of discovering that their economic circumstances had changed, or had never been what we imagined ... Eventually we interviewed over 200 households after extending the area to two further chiefs' wards where we had just recently been doing a house-to-house survey of the economic status of males in the household.

2.3. The households interviewed had a considerable range of incomes ... one was over R800 p.m. Before attempting to extract some results from the questionnaires I and my fieldworkers have weeded them out, using first R50 p.m. and then R100 p.m. (1983 prices) as cut-off points (where these income-levels refer in the main to income from primary income-sources). However, this procedure is flawed. Although poverty has to do with households it also has to do with individuals.

A small household of 2 elderly pensioners might have had a household income below R100 p.m. in 1983, but they would in the normal sense of the words have been 'better off' than a household of 12 members with combined household income of R120 p.m. I have stuck to the mechanical rule however at this stage, for fear of having to turn children into adult-equivalents and so on. In what follows results are produced for a sample of 90 households with primary-income below R100 p.m. in 1983; at a few places I use a larger sample of 109 households derived from the smaller sample by eliminating a few cases of single or paired pensioners (with no dependants) and a few mistakes, and adding in some households that my assistants had not been able to assess in compiling the earlier panel.

3. Some demographic characteristics of relatively poor households.

3.1. They are more frequently headed by females than are households in general. This is true of 52% of households in this sample.

3.2. Their membership (including those who are 'away' along with resident members) is predominantly female: women form 60% of this relatively poor population.

3.3. It appears to be the case that they are older and have a lesser children dependency-ratio than households in general. The average

age of heads is 55 years; children (≤ 14 years) form only 37% of the population instead of the more usual percentage over 40.

3.4. They are smaller than average: 5,8 persons in residence and away (of whom 5,4 persons are normally in residence). In 1981 the mean household size in my Census Survey (about 4 500 households) was 7,0. Hofmeyr subsequently found it was over 8 with a systematic household sample of 370-odd in 1982-83.

3.5. In response to the question whether any members of the household were "chronically sick, disabled, physically handicapped" over 40% of the households answered in the affirmative. Partly this characteristic repeats the fact that they are older - since 13 of the 41 persons referred to were suffering from "sicknesses of old age". However, there were also 5 suffering from high blood pressure, 4 with their eyes (including blindness), 4 from mental problems; 3 from TB; 3 from asthma; 2 were disabled, and so on.

It may well be that in these listed features, we are partly picking up the implications of an incorrect (or dubious) decision to take household income as a criterion of the poverty, rather than household per person or per adult-equivalent. Had we done the latter we might have picked up more households of the compound type in an early-to-middle phase of their domestic cycles, with several earners (hence relatively high household income) but large numbers of children - often from several mothers - and hence lower incomes per capita than one would initially imagine.

4. Incomes

Because of the numerous, usually low-paid, ways in which members of these poor households try to 'make a living' or to obtain assistance, it is rather difficult to summarise this information in a normal-sized

table. I shall have to be rather more impressionistic and confine myself to a smaller number of households, viz. 31 in the suburbs of Mpande and Mbulu.

4.1. Domestic work (both in town and locally) is a major occupation - 11 individuals in these 31 households were so engaged.

4.2. Pensions and welfare payments were important - though not as important as in the overall sample : here there were 6 recipients.

4.3. There was a considerable range of small ways resorted to in order to earn something locally - at least 14 individuals in these households were so occupied : occasional shoe-repairing, digging toilet pits (2), making grass mats, making brooms, helping in peoples' gardens, making mud bricks (2) (at R10 for a 100), chopping wood, jersey-making (2), house-decoration and so on. The young man who helped in gardens made R30 from the activity last season. Jersey-knitting is almost certainly more lucrative - the report suggests R50 - R60 per month.

4.4. In this context child maintenance payments and assistance from men with whom women in the households have relationships can become significant. Here 8 cases are listed among the 31 households - with R10 - R20 being the usual range, though this figure may include gift in kind, especially baby-foods. In the 90-household sample, there were 14 cases of such help.

4.5. Outright assistance by family is also important: 6 cases are reported here of gifts of money and/or food; and 4 cases in which the neighbours seem to have done more than simply lent money or food short-term on a reciprocal basis. In the 90-household sample, 11 cases of assistance by family were recorded. I fear that this does not constitute

a really thorough discussion of incomes but it will have to serve for the present.

5. Subsistence activities

One might imagine that these households - living in a semi-rural environment - would rely heavily on 'living off the land' in so far as that is possible. There does seem to be evidence of this but (a) it is not easy to prove that they rely more heavily than other households and (b) certain possible ways of living off the land, i.e. by cultivating fields or running cattle require (usually) financial inputs, at least at some stage.

In the 90 household sample, 62 households fetch their own wood rather than buy it; 35 built their own houses entirely without paying for the labour of builders; 88 collected wild plants at certain stages of the year and of the 84 whose views we have recorded, 18 households actually said that such plants were an "important" part of their diet. However, only 12 of these households had their own fields (not unlike the overall figure of 17%) and 14 had cattle.

6. Household consumption of publicly-provided services

I had hoped to investigate consumption especially of food, but this has so far proved impossible. In the questionnaires it was possible to ask about education and health/medical services.

6.1. In reply to the question whether any current members of the household had had to leave school because of cost associated with schooling only 17 said 'yes' out of 84 who answered. It may be that this reflects the relative scarcity of children in the sample, or also that education is one of the preferred points at which relatives may assist.

6.2. A very substantial proportion of respondents had attended clinics, hospitals or private doctors recently. Although pensioners reported that they had free access to clinic services there were many who had paid not inconsiderable sums to obtain help - in many cases averaging out at R4 - R5 per visit including transport. That they felt financial contrasts in this connection is shown by 68 out of 85 saying that had they more income they would wish to use medical services more frequently.

7. Background of these households

A substantial proportion of these households have moved (in some sense) to Vulindlela from other places. 'White farming areas' and other segments of KwaZulu figure prominently. The same picture emerges from an examination of the occupations of the fathers of the 2 main adults in the current households: of a possible total of 180 (with a large number of 'don't knows'), 31 were 'farm labourers', 32 were 'farmers' and 40 general labourers (presumably in a more urban context). Pursuing the same line of investigation we asked respondents to consider all four parents of the two main current adults and to say what the highest educational level was reached by any of the parents. Of 74 cases where an answer was given, 41 were cases where no parent had had any education whatever. Most of the remainder (21) had Std. 3 or less.

8. Final Remarks

There were 34 males and 21 females listed as 'unemployed' in the 88 households for which the question was answered. While in 43 others there were no unemployed (as defined locally) and so we cannot say that unemployment is the major immediate cause of poverty in the sample, still the creation of more employment were it possible would undoubtedly help. Clearly many of the poor are willing to work, though their situ-

ation and characteristics seem to limit them to the non-lucrative end of the 'informal sector'. It seems to me that in cases such as this the Guaranteed Rural Employment scheme as proposed by Reynolds ought to be investigated. Social provision and intervention (mainly via the State) can be seen in the rising numbers at school, the free medical clinics for pensioners and indeed in the system of pensions and disability grants which are so important to these households. I think we should think very seriously about the GRE (see Paper No. 234).